

by John Clark Sr.

### Introduction

There are few areas of believers' lives where more harm has been inflicted upon hurting souls by ministers themselves than in the turbulent and delicate area of marriage, divorce, and remarriage. I have seen hearts broken, and homes divided, by the foolish counsel of religious men, well-meaning certainly, but without that healing touch of God's truth, which binds up the broken-hearted, and sets the captives free. *"The wisdom that is from above", wrote James, "is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy."* I am willing to put the following instruction concerning the issues of marriage to this test, confident that the One who allowed me to understand His truth will judge me guiltless in passing on the truth to others.

Within the Church, there are three groups of people, so far as marital status is concerned, which are sub-divided as follows:

1. The "unmarried"
  - A. never been married.
  - B. widowed.
  - C. divorced
2. The believer married to another believer.
3. The believer married to an unbeliever.

Before giving counsel to anyone, any pastor worth hearing will first determine to which group the person whom he is counselling belongs, because the counsel of God is different for each group. Having made that determination, the understanding counsellor will search for other distinctions within each group. For example, if the believer he is counselling is separated or divorced, is the believer he is counselling separated or divorced from another believer or from an unbeliever? And if he or she is separated from another believer, was that other believer guilty of infidelity? Or, for another example, if the believer being counselled is married to an unbeliever, is the unbeliever a good spouse, faithful and loving, or is that spouse abusive and unfaithful? Such considerations make a tremendous difference in the counsel which should be given. The commandments of God are always directed toward specific individuals or groups. If, for example, someone in Israel had assumed that God's commandment to make incense for the altar was for everyone, they would have lost their lives (Ex.30:22-38). That commandment was only for the priests. Other commandments were only for Israel's judges. Others, for every Israelite. It is always of first importance, when considering the meaning of any of the wonderful commandments of God, to ascertain to whom God is speaking. Failure to do so could result in tragic consequences.

This is the unfortunate situation with many now who, upon reading some of Jesus' words concerning marriage, have unwisely assumed that those words apply to all marriages. The heartache and confusion which this has caused is immeasurable. With each new tale of a home being divided, or a young life being robbed of its joy by such a misunderstanding, my fervor to make known the truth of the matter grows. As the young man, Elihu, spoke only after waiting for some wisdom to be shown by the elders before him, I have waited in vain for the recognized leaders of the Church to speak out clearly on this matter, but they have not. And I ask myself, is this silence the result of ignorance? Is it that they know that it isn't wise to speak out on the matter of divorce and remarriage? Is it merely the typical impatience of youth that stirs me to speak? Or is it now, as Elihu concluded, *"Great men are not always wise. Neither do the aged understand judgment"* (Job 32:9)?

But the pain that I have seen inflicted upon earnest and humble souls by well-intentioned but ill-informed ministers is so great, and the availability of truth that would set these damaged lives free is so scanty, that I am compelled by a sense of decency to provide what I feel is the simple truth of the gospel concerning marital issues, as the Bible provides us with it.

To make it easy for the reader to find the instructions in the Bible which apply generally to him, I have separated the instructions into three sections, giving instructions dealing with each of the three general groups of people in the church as concerns marriage: unmarried, married to a believer, and married to an unbeliever. Everyone in the church will find his place in one of these three groups. My hope is that you will gain from these instructions concerning marriage a deeper appreciation of God's love and compassion for men and women who find themselves in unsavory and difficult situations.

I should also note that in no verse of the Holy Scripture can one find instructions from God to the unconverted world at large concerning marital issues. The commandments of God which we find in the scriptures are, without exception, written, or in the case of Jesus' words, spoken, to those who were in covenant with God. The standing commandment for sinners is, "repent." Once a sinner obeys that essential commandment and is converted to Christ, then the instructions concerning marriage will apply. Because of the ruinous doctrines of "Christianity" which welcomes as converted those who never have been - we must now define "converted" or "born again". "Born again" or "converted" are those people, and ONLY those people, who have received the Spirit of God - the baptism of the holy Ghost with the evidence of speaking in other tongues. If you have not had that experience, the marital counsel for "believers" is not yet for you, though if you obey God, it will be, for God *"gives the holy Ghost to all who obey him"* (Acts 5:32).

### THE UNMARRIED

#### Never Married

For those who have never married, the instructions are, to control the lusts of the flesh, to be morally pure before the Lord, and to marry if they desire to do so. For those who *"have power over their own will"* and have determined to remain single, permission, even encouragement, is given to remain unmarried (1Cor.7:7-9). But this is a choice which must be made *"in his heart"* (1Cor.7:37). Celibacy cannot be imposed upon anyone. No one but God has that authority, and he has not done it. For

those who desire it, permission is given to marry. Marriage is honorable before the Lord. Absolutely forbidden, however, is for the unmarried believer to marry an unconverted person. Marriage of believers to unbelievers is one issue which is non-negotiable with the Almighty. It is sin. King David warned the young man Solomon (unfortunately, to no avail) to avoid entanglements with ungodly women. David's wise words to his son are found in Proverbs: *"For the commandment is a lamp; and the law is light; and the reproofs of instruction are the way of life. To keep thee from the evil woman, from the flattery of the tongue of a strange woman. Lust not after her beauty in thine heart, neither let her take thee with her eyelids. For by means of a whorish woman a man is brought to a piece of bread, and the adulteress will hunt for the precious life..."*

*Let not thine heart decline to her ways, go not astray in her paths. For she hath cast down many wounded. Yea, many strong men have been slain by her. Her house is the way to hell, going down to the chambers [bedrooms] of death...*

*A foolish woman is clamorous. She is simple, and knoweth nothing. For she sitteth at the door of her house, on a seat in the high places of the city, to call passengers who go right on their ways. Whoso is simple, let him turn in hither. And as for him that [lacketh] understanding, she saith to him, "Stolen waters are sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant." But he knoweth not that the dead are there, and that her guests are in the depths of hell." (from Prov.6,7,8)*

The penalties which God ordained for immorality were severe. Accordingly, the warnings against immorality were stern. The death penalty was to be imposed for fornication (Dt.22:20-21; 1Cor.6:9-10), adultery (Lev.20:10; Dt.22:22-24), whoredom (Lev. 21:9; Eph.5:5), rape (Dt.22:25-27), incest (Lev.18:6-18,29; 20:11-12, etc.; Dt.27:20,22,23), homosexuality (Lev.18:22; 20:13; Dt.23:17-18), bestiality (Ex.22:19; Lev.20:15-16; 18:23; Dt.27:21). *"Ye shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy."*

Paul himself counselled the never-married men in the church to consider the spiritual consequences of marriage. *"I would have you without carefulness"* he wrote. *"He that is unmarried careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord. But he that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife" (1Cor.7:32-33).* And to the never-married women, he wrote, *"The unmarried woman careth for the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit, but she that is married careth for the things of the world, how she may please her husband" (1Cor.7:34).* So, Paul rightly felt that an unmarried person is in a better position to give full attention to the work of the Lord than is a married person. However, Paul quickly and wisely lets the church know that he is not commanding any never-married person either to marry or not to marry. That is altogether a decision for the individual to make in his own heart.

The never-married believer's liberty to marry or not to marry is an unalienable privilege in Christ. Paul spoke of evil men who would come, forbidding some to marry (1Tim.4:1-3). These false teachers were, and are, believers in Christ, who *"depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils."* The never-married believer is absolutely free to choose whatever he or she will, concerning marriage. The only restriction is that, if the believer decides to marry, he or she must marry another believer! Would to God that this warning were sounded from every pulpit: **MARRIAGE TO AN UNBELIEVER IS SIN! And lest we be misunderstood, we are saying, THE MARRIAGE OF A PERSON WHO HAS BEEN BAPTIZED WITH THE HOLY GHOST WITH THE EVIDENCE OF SPEAKING IN OTHER TONGUES, TO A PERSON WHO HAS NOT RECEIVED THE BAPTISM OF THE HOLY GHOST, IS A SIN!**

#### **Widows**

Throughout the Bible, we see in God a great tenderness and concern for widows. God repeatedly commanded the Israelites to show compassion to the widows and orphans in Israel. One of the greatest indications of the righteousness of Job was that he *"caused the widow's heart sing for joy" (Job 29:13).*

In the main, the instructions for widows concerning marriage are the same as for the never-married. They are permitted to remarry. The only exceptions concern who may marry a widow. Under the first covenant, the priests of Israel were forbidden to marry a widow, unless her previous husband had also been a priest (Ezek.44:22). The scriptures forbid only one person ever to marry a widow: the high priest of Israel. He alone was required to marry *"a virgin from his own people" (Lev.21:14).* So, the restrictions were not for the widows. They could remarry. The restrictions applied to the priesthood.

In one other place we find a widow's remarriage discouraged. In 1Tim.5, Paul discusses the church's care for widows. He states that the church should support financially only those widows who are advanced in years and who have consistently ministered to the needs of the saints over a period of time. *"But the younger widows refuse, for when they have begun to wax wanton against Christ, they will marry, having damnation, because they have cast off their first faith."* Paul is not saying that if a widow remarries she has forsaken the faith. He is saying that if a young woman is *"taken into the number"* of those the church supports financially, she will become *"idle, wandering about from house to house. And not only idle, but tattlers also and busybodies, speaking things they ought not."* Far from teaching that the young widows must never remarry, Paul continues his discourse by saying, *"I will therefore that the younger women marry, bear children, guide the house, give none occasion for the adversary to speak reproachfully" (1Tim.5:13-14).* Paul's concern was that, if the church made it so that the young widows had no need to work, but had excessive time on their hands, then they would become lax in faith and become easy targets for Satan, and lured away from Christ by an attractive unbeliever.

It would be very good if a young widow found a godly man to marry, though some may not think so. But can we deny that it was a good thing for Boaz to marry the widowed stranger named Ruth? Or did the widower Abraham sin after Sarah's death, by marrying Keturah? Or did the wise and righteous Abigail do wickedly by accepting David's proposal of marriage after God had destroyed her evil husband Nabal? Time after time, God gives us examples of righteous widows remarrying, and of righteous people marrying them.

Just a little experience teaches that a young person who has tasted the benefits of married life typically has natural urges for companionship that are exceptionally strong. To those who diligently seek it, God gives grace to control the natural passions, but it is a great trial of faith for a previously married young person to keep himself or herself pure. Acknowledging this fact of life, Paul

writes to the unmarried and to widows, *"it is good if they abide [remain single] even as I. But if they cannot contain, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to burn [i.e. with desire]" (1Cor.7:8-9)*. Paul, knowing the will of God, permits, and even desires, that widows and widowers in the church remarry.

### **Divorced**

If the divorce occurred prior to conversion, it is only a part of that sinful life which is now, in Christ, done away. So far as permission to remarry is concerned, the wise and merciful church will not consider that previous divorce. A divorce, or ten of them, which took place when one was in sin is a dead issue, being part of the life of sin and rebellion which is now repented of and turned from. It is washed away by the blood of Christ, never to be remembered against the believer again. Paul wrote, *"If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature. Old things are passed away. Behold, ALL THINGS are become new."* Every part of the old life of sin is gone. Unfortunately, some would say that in Christ all things are become new -- except one's marital history. But their unwillingness to forgive a sinner's previous marriage(s) is not a reflection of God's heart. When a sinner comes to Jesus, he is given a new life. Whatever failures occurred in the past are gone, completely and forever. A sinner who is washed from sin by the blood of Christ is free, and worthy, to marry in the kingdom of God, if he so desires. In truth, if a sinner suffers a divorce and then turns from sin and is converted to the way of the Lord, he really doesn't belong in the category of "divorced", for he is truly a "new creature", with no error of the past obstructing his pursuit of a quiet and peaceful life on this earth, and with no divorce on his record.

A believer who, while in sin, lived in constant fornication, giving himself over to the lust of the flesh, and flaunting the laws of both God and man, would be allowed to marry in the kingdom of God, according to the never-remarry fanatics, as long as he or she had not married, but the believer who, while in sin, refused to compromise his or her good moral standard and married in good faith, resisting the lusts of this flesh, would be denied this privilege in Christ. Unbridled sin is rewarded, and fear of God is punished. This is not the way of the Lord. All sinners, once their sins are washed away by the blood of Christ, are free to marry in the kingdom of God, regardless of their past marital history.

An examination of the commandments concerning believers who divorce is shortly to follow.

### **BELIEVERS MARRIED TO BELIEVERS**

Jesus said, *"What God hath joined together, let no man put apart" (Mt.19:6)*. What Jesus is saying in this verse is that, if God puts a marriage together, no man can "put it asunder." There are many marriages "joined together" by men rather than by God. Men, therefore, are able to annul it, or to lure one spouse away from the other. Not so with a marriage joined together by God. When God puts a marriage together, men cannot break it apart.

The spiritual experience of being joined together by God will comfort both the marriage partners through very difficult times, and serves as an anchor for the marriage tossed by the ordinary trials of this life. Paul warned those who were considering marriage that they *"will have trouble in the flesh"*. Nevertheless, *"if thou marry, thou hast not sinned."* And, in fact, *"he that giveth her in marriage doeth well" (1Cor.7:38)*. Solomon said, *"Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favor of the Lord" (Prov.18:22)*. A man with a wife who trusts in Christ possesses great riches. "Her price", wrote the wise man, "is far above rubies." And he is a fool who fails to value her as such.

Paul wrote to the believing wives, *"submit yourselves to your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church...therefore as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing" (Eph.5:22-24)*. Peter echoed this godly counsel when he wrote, *"Ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands, that if any obey not the word, they also without the word may be won by the [conduct] of the wives, while they behold your chaste [conduct] coupled with fear....For after this manner in the old time the holy women also, who trusted in God, adorned themselves, being in subjection unto their own husbands. Even as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him "lord." Whose daughters ye are, as long as ye do well...." (1Pet.3:1-6)*.

Simply put, the Lord expects his married daughters to behave themselves with humility, sobriety, and purity, trusting in God, rearing the children in the fear and admonition of the Lord, and submitting to her own husband "as unto the Lord."

A wife who is belligerent and domineering is akin to a curse: to be avoided at all costs. *"It is better to dwell in the wilderness, than with a contentious and an angry woman", observed Solomon (Prov.21:19)*. It is a fascinating insight into Solomon's nature that he would compare a contentious woman to a continual, irritating drip...drip...drip (Prov.19:13; 27:15). It is easy to see that Solomon, wise as he was, was the type of man who would be driven to distraction by a leaky faucet! Agur, the prophet, noted as well that quarrelsome wives are a plague to the earth itself (Prov.30:23). The good news for believing wives is that, in Christ, she need never resort to contentiousness, that the only way to accomplish what is right is to behave the way Christ has commanded her to behave. Otherwise, she does not accomplish good; she only exacerbates the problem.

To the believing husbands, Paul wrote, *"Love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it. Men ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. ....Let every one of you so love his wife even as himself, and the wife see that she reverence her husband" (Eph.5:25,28,33; also Col.3:19)*. Peter gave these instructions to the believing husbands: *"Ye husbands, dwell with [your wives] according to knowledge, giving honor unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers be not hindered" (1Pet.5:7)*.

So far as holiness is concerned, the Lord demands more of his married sons than he does of his married daughters. More humility is required of the man than of the woman, just as Christ is more humble than is the church. Simply to "submit yourselves" is easy. To be required to be the head of anything as Christ is to the church is a heavy requirement. *"To whom much is given, much is required"*, said Jesus. And if the husband's place at the head of the family unit seems lofty, one shouldn't lose sight of the immense responsibility which attends that office. It is not a position which permits abuse or arrogance, when its calling is rightly fulfilled.

Fidelity to the marriage covenant was expected of both the man and woman, contrary to what many seem to think. The men in Israel infuriated the Lord by forsaking their Israelite wives for the more sensual heathen women. God felt very deeply the pain of the betrayed women in Israel, and was vehement in his denunciation of their unfaithful husbands: ***"Judah hath dealt treacherously, and an abomination is committed in Israel and in Jerusalem. For Judah hath profaned the holiness of the Lord which he loved, and hath married the daughter of a strange god. The Lord will cut off the man that doeth this, the master and the scholar, [and the priest], out of the tabernacles of Jacob...."***

Then, in reference to the broken-hearted cries of the forsaken wives in Israel, God gives this touching description of their tearful pleas to Him, with a stern warning of the condemnation to come to their unfaithful husbands: ***"And this have ye done again, covering mine altar with tears, with weeping, and with crying out, insomuch that he regardeth not the offering any more, or receiveth it at your hand. Yet ye say, 'why?' Because the Lord hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously. Yet she is thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant. And did he not make one [in marriage]...that he might seek a godly seed? Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none of you deal treacherously against the wife of his youth" (Mal.3:11-16).***

God was consistently clear in his insistence that the wives in Israel be cared for and treated with respect. If a man took one of his slave girls to wife, then was displeased with her, he was forbidden to reduce her again to the status of a slave. She must be allowed to be redeemed by her own family, if she must leave his house. If he had betrothed her to his son, then from that time ***"he shall deal with her after the manner of daughters."*** If he takes another wife besides the slave-girl, ***"her food, her raiment, and her duty of marriage [i.e. sexual relations], he shall not diminish" (Ex.21:8-11).*** So, a wife from the lowest stratum of Israel's society was to be cared for and given the respect due one of her high position in life's order. But even more revealing than this, is God's commandment concerning treatment for young heathen women, taken captive as spoils of war: ***"When thou goest forth to war against thine enemies, and the Lord thy God hath delivered them into thine hands, and thou hast taken them captive, and seest among the captives a beautiful woman, hast a desire unto her, that thou wouldest have her to thy wife, Then thou shalt bring her home to thy house, and she shall shave her head, and pare her nails. and she shall put the raiment of her captivity from off her, and shall remain in thine house, and bewail her father and her mother a full month. And after that, thou shalt go in unto her, and be her husband, and she shall be thy wife. And it shall be, if thou have no delight in her, then thou shalt let her go whither she will. But thou shalt not sell her at all for money, thou shalt not make merchandise of her, because thou hast humbled her" (Dt.21:13-14).***

Is it not an indication of the compassion of God for the defeated, the downtrodden, the hopeless, that he would command his sons to allow a heathen woman time to recuperate from the trauma of war before taking her to his bedchamber? Does that not indicate a tenderness toward even those who have never known him? I think it is particularly impressive that the time God required the Israelite men to give to those women to mourn was the same amount of time God gave Israel to mourn the loss of Moses (Dt.34:8). Pain is pain.

There are many other examples of God's care for and love for his daughters in Israel who were married. The notion that a woman was considered as nothing, and were abused with God's approval is a result of ignorance of the scriptures. The Lord kept the evil hand of men back from their corrupt designs, demanding rest for the slaves at least one day in seven, and provision for the poor from everyone's fields, justice for the outcasts even if they were from a foreign land, and honor and consideration be given every wife, even if she came from the lowliest home, or no home at all. God would not permit the males in Israel to fight the battles of the Lord, nor conduct any other business which would take him from his wife, for at least one year after they were married -- not for the man's sake, but for the young woman so recently taken from her family to be his wife (Dt.24:5). God is the best friend women have ever had, or any one else, for that matter. ***"Marriage is honorable in all"***, wrote the New Covenant teacher, and God has laid out for us all to see how to participate in the honor of it. May God grant us the grace to do so.

There is no real controversy that I know of, concerning the conduct which God requires of His children who are married. Fidelity, purity, and charity are attributes which will never be lacking in the life of an effective believer in Christ. The controversies, and there are many, center on the matters of divorce and remarriage. So, let us examine with a firmly Spirit-led and Biblical perspective on these extremely delicate and important subjects.

If divorce involves two believers, remarriage is simply forbidden. Reconciliation is possible. The two believers do not have to remain separated. But remarriage to others is not permitted to two believers who divorce. They must remain single until Jesus comes, or be reconciled to one another. Even in the Law of Moses, God forbade a man to marry his wife's sister while his wife was still living (Lev.18:18). If a believing man were to divorce a believing woman and then marry another believing woman, he would be doing precisely that. He would be marrying his wife's sister (in Christ), thus causing unnecessary division in the family of God. Moreover, if a believer leaves his believing spouse and marries another believer, not only has he committed spiritual incest with his living wife's sister, he has committed adultery against his wife, thus giving his wife grounds upon which she may divorce him and remarry - but again, only in the Lord. The simple rule to remember concerning separated believers is that separated believers may not marry. They may be reconciled to one another, but never another believer while the first spouse is still living and has not been immoral.

According to the Bible, however, reconciliation is permitted only if neither of the two marry and divorce someone else during the separation (Dt.24:1-4). God in no way endorses rotating marriage partners. I do not believe that it is the will of God under this New Covenant, for believers to partake of the carnival atmosphere which now surrounds the world's idea of marriage. It is a holy institution, and should be entered into with all sincerity and commitment. Anything less than that is ungodly and unworthy of the blessing of Christ. In the world to come, marriage and reproduction will be forgotten experiences, ***"for in the resurrection they***

*neither marry, nor are given in marriage" (Mt.22:30)*, but so far as this life is concerned, marriage between two believers is to be permanent.

When Jesus spoke concerning the issue of divorce and remarriage, this was the situation to which he was referring. Jesus never spoke to the issue of a believer married to an unbeliever. Neither did he, nor Paul, nor any other biblical writer, ever give any instructions concerning marriage to the world at large. When Paul gave instructions for marriages wherein one believed and one did not, he never spoke to the unbeliever. All his instructions were written to the believer in that situation. And his instructions for saints in that situation differed from his instructions for saints who were married to other believers. When Paul wrote concerning believers married to one another, his instructions were identical to the words of Jesus. In fact, in that case, Paul merely repeated the Master's words (1Cor.7:10; cp.Mt.19:5:32). To wit, the believer who divorces another believer may never remarry. But what, one may wonder, if one of the married believers turns away from Christ and abandons his believing spouse?

There is no one who is more practical than God. In a sense, no one is more "down to earth" than Jesus. Jesus knows that, sadly, there will be some cases in which a believer "backslides" into wickedness and renounces the faith. When a believer is married to such a person, Jesus made provision for the believer to divorce that fallen one and remarry (Mt.19:9; 1Cor.7:15). In no case does the Lord require a believer to endure endless abuse and degradation at the hands of a man or a woman who has cast off their faith and returned to the vomit of sin. If a believing husband sets his heart on the pleasures and possessions of this world, and refuses to turn from his infidelity, his believing wife is free to pursue eternal life alone or, if she desires, with another mate in Christ. Such a man is a reprobate, a reject of the kingdom of God (Tit.3:10), and a faithful woman in Christ is not required to spend her life in loneliness because of her unfaithful husband's apostasy.

This is not to suggest that if one errs from the faith, his believing companion is given license to forsake him quickly. The privilege, in certain extreme conditions, of a believing man or woman to remarry even if he or she is divorced from another believer should not be used as a "loophole" for a believer to abandon his or her unbelieving spouse out of a lack of patience and faith that God can heal a troubled marriage. Divorce is not a gimmick to be used as an escape from responsibility. The love of God forbids that. In all cases, as Paul noted, **"God has called us to peace."** If a believing husband becomes slack in the faith, methods are given in the scriptures for the believing wife to win the man again to the right way. Peter wrote to women who find themselves in such a case, **"Ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands, that if any obey not the word, they may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives, while they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear."** Divorce is not the answer for a believing couple. Reconciliation, through patience and forgiveness, is. To both husbands and wives, Peter continues by saying, **"Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous, not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing. But contrariwise, blessing, knowing that ye are thereto called, that ye should inherit a blessing" (1Pet.3:8-9).**

So, the believing spouse of a backslidden saint is required by the love and holiness of God to give the backslider every opportunity to see the error of his or her way. The only exception to this rule is in cases of adultery. If a believer commits adultery, the believing spouse is at liberty to leave immediately. There is no commandment of God which would require a believer to submit himself or herself to the possibility of contracting a disease from an unfaithful spouse.

I am forced by the misinformation concerning this point to bring in the Greek language here. For, when speaking of a marriage between two of God's people, Jesus said that, except for the sin of fornication, there were no legitimate grounds for divorce (Mt. 19:9). Some have said that the word "fornication" does not mean "adultery"; therefore, even if a believing man commits adultery against his believing wife, she must stay with him. They say that the Greek word used here for "fornication" never can mean anything else except "fornication", and so we must understand Jesus' words here to mean only that, if someone discovers, after marriage, that his or her spouse was sexually active before marriage, then he or she could divorce that person. This means, so some teach, that adultery after marriage is not an acceptable grounds for divorce.

Now, I must agree that if one believer weds another, and only then discovers that his or her mate has not been truthful concerning pre-nuptial sexual activity, that believer has every privilege to dissolve that marriage as quickly as possible. In ancient Israel, God even commanded the death penalty for such (Dt.22:13-21). But to suggest that the Greek word here can mean only "fornication", and, therefore, a believer is bound to an adulterous mate for life, is manifestly foolish. First of all, the Greek word translated "fornication" in both Mt.5:32 and Mt.19:9 (porneias), can refer to any manner of moral uncleanness. To quote from a world-renowned Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament, this word, porneia, may refer to "every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse." Secondly, Jesus sent us a Spirit to guide us into all truth, so that we would know better than to command a woman to stay with a man who has forsaken Christ and is now bringing home diseases instead of bringing home the bacon. Would the proponents of the doctrine of "no remarriages under any circumstances" command a woman to stay with a man who is sexually abusing their children? Have we no more knowledge of God than that? If one argues that the scriptures are unclear at this point, let me argue that the Spirit is not.

So, the truth concerning believers married to believers is that they are permitted to divorce, but if they divorce for any reasons other than infidelity to the marriage vows, they may never marry again (however, they may be reconciled to one another). The only exception to this very rigid rule is, if one of the believers in a marriage becomes unfaithful to Christ and stubbornly refuses, over a period of time, to turn from his wickedness. His suffering spouse will, at some point, be set free to continue in the faith as he or she will, either alone or with another mate in Christ. There is no prescribed "time limit" for patience on the part of the suffering spouse. Only by knowing the Spirit of God can the believer know when his or her wayward spouse has rejected God's last call. In cases of moral impurity or abuse, an abused believer is free, if he or she will, to divorce immediately, with liberty to remarry, but only to another believer. He or she is also free to decide to forgive the repentant spouse and to stay with them. It is altogether the choice of the offended spouse.

## BELIEVERS MARRIED TO UNBELIEVERS

As I have said, the will of God concerning the conduct of His children is unquestionably clear. We need not belabor the point. The cloudiness comes when ignorant men lay burdens upon the saints which are not of the Lord, "*thinking to do Him a service.*" Many believers today are married to unbelievers, and are not being told the truth as to either their responsibilities or their options. As a result, they are afraid to feel what they feel, to think what they think, and to do what, in many instances, the Spirit of the Lord is leading them to do. The truth about marital responsibilities of a believer married to an unbeliever, and the options for divorce will set the child of God free to live according to the true will of a very good God.

If divorce involves a believer and an unbeliever, the circumstances must be considered. It must first be said, however, that this situation, believer married to unbeliever, should never exist, except when one of two sinners comes to Christ after they are married. A believer who marries an unbeliever, and puts himself or herself in that terrible position, has already sinned. And it may be that the only way for the believer to repent is simply to get out of the ungodly marriage, as the Israelites were forced to do, after they had rebelled against God's commandment to abstain from marrying the ungodly (Ezra 9,10; Neh.13:23-31).

Jesus, during his earthly ministry, never spoke to this situation. This is an extremely important point. What Jesus said about divorce and remarriage applies only to believers who are married to another believer. When Paul gave his instructions for believers married to unbelievers, he said, "*I speak, not the Lord*" (1Cor.7:12).

There are, according to Paul, two kinds of unbelieving spouses, the one who is "*pleased to dwell*" with the believer and the one who is *not "pleased to dwell"* with the believer. If the unbeliever is pleased to dwell with the believer, the believer may not leave him (1Cor.7:12-13). If the unbeliever is not "pleased to dwell" with the believer, the believer is at liberty to make a choice concerning the marriage (1Cor.7:15-17). What is the difference between a pleased-to-dwell-with unbeliever and a not-pleased-to-dwell-with unbeliever? The Bible gives us but one difference by which we can make such a judgment. Paul says it this way: "*The [pleased-to-dwell-with] unbelieving husband is sanctified by the [believing] wife, and the [pleased-to-dwell-with] unbelieving wife is sanctified by the [believing] husband. Else were your children unclean. But now they are holy.*"

Now, any sensible person knows that God is the only One who is able to sanctify anyone. No wife can sanctify her husband, and no husband can sanctify his wife. The point Paul is trying to make here is that if an unbelieving spouse is truly pleased to dwell with a believer, he or she will follow the believer into the way of life. That is the only way we are given in the scriptures by which we may judge whether or not an unconverted person is pleased with a believing spouse. How can an unbelieving spouse be pleased, from the heart, to live with a believing spouse without following that spouse into eternal life? We are to judge whether or not we have a pleased-to-dwell-with spouse or a not-pleased-to-dwell-with spouse by their response to Christ, and that alone. If they follow the believer into sanctification, they are pleased to dwell with the believer. If they reject sanctification, they are not pleased to dwell with the believer. It never gets any more complicated than that.

In the eastern part of North Carolina some years ago, a woman in a pentecostal church was married to an unbelieving man. This man was one of the filthiest, most immoral men in town, and the dear sister was constantly in despair over his life and the resulting shame and hurt for her and her house. Yet, when she sought from the church some direction, she was told to ask her husband if he was pleased to dwell with her. And if he said "yes", she was told, she would have to remain with him as his wife. Of course, whenever she asked her husband if he was pleased to dwell with her, he would respond in the affirmative. So, dutifully, she stayed with the drunken whoremonger, bearing what she thought was the burden of the Lord. Finally, her situation grew so desperately evil that, despite the condemnation of the church, she left the man. Only when she was taught the truth was she relieved of the guilt which men, in the name of Jesus, had heaped upon her aching heart. We are not told that we must stay with unbelieving spouses if they SAY they are pleased to dwell with us, but only if they ARE pleased to dwell with us. Of course the whoremongering husband would say that he was pleased to dwell with this daughter of Christ. He could go do as he pleased and not have to worry about what she was doing. He and an ignorant church were working together to make her life, which should have been blessed, a living hell. And this is not an unusual situation. There have been situations in which men have brought women into their homes to live, and still their believing wives felt compelled to stay with them! And from what I have seen, they are not being taught that God is not pleased for his daughters to be in such a degrading, filthy predicament. What pain many ministers are inflicting on souls that are bearing untold anguish of heart!

"*If the unbelieving depart,*" wrote Paul, "*let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such a case*" (1Cor. 7:15). The word "bondage" here, as in other places (i.e. 1Cor. 7:39; Rom.7:2-3), means bound in a legal sense, that is, not permitted by the law of God to marry another. If a believing woman finds that her unbelieving husband has deserted her, she is free from that unbeliever to pursue life as she will, under God, either alone or with a mate in Christ. If the unbelieving depart, let him depart. The sole reason God allows such a marriage to continue is to save the unbeliever, anyway. The believer is not bound. The never-remarry-under-any-circumstance activists labor incessantly to make Paul's phrase, "not in bondage", mean only that the spouse is no longer obligated to perform the duties of marriage. Still, they contend, the separated persons are commanded never to remarry. This is contrary to every scripture and all reason. "In bondage" (e.g. Rom.7:2) clearly means that one is required by God to remain married. "Not in bondage" clearly means that one is permitted to remarry. There is no need to attempt to squeeze any other meaning out of that easily understood phrase.

But I want to give to the word "depart" a wider definition than the reader may have in his mind. I believe that if an unbelieving spouse gambles away the family's food money, he has departed. I believe that if the unbelieving spouse physically abuses his partner, he has departed. I believe that if the unbelieving spouse sexually abuses the children, he has departed. And I believe that if the unbelieving spouse commits any other crimes of equal seriousness, or breaks the vows upon which any legitimate marriage is founded, he or she is not pleased to dwell with the believing spouse and has, in fact, departed. A brother or a sister is not in bondage in such cases.

Let me re-emphasize the fact that time must be given to an unbelieving spouse, even one who has a difficult time adjusting to his converted spouse's new, godly lifestyle. He married a sinner. Now converted, his spouse is, in a very real sense, not the person the unbelieving spouse married. Any truly just person is eager to give the unbeliever time to adjust and consider the difference. Sometimes, the unconverted spouse is not resisting the call of God. He is simply waiting to see if the change is genuine, or if it is just a "phase" through which the believer is passing. God may give the unbeliever years to come to Him. Especially if the believing spouse fails to be the faithful witness which the unbeliever needs. The church must know the mind of the Spirit well enough to be able to tell if and when it is time for the believer to move on, leaving the displeased unbeliever behind. This assumes, however, that the believer treats the unbelieving spouse with dignity and all fidelity. The sincere desire of any right-spirited believer will be for his or her marriage to succeed, to the glory of God, and for the unbeliever to know the peace of Christ. There have always been some in the kingdom of God who would abuse the privileges given to them. They will receive their damnation in their time. The instructions given to saints concerning marriage, divorce, and remarriage work for our benefit only as we follow them in charity and in good faith. Apart from the love, sincerity, and holiness of God, none of these commandments can be rightly understood or properly obeyed. God has called us to peace. *"As much as lieth in you,"* Paul taught, *"live peaceably with all men."* This commandment applies most of all to the believer's relationship to those in his or her own home.

The believer is required to yield to the unbeliever in everything that does not compromise the standard of holiness which God demands of all his children. We are to be examples of "bending over backwards" to be at peace with others. The mercy of God, however, has provided the believer with a way out of the situation in which the believer has obeyed the will of God in his or her behavior toward the unbelieving spouse, and the unbeliever has steadfastly rejected the way of peace for the ways of the world. The believer is free in Christ to choose to be alone or to make the journey home with another believer, when the unbeliever resolutely turns his or her back on Christ.

### **SUMMARY**

We have studied now the three groups concerning marital status in the church. There will always be people in situations not specifically mentioned in the Bible, but that is, in part, why the Lord died: to make the Spirit of God available to us so that we could know what judgments to make, even if the situation is not specifically described in the scriptures. Paul certainly made judgments concerning situations which were not dealt with anywhere in the Bible. That is the kind of connection with God which is now so desperately needed by the church. The Spirit indeed "is life", and I know that we cannot face this life successfully without it. It is the Spirit which teaches us to pay careful attention to the commandments of God and, then, gives us grace both to understand and to obey them.

Jesus condemned the religious leaders of his time for heaping burdensome doctrines on the backs of God's people (Lk.11:46) This happens now, every time a wrong message is delivered to a child of God, burdening his life with commandments grievous to obey, and making the will of God that much more difficult to discern. To those who are trying to serve God while bearing these burdens of the doctrines of men, Jesus pleads, *"Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."*

Jesus will give you rest from your confusion, loneliness and fear. He will lift from your weary back the heaviness of misunderstanding the will of God for your life. And the relief comes when one at last learns that God is, indeed, good. God is, and always has been, more compassionate, more forgiving, and more tolerant, than men are even able to be. I can think of no way in which the disparity between the mercy and reasonableness of God and the harshness and blindness of men is more clearly delineated than by comparing what the Scriptures teach concerning marriage and divorce to what some men teach.

I hope that this study has in some measure restored your faith in God's mercy and love for you, and that the fear and frustration which men's wrong ideas may have planted in your heart have been removed by the tender hands of Jesus, the true lover of your soul.

### **A final note from the author.**

As a matter of conscience, I must address here the issue of the new birth, for if one is ignorant of the truth concerning when a person is born of the Spirit, how can one judge whether he or she is married to a believer or not? Or how can one know if he himself is considered by God to be born again or not? No issue concerning eternal life can be perfectly understood, unless the truth concerning the new birth is perfectly understood.

The baptism of the Spirit, which was first received by mortal men on Pentecost morning (Acts 2), is the experience of new birth. We are baptized by the Holy Ghost into the church of Jesus Christ (1Cor.12:13). Every person who receives this new birth experience speaks in tongues as the Spirit gives them utterance. There are no exceptions, according to Jesus (John 3:8). Time and space will not allow a complete discussion of this issue here, but we have available for you a cassette series on the subject of the NEW BIRTH. You cannot afford to neglect this most important of all church doctrine.