

Editorial - Marriage and Divorce

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A Review of *Until Death Us Do Part: "The Sad Case of Bert Zandstra" and Other Essays on Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage* by David J. Engelsma

Introduction

In the west, the almost universal practice of marriage in all ages and throughout the whole world is being abandoned. Men and women are "living in sin" in increasing numbers and even when they do marry an increasing plague of divorce growing steadily over the last century brings misery to men and particularly women and children. Drunkenness in our streets, flagrant immorality, and a steady increase in our prison population bear mute witness to a society in decline—and neither church nor state knows what to do about it.

Just as Communism failed as an economic system in the East, liberal humanism is manifestly failing as a social system in the West. So it behoves us as Christians to get our thinking straight, for the church is not guiltless in these matters. In the area of marriage and divorce, David Engelsma has already contributed *Better to Marry: Sex and Marriage in I Corinthians 6 & 7* (1993) and *Marriage, the Mystery of Christ & the Church: The Covenant-Bond in Scripture and History* (rev. 1998). *Until Death Us Do Part*, published by South Holland Protestant Reformed Evangelism Committee (2005) contains "eight essays on marriage, divorce and remarriage" which originally appeared as editorials in *The Standard Bearer*.

We begin by considering our Lord's teaching on the matter.

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. But from the beginning of the creation God made them male and female. For this cause shall a

man leave his father and mother, and cleave to his wife; And they twain shall be one flesh: so then they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder. And in the house his disciples asked him again of the same matter. And he saith unto them, whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her. And if a woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she committeth adultery (Mark 10:2-12).

Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery: and whosoever marrieth her that is put away from her husband committeth adultery (Luke 16:18).

But does not our Lord allow divorce in the case of fornication? Yes: Matthew's Gospel gives two examples of exception.

It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement: But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery (Matt. 5:31-32).

The Pharisees also came unto him, tempting him, and saying unto him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause? And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder. They say unto him, Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away? He saith unto them, Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so. And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit

adultery. His disciples say unto him, If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry (Matt. 19:3-10).

Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery: and whosoever marrieth her that is put away from her husband committeth adultery (Luke 16:18).

Take what is perhaps the most common situation. A couple gets married. After some time the man, who normally is out and about most on his business, meets an attractive young girl. His wife, possibly burdened with several children, seems less attractive. He goes off with the young floozy, commits adultery and a divorce ensues; he may then well marry her.

Now consider the position of the wife. In all this she is wholly innocent. She is left to grieve with the shattered children. Then after a few years she meets a man, who has never married, they are attracted and marry. She now is committing adultery, and her new husband "*doth commit adultery.*" That is the clear teaching of our Lord. How does this come about?

Moses was not only leading a theocracy, but also legislating for the political situation. Men were abusing their position; putting away was probably common. A man might send his wife away and then when she had support from another man demand her back! To regulate the situation Moses properly instituted a civil divorce which afforded some protection for the wife (Deut. 24:1-4). But if you allow a law, it is abused! Think abortion! Think sodomy! Think, probably, euthanasia!

Well, we too as a state need regulations concerning divorce, and the grounds for it have steadily widened over the years. It is the duty of the church, and particularly in an established position as in England and Scotland, to tell the civic authorities what the biblical position is! We cannot but accept state legislation, but we must hold the biblical position. When the state grants a divorce the separate parties are free to marry whom they will. They are treated as unmarried persons. And perhaps unsurprisingly they assume the church will go along with their choices and are hurt by refusals. But within historical memory, a king of England had to abdicate his throne because he wished to and did marry a twice-divorced woman; a beautiful princess died in a car crash following her divorce having lived but half her days; and recently the divorced Prince of Wales remarried in a registry office because he could not do so in the Church of England.

So what actually happens when a couple divorce? They separate *a mensa a thoro*—from board and bed. They live separate and largely independent lives though often connected by children. But if the marriage was freely entered into by both parties and consummated, a bond was set up which neither they, nor church, nor state can alter.

Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder (Matt. 19:4-6).

That union in all ages since the beginning and throughout the whole world is created by God, whether men believe in Him or not and lasts "*till death us do part*" and God terminates the life of one or both parties.

Once that point is grasped all the above teaching of our Lord falls into place. Let us look at some further texts:

Know ye not, brethren, (for I speak to them that know the law,) how that the law hath dominion over a man as long as he liveth? For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband. So then if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress: but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man (Romans 7:1-3).

And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband: But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife (I Cor. 7:10-11)

But to the rest speak I, not the Lord: If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away. And the woman which hath an husband

that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy. But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace. For what knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save thy husband? or how knowest thou, O man, whether thou shalt save thy wife? (I Cor. 7:12-16).

How great and glorious is the bond of marriage is illustrated by the relationship of Christ and the church:

Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church. Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband (Eph. 5:22-33).

Divorced people have two options. Either remain unmarried or return to their original partner. Otherwise, even if they are both innocent, new marriages are adulterous!

One more text: "Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge" (Heb. 13:4). We have been warned!

Review

Well, I fear that this is a rather lengthy introduction to Professor Engelsma's pamphlet. Those who have met him will know that he is "a Big Man" physically and intellectually. Added to that, he speaks and writes with a pleasing and refreshing plainness! It is necessary to see where he is coming from—though he is not responsible for my exposition. Engelsma argues,

One doctrine of marriage, and one only, guards the true church of Jesus Christ against every corruption of marriage and preserves the holy institution among the covenant people of God. Marriage is the intimate bond of love between one man and one woman for life. Only death dissolves the bond. To be more precise, only God dissolves the bond, and He dissolves it only by death (p. 1).

A recent correspondent in the *English Churchman* accused Professor David Engelsma of heresy for teaching the indissolubility of Christian marriage. But he is of course simply holding the catholic [universal] doctrine, to echo the words of Vincent of Lerins, "*quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est.*"

Let us go through the 8 chapters of *Until Death Us Do Part*.

1. The Sad Case of Bert Zandstra

Bert Zandstra is fictitious, invented by the editor of *De Reformatie*, the church paper of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands ("Liberated"). But the story of this 30-year-old adulterer is all too real. Deserting one wife and three children, he marries a younger woman, leaves his conservative Reformed church, moves town sixty miles and subsequently is admitted into another church of the same denomination which accepts them as members. "Bert Zandstra goes to hell, as does his new wife. Only now he goes merrily to hell, supposing all is well with his soul. The Reformed church is responsible" (p. 6). But get the pamphlet and read the story for yourself!

2. The Scandal and Silence

The scandal is unbiblical divorce in evangelical and Reformed churches. Hear Christ's word: "But whoso shall offend (Greek: *scandalize*) one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matt. 18:6). "This warning is especially fitting regarding the scandal of divorce and remarriage, for innumerable children of professing Christians are the spiritual casualties of this sin" (p. 10).

The silence is illustrated by the 1986 meeting of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI) in Chicago. Apparently "the attempt to address the evil of divorce and remarriage with a strong, biblical statement was scuttled in the back rooms of power by the prominent pastors whose large evangelical churches are full of divorced (and divorcing!) and remarried (and remarrying!) members. This was the meeting of ICBI that was to apply inerrancy to life. So much for application! So much for inerrancy! So much for life!" (p. 12). Malachi knew better:

... the LORD hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously: yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant. And did not he make one? Yet had he the residue of the spirit. And wherefore one? That he might seek a godly seed. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth. For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away (Mal. 2:14-16).

Enough said?

3. The Hillsdale Scandal

Adultery, divorce, incest and suicide: sounds like a Red Top. Read the sad story for yourselves.

4. The Remarriage of the Guilty Party

"Now the *guilty* party may remarry. The man or the woman who committed adultery against his wife or her husband, thus causing the divorce in his or her first marriage, is allowed to remarry and to be a member in good standing in the church. The churches that are now allowing this are evangeli-

cal, Reformed, and Presbyterian churches that have a reputation for conservatism and orthodoxy" (p. 22).

But of course! Whether or not the implied distinction between innocent and guilty is valid, it was pointed out by the late Professor John Murray (and doubtless by others before and after him) that if the innocent party may remarry it is on the ground that the marriage is at an end. Logically that must apply to both parties. Doubtless it was that logic that compelled the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in 1956 to approve it (p. 22). Slippery slopes come to mind. Here is Engelsma's conclusion:

The thinking that has prevailed in Reformed churches concerning the right of the remarriage of the innocent party always suffered from a fatal flaw. This flaw should at last be recognized. It is the notion that adultery dissolves the marriage bond ... But the notion is false. First, experience gives the lie to it: many marriages of the people of God have survived adultery. Second, the notion rules out the exercise of forgiving grace in the lives of married believers: if adultery dissolves marriage, there is not even the possibility that a betrayed husband or wife forgives the offending marriage companion and is reconciled. Third, and worst, it flies in the face of the gospel concerning the real marriage, of which ours are symbols: our adulteries against God in Jesus Christ do not and cannot dissolve His covenant with us (see Jer. 3; Ezek. 16).

Let it be shouted from the housetops: adultery does not dissolve marriage so that the guilty party may remarry. It does not dissolve marriage so that the innocent party may remarry. Only God puts asunder what He has joined together, and He puts asunder by death (Matt. 19:4-6; I Cor. 7:39). This must be the stand of the Church of Jesus Christ. Only then is she secure against the wickedness of the approval of the remarriage of the guilty party (p. 27).

5. More Light on Divorce and Remarriage: Matthew 19:9

Among the many excellencies of *The Standard Bearer* is that, unlike many church or organisational papers, it publishes dissenting and questioning letters from its readers and supplies responses. Probably not all can be dealt

with, but the approach is correct and healthy. A reader writes, “Prof. Engelsma’s otherwise excellent series on divorce and remarriage left me in a bit of a logical quandary” (p. 28). His problem was that Matthew 19:9 appears to allow divorce and is cited in the *Westminster Confession* XXIV:V. “The trouble that I have (and I am greatly troubled by all of this) is that these passages seem to present a contradiction. On the one hand, divorce and remarriage are apparently permissible in the case of adultery. On the other hand, the only ground for remarriage is the death of a spouse” (pp. 28-29). Well read the response to see how the quandary is resolved!

6. Marriage: a Lifelong Bond

“The evil of unbiblical divorce and remarriage that invariably follows is widespread in Reformed churches ... Various factors contribute. A significant factor is the churches’ conformity to the world. In these last days, the churches become worldly, as Christ forewarned. Therefore, lawlessness increases both among the membership and on the part of the institute itself. ‘And because lawlessness shall abound, the love of many shall cool’ (Matt. 24:12, Greek text). The root of the scandal is the churches’ refusal to view marriage as a lifelong, unbreakable bond that God establishes between one man and one woman.” So Engelsma begins. Over against the view of marriage as a (“conditional” and “fragile”) contract, Engelsma contends at length that “Only the death of one of the married persons dissolves the bond, for the bond is super-humanly strong: ‘one flesh’ by the joining of the Almighty” (p. 39).

7. Marriage: a Calling

“As to its nature—what it essentially is—marriage is a lifelong, unbreakable bond established by God between one man and one woman. As to how the people of God are to regard marriage, and their life in it, marriage is a calling” (p. 40). Engelsma then expounds from I Corinthians 7.

The one important thing about marriage is “the keeping of the commandments of God” (v. 19). For believing young people, regarding marriage as a calling will mean that they marry. God commands them to marry, and sooner rather than later. Unless they have the gift of continence and have resolved to remain single in order more devotedly to serve the Lord, they are to marry, in order to avoid fornication (I Cor. 7:1ff.). Since the

young men must take the initiative, they must consider themselves duty-bound to seek wives among the young women in the church, thus providing their spiritual sisters with the husbands whom they are commanded to marry. There should be more of this seriousness in dating and deciding to marry, and less of the quest for an emotional "falling in love" (p. 41).

He then goes on to consider "The Marriage Ceremony" and "The Practice of the Calling" and recognizing that some are called to singleness adds they "must guard against resentment and bitterness."

It is also foolish. For marriage itself or single life is of no ultimate importance. That is why married people are to have their wife or husband as though they did not have them (I Cor. 7:29). Only one thing matters: living obediently in our calling. This is the only thing that will matter one day when each of us gives account of his or her life in marriage to Christ the judge. How much or how little happiness we had will not even come up. The question from the tribunal will be: "Did you fulfil your calling?" With eternal consequences (p. 45).

8. Narrow Is the Way: The Argument from Remarriage to Homosexual Relationships

And now a darker shadow falls on the discussion. Dr. Lewis Smedes, a minister of the gospel in the Christian Reformed Church writing in *Perspectives* (May, 1999), "A Journal Of Reformed Thought," argues in effect that if the CRC is prepared to accept divorce and remarriage it may in time accept sodomite partnerships.

Well it is an issue we are currently facing with the arrival of "civil partnerships" and this essay may help to prepare us! But let Engelsma have the last word in this booklet and essay:

As for the wideness of God's mercy, who can sufficiently extol it? Higher than heaven, deeper than hell, wider than the east is from the west! Wide enough to forgive, bless and save fornicators, adulterers, unbiblically divorced, remarried, and homosexuals! As it is wide enough to forgive, bless, and save those

who are worse sinners than any of them: the proud! In the way of our repentance! Only in the way of our repentance
 The teaching that God's mercy saves impenitent sinners who go on in their sin is a false gospel. It is the heresy of antinomism. It invents a "faire and easie way to heaven," only to send the comfortable sinners to hell. Wide is God's mercy. But narrow is the way. Does anyone remember anymore? Narrow is the way (p. 52).

This is a valuable pamphlet. I understand that Covenant Protestant Reformed Fellowship (CPRF) of Ballymena are making it freely available (tel. 028 25891851 or www.cprf.co.uk), and I hope it receives wide distribution among individuals and churches.

Discussion:

1. Almost all commentators—Poole, Henry, Gill, and others—read the exception clauses in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 as if they read "saving for the cause of adultery" and "except it be for adultery." They do not! The texts actually run "saving for the cause of fornication" and "except it be for fornication." The words are different in English and they are different in Greek, and presumably different in Aramaic in which our Lord probably spoke. Further no word in one language exactly represents its equivalent in another because every word covers an area of meaning which will differ between languages. But since God the Holy Spirit has inspired the Greek text we may not simply overlook it.

Is there then a meaning which explains "*fornication*?" Yes, if we compare Scripture with Scripture we find the following:

If any man take a wife, and go in unto her, and hate her, And give occasions of speech against her, and bring up an evil name upon her, and say, I took this woman, and when I came to her, I found her not a maid: Then shall the father of the damsel, and her mother, take and bring forth the tokens of the damsel's virginity unto the elders of the city in the gate: And the damsel's father shall say unto the elders, I gave my daughter unto this man to wife, and he hateth her; And, lo, he hath given occasions of speech against her, saying, I found not thy daughter a maid; and yet these are the tokens of my daughter's virginity. And

they shall spread the cloth before the elders of the city. And the elders of that city shall take that man and chastise him; And they shall amerce him in an hundred shekels of silver, and give them unto the father of the damsel, because he hath brought up an evil name upon a virgin of Israel: and she shall be his wife; he may not put her away all his days. But if this thing be true, and the tokens of virginity be not found for the damsel: Then they shall bring out the damsel to the door of her father's house, and the men of her city shall stone her with stones that she die: because she hath wrought folly in Israel, to play the whore in her father's house: so shalt thou put evil away from among you (Deut. 22:13-21).

Commentators disagree but I find this a persuasive solution.

Whether the (to us) harsh penalties against adultery, bestiality, fornication, sodomy were actually carried out we do not know, as examples are not recorded. Doubtless they are noted as warnings to them and us! But if on his wedding night the man discovered that his wife was not a virgin there "*except it be for fornication*" was occasion for divorce.

We have of course a New Testament illustration of this in the case of Joseph:

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily. But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost ... Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife: And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS (Matt. 1:18-20, 24-25).

Because they were espoused a formal certificate of divorce was required. But since "*fornication*" in the Greek also covers a wide area of sexual sin, I suggest that should a wife discover that her husband is a sodomite; or a hus-

band that his wife is a lesbian or either that the other is guilty of bestiality then they may be put away. No proper marriage has occurred.

This interpretation covers our Lord's exceptions but maintains His position that He has completely forbidden divorce. If correct, it clarifies but also supports the position taken in this pamphlet.

2. Inevitably this position will throw up hard cases. We mentioned one above where the innocent wife in a divorce remarries a man who has never married, and now both are adulterers. Or a man grows up, starts work, marries, the marriage does not work out, and they are divorced. Subsequently the man is converted to Christ and in due time meets and marries a single woman and they then have a family. Again both are adulterers. In the eyes of the state the marriages are perfectly correct but in the teaching of the church—and more importantly of Christ—they are not.

3. "In the teaching of the Church"—there's the rub! Nobody told them that they should not marry! In the Great Commission we read:

And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen (Matt. 28:18-20).

There has been a welcome revival of expository preaching in many evangelical churches in this country. A good start has been made. I understand that Reformed churches carry out extensive instruction of their young over many years, and that, allied with *Heidelberg Catechism* preaching, means that all the main heads of doctrine are covered. For four hundred years the Church of England included the regular reading of Scripture, both Old and New Testament; the singing of Psalms and Canticles; the Lord's Prayer; the Ten Commandments and three Creeds (*Apostles'*, *Nicene* and *Athanasian*) in her worship. It was impossible to grow up in that atmosphere without obtaining a significant amount of instruction—though I fear now anything or nothing goes! Presbyterians have an excellent confession and catechisms, but with rare exceptions are they taught. In many churches, even evangelical ones, igno-

rance reigns supreme. In over fifty-five years, since I obtained my majority, in five varied churches in England, Ireland and Wales, I have only enjoyed about six months of sustained doctrinal instruction in one of them. The rest has had to be largely self-taught. Engelsma somewhere cites the case of a woman who pleaded with her pastor for instruction to be given on marriage and divorce. "I would not touch it with a barge pole" was the response. Perhaps not surprising if churches are full of the divorced!

4. Finally I am conscious that I edit this journal on behalf of those who accept the Reformed confessions, specifically the *Three Forms of Unity* and the *Westminster Standards*. It is a curious fact that the continental confessions largely ignore the subject of marriage and divorce. But the *Westminster Confession*, which came a century later, devotes Chapter XXIV to it in paragraphs V and VI. The doctrine set forth there differs from that expounded above. May I therefore remind our members that the *Journal* is open to all in terms of articles or correspondence. Please do not be backward in coming forward.

Bibliography

As well as the two books of Engelsma referred to at the beginning of the article, I have found great help in the work of an Anglican minister, Andrew Cornes, *Divorce and Remarriage* (Eerdmans, and Hodder and Stoughton, 1993). Cornes too agrees that a marriage freely agreed by both parties and consummated after an appropriate service constitutes an inviolable bond "till death us do part."