

Letters

Dear Sir,

I write to thank you for the Summer 2006 copy of the *British Reformed Journal* that you sent me. I do appreciate your taking the trouble to read *The Bible: Its Necessity, Qualities and Use* and to prepare and publish a 9-page review. I hope that it will be well received by your subscribers.

Concerning the AV still being "the best available translation of the original Hebrew," any of your readers wishing to investigate this further would find Oswald T. Allis, *Revised Version or Revised Bible? A Critique of the Revised Standard Version of the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1953) of interest. In 60 pages he provides some detailed evidence, which has not really been superseded, of the way in which scholarly subjectivity alters meaning. He also addresses the problems of versification in pages 58-60. His conclusion with respect to the needs of Bible-believing Christians is as follows: "A version to be acceptable to them must tell them as accurately as possible what the Bible says and not what some consensus of scholars, who however learned are after all mere mortals like themselves, think it ought to say" (p. 60). My copy of this work by Allis is bound with *Revision or New Translation? The Revised Standard Version of 1946: A Comparative Study* but neither have any ISBN reference.

I would also add that if you can advise your readers to quote BRJ 45, Truthzone Limited, 676, Yarm Road, Eaglescliffe, Stockton-on-Tees, TS16 ODP will supply *The Bible: Its Necessity, Qualities and Use* at £9.00 per copy post paid.

Every Blessing in our Lord's Service,

Yours sincerely,

Roy Mohon MA, Dip. Theol., ACIB, FFA, eTA

Dear Sirs,

Just a short note really with regards the position on divorce and remarriage, as put forward in the editorial in issue 44. The position given in the editorial is the position of the Protestant Reformed Churches, and also the Anglican church (at least officially). It is not however the position of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, which allows divorce and remarriage in certain circumstances.

The two articles in question in the Confession are as follows (chapter 24):

V. Adultery or fornication committed after a contract, being detected before marriage, giveth just occasion to the innocent party to dissolve that contract. In the case of adultery after marriage, it is lawful for the innocent party to sue out a divorce: and, after the divorce, to marry another, as if the offending party were dead.

VI. Although the corruption of man be such as is apt to study arguments unduly to put asunder those whom God hath joined together in marriage; yet nothing but adultery, or such wilful desertion as can no way be remedied by the Church or civil magistrate, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage; wherein, a public and orderly course of proceeding is to be observed; and the persons concerned in it not left to their own wills and discretion, in their own case.

From this we see that the actual act of adultery in and of itself does not break the marriage bond. All the *Confession* states is that it allows the innocent party to dissolve that contract, if they so wish. Of course, if they wish reconciliation instead, that's fine.

However, it is assumed by holders of the PRC/Anglican position that if the contract is dissolved, then both parties would be free to marry again. Hence this is consequently seen as an easy route for anyone who is fed up with their spouse. All they have to do is commit adultery, then the innocent party can sue out a divorce and the guilty party can go off and marry someone else anyway. I would suggest that this is not the Westminster position at all. The *Confession* does not explicitly state the position of the guilty party in any of this. However, it does state the position of the innocent party, i.e., that they are free "to sue out a divorce: and, after the divorce, to marry another, as if the offending party were dead." Now if both parties were allowed to remarry after the contract had been dissolved, why on earth does the *Confession* only mention the innocent party? Why not mention that both are free to remarry? I suggest that it is because the guilty party *is not free to do so*. The proponents of the PRC/Anglican view are quick to assume that the guilty party is free to remarry because the innocent party is, but nowhere does the *Confession* teach this. Rather the guilty party is under the ban of the church from remarriage.

I understand this to be the position of my church (Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland). I have been trying to find information to back me up on this, but it is quite scarce (this sort of thing doesn't happen very much in our church, thankfully!). However, I did find an interesting sentence in an article in the February 1996 issue of the *Free Presbyterian Magazine*, referring to the divorce of the Prince and Princess of Wales: "Given the confessed adultery of both parties, we do not object to the divorce, though it would be unscriptural for either of them to remarry." (Of course,

this was written before the death of the Princess of Wales). Now, if the PRC/Anglican criticism about the Westminster position is true, this divorce *would* free them both up to remarry, hence I can only conclude that they would be under the ban of the church (and state in an ideal world) to remarry by reason of them both being guilty parties. This is after all no different from the PRC/Anglican view, except for the fact that the PRC/Anglican view would extend the ban on remarriage to an innocent party as well. Remarriage of the guilty party is not an option in either view.

The scriptural ground for the Westminster position is based on Matthew 19:9:

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."

Assuming the word "fornication" to include adultery, the first half of the verse tells us:

(1) Anyone putting away his wife for anything other than "fornication," i.e. *not* for a valid reason (i.e., she is *not* a guilty party), commits adultery if he marries another, because technically he is still married to his first wife as the divorce is for an invalid reason.

(2) The presence of the exception clause then clearly infers by good and necessary consequence that anyone putting away his wife *for* "fornication," i.e. *for* a valid reason (i.e., she *is* a guilty party), does *not* commit adultery if he marries again, as he is the innocent party.

The second half of the verse tells us that anyone marrying her that is put away commits adultery because:

(1) If it was *not* for a valid reason (i.e., fornication), she would still technically be married to her first husband.

(2) If it was *for* a valid reason, she is the guilty party and therefore under a ban from remarrying, so if she does marry again it would be adultery.

With regards Matthew 5:32, the first half of the verse is different:

But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery.

In this case:

(1) If the putting away was *not* for a valid reason, it would cause the wife to commit adultery (if she married again) because she would still technically be married to her first husband.

(2) If the putting away was *for* a valid reason, using the same logic as above, we

conclude that this does *not* cause her to commit adultery—which it does not of course as such, as the putting away does not cause the adultery because adultery has already occurred. The adultery causes the putting away. This shows that there is no blame attached to the man if he was to put her away for a valid reason (and indeed remarry, although remarriage isn't really the issue here). He is not *causing* her to commit adultery (if she should marry again) as he would be if the divorce was on invalid grounds; it would be her own sin alone if she remarried, and he would not be culpable in this case, as he would have been in the case of divorce for an invalid reason.

It has been pointed out that other similar verses appear without the exception clause, i.e., Mark 10:11-12 and Luke 16:18. However, we must ask the question, how many times must something appear in Scripture to be authoritative? Answer: once. (In fact, the exception clause appears twice actually.) The other two instances in Mark and Luke without the exception clause are simply giving the "norm," i.e., no divorce "for every cause," as the Pharisees had wanted to be the case. Fornication is the exception rather than the rule.

Now, the question remains, how long does a guilty party remain under this ban? Maybe other ministers and members of Westminster Confession churches could enlighten me on this one, I don't know. The *Confession* is silent, There are three possibilities I suppose:

- (1) Until the death of the individual guilty party themselves.
- (2) Until the death of the divorced spouse (e.g., Diana, in the case of Prince Charles)
- (3) Until a credible profession of repentance on the part of the guilty party (if ever).

I suggest that (2) is the correct one (this would agree with the PRC/Anglican view, in fact). An article in the *Free Presbyterian Magazine* for March 2005 states, "Mrs. Parker Bowles is now divorced but her former husband is still alive. Obviously Prince Charles is now free to remarry as his wife is dead, but his fiancée is not free to do so, and so the proposed marriage will not be scriptural." (This assumes of course that Mrs. Parker Bowles was not an innocent party in her divorce). Position (3), however, is the more common one taken in most Westminster Confession churches today. The argument goes that as we are indeed to forgive others upon a credible profession of repentance in our everyday lives, then this should be the case here. If done properly and strictly this could indeed work reasonably well, but one can easily see the large loophole that this position opens up in that more liberal ministers and churches could just ignore this ban completely and allow remarriage anyway (which, alas, most of them do these days). I think that many such people are following John Murray in this. Perhaps it is this interpretation that people are reacting against when they criticise the Westminster position.

The point I am trying to make really is that it seems to me that the holders of the PRC/Anglican view tend to think of us Westminster Confession people as having a very “low” view of marriage and they a very “high” one, whereas I would suggest it is the other way around. In the PRC/Anglican view, a man can commit adultery a thousand times, and his wife could do nothing about it and would be duty bound to have the cad back (the only other alternative being some kind of separation with no possibility of remarriage for either until the death of one of them). The Westminster position on the other hand is that if a man commits adultery once, the innocent spouse can (if she so wishes) sue out a divorce straight away, kick the wicked adulterer out of the house, and put him under the ban of church and state from ever marrying again. That to me is a high view of marriage. That would make anyone think twice about adultery.

One final note about “wilful desertion.” Again, proponents of the PRC/Anglican view think this also makes the Westminster view a very “low” view of marriage, but the Confession is very careful. Firstly the proof texts are from I Corinthians 7, so it would only ever apply to an unbeliever “wilfully deserting.” Believers would not have this option. Then the divorce is not in the hands of the couple to just “decide” to do it. Only “such wilful desertion *as can no way be remedied by the Church or civil magistrate*, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage” and “the persons concerned in it *not left to their own wills and discretion*, in their own case.” Of course, if found guilty, the deserter would be under the same ban of remarriage as if he had committed adultery, so again we have a suitable deterrent from doing such a thing. All this is a far cry from the easy “quickie” divorce that the PRC/Anglicans would have us believe the Westminster view entails.

The doctrinal basis of the BRF is “The inspired, infallible, inerrant Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as summarised and systematised in the Reformed confessions, specifically the *Three Forms of Unity* and the *Westminster Standards*.” You rightly indicate that the doctrine expounded in your editorial differs from that which is set forth in the *Westminster Confession*. Given this fact perhaps you might make it clear in the next issue of the *Journal* that the view you expressed in your editorial was a purely personal one and in no way represents the official view of the BRF? Or does it???

Paul Hayden

RESPONSE:

1. The doctrinal basis of the BRF is exactly as Paul quotes it in his last paragraph and as it is stated on the inside cover of each *BRJ*. Michael Kimmitt's editorial already made this perfectly clear, and he pointed out that the *Three Forms of Unity* (mentioned in the BRF's doctrinal basis) made no statement regarding divorce and remarriage (*BRJ* 44, p. 14). Some of us *in* the BRF, though not the BRF itself, believe that the Word of God teaches that marriage is a life-long bond between one man and one woman.
2. This position that marriage is a union between husband and wife "until death us do part" is that of the historic Christian church for its first 1500 years or so with barely a dissenting voice. It is the traditional view of Anglicanism and the Brethren, as well as that of the PRC and many within the Dutch Reformed. It is also the conviction of people within Presbyterian, Congregationalist and Baptist churches (e.g., *BRJ* 45, pp. 28-31), etc.
3. Matthew 19:9 is the only biblical verse which could, if taken all by itself, allow for the remarriage of the "innocent party" while his or her spouse is still living. However, this interpretation of the text is ruled out by the following three considerations.

- a. It would contradict many other clear passages in the Word of God:

... 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. 5:32).

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 10:11-12).

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).

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 (Rom. 7:2-3).

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).

The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord (I Cor. 7:39).

- b. It does not fit with the context. I have never heard anybody respond to the Westminster view of divorce and remarriage as the disciples immediately did to Christ's teaching: "If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry" (Matt. 19:10). The position that there is no remarriage (even for the "innocent party") while his or her spouse is living frequently draws forth this cry. Similarly, Christ's reply to the disciples' protest makes perfect sense. He states, "... there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake" (Matt. 19:12). Jesus points to divine illumination as enabling one to "receive" His teaching: "But he said unto them, All men cannot receive this saying, save they to whom it is given ... He that is able to receive it, let him receive it" (Matt. 19:11, 12).
- c. It is excluded by I Corinthians 7:10-11 where the Apostle Paul summarizes and states the teaching of Jesus Christ during His earthly ministry: "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 ..." Inspired Scripture here teaches two, and only two, options for a divorced woman (or man): (1) remain unmarried or (2) be reconciled to your spouse. No third option, remarriage, is mentioned. Faithful to Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5, Mark 10, Luke 16, and *Matthew 19*, Paul does not give permission to remarry while one's spouse is living.

Thus the exception clause ("except it be for fornication") is not an exception enabling remarriage (while one's spouse is living) but an exception permitting divorce (after which clause it is added): "*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" (Matt. 19:9).
- 4. The argument for the unbreakable bond of marriage is not primarily that it is a "higher" view of marriage, but rather that it is biblical teaching, laid down by God at creation (Gen. 2:24), declared by the Old Testament prophets (Mal. 2:10-16), and reaffirmed by Christ (Mark 10:2-12; Luke 16:18) and the New Testament apostles (Rom. 7:2-3; I Cor. 7:39). This is a picture of the "great mystery" of the union of Christ and His church (Eph. 5:32).

Rev. Angus Stewart (BRF Chairman)