

Except for the Cause of Fornication

By Rev. D. Earl Cripe, Ph.D.

I want to focus a subject that has caused much confusion and difference of opinion in the Church. Like most controversies, it is cleared up by the proper use of the Scriptures themselves. There are people in the Church who want to be right in their beliefs and actions but they have a deficient view of the Bible, often taking the letter rather than the spirit of truth. In many cases this is not altogether their fault because their Christian leaders, who are supposed to be teaching them sound doctrine, are not. In fact, in many churches, the worship service is used exclusively as an arm of evangelism and the preaching seldom if ever goes beyond what Hebrews 6:1-5 calls the first principles of the doctrines of Christ. I personally have no quarrel with evangelism. It is the basic mission of the Church in the world. But it is not the basic purpose of the assembly. In the assembly God gave some the gift of prophecy, others preachers and teachers for the perfecting of the saints for the work of the ministry. Evangelism should be carried out in the world where the sinners are. The Church is for the maturing and building up of the saints. But this cannot happen if those who have the gifts of understanding and teaching do not use them for this purpose.

On the subject at hand, however, most of the confusion is deliberate in order to accommodate an out-of-control situation that most religious leaders have neither the wisdom nor the resolve to deal with. It is easier to misuse the Scriptures to make room for these misdeeds than it is to try to do anything about them. This is an understandable but sad lamentable situation.

The subject I have in mind is introduced in Jesus' teachings in 5:32:

Matt. 5:32 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.

A bit is added in Matthew 19:9, which reads:

Matt. 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.

It is interesting in passing that this mention of the law of fornication is only found in Matthew where Jesus is presented as the face of the Lion, or in other words the King over the earthly Kingdom first of the Jews and then, after the rejection and voiding of the Old Covenant, the King over the New Testament Kingdom of God on earth which is the Church. The point here, which I will not take time to enlarge upon, is that this teaching is coming from the King Eternal, Immortal and Only Wise, the Law Giver Himself. It is not mentioned in Luke by Jesus the Man, nor in Mark by Jesus the Servant nor in John by Jesus the King Eternal from Heaven, ruling over all things everywhere. It is only Jesus the King over the people of God.

It has been fashionable to use this teaching to justify dissolving a marriage if there is adultery involved. In order to avoid shooting off in so many directions that we cannot arrive at a conclusion on anything, I am only going to give you a brief statement on that, and we will pursue it more later. If a mate is committing adultery, the offended party, by I Corinthians:

I Cor. 7:10 And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband:

I Cor. 7:11 But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife.

Simply put, this passage is saying that a situation may arise that makes it impossible for you to live with your spouse. No woman is required to live with a man who crawls out of another woman's bed to come home and get in bed with her. Nor is any woman required to abide in a seriously abusive situation where her physical and mental health is constantly being assailed by a mean and bullying husband. I am not talking now about arguments, differences of opinion, some physical tussling or even an occasional bruise. I

am talking about a situation where a man brutalizes her husband, or, as in one case I knew of, where a wife physically brutalized her husband. You may find it necessary to separate from that person and live alone. But here is the often neglected truth. If you, as a Christian, initiate the action for whatever reason, your options are two: remain unmarried, or be reconciled to your husband or wife. There is no third position. Irresponsibility on the part of your mate does not break those sacred vows that you took before God and the Church to remain married to that one person, through the worst of it if necessary, until death separates you. You can solve the problem of being beat up without taking the additional step of breaking your solemn oath.

‘Till Death Do Us Part

As for the biblical theology of divorce and remarriage on the part of such a woman, for example, St. Paul lays it down clearly in Romans 7. All of those who know the law of God know that it has power over people as long as they are alive in this world. St. Paul is speaking of the law of God for men who live in this world. He is not speaking of a particular law of the land but of the Holy Scriptures and the immutable law of God. We know that the woman who has a husband is bound by God's law to her husband as long as he is alive. She is only released from that bond when her husband dies. So then, if, while her husband is alive, she is married to another man, she has committed adultery and shall be known as an adulteress. Among the community of God's people, any woman who is married to another man while her husband is alive shall be considered an adulteress. If her husband is dead, she is free from that law so that she is not an adulteress though she marries to another man. Now this is if the woman takes this action on herself. There is something else in I Corinthians 7, bearing on this subject, and we will take it up later.

God's Word Versus Humanism

In our irreligious, sacrilegious, promiscuous, and permissive society it is necessary for us to reassert the force and meaning of this law of God before we can go on to use it as the basis of our illustration. Marriage was the first of all human conventions and ordinances. Before there was ever a civil code, a court, a nation, a constitution, a king, a president, a governor, a boss, an

employer or any of the conventions that we are so familiar with in life today, there was marriage. You can read about this in Gen. 2:24: “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.”

In the course of time, the people of God came together in the nation of Israel. In the Book of Deuteronomy we read the law concerning marriage and what rules govern it. The first rule laid down about it, in the 22nd chapter, beginning with verse 13, had to do with the integrity upon which this life-long situation was based. It is called the law of fornication and it is this to which Jesus refers when he speaks of an exception in Matthew 5 and 19. If a man married a maid who had not been married and presented herself to him as a virgin and then found out on his wedding night that he had been deceived, he had the option of putting that woman away for the cause of fornication. He did not have to keep her. In that case, there was no marriage and the man was free to pursue another situation. Fornication is a term which means illicit sexual activity of all types. There are indeed times when fornication can have reference to adultery or illicit activity between *married* people. There are other times when it refers specifically to the unauthorized sexual activity of *unmarried* people, and then there are times when it comprehends just the thought of sexual activity, making no reference to whether one is married or not.

The Laws of Fornication

The 22nd chapter of Deuteronomy makes clear reference to sexual promiscuity by unmarried people. If a man takes a wife and finds out that she is not a virgin, he may put her away. A man is not required by God's law to keep a wife who has defrauded him and misrepresented herself to him. From the beginning God has allowed that a man not to be bound by his marital vows if he found that to be the case. However, he had to be able to present proof of his charge and he had to do this immediately. He had to make his decision at once whether to keep this woman or to put her away. If he put her away, he was quit of the responsibility. If he did not, he could never bring it up again as long as she was alive. He could never use it against her or decide to put her away in the future for that cause. He had to make his decision *on his wedding*

night. "Shall I keep this woman or shall I not?" He was permitted and was not bound, by the marriage vows, to keep her. And we must add that this is an option that is only open to a man who did not know that this new wife was not a virgin, and who is himself morally circumspect. However it may come as a surprise to some of you to know that this is still relevant and applicable to many young men and young women of the Church.

The Law of Marriage

In the 24th chapter of Deuteronomy, beginning with the first verse, there is a law concerning marriage. That law stated that if a man married a wife and the time came when he did not find pleasure in her or lost interest in her, he could write her a bill of divorcement and put her away. When Jesus was being challenged concerning the law of Moses and the law of God by the Pharisees who were trying to trick him, they asked, "Can a man put away his wife $\frac{3}{4}$ can he divorce her for all of these various causes?" Jesus' answer was that from the beginning, God made them male and female. What God has joined together cannot be separated by man. It was never intended to be. So the answer to their question was "no." A man cannot put away his wife for all of those causes, nor can he put her away for any of those reasons. Then they said, "Well, then, if that is true, why did Moses suffer the people to write a bill of divorcement and put away their wives?" Jesus replied that it was that because of hardness of heart Moses suffered them to do it, but from the beginning it was not so. So from that time on, whoever put his wife away for any cause, saving the law of fornication, was guilty of adultery and guilty of causing his wife to commit adultery. A comprehensive study of Jesus' answer would clarify what Jesus was saying. Under the Old Covenant, before the children of God had the Holy Ghost in their lives, before they had the new nature, before they were capable of the high and lofty behavior that God has always wanted from His children, a provision had to be made for the hard-heartedness, indifference, and dereliction of man. Either that, or God would have to get rid of him altogether because he could not do what he was supposed to. He did not have it in him. God faced that decision in the sixth chapter of Genesis in the days of the Great Flood. It crossed His mind to get rid of the race. He said that He thought He would just destroy man whom He had created and forget it.

But then He decided on a different plan and spared man in His mercy. That forbearance of God (as we have just studied in the third chapter of Romans) was only until the day that Christ would come and make a new nature and a new creation for man to live in. Then the kind of behavior that God had envisioned for man from the creation would be possible. Once this time had come, Jesus said that inferior behavior would no longer be acceptable. The law of fornication stood and still stands. It is still permissible for a man to reject his wife at his marriage time if she has not properly represented herself to him and he has been defrauded into thinking he is marrying a virgin when he is not. God never intended for a man to be stuck for the rest of his life in a dishonest situation that he would not have consented to, had he known. But the law of divorcement would no longer be acknowledged because it is no longer necessary for man to live in dereliction.

It is Better Not To Vow, Than to Vow and Not To Pay

When two people stand up before God and the Church and pledge to keep themselves to one another until death separates them, they have made a pledge to which God will hold them and to which the legitimate Church will hold them. Unfortunately, the Church has always been infiltrated with leaders of lesser character, willing to please the people, to tell them what they want to hear and to scratch those itching ears. These pretenders, false brethren, and spiritual cowards will give people the permission to break those solemn vows and to separate. But God will not do it. The law of God does not permit it! Legitimate Christian ministers who are more interested in truth than they are in their own popularity will not do it. Of that you can be sure. Whatever the contemporary Church and the law of the land allows, God does not allow it. When you make that vow — until death separates us — in the sight of God and by the law of God, you are bound by it, my friend. Nothing can break that vow and that bond except death. Man tries to put asunder what God has joined together but when the words are spoken by men of God, "What God has joined together, let no man put sunder . . ." when we repeat those words of Jesus, we are not only talking about what God *permits* His Church to do, but we are also describing what is *possible*. Man *cannot* put asunder what God has joined together. He can only *try* to do it, but it does not work. So those who violate that law of God and embark upon this life of dishonesty, libertinism and

promiscuity are outside the law of God and are making a genuine mess of their lives. Nothing that they do from that point on is commendable in terms of conjugal life.

Forever, Oh Lord, Thy Word Is Settled In Heaven

This is the way it is. It is not debatable. It is clear. The Apostle speaks with great articulation. There is no room for question: “If, while her husband lives, she shall be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress,” because she is bound by the law of God to her husband as long as they both live. You can bring up all the peripheral problems you want, but the fact is that these are all the unfortunate and unhappy consequences of disobedience and dereliction. They often lead to a domestic situation which can never be put right because the law of God has been violated. The truth is that the woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive. There is a provision in the Bible that says if he is contentious, cantankerous, cruel and unfaithful she does not have to live with him. Even so, he is still her husband and cannot marry another. Let her be reconciled to him or remain single.

The fornication mentioned by Jesus then, only applies to newlyweds on their wedding night. For deception and fraud, a new marriage may be dissolved and both of the participants are free from it. But tomorrow, even that option goes away forever. This means obviously, that here must be true moral outrage and rejection. A man who will sleep with his bride on his wedding night, does not have that moral outrage and cannot exercise that option for it is gone with the breaking of the dawn.

This rule which Jesus calls up in no way applies to a marriage that has existed for a time and makes no reference to adultery.

But what if a woman becomes a Christian and her unbelieving husband divorces her because of it, through no fault of hers? Is she then an adulteress if she remarries a marriageable man? That is the most difficult question with the most elusive answer in this sequence of thoughts and in the next article I will attempt to deal with it, if the Lord is willing.