

Believing the Permanency of Marriage (3)

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Many would say that it is a good thing when a marriage lasts for life. In fact, those who have remained married for a long time are sometimes interviewed and asked what their secret is. Indeed, many praise a long marriage. Few, however, confess that the marriage bond is always lifelong, meaning that even if a divorce takes place, that divorce does not sever the bond. Yet this is what God says.

Marriage is a lifelong covenant bond patterned after the lifelong marriage union between Christ and his church. There is one ground given for divorce, namely, fornication. Yet if a divorce takes place, remarriage is prohibited as long as both the man and the woman are still alive. The reason why remarriage is prohibited is that a divorce does not sever the lifelong marriage bond.

Before considering some applications of this doctrine to both dating and marriage, we look at one passage that some say gives a ground for divorce and remarriage. “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. (1 Cor. 7:15).”

Some say that, in addition to fornication, desertion is a ground for a divorce. A deserted spouse, it is said, is allowed not only to get a divorce but also to marry someone else. A verse frequently cited in support of this idea is the following:

This text, they say, teaches that if your spouse deserts you, you are no longer bound in marriage, and therefore you may marry someone else.

That, however, would clearly contradict the passages we have already looked at that state quite clearly that the marriage bond continues for life (Rom. 7:2–3; 1 Cor. 7:39; Mark 10:11–12). Furthermore, if we look at the wording of 1 Corinthians 7:15, we can see that God is not talking here about the severing of the marriage bond. He says that a brother or sister who lets an unbelieving spouse depart is “not under bondage.” He does not say that the believer in this situation is “no longer bound” to his or her departing spouse. When a believer lets his or her unbelieving spouse depart he is still “bound” yet not “under bondage.”

The state of being “bound” in marriage continues until death. One of the verses we have looked at which teaches this is found in this very chapter: “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” (1 Cor. 7:39).

Nothing other than death severs the marriage bond.

The verb translated “bound” in verse 39 is different from the verb translated “under bondage” in verse 15, and the two verbs mean different things. To be “not under bondage” is to be not enslaved. If a believer has an unbelieving spouse who departs, the believer who has remained faithful is not spiritually enslaved. He is not guilty before God and in bondage to sin, even though he vowed to dwell with his spouse who has left him. He might feel guilty dwelling apart from his spouse. Yet our heavenly Father comforts him, assuring him that he is righteous in Christ. God grants peace to the hearts of his people, and the sinful conduct of an unbelieving spouse will not change that.

Sadly, a believer who has been deserted by an unbelieving spouse is often tempted by others to remarry. This is especially the case if the spouse that departed commits yet another sin

by marrying someone else. The believer in this situation, in addition to experiencing the tremendous grief of having his or her spouse leave and marry someone else, also frequently has to deal with people who encourage him or her to remarry.

Some of those tempters may even profess to be believers, perhaps even Reformed believers. It is not that uncommon to hear comments like these: “I go to a Reformed church that allows for remarriage after divorce.” “Your church stands virtually alone in its view of divorce and remarriage.” “Even the reformers allowed for remarriage after divorce.” “Certainly our loving God would not want you to be unhappy for the rest of your life.”

Sometimes a child of God is tempted like this again and again. He or she is being tempted not only to commit adultery but also to leave a church that is proclaiming the truth and to join a church that maintains false doctrine, at least regarding marriage.

This sad situation is not all that uncommon. Some of our churches have one or more members who are experiencing this. If we are in this situation, we must remain steadfast and refuse to give in to temptation. God will bless the believer who remains faithful. Even in sorrow, such a believer will have peace in his or her heart, a peace that only God can give.

Our covenant God will bless not only the believer who remains faithful but also his or her children. There may be tempters who say, “Consider your children. They need a father.” Or, “They need a mother.” Heed them not. The Lord is faithful. He will bless the believer and his or her children.

We must warn a believer if we come to know that he or she is contemplating marrying someone else and leaving a church where the truth is preached. If a person does that, he or she

will be walking in the sin of adultery. No matter what others may say, God refers to such a person as an adulterer. And an adulterer will have no peace and no real joy.

It is important for us to remember to encourage God's people who have been deserted. We must encourage them to remain faithful and comfort them with the covenant promises of our faithful God and Father. Our Lord will certainly bless them and also their children. May we remember them in our prayers and include them in our fellowship.

Next time, Lord willing, we will consider some more practical applications of the biblical teaching concerning the lifelong bond of marriage.

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