

THE CHURCH AND THE PROBLEM OF DIVORCE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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I. INTRODUCTION

In order that the reader might have perspective in reading this essay the following is set forth as answers to the why, what and how of this writing in terms of the basis for writing the problem of the essay and its method.

A. Basis For Writing. Current statistics suggest that one out of every four marriages end in divorce. Although such statistics are not an accurate indication of the total picture of family breakdown, they do suggest the tremendous amount of serious family problems in our times. Some authorities compare the divorce rate of the present with that of the past, and conclude that the family of today is in much more trouble now than it has ever been.

Most thinkers still hold to the opinion that divorce is not desirable, and that the church should seek to gain a better understanding of marriage, so that it, the church, can become more stabilized. However, although the church still holds that divorce is undesirable, it does not seem to be concerned to implement this sacred dogma through helping to stem the tide of broken marriages in our time. Thus, either the church's viewpoint is undesirable in our time, because it is not workable or the church must be about its father's business in helping to save marriages

that are being lost.

Being a citizen both of the church's tradition and of the contemporary world where divorce is our common lot, I find myself in a dilemma: Shall I forget about church dogma and about marital chaos? Shall I as pastor approach my community proclaiming the ancient dogma in the light of current facts? This is an issue which any contemporary pastor must resolve, if he is to be effective in his community regarding the marital crisis.

B. Problem Of The Essay. In this writing, we will give a comprehensive analysis of the church's position as it views divorce, and will weigh the merits of the church's view for our time. For, if the church has an obligation to declare the mind of Christ on this agonizing issue, it must be sure of what Christ would be saying, if he were speaking in the matrix of the twentieth century. For, Church dogmas have been revered before, only to find that they were not "of God," and were thus not workable for men. Thus, it might be that a "theological revolution" of the traditional church view in this matter is in order, since the church seems to be quite ineffective on this issue before us today. And, this is what we seek to make clearer in one way or another-- in this writing.

C. Method Of The Essay. In order to accomplish this clarifying purpose, this essay will employ a four-pronged approach. First, we will analyze the divorce problem in our times in chapter II.

Secondly, we will present the church's dogma on divorce in chapter III. Thirdly, we will evaluate the church's dogma on divorce in Chapter IV. And, fourthly, we will suggest solutions for stemming the tide of divorce in Chapter V.

II. DIVORCE IN OUR TIMES

Obtaining a divorce in the 20th century is an accepted mode of conduct, putting the divorce rate at an all time high in our times, statistically. Though statistics mean nothing in and of themselves, they do reveal that people's lives are shattered daily in mass, as a result of the quantity of marital breakdowns. Thus, let us see what divorce means and what kinds of problems emerge as a consequence of divorce.

A. Meaning Of Divorce. What is divorce? Put very simply, we can answer this question by saying that divorce is the process of "unmarrying a person." It is the legal provision for being released from the obligations of the contract of matrimony-- being the "last rung on the ladder" of marital or family breakdown and disorganization. It is the step which legalizes the separation of husband and wife, and the granting of custody to one or the other where children are involved-- usually their being granted to the mother. Divorce is "of marriage-- its "funeral" and "burial."

B. Causes And Problems Of Divorce. What are the causes of divorce, the "legal death" of marriage??? And, what are the consequent problems of this "funeral" and "burial" of marriages???

Truthfully speaking, it must be said that divorce itself is not the "cause" of marital disruption, but is the "result" of it. For, when the obvious "legal death" of marriage occurs in actual divorce, it is merely the revelation of the "spiritual death" of such marriages having occurred long before. Thus, when most couples seek "legal" divorce, it is because the "spiritual" divorce between the couple is already beyond repair.

However, there is a sense in which the divorce rate itself is "causal" to the divorce "problem". For, if divorces were not so easily obtained, more couples would perhaps endeavor to work through their marital difficulties and ~~save~~ their marriages. But, where getting a divorce is almost as easy as getting a "credit card", many couples often find themselves "over-spending" their "divorce charge cards". Thus, it is not surprising that one out of every four marriages contracted today end up in "marital bankruptcy".

Let us look at this abundant "marital bankruptcy" issue in terms of some specific causes and consequent problems, in two ways. First, let us look at its sociological causes and problems in terms of its urban and scientific setting in the twentieth century. And, secondly, let us view its psychological causes and problems from the viewpoint of the individual.

1. Urban and Scientific Causes and Problems. The high rate of divorce in the Western World has its roots in a change in the

social-cultural patterns of living in our civilization. Two characteristics may be emphasized. One is the scientific conquest of which has led the universe to industrialization. Scientifically, we are less involved in a physically exhaustive striving for the fundamentals of living, and have gained time and energy to concentrate on self-development and self-realization. The other is industrialization which has led to urbanization with the consequent fragmentation and depersonalization of all human relations -- including our family relations.

Now this concern for self-realization, on the one hand, and the fact of depersonalization, on the other hand, both in the living of same person in our times is what leads to family strife. For, all tensions and frustrations of our living bear fruit in the close relationship of marriage and family life. So, in a world where men live in a competitive, critical and often hostile environment and where they have to act, to play a role, to conform, to pretend, marriage and family life are bound to be affected tremendously.

Now, when this "split individual" comes to the confines of home and his family, he sheds all pretense and often allows the frustrations that have been his during the day to come out in hostility toward his family. Whereas, in previous generations, when there were large families at home-- including many children and other kinfolk in the household-- one could often find many shoulders at home to help bear his frustrations. And,

too, the surrounding neighborhood had a much more "personal air" about it, so that one might also find a few more shoulders in the community for helping in bearing his burdens.

But, with the reduction of personal relations to an "air of impersonalism" in our urbanized, industrialized, scientific environment today, the "amount of shoulders for personal relief" are greatly reduced. The marital partner is almost the "exclusive shoulder for personal relief" today. Thus, such exclusive amount of shoulders for personal relief of tensions "makes it almost unbearable for the sole partner to endure for a long period of time. It is almost too much to expect for "one single shoulder to bear".

1. Individual Causes and Problems. From the viewpoint of the individual, we find that modern men often enter adulthood little prepared for, children today are often reared in a fragmented society, living in smaller units of rather isolated families in an urbanized society- consequently, the individual grows up in a world filled with competitiveness and hostility. And, his emotional reactions are often developed within a small group of contacts, which more often than not are highly unsatisfactory from a "personal" point of view. His understanding of other human beings is often limited, because of the greatly diminished family unit. Thus, the contemporary individual makes his choices without much knowledge of human beings, and without the traditional support and vision and fool-

ishness of his clan, family peers and others.

Further, freedom of choice of today's individual in our fragmented society is influenced by the emotional conditioning under which he makes his choices. Projections of his own wishes and expectations, wishful thinking and unawareness of the short comings of human nature distort the "reality concept", and result in choices based on a very limited knowledge of the "humanity" of the marriage partner. And, even though Western civilization has made human dignity, the development of the human personality, and the inner integrity the center of its mandates, these very postulates often leads the individual into conflict, since the individual finds it difficult to accomplish these goals in his hostile contemporary environment.

Therefore, we see that the contemporary sociological issue has serious repercussions in the psychological being of individuals today. For, the way in which our present society is organized for living makes it difficult for today's individuals to become "mature" and "free" persons. And, because so many "immature" and "unfree" persons marry, it is more than miraculous that the divorce rate is not more than one out of four. And, further, it is also more than miraculous that we have as many "happy marriages" as we do in our times.

III. CHURCH DOGMA ON DIVORCE

Any intelligent approach to the position of the church and/or its ideologies on the question of divorce must begin with the Scriptural background, and must develop along the lines of how men have interpreted this Scripture through the ages. And on these two bases we can see better how we are faring as the contemporary church in this matter. Thus, let us look at the church's position on divorce in terms of its Biblical and its Historical Bases.

A. Biblical Perspective. The Old Testament is perfectly clear regarding divorce. For, the Law of Moses made provision for divorce, with a realistic allowance for the "hardness of men's hearts". For example, Deuteronomy 24:1 reads: "When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it comes to pass that she finds no favors in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her a bill of divorcement and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house.

Scholars consider this passage of scripture as a prime source for the predominant position of the Old Testament on divorce. Basically, two schools of thought have emerged in the interpretating this passage-- one conservative in its interpretation, and the other liberal. The more conservative group

of scholars under the leadership of Shammai, a Jewish scholar, interpreted this passage of Scripture to mean adultery, and restricted divorce to adultery alone. Hillel and his school read the passage more liberally, allowing that a man was justified in putting his wife away for any cause, even burning his supper. This, they declared, was not to encourage irresponsibility, but to emphasize the importance of inner harmony in the family.

It was evidently this difference between the two schools of thoughts which formed the background for the Pharisees' question to Jesus in Mark 10:2-9. See also Parallel passages in Matthew 19:3-9 and Luke 16:18. And, Jesus' answer to their question about divorce was seemingly absolutist. Jesus seemed to be saying that there is no place for divorce in the divine plan in that passage. This most people believe was the position of Jesus on this subject. However, in Matthew there seems to be an "escape clause" to the absolutist position of Jesus in the passage cited above, where Jesus is reported to have said that divorce can be permitted on the basis of "unchastity". But, most scholars agree that this is probably an added position by Matthew to give some little laxity to the absolutist position apparently taken by Jesus.

The Apostle Paul seems to have joined the absolutist position regarding divorce. For, Paul saw the covenant between man and wife as an analogue of the covenant between Christ and His Church, and hence indissoluble. So, there was no place for

divorce in Paul's thinking-- not even when believers and non-believers were married.

Now, with St. Paul being recognized as the "Chief Interpreter" of Christ, and with Paul taking an absolutist position on divorce, it can fairly well be concluded that the New Testament is in essence against "absolutely" divorce. However, it must be remembered that Paul discusses the question of divorce from the male viewpoint, because of his patriarchal viewpoint. So, with the emerging idea of the equality of women as a genuine theological idea, the issue can be raised as to whether St. Paul can remain the "Chief Interpreter" of Christ in our new age with a different viewpoint.

B. Historical Perspective. We look now at the attitude on divorce by the "fellowship of believers" in history--and, we find that two differing attitudes have been taken in history-- one the Catholic, and the other the predominantly Protestant, which affects contemporary theological thinking.

1. Catholic.¹ Down to Augustine the church had remained static in its position toward divorce. The "absolutist" position seemingly taken by Jesus with the reinforcement of Paul was the final word on the subject. The next giant profoundly affecting Christian thought was St. Augustine, who reinforced the traditional position. He reinforced the barriers around marriage

1. By "Catholic", we are referring to the "Roman Catholic Church"; though we recognize that the "Greek Orthodox Church" and the "Anglican Church" are called "Catholic" also, or at least "inclined" toward "Catholicism".

by calling it a "Sacrament" which meant not so much a new interpretation, but simply undergirding the tradition he received from the Church into which he was baptized. So, with St. Augustine the position of the Catholic Church was "fixed"; and from that position it never wavered.

To be sure, the Catholic Church has encountered many heart-rending problems through its "absolutist" stands. And, they have had to make a variety of provisions to deal with divorced Catholic members, in order to adjust to state regulations. But, theoretically at least, the Catholic Church stands with the "absolutist" tradition regarding divorce-- "no divorce". "That which God hath joined together, let no man put assunder", the Catholics would say.

2. Predominantly Protestant. The position of the Protestant bodies on the issue of divorce has its rootage in the Lutheran and Calvinist traditions. These two founders of the major Protestant thought held basically to a more liberal attitude on the question of divorce. For, both took the position that divorce could be permitted on the basis of adultery.

They grounded their position on the Scripture where divorce may be permitted on the basis of unchastity-- with the guilty partner cutting himself off from the "vine" of marriage as a rotten branch, and with the innocent party free and privileged to remarry. But, the condition of "unchastity" was the only basis permissible for divorce in their thinking, since this was the

only "Biblical Basis" evident in the New Testament.

Now, the many "Sons of these two Reformers" have not all been obedient to their "Biblical Basis" for divorce. For, many Protestant bodies today have a very "relaxed attitude" toward the basis for divorcement-- being much more liberal than the "unchastity basis" of Luther and Calvin. At least, if these denominations are not "more relaxed and more liberal" than the Reformers in "theory", it is a known fact that many Protestant Denominations today condone divorce on more than one basis in "practical outlook".

Thus, whereas the "absolutist" position of Catholics raises problems of one kind, as they try to "accommodate" their "rigid" position to the exigencies of the time, the "liberal" position of many protestant denominations also raises problems of another kind, as they try to "relate" their "loose" position to their eternal heritage. And, that leaves our Heavenly Father with two kinds of "Prodigal Sons" to do his bidding-- one being a "Pharisaically Sinful Son" keeping the law of the household "grudgingly", and the other being a "Spendthrift, Sinful Son" breaking the law of the household "riotously". Who shall be judged the "greater Sinner?" That is the question that leads to our next consideration.

IV. EVALUATION OF DOGMA ON DIVORCE

We turn now to an appraisal, that is to estimate the value, of the various dogmas on divorce and their implications for resolving the issue of how the church can be more effective in relation to the menace of divorce in our times. And, in appraising the dogma on the church regarding the issue of divorce, we will endeavor to show that both Catholics and Protestants must reconsider their policies on this "hellish issue" in our times.

A. Catholic Evaluation. That the causes and problems of divorce are a "fact of life" is the basis shortcoming, it is of the "rigid" Catholic point of view on divorce. For, it is no longer a matter of merely trying to prevent divorces through Church "Injunctions", but really a matter of "redeeming the times that are corrupted by tragic divorce everywhere". Thus, to take a stand on a "Heavenly Principle" that does not become "Incarnate" to deal with living issues is a contradiction of the meaning of Jesus' coming.

For, the "word in the Beginning" made no provision for "Sin under any circumstance". But sin did occur; and provision was made by the coming of Christ to redeem that which was never con-

doned by God from the beginning. Even so, it would appear that the Catholics need to "come down from heaven on this issue to seek and to save those who are lost in the throes of divorce-ment".

For, of what value is it for Catholics to claim that they have "kept the faith once delivered", if they are not "delivering men from despair". Is keeping an "impersonal faith" greater than "saving men?" Were men made for this divine law on divorcement, or was the divine law of divorcement made for men? And, yet the Catholic church would "saddle broken men and women and children with exclusion from the Holy Sacrament" when this divine law on divorcement is broken.

What can be more cruel than that? For, persons who experience divorce are "already saddled" with the burden of emotional problems-- frustration, guilt, loneliness, feelings of inferiority, and intense discouragement from their shattered marital dreams. The issue of facing friends, then work, and their family is often too much to bear, with the consequence of such persons "turning within themselves". Thus, to exclude them also from the innermost meaning of the church's fellowship, the sacrament, is to be "more than cruel to a person already beaten".

This "Prodigal Son" who stayed at home to attend to the law of the household" must reconsider its attitude toward men with broken lives who need some place to call home. For, if the church and its Sacraments were not designed for "Sinners"--

"Repentent Sinners" to be sure-- then, "for whom" were these things designed?? And, who shall be able to partake of them, since we are "All Sinners" before God??? So, shall we remain "Miserable Sinners" by remaining together in an "impossible marital situation," just so that we can not be "excommunicated or barred from the Sacraments?"

If that be the case, then it is reasonably understandable why many Catholics choose to forget about God, the church, and its Sacraments in order to find some degree of happiness in the divorced state--even if it means that they are "Mortally Divorced Sinners." For, the "rigidity" of the Catholic position on this matter of divorce leaves many people "no other meaningful alternative" than to become "Mortally Divorced Sinners."

B. Protestant Evaluation. While it might be that the foregoing evaluation of the Catholic position is calling for a more "liberal doctrine" on divorce, we hasten to say here that the Protestant position on divorce should be more "rigid in theory". Granted, that Catholics should be more "redemptive in their practices" toward divorced persons, but we are not advocating that divorce become an "acceptable church dogma in theory." For, just as we must be "redemptive in practice toward sinners in general," we could never accept the idea "that sin is all right in theory." "Divorce" as well as "Sin" must always be concerned or conceived of as "evil"-- our suffering to be redemptive toward them only because we "love men", but not

because we "agree with their sins."

So, herein lies the great weakness of the "loose" Protestant ideas toward this monstrous evil in our midst--"divorce, the death of holy matrimony," and, it is because of this "loose" Protestant idea" in theory" concerning divorce that the "legal laws on divorce have become lax." For, the American "Legal Structure" is based upon the "Protestant Ethic"-- with Protestants predominating in numbers in America, and thus influencing legislation in America through their votes. Thus, if divorces are as easy to obtain as getting a "charge card," then the Protestant "looseness in theory" can be "charged with our over-spending in divorce."

And, what can be more cruel than that? For, people who have been "brutalized by law-standards and compromised convictions" in all of their sociological and psychological influences in our impersonal secular arena need something to "look up to as being holy". And, if marriage is not set forth as "being holy in Protestant theory, then where is the idea of the "holy to be found" by men today?

This "Prodigal Son" who left his "holy home" to squander away our holy substance about holy matrimony in its theory" must also reconsider its attitude about "holy laws" which men must have before them, if "men themselves are to be more holy." For, if God Himself, the "Holy" One of Israel, is not the "Real Contractor" of our marriages, then "how" are they to be placed on

solid foundation in the beginning? And, if they are not placed on solid foundation due to what we "think" about marriage "theologically", then why should men "even think twice" about destroying their marriages, when the least problem arises therein.

Thus, it is also reasonably understandable as to why so many Protestants choose to forget about their vows made at the "altar of Matrimony." For, even though we "Protestant Ministers say the word Holy," the couples know that "we" do not really mean that in "theory". And, "they" do not really mean it, when "they" say, "I do". For, the "looseness" of the Protestant position on the matter of divorce is the "fertilizer for the harvest of the whirlwinds of divorce".

V. TOWARD A SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF DIVORCE

If the "mounting tragedies of divorce" are to be dealt with effectively, the Christian Church itself must confess for its own irresponsibility in this matter. And must assume its responsibility as a relevant servant to the issue of marriage. For, the church has been a "silent partner" in the growing "over-emphasis" of materialism in Western culture--which has caused the break-down of basic, personal relationships in all areas of life, including marital and family relationships.

Everywhere we turn, including marital and family relationships, we find men "selling their very souls" for "more things" rather than for "better personal relationships." And, all during this "materialistic build-up" in our culture, the church has "joined the parade of materialistic marchers--or, at least, has given tacit approval by its silence." Thus, "repentance" by the church is in order, if it is even to begin to "see" where its responsibility lies in this "tragic issue of divorce".

And, when the church "repents of its sins" in this matter, it must assume the responsibility to "wage an aggressive war" against this "monstrous evil of divorce". But, "how" and in "what ways" can the church "wage an aggressive campaign" in this matter? Must it find "new programs" or "revitalize its basic

programs? "The solution being suggested here is the latter-- the" revitalization of its basic, traditional programs" as aids toward resolving marital problems.

A. Preaching Aid on Divorce. The issue of communicating new "spiritual emphasis" in our times to the mass of "materialistic-minded people" is laid at the door of the church's best "mass communicative media"-- namely, "preaching". For, unless a "new spiritual idea" is gotten to a mass of people in a "hurry", it will be futile to try to "stem the marital crisis". For, each marriage is put under terrific pressure due to the "social milieu" in which that marriage takes place and is lived. Thus, one way that the church must endeavor to "evangelize the social order" with a "new spiritual idea" about its "basic values" must be on a "massive scale"-- namely, through "Massive Preaching". So, a relevant ministry with a relevant message must be trained and employed in our church.

B. Christian Education Aid on Divorce. Another basic means needed to communicate a "new spiritual idea" about basic values "men in our cultural" has to do with "Christian Education"-- a means by which the members of the church are "nurtured and nourished on basic spiritual values" throughout their lives. Possibly, the reason why "materialism has taken over" in our culture is due to the lack of effective teaching of "spiritual values" to the members of the church itself. And, thus, the

church has not had a "prepared army of seasoned veterans" to wage war effectively against the "invading monster of materialism". So, a stronger program of Christian Education in our churches must be enhanced by professional Directors of Christian Education as a "standardized ministry" in the churches.

C. Worship Aid On Divorce. Still another basic means needed to communicate a "new spiritual idea" about "basic values" to men in our culture can be found in "meaningful Christian Worship". Now, there is an old adage which goes like this: "those who pray together stay together". Now, to be sure, this old adage is genuinely true--provided that the worship and prayer are "creative and meaningful ". For, "uncreative and unmeaningful" worship and prayer in many of our churches are probable causes for many persons seeking after "other areas of refreshment" for their "battered lives". And, if most men understand what worship and prayer mean by means of what they experience in our churches, then this is the probable cause for many persons also giving up "private devotions" at home. So, here in this area of Worship which should "dramatizes spiritual values through ritual," we find another significant aid that can be provided to "arrest this marital monster".

D. Counseling Aid on Divorce. Now, the crucial aid needed in this "crisis of marriage" is much more "pastoral counseling" to marital situations "near the rocks". To be sure, the previously mentioned aids "do help" in this crisis. But, those aids are

"predominantly social in nature", while marriage is "predominantly private in nature". Thus, "Pastoral Counseling" is sorely needed as an aid to get to the "roots" of many of the "false values" in the "private thinking" of married couples. And, to do this "private communicating of new, spiritual values", we recommend a "twofold, aggressive attack" on this problem.

1. Pre-Marital Counseling Aid. On the one hand, the church must "make known" (advertize) and "provide for" (have competent staff for) guidance to "young, starry-eyed couples" seeking to enter the "Holy Estate of Matrimony". For, all too many young couples enter upon this "Holy Estate" with "cockeyed, false values" gained from a "cockeyed, false value system" promoted by our culture. And, where anyone begins operating on the basis of "cockeyed ideas", including marital operations, a problem "must" occur because a problem was "planted at the very beginning". So, we recommend a sound, strong program of "Pre-Marital Pastoral Counseling" BEFORE every marriage ceremony performed by a Pastor. And, we further recommend that there be "several counseling sessions" BEFORE performing the ceremony, since "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" in all situations, including marriage.

2. Marital Counseling Aid. No matter how much "preventative" effort is put forth BEFORE marriage, there will always be the need to wrestle with problems that emerge DURING marriage-- which means that a program of "Marital Counseling" must be "made

known" and "provided for", also. For, previous information given to the "head" BEFORE marriage does not preclude the "necessary, living adjustment" to that previously given meaning DURING marriage. And, too, many "starry-eyed couples" do not always "actually hear" what is being said to them in "Pre-marital counseling", since they can "only hear and see each other"; then. So, they often need to "rehear" what they "did not hear" BEFORE-- "Christian Counsel" through "Marital Counseling" DURING their period of "marital dischord and adjustment" as a "cure" for their marital ailments.

E. Summary on Recommended Solutions. Now, in recommending the above four aids that must employ to "attack this marital monster," we do so with the full knowledge that even this is not the full solution to the problem. For, after all that the church can do and be regarding this problem, the individual couples themselves are still "free to accept or to reject" the church's offer of solution. However, we are fully aware "that the church cannot do less than this" and expect to "save its own soul".

For, if the church is not involved in the "redemptive process" of restoring "Adams and Eves" to their "Divine Obligation of Being One Flesh", then not only "God Himself" but also "Adams and Eves Themselves" will forsake and forget about the "Irrelevant Church". For, if the church is not involved in the "redemption" of the "basic institution for life itself", then it should "get out of the business of redemption altogether".

For, no where else can there be "deeper hurt that tries men's souls" than in the "intimate tragedy of marriage".

Now, in order to conclude this essay on a note of "optimism" in the midst of a "pessimistic reality", let me leave the reader with this writer's basic Christian conviction about all problems of life, including marital problems. Because, I believe in the "ultimate power and goodness of God", I am persuaded that some means will be found to save and to stabilize the basic institution of marriage which God has ordained and wills to be. In spite of the many irrelevant churches on the issue of marital tragedies, I still am convinced that "eye both not seen nor ear heard" about what God will and can do to protect the institution of marriage in his kingdom.