The Messiness of Marriage and the Knottiness of Divorce: A Call for a Higher Theology and a Tougher Ethic

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A billboard in California that reads “$25—Cheap Divorce, Unload the Deadbeat!” captures the manner in which some in our current society devalue marriage. If there is one issue around which great concern for church and society gathers, it may well be the rate by which nearly half of marriages today end in divorce tomorrow. In some states and provinces, citizens are offered no-fault divorce, meaning that no reason, such as oft-quoted “irreconcilable differences,” need be presented. The newest option is divorce online, everything made easy for people to break the vows they made that wedding day when they honestly thought they would be in love forever. Our society’s ticket for divorce is all too often the simple mantra “I don’t have feelings for him (or her) anymore,” as if the mood of the day determines the validity of the promise. We who love the Lord and love Christ’s body, the church, and love our children and care for our larger communities ache when we hear that someone else we know is encountering the end of marriage. Divorce is heavy on the hearts of many in both church and society.

We are called upon as the Christian community to carefully hold the institution of marriage in high regard as does Scripture. Although not the holy sacrament that our Roman Catholic friends consider marriage to be, its permanent character and redemptive function are important values in a biblical and Reformed understanding of marriage. Yet, we struggle to offer real hope to couples in our congregations whose marriages are plagued with conflict and suffering. Beyond preaching a theology of marriage that reflects the words of Jesus in Matthew 19:6 that no one be allowed “to separate what God has joined together,” beyond rehearsing the importance of keeping covenant with each other, and beyond reminding parishioners of how difficult divorce may be for children, how can we help? Do we who are pastors make much of a difference in marital health with the premarital conversations we have with couples that we wed? We rightly wonder how we can be useful pastorally when we in the church

1 See Judith Wallerstein, Julia Lewis, and Sandra Blakeslee, The Legacy of Divorce: A 25 Year Landmark Study (New York: Hyperion Press, 2000) in which these researchers demonstrate the long-term negative effects of divorce on children followed over an extended period of time.
are sometimes the last to be told of marital distress. In addition, how do we think about the nearly broken marriages in our churches where couples are committed to staying with each other but live in quiet sadness, separate bedrooms, and life without passion? How can we do more than just “wink” at these difficulties, letting them be, and, instead, work to rebuild them? How can we realistically offer hope to couples and families in the midst of marital distress?

The answers may have to do precisely with what we preach and teach about marriage and divorce in our church communities. We are pressed, first of all, to ask basic questions of our Reformed theology of marriage. How does God participate in marriage? How much does God join people together when they become *one flesh*? How much are they one, and how much do they remain two? How exactly does God see them? What does God think? How does Satan participate in the destruction of a marriage? How might the Devil use the pulpit and the church as his Screwtape-style tools? What exactly does Scripture teach us about divorce? Is not the term *biblical divorce* an oxymoron? Alternatively, is a marital unfaithfulness ground for breaking up a marriage? What has to be so wrong as to justify divorce in God’s eye? What do pastors and elders need to do to be helpful?

To give answers to these questions, first a story of marital distress typical to the parishes that pastors serve will be presented. Theological considerations about the nature of marriage will be reviewed, especially in light of our current North American culture’s view of marriage. A case will be made for a higher theology of marriage in the Reformed community and specific pastoral recommendations will be offered. Next, the knottiness of divorce, the conundrum of difficulties with an ethic of divorce will be presented, especially as these relate to our appropriation of the “exceptional clauses” found in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9. A tougher ethic of divorce will be encouraged, especially in the light of pastoral dilemmas that result from softening an ethic of divorce.

The Messiness of Marriage

Charles and Diane were referred to me for pastoral marital therapy by a local pastor of the church they attended. (I take pains to call my ministry with them *marital therapy* because I reserve the term *pastoral counseling* for the counseling that a parish pastor does. (A parish pastor should never spend hours of conversation with people such as I spent with Charles and Diane.) Charles and Diane had been married for nine years, after meeting at a Christian college in the West. They rode horses. They lived on acreage south of the city with two delightful daughters. The precipitant for coming, their ticket for admission to marital therapy, has to do with the night that Charles kicked a hole in the one-by-four wall of the horse barn because he was so angry with his wife. She had developed the habit of putting her daughter to sleep by rubbing her back, then inevitably falling asleep herself at her daughter’s side. Charles raged at the emptiness of the space next to him in his marital bed. For many nights, he had fallen asleep alone as Diane quietly preferred to stay asleep near her daughter.
Of course, Diane’s take on things sounded so different. She had tired of her demanding husband; she admitted the need to withdraw from his side to “fall asleep in peace.” The love and care she remembered from him in the early years of marriage was now a distant memory. He was often angry; she was on the run, wondering if leaving the marriage could possibly bring her peace. In addition, out of context, she quoted the Pauline privilege of 1 Corinthians 15:7 to me: “for God has called us to peace.”

Here before me were two people who had fallen in and out of love with almost no understanding of why they had married each other. Indeed, love is blind. Neither, as a Christian, believed in the cultural default to divorce. They were together in promise though each resented the other deeply in heart. My job, as a pastoral marital therapist, meant spending nearly two years introducing them to each other. There was a part of each that the other needed to know. As briefly as I can, let me explain. Charles, the raging six-foot-six-inch bull that he was with his rodeo belt buckle, was a walking wounded man. Yes, we talked about his childhood, as these early covenantal connections are critical to growing up well. His memories circled around the theme of disconnection, especially from his own mother who had her own problems having spent her first five years in an orphanage in North Dakota. Closeness and trust are usually difficult to sustain for an orphan. One day in a moment of irritation, she pitched his sheet and pillowcase to the floor in front of his room and yelled. “Make it yourself.” He stared out a window at the horses with a tear in his eye, wondering why she did not care. You would think he would find a wife who would correct that—be the warm attentive lover, the affectionate playful woman who would indeed understand his burdened heart. Somehow his romantic radar had taken him far afield. Diane now was cold and distant with her face turned away from him. Hardly the woman of his dreams.

She told me of similar tragedy. Yes, she said she loved him, but he never “got it” as to how fragile she felt. All her life, she said, she barely held herself together. He had been her rock; now he was her accuser. “So mean to me,” she reported. Her memory went back to the days when her mother left her cowboy father on a ranch in Oregon. She recalls driving away in the car, clothes barely packed for the getaway, leaving an inebriated, abusive father never to be seen again for twenty-nine years. Then, to make matters worse, her mother married another man in Salt Lake City who turned out to be the abuser of both her and her sister. (Charles never knew.) You would think here as well that the man of her dreams would prove to be gentle and patient, full of the fruits of the Spirit, loving, kind, and not self-seeking. Yet, the man to whom she was attracted turned out to be an angry cowboy, physically demanding and now ready to scream for her affection. Not at all the husband we might choose for this fragile, tender woman now falling asleep with her daughter.

Did God choose them for each other or did the Devil? All this harshness, all this raging and kicking, all this resentment they had for each other, all this unhealthy enmeshment by mom with her daughter—is this not the family
destruction that delights Satan himself? How could this be of God? How could the Lord of love take part in putting these haters together? If the Devil did it, then maybe divorce is a good, even redemptive, idea.

Maybe, however, God was involved. The end of this marital story is one of the few where a man and a woman stay the battle, dig in deep, and sort things out. Charles and Diane were able to let God’s grace wash over their suffering, enough at least so that they could find gold nuggets in the sand. They discovered what our young people need to know and what all pastors need to preach; in marriage sometimes we must make a “redemptive mess” so that in the fixing we are made whole or, in shorter verse, that often, in our broken post-fallen world, marriage is about forgiveness. Charles learned Diane’s story. When he realized what a monster he had become to such a tender, sexually wounded woman, his anger turned to tears, especially when he realized how much courage it took for her to ever make love. Diane saw the wound in the tear of the empty son; she saw beyond his cowboy bravado to the window of his heart where he looked out wondering like the orphan if he could ever be loved. Empathy, the act of “living into” the experience of the other, found its way back to this marriage. The command of our Lord to love our enemies sometimes includes our own marital partners, and in this story it became redemptive.

In the act of the forgiving that each was able to do is the redemptive miracle of marriage. In the letting go of the hurt of neglect or of abuse, each forgave the parent as well. Such forgiveness is of one piece; a forgiving heart is a forgiving heart. Charles was able to go to the home of his parents for Thanksgiving dinner and not tighten up inside and withdraw. Diane got on an airplane and flew to Salt Lake City, where her father had resettled, and, after twenty-nine years, she sat with him in a restaurant and said the gospel words, “Dad, I forgive you.” In the act of forgiving our mates, we are also forgiving others who have trespassed against us. In the act of forgiving, we are letting go of the very human suffering that demands that we fall in love with exactly the right person to forgive. It was God who brought these two people together, not the Devil. A divorce in this case would have only aborted the redemptive process of forgiveness that sometimes takes two years. Without the redemption that marital conflict can bring, each would have inevitably gone on to find another who once again would need forgiveness. How wise it is to learn the first time.

A High Theology

Rev. David Wurster, a Lutheran pastor, makes this point in a journal article entitled “Marriage: Crucible For Growth.” He writes that unfortunately we in Western society think of marriage as a haven of rest where love comes easy and stays without effort. He writes instead that marriage is always hard work, that
the human heart is refined in the flames of love and the fires of marriage.\textsuperscript{2} People, he says,

choose partners who have the potential for bringing them face to face with some of their central life fears so that these fears can be worked through for further growth and mastery people recreate in marriage their central life dilemma in order to work it through and this time to come out better. In this process only the person we really love and who touches our very roots has the capacity to drive us crazy as well as to help us find our deepest strengths.\textsuperscript{3} Certainly marriage does all the things that the church has historically said it does. It does provide for mutual companionship, a place for procreation and for family life, and certainly, as the Westminster Confession tells us, a “remedy for the prevention of sin.”\textsuperscript{4} There is so much more though. We sometimes make a mess of marital relationships in order to recreate precisely the dilemma we need to face in ourselves in order to be whole, redeemed from the troubles of our pasts.

This is in keeping with the basic biblical principle invoked in credible pastoral counseling, the observation of Moses in Genesis 2, that, as God would have it, we leave our mothers and fathers and cleave to our mates in order to truly become one flesh. In our Genesis 3 fallen world, that leaving must always include forgiving. Sometimes, only in the midst of our deepest marital conflicts do we finally see what needs to be forgiven so that our hearts can be free of the tyranny of the resentments that poison us. One of the functions of marriage in our broken world is to make a redemptive mess in order to finish the forgiving that we sometimes have to do. This is a truth that must be heard from our pulpits. If we are silent about the redemptive value of troubles in marriage, our Christian community and especially our youth are left with either dutiful obedience without relief, which may become a life of marital misery, or the societal

\textsuperscript{2} For a more expanded presentation of how marriage recreates “central life dilemmas” for redemptive purposes, see Howard Hendrix’s very popular book \textit{Getting the Love You Want} (New York: Harper, 1988) in which he argues that persons in Western Society are romantically attracted to “mates who have their caretaker’s positive and negative traits, and typically the negative traits are more influential” (35) [an “imago construction”] so that in relating to these persons they create the opportunity to heal their own childhood wounds in the context of marital distress. He argues that in the changing (156) that we actually do for each other we participate in that person’s healing as well as our own. Hereby he offers a redemptive theory of marriage by which marriage facilitates the resolution of unresolved inner conflict. Psychological theorists Scharff and Scharff speak in a similar fashion in terms of marital repair in their text \textit{Object Relations Couple Therapy} (Northville, N.J.: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1991).


\textsuperscript{4} See C. Benton Kline, “Marriage Today: A Theological Carpet Bag,” \textit{The Journal of Pastoral Care} 33, no. 1 (March 1979): 24-37 in which he outlines the above four functions of marriage. It is of interest that he says nothing about pleasure, redemptive development, or bringing glory to God as purposes of marriage.
default of the view that marriages in trouble are terminally ill and that divorces serve to mercifully kill.

The primary understanding of marriage in our North American culture is a romantic view that marriage is simply a celebration of love, wherein love is taken as romantic attraction. Marriage, biblically understood, is certainly about “making love,” as the Lover and her Beloved rehearse poetically in the Song of Songs. Holy matrimony is, however, much more in terms of promise, troth, covenant, committing to be together when we do not want to be.5 Our wedding ceremonies and our community celebrations do much to recognize and delight in the affection that two people develop for each other, but, in our culture, there is much less emphasis on the promising that is done to each other (horizontally) as well as to God (vertically). In terms of attachment, marriage is hardly necessary when two partners want to be together. Marriage becomes more of a necessity when we do not want to be together; only then does it bind us in ways that may be redemptive beyond what can be seen in the moment of conflict. As Hendrix testifies, “I have come to believe that couples should make every effort to honor their wedding vows to stay together ‘till death do us part’ . . . fidelity and commitment appear to be conditions dictated by the unconscious mind.”6

If we are to call for a higher theology of marriage that presses for permanence and a tougher ethic of divorce that raises the bar for dissolution, we have a responsibility not simply to tell couples in distress to be faithful to their promises; we must also show them how to be. Marriage among other things is the promise to walk the road of forgiveness. We as leaders of the church must lead the way to this learning.

Karl Barth is most helpful here. He sees the promise of marriage as obedience to a divine calling that is total, exclusive, and permanent. In language that nearly echoes a Roman sacramental view of marriage, Barth describes the activity of God in bringing two people together as a divine grace. For him, “to enter upon marriage is to renounce the possibility of leaving it.” He sees no room for anything but working things out, staying the marital battle. Were we to have the option of leaving marriage, he suggests, “Love would obviously be replaced by what is essentially a constant playing at love. And the full and exclusive life partnership of marriage by a flabby and non-binding experimentation which dispenses with all real discipline and is exempt from that final exertion.”7

It is interesting to note how nearly forty years later his description of “playing at love” aptly describes our present-day culture. Many have drawn back from making commitments, and if they do, they are making them later in

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5 Lewis Smedes present a horizontal view of marriage in his description of marriage as a covenant of fidelity to a vow, a calling, a person, a relationship, and a community. See The Making and Keeping of Commitments The Stob Lectures, 1986-1987 (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications).

6 Ibid., 115.

young adult life. The average age for marriage today is age 27 for men, 25 for women. More couples choose to live together without commitment. Barth may have been seeing the future we are living in today. Charles and Diane did not exempt themselves from “that final exertion” that Barth describes, and they struggled their way to freedom from the sin of deep resentment. Only the valiant effort to hold oneself accountable, not just the mate but the angry, hurting, troubled self that must be the promise of marriage—only such final exertion carries with it the strength to forgive the deepest of wounds. Marriage, then, in our broken world, is often about the effort of forgiveness.

Such a high theology of marriage leaves little wiggle room for those who dare to enter. We are kept in the bonds of promise in such a way that we finally hear the voice of the trainer who has committed to helping us tame our wildest instincts for revenge toward those who hurt us; we then relinquish the ransom that we want paid for the sins against us. Thus, we are left to struggle with each and, like Jacob of old, learn the true identity of those with whom we wrestle until, finally, we are pinned down in God’s revelation to us about the forgiving that we must do. We then walk forward, sometimes limping, but surprised by joy. We are surprised that we can fall in love again, surprised that we can eat Thanksgiving dinner without a knot in the stomach, surprised that we can be free to forgive a father for his sins in our childhood, even twenty-nine-year-old sins. Such is the healing power of the grace of God in marriage.

Pastoral Implications

This view of the redemptive dimensions of marital conflict offers us as pastors and elders and Christian friends and family members significant pastoral opportunities. First, we can sincerely be encouragers. When days are at their darkest, we have a word of hope that it is just not over when couples first think it is over. If we know about the redemptive value of working through conflict we can say so, bringing hope to couples willing to do the hard work of discovering their own brokenness and forgiving it. We can give our brothers and sisters caught in the swells of the storms of marriage a guiding belief that God has a message in the messes of marriage, a word of healing even to places in their hearts of which they may only dimly be aware. Yes, this kind of spiritual growth is painful, sometimes too painful for people to manage by themselves. However, it can be done. God’s Spirit is the spirit that promises to make all things new.

Second, by this view of the redemptive dimensions of marriage all of us can be advocates. Marital breakdown, as common as it may be in our Western culture, is not a necessary given, not if people take the opportunity to do “the final exertion” of which Barth speaks. We can promote educational efforts to reeducate people about the purposes of marriage, moving well beyond the unfortunate romantic understandings that our culture teaches every day. We can speak for justice in marriage in terms of defending the rights that both persons have to be heard in a way that may be redemptive. We can speak for justice in judgment as well, noting that “there is always more to the story” that must be
discerned in order for accountability to move toward redemption, not condemnation. There are many people sidelined by marital suffering, sometimes lying beaten in confusion, hurt, and bitterness in need of the Samaritan who does not walk by, but instead lends a helping hand.

Third, by this view of the redemptive dimensions of marital conflict, we can be co-confessors because we stand in some solidarity with marital sinners. We all play a part in the marital breakdown of our communities by the peer pressure we create to not have problems, by the less than helpful values we hold about not dealing with sadness or expressing anger or openly managing conflict or by the harsh judgments we make about sexual sinners. We may be among those who have brought unforgiven injury. Why should we be surprised? As all of us sin and come short of the glory of God, we participate in sinfully wounding the married. By the grace of God, we can say so. People are hurt by lots of things for lots of reasons. There may be trauma untold like that of the orphan who cannot trust love. There may be injury. There may be accident. There may be neglect or abuse by parents. All of these are the truth about our not-yet-redeemed world. We may have hurt our children at times in ways we cannot see. As parents, we should be the first in line to acknowledge our shortcomings and to help our children see the truth of our own participation in their marital suffering. Sad that sometimes our pride and our fear of implication stand in the way of their marital redemption. If we as the Christian community bear the burden of guilt together, the load may be lighter for those dropping to the ground in marital defeat, sometimes stoned by those who do not understand.

The Knottiness of Divorce

In addition to the ache we feel in our hearts as pastors and elders and family and friends of the divorcing, there is also a judgment call we often make, even if privately, about the rightness or the wrongness of this divorce. As much as we might hold to a high theology of marriage and believe in the permanence of promise, we struggle to discern our pastoral responses, especially in terms of how we position ourselves with the divorcing. How close should we be? How friendly? How distant? What is truly pastoral? If we are kind to the divorcing, do we think of ourselves as condoning a decision with which we may disagree? If we withhold forgiveness and acceptance, might that be the punishment that a sinner needs for a change of heart? How much must judgment remove us from them?

We take caution here to remember what many who are divorced report that when they needed the church the most in the middle of marital conflict, the church leadership and community backed away. Yes, divorcing people may have withdrawn as well in their own pain and guilt. Should we have gone and found them, exercising a shepherdlike initiative? When an extramarital affair is part of the painful story, must we pick sides with what we have historically called the “innocent party” against the “guilty party,” the adulterer? Is marital unfaithfulness ground for a divorce because it strikes at the heart of a sexual promise? We need to draw lines in the sand somewhere in terms of what we, as
the church, will accept from sinners. How is this line to be determined? What would Jesus say and do? How does Scripture inform us?

First is this biblical truth: divorce is not God’s way. The prophet Malachi in 2:16 reminds God’s people that, despite all the concessions that Moses may have allowed, God hates divorce. The prophet speaks:

(13) Another thing you do: You flood the Lord’s altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. (14) You ask, “Why?” It is because the Lord is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.

(15) Has not the Lord made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking Godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. (16) “I hate divorce,” says the Lord God of Israel.

_Hate_ is a strong word. The Hebrew verb _shena_ means to hate, to feel aversion for, be disgusted with, to separate, (as a result) to divorce. In this passage, Jehovah directly confronts the divorces of his people. The point is obvious; divorce is not acceptable; it is not God’s way. When we make covenant as God makes covenant, we must keep covenant as God keeps covenant. Divorce can never be thought of with immunity.

In the Synoptic Gospels, we have the word of the Lord on divorce presented in different contexts. We begin with Mark, remembering his testimony as the first from which both Luke and Matthew may have drawn. In chapter 10, we hear the instruction of Jesus in response to the test of the Pharisees, those charged with the interpretation of the Torah.

(2) Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” [hoping to trap Jesus in heresy] (3) “What did Moses command you?” he replied. (4) They said, “Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.”[This is the Mosaic Concession of Deuteronomy 24.] (5) “It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law,” Jesus replied. (6) “But at the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female.’ [quoting Genesis 1 and 2] ‘For this reason a man will leave his farther 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.”

Clearly, Jesus confronts the concession of divorce that Moses had offered and teaches his disciples that with the coming of the Son of Man things are different. Now there is a higher ethic in place that does not concede to the hardness of heart that God saw in his people. By Mark’s account, no more could men simply write a certificate of divorce and marry someone else. It was common in Jesus’ day for men to divorce and marry another and believe that they were clear of judgment. Our Lord calls his followers back to the standard set in the garden. “They are no longer two, but one.” The Mosaic concession is confronted in Mark. Jesus makes this clear:

(10) When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. [After all, it was new to them.] He answered, “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman
There are no exceptions anymore, no backdoor exits out of marriage because another woman or man may be found “pleasing in his eyes.” Jesus tightens the reins and proclaims the will of his Father, that God hates divorce and will no longer allow what Moses allowed. Marriage as God created it is to be permanent. Jesus’ word to us is this: “What God has joined together let man not separate.” In the act of writing off one wife and marrying/lying with another, the first covenant of marriage is adulterated. Divorce is wrong; it is an evil thing.

In Luke, we hear the same unilateral condemnation of divorce. Luke places the words of Jesus in the context of a list of teachings after the parable of the shrewd manager, as follows:

(16) the Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it. (17) It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop from the Law. (18) Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits moicheia, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits moicheia.

If one person leaves for another, that person breaks the promise made. If someone marries someone divorced, that person participates in the promise breaking of the other. Moicheia means unfaithfulness, to adulterate; it has to do with infidelity. The point that Jesus makes is this: There is no guilt-free end to a marriage. Divorce and remarriage adulterate the marital covenant.

The apostle Paul gives a similar command to married people in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, words he attributes directly to the Lord. Paul’s instruction there is as follows: “To the rest I say this (not I but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. However, if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.” Without exception, these three records of the words of Jesus clearly emphasize that marriage is permanent, that the bond is not to be broken, that breaking a promise is breaking a promise. It is not to be allowed; it is not God’s way.

Second is this biblical truth: Divorce is sometimes necessary. As Jesus himself makes clear, God did allow divorce in the Old Testament as a concession to the hardness of the hearts of his people. Moses assumes this concession in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 as follows:

(1) If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds some indecency about her and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and [the text goes on through a second marriage and a second certificate of divorce], (4) then her first husband who divorced her is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the Lord.

In this text, we find God’s prohibition of remarriage to the woman one has once divorced. To do so is to make a mockery of marriage, and Jehovah will not allow this. Here, Moses assumes the acceptability of the certificate of divorce whether it be for some sexual sin, as the rabbinic school of Shammay main-
tained or any general displeasure as the liberal school of Hillel believed. A third rabbinic tradition, the school of Akiba, also held a very liberal position on this matter, arguing that divorce was acceptable when a wife simply “finds no favor” in her husband’s eyes. Given the hardness of heart that God saw in his people, divorce was sometimes necessary in the Old Testament world.

The Exceptional Clauses

In Matthew’s account of the words of Jesus, we also find concession for divorce, though historically we have a great deal of difficulty understanding the intent of the exceptive clauses because they are not found in Mark or in Luke. We hear the exception as follows, first in the Sermon on the Mount: “It has been said, ‘anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for porneia, causes her to commit moicheia and anyone who marries a woman so divorced commits moicheia.”

Porneia is a word that originally means “to sell,” as in “harlot for hire,” “to prostitute,” or “to fornicate.” It correlates with the conservative (Shammai) interpretation of the Hebrew ‘erwath dabar, the “some indecency” of Deuteronomy 24. In ancient culture, “intercourse with harlots is permissible as long as it takes place in secret and causes no offense.” On first reading, it appears to be the case that Jesus is allowing the very concession he confronts—what Moses allowed in the Old Testament, namely a concession for divorce because of sexual immorality, unfaithfulness to the marital promise.

In chapter 19, Matthew records the response of Jesus to the question of the Pharisees about the common practice of divorce in that day:

(3) Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” (4) “Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female’ (5) and said, ‘for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be tied to his wife, and the two will become one flesh?’ (6) So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate. (7) Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?”

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8 See the two-part article by Allen Verhey, “Divorce and the New Testament,” The Reformed Journal (May-June 1976): 17-19; (July-August 1976): 28-31 in which he describes the differences of thought between these rabbinic schools of thought and their connection to the words of Jesus in the two passages in Matthew.

9 Ibid.


(8) Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. (9) I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for porneia, and marries another woman commits moicheia.”

There has been a great deal of debate over the centuries about the intent of these exceptive clauses, a debate yet to be resolved in any definite way. Obviously, it is unlikely that Jesus would confront the Mosaic concession of Deuteronomy 24, and then simply repeat it, taking sides with the more conservative Shammean interpretation. The Pharisees were trying to test Jesus, seeing if they might draw him into the conflict over divorce and hear a word from Jesus that could bring charge against him. It would be most unlikely that he would simply take sides with the school of Shammai, even though their more conservative view honored marriage more. Others suggest that Jesus himself or else Matthew as the writer was adjusting this testimony\(^\text{12}\) about the permanence of marriage for a Jewish audience in the light of specific divorce practice. Each of the synoptic authors attends to the issues that his audience was facing with regard to the practice of divorce. Jewish law at the time Jesus spoke required that a woman caught in the act of adultery be stoned to death (Lev.20:10; Deut. 22:22) as the story of John 8 exemplifies. However, should a husband of such a woman want to spare the life of his wife, he was allowed to write her a certificate of divorce and in so doing save her life. If divorced, she was no longer considered married; her sin would be the porneia of a single person. Death by stoning would be avoided, but the price for her life was that she remain single. In such a case where the intent of divorce was not to replace one wife with another but to save a life, the ethical import is different. Accordingly, the word of the Lord to Matthew’s Jewish audience could quite correctly reflect that exception. This is one possibility that gives honor to the text as the word of God, while maintaining the emphasis of Jesus that the Mosaic concession has folded; that God’s way with marriage is permanence.

We have taken great pains here to qualify the words of Jesus recorded in Matthew, viewing them in their historical context of Jewish divorce law, for good reason. These Matthean texts have been viewed historically as justifying divorce in general on the basis of marital unfaithfulness. Such a belief may misrepresent the intent of our Lord with regard to his comment on divorce. There is in the collective thinking of the evangelical Christian community a “default to divorce” as soon as there is news that in a certain case of marital breakdown there has been porneia, the unfaithfulness of an extra-marital sexual relationship. This interpretation of these exceptions given in Matthew serve unfortunately to lower our theology of marriage and also soften our ethic of divorce.

\(^{12}\) See Richard B. Hayes, “Divorce and Remarriage,” in *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), in which the author suggests that the exceptive clause “represents Matthew’s own casuistic adaptation of the tradition.” He calls the exceptive clause “Matthew’s modification of the saying,” suggesting that “the radicalism of Jesus’ teaching is softened to make it more readily applicable as a rule for the community’s practice” (353).
Many times pastors and elders, charged with the difficult responsibility of passing judgment, and parishioners, needing to clarify their own values about marriage, draw from these exceptive clauses the conclusion that divorce is permissible, even mandated on “biblical grounds,” because, as we hear it, “adultery is grounds for divorce.”

It may be the case that we as officers and members of the Christian church have listened more to Matthew’s account, written for Jewish hearers who did indeed stone adulterers, than to the accounts of Mark and Luke where, without exception, the emphasis of Jesus is clear: The man or woman who divorces and marries another breaks the promise of marriage, and breaking a promise is wrong. This emphasis is also found in Matthew, “What God has joined together let not man put asunder” (9:6). This comes along with the exception given, but the exception has appeared to speak louder than the rule in our public policy about divorce with very little clarity about what the Matthean exception may intend. With this have come some unfortunate pastoral difficulties.

Pastoral Dilemmas

There are several pastoral dilemmas that relate directly to an ethic of divorce that flows from an uncritical acceptance of marital unfaithfulness as grounds for divorce. The first has to do with the difficulties of choosing sides in a marital dispute. When the partner who has been unfaithful is labeled as the guilty party and the other as the innocent one in the choosing of sides, the church serves unwittingly to further facilitate separation and divorce. (Both the reports on marriage and divorce to the CRC synod in 1973 and 1980 address these difficulties.) In my experience as a parish pastor, when this division of guilt and innocence is set in motion, the mandate toward reconciliation becomes less of an option. When the guilty party, the sexual sinner, has been held accountable in discipline, whether formal or informal in such a fashion, he or she most often decides to leave the fellowship and join another congregation that gladly welcomes new members, sinners though they be. The innocent party is seen with compassion, embraced by the congregation as the victim of sin done against him or her, and supported through the difficulty. Though not its conscious intent, the church leadership and community serve to drive more of a wedge between the two persons, in effect further facilitating the separation and divorce.

In contrast to the command of our Lord to “not put asunder what God has joined together,” the church in these cases unfortunately makes reconciliation less possible, in part, because this choosing being driven by these judgments, renders marital therapists less able to be of help. Unless the church community holds both parties accountable, praying that both parties of the distressed couple seek biblical counsel to determine his or her part in the marital breakdown,

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13 Acts of Synod, 1973 (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1973) (though not accepted by Synod) deals directly with this question on page 599.
unless each “looks for the beam in his [or her] own eye,” the marital therapist is at a disadvantage to assist in the process of mutual forgiveness that is an absolute necessity for true reconciliation.

The second pastoral dilemma has to do with the way we view the couple in distress. There is theological warrant for a different way to see things having to do with the one-fleshness of marriage. How does God see a married couple? How much does God join couples together when he joins them together? How much are they one and how much are they still two? In our individualistically oriented culture, it is very difficult to think differently, but we may not be seeing married couples the way that God does. As the Son of God reminds us in Matthew 19:6, “They are no longer two, but one.” To what degree do we see them that way? If we do, they both share in the marital breakdown. Specifically, they are both responsible in some way for the marital unfaithfulness of one. Marriage is, after all, a living relationship with its own life before God—a covenant with life. One insightful student wrote it this way: “Marriage is a community of the Spirit of two, the very Spirit that promises to make all things new.” We are called upon to see the couple the way God sees the couple and to support every effort for reconciliation, the restoration of oneness.

Third, we must consider the pastoral danger that we may be continuing a harsh response to sexual sin, woven deeply in the pages of church history from the intended stoning of John 8 until today. This severity of punishment does not demonstrate God’s grace as all embracing of all sinners but, instead, may carry forth the agenda of angry hearts bent on severe condemnation of sexual sin. The seventh commandment becomes different from the others. Still today, in Mideastern countries such as Yemen and Ethiopia, “honor killings” by family members take the lives of women caught in adultery in order to preserve the name of the family. In the days of Calvin in Geneva, the attitude toward sexual sin was quite severe. There were two forms of torture that could be authorized by the general council to extract the truth from persons suspected of adultery. In 1566, two years after Calvin ended his ministry in Geneva, the general council of the city adopted an ordinance that those caught in adultery were to be punished by the sentence of death. Women caught in the act were drowned in the Rhone River, and men were beheaded outside the city gates.14 There was really no forgiveness for adultery. It may be that to some degree in our evangelical Christian psyche things are much the same. In mind and heart do we still stone the adulterer? If so, then the gospel has a way to go to truly meet the couple crippled by marital unfaithfulness.

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14 See Robert M. Kingdon, Adultery and Divorce in Calvin’s Geneva (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994) for a well-informed discussion of the divorce cases that Geneva faced in Calvin’s years of ministry. Also see David L. Smith, “Divorce and Remarriage from the Early Church to John Wesley,” The Trinity Journal (1990): 131-42. By Calvin’s view, a traditional Protestant perspective, there were four reasons that would give grounds for divorce: adultery, impotence, extreme religious incompatibility, and abandonment. He also “provided for annulment when a spouse could not, because of some physical infirmity, perform the conjugal act” (138).
Pressing for a tougher ethic of divorce that gives less weight to Matthew’s exceptive clauses brings us to a higher level of expectation as well as hope. First, we can see the sin of marital unfaithfulness in the light of God’s grace. What follows from this view is that marital unfaithfulness is a forgivable sin. Certainly unfaithfulness in marriage strikes at the heart of the marital vow because marriage is a sexual promise. Certainly it rips a deep wound in a marriage, but it is first of all a sin that needs forgiveness, not a reason for divorce. As one colleague stated it, “If a covenant is broken, that does not mean that a covenant is gone.” God’s way for marriage is that it be permanent. Adultery with another is to be forgiven as is every sin committed against us. From an ethical perspective, my view is that it is never right to use a default to divorce based on marital unfaithfulness; if divorce does happen as the “right” decision, it must be for other reasons.

Smedes argues in a similar vein as follows:

Given the total gist of the gospel, and given what seems to be the best of compassionate common sense, we can conclude at least this: Adultery by itself does not destroy a marriage. It may wound persons very deeply; it assaults the contract to which both parties consented at the beginning of their marriage; it flies in the face of God’s will for sex and marriage; it makes a reasonably good marriage much harder to sustain; and it might even trigger an avalanche of resentment and recrimination that eventually does destroy a marriage. However, adultery as such does not have the power to undo a life-union.\(^{15}\)

Second, disallowing a default to divorce based on the exceptive clauses of Matthew positions pastors and church leaders and family and friends to pray for the “final exertion” of which Barth speaks to find a road to redemption through the hard work of discovering what remains to be forgiven in the heart of the marriage. Only such effort will move a broken marriage forward to the mending that can occur when God’s Spirit opens the eyes of those who have sinned against each other. The redemptive messes that people create in marriage can become the occasion for God’s revelation to both husband and wife about the divine reasons that God “stuck them with each other.”

Third, a tougher ethic of divorce with its emphasis on redemptive possibility will see divorce as the “right choice” only when it is judged to be the lesser of two evils. This is to say that although divorce is not God’s way, it is at times necessary because, as Smedes suggests, God “sometimes disapproves of its alternatives even more than he disapproves of divorce.”\(^{16}\) This serves as a different foundation for ethical judgment by elders who are charged with the supervision of the spiritual lives of church members. They are challenged, by this way

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\(^{15}\) Lewis B. Smedes, *Sex for Christians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 200.

of thinking, to continually emphasize the permanence of marriage, encourage those in marital distress to fight the good fight of personal accountability, to seek new insight into the dark corners of their own hearts, and to work toward mutual forgiveness. Couples are to be considered one with regard to marital responsibility—to do the marital homework of discerning what God wants them to learn about themselves. Then, only when there is failure in this pastoral method, when a husband or a wife refuses to be accountable; refuses to honor the boundaries of marital promise; and refuses to engage the spiritual resources of praying Christian friends, the ministry of Word and Spirit in pastoral care, and the effort of marital therapy; only then, when it is also judged that the destruction of staying in such a conflicted marriage is greater than the destruction of leaving it, only then may it be considered the correct decision. Obviously, this may be the case when there is consistent adultery or ongoing abuse. There are times when the pain is too awful to know, when people in marital conflict are unable to manage the task of reconstruction and reconciliation because the wounds of life have cut too deep. It is true that in such cases people may need to file for the divorce to salvage life. They should never be told to endure in a manner that is not redemptive. Only then ought divorce be seen as the correct call.

This is a harder road, but it is a higher road that opens up more opportunity for the work of God’s Spirit to redeem what has been lost since the days when couples fell in love, often blinded to the realities of their own wounded hearts. They found that only in the depths of passion, pain welled up and drove them from each other. Cast from the garden, no longer naked and unashamed, they reeled at the injuries of sin and evil away from God. Only by toil, by the sweat of keeping their marital promise, can they be delivered from further suffering. It is the Gardener who shows us the way. He left the garden too, voluntarily on his own, to find us and teach us that to marry in this world is to practice repentance and offer forgiveness. Best we learn from him.

As we well know, despite our wayward adulterous walk as God’s children, the faithfulness of God and God’s corresponding forgiveness brought us back to our covenant with him. As we all know, the love of Christ is about a love so deep that he could forgive us for what we put him through on Calvary and look to the great wedding day of Revelation 21 when we will be his bride. As we all know, the Spirit moves in ways so wonderful that even we can forgive those who trespass against us in marriage. By our Christian view of marriage, God does just the right thing when he brings us to each other as husband and wife. A ten-year-old girl named Kristen was asked this question: “How do you decide whom to marry?” She thought for a moment and then responded with these words, “No person really decides before they grow up who they’re going to marry. God decides it all way before, and you get to find out later who you’re stuck with.” Of such is the goodness of the providence of God.