

Hot Topics

Marriage and Divorce

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Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)

Hot Topics: Marriage and Divorce

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Background Notes

Key Scripture Texts: Genesis 1-3; Deuteronomy 24:1-4; 1 Corinthians 7:10-17, 20, 27, 39; Ephesians 5:21-33; Malachi 2:14-16; Matthew 19:1-9; 1 John 2:1-2; and others.

Introduction

Divorce in the United States has been increasing since the end of the 19th century, dipping slightly in the 1990's. According to recent statistics:

The Divorce rate: 3.6 per 1,000 population (46 reporting States and D.C).

50% percent of first marriages, 67% of second and 74% of third marriages end in divorce

The divorce rate in America for first marriages is 41 percent, for second marriages 60 percent and for third marriages 73 percent.

The last-reported U.S. divorce rate for a calendar year, available as of May, 2005, is 0.38% divorces per capita per year.

The divorce rate last year (per 1,000 people) was 3.6, the lowest rate since 1970 and down from 4.2 in 2000 and from 4.7 in 1990.¹

Of greater interest is the research of George Barna, especially as it impacts Christian communities:

- 11% of the adult population is currently divorced.
- 25% of adults have had at least one divorce during their lifetime.
- Divorce rates among conservative Christians were significantly higher than for other faith groups, and much higher than Atheists and Agnostics experience.

George Barna, president and founder of Barna Research Group, commented:

While it may be alarming to discover that born again Christians are more likely than others to experience a divorce, that pattern has been in place for quite some time. Even more disturbing, perhaps, is that when those individuals experience a divorce many of them feel their community of faith provides rejection rather than support and healing. But the research also raises questions regarding the effectiveness of how churches minister to families. The ultimate responsibility for a marriage belongs to the husband and wife, but the high incidence of divorce within the Christian community challenges the idea that churches provide truly practical and life-changing support for marriages.²

Some have challenged these findings, but Barna stands by his assessments. It has been suggested that Christian churches may have difficulty acknowledging or even being aware of divorced persons in their congregations. The stigma of divorce within some Christian denominations may prevent open discussion about such issues, and give the false impression that few couples have had to deal with the problem.

Talking about marriage and divorce within the church is a healthy experience, akin to confession and renewal within the Christian tradition. When the church makes such conversation difficult, it casts a stumbling block on the pathway of those who want Christ to become their restorer. The whole Gospel is for the whole person — including the marriage person. Honesty about marriage and divorce does not mean promoting divorce or

¹ Information from U.S. Census sources and state-by-state reporting.

² <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/15-familykids/42-new-marriage-and-divorce-statistics-released>

devaluing marriage. Instead, freedom to examine this important topic is a sign that the Church is God's redeeming community in the world.

Among the challenging aspects of divorce is the impact on children. In an excellent article, Julie Hanlon Rubio examines the fact that "More children than ever spend at least some of their childhood in single parent homes, while others live in blended families or split their time between two families."³ Rubio calls for a theological re-examination of the place children occupy in the total marriage-family unit. Based on research and church history, she cites authorities who want to keep all persons involved in marriage uppermost in making the divorce decision. The decision to divorce is not just about the couple, she insists. One prominent church father who developed the "three-in-one flesh" model was John Chrysostom who argued that the "one flesh" nature of marriage points to the child as "the bridge connecting mother to father."⁴ We encourage further study on this intriguing approach to the marriage-divorce issue.

On a personal note, I'd like to add a few remarks closer to home — my home. What appears in these *Notes* does not take place in a vacuum. Nor do I look at divorce as something that happens to other people but never to us. Many persons within the First Nazarene community know our story, having shared parts of it with our family. The challenges of church life and personal struggles led to my divorce from Susan in the mid to late 1980's. Having served as a pastor's family for eight years, we had our share of pressures and wounds. Fortunately, we left the pastorate before the tragedy of divorce overtook us. My own dark night of the soul ensued, filled with questions and uncertainty. None of this was easy nor was it brief. Only after much personal counseling and spiritual renewal did the darkness yield to God's redeeming light. On a bright Easter Sunday in 1989, our marriage was restored, and I had the privilege speaking to our congregation with the testimony of what God had done in our lives. The church family of First Nazarene came alongside us at critical points until the work of restoration was completed. And so, when I write or speak on the subject, it is from that inside place where the battle rages. We have often commented that our experience has made us more sensitive, aware and compassionate toward persons in similar distress.

My prayer is that Scripture and common sense will guide the *Notes* which follow.

The Genesis Connection/Disconnection

Among the earliest Old Testament passages which deal with marriage and divorce are those found in the creation accounts of Genesis 1-2. Our previous studies in this series have addressed aspects of these texts, but they stand repeating.

¹⁸ Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." ...²¹ So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²² And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. ²³ Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." ²⁴ Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. ²⁵ And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed (Genesis 2:18, 21-25).

1. *Companionship* within the human species was important to God because companionship eternally belonged to God's nature: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In woman, man found his peer and his equal which consisted in a physical union at his origin and in a physical union in his marriage. The notion of the "helper fit for him" does not imply *inferiority* but *correspondence*.
2. *Revelation* from God was required for humankind to understanding the nature of the marriage union. As we noted previously, the "deep sleep" in this story suggests that Adam received a revelation from God in the form of a vision which explained to him the true meaning of marriage as a "one flesh" relationship, and, as

³ "Three-in-One Flesh: A Christian Reappraisal of Divorce in Light of Recent Studies," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 23/1 (2003), pp. 47-70.

⁴ "Homily 12: On Colossians 4:18," *On Marriage and Family Life*, St. Vladimir's Press, 1986, p. 76.

such, Adam and his wife were inseparable in the eyes of God. The symbol of *divine surgery* and the mechanics of *the rib* teach this union.

3. God "brings woman to man" in Adam's vision, the sign that *this creature* is designed for him. It is not among the animals that Adam finds his complement but in woman.
4. Relationships based on *birth* remain intact but they no longer control the life of the one who enters into the marriage union. "Leave and cleave" expresses the proper order for men and women who enter marriage. The act of leaving is not a sign of disrespect but is an act of obedience to the divine order of marriage. Failure to do this can result in all sort of problems between husbands and wives, especially where parental control interferes with marital companionship.
5. The absence of shame is also a sign of the new privacy which surrounds the one-flesh nature of marriage. Should shame return (and it will in Genesis 3), it is due to an interloper, Sin, which becomes the first "other man" or "other woman" in human history.

The fracturing of marriage occurs during the Fall, according to Genesis 3. We include a few key texts concerning that in what follows.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'" ² And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, ³ but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" ⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. ⁵ For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." ⁶ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. ⁷ Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths (Genesis 3:1-7).

1. The Serpent symbolizes Sin in its personified form and reveals the chaos already lurking within the creation order even before Adam and his wife eat the forbidden fruit. In the ancient world, talking animals generally refer to "the gods," but in this case the reader is given no additional information about "the serpent" (Hebrew: *nāḥāš*,) except that it was "more crafty" (Hebrew: *ārûm*, "crafty, shrewd, subtle, prudent" usually in a good sense). Whereas the Hebrew word doesn't necessarily refer to evil intent, in this case, the idea of "trickery" may also be involved. Or as Derek Kidner describes the serpent as having "malevolent brilliance."⁵ It is this clever creature who approaches the woman and engages her in conversation *even though it is not her peer* (Genesis 2:20b). Recall that among the animals no peer was found for Adam, and thus, likely, the *Genesis* writer intends to tell us *none for the woman* either. The serpent comes to the woman as a creature below her in the hierarchy of living things, and yet it presumes to converse with her as if it was her husband.
2. Allowing this conversation to take place, the woman enters dangerous territory, for she is permitting a non-human to influence her thinking. Presumably this creature, though sentient and apparently rational, does not have the divine image as the woman and her husband do. Her first obligation is to God and the second is to her husband. With regard to God, she must actively exercise her image-of-God qualities and take charge of this intruder into the garden of God, exercising dominion over it. With regard to her husband, she must consult with him as a peer, seeking wisdom and insight together as a married couple.
3. The consequence of the misguided process on which both man and woman embark is that the knowledge which they acquire ("the eyes of both were opened...") does not give them an advantage within creation but subjects them to an awful truth about themselves. Acting alone and in isolation from the creation covenant, the woman and her husband *lose their innocence and acquire shame in its place*. One fundamental element in their marriage union has been breeched: intimacy through complete openness is replaced by shame through a fabricated privacy ("they sewed fig leaves..."). Shamelessness through innocence is displaced by secrecy through inventiveness. What enables a return to companionship involves a considerable loss in the original marriage covenant. While Adam and his wife are not technically divorced, their fellowship virtually is.

⁵ Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, in The Tyndale Old Testament Commentary Series, InterVarsity Press, 1981, p. 67.

4. The use of the word "naked" is instructive for it comes from the Hebrew word *'ērōm* which shares its root with the previous word *'ārūm* which described the cleverness of the serpent. That is, the two words sound very much alike, a feature sometimes called their "assonance." Such a literary device creates a connection between the words — a play-on-words — in which the *cleverness* of the serpent led to the sense of *nakedness* for the human pair.

Temporarily aided by their technical skills ("fig leaves"), the man and his wife remain hidden from Yahweh God who, as the "Spirit of the Day,"⁶ seeks them out. God is unwilling to have humankind hidden from Himself. Further, he seeks to discover why they feel naked in relationship to each and other, and, presumably, from Him.

⁸ And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. ⁹ But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" ¹⁰ And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself." ¹¹ He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" ¹² The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate" (Genesis 3:8-12).

By asking the question, "Where are you?" God is not conceding His own ignorance of the humans whereabouts. Rather, this question is more akin to our, "Where has your choice left you in relationship to Me and each other?" As evidence of the marriage fracture is the individualistic responses of both Adam and his wife. Adam does not speak in terms of "we," rather, he uses the singular pronoun "I," thus revealing the degree of separation and isolation into which he and his wife have fallen ("I...I...I...I"). Notice the cascading experiences leading to eventual isolation: "afraid, naked, hid." While the sense of nakedness was bad enough, it did not equal the sense of hiddenness which followed it. Before the Fall, human beings knew nakedness but without shame. After the Fall, nakedness led to the degree of human separation implicit in the word "hid."

"Who told you were naked?" is the next operative question which follows the first one, "Where are you?" The judgment that *nakedness equaled shame* is what God asks Adam to explain. It is a question about meaning, and where Adam obtained it. God is working backward from human hiddenness to human nakedness, and then He asks Adam to explain how he came upon the significance of his present sense of shame. Not waiting for Adam's answer, he probes into Adam's violation of the covenant commandment about eating the "Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil."⁷ It is at this point in the story that the social dimension of Adam's sin assumes an enormous role: "The woman you gave me..." is Adam's leading statement through which he reveals his degree of separation from the woman. Notice how Adam distances himself from this partner whom he once declared to be "bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh." Rather than see her as part of himself, he treats her as someone alien to his true nature, someone foisted on him by God. Someone has slyly remarked that in Adam's statement we have a case of "passing the buck in the Garden of Eden." Adam does not say "I did this," but, in effect charges that, "*she* made me do this."

It is out of such alienation and blame laying that marriages suffer damage and, in some case, divorce. But God is unwilling to allow such separation to become the final state of the relationship. By intervening, God passes judgment on the offending Serpent, and then proceeds to clothe the human pair with skins from animals God Himself must have slain expressly for the sake of human redemption. Indeed, only redemption can restore the brokenness of marriage. We find that powerfully illustrated in the events following the Fall.

Torah Sequels: How Hebrew Law Viewed Marriage and Divorce

When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out

⁶ While most translations use the phrase "in the cool of the day," they are ignoring the use of "Spirit" as it appears in Genesis 1:2, enabling the creation of order from chaos. The phrase literally reads "as the Spirit of the Day (Hebrew: *l'ruah hayyōm*)," where "day" points to the day of God's judgment and the reckoning which human beings must have with Him when they sin.

⁷ The use of the word for knowledge used here (Hebrew: *da'at*) points in the direction of making a judgment about something since the whole sentence has to do with "good and evil," terms which pertain to moral or ethical choice.

of his house, ² and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, ³ and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife, ⁴ then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the LORD. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance. (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).

In his commentary on this passage, Gottwald Norman remarks, "It is in fact a law presupposing divorce but attempting to control its abuse."⁸ That is, Israelite men divorced their wives, but not without cause. Still, what causes counted before God's tribunal? This passage uses the ambiguous phrase, "but she finds no favor in his eyes," and then gives an instance in further clarification: "some indecency in her." The underlying Hebrew for this latter expression is *'erewāh dābār*: "a naked thing," where "naked" comes from the root form *'ārāh*, "nakedness" and is closely associated with the "genitals," usually of a woman. We might use the idiom, "caught with one's pants down"! The point of the language is to emphasize the public and exposed nature of the woman's actions. The Rabbis interpreted this to mean "moral lapse" or "something externally repellent."⁹ Later writers, such as *Jesus Ben Sirach* applied the expression more broadly: "If she does not go as you direct, separate her from yourself" (25:26) Or, put bluntly, if she doesn't do what you tell her, get rid of her. The whole matter of "cause" will come up for debate time and time again, into Jesus' time, as we shall see.

I am inclined to see connections between the Torah code here and what we saw in the case of Genesis 3. The emphasis falls on why it is that nakedness is on the table for discussion. In the case of Adam and his wife, it was because of sin without necessarily entailing a specific sexual sin. Unlike some of the Medieval scholars who wanted to connect sex and sin in the Genesis story, I am not seeing that connection at all. Adam and his wife chose poorly in their decision to accept the Serpent's interpretation of things, and it was out of that choice that "their eyes were opened" and they became aware of their nakedness. Both elements — the public nature of the sin and the subsequent shame over nakedness — are present in *Genesis* and in the *Deuteronomy* text. Some sinful action is involved which fractured the marriage in both cases.

What is the remedy in the Torah code? The husband, under these circumstances, was required to give his wife a document which contained an explanation of the ensuing divorce. The Hebrew says he must "write for her" (from *kāthab*) a "book" (*sēper*) of "divorce" (*k'ritūt*, literally, "cutting"). Divorce, understood in this light, was a "severance."¹⁰ Ironically, the term used to "make" a covenant is based on the same root: "to cut a covenant" was the common language for making a covenant or treaty in the ancient world.¹¹ The use of the word "cut" rather than "make" underscored the nature of judgment within the covenantal arrangement. A ritual involving the cutting of a sacrifice symbolized the consequences of breaking the covenant. By using this same term in connection with divorce documents reveals the gravity with which Yāhweh viewed the decision.

How important was the "written divorce document"? No doubt it had benefit for the woman since it explained the circumstances under which she was forced out of the marriage. The document removed any doubt about the circumstances and allowed her to justify herself if anyone questioned the basis for the divorce. This would, of course, be of special importance in any subsequent remarriage. Evidence for the "document" appears elsewhere in the Old Testament:

She saw that for all the adulteries of that faithless one, Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce. Yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but she too went and played the whore (Jeremiah 3:8).

Thus says the LORD: "Where is your mother's certificate of divorce, with which I sent her away? Or which of my creditors is it to whom I have sold you? Behold, for your iniquities you were sold, and for your transgressions your mother was sent away (Isaiah 50:1).

⁸ Norman Gottwald, "The Book of Deuteronomy," in Charles M. Layman ed., *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, Abingdon Press, 1971, p. 115.

⁹ Hans Jochen Boecker, *Law and the Administration of Justice in the Old Testament and Ancient East*, Augsburg Press, 1980, p. 110.

¹⁰ Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 21:10-34:12*, in Word Biblical Commentary, 6B, Thomas Nelson, 2002, p. 567.

¹¹ For a detailed treatment of this topic, see Meredith G. Kline's ground-breaking work, *Treaty of the Great King*, Eerdmans, 1963.

We might suggest three likely reasons for the document.¹² 1) Prevent frivolous, thoughtless or rash dismissal; 2) Give woman the freedom from her marital obligation to the husband issuing the document; 3) Protect her reputation and the more severe penalty of drowning. The net benefit to the woman was enabling her to get married again. However, she could never return to her original husband *if she married another* man and then was divorced from him (or he died).

But does this passage constitute a "law of divorce"? Christensen doesn't think so; such laws would have been well-known throughout the ancient world, including Israel. For example, the famous *Code of Hammurabi* (1792 to 1750 B.C.E.) provided conditions, such as the following:¹³

141. If a man's wife, living in her husband's house, has persisted in going out, has acted the fool, has wasted her house, has belittled her husband, he shall prosecute her. If her husband has said, "I divorce her," she shall go her way; he shall give her nothing as her price of divorce. If her husband has said, "I will not divorce her," he may take another woman to wife; the wife shall live as a slave in her husband's house.

142. If a woman has hated her husband and has said, "You shall not possess me," her past shall be inquired into, as to what she lacks. If she has been discreet, and has no vice, and her husband has gone out, and has greatly belittled her, that woman has no blame, she shall take her marriage-portion and go off to her father's house.

143. If she has not been discreet, has gone out, ruined her house, belittled her husband, she shall be drowned.

148. If a man has married a wife and a disease has seized her, if he is determined to marry a second wife, he shall marry her. He shall not divorce the wife whom the disease has seized. In the home they made together she shall dwell, and he shall maintain her as long as she lives.

149. If that woman was not pleased to stay in her husband's house, he shall pay over to her the marriage-portion which she brought from her father's house, and she shall go away.

What Deuteronomy offers is some insight into the meaning of marriage, not just a few rules about divorce. When the road to divorce is begun, many unintended outcomes may meet the former spouses along their future marital journeys. Some of them, the text tells us, are "a great evil" to Yahweh and that which "defiles" the land — a short-hand way of saying that they have social consequences. Once divorce takes place and a new marriage is contracted, the original relationship is no longer possible, thus pointing out the potential finality of divorce.

God Hates Divorce: But He Loves People

Perhaps the last of the writing prophets offers the most sobering words concerning the subject of divorce in the Old Testament.

...You cover the LORD's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand.¹⁴ But you say, "Why does he not?" Because the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant.¹⁵ Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth.¹⁶ "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. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith." (Malachi 2:13b-16).

Some key phrases focus the argument of this mini-prophecy.

1. "wife of your youth."
2. "companion."
3. "wife by covenant."
4. "made them one...their union...with the Spirit."
5. "faithless; "don't break faith."
6. "I hate divorce."

¹² Fulata Moyo, "Can Divorce Be A Solution to Marital Problems in a Christian Marriage?" *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. 56, Issue 4, 2004, p. 439.

¹³ Source: *Babylonian and Assyrian Laws, Contracts and Letters*, compiled by C. H. W. Johns, in 1904, one of a series called the *Library of Ancient Inscriptions*, from a facsimile produced by The Legal Classics Library, Division of Gryphon Editions, New York in 1987.

A number of prominent biblical values appear in this passage which, if we read it correctly, governs the way we view divorce as a "first option." The opening part of the text (2:13) reminds us that our spiritual lives and our walk with God are both affected by what we do in our marriages. When Israel weeps because God doesn't accept their offerings, we are told why this is the case. The blessing of God is withheld when thoughtless and selfish motives lie behind a man's divorce of his wife. We cannot separate spiritual life from our marriages.

The expression "wife of your youth" draws attention to marriage at its inception and in its innocence. Marriages in the ancient world were commonly concluded as part of an arrangement with the respective parents. We are inclined to discount them, therefore, because they seem to rob the partners of their freedom to choose each other. However, wise and thoughtful parents often consulted with each other, noting the qualities of their children and then attempting to match likely compatibilities based on time-tested experience. Within Indian society, the distinction is usually made between 1) arranged marriages, and 2) love marriages.¹⁴ The Hebrews would probably not make such a sharp distinction. More than likely *Malachi*, by using the phrase "wife of your youth," was looking back to an arranged marriage, the careful and wise result of a process within the respective families. The final form was a covenant of marriage, witnessed by all and blessed by Yahweh. At some later time, after the return from Exile, marriage in Israel came under assault from foreign influences, much as it had before the exile. The books of *Ezra* (9-10) and *Nehemiah* (13) document the pain and suffering inflicted by such circumstances, and the subsequent separation from pagan relationships. *Malachi* simply reminds the people about the perils of departing from covenant-based marriages and entering into supposedly choice-based marriages to pagan partners.

By calling the original partner a "companion," the prophet throws the spotlight on the "bond" which holds the two spouses together. The Hebrew word is *ḥ^aberet* from the root form *ḥābar* which means "join, coupled, league, heap up, have fellowship with, be compact." Other variations can mean "a binder, clamp, joint." Our idea of "tying the knot" can be found in some of these forms.

"Wife by covenant" brings into focus the language of covenant obligations and the consequences of violating *berit* ("covenant"). This term denotes the legal and sacred union, sanctioned by Yahweh, and binding on the partners. Used in conjunction with "companion," the covenant-wife terminology once more emphasizes the permanent nature of the marriage relationship.

When *Malachi* tells Israel that **God has made husband and wife "one,"** he uses the term *'eḥād*, the same adjective found in the famous *šema*': "Hear, O Israel, Yahweh our God, Yahweh is *one*..." The unity of God, as opposed to the plurality of false gods, sets Israel apart from the pagan nations. In a similar way, the manner in which Jewish people practiced marriage reflected on the unity of God — the One who made man and woman *one*. Of course, this statement in *Malachi* 2:15 is a direct citation from *Genesis* 2:24 ("one flesh"). We are, in our marriages, reflections of God, and the union of marriage (the *'eḥād*) is part of the *image* of God within the fabric of humankind. The implication seems to be that divorce is a form of idolatry because it fractures the "one" and makes out of marriage "more than one." Many gods seems to equate with many spouses, *seriatum*. Marriage is God's idea and the reflection of God's being.

This notion of *God reflected in marriage* gets further reinforcement from the reference to "Spirit" in this same verse (2:15). God's Spirit (*ruaḥ*) is somehow present in the marriage bond to such an extent that marriage partners share in a "portion" of that Spirit (the Hebrew word is *še'ār*). However, the same word also means "a remnant" or "survivor," and what *Malachi* likely has in mind is that Israel in her present state, after the Exile, is a remnant and survivor nation. As such, her national existence is quite fragile, held together by the presence of God's Spirit. Because of this social tenuousness, God warns His people about playing fast and loose with their

¹⁴ <http://weddings.iloveindia.com/features/love-and-arranged-marriages.html>.

marriages. In one sense, the future of the human race rests with the integrity of Israel, and since Israel is only a small remnant on the earth, they must strengthen their marriages so that children born to them will multiply and reproduce the covenant people in larger numbers. That is why the writer uses the language "godly seed" and urges the people to "guard themselves" from cultural assimilation. This is a powerful social commentary with implications for us. Christian marriages are reflections of our covenant with God through Jesus Christ. Maintaining flourishing marriages (and families) contributes to the multiplication of godliness in the world and to the presence of greater godly influences within the culture.

"Keeping faith" is central to our covenant with God, whether for salvation or within marriage. The primary virtue of God's people within the covenant is faithfulness, usually expressed by the Hebrew word *hesed* — covenant love/loyalty. By contrast is the word used here for "faithless," *bāgad* which means "deal treacherously, be deceitful, depart from a friend."

The various verb forms appear forty-seven times, twenty-one times using the participle as verbal noun to describe the one who deals treacherously. He is one who does not honor an agreement. The root in South Arabic means "to deceive."

The verb is used to denote unfaithfulness in several different relationships. It is used in connection with unfaithfulness in marriage. The object of the faithlessness may be the wife (Exo 21:8, a slave wife; Mal 2:14, wife of one's youth), or the husband (Jer 3:20). The latter passage also illustrates that the word is used to describe Israel's unfaithfulness to the Lord (Jer 9:2]). In addition to the metaphor of unfaithfulness in marriage to describe Israel's revolt against the Lord, the Lord or his covenant is sometimes the explicit object of the verb (1Sam 14:33; Psa 78:57; Psa 119:158). Even to question his justice is an act of treachery (Psa 73:15). Involved in unfaithfulness to the Lord's covenant may be unfaithfulness to one's brother (Mal 2:10ff). Thus the word is also used of breaching man-made treaties and the social responsibilities expected in normal human relationships. The men of Shechem dealt treacherously against Abimelech whom they had made their king (Jud 9). Job felt betrayed by his friends (Job 6:15), and in Jeremiah's time property rights were violated by treacherous men (Jer 12:6).¹⁵

The state of unfaithfulness pertains not only to the marriage, for it also has an impact on the surrounding community. The crisis Israel faced when Malachi preached suffused throughout the whole society. In some ways, unfaithfulness within marriages uncovered a general moral malaise where keeping promises, holding to commitments and making good on pledges were serious weaknesses in the wider culture. As goes marriage, so goes the wider social fabric.

Jesus and the Gospels: Radical Marriage

In our previous studies, we examined Jesus' teaching on the eunuch, and the radical demands following him have on the single life and on marriage. A certain irony shadows the life of Jesus in the matter of marriage and divorce. Concededly, Jesus did not enter into the marriage relationship himself, and, although his sexuality was fully intact, he chose to forgo normal sexual activity in the interest of his sufferings and the cross. What could he possibly have to say, practically, on the onerous subject of marriage and divorce?

Judging from the Gospels, he had significant things to say. Among the important passages, is this one from Matthew's Gospel:

3 And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" 4 He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 5 and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh'? 6 So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." 7 They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" 8 He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. 9 And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery" (Matthew 19:3-9).

¹⁵ Louis Goldberg, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, et. al., Volume 1, entry #198, Moody Press, 1980.

When raising the question of divorce with Jesus, the Pharisees focus their argument on a single phrase: "for any cause" (*kata pasan aitian*, literally, "every cause").¹⁶ We might literally read this as "according to 'any cause'," where the *pasan aitian* represents a particular way of interpreting the marriage/divorce material in the Hebrew Scriptures, in this case, the *any cause* method. Prior to Jesus' time, rabbis who belonged to the Hillel wing of the Pharisee party began to teach a special method of divorce known as the "any cause" divorce. We might talk today about "no-fault divorce," where the term "no-fault" had to do with a *type of reasoning* for granting divorce. The Hillel faction found a welcome audience for their theory. They based their view on Deuteronomy 24:1 (see above), noting the phrase "a cause of immorality" (or literally, "a thing of nakedness"). Picking up on the word "cause," they concluded that sexual immorality was only one cause *among other causes*, and that was the reason why Moses used the word "cause" in addition to using the word "immorality." If there could be a *cause* of *x*, there could also be a cause of *y* or *z*! The followers of Hillel made the case that anything, including a bad meal or a bad hair day could be the cause for divorcing one's wife. Put concisely, they taught that a man could divorce his wife for adultery for *any cause*.

However, the right wing of the Pharisees party, led by Shammai, was far more conservative and demanding in their interpretation of this matter. They took the opposite view and claimed that the *only cause* for divorce was sexual immorality (adultery).¹⁷

With these two contrary views in the wind, the Pharisees (left and right wingers) come to Jesus for his *judgment* as a rabbi. When they ask him, "Is it lawful to divorce your wife *for any cause*?" what they were actually saying was "Is *any cause* divorce valid?" In other words, they wanted Jesus to either endorse or reject this new legal style known as *any cause* divorce, in much the same way we might question so-called *no fault* divorce. What's important to note is that Jesus rejects the *any cause* approach advocated by the members of Hillel's group. He is not ruling out the existence of *other causes* or *some causes* other than adultery, but he is disallowing the *any cause* standard. According to Jesus, *Deuteronomy* was only referring to a single reason, namely, sexual immorality. This does not rule out other reasons, but one would have to look elsewhere in Scripture to find them — they could not be argued from this single passage.

What Jesus was telling his audience boils down to this: a person can't just go out and get a divorce whenever he feels like it. There had to be a *lawful cause*; not just *any cause* would do. Persons who had followed Hillel's less restrictive approach were not really divorced, even though they followed the *any cause* rule. Since they weren't really divorced (since the *any cause* rule was invalid), anyone who had gone out and married someone else were actually living in a state of adultery. Thus,

31 "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' 32 But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery. And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery (Matthew 5:31-32).

"Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery" (Luke 16:18).

Divorce for the cause of adultery, Jesus argued, was a legitimate cause. Divorce for *any cause* was not legitimate and that is why he goes on to explain that a person divorced for *any cause* grounds commits adultery if he remarries. Understood within the context of Jewish legal practice, all of this makes good sense. It also does not limit the reasons for divorce to a single one, but it certainly rejects the notion that just any reason is acceptable. Jesus rejects a wrong-headed explanation of the Old Testament, especially Deuteronomy 24:1, as offered by Hillel. At the same time, he does not deny other bases for divorce accepted in the Old Testament and among his Jewish contemporaries. For example, consider the following Scripture:

10 If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, or her marital rights. 11 And if he does not do these three things for her, she shall go out for nothing, without payment of money (Exodus 21:10-11).

¹⁶ For an interesting treatment of this text, see David Instone-Brewer, "What God Has Joined," *Christianity Today*, October 2007, pp. 26-29.

¹⁷ See *Mishna*, Gittin 9:10.

The passage speaks about a man who marries more than one wife, and how he ought to treat the first wife when he takes the second one. Failure to keep the three-fold promise of her maintenance — that is he flagrantly neglects her — she is free to leave him and encumbers to him no further financial obligation. Notice in what the three signs of support consisted: food, clothing and love. Absent these, divorce by the wife was permitted. Based on this text, reasonable grounds for divorce exist for abuse, physical and emotional abandonment, as well as the well-recognized adultery.

And What Did Paul Say?

We have previously commented on the culture of Corinth, and the ways it reflected a rainbow of paganism in the ancient world. Working in that city was a challenge for Paul, though he pastored the church there with both tough love and compassion. Sexual immorality was a common occurrence and required diligence on the part of any pastor who sought to teach, correct and grow the church in Corinth. One key pastoral letter from Paul to Corinth included teaching on the marriage and divorce question.

¹⁰ To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband ¹¹ (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife. ¹² To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. ¹³ If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. ¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. ¹⁵ But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. ¹⁶ Wife, how do you know whether you will save your husband? Husband, how do you know whether you will save your wife? ¹⁷ Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches.

...²⁰ Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called ... ²⁷ Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife ...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 (1 Corinthians 7:10-17, 20, 27, 39).

In our previous studies we examined 1 Corinthians 7:1-9, noting the main purposes for marriages, and how Christians should conduct themselves within the marriage relationship. Recognizing that most Christ followers cannot reasonably remain celibate (for companionship and sexual reasons), Paul counsels them to marry and then to live their lives as persons who "belong to each other."

To better appreciate what Paul tells his audience, it is helpful to examine the Jewish Greek and Aramaic documents ("papyri") which speak to marriage and divorce issues. David Instone-Brewer has done a thorough job of reporting the results of his studies in this regard, and we will share some of his research in what follows.¹⁸

In this passage, Paul is helping non-Jewish believers to cope with the Greek-Roman custom of groundless divorce-by-separation. He reminds them that Jesus taught against a similar type of divorce within Judaism, and reminds them of their binding obligations within a marriage contract to provide emotional and material support for each other. He tells them if their partner dies, or if they are divorced against their will, they are no longer bound by this contract and can remarry.

The only facet which is not paralleled by the papyri is Paul's combination of equality and security of both men and women in marriage. Greek-Roman marriages gave equality to men and women, because either partner could opt out of a marriage at any point, but there was little security. Jewish marriages gave total security to the man, so long as he did not give his wife grounds for divorce, but the woman had no security and could be given a divorce certificate at any time. Christian marriages had the security of a pre-Hillelite Jewish contract, which forbade divorce except on the biblical grounds of emotional neglect, physical neglect or adultery. Christian

¹⁸ David Instone-Brewer, "1 Corinthians 7 in the Light of the Jewish Greek and Aramaic Marriage and Divorce Papyri," *Tyndale Bulletin*, 52.1, (2001), pp. 101-116; 52.2, (2001), pp. 225-243; also, his book, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church: Biblical Solutions for Pastoral Realities*, InterVarsity, 2006.

marriages also gave equal rights to men and women who could both gain a divorce for any of the biblical grounds without the one-sided right of the husband who was the only one who could validate the divorce by writing out the certificate.

Even in pre-Hillelite marriage contracts, a woman could not get a divorce on the grounds of adultery because Jewish law allowed polygamy, so marriage did not commit a Jewish husband to sexual faithfulness to one woman. Jesus taught monogamy, which removed this inequality.

Paul's handling of "mixed marriages" (believer to a non-believer) looks for the silver lining. When one spouse converted to the Christian faith and the other did not, the marriage was technically considered "an unequal yoke."¹⁹ However, this did not mandate that believers divorce their pagan spouses, but held out the hope that the Christian might have a positive influence on the other spouse. Even more pressing was the situation with the children. Paul notes that the Christ follower could have a "sanctifying" influence on them by remaining in the marriage. The same would apply to the testimony of a believing spouse on their non-believing counterpart. The Gospel and its positive effects — the missionary vision — remained in Paul's heart throughout. The marriage was larger than its corresponding partners, considering how it might possibly impact other people's lives.

Insisting that God has called us to "peace," Paul reflects the wider concept of *shalom* — a distinctively Jewish value indicating wholeness, restoration and well-being. Marriages should seek such a thriving condition. Allowing that divorce is sometimes necessary, the New Testament encourages the search for alternatives, while all the time showing compassion to those who are most deeply affected by any severance of the marriage bond.

Paul has a positive approach to marriage throughout. He strongly affirms the goodness of marriage and he denies the idea that it is sinful. He emphasizes throughout that a marriage is binding, and that believers should do everything within their power to avoid the circumstances which lead to a divorce. He leads believers from a world of Greek-Roman morals, through a world of Jewish morals, and beyond to a world of Christian morals.

"The Messiness of Marriage and the Knottiness of Divorce"²⁰

A number of truly personal and "pastoral" concerns arise from considering the divorce question. What happens if we simply accept marital infidelity as grounds for divorce? Several things are likely:

1. We choose sides, labeling one spouse the guilty party while accepting the other as the non-guilty party. Such labels might actually accelerate the divorce process by effectively demonizing one partner over the other. Hope for reconciliation dims as a result. Faced with isolation from the Christ community, the guilty party will more than likely leave the fellowship as well as the marriage. By contrast, the "innocent party" stays in the church without their spouse. Yet, the overriding command of Scripture is "do not separate what God has joined." What should happen is that the church hold both partners accountable, and, through prayer, seek a deeper understanding of what *both* contributed to the break-down of the marriage. That is, we seek to follow the "beam in my brother's eye, two-by-four in my own" approach (Matthew 7:3-5).
2. A thoughtful student of Scripture once declared: "Marriage is a community of the Spirit of two, the very Spirit that promises to make all things new." How will we view the marriage in distress? Two persons? One being — the marriage being — one flesh? Three beings — including *children* (see our comments in the Introduction)? When Jesus reminds us in Matthew 19:6 that "They are no longer two, but one," he helps the church avoid taking sides: we ought to be on the side of the marriage.
3. It's tempting to treat sexual sin as more grievous than other failures within a marriage in distress. Let's be clear. Sexual sin *is serious*, but so are emotional abuse, neglect, and the absence of nurturing love. While a

¹⁹ The idea of the "unequal yoke" is a metaphor derived from the mismatching oxen of unequal strength, size or experience. Paul applied it to marriage (and perhaps to other contractual relationships) in 2 Corinthians 6:14.

²⁰ The heading is taken from an article of the same name written by Ronald J. Nydam in the *Calvin Theological Journal*, 40 (2005), pp. 211-226.

sexual dalliance should never be justified on the grounds of the other partner's "coldness," still, the responsibility rests with both spouses to work through their issues. The church must not unwittingly become the enabler of the divorce because it has problems coming to terms with sexual indiscretions. If a couple is crippled by marital unfaithfulness, the call of the Gospel is to make them whole again. The Gospel declares that marital unfaithfulness is a forgivable where there is confession and repentance. Granted, the situation is messy and human nature is moribund, but God is faithful.

Unfaithfulness strikes at the heart of the marital vow because marriage is a sexual promise. Though infidelity rips a wound in a marriage, it still remains first of all a sin that needs forgiveness, not just a reason for divorce. Just because a covenant is broken does not mean a covenant is gone. God's ideal for marriage is its permanence. In his helpful book, *Sex for Christians*, Lewis Smedes writes:

Given the total gist of the gospel, and given what seems to be the best of compassionate common sense, we can conclude at least this: Adultery by itself does not destroy the marriage. It may wound persons very deeply; it assaults the contract to which both parties consented at the beginning of their marriage; it flies in the face of God's will for sex and marriage; it makes a reasonably good marriage much harder to sustain; and it might even trigger an avalanche of resentment and recrimination that eventually does destroy a marriage. However, adultery as such does not have the power to undo a life-union.²¹

All of this suggests that the redemptive messes that people create in marriage can become the occasion for God's revelation to both husband and wife about the divine reasons that God "stuck them with each other." That said, divorce may well be the lesser of two evils. As Smedes writes: God "sometimes disapproves of its alternatives even more than he disapproves of divorce."²²

Still, as accountable members of the church, persons in marital distress are still called to "fight the good fight of faith," and, as such, still are *one flesh* until such a time as divorce happens. Even then, couples may well find themselves restored by God's grace even after a judge has signed the papers decreeing the dissolution. Time may pass; hurts may linger; but the promise remains. Should "times of refreshing" not succeed in renewing love's bond, and should the pain be too awful to know, and the wounds of life cut too deep — only then should divorce have its say. A harder road to follow? Yes. But it opens up the opportunity for God's Spirit to redeem what has been lost since those early days. Here we are reminded once more of Adam and his wife:

Cast from the garden, no longer naked and unashamed, they reeled at the injuries of sin and evil away from God. Only by toil, by the sweat of keeping their marital promise, can they be delivered from further suffering. It is the Gardener who shows us the way. He left the garden, too, voluntarily on his own, to find us and teach us that to marry in this world is to practice repentance and offer forgiveness. Best we learn from him.

As we well know, despite our wayward adulterous walk as God's children, the faithfulness of God and God's corresponding forgiveness brought us back to our covenant with him. As we all know, the love of Christ is about a love so deep that he could forgive us for what we put him through on Calvary and look to the great wedding day of Revelation 21 when we will be his bride. As we all know, the Spirit moves in ways so wonderful that even we can forgive those who trespass against us in marriage. By our Christian view of marriage, God does just the right thing when he brings us to each other as husband and wife. A ten-year-old girl named Kristen was asked this question: "How do you decide whom to marry?" She thought for a moment and then responded with these words, "No person really decides before they grow up who they're going to marry. God decides it all way before, and you get to find out later who you're stuck with."²³

We might quibble with her theology, but the operative wisdom of her understanding is true. "Of such is the goodness and providence of God."

Bulwarks of Marriage: Keeping Divorce at Bay

²¹ Eerdmans, 1994, p. 200.

²² "Divorce: An Ethical Response," *The Reformed Journal*, October 1976, p. 11.

²³ Nydam, p. 226.

If our introductory analysis of the Fall (see above) was correct, then what led to Sin was a letting down of the protection established by God within marriage. Adam and his wife were called to be co-protectors of the garden. Their failures were both human and marital. Genesis 3 makes those points reasonably clear, as we have already seen. Our bulwark against Sin is a strengthening of holiness. Temptation seeks the vulnerabilities in human nature, and among them is the loosening of the marital covenant. If being human involves, in part, being in relationship, then it stands to reason that stronger relationships contribute to those defenses which keep divorce at bay. This is not to say that marriages become wholly immune to fractures and separations. As Scripture counsels, "Let anyone who thinks that he stands, take heed, lest he falls" (1 Corinthians 10:12). But God has offered His own support for marriage in the story of redemption itself.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians tells that story and makes the connection:

21 submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. 22 Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. 25 Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, 26 that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 27 so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. 28 In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, 30 because we are members of his body. 31 "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." 32 This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. 33 However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband (Ephesians 5:21-33).

1. *Submission* is a two-way street because it is based on *reverence for Christ*. That is, we must not demand from each other what belongs properly only to God. Reverence of this sort is due to God alone. The Greek word used by Paul is the stronger term *phobos* which has the nuance of "fear, respect." In the presence of the awesome King of kings and Lord of lords, partners in a marriage make no pretensions to being "lord" over each other. Thus, we can speak of "mutual submission" in which husbands and wives find a proper equality in service, care and respect. Imagine how the story of Genesis 3 might have turned out had this principle been followed!
2. *Headship*, when applied to marriage, is not about authority but about the *source* of love. Studies in ancient anatomy reveal that physicians living at Paul's time (including his personal one, Luke) didn't locate thought in the brain, but in other organs like the heart, liver and kidneys. However, they accorded to the "head" the source of life and reproduction. Paul calls Christ "the head" precisely because he is the "Savior of the body." Along with that imagery comes the reference to: 1) giving up oneself for the other; 2) sanctifying (making holy) the other; 3) washing the other; 4) presenting the other without spot, wrinkle, or blemish in all splendor. As the "head," husbands nourish, cherish and hold fast their wives, treating them as they would treat themselves.
3. Marriage, as the union of two-in-one, is a genuine *mystery*. Having a strong marriage involves *respecting and honoring the mystery*. For Paul, the true "source" for marriage lies within the Christ-church relationship. And in this connection exists the deeper mystery. How are we to understand the mystery of marriage? 1) We don't understand everything about marriage when we begin that relationship; 2) As the marriage unfolds, it reveals twists and turns which are unexpected and even fearful; 3) God must reveal the meaning of *their* marriage mystery to the partners; 4) Marriage is richer and deeper as time passes, and as the mystery is revealed. That said, sometimes the puzzlement of marriage displaces its mystery. So perplexing are the hard and difficult patches faced by the partners, that they imagine they have made a grave error in choosing each other. Suddenly the puzzle is not the marriage but the other partner! "If I live a thousand years, I will never figure you out!" exclaims the frustrated husband or wife. And they might be right about that! Paul tells us that a "great mystery" (*to mustērion touto mega estin*) lies hidden within God's relationship to us through Christ, and our marriages also share in that mystery. Just as a life-long commitment to Jesus Christ is required to plumb the depths of that relationship, so also marriage takes a life-time to fully appreciate its meaning and depth.

4. God stands as the true bulwark of marriage, having blazed the trail for a fallen humanity whom he came to redeem. Marriage is, then, not simply a human institution which rests on natural foundations. As we have said frequently in our studies, marriage is God's idea, not ours. By the same token, marriage finds its true meaning in another grand idea of God: salvation. The Fall fractured marriage; the cross restores marriage on new foundations. We are made one in Christ, both God and humanity in the community; we are made one in Christ, both man and woman in marriage. Paul implies that salvation is not only about the marriage *partners*, it is also about the marriage *person* — one flesh. In our weakness, we are flesh; in God's salvation we are one flesh made new.

In his pastoral letter to all the churches, "John" writes with both candor and compassion:

1 My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. 2 He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:1-2).

The writer of this letter prefers the language of *family* to talk about the people of God. His reference to "little children" in this passage stresses the inexperience and vulnerability of his audience. Elsewhere he used the language of "young men" and "old men" in order to emphasize strength and wisdom. Newcomers to marriage are, by all intents, "little children." To the newlyweds, then, this passage says: "I am writing these things to you so that you might not divorce. But if anyone does divorce, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous..." When our marriages are in distress, on the verge of divorce, in the midst of separation, and all hope seems gone, this passage encourages us with the truth that Jesus Christ is our "advocate." The Greek word used here is *paraklētos*: one "called to one's aid; a legal assistant." In John's Gospel the same term is applied to the Holy Spirit. God comes to our aid, takes up our cause, and seeks our restoration. Here is restorative justice in action — the kind of justice which does not settle scores but which saves souls — and marriages.

Agapē Love: The Selfless Choice and The Second Chance

Two final passages bolster the bulwark of marriage. They both rhapsodize the virtue of love, in particular, the *agapē*-style love unique to the Christian faith.

Love Arrives

7 Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. 9 In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. 10 In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. 11 Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. 13 By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. 14 And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. 15 Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. 16 So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him (1 John 4:7-16).

Love Abides

1 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. 4 Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. 7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8 Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. 12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. 13 So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love (1 Corinthians 13:1-13).

From the hands of different writers ("John" and Paul), these poetic expositions of *agapē* love coincide with and complement each other. We have suggested two possible emphases: Love Arrives and Love Abides. When thought of in terms of marriage, love is present in the first stirrings of human attraction, as two people find each other and then explore the meaning of the strange and wonderful mystery which draws them together. *Love arrives!*

1. In the first of the two love-texts, we hear how this love arrives when God sends His Son into the world (4:9) with a definite purpose: "so that we might live through him." We gather hope from this arrival, for we immediately seize upon that purpose for our marriages: that our marriages might live through him.
2. Furthermore, with this arrival human beings glimpse the nature of God: "No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us" (4:12). Inasmuch as God's character is relational, we have the additional assurance that the arrival of God's love in our marital lives brings with it the true model of authentic relationship.
3. One other truth emerging from 1 John 4 is that God's love is something "we come to know and to believe." The underlying Greek verb forms imply a process leading to a settled condition (perfect tenses). This, too, is Good News for married persons: love progressively leads us "to know and believe." While we might desire a fast and final result at the onset of our marital vows, reality tells us otherwise. The power of *agapē* love gradually moves us forward as we learn to "know and trust" each other in marriage.

More critical for lasting, life-long marriages is the assurance that *Love Abides*. Human experience teaches us the partial and temporary quality of life. Paul's 13th chapter climaxes with the words "now faith, hope and love abide, these three; the greatest of these is love" (13:13). The word "abides" (Greek: *menei*) underscores the persistence and permanence of *agapē*. Such love does not depend on human personality or temperament; it does not require constant self-assurance. As 13:8 puts it even more clearly, "Love *never ends*" (*oudepote piptei*: "does not ever fall down"). Of course, such a quality does not exist within human beings, at least not naturally. By nature, we can fall and have fallen! Human history tells the tale of the Fall in both text and sub-texts. Marriage constantly grapples with the fear of falling. More practically, we talk about "letting each other down." Disappointment is a common companion of marriage. On the other hand, marriage lived by the power of *agapē* love promises better things.

1. When Paul offers his "list" of Love's heroic triumphs, he uses words like: patient and kind — the pair of positives which anchor the marriage enterprise! Holding up and holding close! God's love does not abandon marriage partners to their own devices when it comes to patience and kindness. Are these not the bulwarks of personal salvation, that God's patience and His loving-kindness bring us to repentance (Romans 2:4)? The God who is long-suffering and not willing that any should perish (2 Peter 3:9) pours his Love into marriage partners from the moment they exchange their vows and say the telling words, "I do." Strengthened by patience and kindness they receive from God the first-fruits of His saving Love.
2. Strangely, more of Love's activity is spent stemming the tide of the foes to marriage. Repeatedly Paul tells what Love does *not* do: envy, boast, be arrogant, be rude, insist on its own way, be irritable, be resentful, rejoice in wrongdoing. How many are the enemies of marriage! How necessary is the bulwark of divine Love against them!
3. As if to add flourish to his love-symphony, Paul applauds Love's achievements: Bears all, believes all, hopes all, and endures all. Some of us would gladly settle for lesser accomplishments: Help us bear *some*, believe *some*, hope *some*, and endure *some* of marriage's hardest trials! But God's Love is rich and lavish (Ephesians 2:4), and he sheds it broadly and deeply into the heart of our marriage.
4. Coping with immaturity in marriage is a familiar theme: "Grow up!" we'd like to say to our partner from time to time. "When I was a child..." Paul remembers. Marriage begins that way, and in those early days we "speak like a child" to each other, think about each other in "childish terms," and lay plans together as novices engaging in a new vocation. As time passes, however, the weight of marriage starts to stretch the fiber of our "childish ways," and we start to expect from each other much more than before. Is the marriage person equal to this task? Paul tells us that Love is!

5. Early in the marriage not all is yet clear. "In a mirror dimly," Paul reminds us in 13:12. Will we ever see "face to face" as the passage hopes we will? Or better, will we ever see "eye to eye"? What we need in the marriage journey is the wisdom of the heavenly parent who knows us better than we know ourselves; who knows our marriage person better than we can even begin to imagine it. And Love stands ready to make known to us what ordinary knowledge fails to communicate. Love is a form of knowing which partners in marriage desperately need when a great deal about their relationship (and each other) makes no sense at all.

Some Unanswered Questions: What If...?

Most of what we have said in this week's *Notes* has been proactive or preventative in nature. We have briefly alluded to the eventuality of divorce and remarriage. Without making prior judgments, Scripture holds the standard of marriage high, believing that the health of the Christian community — and the world — requires it. However, divorce happens and so does remarriage. What does God say about such outcomes? The door is always open for forgiveness, reconciliation and new beginnings. That is the Good News, and we are all about good news!

To those for whom reconciliation with former spouses has not taken place, the Gospel remains good news. As Paul concluded in his Corinthian letter, "God has called us to peace — *shalom*" — His kind! If God could use Paul — one whom Scripture called a murderer (Acts 9:1) — who are we to cast a stumbling-block before those whose lives have been fractured by divorce? Where willful sin contributed to the failure of a marriage, repentance is God's remedy. And to all, our Lord extends the invitation: "Repent, the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" He placed no special conditions on adulterers, but issued the righteous call: "Your sins are forgiven. Go and sin no more" (John 8:11)! His offer to divorce persons, and to those who have remarried is the same as to the rest of humanity: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a New Creation; old things have passed away, all things have become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Nothing more is to be gained from theological dicing and slicing of disputed biblical texts. All Scripture must be read in light of the Gospel; eternal life resides in Jesus not in written texts whose purpose is to point, like signs, to him (John 5:39). When they point, they remind us of why he came: to make all things new. Couples who start afresh, having suffered through the pain of divorce, may humbly and hopefully turn toward God's future where tears are wiped away, and where the light of God drives out the darkness of despair.

And so to those who read these *Notes*, who have lived the nightmare of failed marriages and the trauma of divorce; who have determined to start anew with a new partner in the sacred bonds of marriage — to you we extend the comfort of the Scriptures and the promise of Jesus:

28 Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

We recommend to you this Jesus our Redeemer who, when he places his yoke on your necks, also pulls alongside you in your marriage, and to your marriage he gives his rest as well. In him is mercy and pardon. To whom we give the burdens of our marriage and from him we learn its true nature.

Concluding Thoughts: A Wedding Homily

One of the most joyous moments I experienced during the past few years was the occasion of my daughter's wedding in the Spring of 2008. Most of the reason lies with the event itself, as I walked her down the aisle and gave her away to the loving care and protection of John. The rest of the reason was my privilege to offer the wedding homily during the service. Among the things I wanted to do was to place that blessed day in its biblical context, but also to allow the wisdom of others to shape whatever counsel I might offer to the happy couple. After some reflection, I have decided to incorporate the full content of that homily in the concluding section of this week's *Notes*. All personal references have been left intact, though I suspect many of you may want to adapt them to your own marriages. Rather than offer formal footnotes, I have summarized the sources I consulted which added meaning and insight to the whole piece. My prayer is that what was said on that

occasion may strengthen your marriage resolves and offer insight into what God is doing during this season of your relationship. For those who are contemplating marriage or perhaps counseling those in marriage crisis, may you find some modicum of encouragement in these words.

Reflections on Marriage
Julie Brown and John Scott Wedding
May 25, 2008

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. The basis for the message on this joyful wedding day are the readings from 1 John 4 and the great chapter of love, 1 Corinthians 13.

"Show your love by what you do" is often advice given to people who are suppose to live more "like Christians". Ironically, Paul's so-called "Love Chapter" seems to move in a very different direction, suggesting that people can "do" all sorts of things and still not "have love". They can be eloquent speakers, benevolent benefactors, and even courageous martyrs and still come up short in the matter of love. Of course, Paul chooses to use an off-the-beaten-path-word for love, *agapē*, not one of the popular favorites in his own day, a rather uncommon word, really. Choosing such a word signals Paul intentions to pour some fresh meaning into a word without much of a reputation already. He could have used *eros*, the love which *wants*; or *philos*, the love which *befriends*; or *storgē*, the love which *feels* with affection. But he didn't. Instead he picked this word *agapē* which means the love which *chooses*, the love which *wills*. Here is unconditional love found in the very nature of God Himself: for God is love, God is *agapē*. And God made no demands on human beings before he chose to love them: "For God so loved the world that He gave his only son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

And so, on this glorious occasion when John and Julie have chosen to join their lives together, our interest in "love" moves beyond words and actions into more dangerous territory. You see, there is this tricky little phrase in the wedding ceremony that says "till death do us part", a rather quaint way of saying what Paul says in his letter: "Love never fails". I once witnessed a wedding service where it was proposed we change all of that to read, "till love shall end", and at once, I protested that if you walk down that road you'd need to change the meaning of love as the Bible understands it. For love is not some kind of oil reserve that one day just runs out all by itself, and nobody can do anything about it. Why of course, we can-do something about!, and that's our focus today.

Love never ends," St. Paul writes in the lesson read from 1 Corinthians 13. Or, to put it more positively, "love abides." What does that really mean--to say that "love abides"? Or, indeed, what possible sense could it make to say this in a world in which the truth so clearly seems to be that love quite often does not abide?

We pause for a moment in this service in order to think about just that question. And we do this not only for the sake of Julie and John . No, we do it for our own sake, because we all need regularly to remind ourselves what marriage actually means. We do it so that together we can think about how it might be that Julie and John, or any of the rest of us, might solemnly vow "not to part till death parts us."

It's a crazy thing to do, really. That two young people should together reach out and take hold of their future in this way--should determine that, come what may, it will be a future together--can hardly make sense. Unless, perhaps, God makes sense of it for us. For the miracle and the mystery of marriage is that God permits us to exercise just a little of His own creative power--to determine this one thing about our future: that it will be a future together. And having permitted us to be as creative as he Himself is, God then asks us--and invites us--to learn also to be as steadfast and faithful as He is.

What might God hope to accomplish through such a crazy invitation? God has in mind to get something done in us and to us. Stanley Hauerwas, who teaches theology and ethics at Duke Divinity School, and who almost

never fails to be provocative, once wrote that the most basic law of marriage could be stated in a sentence: "You always marry the wrong person."

He went on to explain: "The one thought to be Mr. Right turns out not to be. Ms. Right tends to show up after marriage. But the adventure of marriage is learning to love the person to whom you are married.... Love does not create a marriage; marriage teaches us what a costly adventure love is." The good professor from Duke deliberately made the point a little provocatively, but it is nonetheless true.

Of course, for anyone who is married, it is true that you may not be married now to the person you once thought you were marrying. Five years from now, or ten years from now, the person sitting next to you won't necessarily be the person you thought you were giving yourself to. Go, ahead, turn to the person to whom you are married and say, "Hey, you're not the person I married". Some of you did that enthusiastically... The rest of you--Oh, how I hate to see pain on people's faces!

So if marriage requires us to choose just exactly the right person ... well, we're all in very big trouble. The target keeps shifting. Marrying means promising to be faithful to someone who may keep changing. And so, God does not ask you today, "John, *do* you love Julie?" but rather, "John, *will* you love Julie?" "Julie, *will* you love John?"

Marriage, therefore, exists not primarily to make us happy but to make us holy--though in the long run, of course, there can be no happiness apart from holiness. But it's holiness that God is after. Holiness simply means that God undertakes the life-long project to transform our lives, make them grow, cause them to be strong, and, above all else, make them reflect who He is--become godlike ourselves. And so in marriage God goes to work on us--begins to teach us what it means, what it will require of us, to love even just this one person as God loves each of us, with steadfastness and faithfulness. Every marriage will be different, of course, and so the lesson will have to come in different ways, but it has a chance to happen for us only as we accept the discipline of marriage as God's good gift to us.

They will have to learn these things, and have opportunity to learn them, precisely because, by God's grace, "love abides." God gives us time. That comes first--the time, the abiding, the commitment to abide in a love like God's, the love that joins Father, Son and Spirit. And when that comes first, when--as God's gift--you have a duty to abide, when you know that this other person is not just someone you fell in love with but (to paraphrase Will Willimon) "the one you're stuck with," then very gradually we may learn. Then God slowly begins to make of us the people he wants us to be, draws us into his own love--the only sort of love that truly abides.

In his book *Works of Love*, Soren Kierkegaard, that tormented philosopher-genius of 19th-century Denmark, wrote a series of chapters reflecting on the themes of I Corinthians 13. One of his chapters is titled simply "Love Abides," and in that chapter are two of the most unforgettable and powerful pages that I have ever read. I was tempted just to read them today, but I didn't think that would work too well. So instead I will try simply to capture their flavor for a moment--if only in summary form.

Kierkegaard pictures two people, whom together he calls the "lover-beloved," two persons joined by the *hyphen* that is *God's own love*, the love which abides, persons who no longer seem able to keep their bond together. He writes, "And so the breaking-point between the two is reached". The beloved turns away. But, says Kierkegaard, the lover keeps the hyphen: "lover-." Imagine, Kierkegaard says, that you saw nothing but a word followed by a hyphen. What would you say? You would say that the word is not yet complete. Consequently, "the lover"--who *wills to abide* in the eternal love that is God's--believes that the relationship which another considers broken is a relationship that has not yet been completed. And so the "lover-" abides.

Then Kierkegaard explains himself again, shifting the metaphor. "And so it came to the breaking-point." But the lover abides. He--or she--says: We're only *halfway through this sentence*, a sentence that is not yet complete.

What a difference there is, Kierkegaard notes, between a sentence fragment and an unfinished sentence. And for the lover, who *wills* to abide, it cannot be a broken fragment. The sentence is simply not yet complete.

Then Kierkegaard says it again. "And so it came to the breaking-point." Lover and beloved are no longer speaking to each other. But, Kierkegaard writes, "the lover-' says: 'I will abide; therefore we shall still speak with one another, because silence also belongs to conversation at times.'"

Kierkegaard then proposes one final grand picture: "Does the dance cease because one dancer has gone away? In a certain sense, yes. But if the other still remains standing in the posture which expresses a turning towards the one who is not seen, and if [because you abide] you know nothing about the past, then you will say, 'Now the dance will begin just as soon as the other comes, the one who is expected.'"

Every time I read that, I try to picture it. The lover, standing there in the posture of the dancer, waiting for the beloved. Not assuming that the dance has ceased, but abiding, expecting the beloved to come and the dance to begin again. I try to picture it!

It seems like a rather awkward posture, doesn't it? One could get a cramp--or lots of cramps. A stiff neck. One could tire. One could become impatient. But that is why God gives us time, gives us marriage: that we may not tire, but, on the contrary, gain joy in abiding. And that, Julie and John, is why God gives you time, gives you marriage today--that slowly and patiently you may be drawn into God's own love, a love stronger and more steadfast than comes naturally to you or to any of us. That you may be drawn into the dance of love that never ends, because, as St. Paul says, "love never ends." Love abides.

The God of love, has established marriage for the welfare and happiness of mankind. His was the plan and only with Him can you work it out with joy. God said, 'It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a partner for him.' Now your joys are doubled since the happiness of one is the happiness of the other. Your burdens now are halved since when you share them, you divide the load.

May the Lord bless you, John.. May your strength be Julie's protection, your character be her boast and her pride, and may you so live that she will find in you the haven for which the heart of a woman truly longs.

May the Lord bless you, Julie. May God give you a tenderness that will make you great, a deep sense of understanding and a great faith in the Lord Jesus. May He give you that inner beauty of soul that never fades, that eternal youth that is found in holding fast the things that never age.

May the Lord teach both of you that marriage is not living merely for each other; it is two uniting and joining hands to serve the Lord. May God give you a great spiritual purpose in life. May you seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and the other things shall be added to you.

May you not expect that perfection of each other that belongs alone to God. May you minimize each other's weaknesses, be swift to praise and magnify each other's points of comeliness and strength, and see each other through a lover's kind and patient eyes.

May the Lord make such assignments to you on the scroll of His will as will bless you and develop your characters as you walk together. May He give you enough tears to keep you tender, enough hurts to keep you humane, enough of failure to keep your hands clenched tightly in the Lord, and enough of success to make them sure you walk with God.

May you never take each other's love for granted, but always experience that breathless wonder that exclaims, 'Out of all this world you have chosen me.'

When life is done and the sun is setting, may you be found then as now still hand in hand, still thanking God for each other. May you serve the Lord happily, faithfully, together, until at last one shall lay the other into the arms of God. This we ask through Jesus Christ, Great Lover of Our Souls. Amen.

[For their helpful insights and memorable phrases, my acknowledgements for this homily go to: Soren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, *Kierkegaard's Writing*, Volume 16, [1847] 1998; Louis H. Evans, "Prayer for a Bride and Groom"; Gilbert Meilaender, "Love Abides", *Christian Century*, October 11, 2000; Stanley Hauerwas, John Berkman, and Michael G. Cartwright, *The Hauerwas Reader*, 2001; Will Willimon, "The People We're Stuck With", *Christian Century*, October 17, 1990].

Glory to God! Amen.

Digger Deeper: Hot Topics: Marriage and Divorce
(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of *Hot Topics: Marriage and Divorce*, carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website <http://notes.chicagofirstnaz.org>, or pick up a copy of the *Background Notes* at the **Information** desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. From your own observations, what are the common causes for divorce? Do you think Christians are more or less likely to experience divorce? Explain your answer.
2. In what ways should the Christian community be of help to those contemplating divorce and to those already divorced?
3. Under what circumstances do you think divorce is permissible? What about remarriage after divorce?
4. Carefully read Genesis 2:18, 21-25. What are God's reasons for establishing marriage? How does God view each partner in the marriage relationship? Why is shame discussed in this passage, and what does this tell us about a healthy marriage?
5. Genesis 3 tells the story of the human fall into sin. Discuss the ways both man and woman shared responsibility for this event. How did their actions set the stage for marital distress? What were the first signs of "trouble in paradise"?
6. After they sinned, what further actions by the man and the woman deepened their alienation? What remedy did God provide in order to restore their relationship?
7. What does Deuteronomy 24:1-4 tell us about divorce in the Hebrew culture? What role did the "bill of divorce" have in the process? (See also Jeremiah 3:8; Isaiah 50:1).
8. Read Malachi 2:13b-16. What key ideas about marriage do you discover? Why does the prophet oppose divorce?
9. Study Matthew 19:3-9. What question is Jesus discussing with the religious teachers? Trace the argument Jesus uses to answer the question. What essential ideas about marriage does he emphasize? What guidance does he offer to persons contemplating divorce? (Compare Matthew 5:31-32; Luke 16:18).
10. According to Exodus 21:10-11, in addition to adultery, what "causes" seemed to justify a divorce in Israel?
11. What kinds of marriage-related problems does Paul address in 1 Corinthians 7:10-17, 20, 27, 39? What seems to be the over-riding principle Paul follows in offering guidance about marriage and divorce (note 7:15)? What other instructions does he give to married, single, and divorced persons?
12. What distinctively Christian values govern the marriage relationship in Ephesians 5:21-33? Discuss the word "submit" within the context of this passage? What does it mean? What does it not mean?
13. How does God offer hope to divorced persons? Use 1 John 2:1-2 as background for answer. Define the word "advocate," and explain its relevance to divorced persons.
14. God's special kind of Love (*agapē*) creates the real bond of Christian marriage. Read 1 John 4:7-16 and 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 which both discuss how this Love should operate in the lives of married persons. Identify several ways that this love is especially necessary for a strong marriage, based on a reading of these passages.
15. What enemies of marriage contribute to divorce? How is God's Love the greatest bulwark against the enemies of marriage?