



"For as long as you both shall live"

The promise not to separate (divorce)

The words of the title are part of the question put to the bridegroom and to the bride as their marriage is solemnized:

"Do you also promise never to forsake her (him), but to be true to her always, in good days and bad, in riches and poverty, in health and sickness, for as long as you both shall live?"

Marriage is a union for life. As the marriage is solemnized, the church asks: "Do you intend to stay in this marriage? Do you ... promise never to forsake your spouse?" Only one situation dissolves marriage, namely *"till through death you are parted."*¹

It seems that all who marry in the Christian church readily make this promise. They feel so in love with each other that they are convinced they will love the other for as long as they shall live. Some, however, have said afterwards: "I did not quite know what it was that I promised." In a certain sense, no one realizes the full implication of what it is to promise troth to your wife or husband for as long as he or she lives. Nevertheless it is important to prayerfully consider the various angles of the marriage relationship. The form for the confirmation of marriage that I used when I was a pastor in The Netherlands from 1980-1988 states:

"For that reason one should not rashly or thoughtlessly enter marriage but reverently and thankfully, in the fear of the Lord."

To this end pastoral pre-marital sessions and a visit with two elders before marriage can be helpful, as well as open contact between parents and children before marriage.

The reality of divorce

The concept of the permanency of marriage is increasingly being challenged particularly in contemporary Western society. Marital breakup is continuing *"its unrelenting upward trend."*² The *"explosion of divorce ... is a recent phenomenon, unparalleled in human history."* Although the practice was present in the Old Testament, it was exceptional. Though it was frequent among the upper classes in the Greek and Roman societies of the late ancient period, the practice was not common among the masses. The early Christian church *"taught a high view of marriage, and divorce was rare among Christians."* During the Middle Ages and right into the Reformation era this *"attitude was carried over into the wider society."*

*"Not until the Enlightenment did divorce re-emerge in Western culture."*³

Civil law and divorce

As the Gospel of our Lord Jesus spread to the nations, civil law did not right away reflect the views taught by the church. For instance, from the time of the first Christian emperor of Rome, Constantine the Great,⁴ through the reign of Justinian I,⁵ there was little influence on civil law from the side of the church. It was particularly from the Middle Ages on and right into the Reformation era that *"ecclesiastical strictures against divorce were paralleled by civil laws and social sanctions in European society as a whole."*⁶ From the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century on, as traditional Christianity as well as politics and culture were often challenged by secularism, many

countries began to provide a formula by which divorce might be obtained in a small number of cases. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries divorce was made increasingly available to all. The grounds were gradually widened. Initially many societies considered adultery to cut at the root of marriage and family life and thus a ground for divorce. Later on the grounds were gradually widened to include other offenses than adultery, especially cruelty and desertion. Still later the grounds were widened to include *"incompatibility"* and *"complete and permanent marital breakdown."* Today civil law allows divorce on trivial grounds, and there is the legal recognition of "no-fault divorce," asserting that no single party is responsible.

This *"constitutes a denial of the interest of society in the maintenance of marriage and family."*⁷

This development has changed the perception of marriage from a relationship of lasting commitment to one of convenience. Instead of a marriage relation that lasts till through death we are parted, the institution of marriage in society is dying.

The church's right to a judgment of its own

One of the stipulations in the Church Order of the Free Reformed Churches of North America⁸ reads as follows:

*"As a rule the church acknowledges the government's decision in divorce cases, at least as far as the legal consequences are concerned. However, the church has the right to a judgment of its own with regard to such cases."*⁹

So "as a rule," in view of the relationship that there still is between church and state, when a judge in court grants a married couple a divorce, the church acknowledges this decision, *"at least as far as the legal consequences are concerned."* Imagine the disorder that would develop, if the church would not acknowledge decision by the government. However, *"the church has the right to a judgment of its own..."* This is important to the church in view of the fact that in a secular society statistics become laws. But, the church does not simply go by statistics. The church *"has the right to a judgment of its own."*

This "judgment of its own" pertains to divorces which are not in accordance with God's Word. Prof. C. Van Dam writes:

"...What if someone has gone ahead and before the consistory could intervene secured a divorce which is not justified by Scripture? When a civil judge declares that a legal divorce has broken a marriage, the church may still attempt reconciliation and not consider the judge's verdict final" but rather "ask the people involved not to consider this as final since it is not pleasing in God's eyes and to try to undo this. If this fails, the church has no choice but to acquiesce to the law of the land and accept the divorce. But the church must also warn against a subsequent remarriage because the divorce was not according to God's Word. There should be reconciliation or no remarriage" (1 Cor 7:11).¹⁰

This "judgment of its own" entails also that adultery is not necessarily a ground for divorce.

"The church must point to the necessity of repentance with regard to that which has broken or which threatens to break the marriage."

It is possible even then that *"the husband and wife ... be reconciled to one another and the broken relationship be restored."*¹¹

Adultery should not render divorce inevitable, although the church states that divorce *"on the ground of adultery is allowable."*¹²

In this case, the church's "right to a judgment of its own" proceeds from the reality of grace. It may well be that in a world that is becoming increasingly secular the church has to express more clearly its own judgment. The apostle Paul makes clear to the church in Ephesus that Christ calls us to

standards and values totally at variance with the standards and values of a secular society (Ephesians 4:20f).

In general, the Reformers agreed that according to Scripture marriage is holy and in principle indissoluble, but in practice there are certain acts that break the marriage bond and hence permit divorce and remarriage. Martin Luther (1483-1546) considered divorce as a permissible last resort in three cases, namely of infidelity, impotency or refusal of marital relations, and desertion. He supported remarriage for the offended party.

John Calvin (1509-1564) allowed divorce only for adultery and, more hesitantly, for desertion on grounds of irreconcilable differences.¹³ He clearly opposed the view that *"leprosy is a proper ground for divorce, because the contagion of the disease affects not only the husband, but likewise the children."* In a case where a husband 'burns with sexual desire,'

Calvin writes: *"...If they give themselves up to be guided by the Lord, they will ... follow what He has prescribed,"* and He will give them *"the assistance of the Spirit."*¹⁴

In 1561 the city of Geneva enacted a law permitting divorce, as a last resort, for the two reasons of adultery and desertion. At the same time Calvin says that although the civil authorities for these two reasons may legalize divorce, before the Judge of heaven and earth divorce is unlawful.¹⁵

Uldrich Zwingli (1483-1531) and Martin Bucer (1491-1551) had more liberal ideas about divorce. Zwingli believed that the cause of adultery in Matthew 5 was intended as an example, to which could be added other legitimate causes, such as abandonment, endangerment of life, and insanity. Bucer, who was a friend of Calvin, went further still, becoming the first Reformer to permit divorce by mutual consent.

John Calvin emphatically rejects this view of his friend. He writes in his commentary with reference to Matthew 5:31:

*"...National laws are sometimes accommodated to the manners of men: but God, in prescribing a spiritual law, looked not at what men can do, but at what they ought to do. It contains a perfect and entire righteousness, though we lack ability to fulfil it. Christ, therefore admonishes us not to conclude, that what is allowed by the national law of Moses is, on that account, lawful in the sight of God."*¹⁶

Although *"the husband and the wife are united by mutual consent, yet God binds them by an indissoluble tie, so that they are not afterwards at liberty to separate."*¹⁷

He has been followed in this by later Reformed theologians. His position has continued to be the position of the churches of the Reformed persuasion.

The church's "judgment of its own" enables it to say: Even though contemporary divorce laws permit the so-called no-fault divorce, which allows the marriage contract to be nullified with the affirmation — by one party — that the marriage was in "irremedial" breakdown, the laws which are in the gospel of Jesus Christ speak differently. It is for that reason that the church continues to ask the bridegroom and the bride as their marriage is solemnized: *"Do you also promise never to forsake her (him), but to be true to her always, in good days and bad, in riches and poverty, in health and sickness, for as long as you both shall live?"* But the church must accompany this question with a faithful ministry to the couple, pastoral help and comfort, and instruction to live in all circumstances out of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

LW Bilkes

© 2016
www.christianstudylibrary.org

¹ This is how the newer Dutch form for the confirmation of marriage in the midst of the congregation puts it: "*totdat de dood u zal scheiden.*"

² Stanley Grenz, *Sexual Ethics: A Biblical Perspective*,

³ Stanley Grenz, *Sexual Ethics: A Biblical Perspective*,

⁴ He 'adopted Christianity' around 312.

⁵ He is known as a champion of Nicene orthodoxy, established many churches and monasteries, closed pagan schools of philosophy in Athens, and is chiefly remembered for the Justinian Code, which in 529 brought order into the Roman law by which the Roman empire was governed.

⁶ Stanley Grenz, *Sexual Ethics: A Biblical Perspective*, 100.

⁷ Stanley Grenz, *Sexual Ethics: A Biblical Perspective*, 101

⁸ Adopted in line with the 1959 synodical decision of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in the Netherlands.

⁹ Article 70D1 Church Order as used in the Free Reformed Churches of NA. C. Van Dam, *Divorce & Remarriage: in the light of Old Testament principles and their application in the New Testament*, 47, 48.

¹⁰ C. Van Dam, *Divorce & Remarriage: in the light of Old Testament principles and their application in the New Testament*, 46, 47.

¹¹ Article 70D7 Church Order as used in the Free Reformed Churches of NA.

¹² Article 70D2 Church Order as used in the Free Reformed Churches of NA. Cf. C. Van Dam, *Divorce & Remarriage: in the light of Old Testament principles and their application in the New Testament*, 42.

¹³ John Calvin, *Calvin Commentaries: Corinthians I*, 239, 240. He writes with reference to verse 11: "Paul does not mean ... that separation is allowable." He does not give permission to the wife to live apart from her husband; "but if she has been expelled from the house, or has been put away, she must not think that even in that case she is set free..." but rather "are bound, so that they cannot take other husbands."

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Calvin Commentaries: The Evangelists II*, 393 (with reference to Matthew 19:9).

¹⁵ Cf. J. Douma, *Echtscheiding: Ethisch Commentaar* 8, 68.

¹⁶ John Calvin, *Calvin Commentaries: The Evangelists I*, 292.

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Calvin Commentaries: The Evangelists I*, 293.