

Divorce in the New Covenant. (Rev. Dr. Todd S. Bordow)

I. The problem – determining the pastoral goal

- A. Save marriages
- B. Seek repentance

Important question – if A, might never get B. If B, might not end in A?

Suggest B biblical answer

II. The Old Covenant – easy divorce **Deut. 24:1-4** *When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife, then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the Lord.*

- A. Matt 19:8 – Not ideal, because of Israel's hardness of heart
- B. Concern – protection of the woman

III. New Covenant – heightened ethic. **Matt 5:31&32.** *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 sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.'*

- A. Matt 5 - Six antheses comparing OC ethic to NC ethic
- B. Three interpretive options
 1. Correction view – Jesus correcting misunderstanding of the Mosaic Law
 2. Lutheran view – Jesus is stating ideal only he can fulfill – “must be perfect”
 3. Redemptive -Historical view – Jesus is stating the heightened ethics in his kingdom of heaven he is establishing through his death, the age of the Spirit.

“In each case Jesus replaces a Mosaic command with instructions that express the ethical goal toward which the Mosaic law points. In cases where the Mosaic law in question is a pragmatic attempt to legislate a less than ideal situation, Jesus nullifies the command altogether by demanding a change in the situation itself so radical, that if it takes place, the legislation becomes unnecessary.” (Frank Thielman, *The Law and The New Testament*, pg. 51).

“The Sermon on the Mount portrays the ideal of the person in whose life the reign of God is absolutely realized. This righteousness...can be perfectly experienced only in the eschatological kingdom of God. It can nevertheless to a real degree be attained in the present age; insofar as the reign of God is actually experienced.... Even as the kingdom has invaded the evil age to bring to

people in advance a partial but real experience of the blessings of the eschatological kingdom, so is the righteousness of the kingdom attainable, in part if not in perfection, in the present order. Ethics, like the kingdom itself, stands in the tension between present realization and future eschatological perfection.” (George Ladd)

C. The use of hyperbole in the antitheses to speak of NC ethics

5:23 - leave offering, 5:29&30 - cut your eye out, arm off, 5:34 - No oaths

Matthew 5:31&32 - hyperbole

1. You cannot make your wife commit adultery by your sinful actions
2. There are cases where it is not adulterous to marry a divorced woman
3. No mention of wives divorcing husbands
4. Paul lists at least one other reason for divorce – abandonment

The point

1. Jesus is not moving from hyperbole to exact legislation
2. Sexual immorality represents breaking of the marriage covenant - example
3. There should be no easy divorce in the new covenant between Christians, heightened from Mosaic code – Spirit softens hearts
4. Two people filled with the Spirit should make marriage last until death
5. In God’s eyes, if you cause a divorce, you are responsible even if divorce is declared (she commits adultery figuratively because in God’s eyes he is still responsible. God will judge the sinful one who caused the divorce.)
6. The counseling focus is to call to repentance the one(s) causing the divorce, not necessarily the one filing for divorce

IV. Reformed History – Cruelty as exception (if Matt 5 not exact legislation)

William Perkins (1558-1602) labeled “malicious dealings,” or, “intolerable conditions,” “loss of life, or breach of conscience” as exceptions for divorce

William Gouge (1575-1653) “Gouge was one of the divines who helped craft the WCF Gouge had such a broad definition of desertion that, like Perkins, desertion could be an action on the part of an unbelieving spouse who lives in obstinate sin, not necessarily the one who physically departs. Gouge was willing to consider that if one spouse apostatizes from the faith, that spouse has, in effect, deserted his Christian spouse, and after trying to plead with the apostate person to repent, but to no avail, the Christian spouse may seek a divorce” (PCA 1992: 197).

V. The Gospel and Hardness of Heart, and Cruelty

A. The gospel and Spirit gives us ability and power to love – regular cruelty demonstrates an unbelieving heart

B. A spouse (in the church) who is consistently cruel to his/her spouse has hardened his/her heart to the gospel

VI. Counseling principles and strategy in troubled marriages with cruelty (most common)

- A. The pastor is not a marriage counselor, he is a spiritual counselor.
 - 1. Rel w God – your calling, expertise
 - 2. Someone hardened hearts to God
 - 3. If less, life skills, get help
- B. The pastor, in a potential divorce, looks for a hardened heart, or hearts.
- C. A pastor cannot do more than the Spirit can do, do not overestimate your power.
 - 1. Thirty years gospel – no love
 - 2. I can work with, warn, etc... naïve, prideful, setting yourself up failure
- D. Saving the marriage at all costs often results in further abuse, even suicides
 - 1. I've seen this – keep parties from moving out
 - 2. Can't take it anymore – what have you done?
- E. It is not for the session to make final decisions on who can divorce in s cruelty situation, that is up to the spouse. There is no such thing as an ecclesiastical divorce in the Bible.
 - RC – middle ages
 - OT, not Rabbis, spouse
- F. You must bring church discipline against the abusive party, if unsure, God will sort it out. End of 35 years, not easy discern, someone is lying. Not detectives
- G. Be careful of concern about church image; minister to people.
 - 1. I remember – must not look anti-nomian
 - 2. Dangerous – rush for image
- H. Do not give advice on the legalities of divorce, refer to professionals.
- I. All positions have gray areas
 - 1. What is sexual immorality?
 - 2. What is desertion? Abuse, same house, no talking, sex?
 - 3. What about physical abuse?
- J. Regularly cruelty has abusive elements to it, both psychological and physical.
- K. Cruelty can crush souls. People have their limits. Be careful not to push people to that limit
- L. Two miserable people practically divorced but staying together does not glorify God, nor is it a goal of the church
- M. There is much room between supporting/approving a divorce and disciplining for a divorce.

