

Divorce

Written by K B Napier
Friday, 06 February 2015 09:15

Today, a large number of Christians divorce, but is divorce valid? One writer, W. Best of the USA, claims that the New Testament provisions for divorce (see below) are totally misinterpreted and that divorce is not valid in any circumstance whatever. On the other hand, the New Testament texts he refers to appear to allow divorce for two reasons. I must admit that whilst Best's argument is well constructed, I am not convinced he is right (which is NOT to suggest that maybe I am right, either!). Let us see what the Bible says...

Firstly, the general principle is declared by Jesus Himself when He was answering the Pharisees: God intended that when a man and woman married they would become *'one flesh'*

"What therefore God hath joined together, let no man put asunder."

(Mark 10:6-8). When the disciples later asked privately for Him to explain His statement, Jesus added that if a man puts away (divorces) his wife and remarries, then he is being adulterous to his former wife; the same applies to the wife if she puts away her husband. (Mark 10:10-12).

Secondly, the concept of *'one flesh'* is said to be a *'great mystery'* because it is based on the unbreakable unity of Christ and His Church. (Ephesians 5:32). Thus, in 1 Corinthians 7:39 we read that a wife is bound to her husband so long as he lives - but an earlier text says that if she *does*

leave him, then she must remain unmarried or, she must later go back to him and he, in turn, must not divorce her. (1 Corinthians 7:10, 11).

Luke 16:18 tells us that a man who divorces and remarries commits adultery and whoever marries his ex-wife also commits adultery. In Matthew 5:32, Jesus says that unless a wife commits fornication (illicit sexual intercourse) she cannot be divorced. Thus, adultery is a clear ground for divorce. Elsewhere in scripture we are told that a non-believing partner who wishes to leave may do so, allowing the remaining partner to remarry without guilt. Only these two reasons are given as cause for divorce.

But, let us note what is said in Mark 10:2-5. In many respects it reminds us of the sin of the ancient Hebrews, when they pleaded with God to give them a king. God was all-sufficient and the Ruler of all kings, yet the Hebrews wanted to be like the other nations and demanded a king for themselves. So God gave them one, and the nation was no longer directly ruled by God. Why did He do it? For the *'hardness of their heart'*! The passage in Mark 10:2-5 says the same kind of thing:

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"And the Pharisees came to Him, and asked Him, Is it lawful for a man to put away (his) wife? tempting Him. And He answered and said unto them, What did Moses command you?"

*And they said, Moses suffered to write a bill of divorcement * and to put (her) away*.*

And Jesus answered and said unto them, for the hardness of your heart he wrote you this precept."

(*A 'bill of divorcement' was a document containing a repudiation of the marriage. To 'put her away' meant to send her out of the home).

Note the explanation for divorce given by Jesus Himself: it is allowed because of the hardness of the heart. Also note that He was talking to Jews, not to Believers. However, several of the other texts we have referred to *do* apply to Believers, so the only conclusion must be that the same *'rule'* applies to us, too.

If we take the note on hardness of heart seriously (and we ought to), then the question of divorce becomes vital to our spiritual health. It suggests that if we divorce, then it is because our hearts are not as they should be toward God and toward His will for our lives. God gave the Jews a king, but the concession was given as a recognition of sin, not as a *'right'*. In the same way, today, many Christians divorce as though they had the *'right'* to do so, or even because they simply do not wish to remain married!

As Jesus told the Pharisees, it is only a humanly-legal *'right'*, not a Godly privilege. It was a sign of their sin, not of God's blessing. There seem to be two extremes operating within the churches today: one party allows divorce as though it were a *'right'* and as though it is just a set-back in life; the other party shuns the divorcee and treats him or her like an outcast. Some ministers, too, often discriminate against Christians who *Biblically* divorce wayward partners. In this they err.

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Jesus' words in John 8:11 are apt at this point. After the Jews had brought a female adulteress to Him for judgement and He had sent them away in shame, He turned to the woman and said two things: that if her accusers were not there to accuse her, then neither would He. Then he said, simply, "*go and sin no more*". Is that the answer? That one who commits adultery must just give up the adulterous relationship?

I do not think this text only applies to the woman in the account. It also applies to us. Surely the thrust of this text is that it is never too late to turn back from our sin and that once we are convinced of sin we must repent immediately and go back to the true path: in this case, the woman had to renounce her sin and go back to her husband.

This subject requires a much deeper analysis, but there is enough here to show us that divorce is *not* a right, or a 'happy release' given by God. Rather, it is a sign of our hardness of heart and of our refusal to get things right with our partner. It is, after all, easier to divorce than it is to repent to the Lord and to live together in harmony.

Another point to note is that the question of human '*love*' does not arise. What matters is that once we are married we become *'one flesh'* which typifies our union with Christ. That union can never be broken or put aside, although we often sin and must turn away from evil. Thus, love for God is the only criterion here, not human love, which is so fickle. (I recognise that some believers are forced into divorce by erring partners).

Easy for me to say all this as a happily married man? Yes, it is. ***But, it does not alter the Biblical texts!*** As divorce becomes easier our Christian consciences become damaged. Humanistic opportunities for divorce provide an escape route for those who do not wish to do as God says, whether they are Christian or not. The biggest danger in all this is that young Christians now see divorce as an option, rather than as an act of defiance or as an allowance conceded by God for the hardness of our hearts.

Finally, I urge ministers to see what scripture says about divorce and remarriage. A pastor cannot be excused for Biblical ignorance. A Christian whose unsaved partner leaves is free to

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marry. So is the Christian whose partner has been adulterous. Thus, a minister has no right, Biblically, to refuse marriage to such ones.

Finally, I have watched the results of unbiblical divorces amongst Christians: misery, poor second marriages, children who go astray, and a decline in spiritual life. The years **will** tell! Let no Christian think he or she may divorce for the sake of it, or because he/she does not want to be reminded of Biblical truth (very common nowadays). The result, whether by God's concession or not, is always a lesser life, with a decline in what should have been.

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