
The Marriage Relationship:

Comment on New Teachings Concerning It

In the Lord's mercy the bulk of those gathered to His Name are clear as to the subjects which recently have been pressed upon us; but some, whose energies could be more happily directed, continue to circulate among us literature designed to harrass and disturb.

Chief among these productions is, perhaps, a pamphlet entitled "Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage", by W. F. Harlow. The argument in it is similar to that advanced by E. D. Berry, of New Zealand (also thrust upon us), and is equally unscriptural, however pleasing and acceptable some of its moralizings are.

It has already been pointed out that if these new teachings (new among us, at least) are correct *a necessary conclusion is that we have never been gathered to the Lord's Name at all!*

He is holy and true (Rev. 3.7). If we have been going on in the allowance of such wickedness as these writers and their disciples claim, how could He have been in the midst? This system is a direct blow at our ecclesiastical position. Not that this would disturb persons outside, such as Messrs. Harlow and Berry. But the realization of this serious fact should have tempered the zeal with which a few of our number embraced these teachings.

Surely those gathered to the Lord's Name are reduced to a sorry pass, when the writings of those in system, and of those with schismatic companies of "Brethren" have to be passed around among us to give us light. Let us beware lest such "light" prove to be darkness!

Mr. Harlow's argument is based upon two errors. Take these away, and the whole structure falls to the ground. They are as follows:

1. That in the O.T. the sole ground for divorce was the discovery, immediately after her marriage, that a woman had been guilty of pre-nuptial sin. To support this theory a false construction is put on Deut. 24.1.
2. Consistently with this we are told that in the N.T. the word "fornication" is always limited to such sin—the sin of an unmarried person,—and that the Lord, when using it in Matt. 19.9, had pre-nuptial sin alone before Him.

With reference to the first, comment is made as follows: Divorce in the O.T. is *not* limited to pre-nuptial sin. Deut. 24.1, does not say such a thing, nor does it hint at it. How could it, seeing that just two chapters before (Deut. 22, 12-22), that line of things has been fully considered and disposed of?

There we learn that under the law the unmarried woman guilty of such sin was to be put to death. She was to be stoned. Consequently no thought of divorce could be introduced, and none is introduced. The advocates of the new teaching would have us believe that this woman, who should be put to death, and for whom the law had but this one penalty, not only escapes that penalty, but *is free to go and marry another man!*

This conclusion is inevitable. If, as those agitating this question affirm, the first verse of Deut. 24 applies to such a woman, then the second verse also applies to her. If her sin possesses the enormity, upon which they enlarge so eloquently,—an enormity which disqualifies her from being the wife of the first man, how does it come that she now is free to become the wife of another? What kind of nonsense is this?

We observe that Messrs: Berry, Harlow, and lesser lights of their school, observe a discreet silence as to this point. Apparently they have never read the second verse of this chapter, or weighed its significance. The elaborate structure of argument they build on Deut. 24.1, is destroyed by Deut. 24.2,—yet they and their followers never see it!

The true teaching of Deut. 24.1, is that, under the law a man could put away his wife easily, and for reasons which we would deem frivolous. A wife's position then was in large measure dependent upon the whim of her husband. For confirmation of this see Deut. 21, 11-14, where a man is allowed by Moses (in one case) to dismiss his wife simply because he has "no delight" in her! The man enjoyed unique privileges under the law. He could have more wives than one. Polygamy was not forbidden, as O.T. history plainly shows.

But we return to our subject. A wife's position, according to Deut. 24.1, was insecure. Few and scanty were its safeguards. One finding "some uncleanness" in her could, without further ado, put her away.

The Hebrew words so translated ("ervah dabar"), mean, according to Young's Analytical Concordance, "a thing offensive". Mr. Darby renders them "an unseemly thing." *These words nowhere mean "fornication."* Nor does "ervah" alone have this meaning, despite labored efforts to have it appear so. It is uniformly and correctly translated "nakedness" in the O.T., with one exception (Deut. 23,14), where it is "unclean".

The precise application of Deut. 24.1, was (like other points of the law), in dispute among the Jews. Hence their question to the Lord: "Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?" The majority held to this liberal interpretation, while some disputed it. However the history of these people shows that it was cus-

tomary among them for men to dismiss their wives for trivial reasons, such as the spoiling of a dinner, a lack of respect for the husband's relatives, talking to other men, or going out with an uncovered head, etc.

With reference to the second assumption advanced by Mr. Harlow, Mr. Berry, and copyists of their teachings, we deny that the Lord in Matt. 19.9, had pre-nuptial sin specially before Him, or that the word "fornication" in the N.T. is used exclusively in this connection.

On the contrary we maintain that *in Scripture*, frequently (if not always), this word is used in a general sense, and that it covers sexual transgression of any kind.

Mr. Harlow tells us (page 12) that Webster's dictionary "gives the primary meaning of 'fornication' as the act of an unmarried person." That its modern sense is usually so restricted we do not deny, but in the dispute before us it is not a question of its modern usage. It is a question of its scriptural usage. Mr. Harlow does not tell us what Webster has to say on this further point, so we quote it for him:

"Fornication is sometimes, especially in the Bible, used to include all sexual intercourse, except between husband and wife, or concubine"—Webster's New International Dictionary, 1929.

According to Young's Analytical Concordance the word is equivalent to "whoredom", and is frequently so rendered in the O.T. But (see Webster), the latter means "unlawful commerce with the other sex, fornication, or lewdness."

We are thus confirmed in supposing the word "fornication" in the Bible to cover sexual sin in general.

But Scripture itself shows that this is so. Consider the following examples of its usage there:

1. In Cor. 5 it includes both adultery and incest.
2. In Rev. 2, 20-22 adultery is included under "fornication."
3. In I Cor. 10.2, this phrase is applied to the wholesale immoralities of the children of Israel, because of which 23,000 were slain. All kinds of sexual sin must be included here. Would any one seriously maintain that all these thousands were single persons?
4. Gentile converts are admonished (Acts 15, 28-29) by the apostles to heed "these necessary things"—to abstain from meats offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled *"and from fornication"* No mention of adultery, because the larger term includes it.
5. See I Thess. 4.3; "This is the will of God, even your sanctification, that you should *"abstain from fornication."* No mention of adultery. The larger term includes it.

Further confirmation of this may be found in Ro. 1.29; I Cor. 6.18; Eph. 5.3; Col. 3.5, etc. This term may possibly be used sometimes in its present restricted sense, as in I Cor. 7; Mark 7.21; but one doubts it. How wise the Lord was, in using the large and comprehensive term "fornication" in Matt. 5.32, and again in Matt. 19.9!

Much of the confusion about this question is, we suspect, connected with a lack of intelligence concerning the nature of the bond between man and wife. What is that bond?

Mr. Berry and his school try to spiritualize it. They speak of it as being union in

love, sympathy, etc.;—being “truly one in heart, mind and purpose,” etc. We fully allow that it is “holy, grand and beautiful” for man and wife to be one in these particulars, but we deny that this is the bond of which Scripture speaks.

In Gen. 2.24, when Eve is presented to Adam, the essential character of marriage is explained by these words: “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife, and they shall be one flesh.” These words were repeated and emphasized by the Lord, who added to them: “Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh.” The Lord does not declare them to be one in mind, or in spirit, or in love, but to be “one flesh”. They are one in a bodily, or fleshly sense.

Again, in this connection, (Matt. 19 and Mark 10) we are reminded “male and female created He them.” The sex element is divinely introduced. Nothing, surely, can be more obvious. Two men cannot be one flesh; two women cannot be one flesh. *A man and a woman* are required. The sexual relationship is in view. It is that which constitutes the bond.

This is recognized among all nations on the face of the earth. It is found in every code of law. It is the plain teaching of Scripture. No so-called marriage is valid without that relationship being entered on. The marriage ceremony in itself is not sufficient.

God joins man and wife together in the sense of fitting them for, and ordering this relationship. It is His plan, His accomplishing. Thus a man, by divine authority, “cleaves to his wife” and becomes “one flesh” with her.

But suppose that, later, he enters into an illicit relationship with another woman—What then? Let the Word of God furnish the answer: “He which is joined to an har-

lot is one body, for two, saith He, shall be one flesh" (I Cor. 6.16). He *was* one flesh with his wife; he now *is* one flesh with the other woman.

Is it not apparent that the new and sinful bond supersedes the legitimate one? If the man in the supposed case is "one body" with the harlot, he can no longer be "one body" with his wife. He cannot have two bodies. He cannot be "one flesh" with two women. The former link has lapsed.

In token of that link being broken, the innocent wife may divorce him, and, returning now to her free and unmarried state, she may do what any other free and unmarried person may do. She may enter into a matrimonial relationship. What is to restrain her?

In Matt. 19.9, the Lord distinctly lays down this principle. But without this distinct affirmation, as much could have been inferred from His statement in Matt. 5.32. There the Lord assumes (human nature being what it is, and current practices among the Jews being what they were), that the dismissed woman would marry again.

Now if the woman, with her lesser privileges under the law, is assumed to marry again, are we to assume less for the man, supported as he was by local custom, and brought up in the atmosphere of a law which did not forbid polygamy (Deut. 21.15)? To assume that the man *could* marry again and *would* marry again is eminently reasonable. No question concerning it could ever have occurred to those who heard the Lord speak. To them this would be a truth that went without saying.

However the point is definitely established, and (as we might well suppose) put beyond all controversy by the Lord in Matt. 19.9. Of what does He speak in that verse? *He speaks of a man who puts away his wife and marries again.*

If this man had put the first wife away for any other cause than one, he now (under the new order of things), is an adulterer. It is evident, then, that if he put her away for the cause cited by the Lord he is *not* an adulterer. What difficulty is there about this?

No doubt the oneness between man and wife should be far more than physical. Husbands are told in Scripture to love their wives; wives are told to obey their husbands. The relationship between them should express the mystic relationship between Christ and the Church. This we fully own. We only declare the *basic* relationship, the *essential bond* of marriage, is shown by Scripture to be physical. It is a bodily union.

Mr. Harlow, Mr. Berry and their disciples lament the number of divorce cases in America, and point out the ease with which legal separations may be effected. As to this we have no controversy with them. We likewise lament the increase of the divorce evil in this favored land, and believe the great majority of such cases to be unscriptural and shameful.

We lament the further fact that this country leads the civilized world in crime of every kind. Here, in 1929, there were 12,000 murders. In England there were but twelve! Here the majority of criminals escape the penalty of their deeds. Across the Atlantic it is otherwise. In this land bombing, assassinations, extortion, bribery and corruption multiply about us.

These are shameful and incontrovertible facts, but no remedy for them is to be found in the twisting of Scripture, or in the distortion of its holy precepts. However dark the prospect, it serves to remind us that the day of grace hastens to its close, and that soon we shall see His blessed face, for whom we wait. While so waiting, may our souls be kept in the even balance of His truth, and in the joy of that expectation!

S.S.