

## REPORT 29

MARRIAGE GUIDELINES  
(Art. 45)

## HISTORY AND MANDATE

The present discussion of marriage guidelines has its roots in an overture sent to the Synod of 1971 by Classis Toronto. The overture requested synod "to appoint a study committee to draw up new guidelines for pastors and consistories in their care of (a) couples contemplating marriage, (b) couples involved in marital difficulties, (c) divorced persons, and (d) those who have been divorced and contemplate remarriage" (Acts of Synod 1971, p. 112).

The study committee appointed in response to this overture reported to the Synod of 1973. Synod did not accept this report, primarily because synod was not convinced of its central thesis that the Greek word *porneia* (unchastity) should be interpreted broadly as referring to any serious rupture in the marital relationship of fidelity. Although the synodical advisory committee had recommended some extensive and drastic revisions of the report, synod thought it more advisable to appoint a new study committee with the following mandate: "to provide guidelines in the light of: a. previous synodical decisions; b. the study committee report (1973); c. the reactions of the synodical advisory committee (Report 4, B, Art. 62, 1973); d. the original overture (Overture 18, 1971)" (Acts of Synod 1973, p. 59).

The Synod of 1975 referred the report of this second study committee to the churches for study. In the light of responses and criticisms received from consistories and individuals, the study committee submitted a revised report (Report 35) to the Synod of 1977. Although the synodical advisory committee agreed that the section of Report 35 devoted to "Biblical Teachings Regarding Marriage" was a helpful presentation of the biblical view of marriage, it disagreed with several major sections of the study committee's report.

The advisory committee to the Synod of 1977 argued that the section of Report 35 devoted to "Biblical Teaching Regarding Divorce" was unsatisfactory. Its treatment of the phrase "except for *porneia*" (Matt. 5:32; 19:9) was considered unsatisfactory because both the traditional position of the Christian Reformed Church and the more restricted position of Report 35 affirm that the phrase in some sense constitutes a biblical ground for divorce. Even though Report 35 spoke of a "possible permissible ground," the advisory committee affirmed that the significance of the exceptive clause does not warrant even such talk about a ground for divorce. The advisory committee disagreed also with the treatment of I Corinthians 7:8-16. Report 35 attempted to use this passage in support of the concept of actions which were equivalent to unrepentant unchas-

tity (*porneia*); whereas, the advisory committee asserted that this passage simply reinforces the teaching of Jesus on the general inadmissibility of divorce and remarriage. Finally, there was disagreement with the section of Report 35 devoted to "Biblical Teaching Regarding Remarriage." The advisory committee affirmed that Scripture never clearly sanctions remarriage after divorce.

The basic position of the synodical advisory committee can be summarized in the following reflections presented in its report:

1. The Bible provides guidelines for marriage, not provisions for divorce and remarriage after divorce.
2. Divorce, or remarriage after divorce, cannot be given general sanction, since the Bible gives no such sanction.
3. Forgiveness and restoration are operative in instances of divorce and remarriage only when such actions are recognized as failure to live up to God's desire for marriage.
4. Forgiveness is operative only *after* instances of sin and confession, not when promised in advance of anticipated sinful activity.

(Acts of Synod 1977, p. 137)

Because of such fundamental disagreements between the report of the study committee (Report 35) and the report of the synodical advisory committee (Acts of Synod 1977, pp. 136-137), synod decided to refer both reports to a new study committee, with the following mandate:

- a. to reexamine and set forth the biblical teachings on divorce and remarriage, evaluating critically the traditional exegesis of the relevant passages.
- b. to formulate pastoral guidelines with respect to the problems of divorce and remarriage as they appear in our society, specifically taking into account the tension which appears to exist between Christ's teaching and situations of clearly destructive marital disruption.

(Acts of Synod 1977, Art. 76, C, 2)

Thus after almost a decade of study initiated by synodical decision, the third study committee presents its report on marriage guidelines. However, since the section of Report 35 (1977) on "Biblical Teachings Regarding Marriage" was considered a helpful presentation, and since the mandate focused on the biblical teachings concerning divorce and remarriage, the committee did not consider it necessary to present a complete account of all biblical teaching on marriage. Instead, it chose to develop only those perspectives on marriage which it considered useful for developing a biblical perspective on the matters of divorce and remarriage.

## MARRIAGE GUIDELINES

### I. BIBLICAL TEACHING REGARDING MARRIAGE

Implicit in all pastoral advice concerning divorce and remarriage lie hidden assumptions about marriage itself. What is marriage? What is its essence, its purpose, and its obligations?

Scripture gives a clear answer to such questions. Marriage was instituted by God at creation. Declaring that it was not good for the man to

be alone, God created woman as a helper fit for him (Gen. 2:18). Man and woman, created in the image of God, were made for each other to become one flesh in marriage. Thus marriage is not a human invention nor an experiment in social relationships which can be altered or abandoned at will. It is a God-ordained, monogamous structure, requiring faithful commitment on the part of husband and wife. "Therefore, a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24).

The purpose of marriage is, therefore, for the benefit and enrichment of husband and wife. Although man was created for fellowship with God, according to Genesis 2 man discovered and God confirmed that man had need also for fellowship and support from a fellow human being. Thus woman was created and marriage instituted so that man and woman could exist in community. Under God's blessing this community of husband and wife would be enlarged by the birth of children. Thus marriage and family were instituted at creation to meet human need and to achieve the purposes of God (Gen. 1:28).

God's will for marriage revealed at creation was reaffirmed in the teaching of Jesus. Responding to a situation in which divorce was used to escape the obligation of marriage, Jesus replied, "What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder" (Matt. 19:6). The apostle Paul affirmed the same when he used marriage to illustrate the nature of life under the law: "A married woman is bound by law to her husband as long as he lives, but if her husband dies she is discharged from the law concerning the husband. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress" (Rom. 7:2-3). Marriage is a covenantal relationship sealed by vows. In these vows love is promised and fidelity is pledged. Fidelity involves loyalty, trust, love, devotion, reliability, and responsibility for the other. The breaking of the vow and the betrayal of the trust involves sin against the marriage partner and guilt before God. Marriage is intended to be permanent, to last until death terminates the relationship.

The basic purpose of God for marriage was especially illumined and enriched by the revelation of Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul declares that the creational institution of marriage, which affirms that husband and wife become one flesh (Eph. 5:31), contains a mystery (Eph. 5:32). This mystery has now been revealed in the union of Christ and his church, of the Bridegroom and the bride (Eph. 5:23-32). Thus marriage is fully understood and achieves its deepest meaning only when it reflects this spiritual union of Christ and his church. In order to understand this declaration, it is necessary to place Paul's teaching about marriage in the context of the Letter to the Ephesians.

The Letter to the Ephesians is an explication of God's purpose which is summarized in Ephesians 1:9-10: "For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." By "mystery" Paul refers to that which was not previously known or fully known but which has now been revealed in Jesus Christ. God's plan of salvation was

revealed in words and deeds in the Old Testament, but its dimensions and the way in which it would be achieved surpassed anything previously revealed and surprised even the apostle himself. What no one had previously known or seen (i.e., the full intention of God's redemptive will, or "the mystery of his will") was now to be seen by faith in Jesus Christ. That which had been revealed in Christ was continuing through the ministry of Paul, i.e., the prime evidence of God's redemptive plan was the unity of Jew and Gentile in Christ (Eph. 2:11-22; 3:4-10).

Thus redemption consists of the reunification of all things in Christ, and that has already begun in the reunification of Jew and Gentile in the church. The church as the unified body of Christ is the visible sign of God's redemptive purpose. In Ephesians 4-6, the apostle calls believers to manifest this unity in every part of their lives. Christian existence is caught up into and must manifest this unity created by Christ. Christian existence is then eschatological existence, i.e., it is to manifest already now what will be when the goal of redemption is finally achieved. Christian life is a call to manifest "ahead of time" what will be in the future and what is already accomplished fact in Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul's instruction about marriage in Ephesians 5 assumes that background. Marriage is one aspect of Christian life whose meaning and possibility have been revealed in Christ. What has happened in Christ unfolds the meaning of the creational institution of marriage. Thus what Paul perceives in the relationship of Christ and the church determines everything he says in Ephesians 5 concerning the purpose and conduct of Christian marriage.

In Ephesians 5:31, the apostle goes back to the creation account: "For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one" (Gen. 2:24). Earlier God had declared that it was not good for man to be alone, so God created not an isolated individual, but a being-in-community (man/woman), and established marriage as the means for achieving and expressing this community. Because of sin marriage can no longer achieve its full purpose. At best, it achieves this purpose only partially because sin divides and impedes all human relationships and expressions of community, including those in marriage.

In Ephesians 5:32, the apostle Paul moves from the creational institution of marriage to the declaration that this is a great mystery. By "mystery" Paul means that in Genesis 2:24 lies an unknown or not fully known intention of God which is now revealed in the relationship of Christ and his church. What is that intention of God? From the beginning God planned to create a human community. However, prior to the coming of Christ that community had been achieved neither in Israel nor in the Gentile world. Sin had alienated humanity from God and from one another. Sin had erected walls of hostility that destroyed genuine community. But now in Christ God has created a genuine human community, one new man in place of two (Eph. 2:15). This one-new-person-in-community is Christ and his body. Thus in the relationship (or marriage) of Christ to his people, God actually fulfills the basic goal or purpose of the institution of marriage.

This fulfillment of the institution of marriage in Jesus Christ has important implications for the Christian view of marriage and family. They are not the *most* important reality. What is more important is the family of God. Jesus himself indicates that this is so when his mother and brothers ask for him and he replies: "Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother" (Mark 3:35). And again on the cross when he says to his mother and to John: "Woman, behold your son, [son] behold your mother" (John 19:26-27). Our family relationships are taken up into and are superceded or fulfilled by the relationships established in the family of God. Therefore, finally—when the kingdom is fully here—there will no longer be any marriage (Mark 12:25; Luke 20:34-36). There will be only the family of God.

So even now, as Christians await the final coming of the kingdom, the Scripture indicates that marriage is not necessary as a Christian obligation, nor is it necessary for personal fulfillment. All that is necessary for discipleship and fulfillment is membership in the family of God by which one participates in the marriage between Christ and his church. Since the purpose of the marriage institution has been fulfilled in Christ, one may choose or be called not to enter marriage (celibacy is one form of discipleship), or one may choose or be called to be married (marriage is also one form of discipleship). Christian single persons should be able to find in the body of Christ that community of fellowship which every human being needs for effective service and for personal fulfillment. This is a quite different view of the relationship of human sexuality and fulfillment than that which exists in our culture and in the church today.

However, even though the basic goal of marriage is fulfilled in Christ, marriage as an order of creation continues until the new creation fully comes into being. And the good news is that because of the fulfillment in Christ, if people marry in the Lord, marriage can serve its God-ordained purposes. Marriage can participate in and serve God's plan for the unity of all things, for establishing the new community. Thus the highest goal and ultimate purpose of Christian marriage is to serve the establishment and welfare of the family of God, or as expressed in the familiar words of the Form for the Solemnization of Marriage, "the purpose of marriage is . . . the furtherance of the kingdom of God."

Marriage and family are not ends in themselves. When marriage and family become ends in themselves or serve only personal goals, they have become idols. When marriage is used only as a means to personal or sexual fulfillment, when marriage and family are used primarily to establish a clan, build a name, control wealth or relationships, they constitute idolatry. Christian marriage must serve God's basic purpose, i.e., it must both contribute to and find fulfillment in the new community created in Christ Jesus. It must do so, of course, in its own unique way.

Marriage is related to God's plan for the world because in Christ God takes up the institution of marriage to serve his purpose of building the new covenant community. By means of marriage and Christian family life people are shaped and molded for living in the family of God. For it is in the intimate relationships of marriage and family life that we discover who we are, that we experience acceptance and forgiveness and what it

means to give oneself for the sake of another. In marriage and family we learn what community is, what love is, and here in a very direct way we experience the care and concern of God for us through the care and concern of others. Marriage can be a means of grace, for marriage and the family are our first lessons in community in Christ. In this way we are prepared for life in the family of God.

If marriage is to serve God's redemptive purpose, it must reflect the reality of and be patterned after the example of Christ's relationship to his people. Everything that the apostle Paul declares in Ephesians about this new reality in Christ applies also to marriage: e.g., about the walls of hostility Christ has broken down and the community that now exists without walls (Eph. 2); about growing together in unity; about putting away bitterness, wrath, anger, and walking in love as imitators of God and Christ (Eph. 4-5). Love, without which marriage cannot exist, has its source in God and in Christ. Such love gives one the capacity to forgive, to seek the welfare of the other, to love even when love is not returned. Christ is the inspiration and the pattern for love in marriage (Eph. 5:25). For Christ has created the reality of and the possibility for genuine human community, also in marriage. Thus in Christian marriage there is always hope that genuine community can be achieved.

The new covenant community has a pattern of relationships—Christ as head and church as body. Since Paul sees marriage as a sort of mini-version of the covenant community, it requires a similar pattern. Marriage establishes a covenant community which reflects Christ and his body. Just as the body of Christ needs a structure to grow in unity, so Christian marriage must be structured similarly to achieve unity. Thus husband and wife are called to pattern their life together after the pattern of Christ and his church. Christian marriage is not just a natural event, but a call to discipleship. God's will that marriage be permanent and not be dissolved by human action, is a reality to be achieved through a life of active obedience which appropriates the unity that exists in Christ. Christian marriage, so lived, constitutes part of our witness to the world concerning God's purpose in Christ. Thus, through its fulfillment in Christ, Christian marriage discovers its true meaning and purpose.

Understood in the light of Christ, marriage and family have an essential relationship to the church as family of God. Church is more than a place where we are taught to live as Christians in marriage, for the church is itself the family of God which is the goal to which Christian marriage contributes and for which marriage exists. For this reason the church as the fellowship of believers, or the new covenant community, must support, encourage, and assist each Christian marriage and family so that it achieves its God-ordained purpose.

To break this unity in Christ, either by attempting to live the unity of marriage apart from its goal in the family of God or by divorce, is to violate that for which Christ died. Divorce is a failure to fulfill the creational norm and the redemptive purpose for marriage.

The basic biblical teaching concerning marriage which has been developed above can be summarized in the following statements:

1. Marriage is an institution created by God. It is a covenant relationship established by the mutual vows of a man and a woman to be husband and wife to each other and to live together as such.

2. God is party to the covenanted relationship of marriage in such a way that he unites those who give themselves to each other as husband and wife.

3. The covenant of marriage reflects the covenant of grace. Its model, and in fact its fulfillment, is the covenant which unites Christ and the church. Therefore, in marriage each gives oneself to the other without reserve or qualification.

4. The marriage relationship is characterized by (a) exclusivity: forsaking all others, (b) mutuality: to become one flesh, and (c) permanency: till death do us part.

5. The permanency or indissolubility of marriage is both a demand and a gift of God. Love, which is essential for marriage and community, is God's gift in Christ. Permanent unity in marriage is, therefore, possible in Christ and demanded of Christ's disciples. Stability and permanence in marriage result from faithfulness within the covenanted relationship and are the blessings of God upon obedience to his will. Thus, only when both husband and wife are loving, respectful, and faithful to each other will marriage enjoy the blessings of permanence and stability.

6. Hope is essential and possible in all Christian communal relationships, including marriage. Hope is the recognition that Christ can and will through his Spirit make possible the unity that God demands. Renewal and new beginnings are possible. The gospel declares that for failures in faithfulness, there is forgiveness; for alienation, reconciliation; for despair, hope. Christian marriage has been taken up into the redemptive purpose of God, and through the blessing of God obedient discipleship in marriage is possible.

## II. BIBLICAL TEACHING REGARDING DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

Jesus stressed emphatically the permanence of marriage. Marriage is intended to be binding for life (Matt. 19:3-9; Mark 10:2-9). Such is the unambiguously clear teaching of Scripture.

Less clear, however, is the Scripture's teaching on divorce and remarriage. The question is, does Scripture grant that in a broken world the sinful actions of one or both of the marriage partners can so dissolve a marriage relationship established by God that it is no longer binding? That God wills the permanence of marriage and that death dissolves the marriage relationship is clearly taught. But it is not unambiguously clear whether Jesus and Paul teach, or imply, that certain actions of the marriage partners can also dissolve the marriage covenant. The issue centers on Jesus' words in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, and on the apostle Paul's teaching in I Corinthians 7:10-16.

### A. *Matthew 5:32 and 19:9*

#### 1. The Meaning of *Porneia*

One of the problems in interpreting the phrase, "except on the ground of unchastity," is the precise meaning of *porneia* (unchastity). Without

repeating the various interpretations summarized in Report 35, submitted to the Synod of 1977, we agree with the conclusion of that report given in the following summary:

1) *porneia* in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 does not refer to "spiritual adultery" or "infidelity of any kind," but refers to sexual infidelity; (2) although the meaning of *porneia* is broader than *moicheia*, its primary reference in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 is to adultery; (3) the word *porneia* in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 should be translated as "unchastity" and be understood to include such sexual infidelity as incest and homosexuality; and (4) because of the association of *porneia* with "harlotry" and "prostitution," the accent appears to fall on persistent and unrepentant unchastity rather than on the single act itself (Acts of Synod 1977, p. 525; for full discussion cf. pp. 520-525).

## 2. The Significance of the Exceptive Clause

The exceptive clause, "except for unchastity," is found only in Matthew. Mark 10:11-12 and Luke 16:18 do not contain it. Since most New Testament scholars accept the priority of Mark, many argue that here Mark represents the original teaching of Jesus and that Matthew's version is a later adaptation. That is possible, but an argument can also be made in the opposite direction (cf. Report 35, Acts of Synod 1977, p. 526). In either case, however, the church must not overlook her confession concerning the canon of Scripture. Even if it is a Matthean adaptation, it continues to be an apostolic word which participates in the authority of Jesus himself. The recorded sayings of Jesus are not simple quotations but are sayings which frequently have been interpreted and applied by the gospel writers. The only access we have to the words and intentions of Jesus is through the words of his apostles. Thus the church confesses that the words of the apostles are for us the words of Jesus.

It may be the case that Matthew, or Jesus, qualified the saying about divorce and remarriage with a view to a Jewish situation: But what that situation was is difficult to prove. Some argue that Jewish law required a husband to divorce a wife guilty of adultery. Therefore, Jesus accommodated his teaching to the Jewish legal requirements. There is some evidence which indicates that a Jewish court would so advise, although whether this was the case already in Jesus' time is impossible to prove. However, there is also evidence that forgiveness on the part of the husband was possible and that the husband was not forced to divorce his adulterous wife. Thus it is difficult to prove precisely what the legal situation was.

Moreover, it is necessary for biblical reasons to exercise caution here. The first occurrence of the exceptive clause is in the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus is demonstrating a righteousness that "exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees" (Matt. 5:20). The second occurrence is in the context of a rejection of the traditional Jewish interpretation of legitimate divorce by Jesus' appeal to the creational mandate for marriage. Thus it does not seem possible that the exceptive clause could be a concession to an existing practice which violates the righteousness

demand by the creational norm for marriage. The thrust of the Sermon on the Mount and of Jesus' teaching concerning marriage reasserts the creational norm and God's demands for righteousness *against* the understanding of that righteousness contained in traditional Jewish teaching and practice. Would Jesus, or Matthew, have tolerated a "Jewish" practice which violated the demands of that righteousness? That does not seem possible. Thus the exceptive clause, even if it were added for reasons arising from a specific Jewish situation, does not violate the righteousness demanded by God's law for marriage.

What, then, is the significance of the exceptive clause? It has been customary to refer to the exceptive clause as the biblical ground for divorce. If by "ground" it is assumed that the exceptive clause gives biblical warrant for divorce in every case where adultery has occurred, that assumption cannot be maintained. It is better, then, not to speak of a biblical ground for divorce. Scripture never intends to provide persons with justifications for divorce, but rather seeks always to encourage and maintain the permanence of marriage.

If the exceptive clause is removed from the saying of Jesus, what remains is a declaration which intends to affirm the permanence of marriage: "Whoever divorces his wife... and marries another, commits adultery" (Matt. 19:9). The declaration in Matthew 5:32 is focused on the effect of divorce upon the wife, but the intention is basically the same: "Everyone who divorces his wife... makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery." The context in both instances is the Jewish tradition in which divorce was an acceptable remedy for any marital discord. In fact, divorce was permitted even for the sake of desiring to marry another. Jesus' declaration, in effect, labels that practice, which made commonplace the remarriage of divorced persons, adultery. In other words, the law had been so interpreted as to approve conduct which the deepest intention of the law clearly disapproved. What the tradition considered "lawful" conduct was actually adultery. Thus Jesus teaches that the righteousness of the law governing marriage far exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

However, in the case where divorce occurs because of *porneia*/unchastity, the condemnation upon remarriage does not necessarily apply. Logically, the statement is analogous to the following: All killing, except in the case of provocation, is murder. Sometimes it may not be murder, sometimes it may be. Certainly the statement does not imply that wherever provocation has occurred killing is approved. Before one can apply the exceptive clause to a specific case of killing, other factors must be known and the total situation assessed. So it is the case where adultery occurs prior to divorce. In such a case, without a further assessment of the total situation, one cannot know whether the general condemnation of divorce/remarriage as adultery applies. It may not, but again it may.

What are these additional factors that must be assessed? The texts containing the exceptive clause do not inform us. Hence, these additional factors must be derived from general biblical teaching. Two key factors, according to the report submitted in 1977, are repentance and forgiveness:

Especially if both partners in a marriage are Christian and the partner who is guilty of physical infidelity confesses his/her sin in genuine repentance then the other marriage partner should accept that confession and, recognizing his/her own weaknesses, seek restoration and healing in the marriage. Such confession and forgiveness is in harmony with our Lord's teaching on the importance of (confession and) forgiveness (Matt. 6:14,15; Matt. 18:21-35; cf. also Col. 3:23 and Eph. 4:32) (Acts of Synod 1977, p. 527).

That report suggested also that the use of *porneia* instead of the more common word for adultery, *moicheia*, may indicate, because of its association with harlotry, persistent and unrepentant adultery instead of a single act of marital unfaithfulness. Therefore, the report concluded that only where there was lack of repentance for persistent sinful conduct could one suggest that divorce was not to be condemned. Although it is impossible to prove that in the exceptive clause *porneia* must have the connotation of persistent and unrepentant adultery, the biblical teaching on the permanence of marriage and on the importance of repentance and forgiveness would point in that direction.

Repentance and forgiveness are fundamental realities in Christian living. Unless there is a willingness to confess sin, to forgive or to accept forgiveness, there can be no genuine Christian community within either marriage, the family, or the church. Every form of Christian community has been created by the forgiving love of God, and the members of that community exist under the obligation to extend that forgiveness to each other, as the apostle Paul exhorts in Ephesians 4:32, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." God pursued Israel, his bride, in love, even when she was unfaithful (cf. Hosea), and Christ "loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph. 5:25). Similarly, when we are sinned against in marriage, or in any other relationship, we stand under the obligation to love and forgive as we have been loved and forgiven by God.

There must always be the willingness to forgive, but what happens when forgiveness is not accepted? What happens when there is no "godly grief" leading to repentance (cf. II Cor. 7:9-11), so that there exists no acknowledgment of sin committed nor any willingness to be forgiven? Without genuine repentance and the acceptance of forgiveness, genuine community cannot exist. Under those circumstances Israel's fellowship with God was broken. So it would seem that there can be circumstances in marriage, namely, *porneia*/unchastity together with a lack of repentance and the acceptance of forgiveness or a refusal to forgive, by which the basis for fellowship is broken, the avenue toward restoration is refused, and divorce possibly not to be condemned. It is not possible, however, to define precisely the circumstances of each particular case, nor the time frame within which a patient waiting for repentance ought to be exercised. Clearly, no sin has the power to destroy *automatically* the community of marriage, family, or church which God has established. God's forgiving love, which we share, is the greater power which heals and restores our broken relationships. Nevertheless, where sin is not confessed and forgiveness not received, brokenness remains.

This biblical teaching on repentance and forgiveness is not explicitly mentioned in the passages containing the exceptive clause, but it seems likely that Jesus would have such factors in mind. Since confession of sin, forgiveness, and being forgiven are essential to all forms of Christian fellowship and community, including marriage, it seems obvious that at least these factors must be considered in applying the exceptive clause.

Thus, although in the use of the exceptive clause Jesus is not creating a ground for divorce, he does acknowledge the effect of sin in breaking norms established by God. Even though the exceptive clause does not automatically supply a ground for divorce in the case of adultery, it does indicate that it is possible for such persistent sinful conduct to dissolve a marriage established by God. Marriage *should* not be dissolved, for that is contrary to God's will; but by persistent and unrepentant unchastity people *can* put asunder what God has joined together. Where such has happened, Jesus does not apply his condemnation upon the subsequent remarriage of the one who did not commit adultery.

#### B. I Corinthians 7:10-16

Many in the church at Corinth were confused about the relationship between Christian faith and marriage: Should Christians marry? How should they conduct themselves within marriage? May or should married Christians separate or divorce? May a believer continue to be married to an unbeliever? What obligation does the Christian partner have to the unbelieving husband or wife who desires to be divorced? It is difficult to reconstruct with certainty all of the motivations and circumstances which produced such questions. Apparently, a false asceticism concerning sexual matters was part of the situation, as well as a false understanding of Paul's eschatological teaching. Because of the difficulty in reconstructing the situation, interpreters do not agree fully on all matters in I Corinthians 7.

The question of marriage and divorce surfaces in I Corinthians 7:10-16. The apostle Paul addresses, first of all, a situation in which both partners are Christian. There he stresses the permanence of marriage by repeating the essence of the Lord's command that "the wife should not separate from her husband. . . and that the husband should not divorce his wife." Divorce is not an action willed by Jesus because it violates God's will that marriage is for life. But what happens when a separation or divorce occurs? The apostle Paul speaks specifically to the wife—for what reason we do not know—but certainly by implication the same exhortation should apply also to the husband. Paul commands that if the wife does separate from/divorce her husband, she should either remain single or be reconciled to her husband.

Is this command universal, i.e., without any possible exception? Some argue that it is. They assert that both Jesus and Paul teach that all divorce/remarriage is sin (not simply the result of sin). Appeal is then made also to I Corinthians 7:39, "A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. If the husband dies, she is freed to be married to whom she wills, only in the Lord." All interpreters agree that Paul teaches that marriage is permanent and that Christians must maintain and regain, if



possible, the marriage union that God wills. But not all agree that Paul's command in I Corinthians 7:10-11 is universal, i.e., without any possible exception. For example, Calvin and others believe that Paul's command is to be interpreted in harmony with Jesus' teaching in Matthew 19:9. It applies, therefore, only to "unlawful and frivolous" divorces and not to that divorce governed by the exceptive clause. The fact that the apostle Paul does not mention the exceptive clause implies neither logically nor actually that he did not know it or that it violates the intention of his command. The case is simply that the apostle does not mention it. His concern is for the permanence of Christian marriage.

The second case concerning marriage and divorce is one which the Lord himself did not address during his earthly ministry. What happens to a marriage when a partner is an unbeliever? The apostle replies that the fact of unbelief is not in itself a ground for divorce. The unbelieving partner is consecrated through the believing partner and the children of such a marriage are holy, i.e., they belong to the covenant people of God. But what happens when the unbelieving partner refuses to live in the marriage relationship? The apostle declares, "Let it be so, . . . the brother or sister is not bound. For God has called us to peace" (I Cor. 7:15).

What is meant by the term *separate* in the clause, "if the unbelieving partner desires to separate" (I Cor. 7:15)? In verses 10-15, the apostle uses two words which are translated respectively as "separate" and "divorce." Some interpreters have suggested that the first term refers not to divorce but only to unofficial separation. Then verse 15 speaks of such unofficial separation and the freedom granted is only the freedom not to live together. The linguistic basis for this approach is not compelling. It is true that both words can refer to various kinds of separation, abandonment, or dismissal, and that neither term is exclusively a technical, juridical term for divorce. However, it is also the case that both are found in contexts, and even in marriage contracts, where they do refer to legal divorce. Thus the Report of 1957 judged the matter correctly when it suggested that Paul's use of these two terms may be only a "rhetorical device to introduce variety," and consequently that report assumed that in verse 15 Paul is speaking of divorce (Acts of Synod 1957, p. 342). In addition, it should be noted that the word for "separate" is the term Jesus uses in Matthew 19:6, ". . . let no man put asunder." Thus the dissolution of marriage is the point of reference.

A second difficulty in I Corinthians 7:15 concerns the phrase, "is not bound." The term can be translated "is not enslaved." Some believe that Paul is thereby affirming only that the believer is not absolutely enslaved in a marriage relationship, i.e., the believer is not required to live with the unbelieving partner. However, the marriage tie continues and the situation is the same as in I Corinthians 7:11, ". . . let her remain single or else be reconciled to her husband." The freedom granted is only the freedom not to live together. Such was the position adopted by the Synod of 1957. However, others believe that the phrase "not enslaved" is a synonymous expression for the "not bound" of Romans 7:1-4. In that case, according to this interpretation, the situation is not the same as in

verse 11 because in that verse the assumption is that the wife is bound and must remain single or be reconciled. In verse 15, however, the freedom granted would then be freedom from the law of marriage which binds husband and wife together. Essentially, this latter position was held by Calvin and is contained in the Westminster Confession.

The final difficulty concerns the nature of the case to which the apostle Paul responds. Is the case restricted to a situation arising from religious incompatibility? If it is, then whatever the freedom is that Paul grants, it applies only where those conditions precisely recur. Such has been the position of the Christian Reformed Church, except during the years 1894-1896. For example, the Synod of 1957 asserted that I Corinthians 7:15 "pertains only to Christians whose *unbelieving* marriage partners 'depart' for deeply seated *religious* reasons" (Acts of Synod 1957, p. 106). Others observe, however, that the unbelief of the partner is not the basis for the freedom granted to the believer. It is rather the refusal of the unbeliever to live with the believer. This refusal may be due to "deeply seated religious differences," but it may also be for any other reason. The reason is not mentioned; the refusal to live in marriage is mentioned. Historically, the stress on the refusal of the unbeliever has led to the affirmation of willful desertion as an act that dissolves marriage. The particular case mentioned in I Corinthians 7:12-16 is interpreted then as an *example* of willful desertion, of a refusal to acknowledge God's will for marriage, and a refusal to accept the gifts of grace available for maintaining and restoring the marriage covenant.

What is at stake in these differences of interpretation? The central issue can be highlighted by means of this question: Can sinful human conduct put asunder what God has joined together? Some believe that it cannot and, therefore, every remarriage after divorce is an act of adultery. This has been the traditional Roman Catholic position. Most others, however, believe that persistent unchastity contains the potential for destroying the marriage bond and that divorce/remarriage in such a case is not adultery. Thus at least one kind of sinful conduct can lead to the dissolution of a marriage. If one accepts the interpretation that I Corinthians 7:15 suggests freedom from the law of marriage, then there is an additional type of sinful conduct which can dissolve a marriage. It should be noted that the apostle Paul does not explicitly address the matter of remarriage after a divorce caused by the refusal of the unbeliever to live in the marriage relationship. Whether implications for remarriage can be derived from his teaching depends on one's interpretation of "not bound." The essential difference between the two traditional interpretations of I Corinthians 7:10-16 can be summarized as follows: one view holds that this passage, although allowing separation, teaches that the Christian obligation is to remain single or to be reconciled. While agreeing that such is the Christian obligation in many instances, the second view holds that in the second case (v. 15) the apostle implies that willful desertion can dissolve the marriage relationship and that remarriage is then a possibility. Obviously, the interpretation of this passage will affect both a "theology" of marriage and the pastoral advice given in situations of divorce and remarriage.

How should the church respond to these differences in the interpretation of I Corinthians 7:10-16? Whenever the church adopts positions affecting the lives of people, it must be certain that the position taken or rule adopted states neither more nor less than the Scripture requires. Since it is not possible to prove conclusively either position on exegetical or theological grounds and thus to state specifically what Scripture requires in this passage, and since these differences of interpretation have a long history in the Reformed tradition and exist also within this committee, the committee decided that it was best not to decide matters by simple majority vote.

Instead, from these difficulties in interpreting this passage which mentions instances of divorce/separation, we should recognize that Scripture speaks more clearly to some cases than to others. It does not adjudicate in advance every case of marital difficulty that the church will encounter. To assume that it does is simply to expect too much. For even in the two cases of I Corinthians 7, the Scripture does not give a fully developed, legal discussion of the matter. In the first instance, the apostle applies a general teaching without mentioning exceptions (cf. Calvin on I Corinthians 7:10), and in both instances specific situations are addressed, the details of which are not completely stated and, consequently, are no longer fully known.

The difficulties encountered in interpreting the above passage, however, do not mean that the church has been left without guidance on matters of divorce and remarriage. For even in I Corinthians 7, the apostle clearly proclaims the will of God for marriage and the possibilities for its redemption. That will of God is clearly stated throughout the Scriptures and those gracious possibilities for redemption and renewal are always available to those who believe. Yet, that same Scripture acknowledges that in a sinful world God's will is not always observed nor are those gifts of grace always claimed. Although the Scripture speaks clearly in terms of principles governing divorce and remarriage, it is neither possible nor wise for the church to attempt to construct a legal code which would cover all cases or all the circumstances that would apply. Instead, in every instance the church must seek pastorally to assist the partners in a marriage to achieve forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration wherever possible. For such is the will of God.

### III. GUIDELINES FOR THE MINISTRY OF THE CHURCH

The church has a special interest in marriage and the family, for the Christian family is an important witness to the unity Christ creates. The unified Christian family, which is open toward the body of Christ, enriches this body, and contributes to the unity of the family of God. Thus the church must develop a full-orbed ministry to strengthen marriage and family relationships, and to heal the brokenness that destroys the unity Christ gives.

The ministry of the church is a corporate ministry of the entire body. Although the official teaching, preaching, and pastoral ministries of the church are of great importance, the mutual ministry and witness of Christian families and persons to each other is equally important. It is

part of the responsibility we assume for one another. Thus the guidelines for ministry are guidelines for the entire church.

#### A. *The Educative Ministry*

Instruction is especially important in an age when the Christian view of marriage is not understood and often under attack. Therefore, the church must proclaim and teach the biblical doctrine of marriage, including both the creation ordinance and/or the law of marriage, as well as the significance of sin, grace, and redemption for marriage.

To achieve this, the church must:

1. Emphasize the sovereign claim of God on all of life so that also in the marriage relationship the first consideration is to please God by doing his will.

2. Stress the God-willed permanence of marriage and counsel against violation of the marriage bond.

3. Proclaim that Christian marriage is a relationship in which the grace of God in Christ enables one to live within the unity God demands.

4. Teach that both partners in marriage fail in various ways to keep the covenant they make. Such failure is sin and such sin tends to separate those whom God has joined.

5. Teach that in Christ husbands and wives are called to be reconciled to each other. They are to confess their sins, forgive one another, make restitution, and again live faithfully to their vows to love, honor, and cherish.

6. Teach that we do not possess within ourselves the power to keep covenant. No one is able to keep the promise to be a husband or wife to the other and to love, honor, and cherish no matter what the circumstances of life, or what the other does to us or fails to do. Only the powerful grace of God can make each able so to keep covenant. Therefore, husband and wife must seek from God what they need in order to be faithful. The church must teach without ambiguity that God will give what each needs in order to keep covenant.

7. Teach that marriage is not an end in itself but finds its fulfillment and ultimate purpose in the family of God, and, therefore, that Christian marriage must pattern itself after the relationship of Christ and his church.

8. Promote a forgiving, sympathetic, and open church fellowship in which concern, compassion, and help can be freely offered and freely received.

9. Challenge the heresies of our day which destroy marriage, e.g., the heresies of selfism, individualism, and humanistic secularism.

#### B. *The Ministry to Those Whose Marriages Are in Crisis*

Sin disrupts the unity we have in Christ. Therefore, besides teaching and proclaiming the biblical doctrine of marriage, the church has a special ministry to those whose marriages are in crisis and to those who may be contemplating divorce.



For such the church must:

1. *Communicate hope to those who are losing hope.* The ground of such hope is not themselves, but God; not their good intentions nor the willingness or capacity of either to change, but the promise of God that he will bless those who seek him.

Those who would have a well-grounded hope must begin by seeking for themselves the forgiving, restoring, and cleansing power of God. They must seek the grace of God in Christ so that they live in obedience to their vows regardless of the responses of their spouses.

Persons who have experienced the power of the resurrection in their own marriages which once were dead but are now alive, can become powerful witnesses to such hope.

2. *Exercise a ministry of reconciliation.* The church must call the marriage partners to confession, forgiveness, reconciliation, and renewed obedience. To achieve this the church must listen so that she understands the attitudes and behaviors of each spouse toward the other, how these affect the marriage relationship, and what God teaches concerning these attitudes and behaviors.

But the church must not only listen, she must also speak in confrontation and with promise. Where overt sinful conduct is present, the church must address the Word of God in rebuke. Where separation is contemplated, the church must warn concerning the seriousness of such action. God declared to Old Testament Israel that he hated the breaking of the marriage covenant (Mal. 2:14-16). This will of God in favor of the permanence of marriage must be declared, for it is a primary motivation for reconciliation—and the grace of God makes reconciliation attainable.

When one or both spouses refuse reconciliation or refuse to begin to live again in covenant faithfulness, the church must remind them of the sacredness of vows once taken and of the biblical demand for forgiveness and reconciliation. Recognizing, however, the complexities created by the deeply intimate relationships that marriage entails, the church must also encourage both partners to exhibit a patience like that of our Father in heaven. Where children are involved, parents should be encouraged to consider also the needs of the children as members of their family and of the family of God. The church must continue to encourage, sustain, and support so that hope does not die.

3. *Develop a corporate ministry of reconciliation.* Friends, fellow Christians, and family must respond promptly with a ministry of hope and reconciliation to those whose marriage is in crisis. Such ministry may begin with one person but the gifts of many must be exercised. The prompt corporate response of fellow believers is necessary for healing to take place within the body of Christ. To develop such a corporate ministry of reconciliation, the church must encourage those whose marriage is in crisis to seek help and assistance, and the church in response must develop an appropriate ministry of support.

4. *Consider the purpose of discipline:* namely whether formal discipline might not be a helpful or necessary means to achieve the repentance of persons involved in marital crisis, when one or both partners by word

or deed refuse to hear the word of God, refuse the call to repentance and forgiveness, and appear to have closed their hearts to the hope of possible reconciliation.

#### C. *The Ministry to Those Who Are Divorced*

Divorce is a traumatic experience and is often the occasion for deep grief with its constituent elements of guilt, anger, loneliness, and feelings of failure. A sense of shame experienced by divorced persons, by others toward them, and by parents or children of the divorced, frequently results in the divorced and their families feeling ostracized from even minimal fellowship. In addition, the many readjustments and the reorganization of many aspects of life contribute to the trauma that is divorce.

Therefore, the church must:

1. Continue to minister with special concern for those involved in this traumatic experience. Divorced persons need to be supported pastorally in a way similar to the manner in which other members involved in other personal difficulties are supported. Even where there is great guilt in divorce with no apparent repentance, the church must continue to minister persistently and patiently.

2. Speak with clarity where sinful conduct is overt and apparent. However, recognizing the limits of human ability to discern the subtlety and intricacy of human motivation, the church must recognize the limits of its ability to assess guilt and blame in the intimate and private turmoil of marital distress.

3. Understand that marital breakdown and divorce requires pastoral attention which emphasizes repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. As long as there is openness to the Word and to the pastoral counsel and admonition of the consistory, participation in the sacraments, which are a means of grace, should not be denied.

4. Exercise formal discipline only when there is disdain for the biblical teachings and when unrepentance is beyond doubt. Marital breakdown and divorce does not by itself mean the loss of church membership.

5. Maintain within the life and work of the church a place of acceptance and appreciation for those who by divorce are living the single life so that they may experience the vital spiritual, moral, and social support they need. The church must take special care to supply what is needed by the children of divorced members so that they may receive what is essential for their development as persons and members of the family of God.

#### D. *The Ministry to Those Contemplating Remarriage*

The permanence of the marriage relationship lies at the heart of the biblical teaching on marriage. God wills a lifelong unity of husband and wife in marriage. Consequently, the basic declaration of Scripture is that divorce and remarriage while one's spouse is alive constitutes adultery (cf. Matt. 5:32; Mark 10:11-12; Rom. 7:2-3).

The Bible also indicates that there can be circumstances involving unchastity (*porneia*) where the judgment of adultery does not fall upon a per-

son who remarries after a divorce. However, the exceptive clause by itself does not fully inform us concerning all the relevant circumstances. Thus the two passages containing the exceptive clause (Matt. 5:32; 19:9), when taken in isolation from the rest of Scripture, are not as clear as they may seem to be. Certainly, they provide no simple law by which to regulate divorce and remarriage. In addition, I Corinthians 7:12-16 allows divorce under certain circumstances. However, since it does not explicitly address the matter of remarriage, it is impossible to prove conclusively that remarriage is either forbidden or permitted under the circumstances mentioned.

Thus, on the one hand, Scripture states the principle or law governing marriage with such clarity that no one should be mistaken concerning God's will for the marriage relationship. The church must constantly reaffirm this biblical teaching both as God's will for its corporate life and in its proclamation to a society in which moral anarchy is destroying marriage and family life. However, on the other hand, the Scripture also considers cases where marriage does not attain the biblical norm. Although the cases considered are essentially only two, in those two cases the Scripture acknowledges the necessity of considering certain actions and attitudes which occur in a sinful world, which conflict with God's will for marriage, and which can destroy a marriage relationship.

The church must exercise its pastoral ministry in the midst of this tension which exists between God's will for marriage and the multiplicity of personal factors which surround particular cases of divorce and remarriage. The church should neither issue a clear prohibition of remarriage in those cases where Scripture is unclear, nor should it attempt to list with legal precision the circumstances under which any particular remarriage does not conflict with biblical teaching. This is neither possible nor desirable. For example, even when unchastity has been a factor in the divorce, the legitimacy of the remarriage is not to be taken for granted. Other factors in the biblical teaching must be considered, such as repentance for personal failure in the breakdown of the previous marriage, forgiveness of others, understanding of the divinely intended permanence of marriage, and a renewed dependence on the grace of God for the success of the remarriage.

Hence, the church must apply these biblical principles to concrete situations in the light of its best understanding of what happened in the divorce and what is being planned for the remarriage. The major part of the burden in making this application necessarily rests on the local consistory, for it has the most intimate and accurate knowledge of the situation of divorce and contemplated remarriage.

Therefore, the church must:

1. Reaffirm the general biblical principle that divorce and remarriage constitute adultery.
2. Deal pastorally with those who have failed to keep the biblical principle by
  - a. Refraining from a strictly legal approach to remarriage that tries to provide a basis for judgment that certain categories of remarriage are always compatible or incompatible with the teachings of Scripture.

b. Seeking to bring persons contemplating remarriage to a genuine awareness of what is involved in the covenant of marriage. The teaching of Scripture concerning marriage, grace, love, loyalty, vows, forgiveness, hope, and promise should be openly discussed.

c. Calling persons contemplating remarriage to an examination of their intentions in the light of the biblical teaching concerning reconciliation with the former spouse, the possibility of the single life, and remarriage.

d. Counseling firmly and compassionately against any remarriage that conflicts with the biblical teaching concerning marriage and divorce.

e. Exercising formal discipline when persons in hardness of heart refuse to heed the admonitions of the consistory and do not acknowledge and repent of their sins involved in divorce and remarriage.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

Your committee recommends:

1. That synod recognize the Rev. Wilbert Van Dyk (chairman) and Dr. David Holwerda (secretary) as representatives of the committee at synod and that they be given the privilege to speak when this report is under consideration.

2. That synod accept Sections I and II of this report as being basically in accord with the biblical teaching on marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

3. That synod adopt Section III, "Guidelines for the Ministry of the Church," and refer the same to pastors, consistories, and the church for guidance in handling the important matters of marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

#### Grounds:

a. The guidelines reflect the demonstrable teaching of Scripture on marriage, divorce, remarriage, repentance, and forgiveness.

b. The guidelines, in harmony with the general provisions of the Church Order, recognize that pastors and consistories, using the gift of wisdom as led by the Spirit, must apply the teaching of Scripture to the specific situations and concrete cases of marital difficulty.

4. That synod declare the committee's mandate fulfilled and, therefore, discharge the committee.

Committee on Marriage and Divorce  
 Wilbert Van Dyk, chairman  
 David Holwerda, secretary  
 Robert Baker  
 Linda Hertel Dykstra  
 George Gritter  
 Mel Hugen  
 James Vander Laan  
 Thea Van Halsema  
 Peter Van Katwijk