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Biblical Perspectives on Marriage and Family

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Editorial Office & Subscription Services:

SBTS Box 2388
2825 Lexington Rd.
Louisville, KY 40280
(800) 626-5525, x4413

Editorial E-Mail:

journal@sbts.edu

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Editorial: Marriage and the Family

Thomas R. Schreiner

Thomas R. Schreiner is a professor of New Testament at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He has also taught New Testament at Azusa Pacific University and Bethel Theological Seminary. He is the author of *Romans* in the Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament and co-author of *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance*. His most recent book is *Paul, the Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology*. In addition, he is serving as the preaching pastor of Clifton Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky.

Cultural opposition to a biblical view of marriage, family, and the role of women appears to be unending. The rise of the pro-homosexual movement constitutes one example of an anti-family agenda. Some denominations are not merely debating whether homosexuality is morally permissible. They are disputing whether or not homosexuals should be ordained as ministers of the gospel. Many unbelievers insist that rejecting the moral legitimacy of homosexuality stems from hatred. Unfortunately, some who maintain that they are believers make the same argument. The worldview of secular culture does not only oppose the church; in some instances it has invaded and captured the mind of some who claim the name of Christ. Many ordinary Christians would be shocked to discover what is taught about marriage, family, and the role of women in colleges and universities that claim to be Christian.

As believers, our desire is to submit to the lordship of Christ in every arena of life. There is no realm over which Jesus Christ should not reign as our sovereign. Hence, we submit to scriptural authority in formulating our view of marriage, the family, and the role of women. We do not trumpet our own ideas about marriage, nor do we appeal to “our experience” or “what God told me” when facing controversial questions like divorce and remarriage or the role of women. We turn to the scriptures to study and seek what God has to say about topics that provoke debate even among Christians. We acknowledge that the Bible has the final and authoritative word on how to conduct ourselves as

husbands and wives, parents and children, and men and women.

If our desire is to pattern our lives by the scriptures, we must study and understand them. Before we proclaim the truth, we must ensure that we know the truth, and such knowledge can only be derived from study. The scriptures are clear, for example, that divorce is never a good thing. It is never ideal for marriages to break apart, for the covenant bond between a husband and wife to be severed. Recent sociological study confirms that children suffer significantly as a result of divorce. The claim that divorce is “better for the children” is in most instances a myth. Preserving marriage, working at a marriage is one of the pathways for our sanctification and holiness as Leigh Conner demonstrates in this issue. When we marry, we enter the school of holiness, as we submit to what God desires to teach us.

The covenantal union between men and women, more particularly the joys of the physical consummation of that union is portrayed in the Song of Solomon. Danny Akin’s sermon from Song of Solomon addresses the responsibilities of husbands and wives. Dr. Akin reminds us that Christ is Lord over every realm of our lives, including how we behave sexually.

Is divorce ever justified? I have already noted that divorce is never ideal, but is it in some cases permissible? The church of Jesus Christ has debated this question throughout history. We have two very fine articles on this question in the current issue. Gordon Wenham, a well-known OT scholar from England, argues that divorce

is permissible in some instances but never remarriage. William Heth takes the other position. He maintains that both divorce and remarriage are justified in some cases. Those who have followed the exegetical debate on divorce and remarriage may be surprised to see Wenham and Heth writing on *opposing* sides relative to divorce and remarriage. In 1984 they published a book together defending the view that remarriage is never right, and an updated edition holding the same position appeared in 1997. Wenham continues to hold the view propounded in both the 1984 and 1997 editions. Heth, on the other hand, has slowly changed his mind, and readers are introduced to his new position here. Our hope is that readers will come to an informed understanding on divorce and remarriage through the help of these two articles.

We are all aware of the intense debate on the role of women in the church. Books propounding the egalitarian view continue to pour forth from publishers. A new book on women, slaves, and homosexuals by William Webb has provoked some discussion. Some have wondered if his hermeneutical approach represents a new breakthrough. In an extended review article I argue that Webb's thesis is not compelling. At the end of the day his conclusions do not differ significantly from the typical egalitarian reading of the text. The old egalitarian reading of the text is simply dressed up here in new hermeneutical clothes.

The relationship between parents and children is fundamental to human society. If families prosper society prospers. If families are dysfunctional, society becomes dysfunctional. Rigorous study of biblical texts on the relationship between parents and children is lacking. We are delighted

to include an essay on this subject by a Hungarian NT scholar, Peter Balla. Dr. Balla's essay is part of a larger forthcoming monograph in which he investigates the biblical teaching on parents and children.

Jesus on Divorce: How My Mind Has Changed

William A. Heth

William A. Heth is Professor of New Testament and Greek at Taylor University and has served as a professor at Taylor since 1986. Dr. Heth has written extensively on the issue of divorce and remarriage. He co-authored with Gordon Wenham *Jesus and Divorce*. A second edition of this work was published in 1997.

Introduction

What did Jesus mean when he spoke out prophetically against divorce and remarriage as it would have been understood and practiced by his first-century hearers? How literally should we interpret those pronouncements? Did Jesus intend to set forth an exceptionless absolute? Or should we approach his divorce sayings as rhetorical overstatements intended to emphasize a particular point, but admitting of exceptions? How would his audience have understood those sayings, and what can we learn from his earliest disciples' attempts to understand and apply Jesus' teaching to their respective Christian communities? Did they faithfully reflect the intent of the one they called Lord and master, or would Jesus be displeased with how they had modified his standard? Furthermore, how should we, his twenty-first century followers, apply them in our very different socio-cultural contexts? These are the kinds of questions that scholars ask as they wrestle with the NT records of Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage.

The American edition of *Jesus and Divorce* appeared in 1985 with the subtitle *The Problem with the Evangelical Consensus*.¹ What is that consensus? The majority of evangelicals believe that Jesus permits remarriage after divorce for marital unfaithfulness (Matt 5:32; 19:9) and that Paul sanctions remarriage when Christian spouses are abandoned by unbelieving mates (1 Cor 7:15). We argued to the contrary that even though marital separation or legal divorce may be advisable under

some circumstances (persistent adultery, physical or verbal abuse, incest, etc.), Jesus taught that his disciples should not remarry after divorce. In short, remarriage after divorce for whatever reason—even sexual immorality (Matt 5:32; 19:9)—was a violation of the seventh commandment, “You shall not commit adultery” (Exod 20:14; Deut 5:18).² How do matters stand now?

The consensus appears to be stronger than ever. *Christianity Today's* 1992 readers survey revealed that

The majority believe that fornication (73 percent) and desertion by a non-Christian spouse (64 percent) are two scriptural grounds for remarriage. At the same time, a significant minority believe Jesus taught that believers should not remarry after divorce (44 percent) and that God designed marriage to be permanent, and remarriage constitutes adultery (44 percent). Less than four out of ten believe there may be reason for remarriage other than adultery or desertion.³

Furthermore, nearly every one of the weighty American commentaries on the Gospels written since 1984 essentially defends the majority view,⁴ and so does every article in IVP's reference collection that touches on marriage, divorce, remarriage, and adultery.⁵ Though we continued to defend our views in the face of others' rejection of our exegesis,⁶ only two scholarly monographs and one major commentary affirmed Wenham's and my understanding of the divorce texts.⁷ For me, personally, this proved troubling. This

meant that the best of evangelical scholarship had read our material and found it wanting—scholars that I admired and who sought to handle these texts as critically and fairly as we attempted to (especially Stein, Carson, and Blomberg).⁸

As noted in the 1997 appendix to *Jesus and Divorce*, no major new interpretations of Jesus' teaching have been proposed since its publication in 1984, and of the six major interpretive approaches we originally surveyed, only two remain as viable options today: (1) the majority evangelical Protestant view and (2) the minority early church fathers' or "no remarriage" view. The view that *porneia* in the exception clauses should be understood to mean marriage within forbidden degrees of kinship (Lev 18:6-18) and that it refers to a specific situation facing Matthew's church in which Gentile converts were incorporated into a Jewish Christian context, is no longer a viable interpretive option.⁹

In what follows I will set forth the major positions on the crucial texts for both the majority and minority views and then explain what caused me to reconsider my interpretive grid and modify my perspective over the past nine years. In the chart under the majority view I will substitute some of the more recent arguments related to the OT texts that I have gleaned from G. Hugenberger's work, *Marriage as a Covenant*,¹⁰ for this is the work that has corrected my understanding of the nature of the marriage covenant encapsulated in

Genesis 2:24 and the way all ancient Near Eastern law codes, including the Bible, have always made a distinction between justifiable as opposed to unjustifiable divorces. I would like to quote here at the outset, if not for the reader, at least for myself, R. F. Collins's reminder in the Introduction to his erudite study on *Divorce in the New Testament*:

In the study of the New Testament, there are more than merely methodological issues which must be considered. Exegesis, the science of the interpretation of texts, is not an exact science, as chemistry and physics may claim to be. Exegesis is a matter of the interpretation of data, a matter of sensitivity and judgment. Even scholars viewing the data from the same angle often come to different conclusions. The use of similar methodology does not always provide the same results.¹¹

And I might also add from my own experience that holding fast to one or two inaccurate concepts means that several others will have to be misconstrued in order to bring coherence to the whole.

Majority and Minority Views

Though other considerations could be noted, the following chart depicts the major points of contention between the majority who believe that the NT allows remarriage after divorce for one or more reasons and the minority who believe that Jesus did not want his disciples to remarry after divorce.

Issue	Majority	Minority
<p>The nature of biblical covenants</p>	<p>Covenants may be both violated and dissolved.¹² The primary sense of “covenant” (<i>b^erit</i>) is that it is an “elected, as opposed to natural, relationship of obligation established under divine sanction.”¹³ Covenants were “the means the ancient world took to extend relationships beyond the natural unity by blood.”¹⁴ Minority view’s point about Hos 1:9 is correct as far as it goes; but once the covenant is broken by Israel’s infidelity, God can legitimately divorce Israel such that the people are no longer acknowledged as “my people” (Hos 1:9). However, the legal right to disown his people does not preclude the completely unexpected and infinitely gracious possibility that God may yet establish a new covenant.</p>	<p>Covenants are binding and cannot be broken.¹⁵ E.g., Hos 1:9 is <i>not</i> an announcement by God of the dissolution of the covenant comparable to divorce. “The covenant nowhere makes provision for such an eventuality. Covenant-breaking on the part of Israel (unilateral withdrawal) calls for severe punishment. Israel cannot opt out by no longer acknowledging Yahweh. The punishment is not an expression of a broken relationship. On the contrary, it is enforced within the relationship; punishment maintains the covenant.”¹⁶</p>
<p>Gen 2:23 — “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” & Gen 2:24 — “leave and cleave” and “become one flesh”</p>	<p>[Agrees with the Heth and Wenham minority view’s points, but qualifies them.] “[T]he ‘relationship formula’ [Gen 2:23] is not merely an assertion of an existing blood tie, ‘but is rather a covenant oath which affirms and establishes a pattern of solidarity.’”¹⁷ “Clearly, sexual union is the indispensable means for the consummation of marriage both in the Old Testament and elsewhere in the ancient Near East.¹⁸” Sexual union probably functioned this way because it was viewed as the oath-sign that ratified the marriage covenant.</p>	<p>The marriage covenant is comparable to the <i>kinship bond</i> that exists between parents and children. The <i>covenanted</i> (“leave” and cleave” are covenant terms; cf. Deut 10:20; 11:22; 13:4; 30:20; Josh 22:5; 23:8; Ruth 1:14-16) <i>and consummated</i> marriage witnessed and joined by God (Mal 2:14; Matt 19:6 / Mark 10:8b-9) results in the two becoming “one flesh,” that is, kin or blood relatives. The kinship nature of marriage is also indicated by the Gen 2:23 relationship formula, “bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh” (cf. 29:14; 37:27; Judg 9:1-2; 2 Sam 5:1; 19:12-13).¹⁹</p>

Issue	Majority	Minority
<p>Deut 24:1-4</p>	<p>The scholarly consensus is that “the intent of this casuistic law is neither to authorize divorce, nor to stipulate its proper grounds, nor to establish its requisite procedure. Rather its sole concern is to prohibit the restoration of a marriage after an intervening marriage.”²⁰ The v. 4 prohibition closes a legal loophole that otherwise might seem to legitimize a form of adultery.²¹ Other reasons have been offered also.</p>	<p>The minority view agrees with the scholarly consensus (which also notes that there are two types of divorce mentioned in vv. 1-3: the one that has just cause [“some indecency”] and the other based on aversion [“hate”] which has adverse financial penalties for the offending husband). Deut 24:4 prohibits unjust enrichment (due to estoppel).²²</p>
<p>Mal 2:16– “I hate divorce”</p>	<p>Interpretation is vexed by a translation problem. ESV is most probable: “For the man who hates and divorces, says the LORD, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts ...” Malachi only condemns divorce based on aversion (i.e., unjustified divorce). “Mal. 2:16 shares the same assessment of divorce based on aversion as seems to be presupposed for the second divorce in Deut. 24:3, with its adverse financial consequences for the offending husband.”²³</p>	<p>NIV translates: “‘I hate divorce,’ says the LORD God of Israel, ‘and I hate a man’s covering himself with violence as well as with his garment,’ says the LORD Almighty.” This is an absolute prohibition of divorce.²⁴</p>

Issue	Majority	Minority
<p>Luke 16:18</p>	<p>This is Luke’s one example of radicalizing the law, and the way it is stated admits of no exceptions. The casuistic form is employed for emphasis and exaggeration: it presents an ideal like Jesus’s sayings in Mark 10:11-12. Jesus’ concern is not with legal definitions but with moral exhortation.²⁵ Alternatively, Luke uses this saying as an allegorical statement on Jesus’ non-abolition of the Law (v. 17)— the person who annuls part of the Law in favor of some other practice is like a man divorcing his wife in favor of another woman. Provides no help in determining Jesus’ literal views on divorce and remarriage.²⁶</p>	<p>The introductory “Everyone who divorces” (<i>pas ho apolyōn</i>) employs a legal ordinance form similar to OT casuistic law.²⁷ Jesus teaches a <i>standard</i> (as opposed to an <i>ideal</i>) that he expects his disciples to keep. Paul apparently follows Luke’s (and Mark’s) unqualified form of Jesus’ saying in 1 Cor 7:10-11. Only two alternatives present themselves in case of divorce: remain unmarried or else be reconciled.</p>
<p>Mark 10:11-12</p>	<p>Jesus, a prophetic wisdom teacher, uses rhetorical overstatement to drive home a general point to hostile questioners. Thus Mark simply records Jesus’ emphatically stated divorce saying without intending to specify possible exceptions. Jesus cannot be construed as teaching an “exceptionless absolute” based on Mark because both Matthew (5:32; 19:9) and Paul (1 Cor 7:15) qualify Jesus’ prohibition of remarriage after divorce. Alternatively, Jesus’ sayings should be understood as generalizations that admit of exceptions.</p>	<p>Yes, Jesus was questioned by the Pharisees, but his final word for them is found in v. 9: “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” However, Jesus’ absolute prohibition of divorce and remarriage is reserved for the disciples in the Markan place of private instruction, “the house” (7:17; 9:28; 10:10; cf. 4:34). Jesus is clarifying kingdom standards for his disciples, to whom Jesus gives insights into the mysteries of the kingdom of God (4:11), not addressing unbelieving outsiders whom he wants to bring to repentance with a prophetic word.</p>

Issue	Majority	Minority
Matt 5:32	<p>The exception, applied in a legal way, qualifies Jesus' prophetic pronouncement (i.e., a wisdom saying that should be read as a prophetic and somewhat hyperbolic summons to an ideal like the preceding sayings about anger and lust).²⁸ The exception reflects the language of Deut 24:1 and identifies a valid divorce. For first-century Jewish readers, a valid divorce by definition included the right to remarry.</p>	<p>This saying employs a legal ordinance form similar to OT casuistic law (cf. Luke 16:18a). This antithesis cannot be read in light of the first two. Jesus sets before the disciples a <i>standard</i> (as opposed to an <i>ideal</i>) that he wants them to keep. The exception restricts the statement "causes her to commit adultery." It is tautologous: if one's wife has already committed adultery, then the husband who divorces her does not make her commit adultery. She has made herself one already. The question of freedom to remarry after a lawful divorce is not addressed.</p>
Jesus' Orientation toward Deut 24:1 in Matthew 19//Mark 10	<p>Matthew sees Jesus as explaining the meaning of the law. Deuteronomy's "some indecency" = Matthew's "sexual immorality." In the OT, divorce for "some indecency" identified a legally valid divorce. Valid divorces always included the right to remarry. Jesus <i>demotes</i> Moses' concession in Deuteronomy and subordinates it to Genesis, but valid divorces are God's permissive will for some innocent victims of divorce.</p>	<p>Jesus <i>opposes</i> the way the Pharisees employed Deut 24:1 and contrasts divorce with God's will "from the beginning." Jesus would neither interpret nor abrogate something Moses never legislated. Jesus prohibited what Moses permitted; he did not permit what Moses prohibited. So Jesus neither divinely interprets nor abrogates Deut 24:1. It was a <i>concession</i> to human sinfulness in the OT era and contrary to God's will all along.</p>

Issue	Majority	Minority
<p>Matt 19:9 and the syntax of the exception clause</p>	<p>Exceptions are precisely exceptions. That the clause modifies both the divorce action and the remarriage action is determined more by the concept of justifiable divorce than by Greek grammar. The clause, either spoken by Jesus himself (Carson, Blomberg) or supplied by Matthew under the Spirit’s inspiration (Stein, Keener, Hawthorne), clearly justifies divorce for immorality and permits remarriage. True, marriage must <i>not</i> be dissolved. But if dissolved by persistent sexual immorality, the marriage covenant is violated.</p>	<p>The placement of the clause after “divorces” but before “and remarries” argues that Jesus permitted divorce for marital unfaithfulness but not also remarriage. In a culture that demanded the wife be divorced for immorality, the exception clause relieves the man of the responsibility for the divorce and its consequences. Understands Matthew’s exception in light of the unqualified form of Jesus’ sayings in Mark, Luke, and Paul (i.e., remarriage after any divorce results in adultery) and the Gen 2:24 “kinship” nature of the marriage relationship.</p>
<p>Meaning of “divorce” (<i>apolyō</i>)</p>	<p>Valid divorces always included the right to remarry. Both Jewish and Roman cultural contexts permitted, yea even required, divorce for adultery and remarriage could naturally follow. Thus Matthew’s readers would assume that the divorce Jesus permits for immorality must be the same kind of divorce that Jesus’ contemporaries practiced: it included the right to remarry. If it meant separation or legal divorce only, without the right to remarry, then Matthew’s readers would not have readily recognized this semantic shift without further explanation.</p>	<p>Evidently the bill of divorce does not dissolve the marriage since Jesus states that remarriage amounts to adultery (Matt 5:32b; 19:9b). Matthew’s Jesus rejects the Pharisees’ proof-text for their “remarriage-assumed” view (Deut 24:1) and instead appeals to Gen 2:24 (with its kinship understanding of marriage) as the basis for his views. Three factors suggest that Jesus’ reference to “divorce” does not sanction remarriage: (1) the “one flesh” kinship concept of marriage; (2) the probably authentic longer reading of Matt 19:9 (“and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery” [cf. Matt 5:32b]); and (3) Jesus’ response to the disciples’ objection in vv. 10-12.</p>

Issue	Majority	Minority
<p>Matt 19:10-12 & the “eunuch saying”</p>	<p>Even with the exception, Jesus’ position is more daunting than Shammai’s. “This saying” (v. 11) refers to the disciples’ objection in v. 10 that “it is better not to marry.” Jesus recognizes that God enables some to remain celibate for the sake of advancing the claims and interests of God’s kingdom (cf. 1 Cor 7:7, 25-38).</p>	<p>“This saying” (v. 11) refers to Jesus’ difficult word against divorce and remarriage in v. 9. “Those to whom it is given” are the faithful disciples (as opposed to Pharisees and outsiders [cf. 13:11-12]) that Jesus encourages (v. 12) to embrace his difficult word that they should remain single after divorce even for sexual immorality.</p>
<p>How do Jesus & Shammai differ?</p>	<p>Jesus is more radical than Shammai. Jewish (and Roman) law <i>mandated</i> divorce for sexual immorality, but Jesus only <i>permits</i> it. This means that broken marriages <i>may</i> still be restored.</p>	<p>Jesus is <i>much</i> more radical than Shammai. Shammai <i>mandated</i> divorce for sexual immorality, but Jesus <i>prohibits</i> most divorces and remarriage after divorce for <i>porneia</i> (i.e., adultery, bestiality, incest, sodomy, homosexuality, etc.)</p>
<p>1 Cor 7:10-11</p>	<p>Paul is talking about divorce in situations other than divorce for sexual unfaithfulness. The believers advocating asceticism (1 Cor 7:1) wanted to enforce their “no sexual relations” slogan on the married (vv. 1-7), the widowers and widows (vv. 8-9, 39-40), those advocating separation (vv. 10-16), and the engaged (vv. 25-28, 34, 36-38), who, like other singles (vv. 29-35), are still free from matrimonial ties and could live single <i>if</i> they have the gift of sexual self-control (vv. 7, 9a; cf. Matt 19:11-12).</p>	<p>Studies indicate that Paul’s teaching on sexuality, marriage, and singleness in 1 Corinthians 6 and 7 stems from the same tradition of Jesus’ teaching that Matthew records in 19:3-12. Yet Paul says that if a divorce or separation takes place, “let them remain unmarried or else be reconciled.” Where Paul specifically mentions the possibility of remarriage, in <i>both</i> instances he notes explicitly that one of the spouses has died (1 Cor 7:39; Rom 7:2-3). Thus Paul follows the teaching of Jesus.²⁹</p>

Issue	Majority	Minority
<p>1 Cor 7:15—“not enslaved” (<i>ou dedoulōtai</i>)</p>	<p>This phrase distinctly frees the innocent party to remarry.³⁰ The essential formula in the Jewish bill of divorce were the words “you are free to any man” (<i>m. Git.</i> 9:3). Paul employs the same formula for believers abandoned by unbelieving spouses.³¹ <i>Douloō</i> (1 Cor 7:15) and <i>deō</i> (1 Cor 7:39; Rom 7:2) “are related”³² and used interchangeably (unless one excludes categories so as to have so few examples left as to be able to argue whatever one wishes). Both free someone who was once married to remarry.</p>	<p>Like Matthew’s exception clause, Paul’s qualifier relieves the innocent party of the guilt of violating Christ’s command <i>not</i> to divorce (mentioned 4x in vv. 10-13). Nothing is said about the possibility of remarriage. The following considerations suggest remarriage is not permitted: (1) marriage is a creation ordinance, binding on all irrespective of their faith or the lack thereof; (2) Paul has already specifically prohibited remarriage in vv. 10-11; (3) when Paul speaks about the binding character of marriage he uses the term <i>deō</i> (Rom 7:2; 1 Cor 7:39; cf. 7:27, a promise of engagement), not <i>douloō</i> (1 Cor 7:15); and (4) where he clearly mentions the possibility of remarriage, Paul also refers to the death of one of the marriage partners (1 Cor 7:39; Rom 7:2).</p>
<p>1 Cor 7:39 & Rom 7:2—“a wife is bound (<i>dedetai</i>) to her husband as long as he lives”</p>	<p>1 Cor 7:39 involves a real case at Corinth and Rom 7:2 occurs as an illustration of how the Mosaic law only has power over people as long as they live. Paul does not have in view divorce for sexual immorality in either place.</p>	<p>Whenever Paul mentions the possibility of remarriage, in both cases he notes specifically that one of the spouses has died. This is Paul’s ordinary usage for the indissolubility of marriage as long as a mate is living.</p>
<p>Church Fathers</p>	<p>A growing, unbiblical asceticism, especially in sexual matters, distorted and restricted the fathers’ interpretation of Jesus and Paul’s teaching. Note the asceticism promoted in 1 Corinthians 7 already.³³</p>	<p>The historic teaching of the church—up to the 6th century in the East and up to the 16th century in the West—stands firmly behind a no remarriage understanding of Matt 19:9 and 1 Cor 7:15.</p>

Initial Doubts about My Minority View

I found my own “no remarriage” understanding of Jesus’ teaching on divorce challenged when I first read C. S. Keener’s book . . . *And Marries Another* in the fall of 1992.³⁴ For the first time since 1982—the year I wrote my Th.M. thesis on divorce and remarriage—I began to wonder if the defense for my “no remarriage” position was as exegetically sound as I had thought.

In November of 1994 I presented a paper at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society responding to Keener’s exegesis. I revised it and published it as “Divorce and Remarriage: The Search for an Evangelical Hermeneutic.”³⁵ It was that spring that Gordon Wenham and I were finalizing the appendix to *Jesus and Divorce* for the Paternoster reprint that finally appeared in 1997; but to be honest, my heart was not fully into writing it. I had begun to feel the weight of the majority position’s arguments. I had written and read so much about this subject that I felt jaded and numbed by the whole issue. Nevertheless, I held out hope that I still might be right and did as much as I could to keep defending our “no remarriage” view in that appendix.

When people would ask whether or not I still held my view, I simply said, “I don’t know what to believe any more.” I had to face the fact that the key articles in IVP’s *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (by R. H. Stein) and *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (by G. F. Hawthorne) were in essential agreement with Keener’s book. I knew my own intellectual limitations well enough not to presume that “I alone must be right,” and one personal conversation with Bob Stein at a professional meeting convinced me that he was as

eager as I was to follow Jesus’ teaching wherever it might lead. I wanted to understand why the best defenders of the majority view were not persuaded by my arguments to the contrary.

Rethinking 1 Corinthians 7:15

Early on in my study of the biblical teaching on marriage and divorce I was influenced greatly by G. Bromiley’s little book, *God and Marriage*. Bromiley develops a theology of marriage patterned after God’s relationship with Israel and Christ’s relationship to the church and paints the kind of “big theological picture” that helps one see the forest of God’s design for marriage through the sometimes ambiguous exegetical trees.³⁶ I was puzzled, however, why Bromiley agreed with me that Matthew’s exceptions did *not* clearly permit remarriage, but *did* believe that Paul allowed remarriage to the Christian deserted by an unbeliever (1 Cor 7:15).³⁷ If Jesus had taught that marriage is for life, and that remarriage after divorce for whatever reason amounts to adultery, how could Paul permit remarriage after divorce in a situation that seemed “less serious” (depending on one’s viewpoint) than the remarriage after divorce for immorality that Jesus disallowed?³⁸

About ten years later when I read in Keener’s statement that Paul’s “not under bondage” (KJV) “distinctly frees the *innocent* party to remarry” and that “If Paul meant that remarriage was not permitted, he said precisely the opposite of what he meant,”³⁹ I found myself initially agreeing with his straightforward analysis of Paul’s language.⁴⁰ Keener argued that the essential formula in the Jewish bill of divorce, “You are free to marry any man” (*m. Git.* 9:3), functions in precisely the same way as Paul’s “not being enslaved”

in 1 Corinthians 7:15. However, I went on to challenge Keener's arguments that "not being enslaved" is different from being "free" to remarry both lexically and conceptually.⁴¹ Without going into all the details here, having just reread my response to Keener after ignoring it for the past six years, I do not see how I missed the fact that Paul's *negative* formulation ("In such cases the brother or the sister is not enslaved") *was* making precisely the same point as the *positive* formulation in the Jewish bill of divorce ("You are free to marry any man"). That Keener was not at all persuaded by my counter arguments is evident by the italicized word in the following 1 Corinthians 7:15-related statement I recently found in his 1999 commentary on Matthew: "Paul's words recall the *exact* language for freedom to remarry in ancient divorce contracts, and his ancient readers, unable to be confused by modern writers' debates on the subject, would have understood his words thus..."⁴² This meant that if Paul made an exception to Jesus' seemingly absolute prohibition of divorce and remarriage in 1 Corinthians 7:15, then it was certainly possible that one could interpret Jesus' exception clauses in Matthew in similar fashion.⁴³

Nevertheless, I knew that both Jesus and Paul adopted viewpoints quite the opposite of their surrounding culture, and that where Paul did mention permission for remarriage, in both places he also explicitly refers to the death of one of the spouses. G. D. Fee had also highlighted the similarity between the language of Romans 7:2-3 and Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 7:39: "A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord." Fee adds that "the language 'bound to a

woman (= wife), '...is Paul's ordinary usage for the indissolubility of marriage as long as a mate is living (v. 39; Rom. 7:2)."⁴⁴ He also makes a telling comment about 1 Corinthians 7:39, one that waves a caution flag in the face of attempts to fill in the answers to nagging interpretive questions by appealing indiscriminately to known first-century cultural backgrounds: "The first statement, 'A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives,' runs so counter to Jewish understanding and practice at this point in history that it almost certainly reflects Paul's understanding of Jesus' own instructions (see on v. 10). As such it is a final word against divorce and remarriage."⁴⁵

To sum up, I had relied quite heavily on 1 Corinthians 7:39 and Romans 7:2-3 as evidence that Paul followed Jesus' understanding of marriage as a "one flesh" kinship relationship that could not be dissolved. I also believed that Paul was reflecting Jesus' sayings in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 when he allowed the divorced believer only two options: "remain unmarried or else be reconciled." However, I had to admit that Paul may not have had divorce for sexual immorality in view in any of those statements. Certainly at Corinth Paul was addressing a situation where divorce was being advocated by those who claimed to be believers, and the ascetic party was trying to force their views of sexual abstinence (cf. 1 Cor 7:1) on both the married and the formerly married (vv. 1-16, 39-40) as well as those pledged to be married and the never-before-married (vv. 25-38).⁴⁶ This led me to reconsider again the possibility that Jesus' teaching on divorce involved either generalizations or rhetorical overstatements that were never intended to be understood as exceptionless absolutes.

Rethinking the Form of Jesus' Divorce Sayings

I have just come off of a fall semester where I was asked to teach the Gospels course at Taylor University to fill in for a colleague on sabbatical. Never having read Blomberg's NAC commentary on Matthew from beginning to end, I chose it as one of my texts for the course. I thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to work through his entire exposition of Matthew's message and his many insightful practical applications. On a number of occasions I drew my students' attention to his cautious avoidance of interpretive extremes.⁴⁷ I was impacted, too, by his very balanced treatment of Jesus' teaching on divorce. As a result, he gained my trust.

Though it almost seems too obvious to mention now, when the Pharisees asked Jesus where he stood on the matter of divorce (Matt 19:3//Mark 10:2), the pronouncements he made were not addressed to friendly disciples who were eager to obey fully his every word. Blomberg's warning caught me off guard: "The specific historical background that informed this debate, the particular way in which the question is phrased, and the unscrupulous motives behind the Pharisees' approach all warn us against the notion that Jesus was comprehensively addressing all relevant questions about marriage and divorce."⁴⁸ Thus it is quite likely that we should not treat "Jesus' words as if they were the objective, referential language of jurisprudence seeking to convey a legal precept."⁴⁹

The sayings in both Mark 10:11-12 and Luke 16:18 give the impression that under no circumstances would divorce or remarriage be possible. However, there are two ways to understand the form of Jesus' divorce saying. It is either an exaggeration (Stein, Keener, Hawthorne, Collins) or "a generalization which admits of certain exceptions."⁵⁰ The former view emphasizes that Jesus referred to himself as a prophet (Matt 13:57), taught as a wise man (Matt 12:38-42), and spoke out powerfully against the religious hypocrisy and injustices he observed (Matthew 23). Therefore, if Jesus wanted to drive home a particular point in the midst of a hostile audience, "his omission of any qualification may be understandable."⁵¹ Davies and Allison note that

Jesus' saying about divorce was, when first delivered, probably intended to be more haggadic than halakhic; that is, its purpose was not to lay down the law but to reassert an ideal and make divorce a sin, thereby disturbing then current complacency (a complacency well reflected in Hillel's view that a woman could be divorced even for burning food: *m. Git.* 9.10). Jesus was not, to judge by the synoptic evidence, a legislator. His concern was not with legal definitions but with moral exhortation (cf. 5:27-30).⁵²

On the other hand, I would prefer to classify Jesus' sayings as generalizations, even though the exposition is essentially the same under either category. I just think words like "exaggeration," "hyperbole," and "rhetorical overstatement" convey the wrong idea. Based on what I have recently learned, I now find myself in agreement with Blomberg:

Few try to make the pronouncements in various other controversy or pronouncement stories absolute (cf. e.g., Matt 19:21, 9:15, and esp. 13:57, a particularly interesting parallel because of its similar exception clause . . .), so one should be equally wary of elevating 19:9 (or Mark 10:11-12) into an exceptionless absolute. The casuistic legal form ("whoever") does not undermine this

claim; parallel “sentences of law” (e.g., Matt 5:22, 27, 39, 41) also contain implicit qualifiers.⁵³

I think a good case can be made that Jesus himself uttered the exception clause. I formerly held that the disciples’ incredulity (v. 10) in the face of Jesus’ saying on divorce in v. 9 could only be explained if Jesus had prohibited all remarriage after divorce, even divorce for sexual immorality. Stein, too, admitted that “Even in the Matthean account the reaction of the disciples seems best understood in the light of a total prohibition against divorce (see Matt 19:10-12). Such a reaction would be surprising if Jesus had uttered the ‘exception clause’ since this was essentially the position of the school of Shammai.”⁵⁴ I think there is a third alternative. From Jewish writings outside the Bible, we know that first-century pre-rabbinic marriage and divorce practice influenced Jewish custom on several points. Not only had the discussions of Hillel and Shammai turned the concession of Deut 24:1 into a right to be claimed (cf. Matt 5:31), a veritable “husbandly privilege,”⁵⁵ but first-century Judaism had distorted the intent of the Mosaic *command* found in Deuteronomy 24:4. This prohibition of a man returning to his first wife after she had remarried and divorced a second time (or her husband had died) was cast in the extreme so that a husband was prohibited from *ever* returning to his wife if she had sexual relations in any form with another man. She had to be divorced (cf. Joseph and Mary in Matt 1:19), even if she was an innocent victim of rape.⁵⁶ If Jewish law *mandated* divorce for sexual unfaithfulness *and prohibited* a wife from ever returning to her husband after she had been unfaithful, Jesus may be countering both of these notions via the excep-

tion clause, which would *permit* divorce for immorality and might even *encourage* offended spouses to forgive and take back unfaithful mates.⁵⁷ I am convinced that Jesus’ goal would parallel Yahweh’s relentless pursuit of unfaithful Israel throughout the OT and that he would try to save a marriage at all costs. Thus the exception clause means that Jewish marriages *may* still be kept together even if divorce for *porneia* occurs (cf. the forgiveness requirement in Matt 18:21-35 and the model of the father in Luke 15:11-32). This would have been shocking to first-century Jews, suggesting that Jesus’ view is more strict than Shammai’s—the radical love of God does unexpected things—and adequately explains the disciples’ horrified reaction to Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 19:10.⁵⁸

Rethinking the Meaning of “Divorce”

The major criticism of the minority view that Jesus did not permit remarriage after divorce, even divorce for sexual immorality, has always been that in the first-century world a legitimate divorce included the right to remarry. C. S. Mann states the point emphatically: “The notion that Jesus was allowing separation, but not divorce, cannot be sustained—as Judaism had no such custom, he would perforce have had to explain it.”⁵⁹ I tried several times to argue that Jesus *had* made it sufficiently clear that he was investing *apolyō* (“I divorce”) with a different semantic content,⁶⁰ but my arguments have not proved convincing. I knew the syntactical argument we employed only opened the door to harmonizing Matthew with an absolute reading of Mark, Luke, and Paul.⁶¹ Further, I have always taught my Greek exegesis students that when it

comes to validating exegetical problems, grammar gets you into the ball park, and sometimes gets you on base, but it will never get you to home plate.⁶² So why did I persist? Why did I continue to think that Jesus must be using the word “divorce” with a new sense?

It seemed very clear to me. Jesus brushes aside the Pharisees’ Deuteronomy 24:1-based concept of “divorce” and replaces it with the Genesis 2:24-based concept that husband and wife become “one flesh.” After quoting Genesis 2:24 in Matthew 19:5//Mark 10:7-8a, Jesus reiterates the significance of the two becoming one flesh by saying, “So they are no longer two but one flesh. What God has joined together let no one separate” (Matt 19:6//Mark 10:8b-9). This meant that the “one flesh” concept in its OT context was the basis for whatever Jesus was saying about the permanence of marriage. Yet none of the books or articles on divorce and remarriage—I had collected around 100 by then—ever nailed down this concept.⁶³

Then in the midst of doing research for my 1982 Th.M. thesis, I stumbled across an obscure yet impressive doctoral dissertation done by A. Isaksson at the University of Upsala, Sweden.⁶⁴ This is where I learned two concepts that steered my exegesis from that point on (cf. minority view of Gen 2:24 in the chart above): “leave” and “cleave” were covenant terms and were later employed to refer to God’s covenant with Israel, and “one flesh” in Genesis 2:24 was an abbreviation of Adam’s remark in Genesis 2:23. To be someone’s bone and flesh was a common OT expression to denote kinship and family solidarity. Since (1) I assumed God’s covenant with Israel could not be broken (cf. Rom 11:28-29), (2) that the fidelity of

Yahweh towards Israel, whom he had joined with himself in a covenant (*b^erit*), is implicitly put forward as a model for husband and wife in Malachi 2, and (3) that kinship relationships cannot be undone, then marriage must be a covenant-based kinship relationship that lasts until death.

There was only one problem. I was missing two crucial details about biblical covenants and the nature of that Genesis 2:24 “one flesh” relationship: (1) biblical covenants can be violated and dissolved and (2) the “one flesh” marital-kinship union is not a literal flesh and blood relationship. (I have already incorporated both of these points in the top two boxes in the chart under the majority view.)

Rethinking the Meaning of “One Flesh” and the Nature of Biblical Covenants

Gordon Hugenberger’s *Marriage as a Covenant: Biblical Law and Ethics as Developed from Malachi* is the most comprehensive study of its title’s focus to date. He also draws upon all the pertinent ancient Near Eastern and related biblical legal and narrative material touching on betrothal, marriage, divorce, and sexual offences.⁶⁵ This study supplied the final “programming” that I needed to resolve the cognitive dissonance on the subject of remarriage after divorce that I have experienced for the past ten years. On my former “no remarriage” view of Jesus’ teaching, what proved most troubling to me all along (though I did have an answer for it) was that Jesus would be labeling as adultery the remarriage of someone whose spouse’s unrepentant sexual immorality or subsequent remarriage had made the restoration of the original marriage impossible. This just did not sound

like the God “who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth” (Jer 9:24).

Hugenberger notes from the start that “the relationship between biblical marriage law and covenantal concepts has been left largely unresolved and, much of the time, virtually ignored.”⁶⁶ He adds that a study of the covenantal nature of marriage could help resolve some of the remaining difficulties in comprehending the biblical ethics and practice of marriage; and one such difficulty is the dissolubility of marriage, i.e., what constitutes covenant breaking. Some say that if marriage is a covenant, then it might be possible to break the covenant by divorce.⁶⁷ Others argue that not divorce, but only sexual infidelity “breaks” the covenant. P. F. Palmer, on the other hand, claims that covenants, unlike contracts, are inherently “inviolable” and “unbreakable.”⁶⁸ The data in my head began to reformat when Hugenberger responded to Palmer’s “unbreakable” covenant notion by saying that “in terms of Hebrew usage covenants may be both violated and dissolved—with both of these concepts expressed by the same underlying Hebrew expression which is customarily rendered ‘broken’ in most English versions...”⁶⁹ I knew immediately that my no remarriage view had been placed in jeopardy.⁷⁰

I learned that the primary sense of “covenant” (*b^erit*) is that it is an “elected, as opposed to natural, relationship of obligation established under divine sanction.”⁷¹ Covenants were “the means the ancient world took to extend relationships beyond the natural unity by blood,”⁷² and “*b^erit* is nowhere employed of naturally occurring relationships and the ordinary obligations which attend them, such as

those which exist between parents and a child or between blood brothers (cf. Gen. 4:9).”⁷³ I had argued that the covenant and consummation of marriage made two totally unrelated people as closely related as they will be to their own flesh and blood children. However, the unity between unrelated persons established by the marriage covenant is *not* the same as a vertical blood relationship between a parent and a child nor the horizontal blood relationship that exists between siblings. The Genesis 2:24 phrase, “they become one flesh,” refers “to the bondedness which results from and is expressed by sexual union” and “refers to the establishment of a new family unit” (cf. Gen 29:14; 37:27; Lev 18:6; 2 Sam 5:1; Isa 58:7).⁷⁴

As already noted in our chart above, “leave” and “cleave” in Genesis 2:24 are clearly covenant terms, as Hugenberger also argues,⁷⁵ and there are four essential ingredients in the OT understanding of “covenant” (*b^erit*): “it is used of 1) a relationship 2) with a non-relative 3) which involves obligations and 4) is established through an oath.”⁷⁶ The scholarly consensus is that an oath is indispensable for ratifying a covenant, and God is invoked in any ratifying oath to act as “the enforcer” of the covenant.⁷⁷ The marriage covenant, as opposed to a contract, involves three persons—the bride, the groom, and God. Furthermore, “covenant-ratifying oaths often consist of *verba solemnia*, that is, a solemn declaration of the commitment being undertaken—solemn because the deity was implicitly invoked as a witness.”⁷⁸ These oaths were not just *verbal* (nor primarily so), but were frequently symbolic: they consisted of “oath-signs” (sharing in a meal, the giving of a hand, etc.).⁷⁹ Adam’s verbal oath-sign is found in Genesis 2:23: “This is now bone of my

bones and flesh of my flesh" (NIV). Far from being a "jubilant welcome" addressed to Eve, Adam addresses these words to God as witness, says Hugenberger: "[T]hese words appear to be a solemn affirmation of his marital commitment, an elliptical way of saying something like, 'I hereby invite you, God, to hold me accountable to treat this woman as part of my own body [cf. Eph 5:28].'"⁸⁰

So what role, then, does sexual union play in the formation of the marriage covenant? Hugenberger argues "that sexual union (*copula carnalis*), when engaged in with consent (i.e., both parental, in the case of dependent daughters, and mutual), was understood as a marriage-constituting act and, correspondingly, was considered a requisite covenant-ratifying (and renewing) oath-sign for marriage, at least in the view of certain biblical authors."⁸¹ "Clearly," says Hugenberger, "sexual union is the indispensable means for the consummation of marriage both in the Old Testament and elsewhere in the ancient Near East."⁸²

It should be obvious now that sexual infidelity is a particularly grave violation of the marriage covenant, a sin against both the covenant partner and against God,⁸³ and if covenants can be violated and dissolved, this sin strikes at the marriage covenant in a unique way. As Carson noted years ago in his commentary on Matthew:

... sexual sin has a peculiar relation to Jesus' treatment of Genesis 1:27; 2:24 (in Matt 19:4-6), because the indissolubility of marriage he defends by appealing to those verses from the creation accounts is predicated on sexual union ("one flesh"). Sexual promiscuity is therefore a *de facto* exception. It may not necessitate divorce; but permission for divorce and remarriage under such circum-

stances, far from being inconsistent with Jesus' thought, is in perfect harmony with it.⁸⁴

Though I was cognizant of Carson's point the year his commentary was released, a few other possibly misconstrued pieces of biblical data (see above) caused me to believe that marriage was "'till death do us part.'" What ultimately caused me to do an about face was a series of OT passages that were lumped together over several pages in Hugenberger.⁸⁵

I was struck with the gravity of the sin of adultery in the eyes of both God and man. Hugenberger noted that "the Old Testament appears to presuppose a general moral consciousness in man, shared even by pagans, which acknowledges adultery as a heinous wrong committed not only against the injured husband, but also against God" (cf. Gen 20:6, 9, 10).⁸⁶ God exclaimed to Abimelech, a Gentile, that if he did not return Sarah to Abraham, "know that you shall surely die, you, and all who are yours" (Gen 20:7). The seriousness of the sin of adultery was obvious to Joseph too. When Potiphar's wife said, "Lie with me" (Gen 39:7), Joseph exclaimed: "How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God" (39:9).⁸⁷ If this is how offensive God viewed a sexual violation of the marriage covenant, then how could I continue to believe that Jesus, God's son, would not view that same sin similarly?

To conclude, the Genesis 2:24 "one flesh" relationship that results from the covenant of marriage ratified by sexual consummation is not an indissoluble union, just one that should preeminently not be dissolved, and a sexual sin like adultery is *the* preeminent violation of the marriage covenant. When we realize that ancient Near Eastern and OT (Deut 24:1,

3; Mal 2:16) divorce law distinguished between divorce without justification (“hate and divorce” in Deut 24:3; Mal 2:16) and divorce with grounds (“some indecency” in Deut 24:1),⁸⁸ it seems most probable that the exception clause in Matthew points to divorce with just cause, a valid divorce that would permit remarriage,⁸⁹ and Jesus limits that just cause to *porneia*.

Pastoral Implications

What does all of this mean for the application of the biblical teaching on divorce and remarriage now that I have come to believe that Paul’s (1 Cor 7:15) and Jesus’ (Matt 5:32; 19:9) words point to a just cause for divorce? As I mentioned earlier, under my “no remarriage” view I felt odd about saying that Jesus would forbid remarriage to the innocent person whose spouse’s unrepentant sexual immorality or subsequent remarriage had made the restoration of the original marriage impossible. This has now been resolved in my mind. Second, in the case of the genuine exceptions, after innocent parties have made all reasonable attempts to save the marriage, neither the church nor mission agencies should stigmatize one’s subsequent decision to remarry or to remain single. Third, if we factor in our own contemporary cultural differences, reflect on the accumulated canonical witness to God’s merciful dealings with his people, take seriously the call to model the forgiveness we received from Christ at the cross and the call to imitate our heavenly Father as his beloved children (Eph 5:1-2), then we should know *not* to apply Jesus’ and Paul’s exceptions in *exactly* the same way their first-century hearers would have applied them. Their culture mandated divorce for sexual immorality. Both Jewish and Roman law, “required a

husband who learned of his wife’s affair to divorce her immediately,” and if he did not do so, “Roman law allowed him to be prosecuted for the offense of *lenocinium*—pimping”⁹⁰ Today I think Jesus would label as unforgiving someone who divorced their spouse for a “one night stand.”

Though we do not have any NT examples illustrating the precise way Jesus’ (or Matthew’s) and Paul’s exceptions might be applied, at least two paradigms teach us to be gun shy of getting trigger-happy with them. First, though Yahweh had the legal right to disown his people due to their infidelity (cf. Hos 2:2a/ /1:9), he only threatened Israel with divorce. However, “just as the threatened covenant of dissolution in Hosea 1 is followed by an unexpected promise of covenant renewal in Hos 2:1-3 [ET 1:10–2:1], so also the threatened divorce in Hos. 2:4ff. [ET 2ff.] is followed by an unexpected promise of a new marriage in Hos. 2:16ff. [ET 14ff].”⁹¹ God’s gracious covenant love ultimately overcomes Israel’s infidelity. Second, I agree with R. B. Hays that “the Christ/church typology [cf. Eph 5:21-33] presents an extraordinarily high standard for marriage; if marriage truly reflects the love between Christ and the church, it should be characterized by infinite loyalty and self-sacrificial love.”⁹²

What, then, do the two exceptions in the majority view have in common, and what can we learn from them about how to handle divorce cases today? At this point in my study, I would second Keener’s summary of Blomberg’s insightful comparison of the two. The principles that unite both Jesus’ (or Matthew’s) and Paul’s exceptions are: (1) both sexual immorality and abandonment violate one of the two fundamental components of

marriage (either the “leaving and the cleaving” or the “one flesh” unity); (2) “Both leave one party without any other options if attempts at reconciliation are spurned”; and (3) “Both recognize the extreme seriousness of divorce as a last resort and as an admission of defeat.”⁹³

Might there be additional legitimate grounds for the dissolution of a marriage?⁹⁴ Here one must be cautious. Some do feel that physical abuse justifies divorce, and I am sympathetic with this suggestion.⁹⁵ Even on my former “no remarriage” view, I taught that in a home where a parent was abusing the children or a spouse was being abused, common ethical sense dictates that Jesus would not require the concerned parent to stay. I agree with Keener that both Jesus and Paul would “would advise the one parent to take the children and leave, at least temporarily.”⁹⁶ However, incompatibility and fits of anger would not fit under the banner of *porneia*. Also, provision for a spouse’s food, clothing, and housing, affection, communication, spiritual leadership, and a host of other qualities, are, no doubt, important requirements in marriage—but failures in these matters do not justify divorce. I am leery, too, of appealing to verses like 1 Corinthians 7:9 (“It is better to marry than to be aflame with passion”), which Paul addresses to widowers and widows (vv. 8-9), and then turn this into a basis for remarriage because one’s sexual needs go unfulfilled if a spouse invalidly divorces them and chooses not to remarry. Paul is quite clear that believers are to remain unmarried or be reconciled in this situation (1 Cor 7:10-11; cf. Matt 5:32b / Luke 16:18b). Also, the OT stories of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife (Genesis 39) and David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11) imply that God has given

us control over the sexual area of our lives and that we are not slaves to bodily passions. Furthermore, my never-before-married single friends are quite suspicious of arguments that seek to justify remarriage primarily to satisfy unfulfilled sexual desires. Certainly, as a lesser of two evils, it would be better to marry than to commit sexual immorality, but this raises other questions I cannot address here.

If we have understood Paul correctly in 1 Corinthians 7:15, willful desertion by an unbelieving spouse who subsequently remarries makes the restoration of that marriage impossible, and I would see no barrier to remarriage (unless, perhaps, for conscientious reasons the abandoned believer desires to remain single). But what if the unbelieving deserter does not remarry? In time and with great assurance that the marriage cannot be restored, it would seem that the Christian could remarry. Just how long one should wait would be determined by one’s theologically informed conscience and whether or not God providentially brings along a Christ-centered believing partner.

One or two writers find in Paul’s counsel in 1 Corinthians 7:27-28 explicit permission for divorcees to remarry. I am quite confident that Paul is *not* here making a blanket statement that “remarriage—like the marriage of a virgin—has problems, but also that it is not sinful.”⁹⁷ This makes Paul explicitly approve of remarriage after divorce without qualification. The ESV now helps clarify Paul’s intent: “Are you bound to a wife (*dedesai gynaike*)? Do not seek to be free (*mē zēteï lysin*). Are you free (*lelytai*) from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman (*hē parthenos*) marries, she has not sinned.” There is a growing consensus,

though not without its problems, that Paul is speaking to the concerns of some engaged couples in vv. 25-38 (cf. NIV, NRSV, RSV translations of vv. 36-38).⁹⁸ The men were asking Paul whether or not to follow through with their promise to marry (cf. *deō* in v. 27) in view of the ascetic teaching they had come under in Corinth.⁹⁹ Paul's initial (vv. 25-28) and final (vv. 36-38) remarks in this section are directed specifically to these couples.¹⁰⁰ Though Paul personally prefers the single state, he wants them to know—contrary to what the ascetics probably taught—that it is *not* sinful to go through with their plans to marry (vv. 28, 36). Thus 1 Corinthians 7:27-28 should not be brought into discussions of the NT teaching on the ethics of remarriage after divorce.

I would like to comment on one final implication of the biblical teaching on divorce and remarriage for church leaders, namely pastors/elders/overseers, deacons, and deaconesses. The most recent studies of “the husband of one wife” requirement (1 Tim 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6) argue that it is a typical ancient way of saying “faithful to one’s marriage.” Paul does not prohibit from church office those who, against their own wishes, have been abandoned or sexually betrayed, but those who are unfaithful to their marriage.¹⁰¹ Thus divorcees should not automatically be excluded from leadership positions in the church, nor should those who have remarried after the very limited cases in which the NT permits remarriage after divorce (i.e., divorce with just cause).

Conclusion

It may sound odd for me to say this now, but my switch to the majority view could be wrong. Nevertheless, I have tried to enumerate the conceptual, theological,

and exegetical reasons for my shift at this time in my life, and the reader will have to decide for himself or herself whether or not I have made the right decision. I think there are some excellent arguments to be made in favor of the minority view. Yet I have found that scholars like Collins, Davies and Allison, Hagner, and Hays, whose exegesis leads them to believe that Jesus categorically prohibited divorce and remarriage, eventually speak of Jesus’ divorce sayings as an ideal that must be realistically applied in this “not yet” era. Their suggested modern applications are almost identical to what we find among proponents of the majority view. Both majority and minority views want to avoid extremes in their application of the NT teaching. Minority view proponents may unfortunately prohibit what God would permit,¹⁰² and majority view proponents may permit what God would prohibit. The latter is the danger in a culture that emphasizes “self-actualization,” personal fulfillment, and “being true to oneself” rather than being true to the attendant commitments and obligations of one’s marriage covenant. Hays writes:

[T]he church must recognize and teach that marriage is grounded not in *feelings* of love but in the *practice* of love. Nor is the marriage bond contingent upon self-gratification or personal fulfillment. The church has swallowed a great quantity of pop psychology that has no foundation in the biblical depiction of marriage; When the marital union is rightly understood as a *covenant*, the question of divorce assumes a very different aspect. Those who have made promises before God should trust God for grace sufficient to keep those promises, and they should expect the community of faith to help them to keep faith, by supporting them and holding them accountable.¹⁰³

Let's teach God's word, preach to his glory, and disciple and equip God's people so that they find their greatest satisfaction and enjoyment in being obedient to Jesus. Only as we seek to please the Lord and imitate our heavenly Father as his dearly loved children (Eph 5:1) will we please one another—and that includes spouses. "He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church" (Eph 5:28b-29).¹⁰⁴

ENDNOTES

¹W. A. Heth and G. J. Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce: Towards an Evangelical Understanding of New Testament Teaching* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1984; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985; updated ed.; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997). In the ten year update we added a 34 page appendix and over 350 additional bibliographical entries, most of them appearing since 1984.

²ESV and so throughout unless indicated otherwise.

³Haddon Robinson, "CT Readers Survey: Sex, Marriage, and Divorce," *Christianity Today*, 14 Dec 1992, 31. Over two-thirds of the 1,500 readers surveyed—primarily church leaders—responded. This was one of the highest responses in two decades of subscriber research. Only one out of ten respondents were divorced.

⁴D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. F. E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984); W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, Jr., *The Gospel accord-*

ing to Saint Matthew, 3 vols. (International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988-95); C. S. Mann, *Mark* (Anchor Bible 27; Garden City: Doubleday, 1986); C. M. Blomberg, *Matthew* (New American Commentary 22; Nashville: Broadman, 1992); R. H. Stein, *Luke* (New American Commentary 24; Nashville: Broadman, 1992); J. Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34* (WBC 35B; Dallas: Word, 1993); D. L. Bock, *Luke*, 2 vols. (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994-96); C. S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). The exceptions are R. H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) and D. A. Hagner, *Matthew*, 2 vols. (Word Biblical Commentary 33; Dallas, TX: Word, 1993-95). This sample is not intended to be exhaustive.

⁵R. H. Stein, "Divorce" in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. J. B. Green and S. McKnight (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992) 192-199; G. F. Hawthorne, "Marriage and Divorce, Adultery and Incest," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. G. F. Hawthorne and R. P. Martin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993) 594-601; C. S. Keener, "Marriage, Divorce and Adultery" in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, ed. R. P. Martin and P. H. Davids; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997) 712-717; C. S. Keener, "Adultery, Divorce" in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed. C. A. Evans and S. E. Porter (Downers Grove, IL:

InterVarsity Press, 2000) 6-16.

⁶G. J. Wenham, "Matthew and Divorce: An Old Crux Revisited," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 22 (1984) 95-107; "The Syntax of Matthew 19.9," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 28 (1986) 17-23; "Divorce," in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. B. M. Metzger and M. D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 169-171. W. A. Heth, "The Meaning of Divorce in Matthew 19:3-9," *Churchman* 98 (1984) 136-152; "Matthew's 'Eunuch Saying' (19:12) and Its Relationship to Paul's Teaching on Singleness in 1 Corinthians 7" (unpublished doctoral dissertation; Dallas Theological Seminary, 1986); "Divorce and Remarriage," in *Applying the Scriptures: Papers from ICBI Summit III*, ed. K. S. Kantzer (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 219-239; "Unmarried 'for the Sake of the Kingdom' (Matthew 19:12) in the Early Church," *Grace Theological Journal* 8 (Spring 1987) 55-88; "Divorce, but No Remarriage," in *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*, ed. H. W. House (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990) 73-129; "The Changing Basis for Permitting Remarriage after Divorce for Adultery: The Influence of R. H. Charles," *Trinity Journal* 11 ns (1990) 143-159; "Divorce and Remarriage: The Search for an Evangelical Hermeneutic," *Trinity Journal* 16 ns (1995) 63-100.

⁷A. Cornes, *Divorce and Remarriage: Biblical Principles and Pastoral Practice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); Warren Carter, *Households and Dis-*

ciplanship: A Study of Matthew 19-20 (Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 103; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994); Hagner, 549. Cf. also M. Bockmuehl, "Matthew 5.32; 19.9 in the Light of Pre-Rabbinic Halakah," *New Testament Studies* 35 (1989) 291-295. Others not dependent on us include R. H. Gundry, *Survey of the New Testament*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 191; J. C. Laney, *The Divorce Myth* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1981); "No Divorce & No Remarriage" in *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*, ed. H. W. House (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990) 15-54. A recent survey and affirmation of our book is D. Warden, "The Words of Jesus on Divorce," *Restoration Quarterly* 39 (1997) 141-153.

⁸See also Blomberg's article "Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, and Celibacy: An Exegesis of Matthew 19:3-12," *Trinity Journal* 11 ns (1990) 161-196.

⁹Wenham and Heth, *Jesus and Divorce*, updated ed., 205-209. The demise of the forbidden degrees of kinship view is the first of four trends we identified as emerging in the decade following the publication of our study. Another recent critique of this view appears in D. Janzen, "The Meaning of *Porneia* in Matthew 5.32 and 19.9: An Approach from the Study of Ancient Near Eastern Culture," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 80 (2000) 66-80, esp. 69-70.

¹⁰G. Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant: Biblical Law and Ethics as Developed from Malachi* (Supple-

ments to *Vetus Testamentum* 52; Leiden: Brill, 1994; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998). I would like to express my deep appreciation to Dr. Hugenberger for several e-mail exchanges and the assistance he provided in the midst of his busy schedule as pastor of the historic Park Street Church in Boston and as adjunct professor of OT and semitic languages at Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary.

¹¹R. F. Collins, *Divorce in the New Testament* (Good News Studies 38; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992) 6-7. See my review of Collins in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39 (1996) 676-678. Collins's approach is thoroughly historical-critical: Matthew is dated in the late 80s; he is a collector of traditions; the form of the exception in 5:32 is pre-Matthean (from his community); and the one in 19:9 is Matthew's formulation.

¹²Cf. Hugenberger, 3, n. 25.

¹³*Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁴D. J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant*, 1st ed. (Analecta biblica 21a; Rome: Biblical Institute, 1963) 175.

¹⁵Cf. P. F. Palmer "Christian Marriage: Contract or Covenant?" *Theological Studies* 33 (1972) 617-665.

¹⁶F. I. Anderson and D. N. Freedman, *Hosea* (Anchor Bible 24; New York: Doubleday, 1980) 221.

¹⁷Hugenberger, 165.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 269.

¹⁹Cf. BDB, "bsr," 142, #4; N. P. Bratsiotis, s.v. "bsr," *TDOT*, 2:327-328.

²⁰Hugenberger, 77.

²¹*Ibid.*, 77, n. 144.

²²Cf. R. Westbrook, "The Prohibition on Restoration of Marriage in

Deuteronomy 24:1-4," in *Studies in the Bible 1986* (Scripta Hierosolymitana 31; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1986) 387-405, adopted by Heth, "Divorce, but No Remarriage," 82-87.

²³Hugenberger, 83.

²⁴Note: As I recall, neither Heth nor Wenham ever advocated this view of Mal 2:16.

²⁵C. S. Keener, . . . *And Marries Another: Divorce and Remarriage in the Teaching of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991) 26-27.

²⁶Blomberg, "Matthew 19:3-12," 162, n. 5.

²⁷J. A. Fitzmyer, *Luke X-XXIV* (Anchor Bible 28a; New York: Doubleday, 1985) 1120.

²⁸Keener, *Marries Another*, 23.

²⁹Cf. Heth, "Matthew's 'Eunuch Saying,'" 255-266.

³⁰Keener, *Marries Another*, 61.

³¹Keener, "Adultery, Divorce," 6.

³²Stein, "Divorce," 194.

³³Cf. Blomberg, *Matthew*, 292-293.

³⁴I first met Craig in July of 1992 when *Christianity Today* brought us together at O'Hare Airport for a CT Institute on divorce (see the Dec. 14, 1992 issue, pp. 26-37). Craig gave me a copy of his book at that time.

³⁵Heth, "Divorce and Remarriage."

³⁶See R. B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996) for a more recent brief but excellent canonical synthesis (361-376) after his exegesis of the relevant texts (349-361).

³⁷G. Bromiley, *God and Marriage* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 67-68. So also F. F. Bruce: "presumably remarriage would not be completely excluded for the believer"

(1 and 2 Corinthians [New Century Bible; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971] 70; and his *Hard Sayings of Jesus* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983] 61); W. F. Orr and J. A. Walter: "The deserted partner, then, is free to marry again" (1 Corinthians [Anchor Bible 32; New York: Doubleday, 1976] 214); Stein, "Divorce," 198; Hawthorne, "Marriage and Divorce, Adultery and Incest," 599; T. R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001) 431. In 1979 Stein was more nuanced about the intent of 1 Cor 7:15: "One cannot be dogmatic and claim that the believer 'no longer being bound' (7:15) implies the right to remarry, but it would be equally wrong to be dogmatic and say that it excludes the right to remarry" ("Is It Lawful for a Man to Divorce His Wife?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 22 [1979] 120).

³⁸The answer to this question will be found under "Pastoral Implications" section in the words of Blomberg (*Matthew*, 293), seconded by Keener (*Matthew*, 191-192, n. 96).

³⁹Keener, *Marries Another*, 61. Keener still stands firmly behind this assertion: "The basic element of the Jewish divorce contract was the phrase 'you are free,' permitting the wife's remarriage (*m. Git.* 9:3; *CPJ*, 2:10-12 §144); Paul employs the same formula for believers abandoned by unbelieving spouses (1 Cor 7:15; see *DPL*, Marriage and Divorce, Adultery and Incest)" ("Adultery, Divorce," 6).

⁴⁰This was true despite the seven

arguments I had advanced to the contrary in *Jesus and Divorce*, 140-144. I also knew, however, what G. D. Fee had said about 1 Cor 7:15b: ". . . several converging data indicate that Paul is essentially repeating his first sentence: that the believer is not bound to maintain the marriage if the pagan partner opts out. . . . Remarriage is not an issue at all; indeed, it seems to be quite the opposite. In a context in which people are arguing for the right to dissolve marriage, Paul would scarcely be addressing the issue of remarriage, and certainly not in such circuitous fashion" (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987] 302-303).

⁴¹Heth, "Divorce and Remarriage: The Search," 84-89. Ph.D. student, R. G. Olender, seconds and extends my arguments in his "The Pauline Privilege: Inference or Exegesis?" *Faith and Mission* 16 (1998) 94-117. Olender adopts a preterite-type view of Matt 19:9.

⁴²Keener, *Matthew*, 191.

⁴³Cf. Bock, 2:1358, n. 27.

⁴⁴Fee, *First Corinthians*, 331; cf. 295-296, 303, 355-356.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 355.

⁴⁶This is why Paul reminds them twice in this section that "it is no sin" to marry (1 Cor 7:28, 36).

⁴⁷Blomberg, *Matthew*, 111, 190, 198, 204, 342-343 (especially relevant to Jesus' saying in 5:32), 377-378.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 289-290. Cf. G. D. Fee, "Issues in Evangelical Hermeneutics, Part II: The Crucial Issue—Authorial Intentionality: A Proposal Regard-

ing New Testament Imperatives," *Crux* 6:3 (1990) 41.

⁴⁹Stein, "Divorce," 197.

⁵⁰Blomberg, "Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, and Celibacy," 162. Cf. W. Barclay, *Introduction to the First Three Gospels* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975) 63: "The form of these sayings ["If any man . . .," "Whoever," or "Whenever"] makes them general rules and principles, . . ."

⁵¹Stein, "Divorce," 194. "Matthew, led by the Spirit (Jn 16:13, 15), has interpreted Jesus' words and shown that Mark 10:11-12 and Luke 16:18 are overstatements addressed to a hostile audience and that Jesus did not intend in a single sentence to establish a law which would cover ever conceivable situation" (Stein, "Divorce," 194-195).

⁵²Davies and Allison, 1:532; cf. 95-96. I find it precarious to maintain that Jesus *always* spoke in this manner. Thus I disagree with Davies and Allison's assessment that "Matthew must be found guilty of misunderstanding Jesus" when he included the exception clause because it "betrays a halakhic interpretation: it turns the Lord's logion into a community regulation" (532). See further Heth and Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce*, updated ed., 218-219.

⁵³Blomberg, "Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, and Celibacy," 162-163. Blomberg also notes, contrary to the rhetorical overstatement approach, that the exception clause in v.9 need not be understood as "a later, inspired addition. It is rather more likely a portion of Jesus' original teaching which Mark omitted and Matthew restored" (163, n. 8).

⁵⁴Stein, "Is It Lawful," 118. Stein does add that "Matthew goes further than the school of Shammai, however, by relativizing Deut 24:1 as being given 'due to the hardness of men's hearts'" (ibid.).

⁵⁵Gundry, *Mark*, 530.

⁵⁶Cf. Bockmuehl, "Matthew 5.32; 19.9," 291-295. Also Carter, *Households and Discipleship*, 56-89. Nearly every one of the premishnaic texts that Bockmuehl works with were already discussed by A. Tosato, "Joseph, Being a Just Man," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 41 (1979) 547-551 (*Jub.* 33:7-9; 41:20; 1 QapGen 20:15; cf. *Tg. Ps.-J.* 22:26).

⁵⁷This is different than saying Matthew inserted the clause in order to bring Jesus' teaching in line with the then current practice in the Matthean community (older historical critical view). It also differs from Collins's view that the Matt 5:32 form of the clause, with its allusion to Deut 24:1 (cf. Heth and Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce*, 168), suggests that the exception served as a conscience clause for those Jewish Christians who felt themselves duty-bound to divorce adulterous wives, either to be faithful to God's will or to obey then current Jewish (and Roman) law, which demanded they divorce adulterous spouses (*Divorce*, 212).

⁵⁸Interestingly, Collins (120-126) follows the minority view on Matt 19:10-12, but believes that divine enablement to remain single is given to those who divorce or have been divorced for *reasons other than unchastity* (v. 9). Collins's exegesis is seconded by Hays, 376-377, n. 17.

⁵⁹C. S. Mann, 388. Cf. Stein,

"Divorce," 193; Blomberg, *Matthew*, 111.

⁶⁰Heth, "The Meaning of Divorce," 136-152; "Divorce and Remarriage: The Search," 94-97. Gundry also proposes, based on the reaction of the disciples in Matt 19:10 (cf. 5:31-32 where remarriage goes unmentioned), that Jesus allowed an exception with respect to divorce but not remarriage. "If so and if they understood Jesus correctly, he redefines divorce as a dissolution of marriage without the right to remarry" (*Survey*, 191).

⁶¹Heth and Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce*, updated ed., 116-120, 227-229; Wenham, "Matthew and Divorce," 95-107; "The Syntax," 17-23. Jonathan Tripple, one of my former Greek students in my Gospels' course, recently noted in one of our conversations about his excellent 28 page paper on Matt 19:3-12: "To say that the majority view would have been affirmed without a doubt if Matthew had placed the exception clause after the verb 'remarries' rather than between 'divorces' and 'remarries,' is really an argument from silence." For the most recent critique of the syntactical argument, see Janzen, "Meaning of *Porneia*," 70-71.

⁶²" . . . we can feel confident that no reasonable writer would seek to express a major point by leaning on a subtle grammatical distinction—especially if it is a point not otherwise clear from the whole context (and if it is clear from the context, then the grammatical subtlety plays at best a secondary role in exegesis)" (M. Silva, *God, Language and Scrip-*

ture: Reading the Bible in the Light of General Linguistics [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990] 15).

⁶³For example, S. A. Ellisen repeatedly states that the sin of adultery "breaks" or "dissolves" the one-flesh union of husband and wife (*Divorce and Remarriage in the Church* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977] 52, 53, 58, 68, 72, 97, 98, 99), and mentions "one flesh" at least five times, but never once tells us what it signifies and in what sense it is dissolved. Ten years later I read Keener's *Marries Another*, and was convinced he still did not know either. He says that "husband and wife become one flesh when they are united sexually" (*Marries Another*, 40), that "They become one flesh in marriage (Gen. 2:24) because they were originally male and female (1:27) and *began* as one flesh (2:23); for the Hebrew idiom, cf. 29:14; Judg. 9:2; 2 Sam. 5:1; 19:13; 1 Chr. 11:11" (160, n. 18), and that "Jesus uses *this image of spiritual unity* [italics mine] to argue that marriage should not be dissolved by people, not to argue that it *can* not be" (41).

⁶⁴A. Isaksson, *Marriage and Ministry in the New Temple. A Study with Special Reference to Mt. 19.13 [sic]-12 and 1 Cor. 11.3-16*, trans. N. Tomkinson with J. Gray (Acta seminarii neotestamentici upsaliensis 24; Lund: Gleerup, 1965).

⁶⁵Among other surprises, Hugenberger calls into question the traditional view, largely based on Lev 20:10; Jer 29:23, that within the OT a married man could not commit adultery against his wife if he had

sexual relations with an unmarried woman (313). “[T]here are, in fact, no texts which condone a husband’s sexual infidelity,” and “a number of texts, including Job 31:1; Hos. 4:14; and particularly Prov. 5:15-23, make clear that, whether or not there was an *legal* obligation, there definitely was a *moral* obligation for exclusive fidelity on the part of husbands” (338). This view finds its most explicit support from Lev 20:10 and Jer 29:23.

⁶⁶Hugenberger, 1.

⁶⁷Cf. D. J. Atkinson, *To Have and To Hold. The Marriage Covenant and the Discipline of Divorce* (London: Collins, 1979) 91. Cf. Blomberg, *Matthew*, 111 (on Matt 5:32b).

⁶⁸Cited in Hugenberger, 3.

⁶⁹Hugenberger, 3, n. 25. Cf. also R. W. Pierce, “Covenant Conditionality and a Future for Israel,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37 (1994) 27-38.

⁷⁰Blomberg was referring to someone like me when he wrote that “marriage is best described as a covenant, which tragically can be broken, rather than as an indissoluble, mystical union that remains even after divorce (as traditionally held by Roman Catholics, and, curiously, by some very conservative Protestants)” (*Matthew*, 290, n. 6). One week after reading Hugenberger, I checked *Jesus and Divorce* (103-104) and realized that I had quoted from Palmer the very “binding and inviolable” portion with which Hugenberger had taken issue. I had used Palmer to identify the two crucial parts in the formation of ancient Near Eastern marriage covenants:

oaths and witnesses.

⁷¹Hugenberger, 174. This sense is operative in Mal 2:14 (“the wife of your covenant”) where the immediately preceding context (v. 15, “Did he not make them one . . .”) contains a reminder of the “one flesh” nature of marriage in Gen 2:24 (cf. Hugenberger, 124-167).

⁷²D. J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant* 2nd ed. (Analecta biblica 21a; Rome: Biblical Institute, 1981) 175, cited in Hugenberger, 11; cf. 164, n. 161 & p. 180.

⁷³Hugenberger, 180.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 162-163.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 159-160.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 184.

⁷⁷Cf. *ibid.*, 11-12, 193, 215.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 278.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 215.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 165.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 248.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 279.

⁸³Cf. *ibid.*, 281-294.

⁸⁴Carson, 417.

⁸⁵Hugenberger, 288-294.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 291.

⁸⁷In addition to the Abimelech and Joseph narratives, B. S. Childs adds that the seriousness with which Israel viewed adultery is also seen when King David “falls under the death sentence for his adultery with Bathsheba. In the other portions of the Old Testament adulterers are commonly linked with murderers (Job 24.14f.) and treacherous men (Jer. 9.2) who misuse God’s name (Jer. 29.23) and oppress the widow (Mal. 3:5)” (*The Book of Exodus* [Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974] 422). Cf. Heb 13:4: “Let marriage be held in honor

among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.”

⁸⁸See the Westbrook bibliographical reference in the chart at Deut 24:1-4. “Some indecency” would refer to “a cause serious enough to permit the husband to divorce his wife while avoiding any financial penalty. Cf. also, e.g., M. G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King*, 115 (cited in Hugenberger, 81, n. 154).

⁸⁹This is the burden of the article by Janzen, “Meaning of *Porneia*,” 66-80. He understands the Pharisees’ question in Matt 19:3 to be “is divorce without just cause permissible? Can a husband divorce ‘for every kind of reason?’” (78). Janzen argues that the Matthean Jesus is much more stringent than his Pharisaical contemporaries. “Not only does he not permit divorce without just cause, but he limits just cause to sexual offenses, a much narrower interpretation than that found in the Mishnah” (79).

⁹⁰Keener, “Adultery, Divorce,” 9. This concern to avoid the charge of “legalized adultery (closing a possible loophole in the prohibition against adultery)” may well be the ultimate reason for the prohibition in Deut 24:4. In support, Hugenberger cites J. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses arranged in the form of a Harmony*, III, 94: “The reason of the law is, that, by prostituting his wife, he would be, as far as in him lay, acting like a procurer” (*Marriage as a Covenant*, 77, n. 144).

⁹¹Hugenberger, 233.

⁹²Hays, 364. Hays writes: “Once mar-

riage is construed within the story told by Scripture, divorce—even if it is permissible in some narrow sense—is seen to be antithetical to God’s design for male and female” (351).

⁹³Blomberg, *Matthew*, 293. Cf. Keener, *Matthew*, 191-192, n. 96. Blomberg adds: “These observations seem to leave the door open for divorce as a final step, as perhaps the lesser of two evils, when all else has failed, similar to excommunication of unrepentant sinners. To open this door of course means that some will abuse their freedom and walk through it prematurely. And undue attention to the exception clause of v. 9 risks losing sight of Jesus’ overall point that divorce is *never desirable*. Married people should always be seeking ways to improve and enhance relations with spouses rather than wondering how they can get out of the commitments they have made. Those who divorce and/or remarry on any grounds must admit failure, repent of the sins that led to the dissolution of their marriage, and vow to remain faithful to any subsequent relationships.”

⁹⁴Blomberg (*Matthew*, 293), Hays (372), and Keener all answer this question in the affirmative. Keener writes: “Assuming that Jesus’ teaching on the subject is a general principle meant to admit exceptions (as Matthew and Paul demonstrate), and acknowledging the probability that his teaching is hyperbolic, we may allow some exceptions not addressed by Matthew or Paul because they were not specifically relevant to the situations these writ-

ers addressed” (*Marries Another*, 105).

⁹⁵G. P. Liaboe, “The Place of Wife Battering in Considering Divorce,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 13 (1985) 129-138.

⁹⁶Keener, *Marries Another*, 61.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*, 63. Cf. also Keener, *Matthew*, 191; “Marriage, Divorce and Adultery,” 714.

⁹⁸Cf. H. Chadwick, “All Things to All Men,” *New Testament Studies* 1 (1954-55) 267-268; G. Schrenk, s.v. “*parthenos*,” *TDNT* 3:60-61; O. L. Yarbrough, *Not Like the Gentiles: Marriage Rules in the Letters of Paul* (Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 80; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985) 101-102, nn. 35-36; Heth, “Matthew’s ‘Eunuch Saying,’” 206-235, 267-286; D. F. Wright, “Sexuality, Sexual Ethics,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 874; Schreiner, 418. Sexual desires improperly channeled are the common factor in Paul’s teaching in both 1 Cor 7:36-38 and in 1 Thess 4:3-8.

⁹⁹Cf. J. K. Elliott, “Paul’s Teaching on Marriage in 1 Corinthians: Some Problems Considered,” *New Testament Studies* 19 (1973) 219-225. Like Fee, I understand the “virgins” in v. 25 as a term “that the Corinthians used in referring to some young betrothed women who along with their fiancés were being pressured by the pneumatics and were not themselves wondering whether to go through with the marriage. Paul’s response is basically from the man’s point of view because it was the cultural norm for men to take the initiative in all such matters. This assumes the influence of

Roman culture since by the time of the early Empire it was common for men to act on their own behalf, without the father acting as *patria potestas* as in earlier days” (Fee, *First Corinthians*, 327). Cf. also J. F. Gardner, *Women in Roman Law and Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1986) ch. 3.

¹⁰⁰ . . . the situation in vv. 27-28 seems to be reflecting a real concern in the community that is finally particularized in vv. 36-38” (Fee, *First Corinthians*, 315).

¹⁰¹Keener, *Marries Another*, ch. 7, “Can Ministers Be Remarried?—1 Timothy 3:2”; S. Page, “Marital Expectations of Church Leaders in the Pastoral Epistles,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 50 (1993) 105-120; Keener, “Husband of One Wife,” *AME Zion Quarterly Review* 109 (Jan 1997) 5-24. J. E. Smith focuses on another related issue: Does sexual immorality permanently disqualify one from leadership? He concludes that the Pastoral Epistles’ leadership qualifications are concerned with the current, not the past status of a leader’s character, that fallen leaders can be restored *if* both their life and their reputation inside and outside (cf. Rom 2:24) the church can be rehabilitated, but that this may be very difficult (“Can Fallen Leaders Be Restored to Leadership?” *Bibliotheca sacra* 151 [1994] 455-480).

¹⁰²Most readers of my work on this subject did not know that I have always applied my no remarriage view in almost the same way as a diligent proponent of the majority view.

¹⁰³Hays, 372.

¹⁰⁴I would like to thank my colleague, Ted Dorman, for reading this article in an earlier draft and offering helpful editorial suggestions.

Does the New Testament Approve Remarriage after Divorce?

Gordon Wenham

Gordon Wenham is Professor of Old Testament, University of Gloucestershire, and is known internationally for his scholarship. He is the author of numerous books and articles, including the two volume commentary on Genesis in the Word Biblical Commentary series. His most recent book is *Story as Torah: Reading the Old Testament Ethically*. He is also the co-author of the book *Jesus and Divorce*.

“A text out of context is a pretext” is the slogan of all those who try and teach the art of preaching and exegesis. It is my contention that, in their original context, all the Gospel divorce texts should be understood as condemning remarriage after divorce. The full arguments for this view are set out in *Jesus and Divorce*.¹ In this article I wish to address the issue more concisely by considering the various contexts in which the divorce texts may be read: first, the broadest context, the early church’s understanding of the gospel texts; second, the narrower context of the whole New Testament witness to marriage; third, the context in Matthew’s gospel; and finally the context of the debates of first-century Judaism within which Jesus was arguing. By way of a coda I shall then consider whether the dominical condemnation of divorce and remarriage necessarily means that it is excluded in a society that calls itself Christian. The analogy with Jesus’ teaching on violence does, I shall suggest, give a model for behaviour in a world where the new creation has been inaugurated but is not complete.

The Early Church Context

Modern Protestants have by and large forgotten that their forefathers, the magisterial reformers, placed great store by the interpretations of the early church. Post-enlightenment scholarship has developed a great hermeneutic of suspicion when it comes to reading the church fathers: the automatic assumption is that they have distorted the primitive gospel and its

associated practices into a corrupt *Frühkatholismus* (early Catholicism). This was not the reformers’ view, nor of course that of the early Christian writers themselves. They believed in an essential continuity between the witness of the early church and the teaching of the New Testament. At the beginning of his *Institutes* Calvin claims that if he wanted, he “could with no trouble at all prove that the greater part of what we are saying today meets their (i.e. the Fathers’) approval.”² It may be that at last the antipatristic tide is turning, among evangelicals at least, with the publication of the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, which shows how the Fathers understood the Bible from Genesis to Revelation.

Unfortunately the volumes on Matthew are not yet published, but for those who read French H. Crouzel, *The Early Church and Divorce* offers a superb discussion of the passages in the Fathers where the gospel divorce texts are discussed.³ To my knowledge there has been no serious attempt to refute Crouzel: even those who do not like his conclusions accept that it is the definitive study.⁴ It discusses fully and carefully all the comments of Christian writers in the first five centuries on this topic.

Among Greek-speaking fathers both pre- and post-Constantine there is total unanimity. Among the earlier group Hermas, Justin, Athenagoras, Theophilus of Antioch, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen, all explicitly condemn remarriage after divorce or clearly presup-

pose this view. The Constantinian settlement, which made Christianity the official religion of the empire, might have encouraged Christian writers to identify imperial legal practice, which permitted divorce and remarriage, with Christian values, but there is no sign of that happening. Later Greek theologians such as Basil, Gregory Nazianzus, Apollinarius, Theodore of Mopsuestia and John Chrysostom all maintain the traditional Christian position that the Gospels do not permit remarriage after divorce. They regard the exception clause as authorizing or requiring separation, not permitting remarriage afterwards.⁵ That this interpretation was the way native Greek speakers understood our Lord's teaching surely indicates that it is the most natural interpretation.

The evidence of the Latin fathers is equally impressive. It is also carefully and exhaustively analysed by Crouzel. Among those who condemn remarriage after divorce are Tertullian, Ambrose, Innocent, Pelagius, Jerome, and Augustine. There is only one dissenting voice in the West, who cannot be identified, but, because he was once identified with Ambrose, is known as Ambrosiaster. He wrote between 366 and 383. His views on marriage and divorce are strongly influenced by Roman law: for example he regards adultery by a husband as much less serious than that of a wife. She may separate if her husband is unfaithful but not remarry. But when the wife is at fault, he may remarry after divorcing his wife. Ambrosiaster explains the reason for this discrimination: "The inferior cannot exercise the same law as the superior. The man is not bound in the same way by the law as the woman is, for the man is the head of the woman."⁶ But as Crouzel points out this is a misapplication of Ephesians 5, which compares

Christ as head of the church to the position of the husband as head of the household, but "this implies no inequality in the fundamental acts of marriage and the right that each spouse has over the body of the other according to 1 Corinthians 7: 3-4."⁷ This demonstrates how distant Ambrosiaster is, not just from New Testament thinking, but from the general attitude of the early church, which always insisted on the duty of mutual fidelity. Little wonder that Ambrosiaster is totally ignored by subsequent fifth-century Latin writers.

The witness of the early church thus points unequivocally to a no-remarriage understanding of the Gospel divorce texts. Since no modern New Testament scholar can ever hope to approach the Greek fathers' grasp of their mother tongue and its nuances, one will have to have extremely powerful arguments to show that their understanding is not the natural understanding of the texts.

The New Testament Context

But could not all the Fathers have misunderstood the Gospel divorce texts? Although these writers were much closer in time, place, language, and presuppositions than the modern reader is to the Gospel texts, they were not contemporaries of the evangelists, so it is not impossible that they misinterpreted Matthew. I therefore shall now review remarks in the epistles and other gospels to see whether they allow remarriage after divorce. Whether these works were written before, at the same time as, or even after Matthew does not seem clear to me, but it does not really affect my argument. They unquestionably provide a closer context for interpreting Matthew than the Fathers.

Easiest to date are Paul's epistles to the Corinthians and to the Romans, about 55 and 57 AD respectively.⁸ Paul's comments in 1 Corinthians 7:10–11 and Romans 7:2–3 are very explicit: "To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife." Here Paul makes three points very clearly. First, his teaching is based on Jesus' words: this is one of four passages in 1 Corinthians where he explicitly appeals to dominical tradition to justify his instructions. Second, couples should not divorce each other. Third, if one does leave the other, she should not remarry. Paul does not actually say that a husband who divorces his wife should not remarry, but that is surely implied. If he should not divorce his wife, *a fortiori* he should not remarry.⁹

Summing up the thrust of this passage Gordon Fee writes: "there is little question that both Paul and Jesus disallowed divorce between two believers, especially when it served as grounds for remarriage.... On the other hand ... divorce may happen.... What is *not* allowed is remarriage, both because for him that presupposes the teaching of Jesus that such is adultery and because in the Christian community reconciliation is the norm. If the Christian husband and wife cannot be reconciled to one another, then how can they expect to become models of reconciliation before a fractured and broken world?"¹⁰

If the thrust of Paul's teaching is clear, it is not so obvious what form of Jesus' teaching he was appealing to. Did Paul know the Gospel sayings about divorce in the form we now have them in the Gos-

pels or was he appealing to some tradition independent of them? If it could be proven that he knew the sayings in their Gospel form, the no-remarriage view would be home and dry. But of course this is not so easy to demonstrate, especially as the critical consensus is that the Synoptic Gospels were written after Paul's epistles.¹¹ As my case at this point does not rest on Paul knowing Matthew in its present form, but only on the observation that nowhere outside Matthew 19 is there ever a hint that remarriage after divorce might be allowed, I shall first review the remarks in Luke and Mark. Then I shall reopen the question of Matthew 19: could it be that, even if Paul did not know it in its present form, he might have known a Jesus-tradition remarkably like it?

Two cases are discussed in Mark and Luke: (i) the husband who divorces and remarries and (ii) the divorced woman who remarries. I shall consider them in turn. First the remarrying husband: "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her" (Mark 10:11); "Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery" (Luke 16:18a). Slight differences in wording notwithstanding both sayings make two remarkable points. First a husband can commit adultery against his own wife: this is implied by Luke and explicit in Mark. But under Old Testament law adultery was committed against husbands not against wives. If a married man took a second partner in marriage or without marrying her, it did not count as adultery; hence the practice of polygamy was legal. However, if a married woman had sexual relations with anyone except her husband, that was adultery by her and the third party. But this saying of Jesus introduces full reciprocity into marriage law:

infidelity by a husband is just as culpable as infidelity by a wife. The second implication of course is that polygamy is not permitted either. Divorce was supposed to give permission for a second union without the stigma of adultery. But if a second union after divorce, with the explicit permission for remarriage it entailed, counted as adultery according to Jesus, how much more second or subsequent unions without divorce.¹²

However it is also important to notice what is not said. Divorce on its own is not equated with adultery, only divorce followed by remarriage.

The same is true of the second half of the statement in both gospels: "He who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery" (Luke 16:18b); "If she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery" (Mark 10:12). The Lukan form of the statement is almost the same as Matthew 5:32b. The Markan form is unusual in envisaging a woman taking the initiative in divorce proceedings, which rarely happened in first-century Palestine.¹³ But what is striking about both forms of the saying is the implication that divorce does not break the marriage bond, so that sexual relations with anyone but one's first spouse is adultery.

According to Jewish law "the essential formula in the bill of divorce is 'Lo, thou art free to marry any man.'"¹⁴ The implication of Jesus' pronouncement is that the essential declaration in the divorce formula does not work. A woman is not free to marry any man after divorce: if she does, she commits adultery. In other words she is still bound by the vow of exclusive loyalty to her husband.

Thus the two halves of the statement in Luke 16:18 and Mark 10:11-12 place

both partners under the same obligations of mutual loyalty: if either husband or wife divorces the other and remarries, he or she commits adultery against the other because they are both bound together as man and wife.

The theological logic behind this position is explained in Jesus' debate with the Pharisees, which immediately precedes these remarks in Mark 10. Asked whether divorce was legal, Jesus declared that it contradicted God's creative purpose that in marriage "they shall become one flesh." So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate" (Mark 10:8-9). It is because God joins a couple together in marriage that the human declaration, "You are free to marry any man" has no legal effect in God's eyes, so that he looks on remarriage after divorce as adultery.

But nowhere in Luke or Mark is divorce by itself equated with adultery. "Let not man separate" is a moral injunction like "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart," whereas "Whoever divorces and remarries, commits adultery" is case law like "Whoever sacrifices to any god, other than the LORD alone, shall be devoted to destruction" (Exod 22:20). There is often a big gap between moral ideals and case law. The former tend to express high ideals, while the latter set minimum standards of behaviour.¹⁵ I may not love my neighbour as myself, but as long as I do not kill him, or steal from him, the law will not interfere. There could be a similar gap between Jesus' "let not man separate" and his description of marriage after divorce as adultery. Clearly St Paul understood there to be a difference, for while he reluctantly tolerates separation without remarriage, he clearly forbids the latter.

Our interim conclusion is therefore that in the wider New Testament context outside Matthew's gospel there is no permission for remarriage after divorce. The teaching of Jesus as reported by Mark, Luke, and Paul is totally congruent with the teaching of the early church on this issue from the second to the fifth centuries AD. This makes it unlikely that Matthew's gospel should be interpreted differently. If it is to be dated as late as AD 85, as often suggested, it would be curious if its teaching on marriage differed so radically from the NT texts that preceded it and the early church fathers that quickly followed it. On the other hand, if it were written much earlier as tradition maintained, why did Paul and the other evangelists understand Jesus' teaching so differently? Whatever context we prefer for Matthew's gospel, it is clear that the writers closest to him in time understood Jesus to prohibit remarriage after divorce.

But before we leave the wider context of the New Testament as a whole, and focus on Matthew's gospel, I want to revert to the possibility that St Paul may have known Jesus' teaching in a form close to that found in Matthew's gospel, as has been argued by my brother David in his highly acclaimed *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?*¹⁶ Though Paul rarely cites Jesus' teaching explicitly, my brother shows that at many points there are very close parallels between Jesus' teaching and St Paul's. These parallels cover topics such as the Kingdom of God, Christology, the death of Christ, Ethics, and the Second Coming. David shows how St Paul does not simply parallel the ideas of Jesus found in the gospels, but often seems to echo their phraseology. He therefore argues "that there is massive evidence of Pauline

knowledge of Jesus-traditions."¹⁷ He suggests that the Jesus-traditions known to Paul were more extensive than our present gospels, which represent a distillation of "fuller oral traditions (such as Paul and others passed on)."¹⁸

Paul's dependence on the Jesus-traditions is explicit in 1 Corinthians 7:10, where he says "Not I, but the Lord" and then proceeds to paraphrase Jesus' teaching found in Matthew 19:6//Mark 10:9 using the same Greek word as the Gospels (*chōrizein*). But this is not Paul's first apparent appeal to the Gospel divorce texts. In 1 Corinthians 6:16 he quotes Genesis 2:24 "the two will become one flesh," just as Jesus does in Matthew 19:5//Mark 10:8. Nor is it Paul's last appeal, for after discussing divorce and remarriage he goes on to discuss celibacy (1 Cor 7:25-27) just as Jesus does in Matthew 19:10-12. It may be that the Corinthians already knew of Jesus' teaching on celibacy and were misusing it in the cause of asceticism as an excuse to break up their marriages.

The main evidence for this reconstruction of the background to 1 Corinthians 7 is (i) the similarity of Paul's teaching to what is in Matt 19:11-12; (ii) that the teaching on celibacy is adjacent to the teaching on divorce in both 1 Corinthians 7 and Matthew 19; and (iii) that Paul is, by his own confession, using the Matthew 19 teaching on divorce.¹⁹

Should this reading of 1 Corinthians 7 and Matthew 19 become accepted, its consequences for the interpretation of Matthew 19 will be profound, for it shows that Paul understood his Lord's teaching on divorce to exclude remarriage, not just in the Markan and Lukan form but in the Matthaean form too.

The Context in Matthew

The idea that Matthew allows remarriage after divorce in some cases rests on the interpretation of two short phrases. In 5:32 Jesus says: “everyone who divorces his wife *except on the ground of sexual immorality (porneia)*, makes her commit adultery.” In 19:9 “whoever divorces his wife, *except for sexual immorality (porneia)*, and marries another commits adultery.” The early church understood the italicised phrases to allow separation for sexual immorality but not remarriage.²⁰ But from the time of Erasmus onwards many Protestants have held that the exception clauses allow full divorce with the right to remarry in cases where a spouse was guilty of sexual immorality, typically adultery. It is my purpose now to determine which interpretation makes best sense within the context of Matthew’s gospel. Does the Erasmian view or the early church view make best sense of the flow of Matthew’s thought? We shall examine the two passages in turn.

First, 5:32a “Everyone who divorces his wife, *except on the ground of sexual immorality*, makes her commit adultery.” This saying is unusual in that it says the act of divorce causes the woman to commit adultery. And it is not clear in what way divorce by itself can be said to cause adultery. The likeliest explanation is that the woman will be forced by economic or social pressure to remarry and therefore, because she is still bound by marriage vows to her husband, will commit adultery against him.²¹ But this is a side issue. The real point is that the husband who initiates the divorce has thereby himself caused the seventh commandment to be broken. All the blame is transferred to the man.

This is of a piece with the rest of Jesus’

exposition of the commandment at this point in the Sermon. Contrary to much Jewish thinking, which tended to blame women for sexual sins, Jesus focuses all his attention on the male and the steps men must take to avoid falling into temptation. It is the man who looks at a woman lustfully in v. 28. It is the man who must tear out his right eye or cut off his right hand in vv. 29-30. It is the man who causes the woman to commit adultery in v. 32a or commits adultery himself in v. 32b.

Not only is the focus on the man in this section, but there is a progression in the seriousness of the man’s sin. It begins in the man’s mind, “adultery in the heart,” develops in his eyes, and then his hand. Next it becomes adultery by proxy (“make her commit adultery”), and finally he commits adultery himself by marrying a divorced woman.²²

Within this context the exception clause simply notes that should a wife have already committed adultery herself (the most likely form of sexual immorality in this context), her husband can hardly be said to have made her commit adultery, when under current Roman and Jewish law he was compelled to divorce her for her action. There is no suggestion here that by divorcing her for sexual immorality a husband gains the right to marry again. That is simply not in the frame of discussion here. The most that Erasmians can claim is that this text leaves open the possibility that an innocent husband may remarry. This text certainly does not authorize remarriage in such circumstances. All it says is that divorcing an adulterous wife cannot be construed as making her commit adultery.

On the other hand, the whole tenor of the passage suggests that an Erasmian interpretation is wrong. The point Jesus

is focussing on is the man's responsibility to be loyal to his wife: men must make every effort to avoid transgressing the commandment even in their thought life. To introduce the thought of remarriage in v. 32a, where the central concern is to prohibit men from even divorcing their wives, is surely most unlikely. It becomes even more unlikely when we reach v. 32b where marrying any divorced woman is the climax of Jesus' exposition of the seventh commandment's implications. Contextually, therefore, a reading that allows for remarriage after some divorces in 32a misses both the central thrust of this section (its focus on male waywardness) and the way it builds to its climax in 32b.

Remarriage readings also lead to an illogicality in verse 32.²³ They could also be said to offer a perverse incentive to sexual immorality. For if the only circumstance in which someone is free to remarry is when the spouse has committed adultery, one could envisage a partner in a desperate marriage encouraging the other to commit adultery just in order to ensure freedom to remarry instead of mere separation. But this type of casuistry seems far removed from Jesus' approach in this passage. In context he is condemning every kind of infidelity, not providing excuses for remarriage.

This reading of Matthew 5:32 suggests that far from giving an escape clause from Jesus' condemnation of remarriage found in the other Gospels, Matthew could be underlining the strictness of Jesus' teaching against divorce itself. According to Matthew 5:32b (whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery), Mark 10:11-12 (whoever divorces ... and marries another commits adultery), and Luke 16:18 (everyone who divorces and marries another commits adultery), it is

divorce followed by the act of marriage that is equivalent to adultery. But according to Matthew 5:32 (everyone who divorces his wife ... makes her commit adultery) divorce by itself can lead to the breaking of the seventh commandment. As we have noted the exception clause exonerates the divorcing spouse from this charge where the partner has already been unfaithful, but we should not miss the point that in other cases of divorce, e.g., on grounds of incompatibility, the initiator of divorce is charged with breaking the seventh commandment. This is not suggested in Mark or Luke. This is what makes Matthew look stricter than the other Synoptics.²⁴

I would therefore sum up Matthew's version of Jesus' words in three statements:

1. Divorce + remarriage = adultery (5: 32b cf Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18)
 2. Divorce alone (except for *porneia*) = adultery (5: 32a)
- These two statements can be combined into:
3. Divorce (except for *porneia*) + remarriage = adultery (19:9).

Statement 3 is an elliptical summary of statements 1 and 2, or at least is the way a reader who has absorbed the significance of 5: 32 could abbreviate them. I now wish to argue that this is the sense that best fits 19:9 contextually, "whoever divorces his wife, except for *porneia*, and marries another, commits adultery."

In interpreting Matthew 19:9 it is again very important to read it in context. It comes in the course of a debate with the Pharisees about the justification for divorce. "Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, 'Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?'" This is slightly different from the way Mark

phrases the Pharisaic question: “‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife’” (Mark 10:3). Matthew clearly situates the debate in the context of intra-Jewish disputes about reasons for divorce, whereas Mark simplifies the debate to bring out the essence of the dispute for Gentile readers. In Matthew 19:3 Jesus is asked to say on whose side he is when it comes to allowing for divorce: does he agree with the conservative Shammaites, who allowed divorce on very few grounds, or with the liberal Hillelites?

The debate (19:3–12) is typical of many in the Gospels:²⁵ (i) someone asks a question; (ii) Jesus attacks the very foundations of his opponents’ position; (iii) his opponents counterattack by raising objections from Scripture to his views; (iv) Jesus dismisses these objections; (v) frequently the disciples interject their difficulties about Jesus’ teaching; and (vi) Jesus reaffirms his own position and challenges his disciples to have faith and accept it.

This is the pattern in 19:16–30:

- (i) Rich Man: What good deed must I do to have eternal life? (v. 16);
- (ii) Jesus: Why do you ask me about what is good? Keep the commandments (v. 17);
- (iii) Rich Man: Which ones? (v. 18) What do I still lack? (v. 20);
- (iv) Jesus: Go sell what you possess; (v. 21). It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God (v. 24);
- (v) Disciples: Who then can be saved? (v. 25); and
- (vi) Jesus: With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible (v. 26).

The divorce debate just a few verses earlier follows the same pattern:

- (i) Pharisees: Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause? (v. 3);

- (ii) Jesus: Have you not read...? What God has joined together, let not man separate (vv. 4–6);
- (iii) Pharisees: Why then did Moses...? (v. 7);
- (iv) Jesus: Because of your hardness of heart ... whoever divorces ... commits adultery (vv. 8–9);
- (v) Disciples: If such is the case ... it is better not to marry (v. 10); and
- (vi) Jesus: Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given.... Let the one who is able to receive this receive it (vv. 11–12).

The most important point to grasp about this pattern is that Jesus does not back down or make concessions to the original questioner or the disciples when they object to his teaching. Instead he enlarges on his original point or restates it in a vivid way and challenges his hearers to have faith to accept his teaching.

It is this context within the standard pattern of Jesus’ confrontation with opponents that makes the Erasmian interpretation of 19:9 so unlikely. For this interpretation allowing divorce and remarriage for *porneia* makes Jesus agree with one side in the Pharisaic debate. But the whole thrust of his teaching up to this point has been that divorce is contrary to God’s creation purposes. When first asked what reasons justify divorce he said: “‘Have you not read that he who created them ... said ... ‘they shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”

The Pharisees correctly read this as a rejection of their concept of divorce, so they counterattack by quoting Deuteronomy 24:1 against him: “‘Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and send her away?’”

We should now expect to Jesus to reject the Pharisaic position and reaffirm his own teaching. The early church inter-

pretation, which we argued above was the natural way to understand Matthew 5:32, fits this entirely. By ruling out remarriage entirely, and only permitting divorce, i.e., separation for *porneia*, Jesus does show that his views are quite different from both the Pharisaic positions. This view also explains the disciples' objection in v. 10, "If such is the case of a man with a wife, it is better not to marry."

But the Erasmian view, which permits remarriage in cases of divorce for *porneia*, just does not fit. David Catchpole sets out the issues very sharply, and because he assumes an Erasmian view, blames Matthew for making a real hash of Mark's "consistent, logical and consecutive"²⁶ account in 10:2-9. He sees Matthew zig-zagging between the Markan Jesus' no remarriage view and Matthew's divorce and remarriage view. In Matthew 19:4-6, 8 Jesus adopts "a position of extreme rigour" but this is "decisively modified" in v. 9, "so that in a discussion about the Hillelite view Jesus ultimately comes down on the side of Shammai."²⁷ He quotes Merkel, who says, "In Matthew's view Jesus is only a Pharisaic scribe."²⁸

As if this were not enough to demonstrate the implausibility of the Erasmian view, which permits remarriage, Catchpole proceeds to accuse Matthew of yet more *non sequiturs* in the verses that follow. He points out that v. 9, as he interprets it, gives no reason for the disciples' objection in v. 10: "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." Catchpole comments: "Nothing in verses 3-9 contains the slightest hint that avoidance of marriage is the best policy: indeed there is nothing which might give grounds for misunderstanding.... Since even the rigorous Shammaite view of divorce belongs inside a context

where marriage is regarded as thoroughly necessary and normal, the disciples' reaction in verse 10 is not coherent. So yet more evidence suggests that Matthew's account is somewhat dislocated."²⁹

Catchpole's careful reading of the text and his candid admission of the difficulties an Erasmian interpretation poses is to be applauded. But surely an interpretation that does not force us to conclude that Matthew is illogical, incoherent, and dislocated is preferable? The early church interpretation avoids all these problems. There are no self-contradictions within Matthew 19, no clashes with Mark 10, and contextually the debate builds to a crescendo with Jesus trouncing the Pharisees and challenging his disciples to accept his teaching. As Quesnell (whose article rightly detects the relationship between Matt 19:10-12 with the preceding section) notes, "The whole thrust of the passage has been toward building up the greatness and sanctity before God of monogamous marriage, the importance of the bond between spouses, as an expression of the divine will for man from the beginning. Then in verse 10 the disciples reject this picture of life utterly."³⁰ "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry."

Jesus' response should not be read as a concession to the disciples, as it would be if vv. 10-12 were simply a call to celibacy. This is the way many commentators and Gospel critics have read it. Such a reading would be totally out of character in Matthew's Gospel. "The ordinary function of the disciples' speeches in the gospels is to ask questions, to misunderstand or object, or simply to advance the action dramatically. They do not enunciate the Christian ideal for life. Their objections are not accepted and confirmed by the Mas-

ter, but are refuted, or made the occasion for stronger restatements of the original teaching."³¹

Rather these verses are "a challenging formulation of the state of a man whose wife has been put away (set loose) on account of *porneia*."³² He may not remarry, so in a sense he is like others who do not marry, those born eunuchs and those made eunuchs by men. "Having rebuffed the disciples' attack in characteristic fashion—with a rebuke to them for lack of faith necessary to receive the difficult word Jesus repeats the call to understanding: He who can grasp it, let him grasp it."³³ Similar calls for faith are found in Matthew 13:9: "He who has ears, let him hear" and Mark 4:9. Read this way Matthew 19:3–12 is coherent and logical, building to a climax in the fashion typical of Jesus' disputes with his opponents. There is no need to suppose clumsy editing by the evangelist or Jesus recanting in the face of opposition. These claims are based on misunderstanding Matthew 19:9 as allowing remarriage after divorce. Within the context of Matthew's Gospel, let alone the rest of the New Testament and the witness of the early church, this is a most improbable interpretation.

The Context within Judaism

Finally we turn to the context of the life of Jesus and his teaching within the setting of first-century Judaism. We have already discussed this in passing as we looked at the other contexts, and it is discussed more fully in *Jesus and Divorce*. I am not sure whether to describe the argument based on the Jewish context as a red herring or an old chestnut! Certainly I think we should be very cautious about claims to reconstruct a picture of the historical Jesus that conflicts with the por-

traits of the canonical Jesus given by the evangelists. Too often, as Schweitzer pointed out long ago, the reconstructions of the historical Jesus and his teaching tend to be little more than scholars seeing their own face at the bottom of the well and supposing it is Christ's. In this case it seems to me quite clear what Paul, Mark and Matthew understood by Jesus' teaching, so I am loath to conclude that modern scholars really understand it better.

The argument from the Jewish context is quite simple. All Jews in the first century permitted divorce in certain cases, and a Jewish divorce always entailed the right to remarry. Therefore any Jewish reader of the New Testament would understand that when divorce was mentioned it included the right to remarry.³⁴

Now no one would dispute that Jews, Greeks, and Romans in the first century assumed that a divorce entitled one to remarry. It is plain too that the Old Testament tolerates divorce with the right to remarriage, though it also quite clearly does not like it. But full divorce was certainly legal. But does that mean Jesus must have thought the same? Could he not have taught something different from first-century Jews? For this is basically what is being said: when Jesus used the word "divorce" (*apolyein*) he must have been using it in the sense that contemporary Jews used it.

This seems implausible to me for three main reasons. First, Christian readers (even form-critics with their criterion of dissimilarity) have always supposed that at some points at least Jesus did disagree with contemporary Jews. Why are there all the dispute stories in the Gospels if Jesus only taught what his contemporaries believed?

Second, it is clear that the Pharisees

expected him to disagree with them about divorce. As both Matthew and Mark observe, the Pharisees came to test him (Matt 19:3; Mark 10:2). This is one of several episodes in which Jewish leaders come to debate political or theological issues with Jesus to make his heretical views public (Matt 16:1; 21:23; 22:15, 23, 34). They were out to prove that he disagreed with their interpretation of the law of the Old Testament. But if the divorce-with-remarriage view is correct, Jesus is just another Shammaite Pharisee, as Goulder puts it: “the radical Jesus disappears in qualifying phrases, and emerges as a rabbi of the school of Shammai.”³⁵

Third, it is a recognised principle of linguistics that the precise sense of a word does not exist in the word alone, but in the utterances in which it is embedded. So it is quite unwarranted to argue that because *apolyein* means “to divorce” (permitting remarriage) in the mouth of the Pharisees, it cannot mean “to separate” (without remarriage) in the mouth of Jesus.³⁶ It is the context that must decide the exact nuance in each case. I have already given my reasons for believing that when Jesus talks of *apolyein* he is talking merely of separation without the right to remarry: it is the only sense that fits the context.

But there is a final consideration. Even the Erasmians who hold that Jesus did allow remarriage after divorce for *porneia* admit that according to Jesus *apolyein* did not always allow remarriage after divorce.³⁷ Basically they break down Matthew 19:9 into two cases: (i) whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery; and (ii) whoever divorces his wife in the case of *porneia* and marries another does not commit adultery.

In the second case the divorce is full

and proper because remarriage does not count as adultery. However in the first case, not even the husband is free to remarry without committing adultery. In other words the legal form of divorce does not give the right to remarriage. So we ought to render the first case: whoever separates from his wife and marries another commits adultery. One might well argue that it is awkward to say the least to have Jesus using *apolyein* in two different senses simultaneously, and that this is another argument against the Erasmian interpretation.³⁸ the early church view is free from this problem for when Jesus uses the word *apolyein* it always means “separate from.” But that is not my main point. It is that the Erasmians must admit that Jesus is using *apolyein* in a different sense from his Jewish opponents. As Erasmians do allow that Jesus taught that divorce in non-*porneia* cases is adulterous, they are saying that this is not real divorce but merely separation.

Finally if we admit that Jesus is using *apolyein* in a different sense from the Pharisees, that he meant “separate” but they meant “divorce,” is this not to accuse him or Matthew at least of being obscure? Not at all. It is a great example of Jesus’ verbal dexterity. It demonstrates his command of language and the debate. No one can read the Gospels without being amazed at his vivid and striking use of language. He takes up old terms and gives them new meanings. Dupont notes that in another dispute with the Pharisees about purity Jesus does just the same sort of thing.³⁹ They follow the Old Testament law that says what you eat and touch makes you unclean, but Jesus says: “It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out” (Matt 15:1–20). Jesus takes familiar Jewish terminology and fills

it with new meaning. He does the same when discussing divorce.

My brother David observed that this type of quip or pun is entirely characteristic of Jesus' teaching, both in John's gospel and the Synoptics.⁴⁰ Talking with Nicodemus Jesus reinterprets what being "born again" means, with the woman of Samaria the meaning of "living water," and with the Pharisees the meaning of "blindness" (John 3:3–7; 4:10–14; 9:38–41).

The Synoptic Gospels often show Jesus picking up a term used by someone else and giving it a different meaning. Jesus "was told, 'Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, desiring to see you.' But he answered them, 'My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it'" (Luke 8:20–21; cf. Matt 12:46–50; Mark 3:32–35). At his trial and on the cross he was accused of saying, "I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days" (Matt 26:61; 27:40; Mark 14:58; 15:29). John 2:21 explains what Jesus meant: "He was speaking about the temple of his body."

When children were brought to Jesus, he speaks first of children and then of "little ones." It would be easy to equate the two, but more careful reading shows "little ones" are not necessarily youngsters but humble believers (Matt 18:5–6; Mark 9:42). Finally one could argue that Jesus enjoyed this sort of quip from an early age! Having at last found him in the temple Mary scolds him: "Behold, your *father* and I have been looking for you in great distress." He replies: "Did you not know that I must be in my *Father's* house?" (Luke 2:48–49). In the light of these examples it could be argued that it would be strange if Jesus had not used *apolyein*, "divorce," in a different sense from his opponents.

Thus all four contexts in which we can

read the teaching of Jesus on divorce and remarriage point in the same direction: separation was allowed for *porneia*, i.e., in situations where Jewish and Roman law required divorce for sexual immorality, but remarriage was never approved. No one, not even ardent defenders of the Erasmian view, contests that the early church held this view. But if one holds that the Erasmian view is the original sense of Jesus' teaching, it becomes a great mystery how the early church came to hold the view that remarriage after divorce was wrong. Second-century Christians would have had both apostolic tradition and non-Christian practice endorsing the right to remarriage. What on earth could have persuaded the whole church to adopt the strict discipline of no remarriage after divorce? This was no minor adjustment to doctrine or ethics. It potentially affected the life style of every member of the church and every potential convert. It does not seem likely that it could simply be based on the ignorance of Gentiles reading the Gospels, who did not know Jewish customs that divorce entailed the right to remarry.⁴¹ For similar principles prevailed elsewhere in the Roman Empire: divorce allowed you to remarry. So why should second-century Christians suddenly have started reading the Gospels in a way that was contrary both to contemporary custom and the traditions that they had inherited from the apostolic age? I find this scenario historically most implausible. With St. Paul, St. Mark, and St. Matthew I believe that only our Lord could have persuaded his followers to make this immense change in marriage discipline and break with both Jewish and classical tradition.

Final Reflections

Although this essay has concentrated on showing that the New Testament nowhere approves of remarriage after divorce, we must not miss the very positive context in which this new teaching is given. This new approach to marriage is possible because Christ has initiated the new creation:

By quoting Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 to undermine Deuteronomy 24:1–3, Jesus was in fact making it clear that the story to which he was obedient was that in which Israel was called by YHWH to restore humankind and the world to his original intention ... the last days must fulfil the creator's intention.... (Jesus) believed himself to be inaugurating the great time of renewal spoken of in the prophets, when the law would be written on the heart's of YHWH's people.⁴²

The church is the place where the principles of the new creation should be lived out. In similar fashion Jesus instructs his disciples to practice forgiveness and avoid violence as befits the messianic age, when the wolf will lie down with the lamb.

Though Jesus inaugurated the new creation at his first coming, it will not, however, be perfected until his second coming. This makes the "last days," the time between the first and second advents, much more like the Old Testament era than we often recognize.⁴³ The Old Testament looks forward to the fulfilment of the promises of a new covenant, a new David, and a new creation. It views the laws as setting a floor for behaviour, not establishing the ideals for human society. Genesis 1–2 portrays creation as it ought to be, with harmony reigning between man and God, man and wife, man and the animals. This is the goal for which the prophets yearn and which Jesus proclaims

has begun to be fulfilled in the kingdom that he has brought.

The Old Testament tells how the first creation fell, and life as we now know it began. Disobedience, dissension, and violence replace obedience, harmony and peace. The flood is sent because the earth was full of violence (Gen 6:11, 13). And after the flood laws are introduced to stop mankind from destroying itself with unbridled violence. "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed" (Gen 9:6). Yet despite authorizing the death penalty for murder, the Old Testament regards even the killing of the guilty as somehow polluting the executioner. The Israelites need cleansing after slaying the Midianites in a war the LORD told them to undertake (Num 31:2–20). David was forbidden to build the temple because he had shed too much blood (1 Chron 22:8–9).

It looks as though the Old Testament has a similar ambivalence towards marital failure. Genesis 2 sets out the ideal of life-long harmonious monogamy. Much of the rest of Genesis illustrates the sorrows of bigamy. Yet the law certainly envisages the possibility of divorce, as is inevitable in a world where dissension and violence are ever liable to break out. Like capital punishment divorce may be necessary in a sinful world. It is provided for the hardness of the human heart. Like capital punishment divorce can curb even worse excesses. But neither is desirable.

This Old Testament situation still prevails in society at large, and so its provisions are still very relevant today. We need police and armies to counter violence. We need divorce to deal with marital breakdown. But what about the church? Is it living in the new creation or the old? How far do Old Testament principles apply in

church life? The church of course is supposed to demonstrate the life of the new creation and be full of love, joy, and peace. Regrettably sanctification is not completed by conversion, nor even later in life! So the Old Testament situation often reproduces itself in the life of the individual believer and the church at large. And this applies to marriages as well as other relationships. I am therefore led to conclude that sometimes the church may with a heavy heart have to sanction divorce among its own members, and exceptionally as some bishops in Origen's day did, even tolerate remarriage "to avoid worse evils." But like Origen we should not fail to point out that it is contrary to our Lord's teaching.⁴⁴

We should remind people that it is not just in marriage that the Christian is called to demonstrate the love of Christ for the church, but that the divorcee can show that love even more poignantly.

A married person as a Christian is called on in faith to express before the world God's love in its aspect of forgiveness. This is the same love which was preached through the OT figures of love and marriage too. Hosea and his "wife of prostitution" (Hos 1-3); Ezekiel and harlot Judah (Ezek 16); Malachi and "I hate divorce" (Mal 2:10-16). The Christian's love for the person to whom he has committed himself is called on to remain faithful even when rejected; and to pursue relentlessly, powerfully, sweetly, even when its object flees it—as men did God's.⁴⁵

ENDNOTES

¹W. A. Heth and G. J. Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce*, 3rd ed. (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002).

²John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 1:18.

³Henri Crouzel, *L'Église primitive face au divorce* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1971).

⁴Here I am thinking of the most learned professor of Church History at the Presbyterian theological college in Belfast, John Barkley, who first told me what the early church held. In his gruff Ulster brogue he said: "They did not allow remarriage after divorce. They were quite wrong of course." The reviewer of Crouzel's book in the *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* was equally emphatic: "It would be difficult to praise too highly Père Crouzel's scholarly study of the Church's teaching and practice..." He shows that the evidence for "a tradition (permitting remarriage after divorce) is so meagre as to be virtually negligible" (J. J. Hughes, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 24 [1973] 61).

⁵Crouzel, 360.

⁶Quoted by Crouzel, 272-273.

⁷Crouzel, 273.

⁸J. A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976) 54-55.

⁹G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 296.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 296.

¹¹For a summary of the consensus views see D. Wenham and S. Walton, *Exploring the New Testament Volume 1: A Guide to the Gospels and Acts* (London: SPCK, 2001) 205-206, 223-224, 297. But J. A. T. Robinson, 116 suggested the Synoptics reached their final form in the late 50s or early 60s approximately contemporary with Paul's epistles, while my father argued in J. W. Wenham, *Redating Matthew, Mark and Luke* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1991) that all the Synoptics were written before the First

Epistle to the Corinthians.

¹²G. J. Wenham, "Gospel Definitions of Adultery and Women's Rights," *Expository Times* 95 (1984) 330-332.

¹³The case of Herodias is often cited, but, as J. Dupont, *Mariage et divorce dans l'évangile* (Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1959) 63 observes, she just abandoned her husband. It could be that Jesus is just aware of what was possible under Greek and Roman law, so C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel according to St Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959) 322.

¹⁴*m. Git.* 9:3.

¹⁵Cf. G. J. Wenham, "The Gap between Law and Ethics in the Bible," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 48 (1997) 17-29.

¹⁶D. Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 381.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 411.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 246.

²⁰For a discussion of the meaning of this term (*porneia*) see Heth and Wenham, 183-184. It covers a wide range of sexual sins condemned in the OT law.

²¹So R. F. Collins, *Divorce in the NT* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992) 167.

²²As an OT scholar I find it surprising that after fifty years of redaction criticism and more recently literary criticism the modern commentaries on Matthew that I consulted do not read Matthew 5:27-32 as a consecutive unit, but as independent sayings without an intrinsic relationship to each other.

²³Dupont sets out the illogicality most

lucidly. If according to v. 32a remarriage is allowed after divorce for *porneia*, but in no other situation, v. 32b has absurd consequences. It must be paraphrased "'Whoever marries a divorced woman is adulterous if this woman has not behaved culpably towards the husband who divorced her. But he is not adulterous if this woman has been divorced for misbehaving.'" Dupont points out that this difficulty is reduced if just the innocent husband has the right to remarry, but not his guilty wife. But if she is not allowed to remarry, that implies she is still bound to her husband, and he to her. Thus when he remarries, he is effectively taking a second wife and is thus, at least in the eyes of God, a polygamist (J. Dupont, 131-132).

²⁴G. J. Wenham, "Matthew and Divorce: an Old Crux Revisited," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 22 (1984) 95-107; and "The Syntax of Matthew 19:9," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 28 (1986) 17-23.

²⁵Other examples in Matthew include 15:1-20; 20:20-28. Briefer examples of the pattern include 9:10-17; 12:10-13; 19:13-15; 21:23-27.

²⁶D. R. Catchpole, "The Synoptic Divorce Material as a Traditio-Historical Problem," *Bulletin of the John Ryland's Library* 57 (1974) 97.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 94.

²⁸H. Merkel, *New Testament Studies* 14 (1968) 207 quoted in Catchpole, 94.

²⁹Catchpole, 95.

³⁰Q. Quesnell, "'Made Themselves Eunuchs for the Kingdom of

Heaven,'" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 30 (1968) 335-358; quote from 342.

³¹*Ibid.*, 343.

³²*Ibid.*, 346.

³³*Ibid.*, 347.

³⁴"A valid divorce by standard ancient definition implied the right to remarry... No ancient Jewish reader would have read Matthew otherwise," says C. S. Keener, ... *And Marries Another* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991) 44. The same insistence that Jewish convictions about divorce must determine the interpretation of the New Testament texts is the heart of D. Instone-Brewer's argument in *Divorce and Remarriage in the 1st and 21st Century* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2001) and his forthcoming *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*.

³⁵M. D. Goulder, *Midrash and Lection in Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1974) 18 quoted by R. F. Collins, *Divorce in the New Testament* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992) 185.

³⁶The same principle would apply if the argument were based on the supposed underlying Hebrew or Aramaic, for the probable terms (roots *slh*, *ptr*, *sbq*, and *nsl*) appear to be broad terms for "send away, dismiss" whose precise sense is determined by the context.

³⁷E.g., John Murray, *Divorce* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976) 25: "It follows from what has been said that the man who divorces his wife (except for the cause of fornication) is not thereby at liberty to remarry any more than the divorced wife. If the woman commits adultery by remarriage, this is so because she is still in reality the wife

of the divorcing husband. And if so, the divorcing husband is still in reality the husband of the divorced woman and consequently may not marry another.”

³⁸See Dupont, 131–147; Heth and Wenham, 133–135.

³⁹Dupont, 145–147.

⁴⁰In personal conversation.

⁴¹So Instone-Brewer.

⁴²N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996) 285–286.

⁴³For an attempt to work out this relationship between the testaments see G. J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading the OT Ethically* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 2000) especially 129–155.

⁴⁴Crouzel, 82–83.

⁴⁵Quesnell, 356.

William J. Webb's *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals*: A Review Article¹

Thomas R. Schreiner

Thomas R. Schreiner is a professor of New Testament at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He has also taught New Testament at Azusa Pacific University and Bethel Theological Seminary. He is the author of *Romans* in the Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament and co-author of *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance*. His most recent book is *Paul, the Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology*. In addition, he is serving as the preaching pastor of Clifton Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky.

Introduction

Sometimes I wonder if egalitarians hope to triumph in the debate on the role of women by publishing book after book on the subject. Each work propounds a new thesis that explains why the traditional interpretation is flawed. Complementarians could easily give in from sheer exhaustion, thinking that so many books written by such a diversity of authors could scarcely be wrong. Furthermore, it is difficult to keep writing books promoting the complementarian view. Our view of the biblical text has not changed dramatically in the last twenty five years. Should we continue to write books that essentially promote traditional interpretations? Is the goal of publishing to write what is true or what is new? One of the dangers of evangelical publishing is the desire to say something novel. Our evangelical publishing houses could end up like the Athenians in Paul's time: "Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new" (Acts 17:21, NASB).

Nevertheless, we should be willing to consider new interpretations. As complementarians we do not want to become unthinking and hardened conservatives. Perhaps we have misread the scriptures for many years. Still, some of the books promoting egalitarian interpretations are "fantastic" in the original sense of the word. One thinks here of the work of the Kroegers on 1 Timothy 2. Their interpretations were certainly new, but they lacked

credibility and were frankly a scholarly embarrassment. William Webb's work, fortunately, is of a much higher quality than the work of the Kroegers. He investigates the whole matter of the role of women hermeneutically, suggesting a method by which we can determine whether a command or practice in the scriptures is normative today. Since Webb's book is a significant argument supporting egalitarianism and is a serious work of scholarship, I will devote the first half of my review to describing his position, so that the reader will have a grasp of Webb's thesis before I critique his position. While Webb's hermeneutical principles on slavery and homosexuality will be noted, I will concentrate on his contribution on the role of women since he attempts to break new ground on this issue in particular.

A Summary of the Book

Webb opens the book in an interesting fashion, listing a variety of passages that represent a hermeneutical challenge today. Is the mandate to fill and multiply the earth still in force (Gen 1:28)? What about tithing and the holy kiss? Is the command to refrain from sexual relations during menstruation normative (Lev 18:19)? If a woman commits adultery today, should she face the water purification ritual of Numbers 5? What should we think of a man wearing long hair or a person getting tattoos? Issues like these and many more present a hermeneutical challenge for believers. I have often read letters to the editor in our local paper that

assert that if homosexuality is wrong then we should follow all the OT laws, such as the law that forbids the wearing of two different kinds of material (Lev 19:19). Webb rightly reminds us that hermeneutical issues are fundamental in assessing the normative status of commands and practices in the scriptures.

Redemptive Movement Hermeneutic

The crucial question for interpretation is this: how can we discern what is transcultural or what is restricted to the culture of the Bible? Webb answers this question by proposing what he calls a “redemptive-movement hermeneutic.” He looks for the redemptive spirit of the text to discern what still applies today. Other words that overlap in meaning with “spirit” are “progressive,” “developmental,” or “trajectory.” He contrasts his hermeneutic to a “static” hermeneutic that does not recognize the movement of the biblical text. A static hermeneutic focuses on the isolated words of the text and does not recognize the direction in which the scriptures are moving. Hence, a static hermeneutic can even justify slavery, provided it is the kind of slavery endorsed by the scriptures. Those who read the text according to its redemptive spirit recognize that we are not limited to the isolated words of the biblical text. God moves his people step by step towards what is more righteous and just.

Some interpreters read the scriptures on a flat level, not comprehending how we should apply them today. For instance, the permission to divorce in the Mosaic legislation (Deut 24:1-4) does not represent God’s ideal for today (Matt 19:3-12). Nor would anyone in contemporary society recommend that a woman suspected

of adultery undergo the water purification rite of Numbers 5. The ritual actually functioned as protection from arbitrary charges in a patriarchal society, but today we would contend that men and women are equally responsible for adultery. We would reject any notion that women are to be specially singled out and punished for adultery. Still, compared to the culture of the day the scriptural regulations *improved* the lot of women. One of the crucial themes of Webb’s work surfaces here. It is a massive mistake to restrict the application of the biblical text so that it only coheres with the cultural world addressed in the scriptures. Rather, we must note the redemptive movement of the text so that the application suits the twenty first century. For example, none of us today would accept the notion that slaves are less valuable than other human beings (Exod 21:28-32), nor would we believe that wives are the property of their husbands (Exod 20:17). The redemptive movement of the text, argues Webb, leads us to the truth that all human beings are equal, and that husbands are not worth more than their wives. We must not restrict our application of the text so that it is enclosed within the cultural world of the Bible. As Webb says, “Relative to when and where the words of Scripture were first read, they spoke redemptively to their given communities” (p. 50). We would err, therefore, in limiting our application to the social world of the scriptures.

One example that Webb gives relates to slavery. Some interpreters draw the principle from Ephesians 6:5-9 that employees should submit to employers. Webb argues that such a principle misfires in applying the text to contemporary society, for employees are not required to submit to employers but to fulfill the

terms of their contracts. They are to do what their job requires in a way that glorifies God and in a way that functions as a witness to others.

Another example used by Webb comes from 1 Corinthians 7 where Paul addresses ascetics in the Corinthian congregation. The ascetic Corinthians, according to Webb, were simply not ready for the message of the Song of Solomon where sexual relations are celebrated. Paul speaks to the particular situation facing the Corinthians and moves them in the right direction, taking them as far as possible. It would be a mistake to read off an entire sexual ethic from these chapters, for we must recognize that we have specifically targeted pastoral words here. Similarly, Webb argues that the texts that say women are barren are culturally limited. Only now do we realize that men can be infertile as well as women. Here we have an example of accommodation in scripture.

Criteria for Determining what is Transcultural

Most of the remaining chapters of the book contain eighteen criteria by which we can determine if a practice is cultural or transcultural. Sixteen of these criteria are intrascriptural and two are extra-scriptural. The intrascriptural criteria are categorized into three groups in relation to the two issues of women in ministry and homosexuality: 1) persuasive; 2) moderately persuasive; and 3) inconclusive. Both of the extra-scriptural criteria are seen to be persuasive. In most cases the criteria fall into the same category for the women's issue and homosexuality, though in some cases Webb sees a criterion to be persuasive relative to homosexuality but not on the women's issue.

My focus in the review is on the women's issue and so I will list the criteria assessed by Webb and categorize them as they relate to the question of the role of women (see pp. 69-70). I begin with his intra-scriptural criteria.

Persuasive

1. Preliminary Movement
2. Seed Ideas
3. Breakouts
4. Purpose/Intent Statements
5. Basis in Fall and/or Curse

Moderately Persuasive

6. Original Creation, I: Patterns
7. Original Creation, II: Primogeniture
8. New Creation
9. Competing Options
10. Opposition to Original Culture
11. Closely Related Issues
12. Penal Code
13. Specific Versus General

Inconclusive

14. Basis in Theological Analogy
15. Contextual Comparisons
16. Appeal to Old Testament

Finally, he has two extra-scriptural criteria, both of which he thinks are persuasive.

17. Pragmatics Between Two Cultures
18. Scientific Evidence

Persuasive Criteria

There is insufficient space to discuss all eighteen criteria, but I will comment and explain some of them, skipping those that I do not think are as important for his overall argument. The first criterion is preliminary movement. This criterion was alluded to above. In these examples biblical authors modified the original culture, pushing it in a new direction so that there is movement towards justice. Webb cites a number of examples of slavery in which the mistreatment of slaves is ameliorated

by biblical authors. Similarly, the OT improves the rights for female slaves and concubines compared to the practices of the ancient Near East. Assyrian rape laws punished the woman who was raped. By contrast, the biblical laws that speak to the issue of rape treat women with much more dignity and respect. The direction of the text, then, points us towards what is fitting for us in our social context.

Seed ideas are also identified as an important criterion. A “seed idea” describes a principle or practice that is present in kernel form but has not yet developed fully in the biblical culture. For example, some verses in the NT suggest that the ideal would be complete equality between slaves and masters, males and females (cf. Acts 2:17-18; 1 Cor 7:21; 12:13; Gal 3:28; Col 3:11; Phlm 15-16), but such equality could not be implemented in the social world of the NT. Seed texts point us to the application for today’s world, showing that slavery should be abolished and that women were limited from certain functions because of the patriarchal culture of the ancient world. Conversely, the scriptures do not give us any warrant to think that homosexual practice was restricted for cultural reasons.

The third criterion is called “breakouts.” Webb notes examples in which cultural norms are reversed or overturned. For instance, left-handed people were used by God in the OT, even though the imagery of the right hand suggests God’s favor and honor. The injunction that men should wear short hair is not a transcendent word (1 Cor 11:14) since Nazirites wore long hair and Samuel had long hair. Primogeniture should not be assessed as transcultural, for God sometimes chooses the younger instead of the older, such as Jacob over Esau and

Ephraim over Manasseh. Breakouts in the case of women include Deborah, Huldah, Priscilla, and Junia who served as leaders, prophets, teachers, and apostles. The call for mutuality in the sexual realm in 1 Corinthians 7:3-5, according to Webb, calls into question the hierarchical structure of complementarians, suggesting a new pattern of equality between men and women. These breakout texts, Webb maintains, cannot be seen as mere exceptions. When combined with the first two criteria, they are a strong argument supporting egalitarianism.

The fourth criterion relates to purpose. A text is culturally bound if when we fulfill the command in contemporary society we do not carry out the original intention. For example, greeting one another with a holy kiss in our culture would make people feel uncomfortable instead of making them feel welcome. Similarly, Webb argues that submission in the ancient world had a missionary purpose. The missionary function of these admonitions no longer apply, for submissive slaves would repel rather than attract unbelievers today. Nor should we support monarchy simply because it is found in the Bible, and hence there is no expectation today that we would submit to a president or prime minister. We pray for leaders, according to Webb, but we do not obey them. In the same way, in our modern culture if women submit to men, such a practice may alienate people from the gospel. In the case of homosexuality no mission statement can be cited to demonstrate that it was banned merely for the purpose of evangelism. Indeed, the biblical prohibition regarding homosexuality was counter-cultural since some in the Greco-Roman world embraced homosexuality. Webb acknowledges that this

fourth criterion is not determinative since a biblical injunction may have more than one purpose.

The fifth criterion relates to the fall or the curse. Webb rightly points out that we are not commanded to perpetuate the curse. For example, sin brought weeds into the world and pain in childbirth, but no one would argue that we should not eliminate weeds or ameliorate pain in childbirth. Some complementarians have cited 1 Timothy 2:14, defending the notion that women are prone to deception. But there is no indication that women are more liable to deception than men, says Webb, nor is there any clear indication in the text of role reversal between Adam and Eve. The verse emphasizes instead that Eve was deceived rather than Adam. Webb concludes from this that women during the biblical era were prone to deception because of lack of education, the young age of their marriages, and their limited social experience. He rejects any notion of male headship in Adam's naming of woman in Genesis 2, arguing that naming of animals is an indication of Adam's dominion over the created world, but in the case of woman the name given points to equality and partnership—not subordination.

Moderately Persuasive

Webb maintains that the five criteria listed above are persuasive, but criteria six through thirteen he thinks are only moderately persuasive. Criterion six is one of the most crucial for the issue of women in ministry. Webb argues that an injunction in the text *may be transcultural* if rooted in the creation order. Some creation mandates are transcultural, such as Jesus' words on divorce. Other creational commands are not binding. For instance, it is

not wrong to be single even though the creation narrative says it is not good for man to be alone. Nor would we conclude that all people should be employed in agricultural work or travel only by walking, even though these two elements are present in the creation narrative. Few today would argue from Genesis 1:28 that we must have as many children as possible, and virtually no one claims that we should ban the eating of meat. Many would agree that the sabbath command has changed, though the sabbath rest is rooted in the seventh day of creation. The creation order addresses the relationship of men and women, for it is clear that both are made in God's image and they are to rule the world together for God's glory. There are overtones of patriarchy in the garden, but they do not, avers Webb, sustain the thesis that patriarchy is transcultural.

The issue of creation continues in the seventh criterion where Webb focuses on primogeniture since Paul's prohibition of women teaching and exercising authority in 1 Timothy 2:12-13 is rooted in primogeniture. Appealing to primogeniture does not demonstrate that the prohibition in 1 Timothy 2:12 is transcultural. Webb says that there are many examples where primogeniture is superseded, e.g., the choosing of Isaac instead of Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, and Ephraim over Manasseh, of David over against his older brothers, etc. These "breakouts" suggest that primogeniture is culturally relative. Furthermore, primogeniture worked well in an agricultural society but does not comport well with our culture. In the social world of the Bible it fostered care for elderly parents and probably lessened sibling rivalry. Still, we do not follow the practice of primogeniture today. Hence, we should not

limit women today simply because in some places Paul appeals to creation to prohibit women from certain activities. The intimations of patriarchy in the garden may, suggests Webb, foreshadow the impending curse. Perhaps the patriarchal echoes in Eden are an example of accommodation in which the past is described through the spectacles of the present. Hence, the patriarchal character of the garden may anticipate the agricultural context to which Adam and Eve were headed. One principle we can derive from the argument from creation is that we should give honor to whom honor is due. The principle from 1 Timothy 2 is that we should “choose teachers/leaders who are worthy of high honor within the congregation” (p. 145).

The priority of man in creation, asserts Webb, only supports woman being the glory of man, not his authority over her (1 Cor 11:7). Some might object that woman is said to derive from man, suggesting a permanent role differentiation. Webb counters that Paul qualifies this argument in 1 Corinthians 11:12, stressing the interdependence of men and women. What we see in vv. 11-12 is actually Paul’s seed idea, while in the previous verses he was influenced by the culture of his day. In addition, Webb thinks Paul’s argument is cultural here, reflecting the view that women are merely “reproductive gardens” (p. 275). Scientific developments since Paul have shown that the notion that women contribute nothing more than being a fertile environment in conception and childbirth is flawed. Paul says that woman was made for man, but Webb says that it does not make sense to deny that men were also made for women. Modern scientific research shows us that we need both the egg and the

sperm for children to be born. Hence, in Webb’s view Paul’s point here should be classified as hyperbole. The transcultural principles of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 are that the genders must remain distinct and that modesty is required in dress. Webb argues that the notion that men own women, that women are subordinate to men, and that women must wear head coverings are all cultural.

I skip now to criterion ten, which says that a matter is transcultural if it stands against the culture of the day. For example, to say that refuge should be given to runaway slaves intimates that slavery is not God’s ideal since other cultures did not provide a haven for fugitives. Webb also thinks that the prohibitions against bestiality and transvestism fall into this category, though his argument here seems weak since it unlikely that either practice was ever common. The softening of patriarchy in texts like Ephesians 5 where husbands are to exercise a nurturing love for their wives is countercultural and hence instructive.

Inconclusive Criteria

Criteria fourteen through sixteen are deemed inconclusive. An element of the text is not, according to criteria fourteen, transcultural simply because it is supported by theological analogy. God is portrayed as Lord in the biblical text, but it does not follow from this that earthly masters *should* lord it over slaves. Similarly, God is portrayed as king in the Bible, but we do not conclude from this that monarchy is required. Similarly, Webb argues that Christ functioning as head of the church does not lead to the conclusion that husbands should function as the authority over their wives. Paul simply uses an analogy accepted in the culture of

his day to motivate his readers to godly behavior. If we accept such an analogy as transcultural, says Webb, then we should also argue that a husband can strip his wife in public as Hosea stripped Gomer (Hosea 2)! If the analogy is literal (love, forgiveness, and holiness are mandated), then the command is still in force today. We should not, however, force analogies when applying the scriptures to today's world.

Skipping criterion fifteen, we come to the sixteenth. An appeal to the OT does not necessarily indicate that a practice is transcultural. Discontinuity between the testaments may show that a practice or command is no longer in force. For example, animal sacrifices, food laws, and circumcision are no longer required for believers as the NT demonstrates. Webb notes that a number of OT texts are cited when discussing slavery, and yet no one would conclude from this that slavery is endorsed. The lifting of holy hands is rooted in the OT, but most would agree that the inner attitude is what matters, not bodily posture.

Extrabiblical Criteria

The last two criteria listed are extrabiblical, and in both instances Webb thinks they are persuasive. First, an element of the text is culturally limited if it cannot be implemented practically into a new cultural setting. For example, gleaning fields is not a practical way to help the poor in an industrial society. Similarly, washing feet made sense in a society where people wore sandals and walked dusty roads, but following such a practice literally today would not make much sense. Conversely, children obeying parents translates well into today's world since children lack knowledge, maturity, strength, and eco-

nomical viability. Citizens are not required to obey leaders today, for we have a democratic society, not a government in which the word of the leader is law. Yet, believers should still submit to elders since church leaders usually have more education and experience, and are typically highly qualified for their job. Webb maintains that women are not required to submit to men, for in the cultural world of the Bible women lacked knowledge and education, social experience, and physical strength. The first two factors are no longer true today, and the third is hardly a rational basis upon which to maintain role differences between the sexes. When we think of homosexuality the pragmatic test rules out homosexuality, for it is clear that men are practically designed for women and vice-versa.

The last criterion is that an element of the text may be limited to the social world of the Bible if it is contrary to social-scientific evidence. For instance, we see clearly from science that the sun rather than the earth is the center of the solar system. Nor would we argue from the Bible today that the earth is flat rather than round. Similarly, says Webb we do not believe that women are like the soil in which the seed of the man is planted to produce children. Nor do we argue that infertility is always the fault of the woman. In Isaiah 3:12 we are told that women make poor leaders, but such a judgment has to be limited to Isaiah's day, for we know women function as leaders in a large number of areas today and succeed remarkably.

Nor can we accept the notion that women are by nature more apt to be deceived than men. Webb criticizes the view proposed by Doriani and me that women are more susceptible to deception than men, noting that such a view

employs social-scientific research to understand the text, when we as complementarians claim that we are merely interpreting the biblical text. Further, he thinks it is unfair for complementarians to object that nothing is said about women lacking education in 1 Timothy 2:14, for neither does Paul say women are more vulnerable to being deceived than men. The latter statement is an interpretation of the text, just as the former. Finally, the view espoused by Doriani and me is guilty of stereotyping and cannot be supported biblically. Webb suggests that 1 Timothy 2:14 should be interpreted along the same lines as Isaiah's statement that women make poor leaders. When Paul refers to women being deceived, he assumes the cultural position of women in the Greco-Roman world in which they were generally uneducated and lacked the necessary experience and social exposure to function as teachers. Indeed, if Paul were prohibiting women from teaching because they are more relational than men, as some complementarians allege, it would make more sense to exclude both women and men who are relational from teaching, since scientific research does not support the idea that women are more easily deceived than men. Hence, Webb concurs that Paul teaches here that women are more easily deceived than men, but we should not infer from this that Paul makes an ontological statement about women. He addresses a cultural situation in which women were prone to deception because of lack of education, social limitations, and early marriage. The principle from the text, then, is that we should appoint teachers who are not apt to be deceived.

Webb then raises another interesting question. How could such cultural factors

influence Eve in the garden, for Paul appeals to Eve in speaking of the deception of women? Webb maintains that it is quite possible that cultural factors were present in the text. Even the opening chapters of Genesis contain accommodation to the culture of the readers. They "may tell us more about the audience to whom the story is being told than about the original event itself" (p. 249). Furthermore, it is not the case that NT writers always use grammatical historical exegesis in interpreting the OT. What we have here is an analogy that relates Eve to the women at Ephesus.

How does this social science criterion relate to homosexuality, especially since some appeal to the social sciences to justify homosexual practice? Webb argues that biological and environmental predispositions to homosexuality do not prove that homosexual activity is morally right, for some could appeal to the same factors to support bestiality, pornography, sex with young children, etc.

Conclusion

The book concludes with a chapter in which the author raises the possibility that he is wrong. Still, he asserts with confidence that the reference to deception in 1 Timothy 2:14 is almost certainly cultural. Webb believes that there are some biological differences between the sexes, suggesting that women should play a greater role in the raising of young children. Those who are convinced by patriarchy should practice what he calls "ultra-soft patriarchy." The patriarchy found in the Piper and Grudem book, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, should be rejected since it falls prey to a static hermeneutic. Following his conclusion, there are four appendices, two relate to the issue of women and deception. Webb concludes

that the direction of the scripture and its underlying spirit support abolishing slavery and favor the egalitarian view concerning women. In the case of homosexuality there is no movement in the text, and hence the prohibitions against homosexuality are transcultural. Those who try to establish a parallel between the women's issue and homosexuality make a serious mistake, for the two issues are dramatically different.

Evaluation of Webb's Arguments *An Inadequate Grasp of Redemptive History*

Probably the most important argument in Webb's book is his claim that we must interpret the scriptures with a view to their redemptive movement, so that we do not restrict ourselves to the isolated words of the text but discern the "spirit" to which redemptive movement points. Webb rightly directs our attention to the importance of redemptive movement, but unfortunately he does not grasp or explain well the centrality of redemptive history. It is interesting that Webb employs the term "spirit" or "trajectory" of the text, but does not use the term "redemptive history." He does not clearly explain the salvation historical character of the scriptures in which the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the climax and fulfillment of all of redemptive history. I suspect Webb would say that he agrees with such a paradigm, but his failure to explain clearly that his hermeneutic is founded upon such a premise is telling. For instance, many of the cultural examples cited by Webb can be solved rather easily once we have a grasp of redemptive history. He rightly concludes, for instance, that circumcision, sacrifices, and food laws are no longer in force be-

cause of the epochal shift between the testaments. It is not apparent, however, that he understands fully how this affects one's entire understanding of the OT. Most of the other examples cited could be explained from the same perspective, including the water purification ritual in Numbers 5, the regulations for slaves in Israel, and many regulations for women in the OT. Any book that purports to explain how to apply the scriptures today must feature prominently the redemptive historical character of the scriptures, but Webb fails to do this and instead introduces eighteen criteria that make applying the Bible today more difficult than necessary.

We should follow the pathway of Jesus and the apostles in teaching that the OT scriptures point to Christ and are fulfilled in him. The NT is the fulfillment of the OT. We have the final and definitive word that God has spoken to his people in the last days (Heb 1:2). In the NT we have the faith that has been transmitted to the saints once for all (Jude 3). We expect no further revelation until the coming of Jesus Christ when we will meet God face to face. Webb never clearly states that in the NT we have the final and definitive word that speaks to every practical issue for all time. The culmination of the fullness of time in Christ (Gal 4:4) means that we need no further word or instruction to understand how to apply the scriptures. Again, Webb may believe this, but he does not clearly state such an idea and instead emphasizes how the "spirit" of the text leads us beyond the wording of the biblical text. I am not denying that many difficult issues of application arise, and that Webb provides some help in assessing these issues. Still, redemptive history is not given pride of place in the entire

discussion. When we discuss tithing, sabbath, circumcision, food laws, menstruation laws in the OT, whether we can wear clothing composed of two different kinds of material, and divorce, we must always discern how the text should be interpreted in light of the fulfillment of all of scripture in Jesus Christ. We do not merely apply this principle to obvious issues like circumcision and food laws. All of the scriptures must be rightly related to Christ. Webb does not convey that this is the central question. In fact, he scarcely speaks at all of all the scriptures being fulfilled in Christ. Hence, he tends to raise issues of application in an abstract fashion, instead of integrating them sufficiently with the story line of the Bible.

Still, Webb has some helpful insights. He rightly warns against applying the isolated words of a biblical text. He does see the redemptive movement of the text, even though he does not emphasize sufficiently fulfillment in Christ. His failure to emphasize that in the NT we have the final and definitive revelation leads to some interesting consequences. He does not clearly relay the idea that in the NT itself we have all the information we need to pronounce on the question of slavery, the role of women, and homosexuals. Again, it is likely that Webb would agree with me, but what an author fails to emphasize is itself illuminating and can signal a trajectory that is slightly off course. Webb emphasizes instead that we may move *beyond* the words of the biblical text in applying it to today, and that we are not required to reproduce the culture of the Bible in today's world. I agree. But he does not explain clearly that in the completed revelation of the scriptures we have the final and definitive revelation by which to address all these issues.

Many of Webb's insights are useful. He rightly notes that some of the laws given to Israel modify the harsh treatment of slaves and women in their day, and yet such laws do not represent the final and definitive word on such matters. We should simply note (as Webb does) that such an approach to OT regulations comes from Jesus himself (Matt 19:3-12). Obviously, we need to read the whole canon carefully to discern where to apply such a principle, but we can agree that OT laws do not function as the *summon bonum*. Again, a salvation historical approach might have led Webb to discuss the law as it is related to Israel. A case can be made that the law was given to distinguish Israel from the Gentiles, but now that Christ has come the era of separation between Jews and Gentiles is over (Eph 2:11-3:13). Webb's book does not set the discussion of application onto the larger canvas of biblical theology, and hence the danger of abstraction (what are those eighteen criteria again?!) surfaces.

If Webb had been more helpful in setting forth his view of redemptive history, it would have been clear that the most important texts for his entire discussion are found in the NT. I do not want to be simplistic here. Christians today still argue over issues like tithing and the sabbath, but I would suggest that both of them must be addressed from the perspective of redemptive history, from the standpoint that all the promises of God are fulfilled in Jesus Christ (2 Cor 1:20).

Webb does remind us of some important principles in the NT. For instance, we must remember that NT letters are addressed to particular situations in the churches. Hence, 1 Corinthians 7 should not be interpreted as the complete and last word on marriage and the single state. The

biblical interpreter, however, must still integrate what Paul says here into a theology of marriage, divorce, and being single. I suppose Webb is not to be blamed for failing to accomplish this when he compares 1 Corinthians 7 to the Song of Solomon. He does not adequately explain, however, the contribution 1 Corinthians 7 makes to the canon. Hence, his explanation of the NT in this instance falls short of providing a hermeneutical paradigm for readers.

Webb rightly reminds us of the cultural context in which the scriptures were written. We are not required to return to the world of the Bible. Greeting one another with holy kisses in the U.S. would make most people feel quite awkward, and most would agree that we are not required to drink wine when we have indigestion. Nor would we argue that we must reinstitute the system of slavery or the monarchy. The application of the biblical text today will not necessarily mirror the first century context. Hence the importance of doing biblical theology and understanding redemptive history!

Even though Webb does not emphasize enough that in the scriptures we have definitive and final revelation, he is correct in saying that contemporary application will extend beyond the wording of the biblical text, that we cannot confine ourselves to the isolated words of the text. Again, the importance of doing biblical theology before applying the text should be emphasized more than Webb does. We do have to think hard about how to apply texts that speak of slavery, women, and homosexuals today. We are required to see how they fit into the redemptive historical framework before applying them woodenly to today's world.

The Five "Persuasive" Criteria

Given what I have said above about the importance of understanding redemptive history and biblical theology, I do not think Webb's eighteen criteria are a convincing resolution to the problem he raises. Many good insights are contained in these principles, but his approach to solving the questions raised falls prey to abstraction and overlooks the rich texture of redemptive history. Despite some good insights, the book tends towards an artificial workbook approach to solving the issues raised. In other words, the book fails because it is not clearly founded on biblical theology.

When we look at the scriptural criteria that Webb thinks are persuasive, it can just as easily be argued that his evidence is ambiguous. He rightly sees preliminary movement in some texts, but such movement is not definitive enough to establish final boundaries. The endpoint or goal of such movement must be determined by the entire canon, and so this criterion is only as persuasive as the exegesis of all the other texts relating to the issue debated. Similarly, "seed texts," and "breakouts" do not in and of themselves clearly indicate the line of demarcation. Both exegetically and logically it can be argued that seed texts and breakouts do not contradict complementarian conclusions. Trumpeting equality in Galatians 3:28 does not rule out differences of roles in Ephesians 5:22-33. Webb thinks seed texts and breakouts are persuasive, but he does not establish exegetically that they necessarily support his egalitarian conclusions. The criteria he thinks are persuasive only work if one assumes his exegetical conclusions. For instance, women functioning as prophets does not necessarily establish the view that women

can teach and exercise authority over men, for it can be argued that the gift of prophecy should be distinguished from teaching. Similarly, he appeals to Junia in Romans 16:7 to say that women served as apostles, but the text is debated and does not clearly lead to egalitarian conclusions.

Approaching the issue “hermeneutically” may mislead readers into thinking that Webb has solved long standing debates on issues, but his “hermeneutical boxes” are actually premised on exegetical conclusions, or even more radically he assumes that the breakout or seed texts establish his view. Webb uses the “seed texts” and “breakouts” and his movement metaphor to modify the texts that restrict women. How new is this argument? Egalitarians have often argued that “clear” texts (at least those they think are clear) should determine how we apply “unclear” texts (such as 1 Tim 2:11-15).

One or two concrete examples will illustrate my point. Webb appeals to the mutuality in marriage emphasized in 1 Corinthians 7:3-5 to suggest that different roles in marriage are cultural. The “breakout” helps us see that the advice to husbands and wives in Ephesians 5:22-33 was not intended to establish permanent roles. But Webb actually begs the question in his argument, for he assumes that mutuality and hierarchy are mutually exclusive. But the biblical pattern of marriage includes both. That this is Paul’s worldview is suggested by 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 where there is both hierarchy (1 Cor 11:3-10, 13-16) and mutuality (11:11-12). Notice how Webb handles this latter text. He sees the “seed idea” in vv. 11-12 and a temporary cultural accommodation in vv. 3-10. His hermeneutical boxes determine his conclusions, but it can just as easily be argued that Paul thought that the

relationship between men and women had elements of hierarchy and mutuality. He put them together in the same passage! Let me note again that what Webb says here is nothing new. Egalitarians often say that vv. 3-10 are transcended by vv. 11-12. Old conclusions with new hermeneutical names should not dazzle us.

Webb calls the purpose criterion persuasive, but when it comes to the women’s issue, he admits that the texts in question may have a purpose besides the missionary purpose he adduces. Many of the texts relating to the role of men and women do not refer to missions at all (e.g., Eph 5:22-33; 1 Tim 2:9-15). Hence, the criterion is hardly persuasive or clear when it comes to the women’s issue. The fifth criterion relates to the curse, and Webb rightly says that transcultural arguments cannot be established from the curse. Complementarians differ from Webb on some of the interpretations proposed here. Nevertheless, we can still accept his basic argument, for it does not clearly lead to egalitarian conclusions. The complementarian view does not depend upon arguments from the curse for their foundation. So, I look back over the five allegedly persuasive criteria, and see some good observations and some helpful cultural analysis. Still, the criteria presented are ambiguous and debatable. They depend upon exegetical conclusions and logical assumptions that are not adequately defended. The first three criteria are the most important, but not one of them, even taken on their own terms, necessarily establishes egalitarianism. They could all be interpreted to deny a heavy handed and one sided hierarchicalism but to fit with complementarianism; yes, even the complementarianism of Piper and Grudem in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*.

Arguments from the Creation Order

The next set of criteria are introduced as moderately persuasive. I will continue to investigate those that especially relate to the role of women. The two criteria that are most important here relate to creation, and hence we will concentrate on these. Webb, as noted, does not see arguments from creation as conclusive since we do not practice many things in the creation narrative. Webb's failure to understand the redemptive historical flow of scripture surfaces here, especially since he speaks of redemptive movement. Complementarians, rightly understood, have never argued that every element of the creation narrative should be reproduced today. We have a canonical view of the scriptures in which we see scripture as the interpreter of scripture, and the redemptive historical flow of the Bible is crucial. For example, we even know from reading Genesis that it was not God's intention for every person to walk or become a farmer! We also know from Genesis that God permits human beings to eat meat. The scriptures themselves clarify what is still binding relative to creation. It is not my purpose to arbitrate the issue of the sabbath here, but surely one must correlate the creation narratives with what is said in the NT to come to a conclusion. When we come to the issue of women in ministry, and this point cannot be stressed enough, the NT itself argues from the created order for differences in role (1 Cor 11:8-9; 1 Tim 2:13). Amazingly enough, Webb fails to see this distinction and appears to lump what the NT says here with whether all should be farmers. Hence, contrary to Webb, Jesus' appeal to creation in the matter of divorce and

remarriage (Matt 19:3-12) functions as the best parallel to the texts about women in ministry. We see in the NT, the definitive revelation of the last days, an appeal to God's good creation supporting a different role for men and women. Two of Webb's weaknesses coalesce together here: 1) his failure to understand redemptive history; and 2) his failure to see the implications of the view that in the NT we have the definitive and final word of God.

At this point a comment about homosexuality should be made. Webb's book is useful because he shows that the scriptures consistently speak against homosexuality and that there is no opening in the text for its legitimacy (though see below for some possible logical weaknesses in his position). And yet there is a striking weakness in the book. Webb actually does very little with the fundamental text in Romans 1:26-27. Here Paul argues from nature, i.e., what God intended for human beings at creation. That one can write a book on the issue of hermeneutics and homosexuality, and refer to this text on only three pages (according to the index) and provide very little exposition of its meaning is nothing short of astonishing. Again, I think Webb is correct in thinking the OT texts on homosexuality are normative, but for someone who emphasizes the redemptive movement of the text, it is strange that he does not see that the climax of revelation (the NT) confirms the OT and argues from the created order. Surely, Romans 1:26-27 is the most important text in the NT on homosexuality (and in the entire canon of scripture!), and yet Webb skates over it quickly. Furthermore, it might explain why Webb does not see a *principal* connection between homosexuality and the women's issue. He is correct in saying that

the former is much clearer than the latter. Still, Webb misses a major point: when it comes to divorce, homosexuality, and the women's issue, the NT argues from the created order. Hence, this criterion is much stronger than the five Webb suggests, for the NT interprets the OT for us and bases its argument on the created order.

One could argue that when the NT appeals to the OT, the command enjoined is not necessarily normative for us today. We do not wear headcoverings today, but Paul alludes to the OT in requiring headcoverings (1 Cor 11:2-16). The use of the OT in the NT is too large of an issue to resolve in a review. It seems that in the majority of cases the commands of the NT rooted in the OT are still normative today. Webb appeals to slavery in discussing this issue (p. 202), noting that some have defended slavery with citations from Isaiah 53 in 1 Peter 2:22-25. He also says that some have appealed to Job 31:13 and Leviticus 25:43 and 25:53 to support slavery. But his examples are hardly convincing and not parallel to the woman's issue. Nowhere does Paul justify slavery by referring to a particular OT text or the created order, as he does the relationship between men and women. Moreover, any reference to Job 31:13 and Leviticus 25:43; 25:53 in Ephesians 6:9 and Colossians 4:1 would only be an allusion. No clear reference exists. Even if Paul does allude to these OT texts, they emphasize treating slaves fairly. They do not justify the institution of slavery. The citations of Isaiah 53 in 1 Peter 2:22-25 do not support the practice of slavery from the OT. Isaiah 53 in context is not even about slavery, and it is misleading to suggest that Peter somehow supports slavery theologically by citing this text. Webb, of course, does not

promote slavery, but he leaves the impression that the NT appeals to the OT texts on slavery in a comparable way to its appeal to the OT in relation to women. The case is weak, for when Peter cites Isaiah 53 his focus is on Christ as an example and as an atonement for sin. No justification of slavery exists at all. Webb's failure to perceive the differences between the slavery and women texts damages his case. We can say again that his hermeneutical categories may look convincing at first glance, but they suffer from lack of exegetical support.

Webb also rejects the transcultural status of primogeniture, but he does not make some crucial distinctions. The point is not that primogeniture is some inflexible pattern that must be enforced in every culture. We are all aware that God chose Jacob not Esau and that David was crowned instead of his older brothers. Webb fails to understand why Paul appeals to Adam as the first one created in 1 Corinthians 11:8-9 and 1 Timothy 2:13. The purpose is not to say that the cultural practice of primogeniture applies to every conceivable situation. I do not believe any complementarian would argue for such a conclusion. We have here, however, Paul's authoritative interpretation of the OT text. The inspired writer, Paul, informs us that the order of is significant, that it tells us something about how the relationship between men and women should be structured. In other words, each passage must be interpreted in context. We cannot and must not make sweeping conclusions about primogeniture regardless of the situation addressed. Paul himself is well aware that Jacob was chosen instead of Esau (Rom 9:10-13). What Webb does not explain successfully is Paul's appeal to the order of creation in

supporting a difference of role between men and women. In other words, Webb again fails to grasp the hermeneutical significance of the NT supporting a practice with an argument from creation. He can point to examples that seem to call the conclusion into question, but in doing so he fails to see that the NT itself answers the questions he poses and that it makes distinctions where he sees none.

Some of Webb's other arguments are also questionable. For example, he appears to suggest that the scriptures are incorrect in identifying some women as barren. It is unclear to me that this is analogous to texts that allegedly taught that the earth was the center of the world or that the earth was flat. Webb actually flattens out the teaching of the Bible too simplistically on this issue. Zechariah seems to recognize that the problem is with his old age too, not just Elizabeth's barrenness (Luke 1:18). Sarah seems to think that Abraham himself is too old to have children (Gen 17:17; so also Rom 4:19). Deuteronomy 7:14 specifically states that both males or females may be barren. All the blame is not laid on women. Webb says often that women are reproductive gardens in the scriptures and contributed nothing but a haven for the child, whereas we know a seed and egg must join together. But he never establishes his thesis clearly from the biblical text. His discussion of 1 Corinthians 11:8-9 is particularly striking where Paul says woman came from man. He says that scientific developments since Paul's day show the mutual contribution of men and women in the production of children. Hence, he finally says the argument here is hyperbolic. The conclusions drawn by Webb are unconvincing. Paul is thinking of creation, where the biblical text clearly teaches that the first woman, Eve, came

from the first man, Adam. As Webb acknowledges himself, Paul also sees that men come through women (1 Cor 11:11-12). Hence, there is no need to appeal to our scientific superiority, for Paul does not deny the contribution of women. But Webb's argument is remarkable for he seems to undercut what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:8-9 by appealing to our scientific knowledge. Ultimately, Webb drives a wedge between 1 Corinthians 11:8-9 and 11:11-12. The latter is a "seed idea" and applies to today; the former is cultural and unscientific and hence is culturally limited. But Paul is not buying into the reproductive garden idea here, for he thinks of how Eve came from Adam's rib, not the conception of people in the womb. There is nothing that contradicts modern science here, unless one believes Genesis is not historical in what it says about the creation of Adam and Eve.

Webb rightly argues that a practice is not necessarily normative simply because a theological analogy is used. We do not think monarchy is established in the Bible, nor do we think slavery applies today, even though God is described as King and Lord. I think we should say that the analogies used are intentional and in God's sovereignty were intended to teach us about God. Webb maintains that the analogy between husband and wife and Christ and the church is not necessarily transcultural. He is correct in saying that it is not necessarily transcultural, but he fails to explain a crucial element of the text. Paul informs us that the institution of marriage is patterned after the relationship between Christ and the church. The "mystery" is not that God thought up marriage and then used that relationship to illustrate Christ's relation to the church (Eph 5:32). No, it is precisely the reverse. Christ's

relationship to the church has priority, and marriage was always intended to mirror how Christ and the church are related. Interestingly, Paul again argues from a creation text, citing Genesis 2:24 in Ephesians 5:32 to justify his view of marriage. So, Webb is correct in concluding that monarchy and slavery are not intended to be in force today, but he fails to see that monarchy and slavery are not creation ordinances while marriage is! Paul makes that very point in Ephesians 5:22-33. Webb fails to discern how the final revelation, the NT scriptures, distinguish slavery from the women's question. He also thinks that if such a view of Ephesians 5:22-33 is accepted, then husbands can strip their wives in public as Hosea stripped Gomer in Hosea 2. The argument is bogus. First, it is unlikely that Hosea 2 literally describes what Hosea would do to Gomer. It should be interpreted as a description of Yahweh's relationship to Israel. Furthermore, Hosea is scarcely the place to establish the relationship between husbands and wives. No one would argue from Hosea that men should marry prostitutes. Clearly the situation was exceptional.

Extrabiblical Criteria

Because of space I turn to the extrabiblical criteria suggested by Webb. He rightly suggests that a pragmatic test can be of some use. A holy kiss is not welcomed by most people in the U.S. as a friendly greeting. Nor is washing feet particularly useful in our culture. Other examples mentioned by Webb are not as clear. He often says in the book that we are not required to literally obey our leaders today as people had to obey the Roman emperor during NT times or a king during the era of the OT. But is the

point of application so remarkably different? Even in the OT, we have examples where people appealed to kings or remonstrated with them when they did something wrong. Webb also says that using the slavery/master texts to say that we should obey employers is incorrect, since we are not required to obey employers but to fulfill our contract. Webb is partially right, for it is true that the relationship between employer and employee differs from the master/slave relationship. The two are not comparable at every point. Still, it seems that Webb overemphasizes the difference. There is still a sense in which most employees must do what their boss says or face the possibility of dismissal. Many people could tell stories of being fired by their bosses. Naturally matters are complex. Employees can sue, and bosses may be unjust. Nevertheless, it seems there is a line of continuity between the two situations that Webb overlooks.

Webb's explanation and application of this criterion is not always clear. He says that church members should submit to elders today because church leaders are educated, experienced, and highly qualified. But it is simply not the case that the elders are always the best educated and most experienced members of the congregation. Nor are they invariably those who are most qualified. Hence, if we follow Webb's view, those members who are better educated and most experienced should not submit to church leaders, while those who are less educated and inexperienced should. Webb introduces factors into the reason for submission that are not clearly taught in the NT. The reason the congregation should follow their leaders is because God has appointed them to lead the congregation, not necessarily because they are at the top of the heap education-

ally and experientially. Webb makes a similar mistake when it comes to the relationship of men and women. The biblical text nowhere suggests that women are to submit to men because of lack of education or social inexperience.

The last criterion suggested by Webb, which he deems to be persuasive, is social-scientific evidence. It is interesting that Webb thinks that his extrascriptural criteria are persuasive. We have already seen that the pragmatic criterion noted above is applied in subjective ways by Webb, and hence it is hardly as persuasive as he alleges. That Webb thinks the social-scientific criterion is persuasive surprises me since it seems to exalt an extrabiblical norm above the scriptures. Moreover, as we shall see, his own use of the criterion is problematic.

Of course, all agree that the scriptures may be misinterpreted. Some did think the earth was the center of the universe, and science helped us see that this interpretation was incorrect. Still, we must be very careful about how we apply this criterion, for we can easily end up with a cultural subversion of the biblical message. For instance, could not Webb's suggestion that the biblical text is culturally bound in speaking of the barrenness of women be applied principally to the issue of homosexuality? Webb, of course, holds the line strongly here, insisting that homosexual practices are always wrong. It seems, however, that someone could use Webb's criterion and argue against him. The argument could run like this: Just as the scriptural writers were culturally bound in thinking infertility was all a woman's fault, so too they are culturally bound when they condemn homosexuality. The biblical writers, after all, did not know, indeed could not know, what we

know about homosexuality. We understand better than they the genetic and environmental factors that lead one to become a homosexual. We have come to realize that it is not a sin at all. Thankfully Webb forcefully rejects arguments like these, but his criterion appears to open the door for others to use such an argument.

The social-scientific criterion is brought to bear upon the issue of woman being deceived in 1 Timothy 2:14. Webb insists that there is no credible scientific evidence that women are more apt to be deceived than men. Hence, Paul uses a cultural argument that assumes that women lacked education and social experience in this verse. I want to say up front that this verse is difficult. I have changed my mind about its meaning more than once. One element has not changed, however, and that is the conviction that egalitarians do not explain this verse credibly. First, it is possible that the traditional view is correct and that women are more prone to deception than men and that is why they should not teach. Such a view is politically incorrect today, but if that is what the scriptures teach, that is where we should stand. Second, I acknowledge that I did depend on some social-scientific research in my own modified explanation of the verse. I believe with Doriani that there is a coherence between the world as it is and the biblical text. Nonetheless, the latter should always have priority, and hence my modified explication of the traditional view may be wrong. Third, I now incline to the view that the point of the verse is that Satan subverted male headship by tempting Eve rather than Adam. If this is the case, then both vv. 13-14 appeal to the same argument—the created order. Or, perhaps the point is that Eve sinned first, but sin is traced through Adam (Rom 5:12-

19), teaching male headship. I feel confident that one of the above interpretations is correct, but admit that I am unsure which one is persuasive.

I am quite sure that Webb's own view of the verse is unpersuasive. He turns susceptibility to deception into ignorance, lack of education, and inexperience, but this does not fit with the scriptures, for deception is a *moral* category. Webb actually reads the language of deception through the lenses of modern society, so that it would be akin to my knowledge of automobiles. Almost anyone could deceive me about how to fix my car when it is in disrepair, but such lack of knowledge on my part is not the same thing as sin, and hence does not comport with the biblical notion of deception. For Eve's being deceived is connected to her sinning (cf. Rom 7:11; 16:18; 1 Cor 3:18; 2 Cor 11:3; Eph 5:6; Jas 1:26), and hence cannot be chalked up merely to lack of education. The deception that leads to sin is not merely ignorance but a culpable state of affairs in which deception is rooted in a desire to displace God.

Webb also suggests that the intimations of patriarchy in the creation account are accommodations to the culture in which Genesis was written. This seems like a desperate expedient to sustain a preferred conclusion. Furthermore, the accommodation theory does not really make sense of *Paul's* use of the text, for it would be flat out wrong to say that Eve was deceived because she was uneducated. Surely Eve could understand the simple prohibition relayed by Adam! Otherwise she would be so unintelligent that she could not understand the most elementary command. Paul thinks her deception is sinful, just as deception is understood in all the other passages in the NT. Webb

has to posit an improbable scenario to interpret 1 Timothy 2:14. It would not be hard for Paul to say women were uneducated, but he fails to do so. All acknowledge 1 Timothy 2:14 is a difficult verse to interpret, but I would submit that egalitarians like Webb do not provide a plausible interpretation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can be grateful to Webb for raising important hermeneutical questions, and helping us see that we must think deeply about these matters. Applying the biblical text to today's world is not always easy, and we can profit from some of Webb's insights and principles when we engage in the hermeneutical task. Nevertheless, Webb's hermeneutic is flawed because he fails to grasp precisely the biblical theological concept of redemptive history, even though he appeals to it in presenting his own view. Nor does he relate well the OT to the NT, faltering because he does not correlate his view with the truth that Christ fulfills all of God's promises. The definitive and final character of the NT canon is not properly integrated into the whole issue of application by Webb. Hence, he introduces abstract criteria to discern what is cultural instead of interpreting the Bible in accord with its storyline. There are some good insights in his use of the criteria, but the criteria he judges to be persuasive are actually remarkably ambiguous and even questionable. They do not establish his conclusion regarding the role of women, and he fails to employ the argument from creation sufficiently in his explication of homosexuality. He does show that the canon excludes homosexuality. Webb rightly perceives that slavery is not God's ideal, but he could have drawn this con-

clusion from rightly assessing arguments from the created order and paying attention to the warrants (or lack thereof) found in the NT itself. To sum up, his defense of egalitarianism is found lacking, for he fails to establish his case exegetically or hermeneutically.

ENDNOTES

¹William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001).

Child-Parent Imagery in the Catholic Epistles

Peter Balla

Peter Balla is the Lecturer and Head of the New Testament Department of the Faculty of Theology of the Károli Gáspár Reformed University, Budapest, Hungary. He received his Master of Theology (1988) and Ph.D. (1994) from University of Edinburgh. His *Habilitationsschrift* was accepted by the Lutheran Theological University in Budapest in October 2001. Dr. Balla's doctoral dissertation, *Challenges to New Testament Theology: An Attempt to Justify the Enterprise*, has recently been published by Hendrickson.

In the Catholic Epistles the theme of the “real” child-parent relationship is not addressed. The figurative sense of the term “children” is often applied to the recipients in two ways: as the children of the writer and at the same time as God’s children. When discussing these texts we focus on two questions: “What kind of views on the child-parent relationship do they presuppose?,” and, “What do the authors want to achieve by using familial imagery?”

James

The Epistle of James does not address the child-parent relationship directly. Since the letter refers to two commandments from the second table of the Ten Commandments (2:11), and in 2:8 the author quotes from Leviticus 19:18 the commandment to love one’s neighbor, it may be surprising that the commandment to honor father and mother does not surface in the letter. However, we can argue the other way round as well: the social interest of the letter, and its appeal to the Ten Commandments may raise the possibility that honor toward parents may be presupposed in some passages.

Abraham appears together with his son in James 2:21; here he is not only the father of Isaac, but the author calls him “our father” (*ho patēr hēmōn*). Franz Mussner argues that this expression was originally a claim made by Jewish people (cf. e.g., Isa 51:2; 4 Macc 16:20; Matt 3:9; John 8:39), but in early Christianity it included Gentile Christians as well (cf.

Rom 4:12).¹ Thus Mussner argues that James’s reference to Abraham as “our father” does not imply that only Jewish Christians are addressed by the letter.²

Abraham is called “our father” in James, but this must be understood in the sense of a “forefather” (cf. Rom 4:1, where in many MSS he is referred to as “father,” but there is also a textual tradition, adopted also by NA27 as the main text, that has *ton propatora hēmōn*). Honor toward the forefathers implies honor to one’s parents as well. This is paralleled in honor toward older people. In James 5:14 the readers are told that ill people should “call for the elders of the church” (*proskalesasthē tous presbuterous tēs ekklēsiās*). It is probable that the term “elders” refers to “officials” here.³ However, the model of the Jewish leadership of villages and of synagogues probably influenced the author of the letter just as it influenced the early Christian church in Jerusalem.⁴ If so, then it is likely that some of the elders were also “old” in age. The “office” of eldership, at least in its origins, is probably connected with the view that old people should be honored. This duty is related to the duty of honoring parents, as we can see in the environment of the NT.⁵

The author repeatedly addresses his readers as “brethren,” most often as “my brethren” or “my beloved brethren” (see e.g., 1:2,19; 2:1, 5, 14; 3:1; 4:11; 5:7, 19). This usage can imply that the Christians belong to the family of God; they are brothers and sisters because they are children of God.

Perhaps this idea is reflected in James 1:17-18. Here God is referred to as the “father of lights” (*tou patros tōn phōtōn*). Wolfgang Schrage points to Genesis 1:14 and Psalm 135:7 (LXX) as examples where “lights” mean “stars.”⁶ This must be its meaning in James 1:17 as well.⁷

However, we may add that the expression also fits the familial imagery, since v. 17 speaks about “gifts” coming from this father “from above”: “Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (RSV). The gift is not specified; it may be “wisdom” (cf. Jas 3:15,17).⁸ Whatever it may include, it implies the father’s provision for his children. The “slightly imperfectly quantified hexameter” in 1:17 contains a word-play; thus *pasa dosis* and *pan dōrēma* are either synonymous, or *dosis* may be translated as a verbal noun, “so that it is ‘all good giving and every perfect gift’ (NEB) that may be attributed to God.”⁹

Verse 18 continues the parental imagery, since the expression “bringing forth” is used: “Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.” The expression “brought us forth” (*apekuēsen*) “denotes the female’s part in giving birth,”¹⁰ but it is probably used here as a continuation of the picture in v. 15, where the same verb occurs: “Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full-grown brings forth death.” As Davids puts it: “Sin produces death, but God produces life.”¹¹

In James 1:18 we further observe the presence of the idea of creation, which is expressed in the term “his creatures” (and in the variant reading in some MSS which have *epoīesen* instead of *apekuēsen*). In

Philo, the creative activity of God and the procreative activity of parents are regarded as being closely related (e.g., *Decal.* 107). The idea of “God as the creator” and “God as father” belong together. Sophie Laws argues that v. 18 continues describing “God as Father,” in spite of the use of *apekuēō*.¹² The verse refers to one particular gift of God, “that of birth.”¹³ God’s gift of new life has an ethical implication: the addressees are expected to lead a way of life that is in accordance with the word of God (cf. also the next verse, 1:19, which begins a paraenetic section: “Know this, my beloved brethren. Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger . . .”).

We may put it this way: Christians are the “children” of God. One implication of the parental imagery is the expectation that Christians will obey him. This imagery may be in the background in the Epistle of James, since this letter is full of ethical advice.

1 Peter

Although 1 Peter has a long passage dealing with duties in the realm of family relationships and in wider circles of the society (1 Pet 2:13-3:7), one can argue that this text is not a Household Code. On the one hand, its concern includes also the leaders of the “state”; on the other hand, it omits the child-parent relationship. However, there is a passage affirming the duty of children to honor their parents. In 1 Peter 1:14 we read: “As obedient children (*hōs tekna hupkoēs*), do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance.”¹⁴

The expression “obedient children” has a similar genitival structure in the Greek to the phrase “the sons of disobedience” (*tois huiois tēs apeitheias*) in Ephesians 2:2.

Thus it may be that it is idiomatic, describing the readers as an “obedient people.”¹⁵ However, the term *tekna* in 1 Peter 1:14 may be a conscious choice of the author in order to anticipate the reference to “father” in v. 17. The only other occurrence of *tekna* in 1 Peter is in 3:6, where the idea of obedience plays a role as well; though here Christian wives are addressed as the “children of Sarah,” and Sarah’s obedience to her husband is emphasized. The choice of the word *tekna* may be due to its association with “obedience.”¹⁶ Although 1 Peter 1:14 does not say explicitly whose children are addressed, the following verses may imply that the readers of the letter are referred to as God’s children.

The author goes on to exhort the addressees to be holy, since he who has called them is holy (v. 15). Although in the NT 1 John 2:20 may be the only other reference to God the father as “the Holy One” (*ho hagios*),¹⁷ the expression is widely attested in the Septuagint in the form of “the Holy One of Israel” (e.g., Ps 70:22 LXX; Isa 1:4). In verse 16, the author makes clear that he refers to God’s call when he quotes from Leviticus 19:2 (LXX): “You shall be holy, for I am holy” (cf. also Lev 11:44, with minor differences). The reference to being “holy” (*hagioi*) can stand in a context where a believing parent’s child shares the parent’s holiness (1 Cor 7:14; cf. also Heb 2:11). Apart from the “priestly” connotations of the quotation from Leviticus,¹⁸ this further aspect may lie behind the use of *hagioi* in this context.

The reference to holiness in 1 Peter 1:15-16 is immediately followed by a reference to God as “father” in v. 17, where we read: “And if you invoke as Father him who judges each one impartially . . .” (*kai ei patera epikaleisthe*).¹⁹ We note the natural way in which the reference to “father”

occurs: it is not a point to be proved, but something presupposed. The paternal imagery applied to God is significant for the author of the letter, since God as father appeared already at the beginning, in vv. 2-3. The reappearance of the motif in v. 17 (after it was implied in v. 14) must have a purpose. The metaphor is used in order to motivate the addressees,²⁰ as v. 17b clearly says: “. . . conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile.” Thus I suggest that we have here an argument similar to that in 1 Corinthians: a parent’s holiness is passed on to the children; this time God himself is the “holy parent.”

The imagery of the child-parent relationship between the addressees and God is continued in v. 23, where a verb related to *gennaō* is used: “You have been born anew (*anagegennēmenoi*), not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.” As the same verb is used in v. 3, the two occurrences form an *inclusio*. The picture is carried over to chapter two, where in v. 2 the addressees are called to long for “milk” (*gala*; cf. 1 Cor 3:2), “like newborn babes” (*hōs artigennēta brephē*). The metaphor has its limits, since real infants do not need to be told “to long for” milk. The author uses the picture to imply that the recipients should acknowledge their need for growth.²¹ This does not mean that they have only recently become Christians. Rather, it emphasizes that they cannot make themselves perfect; they receive salvation from God through the “spiritual” milk (*logikon* here may refer back to *dialogou* in 1:23).²² The picture of being nourished serves to show the addressees how much they have to rely on God.

First Peter 1:22 belongs to the familial imagery, too: “Having purified your souls

by your obedience to the truth (*hēgnikotes en tē hupakoē tēs alētheias*) for a sincere love of the brethren, love one another earnestly from the heart." We observe that "love of the brethren" (*philadelphia*) is mentioned here together with another Greek expression for the idea of "loving" (*agapēsate*), and together with "heart" (*ek kardias*). "Heart" has an adjective in some MSS, "clean" (*katharas*), which is put in brackets in the main text of NA27. If we adopt the shorter reading, then the text is a confirmation of the familial imagery. Michaels rightly notes: "The latter picks up the emphasis on 'genuine brotherly love' in the preceding clause, while the longer reading accents the reference to purification with which the verse begins."²³ We may add that the reference to "obedience" in the same verse may confirm our view that the verse uses familial imagery.

We observe that the whole passage, 1:14-2:2, has a paraenetic character: the author calls the readers to a life-style worthy of those who have been "ransomed" (v. 18) "with the precious blood of Christ" (v. 19).²⁴ The call to obedience to God is expressed by words belonging to the imagery of the child-parent relationship.

It is against this background that a reference to earthly fathers appears in this longer passage. In verse 18 we read: "You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers . . ." (*elutrōthēte ek tēs mataias humōn anastrophēs patroparadotou*).²⁵ The adjective *patroparadotos* ("transmitted by the fathers") is found neither in the LXX, nor elsewhere in the NT. In non-Christian sources it is a positive term praising the old traditions.²⁶ The author of 1 Peter seems to be the first Christian to apply it to the old, pagan way of life from which Christians are freed.²⁷

Thus it is striking that earthly fathers are mentioned in a negative context: they pass on a "futile" lifestyle to their children. There are two possible lines of interpretation. On the one hand, it may be argued that the negative picture about earthly fathers serves as a contrast to highlight the greatness of the gifts of God the Father. In this case there is a tension between real earthly fathers and God the heavenly Father (the term being used in a figurative sense): our heavenly Father has to save us from the futile lifestyle inherited from our earthly fathers. On the other hand, it is also possible to argue that the reference to earthly fathers is introduced in order to point to human fallenness; forefathers throughout many generations are included.²⁸

If we adopt the latter argument, then the context may shed a new light on v. 18. It becomes significant that the reference to earthly fathers appears in a context that is characterized by the familial imagery calling for obedience to God as Father. Earthly fathers are assumed to be honored, in spite of the fact that they participate in the process by which human fallenness is passed on to new generations. Thus it is possible to interpret this passage in such a way that it is not taken to imply dishonoring one's parents. Rather, since God is to be obeyed as "father," earthly fathers are supposed to receive due honor, in spite of their fallen nature.²⁹

We briefly note that at the end of the letter the author refers to Mark as his "son" (5:13-14a): "She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings; and so does my son Mark. Greet one another with the kiss of love." The structure of the letter-ending is similar to those of the Pauline letters.³⁰ The use of the

familial imagery in this verse is similar to the reference to Timothy and Titus as Paul's children. Though 1 Peter 5:13 uses the expression "son" (*Markos ho huios mou*) instead of "child," which is used in the Pauline Corpus, it too points to a spiritual relationship. Because of the word "son," Schrage rightly uses the term "spiritual fatherhood."³¹ There may be a difference, however, when compared with the Pauline Corpus: in the case of Peter and Mark this may not imply that Mark has become a Christian through Peter.³² There is a tradition attributed to a certain "elder" by Papias that Mark was the "interpreter" of Peter (recorded in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.15), and another tradition referring to Mark as a "follower" of Peter (*Hist. eccl.* 2.15.1). Michaels argues that the term "son" here "should be understood as 'convert' or 'disciple' (BGD, 833.1c) in the same way that Timothy is referred to as Paul's 'child.'"³³ Whether or not the latter interpretation is right, Michaels may be right at least in his other suggestion that "Peter seems to have adopted it here to give to his concluding words the ring of a family greeting (cf. his emphasis on the Christian community as a 'brotherhood' in 2:17; 5:9)."³⁴

The reference to a "kiss" in v. 14 fits the familial imagery. We note that a few MSS add "holy" (*hagiō*) to the expression "kiss," instead of the reference to "love" (*agapēs*; the latter being adopted as the main text of NA27). "With the holy kiss" may be an assimilation to Pauline letter-endings (cf. e.g., Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20). "Peter's distinctive 'kiss of love' picks up the admonitions to mutual love in 1:22 and 4:8, and love for the whole Christian brotherhood in 2:17."³⁵ Schrage suggests that this "kiss" may have been part of early Christian worship, "als Zeichen

gegenseitiger Bruderliebe."³⁶ Thus the Christian congregation is depicted here as an extended family where "brethren" greet each other in this way.

To sum up, 1 Peter uses household imagery in the following ways: the author can refer to God as the "father" of the Christians (implying also their brotherhood to one another), and the author can refer to an individual as his own "son" (implying a close spiritual bond). In the NT only 1 Peter applies a reference to the traditions of the forefathers to the former pagan way of life of the addresses. However, this use does not negate the injunction to honor one's parents.

Jude and 2 Peter

I do not discuss 2 Peter and Jude in detail, since they use familial imagery only in passing. The author of Jude uses family language only in v. 1: he refers to himself as the "brother of James," and he makes use of the expression "God the Father." The reference to being the brother of James is probably a claim to be the brother of the Lord as well.³⁷ Otherwise Jude calls his addressees "beloved" (vv. 3, 17, 20: *agapētoi*). The reference to "God the Father" (v. 1) must imply that the author shares the view found in other NT writings that Christians are the "children" of God, but he does not make more use of this imagery in the letter.

The author of 2 Peter calls his addressees "brethren" once (1:10). He refers to "God the Father" in 1:17; this occurrence belongs to the child-parent imagery concerning the relationship of Jesus to God. 2 Peter 1:17-18 refers to the scene of the "transfiguration": "For when he received honor and glory from God the Father and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, 'This is my beloved Son, with

whom I am well pleased,' we heard this voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain."

In 2 Peter 3:4 we find a reference to the "fathers"³⁸ who "fell asleep" (*hoi pateres ekoimēthēsan*), meaning the forefathers (2 Pet 3:3-4): "First of all you must understand this, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own passions and saying, 'Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things have continued as they were from the beginning of creation.'" These "fathers" are either the Jewish patriarchs, or earlier Christian generations.³⁹ In either case, the expression is not used here to refer to people in their role as fathers of children. We note, however, that the very fact that forefathers are mentioned implies reverence toward them.

We have already mentioned that there is an idiomatic use of the term "children" in 2 Peter. In 2 Peter 2:14, at the end of a long list of vicious actions of false teachers, we find the expression: "Accursed children!" (*kataras tekna*). Richard Bauckham paraphrases the idiom in this way: "They are under God's curse."⁴⁰ He notes that literally the idiom means, "children of a curse," and calls it a Hebraism.⁴¹

Thus the few uses of familial imagery in Jude and 2 Peter are close parallels to the uses we meet in the NT elsewhere, though they are not elaborated in any detail in these letters.

The Johannine Epistles

In the Epistles of John, the recipients are addressed frequently as "children." The author calls them his own children; and he also refers to them as God's children.⁴² In 1 John 2:1 the author names the purpose of his writing. It is significant that this is the first time in 1 John when the

author calls his readers "children" (with a diminutive form, "my little children," *teknia mou*): "My little children, I am writing this to you so that you may not sin; but if any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." By addressing his recipients in this way, the author implies that he has a loving relationship to them and that he writes with the expectation that they will obey him.

We note that in the same verse the author refers also to God as "Father" (he already did so in 1:2-3, and implied it in 1:7 by a reference to Jesus as "Son"). Thus the author uses the child-father imagery in a twofold way. First, he himself is the "father" of his addressees in a spiritual sense. We observe that he does not refer to himself as "father," but refers to his addressees as his "children." Second, Christians are regarded as the children of God. This is implied in the first two chapters and is expressed explicitly in 3:1a, 2: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. . . . Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."⁴³

We can find further examples of these two uses, i.e., that both the author and God are seen in the role of the father. We name but a few texts. First John 2:12-14 is a well-structured passage: it has two triplets of addresses. The author begins the first part with the address: "little children" (v. 12). The readers may think it is the same usage as in 2:1.⁴⁴

The author goes on to address "fathers" as a second group (v. 13a). A third group, "young men" (*neaniskoi*), are addressed in v. 13b; then each of the three groups is

addressed a second time (v. 14). On the second occasion, “children” are referred to with another word, *paidia*.⁴⁵ The Greek word is ambiguous, it can also mean “servants,” but it probably means “children” in this context, as they are praised because they “know the father.”

1 John 2:12-14 reads (RSV):

I am writing to you (*graphō humin*), little children, because your sins are forgiven for his sake (*dia to onoma autou*).

I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning.

I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one.

I write to you (*egrapsa humin*), children, because you know the Father. I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning.

I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.

Hans-Joseph Klauck summarises the “most favored” exposition of our days in the following way: The first items of both triplets concern Christians in general, i.e., all the members of the congregation (“als Anrede an die Gesamtgemeinde”). The second and the third items of the parallel structure are addressed to two “age groups” in the sense of the length of their being Christians.⁴⁶ Thus this section is probably addressing various groups among the recipients. Klauck himself suggests that it is worth considering that all three addresses refer to the whole congregation, but under different aspects.⁴⁷ An alternative view would be to understand the three addresses as referring to age groups. Klauck argues that this is unlikely because of the sequence, children-fathers-young men, and because of the content of

what is said to the different groups.⁴⁸

If we accept that *teknia* and *paidia* (in this case as synonyms) refer to the whole congregation, then we have an ambiguity (perhaps intended by the author). On the one hand, they may be used to refer to the “children” of the author.⁴⁹ On the other hand, the terms may refer to the “children” of God. Klauck argues that in v. 12 the expression “forgiveness of sins” and the reference to the “name” (*to onoma*) remind the recipients of their becoming Christians: “Kinder sind jene, die in Taufe und Sündenvergebung das neue Leben als Geschenk aus der Hand des Vaters empfangen.”⁵⁰

In v. 13, “Father” must refer to God, because it stands in the singular, and also because children would not have to be reminded that they “know” their own earthly fathers. “Knowing” here probably refers to knowing God as someone who calls his children to love each other (cf. the immediate context: vv. 9-10).

We observe that this passage addresses children and fathers. We further note that God as Father appears in a context where earthly fathers are mentioned as well. This implies that various groups, including fathers, in a Christian household (and house church) should carry out their duties as God’s children.

In 1 John 3:9-10, the author uses the verb *gennaō* in the perfect tense when referring to the Christians being “born of God”: “No one born of God commits sin; for God’s nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God. By this it may be seen who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not do right is not of God, nor he who does not love his brother.”⁵¹ The imagery includes associations both to the family and to creation.

Christians thank God for their new life; that is why they follow his instructions.⁵²

The author argues that because God loves the recipients (cf. 4:7-8), they ought to love one another as “brethren” (3:10b; cf. also 4:19-21, where, though not mentioned explicitly, God can be seen as “Father,” and this can serve as the ground for Christians to love one another). Rusam emphasizes that God’s fatherhood involves caring love.⁵³

With these examples in the background, we cautiously raise the possibility that in 1 John 4:4 and in 5:21 there may be a conscious ambiguity in the use of *tekna*. On the one hand, it is probable that in both cases the term addresses the recipients as the “children” of the author, though the possessive pronoun “my” is not added in these cases. On the other hand, it may be that the author left out “my” on purpose: the addressees should think of themselves also as the children of God. In 4:4 this second possible meaning is implied by the beginning of the verse: “you are of God” (*humeis ek tou theou este*, the Greek preposition possibly implying being “born” of God, as in 3:9). The final verse of the letter, 5:21, is preceded by a reference to Jesus, the “Son” of God (5:20). Perhaps, then, the addressees are not only referred to as the author’s “children,” but also as the brethren of the Son, as God’s children.

To sum up, the author uses the imagery of the child-father relationship because he expects obedience to his ethical advice. The recipients are called the “children” of the author and of God, because they are expected to obey the teaching of the author, and to fulfil the will of God. This implies a child-parent relationship in which children honor and obey their parents.

Whereas 1 John does not begin like a typical letter, 2 John does contain the sender and the addressees (v. 1a): “The elder to the elect lady and her children, whom I love in the truth”. “Elder” (*ho presbuteros*) can be a reference to an office in the early church, but at the same time it can retain its original meaning: it can refer to an old person.⁵⁴ Klauck suggests that the grammatical form of the comparative, “older,” does not have to be stressed in the Greek, so the term can be translated as “der Alte” (“the Old One”).⁵⁵ The “elect lady” (*eklektē kuria*) is probably a metaphor for the congregation.⁵⁶ This view is strengthened by the last verse of the letter (v. 13), which refers to the “sister” of this lady: “The children of your elect sister greet you.”⁵⁷

By the way of an *inclusio*, both the beginning and the end of the letter mention “children”: the addressees as well as those sending greetings are called *tekna*. Klauck rightly affirms that the letter is like correspondence within a family, but family in this context is understood as *familia Dei*.⁵⁸ It is worth noting that in v. 1 the “children” belong to the congregation: they are the children of the “elect lady.” This implies that the congregation can be thought of as a “mother.”⁵⁹ Verse 4a continues this usage: “I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children (*ek tōn teknōn sou*) following the truth.” Here we note that an exhortation is closely connected to praise: the author probably met some members of the congregation,⁶⁰ and by expressing his joy over them he implies that all of them should live like those he met. In v. 5 the author turns to the whole congregation (addressed as the “lady” again) in order to exhort them to fulfil the commandment of love.

We observe, however, that in v. 4b

another metaphor appears when God is referred to as "Father": "just as we have been commanded by the Father" (4b). In v. 3 we find a reference to peace from "God the Father" and Jesus is also mentioned together with an addition naming him as the "Son of the Father."⁶¹ Thus it seems that the children of the congregation are at the same time the children of God.

The author of 3 John refers to himself as an elder; thus the letter begins by the same expression as 2 John does: *ho presbuteros*. However, there is a difference in the usage of the term "children": whereas in 2 John 4 the children of the "lady" were mentioned, in 3 John the author speaks about his own "children." In 3 John 3-4 we read: "For I greatly rejoiced when some of the brethren arrived and testified to the truth of your life, as indeed you do follow the truth. No greater joy can I have than this, to hear that my children (*ta ema tekna*) follow the truth."

The plural form, "my children," implies a general truth, but the immediate context, v. 3, makes it probable that the addressee of the letter, Gaius, is also included.⁶² This is a further example of using the familial imagery to express the relationship between the author and his addressees. Our interpretation that Gaius is included in the circle of the "children" of the author is strengthened by the frequent reference to him as "the loved one" (vv. 1, 2, 5, 11). Gaius is praised for his services to the "brethren" (v. 5).⁶³ The reference to the "brethren" in vv. 3 and 5 implies that they are all "children" of God the Father.

Thus this letter supposes the child-parent imagery as regards the relationship between the addressees and God. At the same time, the idea that they are the "chil-

dren" of the author is more dominant in 3 John than in 2 John.

We observe that both 2 John and 3 John are concerned with a way of life in accordance with God's will (see e.g., 2 John 4; 3 John 11). The addressees are praised, but at the same time they are warned against the bad examples of others (see e.g., 2 John 7-11; 3 John 9-10). Thus we may see here a use of the familial imagery similar to that in the Pauline Corpus: congregational members are expected to follow the advice of the letter-writer and to live in accordance with the will of God; that is why they are referred to as the children of the writer and the children of God.

Conclusion

To sum up, Christians are referred to as "children" in their relationship to the senders of letters (1 John, 3 John). "Son" can refer in a figurative sense to the spiritual bond between Christians (1 Peter). The figurative imagery may even refer to people as the "children" of the church (2 John).

God is referred to metaphorically as "Father" extensively in these writings. God is the "Father" of Jesus (2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John); and he is also the Father of the Christians (James, 1 Peter, 1 John). The parental imagery is used in these writings in order to imply a strong bond and loving feelings in the relationships to which it is applied. One particular consequence of the Christians being regarded as the children of God is that they are "brethren" to one another. This use is widely attested in early Christianity (here also in 1 Peter, 1 John, 3 John). Because Christians are loved by God, their "father," they ought to love one another as "brethren."

In general terms, in our sources it is

expected from the recipients of parental care that they will return such by their obedience to their teachers and to God's will. This implies a view of the child-parent relationship in which it is assumed that children honor and obey their parents.

Finally, we note the absence of references to tensions in the family that would be similar to those envisaged by some radical sayings of Jesus in the Gospel tradition. In an indirect way, this may confirm a thesis that Jesus' radical call to some disciples was not understood by the early church as a breach of the expectation of their pagan and Jewish environment that children owe honor to their parents.

ENDNOTES

¹Franz Mussner, *Der Jakobusbrief* (Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament XIII, Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder, 1987) 141. See also Sophie Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James* (Black's New Testament Commentary; London: A. & C. Black, 1980) 133.

²Mussner, 141.

³So e.g., Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James* (New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Exeter: Paternoster, 1982) 193; and Mussner, 219.

⁴So Hubert Frankemölle, *Der Brief des Jakobus* (Ökumenischer Taschenbuch-Kommentar 17/1-2; Gütersloh: Gütersloher/Würzburg: Echter, 1994) 2:710.

⁵See my *Habilitationsschrift*, entitled *The Child-Parent Relationship in the New Testament and its Environment*, accepted by the Lutheran Theological University in Budapest in October 2001.

⁶Host Balz and Wolfgang Schrage, *Die "Katholischen Briefe"* (Das Neuen Testament Deutsch 10; Göttingen/Zürich: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993) 20. In

this volume, James, 1-2 Peter, Jude are by Schrage (henceforth cited only as Schrage); 1-3 John are by Balz (henceforth cited only as Balz).

⁷See e.g., Frankemölle, 1:291, 295; and Mussner, 91. Concerning the use of the expression in James, Schrage, 20, affirms: "damit wird der Vaterbegriff in sonst im Neuen Testament unüblicher Weise kosmologisch verstanden und mit den Gestirnen verbunden."

⁸So Davids, 88.

⁹Laws, 72.

¹⁰Ibid., 75.

¹¹Davids, 89.

¹²Laws, 75.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴"Of your ignorance" is partly or wholly missing in some MSS; in the Greek it is parenthetical, interrupting the expression "to former passions."

¹⁵See J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter* (Word Biblical Commentary 49; Waco, TX: Word, 1988) 56. Although the idiomatic use of "son(s) of . . ." is not discussed in this article, we note that since the idiom points to a strong, inseparable relationship, it is based on a family imagery in which sons imitate their fathers to such an extent that they become one with them. The idiomatic use in Eph 2:2 can be paralleled by the following expressions (using *huios/huioi*): "son of peace" (Luke 10:6); "sons of the resurrection" (Luke 20:36); "sons of light" (Luke 16:8; John 12:36; 1 Thess 5:5); "the son of perdition" (John 17:12); "sons of the day" (1 Thess 5:5). We note that the idiomatic usage appears with *tekna* in Eph 2:3 ("children of wrath"), Eph 5:8 ("children of light"), and in 2 Pet 2:14 (though here in reversed order, *kataras tekna*, "accursed children" [RSV]).

¹⁶Ibid., 57.

¹⁷Though even this occurrence is open to discussion, see Michaels, 58.

¹⁸So *ibid.*, 60, pointing also to 1 Pet 2:9.

¹⁹With minor variants regarding the verb.

²⁰So also Norbert Brox, *Der erste Petrusbrief* (Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 21; Zürich: Benziger/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1979) 79.

²¹Eduard Schweizer, *Der erste Petrusbrief* (Zürcher Bibelkommentare 15; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1998) 42.

²²So Schweizer, *ibid.*

²³Michaels, 72.

²⁴Schweizer, 31, affirms concerning 1 Pet 1:13-21: "In dem langen Abschnitt finden sich nur drei Tätigkeitswörter in der direkten Aussageform: 'hofft!—werdet!—wandert!' Es sind alles Aufforderungen, im Griechischen in der Zeitform, die den Neueinsatz betont."

²⁵The order of the last two words is reversed in some MSS.

²⁶See examples in Michaels, 64; e.g., a letter of King Attalus III to the people of Pergamum in 135 B.C.

²⁷So Brox, 81.

²⁸So e.g., *ibid.*, 80.

²⁹Schweizer, 34-35, can point also to some good deeds of the forefathers: "Dabei haben diese [i.e., die 'Väter'] gewiss nicht nur Verbrechen und Perversitäten ausgeübt, sondern auch Kinder grossgezogen, Felder bestellt und für ihr Vaterland gekämpft, schöne Gottesdienste gefeiert und Opfer gebracht. 'Nichtig' war ihr Leben nicht, weil

es im Vergleich zu anderen Völkern inhaltlos oder besonders böse gewesen wäre, sondern weil Gott anderes mit ihnen wollte."

³⁰See *ibid.*, 97.

³¹"geistliche Vaterschaft" (Schrage, 121).

³²So Schweizer, 98, with a reference to Acts 12:12.

³³Michaels, 312.

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵*Ibid.*, 313.

³⁶Schrage, 121.

³⁷So Udo Schnelle, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 2d ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1996) 475-76, who holds that this is a pseudepigraphical writing. For a monograph on this problem, see Richard Bauckham, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990).

³⁸Some MSS add *hēmōn*, thus referring to "our fathers."

³⁹For the view that they are Jewish patriarchs, see, D. A. Carson *et al.*, who argue that "nowhere else in the New Testament is the expression 'the fathers' used of the early Christians" (D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* [Leicester: Apollos, 1992] 436). For the view that they are earlier Christian generations, see e.g., Schnelle, 485, who counts the historical Peter among the fathers already fallen asleep.

⁴⁰Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (Word Biblical Commentary 50; Waco, TX: Word, 1983) 258.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 267. So also Anton Vögtle, *Der Judasbrief, Der 2. Petrusbrief*. (Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 22; Zürich:

Benziger/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1994) 204; and Schrage, 144.

⁴²When referring to the "author," I leave open the question whether the three letters were written by one author or 2-3 John were written by a different person. Similarly, I do not address the question of the historical order of the letters and their relationship to the Fourth Gospel. For a discussion of the issues involved, see Hans-Josef Klauck, *Der erste Johannesbrief* (Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 23/1; Zürich und Braunschweig: Benziger/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1991 (arguing for one author of the three letters who is not the same as the Fourth Evangelist; see esp. p. 126); and Schnelle (arguing for the priority of 2-3 John; see pp. 495-533, esp. 500-504, 516-18, 522). Dietrich Rusam holds that the Johannine Epistles follow the Gospel of John (*Die Gemeinschaft der Kinder Gottes: Das Motiv der Gotteskindschaft und die Gemeinden der johanneischen Briefe* [Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament 133; Stuttgart/Berlin/Köln: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1993]). He observes that 1 John has a larger number of examples of the terms "children of God" and "born of God" than John's Gospel has (11).

⁴³Although in v. 1 some MSS have "has given *you*", it is clear that the author includes himself, because the verb stands in the first person plural form (*klēthōmen*), and because the author uses "we are" (*esmen*) in v. 2 (we note that *kai esmen* at the end

of v. 1 is omitted in some MSS). We may add that v. 2b may belong to this familial imagery as well; if so, then it echoes the similarity between children and their fathers (“we shall be like him”).

⁴⁴Minuscule 630 even adds “my,” to make explicit that the author speaks about his own children.

⁴⁵Some MSS wanted to have an exact parallel, so they have *paidia* also in v. 12 in the place of *teknia*.

⁴⁶Klauck, *Der erste Johannesbrief*, 132.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸The hypothesis of John O’Neill is worth mentioning (1989, 282): “1 John, with its fierce command not to love the world nor the things in the world and to flee the lust of the flesh . . . (1 John 2:15f.) might well have first been written for a monastic community. Note that the community is male, and consists perhaps of three grades, children, men and fathers (2:12-14)” (“The Origins of Monasticism,” in *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honor of Henry Chadwick*, ed. R. Williams [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989] 270-287). “Father” was the Abbot, i.e., the head of the house (see O’Neill, “New Testament Monasteries,” in *Common Life in the Early Church: Essays Honoring Graydon F. Snyder*, ed. J. V. Hills et al. [Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998] 126-132).

⁴⁹See e.g., Klauck *Der erste Johannesbrief*, 133, who speaks of the “role of the fatherly teacher,” known from Wisdom literature.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Concerning the use of the expression “born of God,” Rusam, 111,

affirms that: “Die Vaterschaft Gottes erfährt im 1Joh eine logische Begründung: Gott ist Vater der Glaubenden, weil sie aus ihm geboren sind.”

⁵²Horst Balz also emphasizes the implication that God as father enables his children to withstand evil. Concerning this passage he (Balz, 190) affirms: “Konkret angespielt wird damit auf die Neugeburt der Glaubenden durch den Geist Gottes (vgl. Joh. 3,6-8). Die Möglichkeit eines Lebens im Widerspruch zur Sünde geht allein von Gott aus.”

⁵³Rusam, 111, states: “So wird im 1Joh das Gebot der Gottes—und Bruderliebe weniger auf Gottes väterliche Macht zurückgeführt, durch die er die Möglichkeit hat zu gebieten, sondern auf seine väterliche Liebe.”

⁵⁴See e.g., Balz, 213.

⁵⁵Hans-Josef Klauck, *Der zweite und dritte Johannesbrief* (Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 23/2; Zürich: Benziger / Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1992) 28.

⁵⁶So e.g., Balz, 213; see also S. S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John* (Word Biblical Commentary 51; Dallas, TX: Word, 1984) 318-319.

⁵⁷The term “elect,” *eklektēs*, is replaced in a few MSS by *ekklēsias*, making the implied meaning explicit; see also Klauck, *Der zweite und dritte Johannesbrief*, 34 against the view that the addressee would be an individual, a real lady.

⁵⁸Klauck, *Der zweite und dritte Johannesbrief*, 74.

⁵⁹So also Balz, 213.

⁶⁰So Klauck, *Der zweite und dritte Johannesbrief*, 45.

⁶¹Though some MSS omit this second occurrence of “Father,” while other MSS replace it by a reference to “God.”

⁶²So also Klauck, *Der zweite und dritte Johannesbrief*, 85.

⁶³Rusam, 212, has pointed out that the situation in 3 John fits the general picture we have of early Christianity inasmuch as there are probably house churches implied in this letter as well: Diotrophes probably did not receive some people into the congregation that met at his house (vv. 9-10); whereas Gaius is probably praised for his hospitality in receiving people into the congregation at his house (vv. 5-6). The letter mentioned in v. 9 must have been directed to the whole church in the community, and not just to one house church in it.

Marriage as a Spiritual Discipline

Leigh E. Conner

Leigh E. Conner is the Lawrence and Charlotte Hoover Professor of Psychology of Religion and Pastoral Counseling at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He received his Ph.D. in Psychology of Religion and Pastoral Counseling from Southern as well. Dr. Conner is the author of a number of articles and is the co-author of *Self-Defeating Lifestyles* (Broadman).

Introduction

Christians should view marriage as a spiritual discipline. While pervasive narcissism has eroded marriage as an institution in contemporary culture, marriage provides believers with the opportunity to prepare daily and discipline their hearts and minds towards sacrificial love and towards triumph over the potentially destructive effects of narcissism. By the design of the Creator, in marriage believers come to know each other intimately and provide each other with the benefit of daily opportunities to discern their individual growth towards the ideal of Christ's self-emptying love.¹

The Contemporary Challenges to the Institution of Christian Marriage

Recent research by a reputable Christian research foundation has echoed the commonly held belief that the institution of marriage is in serious danger. Furthermore, this most recent report has shaken evangelicals by asserting that the divorce rate in America for born-again Christians has now actually passed the divorce rate for non-believers by as much as 3%.² Though this research sample does not closely delimit the percentage of couples who are living together outside of marriage,³ the results of this research project should awaken the church to the seriousness of the crisis within its own walls. Furthermore, the research provided another surprising outcome. By chronological age, the greatest percentage of divorced Christians is in the "Builder" generation (37% divorce rate) and the "Boomer" genera-

tion (34%), with the "Buster" generation reporting only a 7% divorce rate.⁴

Other sociological research confirms that as an institution, marriage is a popular, but unstable entity with 50% of contemporary marriages ending in divorce. The divorce rate in America climbed during the 1960s and 1970s, but has stabilized at about 50% in the 1990s. About 75% of those couples who divorce will later remarry, but at least 50% of these remarried couples will be divorced again.⁵ The median length of a marital union is seven years.⁶

Even in the face of these alarming statistics about marital failure, there continues to be a strong motivation among adult couples to form durable committed relationships. The majority of couples seek to live together in harmonious, mutually satisfying relationships, continuing to hope that they might find happiness together, rather than pursue the hollow and potentially life threatening experiences of promiscuous sexual liaisons.⁷ Within the church, marriage continues to be the sanctioned form of union for those individuals seeking a committed life-long relationship.⁸

Biblical Theological Foundations for Christian Marriage

The literature that lays a foundation for Christian marriage in Scripture is too extensive to review comprehensively in this article. Nevertheless, this author would like to emphasize those biblical and theological themes that encourage Christian couples to reflect upon their marriages as an opportunity for spiritual

growth and discipline.

Marriage should be viewed as divinely ordained in creation to fulfill the created nature of humanity in the desire for intimacy, companionship, and community.⁹ The Genesis account of creation indicates that God designed mankind to have a special relationship with him, including the priority for the male and female to live in intimate harmony and companionship (“it is not good for man to be alone”; Gen 2:18). The man and woman were commanded to procreate (“be fruitful and multiply”; Gen 1:28), to share in a mutual life calling (of “maintaining dominion over all of creation”; Gen 1:28), and to live interdependently with each other and in ultimate dependence upon God. However, the entrance of sin into the world corrupted God’s original design for the man and woman, and ever since, we humans have lived in constant awareness of our common “naked vulnerability” and loss of innocence (cf. Gen 3:16-19). The constant and foreboding challenges of survival, the pain of childbirth, and the existential awareness of death and finitude have contaminated the original design and intent for men and women.

Since the Edenic Fall, the stain of sin continues to cover all of human experience, including this originally purely conceived covenantal relationship of marriage.¹⁰ However, even after the Fall, marriage continues to provide adults with a uniquely vulnerable relationship in which the Creator’s image is mirrored in a creaturely vessel on a continual basis. For in holy matrimony, the individuals surrender their psychological defenses, which serve to keep them safely protected in all other relationships. Most marriages become the premier experience of human vulnerability in which each individual

places his personal fragile soul into the care of his beloved marital partner. However, because of sin, most of the time, even in marriage, this unique state of emotional and spiritual vulnerability is subliminal. Even so, in times of conflict and relational dissonance, this vulnerability to one’s life partner is evident as even the most innocent slights and misunderstandings can lead to deep pain and disappointment. Beyond our conscious control, such moments of relational, emotional, and spiritual vulnerability return us to our most unexpected and unwanted memories of past pain and the deeper core aspects of our personalities. In these moments of intense and unexpected vulnerability, it is tempting to view our marital partners as our mortal enemies!

Nevertheless, Holy Scripture describes a dramatically different model of marriage. The Old Testament gives us a penetrating view of God’s intent for marriage, as the children of Israel were challenged to transcend the patriarchal customs of their neighbors. Under divine guidance, the Hebrew society evolved in a patricentric manner, which in its ideal form was to transcend the cultural paradigm of patriarchy of the ancient Near East in which women were viewed as inferior to their husbands, fathers, and sons. The concept of the covenant transformed this devaluing of mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters and placed the ultimate burden of responsibility for the care and nurture of the family upon the males.¹¹

The New Testament ideal for the marital union is demonstrated most clearly in Ephesians 5:18-33: it is a covenantal relationship in which husband and wife voluntarily commit to love each other after the model of Christ’s relationship to the Church. Contrary to popular misconcep-

tions, this covenant relationship demonstrates a quality of voluntary loving sacrifice and submission that is unparalleled in our culture.¹²

Reflections upon Marriage from Contemporary Therapeutic Theories

Some contemporary research about marriage may echo the spiritual truths of the Christian faith. For instance, some research suggests that the experience of seeing our marriage partner as our mortal enemy is an instinctive reaction to the anxiety evoked by marital relational dynamics.¹³ Through studies of thousands of marriages, Dr. John Gottman and his colleagues at the marital research laboratory at the University of Washington in Seattle have demonstrated the inevitable toxic influence that anxiety has upon relational dynamics.¹⁴ Now we see more clearly how our God-given natural reactive responses for self protection are stimulated by the presence of intense anxiety: it mobilizes the autonomic nervous system's stress response and sets an automatic neurological and physiological process in motion.

Gottman has demonstrated the toxic effects of what he calls the Five Horsemen: the interpersonal responses of contempt, criticism, stonewalling, defensiveness, and belligerence.¹⁵ The manifestation of these toxic interpersonal responses mirrors what the Christian church has understood as sinful behaviors, counterproductive to the goal of developing a righteous and godly marriage relationship. Spurred on by Gottman's findings, evangelical marriage counselors are teaching couples how to short circuit these nervous system reactions and to respond with Holy Spirit inspired love. By

responding to anxiety with love, couples escape victimization from bodily responses that function outside conscious control.¹⁶

These new techniques effectively help couples deal with the inevitable threats and anxieties facing contemporary marriages. In the western world couples marry because of a romantic attraction to one another, but they do not realize that marital relationship dynamics are at work when they begin courting one another.¹⁷ Issues related to gender differences, personality temperament, and family of origin projections, are destructively reinforced by the unique stresses of life in the contemporary post-modern, post-industrial, technological world. Our culture encourages marriages of romance, convenience, and happiness that are inevitably vulnerable to the Five Horsemen.

Despite the politically correct perspective that men and women are basically alike but have been culturally influenced to believe in gender differences, the reality of these differences has persisted over time, and continues to be one source of overwhelming anxiety within contemporary marriages. Brain research has shed light on the different ways that men and women process and react to life issues, which lead most couples down the slippery slopes of communication problems, role expectations, and the unhappiness of unfulfilled marital expectations.¹⁸ When one feels misunderstood and disappointed, and the emotional threats of anger, shame, and guilt, one is led to the all too familiar anxiety driven reactions in which one's spouse is seen as withholding, or worse yet, betraying the assumed marital contract. Falling out of love, or the mutual suppression of the marital romantic attraction, leads these couples to

believe that they are hopelessly incompatible and incapable of finding marital happiness.¹⁹

At the turn of the twentieth century, Analytic Psychologist Carl Jung first identified the attraction of opposites in personality temperament as another dynamic in romantic attraction.²⁰ Describing this phenomenon of the attraction of opposites, Jungian-oriented marital counselors have come to recognize that as many as 75% of couples who marry in response to romantic attraction have unconsciously been drawn to someone who is fundamentally different and opposite in their psychological orientation to life. While this attraction of opposites through romantic love is culturally encouraged as the most intense form of interpersonal attraction, their fundamental differences inevitably spawn conflict. This conflict leads to intense pain and disillusionment when the spell of romantic attraction is overcome by the anxiety continually evoked. Overwhelmed by their interpersonal conflicts, these couples look longingly at the 25% of those couples who have married a peer with similar personality temperaments and have considerably less interpersonal conflict as a result. Comparing their marriages with these more user-friendly marriages, the couples who are married to their opposite personality types, feel betrayed and discouraged. I suspect that most of the marriages surveyed by the Barna Associates and other sociological studies (indicating 50% divorce rates) are marriages of personality opposites. The result is that the couples could not endure the chronic presence of anxiety and its dysfunctional children, the Five Horsemen.

Finally, many contemporary family systems theorists have stressed the role

that family of origin dynamics have upon mate selection and the attraction of romantic love. These theorists suggest that individuals are attracted to potential marital partners who have grown up in families that have the same level of emotional development, but which represent complementary systemic dynamics.²¹ Issues related to self-differentiation motivate these complementary dynamics. For instance, as two potential marital partners are unconsciously attracted to their future spouse's family relationship patterns, they believe that these relationship patterns mirror the relational dynamics of their birth families. Later as the truth begins to become clear, they discover that these dynamics appear to be complementary on the surface, such as in patterns of relational closeness. The one partner comes from a family that is emotionally fused interpersonally with very poor interpersonal boundaries, and the other partner comes from a family that is more emotionally detached with very rigid interpersonal boundaries. At the same time, they have not been attracted to a potential marital partner whose birth family's interaction is more sophisticated and/or demands a higher level of individual self-differentiation. Because their level of self-differentiation is compatible, they experience an unconscious safety and comfort. But because their interpersonal relational styles are opposites (fusion versus detached), they are unconsciously emotionally attracted to each other as potential balances to their individual birth family dynamics.

The Spiritual Disciplines

Progressive sanctification is the theological understanding of how redeemed Christians continue to grow in grace as

they pursue their spiritual journey of life in Christ. The New Testament tells us that the pursuit of the mind of Christ is the daily expression of this progressive sanctification for the Christian (1 Thess 5:23). The dimension of this progressive sanctification that continues to challenge each Christian believer is daily confronting the sinful habit patterns of the old Adam and growing in grace into the new Adam. (Col 3:1-17).

Historically, the Christian church has practiced spiritual disciplines such as prayer, meditation, study, worship, stewardship, fasting, solitude, submission, service, simplicity, confession, and celebration.²² Counseling has not been considered a spiritual discipline, though spiritual direction has been a common practice of soul care throughout church history.²³ With the rise of psychology and psychotherapy, many ministers abandoned the practice of spiritual direction and the nurturing of the spiritual disciplines in favor of the powerful change interventions of psychotherapy. Psychological problems required psychological diagnoses and a field of specialists emerged and gradually stole the “birth-right of soul care” from the church.²⁴

Christian counselors focus on exploring the sinful habit patterns of the old Adam because these patterns undermine the promised righteous life style characterized by the fruit of the Spirit. Clinically trained Christian counselors have developed the skills needed to discern the ways in which these sinful habit patterns, dysfunctional interpersonal relationships, and pathological lifestyles continue to contaminate the believer’s longing to know and to live the mind of Christ. Through a combination of skills developed in academic study as well as in the

clinical supervision of actual counseling, clinically trained Christian counselors learn how to identify, interpret, and interrupt the unconscious and conscious manifestations of these sinful habit patterns and unhealthy, ungodly lifestyle issues, in order for the believer to practice new habit patterns of personal righteousness and relational health.²⁵ This process of identification, interpretation, and interruption of these personal and interpersonal dimensions of the continuing influence of the sinful old Adam, utilizes skills and interventions that take seriously the human ego’s resistance to change, the continuing destructive influence of painful life experiences, and the presence and power of temptation and of the ongoing systemic influences that serve to sabotage the expression of the mind of Christ. “Identification” involves the naming and illustrating of how these personal, systemic, and spiritual dynamics are at work in the life of the believer. “Interpretation” seeks to connect these manifestations of sin and dysfunction to their historical, narrative, systemic, interpersonal, cultural, and spiritual origins. “Interruption” involves the various combination of psychological, scriptural, marital, systemic, medical, and spiritual interventions that lead to a “working through” of the continuing presence of old Adam dynamics and change and transformation towards the possibilities of the new Adam (Rom 12:2).

Richard Foster describes the role of the spiritual disciplines as helping the believer replace the automatic sin-oriented habit patterns of the old Adam with new habit patterns of righteousness characteristic of the new Adam.²⁶ Spiritual disciplines do not cause the believer to experience righteousness. Spiritual disciplines prepare the believer to receive the

gifts of God's grace by reducing the influence of the old automatic sin-oriented habit patterns and replacing them with habit patterns oriented to God and his righteousness.²⁷

Spiritual Narcissism

Contemporary critics of American culture describe our culture as a culture of narcissism.²⁸ By this analysis, they are pointing to the prevalent attitude of self-orientation that is dominant in every aspect of our lifestyles. The "me generation" reflected in the attitudes and values of the "boomers, busters, and gen-Xers" is so naturally and completely oriented to their own personal agendas, interests, needs, and desires that not to be "self-oriented" is considered to be controversial and anomalous at the least and pathological at the worst. Called by other names like "postmodern," this idolatry of the "Self" places truth, morality, personal boundaries, political correctness, and spiritual experience at the individual discretion of each person.

Within the therapeutic sciences, concepts like "self actualization," "self-differentiation," and "individuation of one's self" have become the standards by which individual psychological health are measured.²⁹ This self-orientation leads potential counselees into a preoccupation with issues that prevent a full understanding of their personal pain. People come to therapists with a limited conception of their problems, but armed with the popularized theoretical understanding of how to heal their personally defined frustrated and diminished "selves".

Narcissism is the clinical label used to define the personality that is completely self-absorbed. The narcissistic personality has dominated the psychodynamic theo-

ries and therapies of the twentieth century. Requiring long-term psychodynamic psychotherapy with a very high recidivism, the souls of these narcissistic personalities are chronically depressed, empty, and vulnerable to a host of addictions and dysfunctional lifestyles.³⁰

This prevailing dominance of narcissistic preoccupations has infected the world of the spiritual as well.³¹ Congregations are filled with narcissistically vulnerable parishioners who are rewarded with a theology of materialism, success, and excess rather than a theology of simplicity, sobriety, and surrender. The world of narcissistic excess and personal self-absorption is subtly reinforced in congregations that have misidentified the needs of the ego/self with the yearnings of the soul.³² As a Christian pastoral counselor, I have come to discover how frequently we need to beware of what our ego/self defines as "desire," for what the ego wants, is rarely what the soul needs.

It has been this author's experience that the healing of the narcissistic personalities of our generation is not complete unless there has been a significant spiritual transformation in the process. Since most contemporary psychotherapy is a process designed to address the assumptions, attitudes, and adaptation of the ego/self, it leads to therapeutic outcomes that are ultimately reflected in a better narcissistic adjustment to a narcissistic world. However, when the underlying issues of narcissism and spiritual narcissism are recognized and addressed in the therapy as well, long-term healing can occur.³³

Finally, the common tendency towards narcissistic responses is not only characteristic of counselees. It is also the natural response of most counselors as well. Unless the counselor has experienced a

spiritual transformation, which corrects the narcissistic outlook, he or she will inadvertently perpetuate this narcissistic worldview in the course of treating the counselee. The counseling process becomes a collusion between two individuals who prescribe the same narcissistic solutions to life's problems. This phenomenon is described as a "shared paradigm." Since it is the nature of paradigms to filter data that is consistent with the paradigm, alternative solutions to life's problems, or confrontation with the counselee's attitudes that are narcissistically impaired and limited, does not happen since the counselor falls victim to the same paradigmatic filters.³⁴

The problem of narcissistic collusion between counselor and counselee is very dangerous in situations involving the counselee's marriage. Marriage is vulnerable to the temptations and limitations of narcissism. Romantic love tends to provide endless narcissistic mirroring to both partners. While "falling in love," the couple spend hours enveloped in mirroring each other's narcissism. Yet when the "honeymoon is over" and the couple returns to normal reality and can no longer maintain this shared narcissistic illusion with each other, intense conflict and feelings of betrayal replaces the narcissistic illusion. When the contents of this narcissistic betrayal are shared in therapy with a counselor who is also forming a therapeutic alliance around shared narcissistic assumptions, it is inevitable that the counselor will be seduced into affirming the narcissistic perspective of the counselee.

Collusion around narcissistic issues can be prevented by intentionally gearing the counseling process towards producing marital growth and transformation. If the best prospect for individual growth and

adjustment and soulful attention to issues of connection and intimacy arises from transforming narcissism, then marital counseling provides the best context in which such growth and transformation can occur. Formed in a shared narcissistic illusion called "romantic love," and thrust into an inevitable narcissistic crisis when "the honeymoon is over," the ups and downs of the marital connection are the best window into the individual narcissistic needs of both marital partners. But most importantly, the covenant of the marriage has been divinely ordained as the primary context in which personal growth towards self-sacrifice is to occur (Ephesians 5). Consequently, focusing upon the marriage is the primary way of affirming the healing potential that the marriage provides for both partners.

The Healing Potential in Marriage

Marriage and family therapists have demonstrated effectively that marriage is a potential crucible for the change and transformation of the individual partners.³⁵ Applying a variety of theoretical orientations, these marital therapists are demonstrating the opportunities for personal change when couples are encouraged to transcend the anxiety, anger, and bitterness of their relationship. As previously stated, the key to seeing the change potential within the marital relationship is to shift the focus from the partner to one's self and one's own feelings of anger, anxiety, and bitterness.

As the couple understands the manner in which the romantic attraction prevented their ability to understand who they really were, and as they appreciate that they brought their individual narcissism and brokenness into the relationship for healing, they are able to learn how to

work through their marital issues more effectively. They are now able to appreciate how they were attracted to each other through the process of projection: They had unconsciously given each other qualities of their own personalities that seemed “to fit” their partner; but when these projected qualities later resulted in conflict, both partners reacted defensively.³⁶ Armed with this appreciation, they come to accept these projected qualities as aspects of their own denied personality and are ready to be challenged therapeutically with the potential for change.³⁷ Forgiveness occurs as both partners become more conscious and remorseful of how they have been using each other as a way of avoiding the pain of their own narcissism and brokenness.

The Role of Forgiveness in Marital Healing³⁸

The role of forgiveness in marital healing has received considerable attention in the last decade, especially among Christian counselors. Forgiveness has been seen historically as an “event” that occurs spontaneously as the reality of the relational pain is acknowledged. However, forgiveness is actually a “process” that begins with the “event” of the moment of mutual conscious awareness of the relational pain. Forgiveness is not an easy process to activate. For true forgiveness to occur, the couple must be able to face and acknowledge with genuine remorse that they have hurt each other.³⁹

From the perspectives of Scripture and common sense, the process of forgiveness usually begins with a confession of remorse by the party who has caused the pain. The acknowledgement of culpability is essential. The ability to describe how the painful action evolved enriches the

potential for the process of forgiveness to lead to constructive change in the relational dynamics. The perpetrator of the pain then begins the forgiveness process by saying something like, “I am sorry for . . .”

As the confession is acknowledged, the wounded party must embrace and affirm the truthfulness of the pain that is being confessed. An unwillingness to face the pain by either party can prematurely abort the process of forgiveness. If the perpetrator of the offense cannot acknowledge the pain that has been inflicted upon the marital partner, the process of forgiveness is one-sided and left totally in the hands of the wounded partner.⁴⁰

Forgiveness can be painful as the parties uncover old unhealed memories and re-encounter the grief and sadness in these memories. It is this author’s conviction that grief is an essential but frequently overlooked aspect of the process of forgiveness.⁴¹ Because grief is also a “process” rather than an “event,” the recovery of forgiveness can be long and painful as the wounded party must grieve thoroughly the losses that the relationship has incurred.⁴²

As the wounded party continues in the process of forgiveness, various beliefs, assumptions, and expectations are encountered within the heart and mind of the person. As these assumptions, expectations, and beliefs are uncovered, the wounded party now finds himself/herself on an inward journey that is arduous and intense, and beyond the expectations of relational justice that seem fair for anyone who has already been emotionally wounded. It soon becomes evident that because of the depth of personal vulnerability that forgiveness requires, that this process of forgiveness requires us to explore aspects of our personality, per-

sonal life story and unconscious memories that would not have been encountered, if the pain in the relationship had not evoked the necessity of forgiveness. Counselors have frequently remarked how the work of offering forgiveness to someone who has perpetrated a sinful act towards them seems so unjust in light of the fact that they feel like innocent victims.⁴³

The outcome of the process of forgiveness is inevitably a more thorough understanding and appreciation of the brokenness that both parties brought into their marriage. The process of forgiveness provides the couple with an intimate journey together, which if completed successfully, yields a level of healing and growth that benefits both participants as well as their marriage.⁴⁴

Marriage as a Spiritual Discipline

The effects of forgiveness upon both the marriage and the individual partners tends to move the healing to a deeper level involving spiritual dynamics and leading to less recidivism. After years of invoking spiritual wisdom during hundreds of counseling sessions with believing Christians, the author has come to realize that marriage offers believers in Jesus Christ a rare and unmatched opportunity to practice the principles of the Christian faith, including forgiveness, on a daily basis. The nature and level of personal vulnerability to the marital partner is unparalleled, providing a frequency of conflict and dissonance that requires the power of forgiveness to transcend.

Nevertheless, most couples, including Christians, tend to develop automatic habit patterns of sin that exacerbates the pain and conflict in their marriage. The Barna research quoted at the beginning of this article demonstrates that these auto-

matic habit patterns of sin are inevitably strong enough to drive the couple to court instead of the confessional. When we add the research of Gottman and others that demonstrate the role of anxiety and the human body's innate physiological responses to anxiety, the power of anxiety to activate these automatic habit patterns of sin that exacerbate the marital relationship is more thoroughly understood today than at any other time.

As the habit patterns of sin unfold in each relationship, the importance of developing new habit patterns of healing is needed. Even in marriages that are not in serious crisis, these dual habit patterns of sin and healing are evident.

For believers the ultimate goal of the journey of life is the pursuit of the mind of Christ. Spiritual disciplines like prayer, meditation, Bible study, worship, stewardship, fasting, acts of mercy and kindness, and solitude serve to help the believer focus his/her mind on the righteous things of God in Christ. These spiritual disciplines prepare the mind and heart through new habit patterns dedicated to Christian righteousness and maturity, and find their fulfillment in the moments of grace as the Holy Spirit is acknowledged and celebrated in our lives.

Spiritual disciplines are "disciplines" in the sense that they are activities devoted to righteousness that require a disciplined commitment and activity to achieve. Living the daily challenges of marriage with a "disciplined" heart, mind, and will is required for marriage to mirror the standards of Ephesians 5, in which the husband is enjoined to love his wife self-sacrificially like Christ loved the Church and the wife is enjoined to love her husband submissively as unto the Lord. The kind of self-sacrifice and submission

spoken of in Ephesians 5 cannot be the actions of a “command performance,” nor will they arise spontaneously in the presence of narcissistic wounds in the marriage. What is required to reach the righteous attitudes of Christ towards the Church is the daily disciplined response of love and forgiveness in the midst of narcissistic injury and anger. To achieve the loving and forgiving response that is needed to provide the spiritual healing that is latent in marriage, the believer must engage the *challenges of transcending the pain on a daily basis*. As we have suggested, forgiveness doesn’t come easily or without work. To commit oneself to the response of forgiveness on a daily basis is to commit oneself to being open and transparent at our depths with the one person who has the potential power to really hurt us in that vulnerability.

The tempter seeks to undermine our spiritual disciplines. Our success in striving after holiness is a strike at the constant agenda of the tempter to keep our automatic sinful habit patterns in place, blocking our efforts to transcend the hurts and disappointments of life through Christ’s love. The tempter seeks to undermine our marriages, to keep us defensively misaligned in this primary relationship, and to hurt our witness to a lost world. In contrast to this picture of hopelessness, however, the attitude of seeking to find in marriage the spiritual habit patterns of love and forgiveness, will strengthen our marriages, keeping us intimately connected in love, and demonstrating the truth to the sinful world around us.

If marriage can be seen as a spiritual discipline, then our marital partners can be seen as our personal spiritual friends/directors. A spiritual director, or spiritual friend as some people prefer, is someone

who serves as a companion on the spiritual journey. A spiritual friend/director gives consultation to our process of moving towards Christ and away from temptation. A spiritual friend seeks to lift us up in love and communion with Christ as the goal of the spiritual relationship.

As daily companions who see both the best and the worst of our efforts to grow in Christ, our marital partners have a unique perspective to offer us from their experiences with us. If they choose to speak the truth in love, their counsel can gently remind us of the truth, and support us as we return to the right path. Of course, if they choose to speak the truth in a high anxiety confrontational manner, they can activate our defenses and with the autonomic nervous system in full operational mode, can keep us distracted from things of the Spirit! For believers in Jesus Christ, the challenge is transforming our marriages from the chaotically explosive potential of the old Adam to the honest, while loving and supportive, possibilities of the new Adam.

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ENDNOTES

¹Many biblical texts could point to this life journey goal of self-emptying love, but this author has selected Philippians 2:1-11 as his favorite text.

²The Barna Research Group in Ventura, California reported in its December 21, 1999 press release that in a survey of nearly 4000 adults, 27% of the sample defining themselves as "born-again Christians" had experienced divorce at least once. The same research sample indicated that 24% of "non-believers" had experienced divorce at least once. Furthermore, the denominational population groups studied ranked the frequency of divorce as 34% for non-denominational Protestants, 30% Jewish, 29% Baptist, 25% mainline Protestants, 24% Mormons, 21% Roman Catholic, 21% Lutheran and 21% atheist and agnostic.

³The press release that announced these startling results did not indicate what percentage of the research sample lived together unmarried or how this contemporary secular marriage model might have affected the research conclusions. Sociological studies suggest that 50% of cohabiting adults have never been married, with a rise in over a million additional cohabiting couples in the five-year period from 1988 to 1993 (rising from 2.5 million to 3.5 million). See David Olson and John DeFrain, *Marriage and the Family: Diversity and Strengths*, 2nd ed. (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1997) 14.

⁴Again, the frequency of non-marital households is not reported in the press release.

⁵Olson and DeFrain, *Marriage and the Family*, 14.

⁶*Ibid.*, 15.

⁷The threat of sexually transmitted dis-

eases has led many to adopt “serial monogamy,” if not marriage.

⁸Scripturally, a life of chaste celibacy is encouraged as the alternative to marriage for those who have been given the spiritual strength to live as single adults (1 Cor 7:7).

⁹Gen 1:26-27 affirms the image of God in mankind. Christian counseling specialists like Wayne E. Oates and Larry Crabb have demonstrated the Triune relationality of God and its implications for a Christian anthropology of persons in intimate community, mirroring the Triune community.

¹⁰The concept of marriage as a covenantal relationship that mirrors God’s covenant with His people, stands in sharp theological contrast to the contractual models of marriage that dominate our contemporary culture.

¹¹The author is indebted to Dr. Daniel Block’s manuscript, “Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel: A Survey of Laws and Customs,” which will be published in an edited text on the ancient family, for a helpful exegesis of the Old Testament narratives describing the Hebrew family’s covenantal structure. Dr. Block’s analysis demonstrates the implications of the patricentric view of the family in contrast to the patriarchal view of the prevailing culture, and cogently corrects the popular misconceptions that the Old Testament gives license to the neglect and mistreatment of women by men.

¹²Ephesians 5 sets a covenantal standard that is a model of marital intimacy characterized by self-sacrificial love by the husband for his wife,

and inspires a voluntary self-submission in response from the wife towards her husband. Again, there have been misinterpretations of this passage, leading to an inaccurate understanding of the self-sacrificial covenantal qualities of a biblically inspired marriage.

¹³Many marital and family therapy theorists argue that primal fears and anxieties underlie marital dynamics, especially in the midst of conflict. See the Imago Theory described by Dr. Harville Hendrix in *Getting the Love You Want: A Guide for Couples* (New York: Henry Holt, 1988) as a classic example of this thesis.

¹⁴Dr. John Gottman has written often on this topic. Cf. his best seller co-authored with Nan Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (New York: Crown, 1999).

¹⁵In *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, Gottman describes the Four Horsemen of criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. He has since added “belligerence” to his list of horsemen, bringing the total to five destructive horsemen.

¹⁶The Christian Counseling and Family Studies Department at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary has been encouraging Christian counselors to make these applications in marital counseling. The department is also exploring empirical research into the relationship (if any) between Gottman’s Five Horsemen and sinful attitudes and behaviors.

¹⁷The author recognizes that the cultural fascination with romance is very influential in American society

and has replaced the family contract form of marital union still characteristic in third world countries. Anthropologist Helen E. Fisher has written an excellent analysis of the marital attraction process in *Anatomy of Love: The Natural History of Monogamy, Adultery, and Divorce* (New York: Norton, 1992).

¹⁸Deborah Tannen has written a popular discussion of these gender differences in *You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1990). Christian psychologist Larry Crabb has proposed an integrated theological and psychological interpretation of gender differences in his book, *Men and Women: Enjoying the Difference* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991). The tomography brain research of the last decade has demonstrated that men and women have some differences in brain functioning as well. See Daniel G. Amen, *Change Your Brain, Change Your Life* (New York: Three Rivers, 1998) for a popular resource on tomography studies of the human brain.

¹⁹This concept of the mutual suppression of feelings of attraction, is a theoretical description of the eventual dominance of rejection in a relationship previously dominated by attraction, as explicated by British Object Relations Theorists, a popular school of marital and family therapy, illustrated by Drs. David and Jill Scharff, *Object Relations Couple Therapy* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1991).

²⁰Carl Gustav Jung was a disciple of Sigmund Freud who eventually split from the psychoanalytic move-

ment founded by Freud and developed his own school of Analytic Psychology in response. Jung postulated a theory of "the mysterious conjunction," in which the attraction of personality opposites was part of the genesis of romantic love. See C. G. Jung, *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, Volume 14 "Mysterium Coniunctionis", New York, New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1963 for a full discussion of this mysterious conjunction of opposites in marriage.

²¹The family systems theories of Murray Bowen are foundational in this understanding of couple dynamics as derivative of the mixing and merging of their individual family of origin dynamics through what is called a multigenerational projection process. See C. Margaret Hall, *The Bowen Family Theory and Its Uses* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1981) as one excellent illustration of Bowen's theories about intergenerational influences upon the marital couple dynamics.

²²The author has chosen to follow the approach of Richard Foster in defining the classical spiritual disciplines.

²³The classical process known as spiritual direction is primarily a disciplined mentoring by a spiritual director of a directee in the spiritual disciplines of prayer and meditation. The field of Christian counseling has been in the process of reclaiming the role of spiritual direction, but sees it as distinctly different from other forms of counseling, because of its exclusive focus upon the spiritual life of the directee.

²⁴See Leigh E. Conver, "Soul Care: The Repurchase of a Stolen Birthright," *Review and Expositor*, 94 (Winter 1997) 107-130 for the author's analysis of this stolen birthright and its return to the ministry of the local church.

²⁵The author acknowledges that Christian counseling is a loosely defined counseling discipline that covers the spectrum of commitment to the integration of biblical, spiritual, psychological, family systems, and psychiatric perspectives. On the far right of the spectrum, Christian counseling is understood to be exclusively biblical in content and competence. On the far left of the spectrum, Christian counseling is almost exclusively the application of human sciences competency with a very limited application of Christian theology to the process. Martin and Deidre Bobgan, *Against Biblical Counseling, For the Bible* (Santa Barbara, CA: EastGate, 1994) represent the extreme right position. Carroll A. Wise, *Pastoral Psychotherapy: Theory and Practice* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1980) demonstrates the far left position. As chairman of the Department of Christian Counseling and Family Studies at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, this author is defining Christian counseling as it is taught at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary as the balanced integration of clinically acquired counseling skills within a biblical worldview and theological orientation that is Scripturally consistent. Within this integrative orientation, it is appropriate to see how sin manifests itself in the

lives of believers in a variety of habit patterns, dysfunctional relationships, and personal psychopathology. The thesis of this article that "for believers, marriage is a spiritual discipline" is consistent with this orientation to Christian counseling.

²⁶Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (Worcester, PA: Victory Films, 1984), videocassette.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸See Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1979).

²⁹"Self-actualization" is a product of Humanistic Psychology with its belief in the positive nature of human potential that is realized through a process of growth. "Self-differentiation" is a concept from Family Systems Theory that describes the process of "holding onto your own sense of self, while interacting in intimate relationships." Persons with low self-differentiation have poor personal boundaries and can quickly lose their sense of personal self in relationships. Persons with high self-differentiation are capable of maintaining very intense interpersonal relationships while holding on to their own identity. "Individuation of self" is a concept from Jungian Analytic Psychology that describes the life long natural process towards wholeness and balance. Individuation is that process of growth and development towards maturity in which the person becomes more internally

balanced and more in touch with conscious and unconscious aspects of his/her personality.

³⁰The most famous proponent of the treatment of narcissistic personalities is Heinz Kohut. See Heinz Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self: A Systemic Approach to the Psychoanalytic Treatment of Narcissistic Personality Disorders* (New York: The International Universities Press, 1977) for a thorough explication of Kohut's theory of treatment of narcissism.

³¹See David F. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) for an analysis of the church's seduction by the narcissistic and postmodern dimensions of our culture.

³²Because so much of our lives is governed by the ego/self striving for mastery and control in the external world, it is easy to lose touch with the deeper and more subtle yearnings of the soul. If "more is better" and "bigger is best," which are the assumptions of the reality of the ego/self seeking mastery and dominance and control, the yearnings of the soul for connection and relationship, surrender and self-denial, and union with the Almighty become lost in the process. St. Augustine's confession that our "souls are restless until they find their rest in God" is outside of the awareness of the ego/self's preoccupations with mastery and control.

³³One of the classical aspects of this difference in ego and soul and long term healing can be viewed in the importance of deep relational connection, which is crucial to the soul's

survival and growth. As a reflection of the Imago Dei, the soul needs to experience intimacy with others and with God in order to be whole. However, the ego/self is so preoccupied with mastery and control, that the ego rarely recognizes the futility of pursuing mastery and control as a solution to the problem of connection and intimacy. The successful therapeutic outcome of most individual psychotherapies does not necessarily integrate the soul's needs for connection and intimacy.

³⁴The problem of unconscious collusion between counselor and counselee is one of the strongest arguments for Christian counseling. The Christian counselor, having experienced the process of spiritual transformation (the renewing of the mind), has an essential resource to offer to the counselee who is undergoing the same process.

³⁵One of the distinctions of the field of marriage and family therapy within the counseling professions is that marriage and family therapists believe that the interpersonal world of the family is the most productive forum for engaging in change. Identities are forged in the interpersonal crucible of the family; problems develop and are reinforced in the same interpersonal space of the family; and the solutions that are most commonly shared with other family members are found in the systemic exchange of marriage and family therapists. Some marriage and family therapists, like the author, believe that long term change is best achieved in the unique crucible of the marriage.

³⁶The concepts of projection and projective identification are commonly understood within psychodynamic theories to be the interactive consequences of mutual attraction and mutual repulsion around similarities in the individual personalities that are denied consciously, and must be displaced through projection into the other person in order to be managed. Typically there is enough compatibility in this process of projection that the receiver of the projections has some identification with the contents of the projection and reacts as if they were truly part of his or her personality. See Scharff and Scharff, *Object Relations Couple Therapy* for a thorough analysis of how projection and projective identification occur.

³⁷The healing suggested in the ownership of previously denied and projected parts of one's self, involves conscious acceptance of the truth of this denial and projection; acceptance of the destruction to the relationship that has occurred through the denial and projection process and the injustice that has occurred as the partner has lived with these projections; acceptance of the historical origin of these qualities in the counselee's past; and the changing of these qualities through cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and relational changes. In the last five years, many secular therapists have also added spiritual techniques to their therapeutic armament to help counselees experience their abilities to change these previously denied and projected qualities of their own personalities.

³⁸The author wants to acknowledge his indebtedness to his friend and colleague, Bobby Cunningham, for the original insights into the dynamics of forgiveness, which the author has confirmed repeatedly through the years. These insights are found in Dr. Cunningham's article, "The Will to Forgive: A Pastoral Theological View of Forgiving," in the *Journal of Pastoral Care*, 39 (June 1985) 141-149. Another respected scholar within the Christian counseling field who has written prolifically and helpfully is Dr. Everett Worthington. See the references in the bibliography for further details about Dr. Worthington's contributions to our contemporary understanding of forgiveness as a process. Finally, Terry D. Hargrave's work, *Families and Forgiveness: Healing Wounds in the Intergenerational Family* (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1994) has been a valuable resource to this author.

³⁹The process of facing and acknowledging the mutual pain and hurt that has transpired in the relationship appears to be very difficult and so much so that many couples prefer the downhill slide into divorce, rather than face with genuine remorse the painful reality of how much they have hurt each other. It has been this author's experience that the depth of narcissistic defenses that are utilized by either party in the relationship, determines the ability to engage in a genuine process of mutual forgiveness. Without the presence of genuine remorse, forgiveness cannot occur. Genuine remorse appears to

be impossible for many narcissistic personalities who cannot acknowledge that they are sorry for their actions.

⁴⁰As stated previously, seriously narcissistically impaired individuals cannot acknowledge their culpability and continue to project the responsibility for the relational breakdown upon their partners. However, there are also many instances in which the wounded party must move towards forgiveness, even in the absence of confession by their perpetrating partners, as an attempt to give up the bitterness and hurt that they have experienced as a result of the marital conflict. Finally, there are instances in which this "one-sided" attempt at forgiveness is appropriate when the perpetrator is no longer available to heal the relationship, as in death.

⁴¹The author is thankful to his former graduate student, Charlie Gass for pointing out the presence of grief in the process of forgiveness and demonstrating this dynamic in his doctoral thesis, "Implementing a Pastoral Psychoeducational Program on Human Forgiveness in North Central Florida," an unpublished Doctor of Ministry thesis at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, December 1966.

⁴²The process understanding of grief has been affirmed universally, but the reader is invited to consult David K. Switzer's work, *The Dynamics of Grief* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970) for one analysis of grief as a process.

⁴³Whenever this author ventures into

the process of forgiveness with someone who has been wounded by another, he feels that it is appropriate to acknowledge at the front end that the process of forgiveness will likely be a lengthy and painful journey. As one counselee observed years ago: "Forgiveness is harder work for the victim than for the perpetrator, for the perpetrator only needs to face their sin, but the victim ends up taking an odyssey into their life history that they did not choose."

⁴⁴The process of forgiveness, though painful and emotionally challenging, is also very redemptive. The author finds working towards forgiveness with couples to be the single most satisfying experience of his professional ministry. Forgiveness is contagious in that being present to the process of forgiveness transforms all of the participants in the process, including the therapist/facilitator.

Sermon: The Beauty and Blessings of the Christian Bedroom¹

Song of Solomon 4:1–5:1

Daniel L. Akin

Daniel L. Akin is Vice President and Dean and professor of preaching at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Dr. Akin has served as dean since 1996 and has also served on the faculty of Southeastern Seminary and Criswell College. He has an extensive speaking ministry, especially on the topic of marriage and family, and is the author of the commentary on 1-3 John in the *New American Commentary* series.

Introduction

In an article entitled, “What They Didn’t Teach You About Sex in Sunday School,” Peggy Fletcher Stack writes, “Many people assume the Bible has just one message about sex: Don’t do it.”² Well, let me simply respond by saying that anyone who says that obviously has not read the Bible. God, in his Word, has a lot to say about sex and much of it is good.

Sex as God designed it is good, exciting, intoxicating, powerful, living, and unifying. Though the Bible is not a book on sex, it does contain a complete theology of sexuality: the purposes for sex, warnings against its misuse, and a beautiful picture of ideal physical intimacy as set forth in the Song of Solomon. The “one-flesh” relationship (cf. Gen 2:24) is the most intense, physical intimacy and the deepest, spiritual unity possible between a husband and wife. God always approves of this relationship (cf. Prov 5:21) in which husband and wife meet each other’s physical needs in sexual intercourse (cf. Prov 5:15, 18, 19). Paul indicates that sexual adjustment in marriage can affect the Christian life, especially prayer (cf. 1 Cor 7:5). Both husband and wife have definite and equal sexual needs that are to be met in marriage (1 Cor 7:3), and each is to meet the needs of the other and not his own (Phil 2:3-5). God gave us the good gift of sex for several important reasons. These purposes include: (1) knowledge (cf. Gen 4:1); (2) intimate oneness (Gen

2:24); (3) comfort (Gen 24:67); (4) the creation of life (Gen 1:28); (5) play and pleasure (Song 2:8-17; 4:1-16), and (6) avoiding temptation (1 Cor 7:2-5). A husband is commanded to find satisfaction (Prov 5:19) and joy (Eccl 9:9) in his wife, and to concern himself with meeting her unique needs (Deut 24:5; 1 Pet 3:7). A wife also has responsibilities. These include: (1) availability (1 Cor 7:3-5); (2) preparation and planning (Song 4:9ff); (3) interest (Song 4:16; 5:2); and (4) sensitivity to unique masculine needs (Gen 24:67). The feeling of oneness experienced by husband and wife in the physical, sexual union should remind both partners of the even more remarkable oneness that the spirit of a man and a woman experiences with God in spiritual new birth (John 3).

There is beauty and blessing in the Christian bedroom. Here God says eat and drink deeply (Song 5:1!). This text describes the wedding night of King Solomon and his bride, Shulamite (cf. 6:13). The bride and groom are alone with only God as the unseen but welcomed guest. Here before us the couple consummates their marriage in intimate sexual union. Our passage, in exquisite poetry, provides a portrait of what a Christian bedroom was intended by God to be.

Let It Be a Place of Satisfying Attractiveness (4:1-7)

These verses are a song of admiration from the groom to his bride. The time for

the sexual consummation of their marriage has arrived and yet, it will not be until verse 16 that it will happen. True romance is an environment of affection in which sexual union will occur more often and with greater satisfaction. In other words, there are some essential preliminaries before it is time for the main event! Unfortunately, this is not always clear to a male. Having been aroused sexually he is now on the prowl as a predator, and his bride can certainly feel the part of prey. Solomon was sensitive to this, and so he begins with the most important sex organ we have: *the mind!* Thinking about how his new wife might feel, he chooses first to cultivate an atmosphere of acceptance through carefully chosen words.

Men, Meet Your Wife's Need for Verbal Support (4:1-7)

Three times, both at the beginning and the end of this song, Solomon tells Shulamite she is “beautiful” (NKJV, “fair”). Twice he calls her his “love” or “darling.” In verse 7 he says there is no defect or “flaw” in her. In his eyes she is the perfect woman for him.

Women are verbal creatures. They are moved by what they hear and what they feel. “To a great extent, she thinks and feels [about herself] the way a man leads her to think and feel.”³ A man must learn to touch her heart (her mind) through her ears. This helps her feel good about herself, and it relaxes, prepares, and motivates her to give herself in passionate lovemaking to her husband. A wise man will understand the value of words, the right words, in preparation for sexual intimacy.

A study in *Psychology Today* noted that women are more likely to be disappointed with marriage than men, especially in the

context of romance. Why? One explanation is that as compared with men, they have higher expectations for intimacy, and thus react more negatively to conjugal reality. In a major national survey conducted in 1976 by the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan, more wives than husbands said that they wished their spouse talked more about thoughts and feelings, and more wives felt resentment and irritation with husbands than vice versa. The researchers conclude: “In marriage ... women talk and want verbal responsiveness of the kind they have had with other women, but their men are often silent partners, unable to respond in kind.”⁴ A man must meet his wife’s need for verbal support.

Women, Meet Your Husband's Need for Visual Stimulation (4:1-6)

If a woman is a creature of the ear, a man is a creature of the eye. He is moved by what he sees. Verses 1–6 are a continuation of Solomon’s song of admiration as he praises 8 different parts of his wife’s body. This would continue to meet her need for verbal support, especially as we unlock the doors to the Ancient Near Eastern images we encounter. At the same time these verses also teach us something about the male and how visual he is when it comes to sex. A brief survey of these verses makes it clear that Shulamite was not clothed in sweats, flannel, or burlap! Apparently, only a veil covered her eyes. The rest of her body was in full view and Solomon liked, he loved, what he saw. Still, his patience and understanding is singularly remarkable. What an incredible example he sets for men everywhere.

Women in the ancient Near East wore a veil only on special occasions such as the day of their wedding. “Dove’s eyes

behind your veil” both hides and enhances her beauty. It conveys ideas of peace and purity, tranquility and tenderness, gentleness and innocence (cf. 1:15; 2:14; 5:2). Her eyes speak, they communicate to her husband that she has been calmed and set at rest by his kind and affirming words.

“Your hair is like a flock of goats descending from Mount Gilead” (NIV) would probably not get a guy very far in our day, but it would have been lovely music to the ears of Shulamite. Viewed from afar, a herd of black goats descending or skipping down a mountainside as the sun glistened on their black hair was a beautiful sight. As Shulamite prepared to give herself to her husband, she has let her hair down. Cascading down her neck and across her shoulders, her beautiful wavy locks entice the sexual desires of Solomon. Mount Gilead was a high mountain range east of Galilee that was known for its good and fertile pastures. Shulamite is herself vigorous and fertile on this their wedding night. Letting her hair down signals to Solomon her readiness for him.

Verses 2 and 3 focus on the beauty of her mouth. Her teeth are clean, bright, and white; none are missing! Her lips are like a scarlet or red ribbon (lit. “thread”). Indeed, her mouth is beautiful. It is beautifully shaped and enticing to her man. There is some question, because of the unusual Hebrew word used here for “mouth,” whether Solomon has in view physical or verbal pleasures that come from her mouth. An either/or decision is unnecessary. “Her mouth is ... a fertile oasis with lovely words flowing out of it—not to mention possible heavy wet kissing.”⁵ Her lips and her words both are prizes of pleasure.

Her temples behind the veil are com-

pared to the halves of a pomegranate. They blushed red with desire and the sweetness of their fruit entreats Solomon to kiss them. Pomegranates were considered an aphrodisiac in the ancient world. Attractive to the eye and sweet to taste, the image appeals to both the senses of sight and taste.

Her neck was like the tower of David adorned with the shields and weapons of Solomon’s mighty men (cf. 3:7-8). She stands tall and graceful. She is neither cowed nor timid. Why should she be in the presence of a man who loves and admires her with such passion? The image “conveys a sense of unassailable strength. No man could conquer her, and her suitor is awed by the dignity she carries. Her love is a gift; it could never become plunder.”⁶

Verses 5 and 6 draw attention to Shulamite’s breasts. Note that there is nothing even remotely pornographic about this imagery. *Porneia* clearly refers to evil sexual desire and an entire industry is built on exploiting this sinful passion. Solomon’s point here is that a man’s desire for his wife is holy. His pleasure and erotic desire for her is holy. To deny this is to deny one of God’s good gifts. First, they are compared to twin fawns of a gazelle that feed among the lilies. They are soft and attractive, tender and delicate, making her husband want to gently touch and caress them. Second, he describes them as two mountains: one a mountain of myrrh and the other a hill of frankincense. Both spices were expensive and used as perfume for the body and the marriage bed. (Prov 7:17 informs us that the harlot perfumes her bed with myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon.) Now the senses of sight and smell are aroused. So enraptured is Solomon that he desires to make love to his wife all

night long: “until the day breaks and the shadows flee away.”

Time and tenderness are essential twins for a sexually and romantically attractive bedroom. Slow, romantic foreplay is underway. Solomon visually and literally, I believe, undresses his bride. He praises her specifically and in detail for everything he sees. He gives before receiving. He is as much concerned, if not more so, for her pleasure and satisfaction than he is his own. He is loving her as Christ has loved us (Eph 5:25ff).

It is interesting to note that we don't know what Shulamite really looked like. What we do know is what she looked like to Solomon. She was beautiful, gorgeous; no one compared to her. This bedroom is a place of satisfying attractiveness: both to Solomon and Shulamite.

Let It Be a Place of Sensual Anticipation (4:8-11)

According to a recent report, humans are apparently the only creatures on the planet who see sex as fun, with the possible exception of dolphins and pygmy chimps.⁷ I'm not sure what to make of that, if anything. I do know that we humans think about and anticipate the sexual experience, almost without exception. The fact is we give this area of life a lot of time and attention. People will attend seminars like “Getting the Love You Want,” “Resexing Marriage,” “Resurrecting Sex: The Passionate Marriage Approach,” “Marital Sex As It Ought To Be,” and “Hot Monogamy.”

Yes, we think and talk a great deal about sex, but far too often we don't understand it, at least not as God intended. The results of going our own way have not been pretty. Perhaps God has had it right all along. When it comes

to sensual anticipation, what counsel do we receive from him?

Invite Your Mate to Come to You (4:8)

Solomon's complete attention has been on his wife. There is only one first person reference in the first 7 verses (v. 6). Biblical sex will always be focused on one's mate before it looks to one's self. Then, and only then, is it the right time to take lovemaking to the next level. Solomon has called Shulamite his “love” or “darling.” Now he calls her his “bride” (NKJV, “spouse”). He calls her to leave where she is and come to him. Lebanon was near her home. The other mountain ranges mentioned are in the general area as well. The lion's den and the mountains of the leopards perhaps represent fears Shulamite may have. He does not charge her, he calls to her. He does not demand, he invites. He invites her to leave her home and her fears behind. He will care for her. He will love her. She is his love, his darling. She is his bride, his wife. Five times in verses 8–12 Solomon will refer to her as his bride. Sensual anticipation must be clothed with words of safety and security if it expects a warm reception. Solomon's invitation is beautifully delivered.

Indicate How Your Mate Captivates You (4:9-11)

It would seem that Shulamite responded in a positive manner to Solomon's invitation. Solomon's words in verses 9–11 would seem to affirm this. He begins by saying Shulamite has “ravished” or “stolen” his heart. Her love was so overpowering that he could not resist her. Her love had captured his heart and he could not escape. Just a glance of her eye or seeing one link in her necklace sent

him swooning out of control. She was enchanting, and he was powerless to resist her spell. Solomon then says something that is very strange to our ears. He again calls Shulamite his “bride,” but he also refers to her as his “sister,” something he will do no less than 5 times (cf. 4:9-10, 12; 5:1-2). Again we must understand the use of the word in its historical context. In the Ancient Near East “sister” was a term of affection and friendship. In addition to its literal meaning, it could indicate a close and intimate relationship that a husband and wife enjoyed. True lovers will also be true friends, even best friends. This is something Solomon understood quite well.

Repetition is often a wonderful teacher and in verse 10 Solomon again calls Shulamite his sister, his bride. He tells her that her love is delightful, and that it is better than wine. Wine is intoxicating and sweet, but it could not compare to her. He himself was drunk with love for her. Charles Spurgeon, the great British preacher of the 19th century, said her love was better than wine because it could be enjoyed without question, would never turn sour, would never produce ill effects, and produced a sacred exhilaration.⁸

Her smell also got Solomon’s attention. The fragrance or scent of this woman was superior to “all spices” (v. 10, NKJV). For a man, sight is closely followed by smell in the sensual realm. Shulamite knew this and so she prepared herself in a way that would draw her man to her (not that he probably needed any encouragement!).

Verse 11 moves us into even greater sensual and romantic territory. Her lips, he says, drip sweetness like the honeycomb, and honey and milk are under her tongue. The idea that a particular kind of kissing began in France is put to rest by

this verse! Deep, sweet, and passionate kissing is at least as old as this Song. Canaan was a land of milk and honey (cf. Exod 3:8). It was a land of joy, blessing, and satisfaction that would provide for the nation of Israel. It was a land of sweetness to a people who had been enslaved for over 400 years. Solomon found immeasurable joy in the deep, long, and intimate kisses of his bride.

Besides smelling good herself, she also applied attractive fragrances to her clothes. Lebanon flourished with cedar trees (cf. 1 Kgs 5:6; Ps 29:5; 92:12; 104:16; Isa 2:13; 14:8; Hos 14:5-6). The fresh aroma of those mountain cedars filled the nostrils of Solomon as he undressed his bride and made preparation for lovemaking. Virtually all the senses: taste, touch, smell, sight, and sound have played a role in this sensual symphony in this Christian bedroom. The lovemaking that we enjoy in our marriages will only be enhanced as we follow this example.

Let It Be a Place of Specific Availability (4:12-15)

One of the greatest gifts a person can give his or her mate in marriage is exclusive and exciting sex. To enter marriage as a virgin is indeed a precious treasure to bestow on our spouse. Unfortunately, it is also a far too rare treasure. The Bible is crystal clear on the issue: any sex outside of marriage between a man and a woman is sin in the eyes of God. This includes premarital sex, extra-marital sex, or unnatural sex (homosexuality, bestiality, etc.). “Flee sexual immorality” (1 Cor 6:18) is God’s command, and a wise person will always listen to God. Shulamite had listened to the voice of her God concerning her sexuality. Note the beautiful imagery Solomon uses to describe his

bride on their wedding night.

God Is Pleased When We Keep Ourselves Pure (4:12)

Shulamite is described as (a) a garden locked up, (b) a spring enclosed (NKJV, “shut up”) and (c) a sealed fountain. Each pictures her purity and virginity. She had sealed up herself for her husband. She had saved a precious treasure that belongs only to him. I have never known of a woman, or man for that matter, who ever regretted saving themselves sexually for marriage. I have, however, known many who regretted not doing so. In particular I think of a letter written to Josh McDowell several years ago that probably expresses the regrets of many scarred by the sexual revolution:

Dear Mr. McDowell,

Having premarital sex was the most horrifying experience of my life. It wasn't at all the emotionally satisfying experience the world deceived me into believing. I felt as if my insides were being exposed and my heart left unattended. I know God has forgiven me of this haunting sin, but I also know I can never have my virginity back. I dread the day that I have to tell the man I truly love and wish to marry that he is not the only one—though I wish he were. I have stained my life—a stain that will never come out.

Monica

God is pleased and we are protected when we keep ourselves pure.

God Is Pleased When We Give Each Other Pleasure (4:13-15)

Solomon extends the imagery of the garden in verses 13–14, describing his bride as an exotic array of fruits, flowers, plants, trees, and spices. She was unique and valuable, rare and desirable. She was

a fantasy garden, a lover's dream. To find pomegranates, henna flowers, spikenard, saffron, calamus, cinnamon, frankincense, myrrh, aloes, and all chief spices in one garden was unimaginable and yet, in his bride, he found them all. She would satisfy his sense of taste, sight, and smell. He could never be bored. He would enjoy the multiple pleasures discovered in this garden. Each time would be an exciting time, a new and different adventure.

Solomon now thinks of “his wife” as “A fountain of gardens, a well of living waters, and streams from Lebanon” (NKJV). To other men she was locked up, enclosed, and sealed. For her husband she is wide open, accessible, and available. Indeed, her love is overflowing and streaming down for him. What she once held back from others she now gives to her husband with unreserved passion and abandonment. Why? Because she had saved herself for this day and this man. She was no casualty of sexual promiscuity. She did not have the wounds of a young 21 year old who said with pain and sadness in her voice, “I have had 17 partners—too many, I think.”⁹ Purity and pleasure go hand in hand when it comes to sex. Be specific in your availability. It is worth the wait.

Let It Be a Place of Sexual Affection (4:16–5:1)

What do happy couples say about sex? *Reader's Digest* ran an article that answers that question with the caption, “With a dash of surprise, a pinch of romance and a word or two at the right moment, love can be kept simmering even in the longest marriage.” Adapting their list slightly and adding a couple of other suggestions, I think at least 12 things can be said.

What Happy Couples “Say” About Sex

1. They make sex a priority; it is important to them.
2. They make time for sex.
3. They stay emotionally intimate.
4. They know how to touch and what works.
5. They keep romance alive by meeting each other’s needs.
6. They keep their sexual anticipation alive.
7. They know how to play and foreplay (both in and out of bed).
8. They know how to talk to each other.
9. They remain lovers and friends.
10. They maintain a sense of humor and know how to laugh.
11. They want to please the other.
12. They cherish each other as a sacred and precious gift of God.¹⁰

Shulamite and Solomon certainly intended to fall in the “happy couple” category when it came to their sex lives. For the first time in our passage Shulamite speaks, and her words would have gotten her husband’s attention immediately.

Encourage Your Mate to Make Love with You (4:16)

In beautiful and enticing poetry Shulamite invites Solomon to make love to her. She who has said twice not to awaken love until the right time (cf. 2:7; 3:5) now says, “the time is right. I am yours. Come and take me.” North winds are strong and south winds more gentle. In lovemaking Shulamite wants and needs both. She has been listening to every word spoken by her husband, and she too picks up on the imagery of the garden. She is that garden and her beloved is welcome to come in and enjoy. She invites him, she guides him, she tells him what she is feeling and what she wants. *Great sex is the result of good communication.* All the parts fit when a man and woman come together, but sex is more than mere mechanical union. It is a personal and

spiritual union nurtured by careful communication. We cannot be certain of all that is meant by the imagery of coming to the garden and tasting the choice fruits. It is not difficult to imagine all sorts of good things!

Encourage Your Mate after Making Love (5:1)

The marriage has been consummated. The couple has made love. They were not disappointed. They had planned for it, saved themselves for it, studied up on it, and talked about it. All of their time and effort had been rewarded.

It is beautiful to note that Shulamite invites Solomon to come to “his” garden in 4:16. Now in 5:1 he calls her “my” garden. In fact, 9 times in this one verse he uses the word “my.” Note it is used in this manner after, not before, their lovemaking. In tender words he calls Shulamite his garden, his sister, and his bride. Coming in to her was indeed a garden delight. She smelled good, tasted good, and felt good; and he told her so. Their lovemaking had been good. It had been wonderful. She invited him to come to her and he did. He no doubt hoped for many more times together just like this, and so he romantically and tenderly expressed the pleasure she had given him.

In a study by Susan Sprecher, Ph.D., a professor of sociology at Illinois State University, sexual satisfaction was greater in relationships in which partners initiated equally or in which women sometimes initiated sex. Why then, do so many couples fall in the pattern of the man being the only one to suggest having sex? Sprecher and other sex researchers speculate that society’s norms suggest that men should pursue and women should be pursued. The result may be that women tend to be less comfortable initiating sex. Or

it may be that women tend to use subtle, indirect cues—which may not be consciously noticed—to initiate sexual activity, while men use more direct verbal requests and other measures. Women who initiate sex frequently are often very sexually satisfied to begin with, Sprecher believes, and this enables them to be more at ease about expressing their sexual desires. A woman who initiates sex also often stimulates her partner’s sex drive and his desire for her, which helps drive this entire pattern. Several studies have found that many men like it when their female partner initiates sex. Matt Sess, 39, of New York City, says that he has always been the primary initiator in his relationship with Laura, his wife of eight years. “But when she initiates sex, it’s definitely a turn-on,” he says. “It doesn’t happen a lot, but when it does, it’s a pleasant surprise.”¹¹

No doubt Solomon found Shulamite to be something of a “turn on,” and he let her know it. He was a wise man indeed.

Let It Be a Place of Spiritual Approval (4:16–5:1)

The last part of verse 1 has created quite a bit of interpretive discussion. Exactly who is it who encourages this man and woman in their lovemaking? Some believe that it is the friends of the couple. However, the intimate knowledge of this speaker of all that has transpired in their bedroom would rule this out. Others believe it to be the voice of the wind again, personified from 4:16. Clearly it cannot be either Solomon or Shulamite for they are the ones being addressed.

Though his name never appears directly in the entire Song of Solomon, I believe the one who speaks here is God. He is the unseen but present guest in their bedroom. He has observed all that has happened this night, and He tells us what He thinks about it all.

Sex in Marriage Enjoys Divine Approval

“Eat, O friends, and drink; drink your fill” (or “deeply”). The love they share and the gift of sex was given by God.

He lifts His voice and gives hearty approval to the entire night. He vigorously endorses and affirms the love of this couple. He takes pleasure in what has taken place. He is glad they have drunk deeply of the fountain of love. Two of His own have experienced love in all the beauty and fervor and purity that He intended for them. In fact, He urges them on to more.... That is his attitude toward the giving of their love to each other. And by the way, that’s also His attitude toward couples today.¹²

Yes, God is there and he is pleased with what he sees. “He sees the passion. He hears the sighs of delight. He watches the lovers as they caress one another in the most intimate places. He is witness to the fleshly, earthly sights, sounds, and smells.... God desires for us to rejoice in our sensuousness, to give in to it.”¹³

Spouses in Marriage Enjoy Divine Affection

Two terms of tender affection flow from the mouth of God as he looks upon the couple enjoying his good gift of sex as he intended. First, he calls them “friends.” Second, he calls them “beloved ones” (NKJV). God loves them and he loves what he sees. How foreign this is to so many persons’ thinking when they try to imagine what the Creator thinks about sex. He loves us and he likes it when we are engaged in the passion of lovemaking within the covenant of marriage. It can truly be revolutionary and transforming when we accurately and correctly get the

Creator's perspective. We can become like a woman named Beth who said,

Loving my husband can become an act of worship to God. As my husband and I lie together, satiated in the afterglow of sexual ecstasy, the most natural thing in the world is for me to offer thanksgiving to my God for the beauty, the glory of our sexual joy. I don't even think about what I am doing; my heart just turns to the Lord and offers praise. Truly His gift of sex is a wondrous thing.¹⁴

Conclusion

God intended marriage to be enjoyed not endured. He designed it to be a blessing not a curse. God's plan is that we would find unending joy and pleasure with our mate both in and out of the bedroom. A healthy relationship in one area is usually essential to a healthy relationship in the other. With a marriage and a bedroom dedicated to the Lordship of Jesus, we can discover an earthly love that is so much more than we would have ever imagined. This is one of the good gifts our great Creator gives to His children. May we find in it all that He planned from the very beginning.

ENDNOTES

¹Evangelicals have sometimes been hesitant in talking about issues of sex and intimacy in the Church. To a certain extent this is understandable, but at the same time it should be noted that the Bible addresses such topics in appropriate and tasteful language. The Song of Solomon in particular addresses these issues and we can greatly benefit from the godly counsel it contains.

²Peggy Fletcher Stack, "What They Didn't Teach You About Sex in Sunday School," *Religious News Service*, 13 October 2000.

³Tommy Nelson, *The Book of Romance*

(Nashville: Nelson, 1998) 89.

⁴Carin Rubenstein, "The Modern Art of Courtly Love," *Psychology Today*, July 1983, 49.

⁵John G. Snaith, *Song of Solomon* (New Century Bible; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans / London: Marshall Pickering, 1993) 61.

⁶Duane Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon* (New American Commentary; Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1993) 405.

⁷*U.S. News & World Report*, 4 August 1997, 62.

⁸Cited in Paige Patterson, *Song of Solomon* (Chicago: Moody, 1986) 73.

⁹Patricia Dalton, "Daughters of the Revolution," *Washington Post*, 21 May 2000.

¹⁰"What Happy Couples say About Sex," *Reader's Digest*, February 1989, 13–16.

¹¹Julie Walsh, "Who's Lighting the Fire?" (*WebMD Medical News*, 16 March 2000).

¹²S. Craig Glickman, *A Song for Lovers* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1976) 25.

¹³Linda Dillow & Lorraine Pintus, *Intimate Issues* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 1999) 17.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 19.

The *SBJT* Forum: Issues Relating to the Family

Editor's note: Readers should be aware of the forum's format. D. A. Carson, C. Ben Mitchell, Bruce A. Ware and Russell D. Moore have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

SBJT: To handle certain categories of divorce and remarriage cases within the congregation, some churches have established a kind of "ecclesiastical court." What biblical warrant, if any, exists for this practice?

D. A. Carson: For some people, the expression "ecclesiastical court" may be a little off-putting. It may conjure up images of the Inquisition, or at very least of a room full of black-robed, foul-tempered, rule-driven hypocrites, untouched by the mellowing influence of human compassion.

Rightly understood, however, the notion of an ecclesiastical court may be rather helpful. In some parts of the English-speaking world, a "court" is any group that gives a considered judgment on some matter within their purview. In such contexts, Christians sometimes speak of the "Deacons' Court" or the "Elders' Court." All they mean by the latter, for instance, is that the group of elders (pastors) in some church or other gives rulings on matters within the sphere of their responsibility. For instance, a church that practices church discipline must have some mechanism by which a decision is made as to whether or not some brother or sister should be taken before the entire

body to be excommunicated (as in the terrible situation described in 1 Corinthians 5).

How does this apply to the matter of divorce and remarriage? It applies in at least two ways. Most Christians hold that divorce, although always a sign of marital failure and therefore something that God hates in principle, is concessively permitted under certain circumstances that (they believe) the Bible spells out. A slightly smaller number of Christians, but probably a majority, also hold that remarriage under those circumstances is also permitted. Inevitably, difficult judgments arise as to whether or not a particular case falls within the defined bounds. Who makes this decision? Should it not be the spiritual leadership of the church, i.e., those primarily charged with teaching and upholding the Scriptures—those very Scriptures from which our understanding of these matters derives? And hence, we appeal to the elders' court (or, more generically, the "ecclesiastical court"—an expression that focuses less on the body that makes the decision, as in "elders' court," and more on the body for whom the decision is made).

In some ways, however, this is a fairly straightforward instance. When some

D. A. Carson is Research Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. He is the author of numerous commentaries and monographs, and is one of this country's foremost New Testament scholars. Among his books are *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility* (John Knox Press, 1981; reprint, Baker, 1994) and *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Zondervan, 1996).

people speak of an ecclesiastical court with reference to divorce and remarriage, they are thinking of a more complex problem. This problem is most easily seen with an example. Suppose A and B, both Christians, are married. Suppose A divorces B on biblically illegitimate grounds, and that neither has had an affair. The state grants the divorce (on the grounds of, say, "mutual incompatibility"), but because the church does not recognize these grounds, it does not sanction the remarriage of either A or B. Suppose further that a few years later A, having abandoned the faith, marries C. From the Bible's perspective, the church argues, A by marrying C has committed adultery: A has broken the one-flesh union with B. Consequently, B is now free to re-marry. But the only divorce that B has undergone has been the state divorce, on biblically illegitimate grounds. If one of the pastors of the church officiates at the (re)marriage of B to D, some eyebrows will be lifted. It is far better for the "ecclesiastical court" to issue a formal decision stating that the situation has changed since the state divorce, and as a result B now has biblically legitimate reasons to divorce A, and permission to re-marry, should he or she wish to do so. (Of course, there may be personal or other reasons why B should not re-marry; I am not here entering into discussion of the complexities of godly counsel, but merely the broader terrain of what is biblically conceded.)

Someone might well protest at this juncture, "But isn't this a lot of legal wrangling, and a long way removed from the gospel? Doesn't this sound like hair-splitting pomposity? What conceivable justification, biblical or theological or even practical, can you offer for such ecclesias-

tical courts?" It is a fair question—and here are some answers.

(1) Part of the complexity of the situation derives from the thorny history of marriage in the Western world. In medieval times, not only did the Roman Catholic Church understand marriage to be a sacrament, but because of that fact marriage could be performed only by the priest. Protestants dropped the language of sacrament with respect to marriage, but long protected the prerogatives of ministers of the gospel to officiate at weddings. Eventually justices of the peace or other non-ecclesiastical state-recognized officials were granted the right to officiate at weddings, not least to accommodate the non-religious among us. All sides recognize that these weddings are every bit as valid as a wedding celebrated at First Baptist Church.

In fact, I would argue that marriage is a creation ordinance, not a church ordinance. I'm not sure that ministers of the gospel should be involved in the legal matters of weddings at all. I rather like the practices that have developed in France (though I admit that they developed for all the wrong reasons). There, every marriage must be officiated by a state functionary. Christians will then have a further service/ceremony/celebration, invoking the blessing of God and restating vows before a larger circle of family and friends, brothers and sisters in Christ. Similarly, Christians seeking to be married may well undergo pre-marital counseling offered by the church. But the legal act of the wedding is performed exclusively by the state. That is one way of making clear that marriage is not a distinctively Christian ordinance (though it has special significance for Christians, including typological significance calling

to mind the union of Christ and the church); it is for a man/woman pair everywhere, converted or not, Christian or not—truly a creation ordinance.

Ideally, of course, the state should adopt the same standards for marriage and divorce as those demanded by Scripture. But where that is not so—whether by sanctioning marriages after prohibited divorces, or by sanctioning marriages between persons of the same sex, or whatever—Christians will be the first to insist that because we take our cues and mandates from Scripture, our own standards for what will pass for an acceptable marriage will not necessarily be those of the state. So our own members will observe the biblical standards, regardless of what the state permits. The tensions we feel on these occasions arise from one of the most obvious truths in the New Testament: we live in the period of inaugurated eschatology, in the period between the “already” and the “not yet.” As a result we have two citizenships. We owe allegiance to “Caesar,” to our country in this world, and we owe allegiance to the kingdom of God. But where the two allegiances conflict, we must obey God rather than human beings. In this light, and remembering the history of marriage in the Western world, ministers of the gospel who perform marriages (as I do) better remember that when they do so, they are not performing a sacrament, or making a marriage union more holy; they are functioning as officials of the state, licensed by them. They are discharging their duties as citizens of an earthly kingdom. Then, in the larger service in which the wedding is performed, they may also be discharging their duties as Christian ministers—assigning to marriage a much higher value than the state does, drawing

attention to Christian obligations for husbands and wives, reminding all present of the wonderful typological connection between Christ and the church, and so forth. In France, all of these Christian duties are separated from the legal marriage vows themselves; here, they are integrated (in church weddings) precisely because the minister is serving both as a minister of the gospel and as a minister of the state.

It is this intertwining of church-based and state-based obligations that makes some of these matters of divorce and remarriage so difficult. One of the purposes of the ecclesiastical court is to sort out the hard cases.

(2) In particular, the ecclesiastical court makes it clear that the church is not simply adopting the divorce/remarriage standards of the surrounding culture. It gives biblical reasons for its decisions. On the long haul, the trail of its decisions will protect the leadership of the church. For instance, if in the example given above a pastor decided to officiate at the (re)marriage of B, this time to D, on the grounds that B is now free to re-marry since A has committed adultery by marrying C, but that pastor does not first make it very clear that he would not officiate at the re-marriage of any and every believer who has been divorced for “mutual incompatibility,” sooner or later he will be charged with a double standard. Perhaps the daughter of his head deacon has been divorced for mutual incompatibility, without adultery on either side, and now wants to re-marry—and the pastor declines. Expect a nasty fight, unless the church leadership has made it clear why there is an exception in the case of the marriage of B to D, and no exception pertains in the case of the deacon’s daughter.

This is most easily done with a “ruling” or a “decision” that people understand.

(3) Similarly, the process of working through these cases, in the light of Scripture, not only spreads responsibility among the elders/pastors, but becomes the occasion of training for a new generation of young pastors. The church “leaders” who say, “Pastor, just tell us what to do,” and the pastor who goes along with them, are in a foggy conspiracy to keep these so-called “leaders” as ignorant as possible. It is precisely in the outworking of hard cases of many kinds that leadership is trained, and an entire church is helped to think about ethical and other matters in a deeply biblical way. Far from being a nasty revival of the spirit of the Inquisition, a properly run ecclesiastical court is nothing other than the training of new elders/pastors within the matrix of hard cases, and a means of informing the entire church what biblical texts and principles are driving the leadership to its joint conclusions.

SBJT: What is the relationship between the family unit and the preservation of democracy?

C. Ben Mitchell: Strong families can exist under any kind of government, whether totalitarian or free. The family flourished under Caesar as much as under other forms of government. The God-ordained institution of the family is extraordinarily resilient. Democracy, however, can exist only where the institution of the family is robustly protected and cultivated.

One of Carl F. H. Henry’s most recent but lesser known treatises is the slim but rich volume, *Has Democracy Had Its Day?*¹ The volume is an expansion of a lecture he gave at the Acton Institute in Grand Rapids in November 1995. In his essay Dr.

Henry reminds us that the American democratic experiment is just that: an experiment. It is a fragile institution.

The American democratic experiment began with a set of ideals that were shared by those who framed our republic. Those ideals provided the cohesion for a government that was *sui generis* in the world. Those ideals are summed up in the Latin expression, *E Pluribus Unum*, found on our one-dollar bill. “Out of many, One” expresses well the hope of our founders that the American experiment would result in a “nation” that would represent a “more perfect union.”

As Jean Bethke Elshtain puts it: “The great challenge for the Founders was to form a political body that brought people together and created a ‘we,’ but also enabled people to remain separate and to recognize and respect one another’s differences. Modern democrats face the same challenge.”²

Each year since the nation’s founding, the president of the United States has given a “state of the union” address, acknowledging at least the unconscious belief that these United States form a “union.” And I would suggest that both our founders and their progeny understood this union to be more than a joining together of parcels of land. That is to say, the “union” involves more than a uniting of the smaller states into the larger nation. This union represents a set of ideals, a set of core beliefs, a moral center of gravity.

Without family, democracy is impossible. Why? Because family and democracy when properly conceived share a similar set of ideals. It is in the context of family, for instance, that one first learns of the bonds of mutual obligation. Family is the institution ordained by God that begins with a covenantal relationship

C. Ben Mitchell is associate professor of bioethics and contemporary culture at Trinity International University and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He serves as a consultant on biomedical and life issues for The Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission and is a senior fellow with The Center for Bioethics and Human Dignity in Bannockburn, Illinois. Dr. Mitchell is editor of *Ethics & Medicine: An International Journal of Bioethics*.

between a husband and wife. In the words of Genesis, “. . . a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Gen 2:24 ESV). This cleaving and leaving relationship requires mutual respect, shared obligation, and reciprocal love. Parents are to model for their children the covenantal obligations entailed in the context of family. Children are to learn from their earliest days that the family is a place where respect, obligation, and love are found.

This is not to say, however, that families are democratic institutions. In fact, families require clear lines of authority. Biblical family life begins with the confession that Christ is Lord and that God’s will is normative for all members of the family. Submission to authority is required of each individual and of the family unit as a whole. Similarly, democracy requires submission to appropriate authority. Without appropriate structures of authority, government becomes anarchy. Authority can also be found in totalitarian regimes. Yet under totalitarianism submission is not voluntary.

Necessary both to the fulfillment of mutual obligation and to submission to appropriate authority is the notion of self-restraint. One must voluntarily control one’s passions, desires, and other emotions if one is to act in ways that are morally responsible in both a family and in a democracy. Without self-restraint, self-government is not possible. Without self-government, democracy is not possible. Without strong families and the skills they teach and the obligations they entail, therefore, vigorous democracy is not possible.

Finally, it is in the context of family that one learns that sometimes self-sacrifice is

required for the common good. Individual family members sometimes sacrifice their own good for the common good of the family. Parents often do this (or should), but even children can learn that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts and that they themselves should be willing to give up their personal wishes or comforts at times for the good of the family. Here, the similarity with the democratic ideal is striking. In democracy, individual wishes sometimes must give way to the common good. For instance, even though the majority may desire a particular state of affairs (e.g., slavery), democracy exists to protect the minority from the tyranny of the majority. The “common good” takes precedence over individual desires. The common good requires that we treat all members of society with respect, not using them as a means to our own ends, but as imagers of God. Only in a context of mutual respect, mutual obligation, submission to appropriate authority, and self-sacrifice for the common good can democracy thrive. It is within the family that one first learns to cherish these ideals. Without these ideals democracy is not possible.

All of this is to argue that attention to the ideal of the biblical family is not merely self-serving. That is, protection and cultivation of the family is not only about my personal happiness. Sadly, most of today’s emphasis on family seems to appeal more to self-interest than to interest for others. In fact, attending to biblical family structures and ideals contributes to the common good, even to the lives of those who repudiate the biblical family. Without the existence of the biblical family, without the skills learned in the context of family, and without the ideals that inform the institution of family, American

democracy cannot long survive.

ENDNOTES

¹Carl F. H. Henry, *Has Democracy Had Its Day?* (Nashville: ERLC, 1996).

²Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial* (New York: BasicBooks, 1995) 66.

SBJT: Can questions of proper roles for men and women in ministry be separated from the question of the roles of husbands and wives in the home?

Bruce A. Ware: The short answer to this question is, no. Both arenas—the believing community and the home—are spheres in which a structure of authority and submission is inherent, and in which men and women alike are called to understand and embrace God’s good and wise design of male headship. What is not always appreciated is that *both* of these arenas exhibit something of the relationship of Christ with his bride, the church: *both* are spiritual communities reflective of a much greater and more glorious spiritual Reality.

Ephesians 5:22-33 (esp. vv. 31-32) makes clear that marriage has been from the very beginning a human and finite expression and reflection of a glorious spiritual Reality. As the wife submits to her husband, and as the husband loves his wife tenderly and sacrificially, both exhibit the spiritual dynamics and qualities that are characteristic of Christ’s relationship with the church. Christ lovingly leads, and the church respectfully submits, and marriage is the shadow of this greater and everlasting Reality. Given this parallel between human marriage and the Christ-church relationship, the notion of “mutual submission” in the home, as understood and advocated within egalitarianism, is unavoidably (even if unwittingly) an

expression of a fundamental spiritual rebellion and insubordination. Egalitarianism’s ideal of mutual submission in marriage pictures, not the church’s rightful submission to Christ’s Lordship, but her insistence on possessing and exercising supposed equal authority with Christ in their mutually submissive relationship. Here, marriage becomes a picture of treason. Whether intended or not, a marriage modeled after “mutual submission” subverts and distorts the true Reality of Christ’s authority and the church’s submission of which marriage is the God-designed shadow.

Paul is not alone in seeing marriage’s inherent authority and submission structure. Peter’s extolling of Sarah “obeying” Abraham and calling him “lord” shows just how serious Scripture is about this analogy (1 Pet 3:1-6). Submission and obedience to Christ need to mark the Church’s disposition toward her Master, and so wives’ embracing (not throwing off) submission to their husbands reflects this spiritual relationship. In like manner, Christ’s unsurpassed and unsurpassable love for the church must be mirrored by husbands’ genuine and deep loving care for their wives (Eph 5:25-27; 1 Pet 3:7). Where mutual submission is embraced, instead, the reflection intended by this spiritual Reality is mocked and defiled.

The church, too, is an arena in which Christ’s Lordship is to be mirrored. Christ’s choosing of 12 male apostles cannot have been accidental, nor can it be accounted for by appeal to cultural expectations or limitations. How can one say of the Christ who called the Pharisees “white washed tombs” and who drove money changers out of the temple, the Christ who traveled through Samaria and touched lepers and spoke with prostitutes and ate

Bruce A. Ware is Senior Associate Dean and Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Before coming to Southern, Dr. Ware served as a professor at Bethel Theological Seminary, Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Besides scholarly articles, he has authored *God’s Lesser Glory* (Crossway) and co-edited *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace* (Baker).

with tax collectors and sinners—how can one say of *this Christ* that he conformed to social expectations in choosing only male disciples. I'm sorry, but this view is only acceptable to those who have already made their minds up that the supposed true Christ came to liberate women from their positions under a false and sinful male headship. While it is true enough that Christ came to liberate women from all the sinful elements that touched their lives, as he likewise did for men, what this liberation looks like is not at all what egalitarians envision. Yes, Mary is commended for learning at his feet while Martha accepted the lesser value of attending to pressing duties at home; yes, women traveled with Jesus and participated in the support of his ministry; yes, women were the first witnesses of his resurrection as they told doubtful male disciples this good news. But none of this constitutes the abandoning of male headship, as exhibited in Jesus' own ministry, and in his commands for the church that would grow out of his life, death, and resurrection. And why was male headship retained? It is clear that just as marriage has an inherently spiritual dimension, so too does the church exhibit a fundamental spiritual Reality. Christ (who is male and could not have been female as our Messiah) is our Teacher and Leader, and he embodies the principle of male-headship in this role. So too, the disciples of Christ (all male) are charged with taking his teaching and instructing others after his ascension (John 14-16). Moreover, the responsibility of the on-going transmission of apostolic teaching for the church continues to be tied to male-headship as elders (always and only male) are charged with spiritual oversight and instructions, while women are forbidden

to teach or exercise authority over men—the two roles distinctive of elders in the church (1 Tim 2:11-3:7). So, from Christ, through his chosen disciples become apostles, to the elders who teach and lead in churches, male authority is part and parcel of the church's own expression of the nature of Christ's leadership over the church. As church memberships submit to the teaching and oversight of their God-ordained male leadership, they picture our relationship to Christ and honor the authority he has over our lives. As Peter instructs, elders function as shepherds over their flocks, and as such they mirror the greater Reality of Jesus the Chief Shepherd, of which human eldership is the shadow (1 Pet 5:1-4).

So, can one rightly separate the questions of gender roles in the believing community and in the marriage relationship? If we take seriously the shadow-Reality pictures involved in both arenas, we realize that great violence is done to our understanding of Christ's relationship to the church if in either sphere male-headship is abandoned. Like it or not, egalitarian marriages, and female pastors or elders, picture a church hostile to the rightful Lordship of Christ over her. May God grant us longings to embrace, not resist, that Lordship, and may this be made manifest by embracing, not resisting, the human shadows of that Reality. May our marriages and believing communities be finite and human portraits displaying the glorious spiritual Reality of Christ's lordship over his submissive people through responsible and loving male leadership.

SBJT: What are the theological implications of the current debate over homosexuality in the Cooperative Baptist

Fellowship (CBF)?

Russell D. Moore: The voices of sexual liberation on the Baptist left are speaking with southern accents, and that is perhaps the only difference between the homosexuality debate within the CBF and those within the other mainline Protestant denominations. The CBF General Assembly meeting in Atlanta in 2001 narrowly averted what its leadership warned would be a meltdown on the issue, when the group failed by a surprisingly close 701-502 margin to rescind the group's policy against employing openly homosexual missionaries and staff members. This controversy erupted at the same time that longer running sexuality debates continued in other liberal church bodies such as the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church (USA).

For the CBF, however, the stakes are much higher than for the rest of old-line Protestantism since the CBF seeks to reach out to what it considers to be disaffected "mainstream" Baptists for support. As such, CBF leaders at first tried to dismiss pro-homosexual activists in their midst as a tiny "lunatic fringe," unrepresentative of the group as a whole. This representation fell apart when the "lunatic fringe" had enough votes to plunge the entire General Assembly into a protracted controversy, prompting CBF Coordinator Daniel Vestal to plead with the gathering not to splinter apart over homosexuality. The homosexuality issue, however, is part of a larger problem of organizational identity and theological confusion on the Baptist left.

The crisis of organizational identity is largely a generational conflict within the movement. The older generation, led mostly by retired denominational bureaucrats, desperately wants to avoid contro-

versial issues such as homosexuality. In opposing the pro-homosexual "fundamentalists of the left," leaders such as former CBF coordinator Cecil Sherman are using the same arguments against a pro-gay CBF that they used against a biblical inerrancy SBC—namely, money. Baptist social activist groups "can take on any issue they want; they don't have to go to Baptist churches and meet a missionary payroll," Sherman argued to a CBF historical society. "CBF has to stay close to ordinary Baptist churches, because ordinary Baptists give the money that sustains missionaries."

This is precisely the tactic used by Sherman and the "Gatlinburg Gang" of SBC moderates against the "conservative resurgence" of the 1970s and 1980s. The denomination should avoid issues such as biblical inerrancy, they asserted, so that Baptists could unite behind the Cooperative Program and the Foreign Mission Board's "Bold Missions Thrust" program. Conservatives rightly discerned, however, that mission cooperation could not hold the denomination together when, among other problems, SBC seminary professors were teaching an entire generation of ministers that explicit faith in Christ is not necessary for salvation. The "moderate" movement is now experiencing what SBC conservatives warned them of years ago. A group cannot hold together long-term when its only consensus is on what it does not believe—namely, that Scripture is truth without any mixture of error.

The homosexuality controversy, however, is about more than organizational identity. It is at its root exactly what the biblical inerrancy controversy was in the SBC—a theological contest of visions. Baptist liberalism has been scattering the seeds of this chaos for over a generation.

Russell D. Moore teaches Christian theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary where he also serves as executive director of the Carl F. H. Henry Institute for Evangelical Engagement. He is a frequent speaker and commentator on the theological issues facing this generation of Southern Baptists. His first book, *Why I Am a Baptist*, co-edited with Tom J. Nettles was published by Broadman and Holman in 2001.

At the height of the inerrancy controversy, then-Southwestern Seminary president Russell Dilday commended the concept of “soul competency” as “autonomous individualism.” CBF leaders such as Carolyn Weatherford Crumpler have castigated the SBC’s 2000 confessional statement because it affirms biblical authority—an idea they say is in conflict with the authority of Jesus. A leader in the moderate-led Baptist General Convention of Texas denounced the *Baptist Faith and Message* assertion that women should “graciously submit” to the “servant leadership” of their husband as a “Near-dertal” statement, even though the wording was taken directly from Ephesians 5. CBF leaders have applauded Baptist feminists who argue that Paul was in disagreement with Jesus over the question of female pastors.

In fact, the CBF response to gender issues is very instructive of where it will go on the question of homosexuality. The Baptist left has not sought to marshal biblical and theological arguments for women in the pulpit. Instead, they have featured a litany of testimonies of women who argue that their calling is “between Jesus and me,” so no one can question it. When Pauline texts are raised, the CBF leaders have pointed instead to the fact that Jesus never spoke to the issue, and He, after all, is the authority. This has led to a confused younger generation of gay and gay-friendly Baptist activists who see themselves as applying consistently the principles they learned from the older generation.

How can the older generation awkwardly point to biblical authority against homosexuality when the very first point addressed in the CBF’s founding “Address to the Public” was a denial of

biblical inerrancy? What is the younger generation to make of the fact that Jesus never spoke of homosexuality, leaving the only NT texts against gay sex authored by Paul, a biblical figure, they have been taught, whose writings were often conditioned by a misogynistic, pre-modern culture? Why, they ask, do CBF leaders who cheer when the Baptist Women in Ministry group announces that we should listen to “God, not Paul” on gender issues not cheer when homosexual activists argue the same thing? If “there is neither male nor female” (Gal 3:28) is the end of any discussion on gender roles in the church and home, then why should it not be the end of a discussion on gay marriage? If one’s “calling by Jesus” as a woman to the pastorate cannot be questioned, then how can one’s “calling by Jesus” as a lesbian to the mission field be questioned? These are very good questions indeed—questions that increasingly are revealing that the opposition to homosexuality by the powers-that-be on the Baptist left are informed more by a residual revulsion toward homosexuality than by a coherent theological understanding of revealed truth.

Conservative political theorist Russell Kirk once noted that it is not the liberal we should fear, since he is living off the borrowed moral capital of past generations of conservatives. Rather, we should fear the liberal’s grandchildren. It is they who have forgotten the traditions of the past, and who consistently apply the theories they have been taught. The CBF leadership should be very worried by the wave of gray hair they saw stand to oppose the pro-homosexual position. After all, the liberal social activists in the CBF are not “fundamentalists of the left” or the “lunatic fringe.” They are just the

“grandchildren.” They have been listening, and learning, and they are not going away. In fact, they will soon be in charge.

The SBC’s resurgent conservatives should see the CBF homosexuality controversy as a warning. As our collective memory of the inerrancy controversy dims, there will be increasing suggestions that we soften our now robust confessionalism. There will be calls for less emphasis on theological unity, and more emphasis on programmatic unity. There will be the inclination to spend less time teaching the next generation about the issues for which we fought so hard—the total authority of Scripture, the urgency of evangelism, and the exclusivity of salvation found only in Christ. We should resist these temptations—and continually reinforce to the coming generations of Southern Baptists the faith once for all delivered to the saints. After all, we have “grandchildren” too.

Book Reviews

Speaking with Bold Assurance. By Bert Decker and Hershael W. York. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001, 184 pp., \$14.99, paper.

In this book the authors attempt to provide skills and strategies that will enable the Christian more effectively to communicate the truth of God. They are quite successful in carrying out their assignment.

The book is a quick and crisp thirty-one chapters, many consisting of just two-to-five pages. Each is well written and informative. "The Nine Behavioral Skills" (section IV, chapters 11-19) of effective communication adapted from Decker's earlier work, *You've Got to Be Believed to Be Heard*, is worth the price of the book alone. Anyone who is serious about becoming the best Christian communicator possible, building on his or her unique individual personality, will benefit from the insights Decker and York provide. Their challenge to have "a passion for constant improvement" (p. 161) is one every preacher and teacher should heed, and their call for constant and honest feedback is an important word far too many preachers neglect. Just when was the last time one of your messages was really critiqued for strengths and weaknesses, plusses and minuses by someone who would tell you the truth; even if it hurt?! My appreciation for this book is such that I will be using it as one of my texts in the class, "Ministry of Proclamation," and I would encourage others to con-

sider it as well.

There are a couple of things that I believe our authors could have done that would have improved the book. The alternating of "he" and "she" pronouns throughout was distracting and unnecessary. There is no footnoting, neither is there a bibliography. It would be helpful to know the source of their ideas, and who the others are in the field of communication theory and what they are saying. There is some repetition of subject matter that does not really add anything. Finally, "The Decker Grid System" (section V, chapters 20-25), though an interesting and potentially helpful device for composing a message, suffers in my judgment at two points. First, I believe it makes the process appear more simple than it really is, especially the time one must invest for effective communication of biblical truth. Second and more important, I am not sure it will work in doing biblical exposition. I was not surprised to find that the illustrating of the method did not show how to expound Scripture or even develop a Christian message. It should be noted here that Decker and York are currently working on another volume: *Preaching with Bold Assurance*. Perhaps in this work they will show how the "Decker Grid System" applies to biblical exposition, or they will show us that different types of speaking require different methods of preparation, and that the "Decker Grid System" and the biblical expositor simply travel along different

preparation roads following different preparation maps as they compose their messages.

This book is a practical and proven method in how to improve as a public speaker. Those who follow its principles will gain a greater confidence when they stand up to speak, and they will deliver their message with a greater clarity and effectiveness. In the age in which we live the preacher and teacher of God's word must remember: "What we say is more important than how we say it, but how we say it has never been more important." Decker and York will help all of us say it better.

Daniel L. Akin

Providence and Prayer: How Does God Work in the World? By Terrance Tiessen. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000, 400 pp., \$18.99, paper.

Every few years a theological book comes out that is written with such comprehensiveness and clarity that it becomes a classic text in the field for years to come. *Providence and Prayer* could be just such a magisterial text.

Terrance Tiessen, professor of theology and ethics at Providence Theological Seminary in Manitoba, Canada, is the book's author. He surveys ten different theological models to describe God's providence: semi-deism, process theology, free-will theism, church dominion theology, the redemptive intervention model, Molinist middle knowledge,

Thomism, Barthian neo-orthodoxy, Calvinist middle knowledge, Calvinism, and Fatalism. The author describes how representatives of each of these positions approach petitionary prayer and the doctrine of providence. The descriptions of each view are written with clarity and insight in a thorough and evenhanded presentation. Tiessen concludes each chapter with a helpful case study about a prayer group that is requested to pray for a missionary who has been abducted by terrorists. Through the case studies Tiessen applies how advocates of each of the theological approaches would frame the missionary abduction, how they would agree or disagree with those representing other views of providence, and how they would word a prayer for the missionary. Through the methodology of the case studies Tiessen compares and contrasts these theological approaches not only in the abstract, but also in a real life situation. The book also has a helpful glossary, bibliography, indexes, and chart of the various views, in addition to thorough documentation in footnotes.

Tiessen presents each view graciously and fairly, from the pens of its own advocates. One could quibble with Tiessen's selection of which models to examine in the book. Church dominion theology may deserve to be included because of its influence in popular piety, but its paucity of scholarly advocates makes it rather uneven with the other chapters. The chapter on Barth seemed unnecessary since there were already two other chapters on Calvinistic

views, and because Barthian theology has few advocates in popular piety or among conservative evangelical, mainstream, or liberal theologians. Other twentieth century theologians such as Paul Tillich and Langdon Gilkey have more interesting things to say about providence and human destiny. Including a chapter on fatalism is questionable because Tiessen himself acknowledges that no major contemporary theologians advocate this position (p. 272). The primary motivation for including the chapter on fatalism seems to have been to provide a framework to defend Calvinism against the charge that Reformed theology reduces to fatalism, and thus might have more logically been included in the material on Calvinism. Despite these reservations, each chapter makes for interesting reading and affords a distinctive approach to the doctrine of providence. The models that Tiessen examines do provide a helpful spectrum of approaches to these issues.

The author reserves most of his evaluation of other views until he reveals his own Calvinist middle knowledge view. Tiessen presents his view as the last perspective to be examined, but theologially it actually falls in the spectrum of views between Thomism and Barthianism on one side and Calvinism on the other side. In his own approach Tiessen attempts to hold together two seemingly incompatible approaches: Calvinism and Molinism. From Calvinism he draws the convictions that God is in total control of all events, and that humans have only compatibilist (not libertarian) freedom.

From Molinism he draws the conviction that God has both simple foreknowledge and middle knowledge. But by holding these two strange bedfellows together, Tiessen introduces tensions into his perspective. He denies the Calvinist doctrines of immutability and impassibility, opting instead for a view of God being responsive to his creation. At the same time, he denies human libertarian freewill, which is assumed in most middle knowledge approaches. Because God has middle knowledge of the future actions of humans with predictable compatibilist freedom, he can adjust providence to appear to be responsive to human petitions. Tiessen affirms that we should offer petitionary prayer not because it changes things or causes God to change things, but because it was already part of God's sovereign decree that we should do so.

Providence and Prayer compels the reader to think about what he or she believes concerning these aspects of the doctrine of God. Since I would identify myself within the Molinist middle knowledge position, I share many points of agreement with Tiessen's Calvinist middle knowledge perspective. Tiessen's affirmation of the sovereignty of God squares well with the biblical witness. He correctly argues that divine foreknowledge does not require reverse causation. Tiessen recognizes that both God's special and general providence are an expression of God's providential care, and thus aptly does not fall into the trap of defining miracles as violations of the laws of nature. God is Lord over nature, not

an invader of an alien world. He who creates the laws of nature is not bound by the laws of nature.

Having surveyed nine competing views and then proposing a novel alternative, a seasoned scholar such as Tiessen will be cognizant that such an approach is to invite criticism from all sides, particularly since his perspective is not a majoritarian view. I would raise several areas of concern in Tiessen's perspective. First, he seems to be confused at points between *indeterminism*, the perspective that events at the subatomic level are random and unpredictable, and *incompatibilism* (or self-determinism), the view that persons choose their own actions by an exercise of libertarian freewill. Advocates of libertarian freedom would agree (not disagree) with Tiessen's remarks about the danger of applying the Heisenberg principle of indeterminacy to human behavior, since human behavior is accounted for not by randomness but by agent causation. Thus some of Tiessen's arguments which he directs against libertarian freedom may actually apply to indeterminism, but have no force against incompatibilism.

Tiessen unfortunately insists that human action is an all-or-nothing, either-or situation. Either the person's action was determined by prior causes and reasons which may be accurately predicted, or the person's action was merely random or arbitrary (pp. 313-314). The only two options he permits are thus hard determinism or hard indeterminism. But he simply begs the question by not providing an adequate answer to

the proposal of Norman Geisler and others of a robust self-determinism (pp. 187-188, 246-247). As Norman Geisler correctly points out, Tiessen's perspective confuses efficient causality with final causality. The reason that one acts is the efficient but not the final cause of an agent's action. The reason for action alone obviously cannot bring about the action. For example, a person's desire to have a Jaguar motor car is not sufficient to cause the purchase of the vehicle, as desire-belief psychology might suggest. Ultimately, the personal agent must weigh the reasons and make an informed judgment, which might even cut against his or her own desires.

Tiessen acknowledges that humans are created in God's image (p. 327) with the "power of self-determinacy" (p. 291). He even acknowledges that God is not the only agent, but created angelic and human beings to be self-determining agents (p. 291). He even affirms "double agency" in which not only God but also humans "have genuine agency" (pp. 91, 292). Unfortunately, Tiessen does not seem to grasp the consequence of these admissions. Since he denies that humans share a creaturely, finite version of God's libertarian free agency, Tiessen is stuck on the horns of his own creation. Either God does not have libertarian freewill (but instead has a limited compatibilist freedom similar to humans such that He is bound to act according to His character and to reasons outside of Himself), or God makes libertarian decisions without reasons in a totally arbitrary and ran-

dom fashion. These are the only alternatives Tiessen allows for human agents; so why do they not apply to the Divine Agent in whose image they were created? If Tiessen can acknowledge that "God is love, and we are called upon to be loving, after his image and his example" (p. 327), why does he not recognize the parallel in human agency? If God's agency means that he can originate an action without any external forces exerted upon him, why would human agency not follow that same pattern? Tiessen's radical bifurcation between human agents and the divine Agent appears to make his proposal untenable.

Tiessen also acknowledges the distinction between primary and secondary causes, but functionally he reduces all events to God's sovereign decree. He attempts to avoid the charge that human decisions are illusory by appeal to a compatibilist account in which actions are seen as free so long as humans are not coerced into doing them, but act voluntarily, consistent with their own desires (p. 365). Nonetheless, he repeatedly affirms that God is the only real cause, because human "agents" act only for reasons and causes prior to themselves. He uses primarily Old Testament Scriptures in affirming that God causes all things. Tiessen does not address the issue of why the polytheistic context of the Old Testament made it imperative to emphasize God's sovereignty and monotheistic uniqueness rather than secondary causes. While the New Testament continues to affirm the sovereignty of God and proclaim

his ultimate victory, it expounds and enriches the Old Testament accounts by distinguishing more clearly God's activity as primary cause from the activity of human and spiritual beings as secondary causes. The better hermeneutic would take seriously the points at which the New Testament informs and completes Old Testament theology.

By affirming that God is responsive to his creation rather than being a mere impassive observer, Tiessen seeks to avoid the trap that befalls some Calvinists and has created a cottage industry for freewill theists. This affirmation further strains Tiessen's consistency, however, when he also affirms that God is in control of all things. If humans do not have libertarian freedom, just how much adjustment would be required by God? If human actions are almost mechanically predictable as Tiessen suggests, then God's actions would be more like prescribed and predetermined plans along the lines of a computer chess program than as genuine personal responses to the human beings. At the least, the author does not give us reason to conclude otherwise.

There seems to be a logical error in Tiessen's discussion of fatalism, in which he identifies Stoicism as the primary example of fatalism. He seems to think that if he can establish that Calvinism is distinguishable from Stoicism, he can relieve it of the charge of fatalism. So the argument goes as follows: (a) Stoicism is a form of fatalism; (b) Calvinism is not Stoicism; (c) Therefore, Calvinism is not fatalism. This argument commits the

logical fallacy of denying the antecedent. Fatalism is obviously more comprehensive than Stoicism. Tiessen also seems to conflate "fatalistic" and "fatalism." Doctrines can be fatalistic if they share some common themes with fatalism, but not accept all aspects of fatalism. Tiessen thus has more work to do if he wants to relieve Calvinism of its alleged connection with fatalism. The starting place for an answer must be that fatalism is normally an impersonal series of events, whereas Christianity explains history as a series of events overseen by a Person. While Tiessen recognizes the value of a personalistic image of God (p. 311), he unfortunately appears to agree with the assertions of naturalistic and postmodern anthropologists that humans are merely the contingent products of previous causal events. Tiessen agrees with William Pollard that the "I" of the person "is controlled by things and instincts, the product of its given heredity and environment" (p. 247). The event causation account of human action advocated by Tiessen is deterministic, if not fatalistic.

In his effort to be responsive to freewill theism, Tiessen presents an unsatisfying account of divine providence. On the one hand, Tiessen advocates a no-risk view of divine providence. He claims that "God is realizing his intention at every point" (p. 295), controlling "every detail" (p. 330), and that "God is completely in control at all times so that the accomplishment of his purposes is never at risk" (p. 332). On the other hand, Tiessen also claims that God

does not act coercively, and he disapproves of some actions that take place. For Tiessen, God "*always* acts in loving persuasion and *never* coercively" (p. 314, italics mine); "[t]he biblical record leaves us in no doubt that people often resist God's persuasive work and grieve him in so doing" (p. 314); and humans "*normally* choose what they do without external constraint" (p. 331, italics mine). How can these apparently contradictory claims be reconciled? Tiessen can't have it both ways—either God is in control or he is not! According to Tiessen's proposal, how could God always uncoercively persuade people? Tiessen's own definition of compatibilist freedom is that people are free when they act "voluntarily, spontaneously or willingly, without coercion by anything outside themselves" (p. 365). If our future actions are already determined and predictable by our character and desires, how could God change us without forcing such a change on us? Not only is Tiessen's model of divine persuasion reminiscent of process theology, but his ambiguous treatment of universalism (pp. 302, 312) and his rejection of divine timelessness (pp. 321-331) reflect troubling similarities with process theology and freewill theism.

One intuition underlying Tiessen's approach seems to be that suffering people most need to believe that God is in control. But suffering people not only need to believe that God is in control, but also that God cares. Tiessen's retreat to mystery as an account for human suffering, and his decision not to deal with the problem of evil

in this book, offers at best incomplete answers to those who suffer. But when he insists that “Satan and the demons are never able to act contrary to God’s sovereign purpose” and that “[e]ven in their evil action they accomplish the will of God” (p. 311), Tiessen creates enormous theodicy problems for which there must be some accounting to offer a coherent theology.

Tiessen’s approach to divine foreknowledge is also rather muddled. He rightly acknowledges that divine foreknowledge does not count as a case of reverse causation, because foreknowledge is not causally connected to the events that follow. He agrees with the Molinist middle knowledge doctrine that God can know actual events chosen by individuals with libertarian freedom. But Tiessen parts company with the Molinist account about counterfactuals. Since he refuses to consider agent causation and insists that libertarian freedom requires random, unpredictable, arbitrary choices, Tiessen asserts that “precognition of libertarianly free actions is not possible even for God” (p. 331). God only knows future human actions because he knows human character and past and present actions (pp. 317, 345, 405-406), but Tiessen asserts that for God to know counterfactuals of libertarianly free persons is “incoherent” (p. 317). To utilize the distinction suggested by Paul Helm, Tiessen denies O-foreknowledge, the view that God can know an event ahead of time without bringing it about, but accepts a variety of A-foreknowledge, in which God foreknows by virtue of

the fact that he has ordained or ensured that the event will come to place (p. 252). Setting aside for the moment Tiessen’s rigid refusal to consider agent causation as a mediating point between hard determinism and vacuous indeterminism, why would this all-knowing God suddenly get amnesia when confronted with libertarian freewill? Why would the existence of human libertarian freewill be a challenge to the foreknowledge and omniscience of an eternal God of infinite knowledge and wisdom? Tiessen never presents a clear argument as to why foreknowledge of libertarianly free creatures is so far beyond God’s grasp.

In the final analysis, what distinguishes various views of providence is where to put mystery. Semi-deists try to eliminate mystery. Freewill theists and process theologians remove mystery from divine foreknowledge, and place it in the future instead. A Molinist middle knowledge advocate can affirm but not explain how an omniscient God could have exhaustive foreknowledge of what creatures with libertarian freedom will do. How divine election and human freewill can work concurrently is bound up in the mystery of divine omniscience. The stringent Calvinist approach removes this mystery, however, by affirming that humans do not have libertarian freedom. God decrees and predestines everything, and thus it would seem that there is no mystery in dealing with human freewill. But because they cannot account for why a loving God would decree such extensive and gratuitous evil, Calvinists such as Tiessen must

say that God’s character and purposes are mysterious and unknowable. But while we cannot know God’s purposes exhaustively, it is precisely the character and purposes of God that are revealed most clearly in Scripture, especially in the life of Jesus Christ. Why be an agnostic about God’s character and purpose? Would we not rather place the mystery within the transcendent, infinite, and inexhaustible omniscience of God than in the revealed character and purposes of God?

While this review has raised numerous concerns about Tiessen’s analysis, this should not detract from the immense value of this elegant volume. Rather, raising these issues underscore the significance and value of Tiessen’s work. *Providence and Prayer* raises important issues, offers a variety of perspectives, and proposes interesting answers. It is a thought-provoking and interesting book that will be a standard reference for a long time to come. I highly recommend it for educated laypersons and college or seminary students.

Steve W. Lemke
New Orleans Baptist
Theological Seminary

Reformed Confessions Harmonized, With an Annotated Bibliography of Reformed Doctrinal Works. Edited by Joel R. Beeke and Sinclair B. Ferguson. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999, xiii + 288 pp., \$19.99, paper.

This book lays out a harmony of the seven confessions of faith “most diligently adhered to by various

Reformed denominations today” (p. vii). The seven are: the Belgic Confession of Faith (1561), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Canons of Dort (1618-19), the Second Helvetic Confession (1566), the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646-47), and the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms (1647).

The volume follows a topical format, organized around the various *loci* of theology: theology proper, anthropology, Christology, etc. It simply lines up the various confessions across the span of both pages in this workbook-sized volume so that the reader can see at a glance exactly what each of the confessions has to say about the topics followed in sequential ordering. The layout makes for a quick and easy reference to these important documents from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. *Reformed Confessions* also features a short historical introduction to the confessions which helps the reader position these works in relation to the state churches which adopted them and in reference to one another.

This volume is a very fine and helpful introduction to the confessional tradition of the Reformed churches which grew out of the Swiss, Dutch, and English Reformation heritage. Anyone interested in historical theology ought to get a copy.

Chad Owen Brand

Southern Presbyterian Leaders, 1683-1911. By Henry Alexander White. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2000, 476 pp., \$26.99.

Banner of Truth continues its excellent service of reprinting fine works of evangelical theology from the past with this wonderful survey of Southern Presbyterian individuals up to the beginning of the twentieth century. Here one finds a constellation of fascinating accounts of American Christianity, from the early migration of Scottish-Ulster Presbyterians fleeing oppression in Ireland in the early eighteenth century, through Thornwell and Dabney, and even a chapter on the redoubtable Stonewall Jackson. Kentucky Presbyterianism receives attention several times in the book, especially the founding of Transylvania University and Center College, as well as the work of James McGready and the formation of the Cumberland Presbyterian church, an “independent body of Presbyterians who held, for the most part, Arminian doctrines” (p. 211).

The book has a few problems. The print is a little hard to handle for the feeble of eye. The index is woefully incomplete. Publishers are almost better off not to offer an index if they are only going to publish partial listings of names and places. The binding is very stiff in a cloth book—Banner of Truth used to have excellent bindings, but they are declining in quality these days. I also have a couple of complaints about content, but it is futile to gripe at an author who finished his volume ninety years ago, so I will confine my complaints to the recent publisher.

I always encourage students to learn their Baptist heritage well, but once they have done that, they ought to take a glance at the other traditions

which have made such a strong stand for orthodoxy. Though many Presbyterians today cannot seem to decide what they are going to believe, most of these brethren of Scottish ancestry before 1911 did know where they stood. This delightful book will help us appreciate their contributions even more. All in all, it is a good read.

Chad Owen Brand