Dealing with Divorce
from the president
Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

A M.D. friend told me one day of the very different ways people receive news of terminal illness. One man (of course my friend protected the anonymity of his patients) wailed over and over, “I can’t leave Sarah! I can’t leave Sarah!” Another man, in the same week, turned calmly to his wife and said, “Well, Mama, I’d better get those tires on your car.”

What struck me was not just the difference in reaction, but also the similarity. Each thought first of the impact of his death on his spouse. In his crisis, he thought at once of hers.

Good marriages, said C. S. Lewis, require good people. Real love for another is something you do, not just something that happens to you. So marriage becomes a school of virtue, in which good people make a full turn toward each other in order to practice fidelity, which goes so much further than staying out of the wrong bed. Our colleague Mel Hugen used to say that fidelity to your spouse includes honoring him or her. Don’t talk behind her back. Don’t roll your eyes when he can’t remember a punch-line. As a baseline, listen to your spouse respectfully. Ask about what interests your spouse so that her interests may become yours (except for pro wrestling). If you begin a sentence by saying, “You always . . . ,” you find a sunny way to end it.

Alas, by this good standard we are all unfaithful to one degree or another. It’s not just our divorcing brothers and sisters who have broken a vow and lost their way.

But divorce does bring particular pain. Friends and fellow church members lose heart. The spouse who didn’t want a divorce feels abandoned or, worse, betrayed. Children conclude that their family story is over. These sad facts make divorce tough to talk about in the church, because we have to talk there not just about our sin, but also about God’s grace. We have to say that we can’t out-sin God’s costly grace. But who knows how much to talk about the sin and how much about the grace, and in what order? Who, except Jesus, knows how to approach human misery “full of grace and truth” in perfect blend?

Two things we do know. God hates divorce. God also hates hasty and uncharitable judgments about divorce. So maybe, at last, we are reminded how much we all need our Savior, whose grace heals the wounds caused by his truth.

Yours,

Neal Plantinga
California billboard sign displayed the words “$25—Cheap Divorce, Unload the Deadbeat!” Our society’s ticket for divorce is all too often the simple mantra “I don’t have feelings for him anymore,” as if the mood of the day determines the validity of the promise.

Divorce is heavy on the hearts of many parish pastors as well as all of us who love the Lord and his church. We also wonder to what degree the church has failed. What is our part in today’s marital breakdown? Do pastors ever make much of a difference in pre-marital conversation? How can we prevent marital breakdown when we in the church are sometimes the last to know about it? We also grieve over the nearly broken marriages in our churches, in which couples stay with each other but live in quiet sadness, maybe even separate bedrooms, and life without passion. Should pastors just “wink” at those marriages and let them be, rather than work to rebuild them?

Here’s the story of one marital breakdown and its subsequent God-glorifying repair.

Chuck and Debbie’s pastor referred them to me for pastoral marital therapy. (I take pains to call my ministry with them “marital therapy” because I think of the term “pastoral counseling” as the counseling that a parish pastor does. The hours I spent with them are never a task a parish pastor should do.) Chuck and Debbie had been married for nine years and lived on some land outside town where they kept horses. The event that brought them into marital therapy was the night Chuck kicked a hole in the one-by-four wall of the horse barn because he was angry with his wife. She had developed the habit of putting her daughter to sleep by rubbing her back, and then inevitably falling asleep herself at her daughter’s side. Chuck raged at the empty space in his bed. For so many nights he had fallen asleep alone as Debbie quietly preferred to stay asleep near her daughter. And, of course, Debbie’s version of things sounded so different. She had tired of her demanding husband. The love and care she remembered from him in the early years of marriage were now a distant memory. He was often angry; she was on the run, wondering if leaving the marriage could possibly bring her peace.

Here before me were two Christians who had fallen in and out of love with almost no understanding of why they had married each other. But neither believed in the culture’s default to divorce. They were together in promise though each resented the other deeply in heart. My job, as a pastoral marital therapist, meant spending nearly two years introducing them to each other. There was a part of each that the other needed to know. Chuck, the raging 6’6” bull with his rodeo belt buckle, was a wounded man. We talked about his childhood. Early family connections are critical to growing up well. His memories circled around the theme of disconnection, especially from his mother who had her own complicated problems as an orphan. Closeness and trust are sometimes risky business for an orphan. He had wanted to find a wife who would care for him and be the warm person his mother was not. He wanted an attentive, affectionate, playful woman who would understand his burdened heart. But somehow his romantic radar had taken him far afield. Debbie now was cold and distant. Hardly the woman of his dreams.

Debbie told me of similar tragedy. Yes, she said she loved Chuck, but he never understood how fragile she felt. All her life, she said, she had barely held herself together. He had been her rock; now he was her accuser. “So mean to me,” she said. Her memory went back to the days when her own mother had left her cowboy husband on a ranch in Oregon. She recalls she and her mother, clothes barely packed in the car for the getaway, leaving an inebriated, abusive father whom she hadn’t seen for twenty-nine years. Her mother then married another man in Salt Lake City who abused both her and her...
The Messiness of Marriage

sister. Chuck did not know this. The man of her dreams was supposed to be gentle and patient, full of the fruits of the Spirit, loving, kind, not self-seeking. Yet the man to whom she was attracted turned out to be an angry cowboy, both physically demanding and screaming for affection. Chuck was not at all the husband we might choose for this fragile, tender woman.

Did God choose them for each other, or did the devil? All this harshness, all this raging, the resentment they had for each other, the unhealthy enmeshment between mom and daughter. Is this not the family destruction that delights Satan himself? How could this be from God? How could the Lord of love take part in putting these haters together? If the devil did it, then maybe divorce is a good, even redemptive, idea.

But maybe God was involved. The end of this marital story is one of the few in our North American societies where a man and a woman stay the battle, dig in deep, and sort things out. Chuck and Debbie were able to let God’s grace wash over their suffering, enough at least so that they could find gold nuggets in the sand. They discovered what our young people need to know and what all pastors need to preach: in marriage sometimes we must make a “redemptive mess” so that in the fixing we are made whole. Another way of saying this is, Marriage is about forgiveness. Chuck learned Debbie’s story. And when he saw what a monster he had become to such a tender, sexually wounded woman, his anger turned to tears, especially when he realized how much courage it took for her to ever make love. And Debbie saw the wound in the tears of the empty son; she saw beyond his cowboy bravado into the window of his heart where he looked out, wondering, like the orphan, if he could ever be loved.

The redemptive miracle of their marriage lies in the act of forgiving. In letting go of the hurt of neglect or of abuse, each forgave the parent as well. Chuck was able to go to the home of his parents for Thanksgiving dinner without getting knots in his stomach and withdrawing. And Debbie got on an airplane and flew to Salt Lake City, where her father had resettled, and she sat with him in a restaurant and said the Gospel words, “Dad, I forgive you.” In the act of forgiving our mates we also forgive others who have trespassed against us. It was God who brought these two people together, not the devil. A divorce in this case would have only aborted the redemptive process of forgiveness that sometimes takes much more than two years. And without the redemption that marital conflict can bring, each would have inevitably gone on to find another who once again would need forgiveness. Best we learn the first time.

The basic biblical principle invoked in credible pastoral counseling is the observation of Moses in Genesis 2 that, as God would have it, we leave our mothers and fathers and cleave to our mates in order to truly become one flesh. In our Genesis 3 fallen world, that leaving must always include forgiving. And sometimes, only in the midst of our deepest marital conflicts do we finally see what needs to be forgiven so that our hearts can be free of the tyranny of the resentments that poison us. One of the functions of marriage in our broken world is to make a redemptive mess in order to finish the forgiving that we sometimes have to do. This is a truth that must be heard from our pulpit. If we are silent about the redemptive value of troubles in marriage, our Christian community and especially our youth are left with either dutiful obedience without relief (which may become a life of marital misery), or the societal default that marriages in trouble are terminally ill and that divorces serve as mercy killings. If we are to call for a higher theology of marriage that presses for permanence and a higher ethic of divorce that raises the bar for dissolution, we have a responsibility not simply to tell couples in distress to be faithful to their promises; we must also show them how. Marriage (among other things) is the promise to walk the road of forgiveness. We must lead the way.

Such a high theology of marriage leaves little wiggle room for those who dare to enter. We are kept in the bonds of promise in such a way that we finally hear the voice of the One who has committed to helping us tame our wildest instincts for revenge toward those who hurt us. We then relinquish the ransom that we want paid for the sins against us. And so we are left to struggle; like Jacob, we won’t learn the true identity of those with whom we wrestle until finally we are pinned down in God’s revelation to us about the forgiving that we must do. Then we can walk forward, sometimes limping, surprised by joy, surprised that we can fall in love again, surprised that we can eat Thanksgiving dinner without a knot in our stomach, surprised that we can be free to forgive a father for his 29-year-old sins. Such is the power of the grace of God in marriage.

As we well know, despite our wayward adulterous walk as God’s children, God’s faithfulness and forgiveness bring us back to our covenant with him. 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 shall be his bride. 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. And by his Spirit, Christ makes even our marriages places where we can become more like him.
The Christian Reformed Church’s Position on Divorce

In our permissive society divorce is often considered the way out of almost any difficulty in a marriage: from falling out of love or discovering someone more attractive to the more serious matters of infidelity, betrayal, and abuse. Such attitudes are not new. They were present already in Jesus’ day. A Pharisee asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” (Matt. 19:3). Many thought the answer should be yes. Any action or even appearance that caused the wife to lose favor in her husband’s eyes was thought to be a legitimate reason for divorce. Jesus replied that they did not understand God’s will for marriage.

We, too, must understand the biblical teaching on marriage before we can understand the few verses about divorce. Interestingly, the CRC Study Committee Report that deals with divorce is entitled “Marriage Guidelines” (Report 29, Acts of Synod 1980, pp. 467-485). This report was accepted by Synod 1980 as being basically in harmony with biblical teaching and its guidelines for the church’s ministry were adopted. This article will present a brief synopsis of that report. To discover its full discussion of biblical teaching and all of the guidelines, it will be necessary to read the report itself.

Biblical Teaching Regarding Marriage

Marriage is not a human invention or a social experiment to be altered or abandoned at will. It is a God-created institution with a God-given purpose. God created man and woman as two individuals and instituted marriage so that they could become “one flesh.” Because they were created in the image of God they had a need for fellowship—with God and with fellow human beings. Thus marriage was instituted so that they could live in intimate fellowship and community, and as a result the community would be enlarged through the birth of children. Marriage and family were established by God at creation to meet human need and to accomplish the purposes of God.

Since the unity of marriage is willed by God, it should not be broken by human action (Matt. 19:6). God intends marriage to be permanent, to last until death terminates the relationship (Rom. 7:2-3). The report puts it this way: “Marriage is a covenantal relationship sealed by vows. In these vows love is promised and fidelity pledged …. The breaking of the vow and the betrayal of the trust involves sin against the marriage partner and guilt before God” (p. 469).

The apostle Paul adds a further dimension to our understanding of marriage. He declares that the creational institution of marriage contains a mystery which has now been revealed in the union of Christ and his church (Eph. 5:23-32). Hence marriage achieves its deepest meaning and is only fully understood when it reflects the spiritual union of Christ and his church. What does this reveal concerning the purpose of marriage?

This question can be answered only by examining Paul’s rather cryptic saying about the mystery of marriage in the light of the central theme of Ephesians. That central theme is the reunification of all things in Christ ( Eph. 1:10-11). The first evidence of this unity in Christ is the reunification of humanity (both Jew and Gentile) in the church. As the unified Body of Christ, the church becomes the visible sign of God’s redemptive purpose, and its members are called to manifest this unity in every part of their lives (Eph. 4-6). Marriage is one aspect of Christian life that must manifest this unity because marriage is made possible by and expresses the unity of husband and wife in Christ.

Paul’s reasoning is as follows: From the beginning God intended to create a human community and instituted marriage as a means for achieving that purpose. But due to sin humans were alienated from God and from one another. True community was only partially realized and always threatened. Now in Christ God creates anew the possibility for and the reality of a genuine human community. In so doing God actually fulfills the basic goal or purpose of marriage.

Consequently, Christian marriage is related to God’s plan of redemption; in Christ the institution of marriage is taken up to serve God’s purpose of building the new covenant community. Through marriage and Christian family persons are shaped and molded for living in the family of God. It is in marriage and family life that we experience our first lessons in acceptance, forgiveness, and giving oneself for the sake of others; there we learn what love and community are and thus begin to understand God’s love and concern for us. In this light marriage can be a means of grace because marriage
position and family life provide our first lessons in community in Christ. Thus we are prepared for life in the family of God.

If marriage is to serve God’s redemptive purpose, it must reflect the presence of Christ and his example. For it is the presence of Christ and his Spirit that makes forgiveness, reconciliation, and unity possible in Christian marriage and family life. In the light of this biblical teaching the report draws this conclusion: “To break this unity in Christ, either by attempting to live the unity of marriage apart from its goal in the family of God or by divorce, is to violate that for which Christ died. Divorce is a failure to fulfill the creational norm and the redemptive purpose for marriage” (p. 472).

Biblical Teaching Regarding Divorce

Obviously, divorce is not willed by God; it is, in fact, something God hates (Mal. 2:16). But God’s people do not always do what God wills. Thus the church faces the question of how to respond to human failure in keeping God’s will for marriage. Scripture also addresses the reality of divorce, and—especially in two passages—makes judgments about it.

The first passage is Jesus’ saying that except in the case of marital unfaithfulness, divorce followed by remarriage is adultery (Matt. 5:32; 19:9). The CRC Study Committee Report judges that “marital unfaithfulness” refers to persistent and unrepentant unchastity rather than to a single act. How did it arrive at that conclusion? Primarily because the biblical teaching regarding the human response to sin is to follow the way of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation in order to regain and preserve the unity and community that God desires. Thus only persistent and unrepentant unchastity has the power to separate what God has joined together in marriage. In such a case human sinful conduct can break the marriage relationship and the bond of marriage; “until death do us part” no longer exists. Jesus says that in such a case his judgment that remarriage is adultery does not apply.

The second passage is found in 1 Corinthians 7. Here, as in the rest of Scripture, the apostle Paul stresses the permanence of the marriage relationship (v. 39) and in the case of divorce between Christian partners commands that they remain single or be reconciled (vv. 10-11). Although here Paul mentions no exceptions, the Christian tradition has always assumed that the exception stated by Jesus still applies.

In addition, Paul speaks of divorce in the case where a Christian is married to an unbeliever. While some interpret this passage as limited to a divorce caused by unbelief, the passage itself speaks only of the unwillingness of the unbelieving partner to live with the Christian partner. In such a case the Christian is “not bound.” Not bound to what? Opinions are divided. Some say not bound to live with the unbelieving partner, but many others (including Calvin and the Westminster Confession) believe that the freedom granted is freedom from the law of marriage (i.e., the marriage bond no longer exists in the case of willful desertion). If so, the Christian would be free to remarry.

What are the key issues at stake in this discussion about divorce? The major issue is whether human sinful conduct can destroy the binding character of the law of marriage and can in fact separate what God has joined together for life. The two biblical examples mentioned above indicate that certain kinds of sinful conduct can in fact have this consequence. A secondary issue is whether with these two examples Scripture treats all possible situations. Clearly, the apostle Paul addressed one situation that our Lord in his earthly ministry did not. Is it possible that the church must apply this biblical teaching to circumstances not specifically addressed in Scripture? The report believes that the answer is yes.

Conclusion

This report of 1980 modified the CRC’s traditional stance on marriage and divorce in two ways. First, the Bible was no longer viewed primarily as a code book of law which settles every specific issue of divorce and remarriage in advance. Instead, the Bible is viewed as proclaiming basic principles or guidelines to be applied again and again in changing circumstances. The will of God concerning marriage does not change, but it must be applied to cases of failure whose causes are not specifically addressed in Scripture. Second, the church’s task of applying God’s will is viewed as essentially a pastoral rather than a juridical task. It is not the church’s duty to act as judge and jury to grant or withhold permission for a divorce. The responsibility for divorce belongs to the marriage partners who stand before God as their Judge. The church’s ministry to hurting marriages and divorced persons is to bring such persons before the face of God in such a way that they clearly hear God’s will and forgiveness for those who truly repent. God’s grace that refreshes, renews, and restores is always available to such persons. There can be new beginnings where the past is forgiven.

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Keeping Promises Today

Marriage is for life. Yet, sadly, many marriages are terminated today not by a spouse’s death, but by the death of the marriage itself. Why this epidemic of divorce today? Is there something in the moral air we breathe that encourages easy divorce?

The term “easy divorce” is a misnomer, if not an oxymoron. It may describe the legal reality in a no-fault climate, but it also masks enormous pain and loss. No divorce is easy. Marriage is “for better or worse, until death”—and divorce is a death. We were not created to die; death is an enemy calling forth mourning and tears. We celebrate marriages with feasts; a divorce calls for a wake. We may, as they say, “get over” a death; but the void never entirely disappears.

Not always fully sensitive to this, the church has often failed to weep with grieving members who suffer the death of a marriage. Instead, it has often punished divorced people with blame, judgment, and shame. In reaction, in our permissive and therapeutic culture, the temptation is to offer cheap grace or even shrugs of indifference: “It happens; no big deal.” Each of these—judgmentalism, cheap grace, indifference—violates the gospel of grace and trivializes our humanity and the significance of our covenants. Marriage is a big deal and its death a tragedy. Our first response should be to weep with the weeping. In a word: compassion.

Sadly, the Latinate “compassion” and its Greek companion “sympathy” are a debased currency in our day. By its public proponents compassion often comes across as paternalistic permissiveness, leaving opponents of permissiveness in the impossible position of appearing as heartless legalists. Raising the bar against easy divorce comes across as mean and cruel. To raise the question “Isn’t divorce a sin?” suggests that we want to place blame.

Perhaps we need to reframe our thinking. We need to recover the original meaning of compassion and sympathy as “suffering with.” If true compassion involves our ability to identify with those who are in pain, then we must acknowledge our own vulnerability to the same brokenness. True sympathy arises from profound awareness of our common humanity—including our common bondage to sin.

Having compassion for those who are divorced is similar to having sympathy for all bereaved people. Because we know that we are all fated to die, because we face our own mortality in everyone’s death, we grieve with those who grieve and weep with those who weep (Gal. 6:2). A Christian funeral does not deny the awful reality of death; it gives us the opportunity to honestly and deeply grieve together. Similarly, when marriages die there is a rightful place for mourning together. Some of the songs and psalms of lament are appropriate resources for this. They have been the church’s primary biblical resource for Christian mourning—mourning that is not without hope (1 Thess. 4:13).

In addition, we can have compassion for those who have divorced because we know that marital fidelity and joy is a gift as much as a task, and when it comes to sin, marital holiness and sexual purity are challenges for all of us. Again, our common humanity and bondage to the flesh ought to generate some sympathy. There, but for the grace of God, go I.

But in order to really understand, to truly be compassionate to those who have divorced, we must also understand the powerful forces in our culture that make it difficult to keep the promises made in marriage. I am indebted here to a provocative essay by theologian Robert W. Jenson, “How the World Lost Its Story” (First Things 36 [October 1993], 19-24). He suggests that the worldview of modernity destroys our ability to consider our lives as part of a story, and this makes keeping promises extremely difficult. If he is right, then the church is unfair to divorced people and fails in its compassion toward them if we ignore our own responsibility to be a counter-cultural community where promise-keeping is nurtured. This is as true for those for whom divorce offers hope in a tragic situation as it is for those entering marriage for the first time. The church’s role is to be the place where the gospel of hope becomes incarnate.

Why is promise-keeping a problem in the modern world? Let’s look more closely at Jenson’s argument. The modern worldview sharply contrasts with Christian understanding. The Christian gospel is a covenant-based and promise-oriented message of hope. It is a story of the created and fallen world, redeemed by
Christ, awaiting its fulfillment in the bodily resurrection and the new heaven and earth. In the face of disappointment and loss Christian hope is sustained by the belief that the plot of world history is written and directed by a good and sovereign God. No matter what happens, the story already has a good ending. Hope is sustained by faith in God, the Author and Storyteller who promises it will come out that way.

The modern world tries to understand the world and live in it without God. Memories of community and tradition and the stories of God’s past faithfulness do not provide direction or purpose to many people today. Instead, they live for the moment by the light of their own reason. “Modernity cannot hope in the biblical God, founded as it is in a declaration of independence from him” (Jenson, p. 23). Our world today is one in which, for all practical purposes, there is no God, no story, no author and storyteller. Modern people gave up on the assurance of a story directed by God and instead put their faith in the story of human progress. With the triumph of human reason through scientific discovery and technological mastery, a new secular order was established in which superstition and religion no longer existed. Not only could we do without God; we did so much better without him. We were “liberated.”

But now we are two hundred years into the modern project and it is badly failing us. Our contemporary artists and think-
ers tell us that there is no universal purposeful story controlled by God. All we have are our individual stories, so the best we can do is celebrate pluralism and diversity. Relativism and hopelessness are married in what is often called postmodernism. If modernity was fueled by hope in progress through human achievement, the discrediting of progress means the end of hope. “The mere negation of faith in progress is sheer lack of hope; and hopelessness is the very definition of postmodernism” (Jenson, p. 23).

Keeping promises in such a climate is next to impossible. “Promises, our [postmodern] artists keep telling us in drumbeat monotony, should not be made because they cannot be kept. Promises in the postmodern world are inauthentic simply because they are promises, because they commit a future that is not ours to commit” (Jenson, p. 23). “Promises can be made only if reality is getting someplace, that is, if it has a plotted story” (Jenson, p. 23).

So back to the church, compassion, and divorce. In addition to being sensitive to the enormous cultural pressures arrayed against promise-keeping, we also need to ask if the church itself has become modern or postmodern. Is the church a story-oriented, promise-keeping, counter-cultural community in our world, or does it too live for the Now, for the instant present? Promises require story, and story involves memory, tradition, and identity in order that those who live in the present may have hope for the future. For the church to strengthen its members’ ability to keep promises, including those made in marriage, it must be a storied community with a living tradition and clear identity—an apocalyptic community boldly directing its vision to the glorious destiny that awaits the people of God.

The church must ask itself: “Are we such a community?” We need to ask ourselves this question not just so that we can be more compassionate but first of all so that we can be faithful. The gospel’s good news to all of us, divorced persons included, is this: Though we may be unfaithful to our commitments and fail in our promises, God is always faithful to his. Thank God!
I

n the world of my childhood, divorce was almost unheard of. I can name the divorced people I knew on one hand. There was my mother's cousin Jean, whose divorce had disgraced my mother's whole side of the family. There was my friend Gary's parents, Wayne and Donna. Wayne owned the local service station and seldom went to church. And in our own congregation there was Joan. Nobody within range of my young ears talked about why she was divorced. Quite frankly, I didn't know much else about her. Divorce was rare back then.

Times have changed. Divorce is common now. Four of my cousins are divorced. Friends have divorced. Plenty of people in this congregation are divorced. And unless I miss my guess, there are people here this morning who are seriously considering divorce. Now that it has become so common, divorce has become a lot touchier to preach about. Feelings run high. Guilt, anger, pain. So divorce is something of a touchy subject.

Divorce was a touchy subject in Jesus' time too. Politically touchy. John the Baptist preached against Herod for divorcing his own wife and marrying the wife of his brother. So Herod arrested John and executed him. Religiously touchy too. The Old Testament book of Deuteronomy taught that a man could divorce his wife if "she becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her." There were two schools of thought on divorce. The conservatives who followed the teaching of Rabbi Shammai said that a matter of indecency was adultery and adultery alone. Let a woman be as bad as Jezebel, but unless she was guilty of adultery, there could be no divorce. For progressives who followed Rabbi Hillel the matter of indecency could be almost anything—she burned the toast, she raised her voice so that it could be heard by the neighbors . . . Hillel went so far as to say that if a man found a woman who was more attractive than his wife, a divorce could be in order. Both politically and religiously, the topic of divorce was something of a hot potato.

“So, Jesus . . . what do you teach about divorce?” In Mark 10 the Pharisees come to test Jesus. “We’ve heard Shammai and Hillel. What do you say?” Can you sense the bind in which Jesus finds himself? He is now back in Judea, in Herod's territory. If he comes down hard on divorce, he risks the fate of John the Baptist, to say nothing of all the other men who hardly care to hear him take the hard line on divorce. If, like Hillel, Jesus goes easy on divorce, he risks angering the women who follow him and the conservative element among the Jewish leaders. “So, Jesus, what do you say—is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”

You might expect Jesus to take a pretty easy line on divorce. Jesus is so open and accepting. He made his reputation eating and drinking with sinners. Jesus is no pinched-face conservative who pushes the letter of the law every chance he gets. When the Pharisees blister Jesus' disciples as Sabbath breakers for picking a bit of grain to eat, Jesus champions the innocence of their behavior. Jesus is no legalist.

Unlike us, he doesn't tend to single out sexual sins for special treatment either. Do you remember the story about the Jewish leaders who bring a certain woman to Jesus? “We caught her in the very act of adultery,” they report. What does Jesus do? He lets her off. Gently. “Go now,” he says, “leave your life of sin behind.” Jesus, what a friend of sinners. Can we expect a tough line from him on divorce? Not likely.

So Jesus catches us off guard with his response to the Pharisees. “What did Moses command you?” he asks. Moses says, “Hand her a certificate of divorce and send her away.” Simple as that. But Moses didn't write that law as a blank check for any man who wishes to divorce his wife, Jesus implies. Moses required a bill of divorce to limit the evil hard-hearted men could do to women. The bill of divorce was like a modern-day restraining order. It protected the woman from her former husband. “If you want to find out what God thinks about divorce, don't look at the laws about restraining orders,” says Jesus, “look at the creation story in Genesis.” In the beginning God made them male and female. A man leaves his mother and father and is united to his wife and the two become one flesh. Not two, but one. So what God has joined together, let no one separate. Divorce is always evidence of sinful brokenness. In God's eyes, divorce is never right.

Divorce is never right? No divorce? No loopholes? Jesus comes out more conservatively than the conservatives. Even Rabbi Shammai allowed divorce in cases of adultery. Jesus' disciples are apparently shocked. Back inside the house they ask him for further clarification. Maybe they hadn't heard him right. It almost sounded like he meant to say that divorce is never right.

What about people today like Tom and Mary? Tom grew up in a family in which his distant father allowed his angry mother to abuse Tom psychologically. In important ways, even as an adult,
Tom was very much a hurt little boy. Mary was the oldest in a large family with lots of problems. She learned early on that the oldest child has to fill in when parents are unavailable. And since her parents were often not there, she found meaning in lavishing her attention upon those who were weak and hurting.

Early in their marriage, things seemed to go fairly well. But then Tom’s anger with his mother came bubbling up. Their sex life became twisted and violent. Tom came to resent Mary’s planning every detail of his life. When Tom went back grad school, Mary began to resent all the time he spent away from the family. He found her intellectually unstimulating. They fought. The children cried. They grew apart. He spent lots of time with one of his fellow students and slept with her. Finally the whole rotten relationship ended in divorce.

Like the disciples, we want to follow Jesus into the house and take him aside. “You mean to say that people like Tom and Mary should stay married? Isn’t it better sometimes for the sake of the children, for the sake of the individual parties, that people just split up?”

But Jesus doesn’t give the disciples a list of instances when divorce would be okay. He doesn’t tell them how hot the battle has to become or how cold and distant the relationship must grow. Instead he once again holds up God’s high ideal for marriage. God holds marriage, even troubled marriage, in such high esteem that he even sees remarriage after divorce as a further violation of his created intentions. “I tell you,” says Jesus, “that if anyone divorces his wife and marries another, he commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.” Jesus doesn’t soften the blow. “If you’re looking for someone to give divorce the green light,” Jesus seems to be saying in Mark 10, “don’t look to me. As the Son of my Father, I can never just excuse it.”

Of course the good news of the gospel is that what Jesus can never excuse, he willingly forgives. We all stand before him as sinful people. Some of us have misused our sexuality as single people. Others of us behave sinfully and selfishly within our marriage relationships. Still others carry responsibility for marriages that ended in divorce. Jesus welcomes all of us into his presence on the same basis. Not because we have come some really good excuse for the way we have behaved. Not because we have found a loophole to justify what we have done or what has happened to us. No, Jesus welcomes us because we have confessed our sinfulness to him and he has forgiven us. Single, married, or divorced, Jesus never excuses our sin, but he is always willing to forgive it.

As God’s forgiven people God equips us to live in a culture that too easily endorses divorce. The Holy Spirit bends our ear to the drumbeat of the gospel so that we take marriage seriously and live unselfishly in our marriages. The Spirit encourages us to support and pray for those among us who find themselves in marriages loaded with conflict, tension, and pain. God invites us to walk with him a road that is not always easy—the road of faithfulness.

Have you ever watched a figure skating competition in the Olympics? In nearly every round of competition at least one of the young hopefuls, sometimes one of the best, will miss a jump or even fall flat on the ice. Most of the time, the young skater gets up and completes the program, despite the lost hopes for a medal. I always wonder where they get the courage to continue. Now imagine that you are the parent of the young woman who falls. Think how pained and disappointed you would be. And yet imagine how proud you would be to see her pull herself back up and finish the program.

As married people we may sometimes question the wisdom of staying together. We seem so different. We argue so much. We hurt each other in so many ways. We seem so different. We argue so much. We hurt each other in so many ways. We argue so much. We hurt each other in so many ways.

Divorce may sometimes be the best alternative in a world that’s gone crooked, even though divorce is never “right.” But as those who belong to Jesus, we find our righteousness in him. God’s forgiveness sustains each one of us as we live out our lives before him. And it’s always and only God’s forgiveness that enables his children to move beyond brokenness, even the brokenness of the messiest divorce.
The Role of Elders in Marriage and Divorce

Q. How should an elder deal with marital breakdown?

A. As elders we are caught between judgment and grace. We are called to hold people accountable for their behavior, especially as it may relate to helping or harming a marriage and family, and we are called to respond with supportive care to those who are in the midst of marital distress. Here are eight guidelines that may help to accomplish both of those tasks pastorally.

1. Begin with a high view of marriage. Most of those we visit know that God’s way is not divorce (Mal. 2:16). Take opportunity to ask questions that may lead people toward the goal of reconciliation and redemption. We can wonder with them why, after years of loving, this relationship is filled with hurt and bitterness. We can suggest that there are lessons to be learned from marital conflict so that “staying the course” can bring new insight and forgiveness. People sometimes make a “marital mess” so that they can discover the hurts within that need forgiveness. People can learn trust and forgiveness at a deeper level than ever before.

2. Think about a couple as one person the way God does when God speaks of “one-flesh-ness.” This means that the idea of the individual goes to the back burner. To see only two separate people who are sinners misses the Biblical meaning of marriage.

This idea entails viewing the marriage itself as a living entity with strengths and weakness for which it is accountable to God. It also means that the sin of one person is the sin of the other. We share guilt and grace together as husband and wife. This means that we, as elders, hold both partners accountable.

3. Think first of adultery as a forgivable sin as opposed to seeing this break in promise as grounds for breaking the promise of marriage. This means restraining the impulse to judge sexual behavior quickly and harshly. Marital unfaithfulness is not simply a sin, but also a sign that the relationship has gone horribly and painfully wrong.

4. Take care to remember that in our society there is hostility toward women. Most elders are men who may not be fully aware of the experience of women in marital distress. The above truths about the permanence of marriage and the importance of staying the course must not be misused to allow unredemptive suffering or leave women in marital distress where they are in danger of harm (both emotional and physical). This means that in instances of neglect or abuse as well as a husband’s marital unfaithfulness, we must take care to hear the voice of the wife.

5. Resist taking sides in marital conflict. As soon as we make a triangle with one person against another we may indeed feed the problem more than the solution. Our impulse to judge must be restrained enough to carefully hear both sides of a story and wonder how each person may have failed the relationship. We must remember that our goal in terms of marital difficulty is reconciliation, bringing together persons torn from each other. When we choose sides in a conflict we make the restoration of the marriage more difficult. We also make it more difficult for marriage therapists to do the work of restoring a relationship. The idea of an “innocent party” is problematic. When one person is declared innocent the idea of an “innocent party” is problematic. When one person is declared innocent the chances of repair. If a marital therapist is to succeed at reconciliation, he or she needs the church to ask that both people seek marital counsel.

6. Pray with understanding. We pray best when we know what to pray for. It is sometimes a temptation to pray before we understand the real nature of a problem. Until we listen long and carefully we may not know where prayer is most needed. For example, in many cases of marital conflict the most difficult issue and the most powerful problem is the forgiveness of others who have caused people pain. If this is left unacknowledged and is not prayed for, then the use of prayer as a grace for healing is compromised.

7. Believe that divorce is a necessary decision when it is the lesser of two evils. There are times when God disapproves more of the destruction that comes to couples and families than he disapproves of the divorce itself. This is a difficult judgment call to make. It gives due respect to God’s ideal of marital permanence but it also appreciates the realities we face in a world torn apart by sin.

8. Remember the children. Unfortunately, the children of marital difficulty often feel invisible. They go unnoticed by pastoral care providers because the greater need appears to be with parents on the verge of separation. Mothers and fathers at war can easily fail to notice their children, and the children always pay a price. Elders’ care and concern for these sons and daughters is an important part of keeping and building God’s kingdom in families.
The Council Room

Q Is it possible for a divorced person to serve or continue to serve as a minister of the Word?

—An indignant former spouse

The question you pose obviously arises from an experience filled with much pain. I was touched by your letter. It is very compelling. I wish all could read the three-page narrative you sent me and taste just a bit of your situation back then and today. As you suggested, this question with which you end your letter is asked by many others and requires a public response, even if it is on a less personal basis. I’ll give it a shot.

The Church Order of the Christian Reformed Church says that only those persons who “meet the biblical requirements” are eligible for office. Passages like 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 teach that, among other things, an “overseer” must “be above reproach,” “manage his own family well,” “have a good reputation with outsiders,” and be “self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined.” These and other passages are read every time ministers and elders and deacons are ordained to their offices. The words are familiar to us. The challenge, of course, is for our councils and broader assemblies to apply them in specific cases of ministers who experience divorce or wish to be remarried.

Are there clear rules? Well, no, the Church Order offers no specific guidance here. The section on suspension and deposition, for example, uses the language “deviation from godly conduct.” In addition, most synodical regulations and guidelines on divorce and remarriage address membership, not ordained leadership positions. The one has to do with the other, of course, but they are not the same. More can be expected of our ministers. This leaves us with little to go on except precedent, case law.

Researching experiences similar to yours is very difficult. Most information is kept in confidential minutes. Naturally, I do have personal knowledge of recent stories: divorces being ordained to the office; ministers being suspended or deposed; those applying for reinstatement receiving different answers—some allowed and some denied re-entry. Based on those anecdotes alone, I can say to you, yes, it is possible today for a divorced or remarried person to serve in the office of minister. Everything depends on the circumstances and the spiritual condition of the one involved.

For a very long time, I simply assumed what case law might have been before I arrived on the scene, namely, that our denomination absolutely did not permit divorced persons to serve in office. Challenged by your letter, I finally did the little research that can be done in public records and the result was a huge surprise to me.

Not at all unexpected was the stand taken by Synod 1894: divorce is permitted for the “innocent party” only in cases of adultery or desertion by an unbelieving partner. When this assembly was asked whether a minister petitioning for a divorce for a different reason could stay on, it said: “Of course not!” The surprise came in the story that unfolded during the next six years, probably involving the same minister. Even though synod had warned against it, he was officially divorced. In response, synod insisted that he seek from the court an annulment of the divorce decree and attempt reconciliation. As might be expected, the court responded by saying that there was no such thing as an annulment of a divorce and that only a remarriage to the divorced spouse could accomplish the purpose.

When the minister convinced Synod 1900 that he had made numerous attempts but that his former wife was totally unresponsive to his pleas, the assembly made the judgment that the church may “carry him in love in his present position.”

A study committee reporting in 1980 wrote that the church must consider “the multiplicity of personal factors which surround particular cases.” Factors like “repentance for personal failure in the breakdown of the previous marriage,” “forgiveness of others,” “understanding of the divinely intended permanence of marriage,” and “a renewed dependence on the grace of God for the success of the remarriage” must be weighed very carefully. This is said about church members in general. When it comes to reinstatement to ministry, of course, there must be the additional consideration of whether the person involved is “able to serve effectively” (Church Order, Article 84) or, as we used to say it with greater clarity, “could then serve without being hindered in his work by the handicap of his past sin” and whether “his restoration would be to the glory of God and for the true welfare of the church” (e.g., Church Order, 1983, Article 94).

But to your question, “Is it possible…?” the answer is yes. Forgiveness and reconciliation are possible. Thank God this is so. May our Lord grant our assemblies sharp and true spiritual discernment in the midst of brokenness, pain, and a great deal of unmerited grace.
M. Craig Barnes Leads Fall Preaching Conference

More than 200 people attended this year’s Fall Preaching Conference on September 30, 2004, to hear M. Craig Barnes reflect on his recent book Searching for Home: Spirituality for Restless Souls (the Fall Book of the Quarter), in which he addresses the different generations preachers need to reach. Speaking on “The Preacher as Minor Poet,” Barnes considered the subtexts of Scripture and of people’s lives, and addressed the role of the preacher in exegeting both and building a bridge between them. He then led a discussion about how to preach particular biblical passages in light of these themes. Those who attended were encouraged, including one pastor wrote, “I drove 6½ hours for this conference and look more and more to be refreshed and equipped to preach better—so keep offering this stuff!” Others were able to listen in or watch the conference from even greater distances through the simulcast web feed. One person wrote, “As someone who is very interested in preaching better, thank you for making this valuable preaching conference available online! Living 700 miles away I’ve always wished I could attend but never could find the time; thank you to CTS for making this happen—for bringing CTS here in NJ… the wonders of technology!” Barnes’s presentations continue to be available for online viewing through the lecture archive at www.calvinseminary.edu.

Christmas Around the World

A new community celebration was the highlight of the holiday season at CTS. “Christmas Around the World,” held on December 17, 2004, was a wonderful evening of international foods, friends, stories, and songs. Gathering by the fireside and around tables in the student center, families of students, staff, and faculty ate, talked, and sang together. Notable were the songs offered by African, Brazilian, Chinese, Hispanic, Indonesian, Japanese, and Korean groups.

Retreat and Renewal in the Northeast

In October 2004 President Plantinga went on retreat with the pastors, elders and deacons of Classis Atlantic Northeast at the Lakeside Retreat Center in Pittsfield, MA. He spoke on the topic of “Dying and Rising with Christ” in conjunction with the classis theme of “Classical Renewal.”

Plantinga and Ed Gerber, new pastor in Webster, NY, which was also Neal’s first pastorate.
Making Connections Initiative

It takes a church to prepare a minister. The seminary is effective in its task of training pastors and other ministry leaders only when it is closely linked with the church.

Indeed, the church is where people first hear God’s call to ministry. The church in ministry is where people’s gifts for ministry are identified and nurtured. And the church is critical in sustaining pastors for the long haul.

But something is awry. Fewer and fewer people feel called to vocational ministry. Parents and congregations alike seem reluctant to challenge their children and young people to consider God’s call to vocational ministry. And pastors are leaving the ministry in record numbers, usually with deep wounds in the pastors themselves, their families, and the congregations they served.

The “Making Connections Initiative” of Calvin Theological Seminary is a new, multi-year initiative designed to strengthen the collaborative efforts of the seminary and the church in the calling, training and sustaining of pastors and other ministry leaders throughout the CRC and beyond. The goals and strategies in all three areas of this initiative proceed from the conviction that collaboration—making connections, building networks of relationships—is critical in the formation of pastors and ministry leaders.

1. Pre-seminary calling initiatives

Our goal: to increase the number of promising individuals who enter seminary with a vocational commitment to congregational ministry.

Our strategy: to create relational networks that encourage promising individuals to discern their call to ministry. These relational networks include:
- linking prospective seminary students with current seminary students.
- linking prospective seminary students with pastors.
- building stronger bridges to colleges preparing pre-seminary students.
- sponsoring “Discerning Your Calling” events at CTS.
- sponsoring continuing education events throughout the denomination whose goal is to foster a culture of calling and leadership development in local congregations.

You will be hearing much more about this initiative in the coming months. Send email inquiries regarding any of the goals and programs outlined here to MakingConnections@calvinseminary.edu.
2. In-seminary training initiatives

Our goal: to reorient the seminary curriculum around the concept of “Theological Education as Formation for Ministry,” in which formation focuses upon the whole person, including knowledge, character, and skills.

Our strategy: to involve students in multiple and overlapping communities of learning, care, mentoring, and training. These communities include

- students with other students.
- students with faculty in an expanded “Readiness for Ministry” formation program.
- students with mentors/ministry practitioners.
- students in “teaching congregations.”

3. Post-seminary sustaining initiatives

Our goal: to sustain and enrich both ministry practitioners and seminary faculty.

Our strategy: to provide learning opportunities that maximize contact and interaction between faculty and ministry practitioners, including

- continuing education events on campus and across the country.
- a residency program that offers individually tailored learning opportunities for ministry practitioners seeking an extended, on-campus, educational experience.
- reading groups comprised of seminary faculty, pastors, and other ministry leaders who read and learn together.
- the Online Education Center, a web-based center for continuing education for pastors and lay persons.
- consultations between faculty, ministry practitioners, and seminary alumni which give opportunity for cross-fertilization and mutual enrichment.
How is God calling you?

Paul and Sheila Ryan
M.Div. and M.A. in Missions, Class of 2005

“God has given us a passion for communicating Christ and leading his people in Christ-centered worship. Calvin Seminary has trained us not only to speak and sing of his praises, but to be Christ to our neighbors and to the world.”

Calvin Theological Seminary will give you the tools to respond.

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