

A Biblical Understanding of Divorce and Its Implications for the Church Today: A Review Article

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Abstract: This article's ontological formulation is that marriage is a picture of the relationship between Christ and the church. The church is Christ's bride and Christ himself is the bridegroom. The church is made up of all who believe in Jesus Christ as their savior. The allegiance, sacrificial love, and faithfulness of a husband and wife depict the relationship between Christ and the church. Therefore, what God has joined, let no man put them asunder. But divorce with its grave effects destroys the unity of a marriage. It creates problems of allegiance to God. It brings out the "real me" into the surface. The enduring questions therefore for this article are: Did God intends marriages to last? And if so, why is there divorce? What can be done to save and change this situation? These are the questions the author seeks to find out from review of available literature and drawing of conclusions.

Keywords: Divorce, Church Today, Christ's bride.

INTRODUCTION

According to Efird [1], couples quite often marry with "joy, hope, and promises of 'till death do us part' but all too often they end the marriage citing, 'irreconcilable', 'difference', 'unfaithfulness', 'incompatibility'. One wonders whether 'death' or 'debt' is what separates the couple.

The issue of divorce is a real and controversial one in our society today due to changing family patterns and values resulting from enculturation and globalization. The cultural perspective of divorce is no longer the same as it was in the traditional way of life. Biblical passages that speak on divorce have been interpreted in various ways. In fact, three positions existed during the time of Jesus. The seeking of divorce in the law courts by couples today has become commonplace. They often do this at the expense of their children; some too young to comprehend what is happening. The couple concerned look at their own attitudes and problems without considering the effect of the divorce on themselves and on their children currently and in the future.

The church too is at crossroads. She does not understand or rather does not know which way to go especially at such a time when she is being bombarded by technology and global ways of seeing things. Despite this seeming confusion, however, the church has a big role to play as far as the issue of divorce is concerned. This review article discusses what the bible teaches on divorce and how this teaching should be applied to the church today. It involves the role of the church in building good family relationships to avoid divorce and/or reduce the number of divorce cases. It will also discuss ways on how to help those whose families are already broken or on the verge of breaking.

The Teaching of Divorce in the Old Testament

Beginning with God's plan for marriage, Keil and Delitzsch [2], state that man needed help in order to fulfill his calling of perpetuating and multiplying his race and to cultivate and govern the earth. The words of Adam in Gen. 2: 24, "This now is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh," reveal a deep physical and spiritual unity of man and woman, upholding monogamy as a form of marriage ordained by God. Consequently, in leaving his parents and joining to his wife the rights of "conjugal union has been shown to be a spiritual oneness, a vital union of heart as well as body" [2]. The bible declares that God as male and female (Gen. 1:26-27) have created man. Therefore, their union is of God's specific design for humanity.

In his description of Genesis two, James B. Hurley, points out that man was to relate to the earth in terms of ruling, and was also to have fellowship with God. However, he was not made to live and work without human companionship. That is why the phrase, "It is not good for the man to be alone," is a crucial one (2: 18). Therefore, God performed his first operation on man so as to end his loneliness and provide a helper fit for him [2].

While we can think of marriage as a commitment made before God, and socially before men, there are guidelines for living together [3]. In his

article on divorce, D. J. Atkinson, clearly states that the “primary biblical emphasis is on marriage as a covenant relationship between God and his people, and between Christ and the Church,” so Genesis 2:24 points to this as a personal relationship. B. W. Powers concur with this statement when he comments that marriage is a relationship of companionship, mutual help and sexual expression and fulfillment between man and woman. Note this is between two persons of the opposite gender – male and female as created by God.

This being the case, what does the bible recognize as legitimate grounds for divorce? Is there such a thing as a ‘Christian divorce’? What is the biblical precedent? These three questions will enable us to discuss the man-made regulations of Deuteronomy 24: 1-4, and also why Ezra permitted divorce in chapters nine and ten of his book, while Malachi chapter two states that, “God hates divorce”. An examination of these passages reveals that, Ezra declares a prohibition of intermarriages with the heathen, and Malachi deals with dissolution of marriages for the right of remarriage. This bad example during this time of Malachi might have led to contempt of the divine ordinance of marriage. The marriage here being seen as a covenant of God, which means it was done before the face of God, in putting away ‘this wife of his youth’ shows the faithless treatment of the wife. In Deuteronomy 24:1-4, Keil and Delitzsch [2] argue that divorce was not established as a right, but rather was founded on a tradition, which left the question of divorce entirely at the husband’s discretion. This Old Testament legislation recognized the fact that marriages sometimes were broken although divorce was not approved. It also acknowledged the need of civil legislation for the sake of society and served to protect the divorced woman and to legislate against cruelty on her [4]. Powers agrees with this idea when he says that the legislation in Deuteronomy had two clear aims: A practical one that protects the woman who was put away, and a moral one, which served to raise the standards of marital and sexual behavior among the people [4].

Looking at the background of this, divorce in Deuteronomy was variously translated: ‘nakedness of a thing’, ‘shameful thing,’ ‘unseemly thing,’ ‘uncleanness’, and ‘indecenty’. These translations point out that the meaning was disputed among the Rabbis. This is true in reference to W. L. Coleman’s description of three positions of divorce in his article, *Divorce court in Jesus’ day*, which is agreed by other authors, that the first view held by the Shammaites maintained that divorce is only justifiable on grounds of adultery. They were very strict on the interpretation of the law. The Hillelites (followers of Hillel) held on the second view in which they felt a woman remained married at the discretion of her husband. The husband had authority to dismiss her even for the slighted cause, for example, burning of soup. The third, Agiba’s view, insisted that a

husband did not need a reason for divorce. If he found a prettier woman, he would dismiss the present spouse [4]. While many questions would be raised today on the place of the woman in marriage with regard to these views, it is worth noting as Coleman comments further, that despite these laws divorce was not rampant in Israel because they were kept secure by their background training, mutual respect and moral training. Why are the background and moral training together with the quality of ‘mutual respect’ missing in our society today? What has gone amiss in the upbringing of children as they grow?

But in quoting the renowned historian, Josephus, Joachin Jeremias [5] observes that the Hill elite view above prevailed in the first half of the first century, and the separated parties always reunited. The reason for this reunion was two-fold: first, it was brought about by public stigma, which the couple and their daughters felt when the husband divorced his wife; Second, the husband had to compensate the wife with a large sum of money as prescribed in the marriage contract” [5].

This payment prescription and the public stigma were obstacles to any hasty divorce of the wife. Despite these positions or views it should be noted that God planned for marriage to last, the only separation being death; but because of man’s sinful heart, the teaching has been twisted to suit man’s inclinations.

The Teaching of Divorce in the New Testament

The New Testament teaching on divorce focuses on the teachings of Jesus and those of Apostle Paul. Starting with terminologies that are associated with divorce, for example, un-chastity, desertion, certificate (bill) of divorce, in Mark 10 (cf. Luke 16) Jesus prohibits divorce and in Matthew 5 and 19, he offers an exceptional clause. The article shall determine what Jesus meant by this clause to draw principles and lessons for the church today.

Jesus’ Teaching on Divorce: In the context of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus contrasts his teaching about divorce with the traditional rabbinic view [6]. Mark 10 states explicitly that God and those who divorce and remarry are guilty of adultery-established marriage. This teaching is implicit in Luke 16 [7]. Garry R. Collins [8] is of the opinion that Jesus reaffirmed the permanency of marriage, adding that Moses allowed it only because of human sinfulness. According to Plekker [9], the exceptional clause set by Jesus calls for a closer study in differences between the words ‘marital unfaithfulness and fornication’. However, the context surrounding the statement and the exception that Jesus gave must also be looked into. However, the Pharisees tricked Jesus in Matthew 19: 9 to either liberal or conservative (traditional) school of thought on divorce, Jesus’ answer reaffirms God’s original intent for marriage, thus driving home the point

that divorce was not acceptable to God. The exceptional clause as argued by Jesus was primarily for permanence of marriage not to offer a ground for divorce. The clause points out that one party was guilty in the exceptive clause; that we can disobey God and obtain false divorce; and that adultery is a concomitant of any remarriage following divorce.

The question that helps to discuss this exceptional clause is that, 'Is divorce acceptable only because of 'porneia' (unfaithfulness)? What is a rightful ground for it?'

The passage in Matthew 5 has reference to the Jewish law and practice in Deuteronomy 24. However, as Alleman [10] points out, the practice was lax during the time of Jesus in that a husband gave a bill of certificate to his unloved wife. However, Jesus upholds not only the sanctity but also the indissolubility of marriage. Based on God's order of creation he also recognizes the right of the wife by declaring that the husband who divorces his wife causes her to commit adultery, likewise, the man who marries such a divorced woman. This is because in the eyes of God the first marriage has not been dissolved and it cannot until one partner dies (pp. 170-171).

In light of the creation intention as given by God, Atkinson, in describing Jesus' teaching rightly says that in every form of unfaithfulness the commitment of 'one flesh' was being broken. Therefore putting away of one's partner was sin (p. 325). For further discussion on the exception clause, such questions as, 'what function did it serve?' 'Why do Mark, Luke and Paul not refer to it?' *Paul's Teaching on Divorce*: Paul's teaching on divorce is based on an illustration in Romans chapter seven, in which freedom in Christ is illustrated by the law of marriage. The principle is that death dissolves all legalities including marital ties. It is only as long as the husband lives that the law does bind the wife to him. When he dies, she is discharged from the law concerning husband and wife [10].

Paul echoes Jesus' exceptional clause by adding that desertion is second permissible cause for divorce by an unbelieving mate [8]. Following his argument, Paul seems to imply that divorce is only permissible on two grounds: when one's mate is guilty of sexual immorality and is unwilling to repent (Matt. 19:9), and when one of the mates is an unbeliever who willingly and permanently deserts the believing partner. Neither for Alleman [10] marriage for Paul is a mutual compact where husband nor does wife have the right to act without regard to the other's wishes. Therefore, each partner must remain the other partner's servant. The question that needs to be answered now is whether a Christian ought to remain faithful to the marriage bond in spite of hardship and injustice. Separation for Paul is not without consequences, for example, loss of witness,

children brought up in an unchristian atmosphere. However, if the non-Christian takes initiative and puts the Christian away, the believer is under an irrevocable obligation (Matt. 19:15). Though Jesus and Paul seem to have allowed for divorce, the real teaching upheld is that of there being no separation. In case there is, those concerned will not remarry.

Consequences and Effects of Divorce in the Church Today

Even though divorce is allowed in the constitutions of many nations due to various causes and reasons, it is never easy. The church may have their own rules and by-laws according to their beliefs and practices of faith but still the victims of divorce experience several consequences in terms of its causes and effects. From a psychological perspective, separation between the couple hurts. Because the divorced person's thinking is "often dominated by guilt, anger, resentment, and fear" [8]. This pain as Collins discusses is worse when children are involved. For none wins in a divorce situation; everybody loses. The couple, children, parents, community and society is affected to some degree of measure; some less, others more depending on their personality and temperaments. Robert G. Barnes [11] discusses in detail the wilderness journey, which one finds himself/herself because of divorce. This journey is created by emotions and thoughts that destroy one's inner peace.

Divorce is nowhere commended in the Bible. Neither is it encouraged. However, there are several causes of divorce. In her article, *Divorce: can a marriage survive?* Kisuke [12] states that divorce is often the result of hasty friendships. People are impatient; hence, they take less time in courtship. This hastiness comes about because of fear of age, or even of losing this person. In quoting Kisuke [12] further states that formal education also causes divorce because it liberates women. Through education, women have been known or discovered to be intelligent and to possess competitive skills that challenge man's power and strength as opposed to the traditional view that the man is in charge of everything. Because of dual-career, women are not ready to fit into the worlds of the men as was found in the traditional way of life.

Other causes include unexpected pregnancies, whereby people marry quickly to cover up the shame of having a child outside wedlock. However, this cannot often be hidden. It will somehow be exposed in time. Incompatibility is also another contributing factor especially in areas where one partner is brilliant than the other. There is great danger of divorce if the woman happens to be brighter, more innovative than the man is or earns more than the man coupled with a bit of pride earns. Lack of enough quality time with the wife and children due to busy schedule at places of work contributes to divorce too. This lack of quality time, if not handled well, can create room for unfaithfulness,

bitter exchange of words with one's partner and even among relatives. Childlessness or even failure to reproduce sons is also a vital cause. Another reason is obtaining wrong piece of advice when there are problems in the marriage. This often happens when a couple goes to the wrong people to seek advice. In most cases, the advisors work for the couple's downfall [12].

When people are reluctant to commit themselves to a life-long marriage by working at it, divorce in most cases results. Aylward Shorter [13] agrees with Kisuke by saying that, "Young people do not choose their marriage partners carefully"... Hence, through their lack of experience and haste, fragile marriages are formed. These fragile marriages do not last long, for they cannot stand the test of time. It is even worse in this contemporary society in which people have adopted other worldviews.

Further, Shorter continues to state a two-fold division as to why divorce happens. These are common reasons based on two sides, that of the husband on the one hand and the wife on the other. On the husband's side, they include, "inability to live together, wife's infidelity, desertion, laziness, drunkenness or illness." These same reasons apply on the woman's side with the addition of violence and refusal of support; though lack of children is cited as a minor case.

These are genuine reasons to disrupt any family's unity. Since divorce is a social problem, the question that needs to be answered is, "What is the right way to handle marital problems? With the Bible being the base of discussion, it should be understood, first of all, that in the traditional setting, marriages rarely broke up for any of the above reasons because of two reasons pointed out by Henry Okullu [14] payment of dowry and the cutting of a sheep's shoulder, for example, as found in the Kikuyu marriage. This in addition to the birth of a child cemented the marriage and it became a life-long union. (2) Marriage was a family and even a community affair. Wives who separated were still regarded wherever they were as wives of their husbands. Even those who separated suffered. Hence, the couple concerned learned how to live with the help of the extended family and the community.

The phenomenon of separation and divorce between Christians has never been looked at realistically. Divorce is rampant and this carries with it several effects. Its complexity, in the words of John Williams is that of "domestic, personal, psychological, physical, materials, financial and spiritual involvements [14]. This opinion is in line with Collin's idea as cited above.

To cite Effird [1] the purpose of marriage serves practical functions such as provision of a stable society; and protection and transmission of values and

traditions of the societal unit. But divorce places people in situations where they have to deal with not only problems of failure and readjustment but with inordinate feelings of guilt. Lois M. Rabey [15] puts it this way: "Divorce results into . . . families living in circumstances they never expected [or] intended to...Single parents: double duties" [15]. According to Cole [16], the problem of divorce creates animosity instead of love, and resentment in place of forgiveness, did the couples keep their promises [16].

Four very definite stages appear to coincide with the length of time that one separates from a spouse. All these deal with the emotions of the individual. They include loneliness, bitterness, guilt and finally acknowledgement of the situation and a plan for the future. To this emotional list, Collins adds "anxiety, sadness, depression, anger and frustration." He further discusses other effects that deal with behavior – divorce effects how one feels and acts; social p this touches on family members, friends, critics and single people; and also the spiritual – people either are drawn to God or they get angry at Him and rebel. Divorce also involves a period of mourning, which could both be positive and negative in terms of the good times and of confusion or self-pity respectively.

Divorce affects the children and the society in general. For Collins, the influence extends to the children, parents and others. The children express hostility towards the partner who causes the divorce. When they mature, they will resent both parents [12]. Children's feelings will be those of anger, sadness, guilt, self-blame, and hostility. And as Kisuke comments "Children from broken homes make marriage work out of anger" [12].

Divorce also creates the problem of single parents within society; who have no guarantee of total freedom, happiness and peace of mind; who are victims of fear, hatred and jealousy; and who will look like an enemy towards each other. Before, divorce was loathed as it lowered man's dignity regardless of who was wrong. Now with the influence of urbanization, the value is changing drastically.

Implications of Divorce to the Church Today

The implications of what has been discussed above concerning divorce shall be applied to the church today, first by looking at its dilemma, severity of sin and the need for forgiveness of sin. Williams [6] noting that the implication of divorce in the church today has no easy answers. The problem is difficult for the situation is complex and tragic [6], especially these days with the problem of HIV-Aids.

When divorce occurs, there are feelings of failure and guilt. These feelings are however intensified for those within the Christian cycle because of the teaching that marriage is permanent and divorce is

something no truly religious person would or could tolerate [1]. While there are real facts that relate to the problem of divorce, the church and the pastorate should not be at a loss as to how to handle the problems that face society. Rather than assigning the case to the decision of the court, the church should think of a more relevant ethic of marriage and divorce. As B. L Ramm [17] puts it, "The right way is to strive for a total Christian ethic of marriage, an ethic that is possible for all cases." Cliff Edwards [18] adds to this idea by saying that "by rethinking more profoundly the marriage relationship and its real and serious problems, the church may become more responsible in helping their members live up to the marital ideal. One way of doing this is willingness to forgive despite the indecency of relationship [7].

The interpretation of Deut 24: 1- 4 when compared with Christ's teaching points out that divorce is contrary to the divine institution, and anything that is short of what God expects is sin. In the case of exception clause, the church needs to realize that it has misunderstandings. Plekker [9] points out that from extra-biblical studies excuses for divorce have been offered to counter answers from God's word.

The church too has to be aware of the causes of divorce, the magnitude of its effect and harm in the community, church and the family to instruct her members accordingly. One area of marriage that needs cultivation is patience in relationship. For L. Seruyange [19], success in marriage results from learning to forgive, developing magnanimity, being less emphatic, trusting God to change bad situations, praying and leading a spirit-filled life (pp. 15-17).

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, there is no perfect marriage. People have to prayerfully work at their marriages as problems arise. The Holy Spirit is the best teacher (Jn. 16:8ff.). Overall, the church has to look at the interpreting principles from the Bible and give proposals for proper applications to life. However, in order to do this, the discussion will revisit the practical functions that marriage served in the Bible times and look at what these same principles serve in today's church.

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