

A man and a woman are standing in a grassy field, holding hands and looking at each other. They are surrounded by large, leafy trees. The man is wearing a light blue shirt and dark pants, and the woman is wearing a pink top and a floral skirt. The background is a dense forest with sunlight filtering through the leaves.

Until Death Us Do Part

*“The Sad Case of
Bert Zandstra”
and Other Essays
on Marriage,
Divorce, and
Remarriage*

David J. Engelsma

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Introduction

The eight essays on marriage, divorce, and remarriage in this booklet appeared originally as editorials in the Reformed magazine, the *Standard Bearer*.

In certain, important respects, the essays advance the argument for marriage as a lifelong bond beyond that which I have made in two, earlier books, *Marriage, the Mystery of Christ & the Church: The Covenant-Bond in Scripture and History* (RFPA, rev. ed. 1998) and *Better to Marry: Sex and Marriage in I Corinthians 6 & 7* (RFPA, 1993). One such advance is the demonstration that permission of the remarriage of the "innocent party" in a divorce necessarily implies, and invariably leads to, the right also of the guilty party to remarry.

In view of the increasingly strong pressure on churches to accept homosexual relationships, the essay, "Narrow is the Way," is timely. It shows that one of the main reasons for the churches' acceptance of homosexual relationships is these same churches' prior acceptance of the divorces and remarriages of heterosexuals in the face of the clear prohibition of Scripture.

One doctrine of marriage, and one only, guards the true church of Jesus Christ against every corruption of marriage and preserves the holy institution among the covenant people of God. Marriage is the intimate bond of love between one man and one woman for life. Only death dissolves the bond. To be more precise, only God dissolves the bond, and He dissolves it only by death.

This is what all married persons swore to in the vow of the traditional, Christian marriage form: "Until death us do part."

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Chapter 1

The Sad Case of Bert Zandstra

Bert Zandstra is a 30-year old adulterer.

Married with three little children, he fell in love with a younger woman. He then abandoned his wife and children, to live with his lover. Within a year, he divorced his wife and married the object of his lust. Whether she too had been married and had children, so that Bert Zandstra destroyed two families in his passion, is not clear. It makes no difference to the story.

Bert Zandstra's is a sad case.

What makes his case still sadder is that Bert Zandstra sinned against better knowledge. He was a church member. He was member of a Reformed church. The church is conservative. It claims to be a true church of Jesus Christ, based solidly on the "Three Forms of Unity," if not the only true church. When Bert Zandstra left his family, to take up with his paramour, the consistory admonished him. He quickly left the church, asking for his membership papers.

Zandstra moved to a town some 60 miles from his old home and church. There within a year he married his new wife and set about making a new start in life. This included church life. Bert and the new Mrs. Zandstra began attending regularly the Reformed church in town. It is a congregation in the same denomination as the church that Bert left a year earlier. It is a sister church in the federation with the church 60 miles away of which the original Mrs. Zandstra is a member with her, and Bert's, children. Soon Bert and his second wife appeared at the consistory meeting asking to be admitted to the church as members in good standing.

Now the sad case of Bert Zandstra becomes tragic.

The Reformed church accepted Mr. and Mrs. Bert Zandstra as members. It worked with them first, especially Bert. It charged him with sin and required confession. It looked for evidence of sorrow in Bert's attitude. Bert even came to cry some tears over what he had done a year or two earlier. The church forgave him in the name of Jesus. The consistory had him write a letter to his first wife, expressing that he was sorry that he had sinned against her and asking for her forgiveness. In a postscript, the letter added that one day, when the children had grown up, Bert would also confess to them. On a certain Sunday morning, the minister read an announcement to the congregation, informing them of Bert's repentance and of the admission of him and his new wife to the fellowship of the church.

Why, then, some will ask, is this a sad case?

Bert and the second Mrs. Zandstra are happy, are they not? They are now good church members, are they not? There is already talk that Bert may be deacon, even elder, someday. Has not the church earnestly worked for repentance? Did not Bert show sorrow to the point of tears? Who dares to speak of a sad case?

Yes, there are, unfortunately, the original Mrs. Zandstra, now alone, and three children growing up without a father. It could be wished that this were different. But that is the way life is: there are hardships. And life must go on.

Nevertheless, the case of Bert Zandstra is a sad case. Nor is this merely a personal opinion. It is the judgment of God upon this case and all who are involved, with the exception of the original, and true, Mrs. Zandstra and her children. This is the judgment of God in His Word, which will stand regardless of the contrary words of Bert Zandstra and of the Reformed churches that are conniving at his sin.

Bert Zandstra is an adulterer, an impenitent adulterer, according to God's Word: "Whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her" (Mark 10:11). So also is his new wife: ". . . and whosoever shall marry her (or him) that is divorced committeth adultery" (Matt. 5:32b). No adulterer or adulteress will inherit the kingdom of God (I Cor. 6:9; Gal. 5: 19-21).

The Reformed church that has admitted him and his new wife to the fellowship of the congregation has admitted a man and a woman to the Lord's Table who by their life "declare themselves unbelieving and ungodly," to use the language of Question 82 of the Heidelberg Catechism. The consistory has profaned the covenant and brought the wrath of God down upon the whole congregation. The denomination that tolerates and approves such wicked behavior on the part of a member and on the part of a local church shares in the guilt and exposes itself to the divine judgment. One certain, dreadful aspect of the divine judgment will be that the number of Bert Zandstras in the church will increase and multiply (I Cor. 5:6).

Bert Zandstra is fictitious. He represents real men (and women), as his case represents real cases, in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands ("liberated"). But he is imaginary. The editor of the church paper of this denomination, *De Reformatie*, invented him so that the editor could write about such real cases in his churches in a concrete, vivid way. In three articles in *De Reformatie*, under the rubric, "Church Life," Prof. Dr. M. te Velde urged the readmittance of such as Bert Zandstra into the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands ("liberated") in the way outlined above (see *De Ref.*, 18 Mei; 25 Mei; and 1 Juni 1996).

We recognize that the editor of *De Reformatie* is concerned lest readmittance of the Bert Zandstras become too easy. He fears that the churches are, in fact, accepting the Bert Zandstras without confession of sin and reconciliation. He has good and important things to say about the need today for ministers to preach sharply against divorce. He calls on the members of the congregation to pray for and talk to married persons whose marriages are troubled. But in the end, he and his churches take Bert Zandstra back, remarried.

This is a sad case.

It is a sad case, first, because of the nature of the sin. Divorcing his wife and abandoning his children, the adulterer broke the vow that he made to God at his marriage and the vow, thrice repeated, that he made to God at the baptism of his children. Divorcing his wife, he not only cruelly injures her but also likely causes her to commit adultery, and perish everlastingly, as Christ teaches in Matthew 5:32. For now it is

likely that she will remarry, "and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery." He himself tramples upon that ordinance of God that is fundamental both to society and to the church and that has the glorious significance that it symbolizes the covenant of God with His people in Christ (Ezek. 16; Eph. 5:22ff.). He dishonors God, and he hates his nearest neighbors, his own wife and children.

It is a sad case, second, because of the faulty handling of the case, church politically. Bert Zandstra is allowed to seek readmission to the denomination in another congregation (hypothetically, Boshuizen) than the congregation that he left (hypothetically, Hoogbergen). This is permitted by the church, even though he lives only 60 miles from the church that he left. But there in Hoogbergen are the elders who knew his case well and who worked with him when he fell into sin. There is the body of Christ that he offended and then forsook. The autonomy of the local church and, with this, the Dordt church order's prohibition against one church's lording it over another church demand that a penitent Zandstra betake himself to the church which he left, when he seeks readmission.

It is a sad case, third, because the gospel-grace of repentance is corrupted both by Bert Zandstra and by the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands ("liberated"). Repentance is not mere acknowledgment, under pressure, that one has sinned, not even when the confession is made public. Nor is repentance a mere feeling of sorrow, not even when this feeling produces a few tears.

After all, even Bert Zandstra, before he falls pleasurably off to sleep in the arms of his young wife, must have a fleeting thought of the real Mrs. Zandstra, crying alone in her bed, as well as of three little children without a father.

Repentance is heartfelt sorrow over one's sin against God that turns in abhorrence from that sin. The penitent sinner turns from his sin to God, not only as one seeking forgiveness but also as one fleeing his sin, resolved to live now according to the will of God (Heid. Cat., LD 33).

The repentance of a man who says, "I am sorry," while living deliberately and contentedly in his sin is hypocrisy. It is disgusting to

God. It meets with no forgiveness from Him, regardless what a church may say.

Let Bert Zandstra bring forth works worthy of repentance. These works are not that he lives faithfully with his new wife. These works are that he stop committing adultery with a woman who is not his lawful wife in the sight of God. The church must not brush this off by saying that once the man has remarried "the way of return to the first marriage has been cut off." Perhaps this is so. But the way of breaking with his adulterous marriage has not been cut off. The church faithful to the Word of Jesus Christ will say to Bert Zandstra, "Are you truly repentant? Do you now indeed know your despicable sin against God, your wife, your children, and the woman to whom you are now married? Then you will no longer live with your new wife. This is part of genuine repentance, and the proof of the reality of it."

The gospel is at stake here: the free grace of God in Jesus Christ that forgives sins and reconciles the sinner to God and the church is a grace bestowed and received only in the way of repentance. And repentance is such a sorrow over sin as breaks with the sin. Therefore, salvation is also at stake here. Bert Zandstra goes to hell, as does his new wife. Only now he goes merrily to hell, supposing that all is well with his soul. The Reformed church is responsible.

How frivolous Zandstra's repentance really is comes out in his behavior toward his real wife and children. The church permits him to write his wife a letter confessing his sin against her. From 60 miles away, he writes her a letter! One imagines the letter:

Dear Mrs. Bert Zandstra,

This is to inform you that I am sorry that I sinned against you. Please forgive me. Tell the children that I am sorry.

*Yours faithfully,
Bert*

Were such a man sorry, truly sorry by the grace worked by the Spirit of Christ, he would crawl from Boshuizen to Hoogbergen on his hands and knees. He would confess to his wife and children to their faces in tears. He would assure them that he now finds it absolutely impossible to live with the other woman, as impossible as Christ finds it to live with another than His church. And he would plead with his wife to have him back, if she possibly could.

If the man sends a letter, his wife should throw it in the wastebasket unopened.

It is a sad case, fourth, because it shows that the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands ("liberated") have caved in to the world. They have caved in to the world, not in some incidental matter but in the fundamental matter of marriage. Marriage is basic to God's continuing His covenant in the line of the generations of His chosen people. Marriage is the earthly symbol of God's covenant with His people in Christ. The articles in *De Reformatie* make clear that the occasion for procedures to accept the Bert Zandstras and their new wives is an "epidemic" of divorces and remarriages in the churches. The churches become worldly. They cannot withstand the pressure of the godless, adulterous, faithless world. It is not so much that wicked members divorce and remarry as it is that the churches make their peace with the sin. They permit Bert Zandstra and his new wife to sit at the Lord's Table. This is shame to the church. This is scandal to the saints. This is dishonor to God and His Christ.

If this is happening in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands ("liberated"), it is happening also in most of the other Reformed churches in the Netherlands.

It is happening in the conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches in the United States as well.

For the case of Bert Zandstra is sad, fifth, in that it shows the bitter fruit of the erroneous conception of marriage that has prevailed generally in the Reformed churches. This is the view of marriage as a contract that sin and sinners can break. Until recently, sounder Reformed and Presbyterian churches have restricted the right of divorce and remarriage to the "innocent party," that is, the husband or wife whose

mate has committed adultery. The churches have forbidden remarriage to the guilty party. They have not allowed the Bert Zandstras membership in their fellowship.

Now the churches approve the remarriage of the *guilty* party. Church membership is open to them. Men and women may divorce and remarry for any reason and be received as members in good standing in the congregations. This is actually what is going on in many, if not most, of the churches that loudly proclaim their conservatism. Many in our country do not write this for the public. They are not honest, as is the editor of *De Reformatie*. In their public utterances, they insist that only the "innocent" or "deserted" party may remarry. In the life of their churches, guilty parties — the Bert Zandstras — are received with their new mates. In this country too, it is now an epidemic.

This is what it comes to, when the church does not confess and practice the lifelong, unbreakable bond of marriage.

The sad case of Bert Zandstra.

Chapter 2

The Scandal and Silence

The ethical scandal in evangelical and Reformed churches today is unbiblical divorce and the remarriage that almost certainly follows. By "scandal," I do not only mean iniquitous conduct that blatantly violates the clear command of Holy Scripture. But I refer to behavior that gives occasion to the ungodly to mock and reject the gospel and that causes many to stumble into sin and perish everlastingly. It is scandal such as Jesus had in mind in Matthew 18:6: "But whoso shall offend (Greek: scandalize) one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea."

This warning is especially fitting regarding the scandal of divorce and remarriage, for innumerable children of professing Christians are the spiritual casualties of this sin.

An Eerie Silence

About this scandal, there is almost total silence in the evangelical, Presbyterian, and Reformed churches. In view of the prevalence and destructive power of the evil and in view of the importance of marriage and the family for both state and church, the silence is eerie.

The world of North America maintains similar silence about the same evil. Divorce and remarriage are rampant. The consequences for nations and society are disastrous, particularly the ruin of the children, surely a nation's most valuable resource. Divorce (with remarriage squarely in view) is the main social evil in the United States. Not racism! Not sexism! Not poverty! Not the environment! But divorce! The destruction of marriage and, with it, the destruction of the home and family! By the institution of God at creation, the family is fundamental to human life on earth, and marriage is basic to the family (Gen. 1, 2).

Of late, a few officials in government acknowledge the problem. They propose remedies. One is that the state frown on "no-fault" divorce. Another is that those who intend to marry be encouraged to opt for a special, lifelong "covenant" of marriage (as though every man and woman who marry are not, in fact, bound to a lifelong marriage-covenant by virtue of God's institution itself).

For the most part, however, the social reformers and the vocal advocates of "family values" have nothing to say about divorce and remarriage. The reason is that the evil is widespread and entrenched. Condemnation of divorce and remarriage would be unpopular. It would lose votes for the party and the candidate. Besides, many of the social reformers, advocates of "family values," and politicians are themselves divorced and remarried.

Unbelieving teacher and educational critic, Allan Bloom, called the attention of North America to society's strange silence on divorce in his bestseller, *The Closing of the American Mind* (Simon and Schuster, 1987). Lamenting the harmful effects that the divorce of their parents have on the bright young people who attend the University of Chicago, the University of Chicago professor wrote:

Of course, many families are unhappy. But that is irrelevant. The important lesson that the family taught was the existence of the only unbreakable bond, for better or for worse, between human beings. The decomposition of this bond is surely America's most urgent social problem. But nobody even tries to do anything about it. The tide seems to be irresistible. Among the many items on the agenda of those promoting America's moral regeneration, I never find marriage and divorce (p. 119).

The silence of the foolish world may be understandable. But have the churches nothing to say? Have evangelical and Reformed churches nothing to say about wickedness that dishonors the God who is faithful in His covenant with His people and that devastates the lives of professing Christians and their children, not to speak of the disordering of life in society?

The churches keep a shrewd silence because of the prevalence of divorce and remarriage among their own membership. The rate of divorce and remarriage in evangelical churches, we are told, is at least as high as in the world of the openly ungodly.

Leaders in the "mainline," that is, apostate, churches admit their craven silence. In an interview published in the August 11, 1997 issue of *Christianity Today*, Roberta Hestenes of the Presbyterian Church in the USA said:

To say in our church today that divorce is wrong is extremely difficult because we are morally compromised since so many are divorced. We are experiencing the psychological captivity of the church-the feel-good, therapeutic culture has become the operating theology of the church.

William H. Willimon of the United Methodist Church agreed:

A number of Methodist bishops are divorced and remarried; so when asked about that issue, I have to say, somewhat cynically, "When you're trying to attract the affluent upper-middle class, it's tough to take a stand on that particular issue" (p. 17).

The evangelicals, Reformed, and Presbyterians are equally silent, and for the same reason. The periodicals never mention divorce and remarriage. Books that expose and condemn the evil are rare, extremely rare. The preaching studiously avoids it. It was an open secret at the meeting of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy in Chicago in 1986 that the attempt to address the evil of divorce and remarriage with a strong, biblical statement was scuttled in the back rooms of power by the prominent pastors whose large evangelical churches are full of divorced (and divorcing!) and remarried (and remarrying!) members. This was the meeting of ICBI that was to apply inerrancy to life. So much for application! So much for inerrancy! So much for life!

That which claims to be the church of Jesus Christ in the world cannot defend the basic ordinance of God for human life. It is unable to condemn

infidelity to the most basic and sacred of all human relationships. It cannot find in itself to require of those who profess Christianity that they keep their marriage vows. It silently tolerates the same treachery and unfaithfulness that characterize those who do not know the Lord.

This scandalous silence concerning the ethical scandal of our time renders the loud outcries of these same churches against abortion hypocritical. The murder of unborn babies is the world's problem, not the church's. The destruction of multitudes of children of professing Christians by divorce is the church's problem. About this, the churches are silent.

The Speaking of Scripture

How different from the prophet of Jehovah. In a covenant community in which many, including powerful church leaders, were divorcing and remarrying, Malachi spoke out uncompromisingly. Jehovah hates divorce (2:16). The one who thus deals treacherously against the wife of his covenant will be excommunicated by Jehovah Himself from His fellowship (2:12). Where divorce and remarriage go on and are tolerated, all worship of Jehovah is placed under divine interdict (2:13).

How different the silence of the churches from Christ Jesus Himself. In an ecclesiastical climate that permitted divorce, with a remarriage to follow, for any cause, Jesus upheld the divine will and ordinance, that marriage is a one-flesh bond for life made between the two who marry by the Creator Himself. He prohibited divorce. The one exception is the fornication of one's mate. Even in this case, remarriage is forbidden. Jesus upheld marriage and prohibited divorce in the very faces of the religious leaders who were responsible for the marital laxity in Israel (Matt. 19:3-9).

How different from the apostle of Christ. In a world as licentious as our own, he boldly proclaimed the gospel of marriage as a bond that is broken only by death (I Cor. 7:39). He commanded Christians not to divorce or leave their mates. He dared to require that a woman who did leave her husband, evidently because of his fornication, must "remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband" (I Cor. 7:10, 11).

This was Christianity with steel in its backbone. This was Christianity that did not abjectly conform to the world, but that courageously confronted the world with a message that both condemned the world with its ways and

created in the midst of the world, in the elect called out of it, a new life of truth, fidelity, and chastity. For the Christianity of I Corinthians 6 and 7 was the gospel of God, zealous for the glory of God rather than for the attracting and stroking of self-indulgent church members.

Today, the churches say nothing.

There is a deep, deliberate silence about the ethical scandal.

Not only do the churches say nothing against the iniquity, but they also are quick to speak out in defense of divorce and remarriage when a lonely voice makes itself heard condemning the evil. With the rare exception, the books and other writings on divorce and remarriage that do appear in evangelical and Reformed circles have as one of their chief purposes, if not their chief purpose, to justify divorce and remarriage against the objector.

Officebearers and teachers are silent.

Where are the people?

Now and again, a cry is heard from the people of God, lamenting the misery to which the corruption of marriage by the churches exposes the people. For it must not be supposed that playing fast and loose with marriage is an act of love that promotes true happiness among the saints. Rather, it inflicts unspeakable agony on husbands, wives, children, grandchildren, parents, brothers, sisters, friends, and the whole congregation. Nor is the agony limited to the time of the offense. It perpetuates itself from generation to generation. Unforgettable was the haunting plea that was voiced once in the Christian Reformed *Banner*:

What had once been the high point of our family experience for the year (the family Christmas party) we now ritually observe, a hollow shell, a ghost-like mockery of what once was and what might still be except for divorce.... The divorced member of the family and his new wife will be absent from our party, knowing that if they do attend other members will not. The divorced wife and her children will be absent because they feel the dissension within the family and would rather be missed than face the antagonism.... In somewhat more than a week I will return to face five classes of students a day in a Christian school. Each class contains

students who are the sad, living testimonies to the "happiness" which results from divorce and/or remarriages.... I have seen students face the prospects of long illnesses and even death ... with less pain and anxiety than those facing the breakup of what had seemed a secure home. Oh, the hurt in their eyes! ... Convince me, if you can, that those who, in the name of love, smash to bits the happinesses of father, mother, sister, brother, child, pastor, and church are keeping the law of love! Convince me that a denomination which baptizes such actions by silence or by a subdued reprimand is acting out of love! ("Where are We? Where are We Going?" Banner, Dec. 9, 1977, pp. 18, 19)

There was never an answer — not by the editor in that issue of the magazine and not by the church in her synodical decisions. It was too late. The tide of divorce and remarriage had already rolled over the church, and the church herself, under pressure from some of the people, had breached the dike by her official decisions.

Only silence.

What of us, the Protestant Reformed Churches?

In the goodness of God, we have the biblical message of marriage, to the great blessing of our churches and families. This is the message of marriage as a bond between one man and one woman for life in reflection of the unbreakable covenant between God and the elect church in Jesus Christ. Such is the teaching of our ministers, the discipline of our elders, and the lives of our members that we are able to speak out, with the voice of the prophet, of Christ, and of the apostle, against the wickedness of divorce and remarriage.

Are we thankful? Are we determined to hold the message and maintain the testimony? Members as well as ministers? At all cost?

Chapter 3

The Hillsdale Scandal

In the fall of 1999, shocking events at Hillsdale College, a small but renowned college in Michigan, rocked the conservative community in North America. The president's daughter-in-law committed suicide. Her husband informed the public that just before she killed herself she had confessed to adultery with her father-in-law over a period of some nineteen years. She made the confession in the presence of the father-in-law. The board of trustees of the college quickly arranged the president's early retirement and appointed a high-powered committee to find a successor. The committee included famous and influential conservatives William J. Bennett, author of *The Book of Virtues*, and William F. Buckley Jr., editor of *National Review*.

Hillsdale College came into national prominence over the past thirty years because of its resistance to the encroachments by the federal government. This entailed the college's refusal of federal subsidies and grants. To compensate, the college needed hundreds of millions of dollars from rich donors who share the conservative political, economic, and moral views of the college. The recently retired president raised these millions.

Both the college and its president were well-known and highly regarded for their aggressive advocacy of moral rectitude in our decadent society. Parents thankfully gave their young people; the wealthy gladly gave their money.

The suicide of the president's daughter-in-law, the report by her husband of her admission of adultery with the president, her father-in-law, and the quick retirement of the president by the board of trustees (with a retirement package of between two and four million dollars) have shaken that bastion of conservatism to its foundations.

The national media reported the Hillsdale happenings as a scandal.

But the governing board and administration of the college deny the charge. Nothing can be proved. The president denies adultery with his daughter-in-law, and the daughter-in-law is dead. Nor does the board acknowledge any cover-up. They acted responsibly, they insist, retiring the president only because the unfortunate events have made it impossible for him to continue.

William F. Buckley Jr. backs the board. In an article in the December 20, 1999 issue of his *National Review*, Buckley argued that grounds are lacking for judging the former president of the college guilty without reasonable doubt. In addition, the board of trustees did what was best for Hillsdale.

In its February 5, 2000 issue, *World* magazine, the Christian answer to *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U. S. News & World Report*, published the sober results of its own investigation of the events at Hillsdale. The title of the article is "The Truth is Buried." *World* concludes that no scandal can be confirmed. No one can prove that the president of Hillsdale college fornicated with his daughter-in-law over many years. Nor can any cover-up by the Hillsdale board and administration be substantiated.

People may suspect. The media may play up the suggestive circumstances. But even colleges and their presidents must be presumed innocent until proved guilty.

There was no Hillsdale *scandal*, but only a Hillsdale *tragedy*.

Why then speak out on the Hillsdale scandal?

Because there is a Hillsdale *scandal*. It is a despicable, sexual iniquity committed by the college president, recently retired. The administration and board of the college connived at it, indeed approved and celebrated it. Vast and wide, the scandal implicates virtually the whole of political conservatism in North America, as it does almost all the supposedly conservative churches. The Hillsdale scandal is a fact. All acknowledge the fact, although none, from William J. Bennett to *World* magazine, recognizes the fact as scandalous.

Only, the scandal is not what is universally suggested and supposed. It is not that the president of a conservative college, avowed defender of moral rectitude in Western society and professing Christian, slept with

his own son's wife on and off for nineteen years. Nor is it that the governors of the college looked through their fingers at this unseemly behavior, or even that they tried to cover up the wickedness when it came to light.

The scandal is that a few months before the suicide of his daughter-in-law and the report by her husband of her confession of incest, the president of Hillsdale College divorced his wife of forty-four years and married another woman. He did this in a very public manner, the only manner in which one can divorce his wife and remarry. The college community, including its high-powered conservative backers, celebrated the remarriage with a very public banquet on the college campus. It is not at all impossible that William J. Bennett, author of *The Book of Virtues*, and William F. Buckley Jr., champion of the right, were among the celebrants.

Conservative Hillsdale College saw no scandal.

William J. Bennett did not decline to serve on the search committee for a new president on the ground that the board of trustees had attempted to cover up the former president's divorce and remarriage.

Bennett saw no scandal in the president's divorce and remarriage.

William F. Buckley Jr., who with his customary verve and logic argues that no scandal can be proved, obviously does not regard the divorce and remarriage as scandalous.

World magazine noted the divorce and remarriage in passing, as one might report that prior to the events that caught the nation's eye the college president had had an appendectomy. But the conclusion of its careful investigation is that there is no evidence of scandal at Hillsdale. *World* is blind to the scandal of a conservative, professedly Christian, college president's divorcing his wife of forty-four years, the mother of his four children, and remarrying (within a few months).

What accounts for this scandalous failure to see the Hillsdale scandal?

One of two things, and possibly both.

All of these conservative persons and organizations have become so used to divorce and remarriage that they do not even notice the evil anymore. That a grandfather may have committed adultery with his

daughter-in-law still gets their attention. That a grandfather divorces grandmother for another woman is not even noticed. Tolerance of wickedness soon results in blindness to it. American society has reached this point as regards abortion. It is well on the way to reaching this point with regard to homosexuality. It is long past this point with regard to divorce and remarriage. The Bible describes this spiritual condition as the searing of the conscience with a hot iron (I Tim. 4:2).

The other explanation is that all of the parties are themselves so compromised by unbiblical divorce and remarriage that they are unable to speak out against it. Their mouths are shut. The politically conservative galaxy in which Hillsdale College is a bright and shining star is as rife with divorce and remarriage as are the liberal circles that Hillsdale despises. The reputedly conservative churches to which the editors and writers of *World* belong are full of unbiblically divorced and remarried members. By this time the leaven of marital infidelity has leavened the whole lump of most evangelical, Presbyterian, and Reformed churches.

It is not surprising, then, that no one notices the scandal — the real scandal — at Hillsdale, even though it stares them in the face.

The Hillsdale scandal is a classic contemporary illustration and confirmation of the truth that *the* ethical scandal both in our society and in the churches is unbiblical divorce and the remarriage that follows. And all are silent about the scandal. Especially the noisy reformers of society and church are silent about it.

The divorce and remarriage of the president of Hillsdale College is a scandal. It is gross public transgression of the seventh commandment of God's law: "Whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her" (Mark 10:11).

It disgraces him: "If any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel" (I Tim. 5:8).

It disgraces Hillsdale College and the cause of conservatism that Hillsdale represents, not because it happened, but because the college did not swiftly and decisively expel its president when it happened.

Indeed, the college did not even recognize it as a scandal. It celebrated the remarriage.

The Hillsdale scandal — the real and unquestioned Hillsdale scandal — is not neatly confined to a small college in Michigan. It has spread to implicate in the iniquity and disgrace with the shame all who have judged the events at Hillsdale without noticing the scandal. Particularly is this true of those who have solemnly concluded that no scandal is proven or provable at Hillsdale. The Hillsdale scandal is the scandal of William J. Bennett, William F. Buckley Jr., and *World* magazine.

No one should doubt whether the divorce and remarriage is the real scandal of Hillsdale. The cause of the sexual promiscuity and perversity that now deprave and destroy our nation and that defile the churches is the failure to honor marriage. If the former president of Hillsdale College did, in fact, commit adultery with his daughter-in-law, the greater evil, and the cause, was his unfaithfulness to his wife.

The irony of the Hillsdale scandal is that the college and its supporters are enthusiastic about "worldview." They war against the lawlessness of liberalism in society and call for conservatives, especially Christian conservatives, to promote a Christian "worldview" in North America. This is also the agenda of *World* magazine, which could not see any scandal at Hillsdale.

Any "Christian worldview" that has so little regard for marriage and the family that it is unable to notice the scandal of Hillsdale is unworthy of the name Christian. The efforts of such a "Christian worldview" to resist what Robert Bork has called the "slouching towards Gomorrah" of the United States and to advance the kingdom of Jesus Christ — *the calling and privilege of every true child of God and especially every genuine Reformed Christian* — are futile.

The triune God, Creator of the heaven and the earth, has made the family the fundamental institution of earthly life both in the nation and in the church.

The foundation of the family is marriage.

The destroyer is divorce and remarriage.

The scandal.

Chapter 4

The Remarriage of the Guilty Party

Now the *guilty* party may remarry. The man or the woman who committed adultery against his wife or her husband, thus causing the divorce in his or her first marriage, is allowed to remarry and to be a member in good standing in the church. The churches that are now allowing this are evangelical, Reformed, and Presbyterian churches. They are evangelical, Reformed, and Presbyterian churches that have a reputation for conservatism and orthodoxy.

These churches approve the remarriage of the guilty party. In some cases, they may require confession of the adultery that broke up the first marriage. But they approve the remarriage of the guilty party. (It is not my concern here to examine the popular distinction between "innocent party" and "guilty party" in a divorce, whether this distinction is as valid in every instance as is often assumed.)

Approval of the remarriage of the guilty party has become common in the churches. The Christian Reformed Church synodically approved the remarriage of the guilty party in 1956. This is also the position, evidently, of those who recently seceded from the Christian Reformed Church, the United Reformed Churches. They lived peaceably with their church's decision for many years. Objection to the church's teaching and practice of marriage, divorce, and remarriage was not part of their reason for leaving. As is evident from "The Sad Case of Bert Zandstra", approval of the remarriage of the guilty party is now the policy and practice of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands ("liberated").

How the remarriage of the guilty party is regarded in many conservative Presbyterian churches is fairly indicated in the writings of Jay E. Adams. In a book that is highly recommended in conservative Reformed and Presbyterian circles, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage*

in the Bible (Baker, 1980), this popular theologian and counselor teaches his readers that "remarriage, in general, is not only allowed but in some cases encouraged and commanded. It is looked upon favorably in the NT." To the question, "Who may remarry after divorce and under what conditions?" he answers, "All persons properly divorced may be remarried." "Properly divorced," however, does not mean for this influential marriage counselor those who are divorced on the one biblical ground, namely, the fornication of one's mate. Rather it means "those who are released without obligations." These include a professing Christian who has divorced his unbelieving wife in disobedience to the command of Paul in I Corinthians 7:12. Also the guilty party may be "properly divorced" so as to be free to remarry. "Remarriage after divorce is allowed in the Bible and ... the guilty party — after forgiveness — is free to remarry." It makes no difference whether the guilty party committed adultery, divorced, and remarried before or after his conversion (pp. 84-96).

The remarriage of the guilty party is approved in many churches that do not blow a trumpet before their practice. In their public utterances, they argue for the remarriage of the "innocent party." Probably, the minister refuses to officiate at the wedding of the remarriage of the guilty party, for the sake of appearance (mainly, his own appearance). But minister, consistory, and congregation allow the remarried guilty party to remain, or become, a member of the church in good standing. They too approve the remarriage of the guilty party. I know whereof I speak.

A Radical Change

The approval in recent time of the remarriage of the guilty party by these conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches is a radical change and a significant development. In the past, these churches have rigorously restricted the right of remarriage to the innocent party. They forbade the guilty party to remarry. They refused to allow the remarried guilty party membership in the church. Especially the Presbyterians extended the right of remarriage to the believer who is deserted by an unbelieving mate on

account of the gospel, with mistaken appeal to I Corinthians 7:15, but they too disapproved the remarriage of the guilty party.

For many years, the Christian Reformed Church and other conservative churches criticized the stand of the Protestant Reformed Churches, that Holy Scripture forbids all remarriage after divorce. Their vociferous argument was that the innocent party may remarry. What their argument might be today, we do not know, for they have all fallen silent on the matter of divorce and remarriage. The churches do not like to speak on this subject. Whatever the argument might be, it is certainly no longer a defense of the remarriage of the innocent party. For they now approve the remarriage of the guilty party.

Chickens Coming Home to Roost

The radical change demonstrates that it is impossible for a church to restrict remarriage to the innocent party. Such is the pressure of the world, such is the force of the carnal element in the church, and such is the power of the sinful nature of the saints themselves that a church that opens the door "slightly" to the remarriage of the innocent party will eventually throw it open all the way to the remarriage of the guilty party. And if the guilty party may remarry, men and women divorced for any and every unbiblical reason, including burning the toast, are allowed to remarry.

But there is more to the recent development than this. In the approval of the remarriage of the guilty party the chickens are coming home to roost. The right of the remarriage of the guilty party was implied in the churches' approval of the remarriage of the innocent party. What we witness today is simply the logical, inevitable outcome of the approval of the remarriage of the innocent party. The evil tree now bears its evil fruit. And the fruit is exceeding bitter, both in the dishonoring of God and in the destruction of marriage, family, husbands, wives, children, grandparents, grandchildren, and others.

For consider: if the innocent party in a divorce has the right to remarry, the reason must be that the marriage bond has been dissolved. Obviously, one may not remarry, if he is still married to someone else. And this is exactly what the conservative churches have said in the past:

the adultery of the guilty party dissolves the bond. But if the marriage bond is dissolved, it is dissolved, not only for the innocent party but also for the guilty party. This is in the nature of the case. A marriage cannot be dissolved for only one of the married companions. If the marriage has been dissolved, the guilty party has every right to remarry. He has as much right as does the innocent party. He is no longer married. It was his own adultery that dissolved the bond, but the bond is dissolved. As one who is unmarried, he has the right from God Himself to marry. It is preferable that he remarry, for it is not good for man to be alone.

The refusal in the past by conservative churches to allow the guilty party to remarry was a mistake. It was a mistake when judged by the standard of their thinking on divorce and remarriage. One can understand why they made the mistake and even, to a certain extent, sympathize with the mistake. The guilty party is a scoundrel. He is unfaithful. He sins against his wife. He is responsible for the breakup of his family. Often, he is also responsible for the breakup of his neighbor's family. The emotional reaction naturally is to refuse him the right of remarriage and, if he does remarry, the right of church membership.

Nevertheless, the conservative churches that approved the remarriage of the innocent party did not base their prohibition of the remarriage of the guilty party on Scripture. Nor did this prohibition reflect biblical thinking on marriage. Therefore, it could not stand the test of time. To say it better, God's judgment in the history of the church has exposed the approval of the remarriage of the innocent party as erroneous by angrily leading the churches to approve the remarriage of the guilty party.

As an unmarried man, in the thinking now of those churches that approve the remarriage of the innocent party, the guilty party has every right to be married. He has been "loosed" from his wife. Does not the apostle teach, "Art thou loosed from a wife ... If thou marry, thou hast not sinned" (I Cor. 7:27, 28)? Remarriage, therefore, does not exclude him from the church. Likely, he will have to confess the sin of adultery that he committed when he was married to his first wife and also his guilt in breaking up his first marriage, just as any public sinner is required to do. But he may be member of the church as remarried. He did not sin when he remarried. Nor is he living in continual adultery in

his second marriage. This would imply that he is still married to his first wife, but the churches have said that that bond has been dissolved.

To be sure, this approval of the remarriage of the guilty party is a nasty, disgusting business. A fellow church member may break up my and his own marriages and families by committing adultery with my wife. After his wife divorces him, he may very well remarry mine. If he confesses his sin of adultery, and my wife does the same, he may be member with me in the church — living with my wife. What happens to all the children involved, only the devil who is behind the whole business knows. But this is the implication of the position that the innocent party may remarry. And this grim, damnable state of affairs actually obtains in "evangelical" and "conservative" Reformed churches today.

This is what the churches are approving, even though the Word of God teaches, in language that a child can understand, "Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery" (Matt. 19:9a). When the guilty party in a divorce marries someone else, he commits adultery. The relationship is an adulterous relationship, so that he goes on committing adultery as long as he maintains it.

Jesus Christ disapproves the remarriage of the guilty party.

Reexamining the Traditional Position

Inasmuch as it is their approval of the remarriage of the innocent party that has brought the conservative churches into open war with Jesus Christ by now approving the remarriage of the guilty party, the churches must reexamine their traditional stand on the remarriage of the innocent party. It is unbiblical to view marriage as a contract, or bond, that man can dissolve by his sin and at his will. Scripture teaches that marriage is a lifelong bond established by God. God makes the two one flesh (Gen. 2:18ff.; Matt. 19:3-9). Only the death of one of them dissolves the bond, so that the other has liberty to marry again (I Cor. 7:39). The sexual unfaithfulness of one of them is ground for divorce in the sense of rightful, even legal separation (Matt. 5:31, 32; Matt. 19:9). But not even the innocent party may remarry. If she does, she and her

new husband are guilty of adultery (Matt. 5:32b; Matt. 19:9b). She still has a husband. She is still bound to him, "until death us do part," as the form of marriage states.

The thinking that has prevailed in Reformed churches concerning the right of the remarriage of the innocent party always suffered from a fatal flaw. This flaw should at last be recognized. It is the notion that adultery dissolves the marriage bond. This is the notion that was the basis of the churches' approval of the remarriage of the innocent party: her husband's adultery dissolved the marriage so that the innocent wife might remarry. This is also the notion that today compels the churches to approve the remarriage of the guilty party: having dissolved his own marriage by his adultery, the guilty husband has every right to remarry. In view of the importance of sex for marriage and in light of the reaction of the saints against adultery, it is understandable that the churches took the position that adultery dissolves marriage.

But the notion is false.

First, experience gives the lie to it: many marriages of the people of God have survived adultery.

Second, the notion rules out the exercise of forgiving grace in the lives of married believers: if adultery dissolves marriage, there is not even the possibility that a betrayed husband or wife forgives the offending marriage companion and is reconciled.

Third, and worst, it flies in the face of the gospel concerning the real marriage, of which ours are symbols: our adulteries against God in Jesus Christ do not and cannot dissolve His covenant with us (see Jer. 3; Ezek. 16).

Let it be shouted from the housetops: adultery does not dissolve marriage. It does not dissolve marriage so that the guilty party may remarry. It does not dissolve marriage so that the innocent party may remarry. Only God puts asunder what He has joined together, and He puts asunder by death (Matt. 19:4-6; I Cor. 7:39).

This must be the stand of the church of Jesus Christ. Only then is she secure against the wickedness of the approval of the remarriage of the guilty party.

Chapter 5

More Light on Divorce and Remarriage: Matthew 19:9

Matthew 19:9 “And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.”

From a reader comes a request for more light on divorce and remarriage. The request is a response to the series of essays that appeared first in the *Standard Bearer*: "The Sad Case of Bert Zandstra," "The Scandal and Silence," and "The Remarriage of the Guilty Party." The request for more light asks particularly about the Word of Jesus Christ in Matthew 19:9.

Prof. Engelsma's otherwise excellent series on divorce and remarriage left me in a bit of a logical quandary. Unless I am totally misreading Matthew 19:9, the "adultery" exception seems to relate directly to the phrase, "and marry another," in which case the Westminster Confession is correct in saying, "In the case of adultery after marriage, it is lawful for the innocent party to sue out a divorce and, after the divorce, to marry another, as if the offending party were dead" (WCF XXIV.V). On the other hand, Prof. Engelsma's view that adultery is ground only for "separation" does not seem to take into account the phrase, "and marry another." However (and this is my quandary), both I Corinthians 7:39 and Romans 7:3 clearly imply that the death of a spouse is the only ground for remarriage.

The trouble that I have (and I am greatly troubled by all of this) is that these passages seem to present a contradiction. On the one hand, divorce and remarriage are apparently permissible in the case of adultery. On the other hand, the only

ground for remarriage is the death of a spouse. While Prof. Engelsma's arguments against divorce in the case of adultery are compelling, particularly in light of our adulteries against our Lord, I am still not clear on how he would exegete Matthew 19:9. Either Engelsma is correct and the WCF is wrong on this count (notice: I did not even ask about the "not under bondage" phrase in I Corinthians 7:15!), or the WCF is correct and Engelsma is imposing extra-biblical restrictions on divorce and remarriage. However, if the WCF is correct, I still have difficulty with I Corinthians 7:39 and Romans 7:3.

I certainly do not want to give any credence to the Christian Reformed and Van Tilian camps which so eagerly embrace the "paradoxes of Scripture."

If Prof. Engelsma can shed any more light on this subject, I will appreciate it.

Virginia Beach, VA

Does Scripture Then Contradict Scripture?

There is one text in the Bible that might seem to approve remarriage after divorce. One text! If understood as approving remarriage, this text would approve the remarriage only of the "innocent party," that is, the married person whose wife (or husband) has fornicated. All other remarriages are forbidden as adultery.

This one text is Matthew 19:9:

And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.

Against the seeming approval of the remarriage of the "innocent party" in Matthew 19:9 stand a number of texts that clearly forbid all remarriage after divorce, regardless of the ground for the divorce. These passages condemn all remarriage after divorce as adultery.

Mark 10:11, 12: *And he saith unto them, Whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her. And if a woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she committeth adultery.*

Luke 16:18: *Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery: and whosoever marrieth her that is put away from her husband committeth adultery.*

I Corinthians 7:10, 11: *And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband: But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife.*

I Corinthians 7:39: *The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord.*

Romans 7:2, 3: *For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband. So then if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress: but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man.*

The prohibition of remarriage in these passages is absolute.

Romans 7:2, 3 and I Corinthians 7:39 ground the absolute prohibition in the nature of marriage as a lifelong bond by virtue of God's sovereign ordination as Creator and Governor of this world.

One text apparently conflicts with this absolute prohibition of remarriage by a seeming approval of the remarriage of the "innocent party."

If Matthew 19:9 does, in fact, permit the remarriage of the "innocent party," it flatly contradicts Scripture's teaching on marriage, divorce, and remarriage in the passages quoted above, especially I Corinthians 7:39.

Westminster's Admission of Contradiction

Even though it adopts the position that Matthew 19:9 permits the remarriage of the "innocent party," the Westminster Confession of Faith really admits that permission of the remarriage of the "innocent party," and, therefore, Matthew 19:9 (as the Westminster divines explained it), contradicts I Corinthians 7:39. It makes this admission when, having said, "in the case of adultery after marriage, it is lawful for the innocent party to sue out a divorce, and, after the divorce, to marry another," it adds: "*as if the offending party were dead.*" The delegates to the Westminster Assembly recognized that their permission of the remarriage of the "innocent party," supposedly on the basis of Matthew 19:9, contradicted the rule of I Corinthians 7:39 that only death dissolves the marriage bond so that a married person is set at liberty to marry another. Therefore, the Westminster divines felt it necessary to concoct the strange, startling, and obviously false decree that adultery effectively renders the adulterer — the "guilty party" — dead in the sense of I Corinthians 7:39. Thus, they attempted to bring Matthew 19:9 (as they explained it) into conformity with I Corinthians 7:39.

The trouble with this is that I Corinthians 7:39 is not referring to a fictitious, virtual, "as if," unreal death. The apostle does not say, "but if she or someone else decides to regard her husband as dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will." The death in I Corinthians 7:39 that alone dissolves the marriage bond so that a married person may marry another is real, actual physical death — death that breaks all earthly ties, death that puts the man's body (that otherwise belongs in bed with his wife) in the grave.

The explanation of Matthew 19:9 that permits the "innocent party" to remarry contradicts I Corinthians 7:39. In this case, Scripture contradicts Scripture.

Is Matthew 19:9 Self-Contradictory?

Matters are even worse. If Matthew 19:9 permits the remarriage of the "innocent party," the text is *self*-contradictory. Intending to forbid the

remarriage, among others, of the "guilty party" as adultery (this is what the text expressly teaches), the text actually *opens the door* to the remarriage of the "guilty party." It does this exactly by permitting the remarriage of the "innocent party." For if the "innocent party" may remarry, it must be the case that the marriage bond between the "innocent party" and the "guilty party" is dissolved. But if the marriage is dissolved, presumably by the adultery of the "guilty party," it is dissolved for the "guilty party" as well as the "innocent party." And if there is no marriage, the "guilty party" has every right to remarry. Being unmarried, he is at liberty to marry (again).

Thus, Matthew 19:9 contradicts *itself* and plunges the matter of divorce and remarriage into utter confusion and chaos.

The Harmony of Matthew 19:9 with All Scripture

In reality, there is no contradiction between Matthew 19:9, on the one hand, and all the texts prohibiting remarriage, on the other hand. Matthew 19:9 merely *seems* to approve the remarriage of the "innocent party." To say it more accurately, the approval of the remarriage of the "innocent party" is an inference that some erroneously draw from Matthew 19:9.

The meaning of Matthew 19:9 is that all divorce except that due to the sexual unfaithfulness of one's mate is forbidden. In keeping with the Pharisees' question in verse 3, the main subject of the passage is the legitimacy of divorce. The phrase, "except it be for fornication," gives the one biblical exception to the prohibition of divorce. It does not give an exception to the prohibition of remarriage. To say it differently, the words, "except it be for fornication," give the one biblical ground for divorcing one's wife (or husband). They do not give a biblical ground for remarriage after divorce.

Christ does mention remarriage in the text. He mentions this because almost always the man who divorces his wife either intends to marry another woman or will eventually marry another.

What about remarriage after divorce? What about the permissibility of remarriage after divorce in Matthew 19:9?

There is no question about the remarriage of the man who divorces his wife unjustly, that is, the man whose wife has not been guilty of fornication. Jesus states, indeed it is His main purpose with the text to state, that he commits adultery when he remarries.

But what about the remarriage of the man who divorces his wife on the ground of her fornication? What about the remarriage of the "innocent party" in Matthew 19:9?

If Matthew 19:9 concluded in the middle of the text, concluded, that is, with the words, ". . . and shall marry another, committeth adultery," there might be some excuse for uncertainty whether this text permits the remarriage of the "innocent party." Even then, the church would have to take into account the clear, explicit teaching of Scripture elsewhere that all remarriage after divorce is prohibited. Scripture interprets Scripture. The doubtful passage must be explained in light of the clearer passages.

But Matthew 19:9 does not end in the middle. There is a second part: "and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery." "Her" is the woman of the first part of the text who has been divorced unjustly and whose husband then married another, committing adultery. She is the "innocent party." Nevertheless, whoever marries her commits adultery. Of course, she too commits adultery, if she remarries.

Matthew 19:9 condemns the remarriage of the "innocent party" as adultery.

Why?

Because the wife (or husband) is bound by the law to her husband (or his wife) as long as her husband (or his wife) lives. Only death dissolves the bond. Adultery does not dissolve the marriage bond. Emphatically, adultery does not have the power to dissolve the marriage bond.

Matthew 19:9 is in perfect harmony with all of Scripture in the vitally important matter of marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

Divorce is permitted on the ground of fornication.

All remarriage after divorce is forbidden as adultery, including the remarriage of the "innocent party."

The reason is that God's honorable ordinance of marriage is a lifelong, indissoluble bond.

Let the saints practice it.

Let the church proclaim it.

And defend it with discipline.

Chapter 6

Marriage: a Lifelong Bond

The evil of unbiblical divorce and remarriage that invariably follows is widespread in Reformed churches. Many churches quietly tolerate this great wickedness against God and the neighbor. Many others openly defend it.

Various factors contribute. A significant factor is the churches' conformity to the world. In these last days, the churches become worldly, as Christ forewarned. Therefore, lawlessness increases both among the membership and on the part of the institute itself. "And because lawlessness shall abound, the love of many shall cool" (Matt. 24:12, Greek text).

The root of the scandal is the churches' refusal to view marriage as a lifelong, unbreakable bond that God establishes between one man and one woman. Having compromised this fundamental truth about marriage, even those churches that once tried to restrict the right of remarriage to the "innocent party" have caved in to the pressure to tolerate the remarriage of any and all who are divorced, including the *guilty* party. This necessarily follows from the granting of a right of remarriage to the "innocent party." For if the "innocent party" may remarry, it must be that his original marriage has been dissolved. If the original marriage has been dissolved, it is dissolved not only for the "innocent party" but also for the guilty party. And if the marriage of the guilty party is dissolved, she may marry again, just as every unmarried person is free to marry. The church may not forbid it. The church may not refuse the membership of the remarried guilty party, at least not on the ground simply of the remarriage.

The epidemic of divorce and remarriage among their members and, especially, the scandalous presence at the Lord's Table of many who

have unjustly divorced and then remarried ought to drive the churches to reconsider their doctrine of marriage. Specifically, this evil should compel the churches to consider seriously whether marriage is not a lifelong bond established by God, which no one and nothing can dissolve as long as the two live.

Fragile Contracts

Instead, the churches more and more view marriage, if not in theory, then in practice, as a contract drawn up and entered into by the married persons mutually. It is dependent upon their pleasure. As a conditional contract, it can be broken by one or both of them. In this case, the marriage is abrogated. It is as if it never existed. Both may then make another contract with other parties. *Ad infinitum. Ad nauseam.*

A spineless church enthusiastically blesses every new contract and dutifully approves the breaking of the old ones.

What part the great God of heaven and earth plays in this abuse of His holy ordinance is a mystery. It seems to be His role genially to validate every abrogation of the old contract and compliantly to ratify every new one. Whatever suits the will and pleasure of the men and women who marry, divorce, and remarry, He sanctions. The god of the marriage doctrine and marriage practice of many evangelical and Reformed churches resembles nothing so much as a "Great Wax Nose" in heaven.

There is no excuse for the churches' rejection of the truth that marriage is a bond created by God. The testimony of Scripture is clear and compelling. A child can know it. The cleverest theologian cannot explain it away. At the institution of marriage in the beginning, the Word of God described the very essence of marriage as a man's cleaving to his wife in a "one flesh" union (Gen. 2:24). Where was the contract in the garden? Where was the conditional agreement, implying the possible dissolving of marriage? Marriage is, by God's own ordaining and effecting, a bond, a wonderfully intimate oneness. It is such a close oneness — "one flesh" — as unavoidably raises the questions, "Can this oneness be dissolved? Who or what can possibly make two again of those whom God has joined together?"

Appealing to the institution of marriage, specifically the words of Genesis 2:24 that describe marriage as a bond (with the express purpose of forbidding divorce!), Jesus sharpened and strengthened the biblical revelation that marriage is a God-formed bond: "What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (Matt. 19:6). Essentially, marriage is God's joining together of husband and wife as one flesh. It is a bond. There is no room in Jesus' authoritative doctrine of marriage for the notion of marriage as a human contract, not even if God is allowed to peer over the shoulders of the contracting couple to ratify their bargain.

Christ's apostle taught the same, and ordained it in all the churches: "The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord" (I Cor. 7:39). The point now is not that the bond is broken only by death (which the text teaches in language that cannot be misunderstood), but that marriage is a binding and bonding. To be married is to be bound, to be bonded. What binds and bonds is the law, that is, the living Word of God. Of a contract, the apostle knows absolutely nothing.

The alternative to the view of marriage as a bond is the notion of marriage as a contract. James Fitzjames Stephen was right in his debate with John Stuart Mill when he put the alternatives as he did: "(Is marriage) a divine, indissoluble union governed by the *paterfamilias*, or is it a contractual unit governed and dissolved by the wills of the parties?" (John Witte, Jr., *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1997, p. 198).

The Bond in Ephesians 5

All contract theory of marriage shatters on Ephesians 5:22ff. Is the relation between my head and my body that of a contract? Did my head and my body agree conditionally to live together for their mutual advantage and pleasure, or even for their life? Is it part of their "co-living" and of their cooperation that if one fails in its duty the other may sever relations and find another, more agreeable body or head? If the

head should become senile, may the body leave and re-attach? If the body becomes paralyzed, may the head dissolve the relationship?

Can they dissolve their union?

Nonsense, you say.

And you are right.

No fool represents the relation between physical head and physical body as a contract. It is a wonderful, close, ultimately mysterious bond established by the Creator in His creation for every one who partakes of human nature. Such is the bond that head and body, though distinct, are one.

But now the inspired apostle describes the relation of husband and wife exactly as that of head and body: "the husband is the head of the wife" (v. 23); "men ought to love their wives as their own bodies" (v. 28). No more than that of head and body is the relation of husband and wife a contract. As much as the relation of head and body, marriage is a bond of intimate fellowship in which the two share one life.

Not even this in Ephesians 5, however, is the most powerful testimony against the sterile, fragile contract-theory of marriage and for the fruitful, solid doctrine of marriage as bond. The most powerful testimony is the apostle's teaching that earthly marriage symbolizes the relationship of Christ and the church. Having quoted the fundamental Word of God at the institution of marriage, the apostle exclaims, "This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church" (v. 32).

If earthly marriage is not a bond, but a contract, such also is the relationship between Christ and the church. If earthly marriage is a mere contract, dependent for its endurance upon conditions fulfilled mutually by husband and wife, so also is the relationship between Christ and the church. If earthly marriage can be dissolved by one or the other of the parties at his or her will and pleasure, or even by his or her sin, so also can the covenant between Christ and the church be dissolved by the will of Christ or by the sin of the church. And then, a remarriage, at least on the part of Christ.

Years ago, a dear sister, who was not at that time enamored of everything Protestant Reformed, said to me, "The best thing that the Protestant Reformed Churches have going for them is their stand on

marriage." She was not far wrong. For in addition to its being a blessing to many families, as well as to the churches made up of these families, the doctrine of marriage as a lifelong, indissoluble bond serves the gospel of the covenant of grace. And this grand gospel of the covenant as a bond of fellowship between Christ and us, established, maintained, and perfected by the triune God in sheer, unilateral, unconditional grace and, therefore, unbreakable and everlasting, is the "best thing" in the Protestant Reformed Churches, as it is the "best thing" in the Bible.

On the day (which may God graciously forbid!) when the Protestant Reformed Churches give in to the pressures of the world, which are heavy, and to the desires of their own members, which can be strong because of the hard, marital circumstances of ourselves or of our children, and permit remarriage, on that day they will repudiate marriage as a bond. And on that day they will be committed to a doctrine of the covenant as a contract — a conditional, breakable contract.

By virtue of Ephesians 5:31, 32.

Marriage is a bond. God the Creator made it so. He made it so for the sake of the redeemed and for the sake of His own covenant as Redeemer.

The question then is: Can the bond be broken, and if so, by whom?

God must answer this question. Marriage is His institution. He has formed every marriage-bond as with His own hand. Men and women may not speak here. All must listen to the Word of God. Then they must confess what God has said. They must ignore what the world says. They must pay no attention to the answer pleaded for by their own circumstances or by the circumstances of those whom they love.

God's answer, given in Holy Scripture, is plain.

Earthly marriage can be dissolved. It can be dissolved only by God Himself. He dissolves it by the death of one of the married persons (I Cor. 7:39).

Fornication on the part of husband or wife can so strain the bond that divorce in the sense of full, legal separation is allowed. But even then the bond is not broken, so as to permit remarriage (Matt. 19:9; I Cor. 7:10, 11).

Only the death of one of the married persons dissolves the bond, for the bond is superhumanly strong: "one flesh" by the joining of the Almighty.

"Marriage: a lifelong bond" implies "marriage, a calling."

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Chapter 7

Marriage: a Calling

As to its nature — what it essentially is — marriage is a lifelong, unbreakable bond established by God the Creator between one man and one woman.

As to how the people of God are to regard marriage, and their life in it, marriage is a calling. It is not an institution and way of life that is intended primarily for their pleasure, comfort, happiness, and fulfillment. Marriage is intended for the glory of God. Believing men and women are privileged and commanded to serve God in married life. Their happiness and fulfillment are secondary. The only happiness and fulfillment that are of real importance are the happiness and fulfillment that believers have from serving God acceptably in marriage. This happiness and fulfillment they can — and must — have, regardless of their happiness, or lack of it, with their marriage companion.

The Fact of the Calling

That marriage is an earthly ordinance in which the Christian works out his salvation by serving God as God requires in His Word is the teaching of the apostle in I Corinthians 7. This is one of the outstanding passages in Scripture on marriage. The instruction is practical. But underlying the passage and its practical instruction is the truth that marriage is a calling. At a crucial juncture in his teaching on marriage, the apostle declares, *concerning marriage*, "But as God hath distributed to every man, as the Lord hath called every one, so let him walk. And so ordain I in all churches" (v. 17). A little later, with reference to one's race and nationality, one's occupation, and one's social status, as well as one's marital state, he says, "Brethren, let every man, wherein he is called, therein abide with God" (v. 24).

Marriage for Christians is a "vocation." The effectual, saving call of the gospel not only gives elect believers salvation, but also commands and empowers most of them to be servants of God in His holy institution of marriage.

This is what professing Christians ignore today. This is what their supposedly Reformed and evangelical churches allow them to ignore. They view marriage as merely an arrangement of human life for their pleasure and convenience. When it suits them, they get married, and only because it suits them. When they find that their marriage does not please and satisfy, they divorce and remarry. They are sure to leave, if they should have to suffer in their marriage.

When a believer regards his or her marriage as a divine calling, the earthly circumstances of the marriage are of no ultimate importance, whether her husband is a good man or a fool like Nabal; whether his wife is a lovely woman or a shrew; whether the marriage is a delightful life that is ended all too quickly, or a burden heavy to be borne until God finally grants relief in death. The circumstances of marriage are unimportant, just as it is not important whether one is a Jew or a Gentile, slave or free, rich or poor, weeping or rejoicing (I Cor. 7:18ff.).

The one important thing about marriage is "the keeping of the commandments of God" (v. 19).

For believing young people, regarding marriage as a calling will mean that they marry. God commands them to marry, and sooner rather than later. Unless they have the gift of continence and have resolved to remain single in order more devotedly to serve the Lord, they are to marry, in order to avoid fornication (I Cor. 7:1ff.). Since the young men must take the initiative, they must consider themselves duty-bound to seek wives among the young women in the church, thus providing their spiritual sisters with the husbands whom they are commanded to marry. There should be more of this seriousness in dating and deciding to marry, and less of the quest for an emotional "falling in love."

The Marriage Ceremony

When the young people marry, they must enter marriage as a distinct, divine calling. Parents and church must have taught them this from childhood. The minister who marries them must give them this counsel. In the solemn setting of the Reformed marriage ceremony, the traditional, biblical vow must hold the calling before the couple. It is inexcusable that ministers allow the couple to create their own vows, especially when those vows fail to reflect the fundamental biblical duties of love on the part of the husband, submission on the part of the wife, and mutual faithfulness until death parts them.

A December, 1997 editorial in the *Chicago Tribune* ("Promise tweekers: Why today's wedding vows are meaningless") complained about this very thing.

To understand why the United States has the highest divorce rate in the world, go to some weddings and listen to the vows. ... A growing number of couples — perhaps most — compose their own vows. It would be hard to exaggerate the symbolic importance of this shift. The old vows were created by society and presented to the couple, signifying the goal of conforming the couple to marriage. The new vows are created by the couple and presented to society, signifying the goal of conforming marriage to the couple.

The editorialist correctly observes that by thus trivializing the marriage vow society is disparaging marriage and exalting the couple. He asks, "Who is to blame for this transformation of the vow?" His answer is:

I suggest that we blame the clergy. Many pastors have become little more than entertainers, bit players, in the weddings they officiate and in the marriages they launch.... What matters most about the wedding is increasingly overshadowed. The party gets bigger; the embrace of the marital promise gets smaller. What is to be done? First, pastors should reclaim the historic responsibility to

promulgate and maintain the integrity of the marriage vows exchanged in their churches. Central to this reclamation would be the revival of the vow of marital permanence.

Our ministers must insist on the traditional vow. If the couple resist, the minister should tell them to find someone else to marry them.

Then the message at the wedding ceremony must not center on the couple's happiness, their love for each other as no two have ever loved each other before, and a (mythical) life of uninterrupted bliss before them. The message must be the Word of God setting before them and before all in the audience the all-important reality that marriage is a calling. This includes the recognition that there will be troubles in married life. Wisely, the Reformed marriage form begins by assuring the couple of God's assistance of them in their afflictions. This is based squarely on the apostle's teaching that all married saints "shall have trouble in the flesh" (I Cor. 7:28). To leave this out at a marriage ceremony, probably because this "gloomy note" does not harmonize with the pretty flowers, lovely dresses, and sentimental mood, is foolish.

The Practice of the Calling

Because marriage is a calling, believers stick it out in a bad marriage. They do more than stick it out. They exert themselves, on their part, to live as Christ commands them to live in marriage, regardless of their miserable wife or husband. There are bad marriages in the church. One cannot be a pastor in the church for many years and remain ignorant of this. There are husbands who are unloving toward their wife. It breaks your heart to see their coldness, unkindness, and harshness toward their own body. There are wives who are little or no help to their husband. Brawling, sharp-tongued women, they make you cringe when they contradict, criticize, and demean their head. The believer in such a marriage does not, may not, cut and run. It lives in his or her soul, "Abide in the calling in which you are called."

So much is it the case that believers are cheerfully to remain in a bad marriage that the believer is commanded to maintain a marriage with an unbeliever (I Cor. 7:13, 14).

The sense of calling will in many cases move the husband or wife whose marriage companion has committed fornication to receive the unfaithful party back, if she or he repents. Even though the sin has so deeply and painfully hurt them that they are inclined to divorce (as they have a right to do), knowledge that their marriage is above all a calling directs them along the way of reconciliation.

The truth that marriage is a calling, however, does not only function practically in circumstances of marital distress. Its main effect is not that believers decline to divorce. Rather, it produces the fruit that married believers live together daily in the right way. Living in marriage as a calling, the husband exerts himself to love his wife as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her (Eph. 5:25-29). Love for the wife is a command from Christ Jesus his Lord. The lovableness of the woman may make it easier to obey the command in some cases than in others, but the command has nothing to do with her lovableness. Neither does it have anything to do with the husband's feelings of love, or lack thereof.

Love for the wife is a command. It has everything to do with marriage's being a calling. There is simply no place in the Christian life or in the church, therefore, for the mournful words, "I no longer love my wife." Usually the man who utters them supposes that they express a ground for divorce that cannot be challenged. But his words are irrelevant. The proper response to them is, "So what?" If they mean anything at all, they are a confession of sin, as though one would say, "I robbed a bank yesterday." The man must be urged to repent of his damnable sin and to start loving his wife again. The grace of God will enable him to do it, if only he will seek it.

The godly wife is similarly commanded to reverence and submit to her husband, as a help to him (Eph. 5:22-24, 33). This has nothing to do with the power and pride of the male, as it has nothing to do with her own natural inclination or disinclination. Her marriage is a calling, and in this calling the God whom she serves wills her submission.

Carrying out these basic commands for God's sake, Christian husbands and wives will experience a great deal of bliss in marriage — bliss in their own relationship — as God blesses those who fear and serve Him.

For some in the church, God prevents and prohibits marriage. By governing the circumstances of their lives, God makes marriage impossible for some who would like to marry. Others He forbids to marry, e.g., the woman who is divorced because her husband is guilty of fornication (I Cor. 7:10, 11). Such are to receive their single life from God as a calling. Willingly, joyfully, they are to serve God as single persons. They must guard against resentment and bitterness. Discontent in single life is rebellion against God whose calling this is for the single person.

It is also foolish. For marriage itself or single life is of no ultimate importance. That is why married people are to have their wife or husband as though they did not have them (I Cor. 7:29). Only one thing matters: living obediently in our calling.

This is the only thing that will matter one day when each of us gives account of his or her life in marriage to Christ the judge. How much or how little happiness we had will not even come up. The question from the tribunal will be: "Did you fulfill your calling?"

With eternal consequences.

Chapter 8

Narrow Is the Way: The Argument from Remarriage to Homosexual Relationships

The church ought to embrace "homosexual people who live faithfully in covenanted partnerships."

This is the plea that Lewis Smedes addresses particularly to the Christian Reformed Church (CRC).

Writing in the May, 1999 issue of *Perspectives*, Smedes urges the acceptance of practicing homosexuals in the CRC. He exhorts the CRC to "embrace," that is, accept as members of the church in good and regular standing, "Christian homosexual people who have committed themselves to a monogamous partnership" (all quotations in this editorial are from the article by Lewis Smedes in the May, 1999 issue of *Perspectives*, pp. 8-12).

Perspectives is a religious periodical, "A Journal of Reformed Thought." It is edited and largely written by theologians, teachers, and other prominent, influential persons in the Reformed Church in America and in the CRC.

Dr. Lewis Smedes is a minister of the gospel in the CRC.

Smedes' Plea for Homosexual "Marriage"

It is not the purpose of this essay to criticize Smedes' plea for the approval of the practice of homosexuality in the CRC. Something might well be said in this regard. No doubt, reflecting on the plea by a renowned Reformed theologian for approving homosexual relations would be beneficial. Strong pressure is now being exerted by the evil one upon all churches, "conservative" as well as "liberal," to cave in to the world here also.

Critique of the plea for approval of homosexual sex would note that the learned Dr. Smedes professes ignorance as to the meaning of the Holy Spirit in those passages of Holy Scripture that treat of homosexuality, particularly Romans 1:18-27. Smedes does not know who they are who are described in the passage: "Who were these people, the ones who were having sex with partners of their own gender? ... Nobody knows for sure." Nor does he know what is meant in the passage by "against nature": "What he (the apostle-DJE) *meant* by 'contrary to nature' none of us knows for sure."

The doubt of our unbelieving age that increasingly prevails in the churches has blinded Smedes' mind to the clear testimony of the Word of God. The people spoken of in Romans 1:18ff. are men and women who perversely lust for people of the same gender and then perversely engage in sexual acts with them as best they can. The practice of homosexual sex is "against nature" in that it contradicts the will of God for sex as made known in creation itself. This will of God, writ large in nature in the physical characteristics that distinguish male and female by virtue of God's creation of the human race, is sexual relations between a man and a woman in marriage.

One who is uncertain about these basic things of divine revelation and the Christian religion is disqualified to be a teacher of the church on sexual and marital ethics.

Comment on the plea for approval of homosexual relations would call attention to significant verbal slips, when Smedes is lamenting his church's current prohibition of "monogamous partnership(s)." "To *all* homosexuals it says: *You have no choice*; you may not marry and you must be celibate" (the emphasis is Smedes'). The noteworthy words are "marry" and "may." The use of "marry" shows that the "partnerships" which Smedes asks the CRC to approve are, in his thinking, marriages: homosexual *marriages* (the emphasis is mine). If Smedes has his way, there will be two kinds of marriages in the CRC, heterosexual and homosexual.

Closely related is his use of "may" in his wording of his church's present forbidding of homosexual unions: "You *may* not marry." But this is a mistake. What the church says is, "You *cannot* marry (each other)."

The thing is impossible, as impossible as it is for homosexual sex to be fruitful in children. By definition, definition grounded in the ordinance of God at creation, marriage is a relationship between a man and a woman, a male and a female. Men can do many things with men, and women can do many things, apparently, with women. One thing that they cannot do is marry.

Analysis of Smedes' plea for homosexual "marriages" in the CRC would also predict that this abomination is sure to come in that church. If ministers are permitted publicly to advocate homosexual "marriage," it will come. If theologians of the stature of a Lewis Smedes are already bold to plead for homosexual "marriage," it will come sooner rather than later.

The Argument for Homosexual "Marriage"

But my interest in Smedes' article lies elsewhere. The interest of the readers ought to lie elsewhere. Our interest is not the plea itself for homosexual relations, but the argument raised on behalf of the plea.

Smedes has an argument.

The argument is solid and compelling, indeed, irresistible, as far as the CRC is concerned.

The CRC may yet for a time forbid homosexual partnerships, but they will not do so by refuting Smedes' argument. They will merely ignore it.

This argument is equally compelling for many in other Reformed and Presbyterian churches.

The argument fails completely in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC). But then it is important, even urgent, that members of the PRC carefully consider the argument, so that they strengthen their determination that this powerful argument for practicing homosexuals in the church never get a foothold among them.

Smedes' argument is this: Just as the CRC came to approve the remarriage of divorced persons despite Jesus' prohibition, so also the CRC can and should approve homosexual "marriage."

For many years, the CRC forbade remarriage after divorce and excluded remarried persons from membership in the church as those

living in adultery. In the 1950s, the CRC radically changed its stand and accepted remarried persons as members of the church. These are not only "innocent parties," but also "guilty parties" and those who divorced for all kinds of unbiblical reasons.

Smedes readily acknowledges that the reason for the acceptance of remarried persons by his church was not the discovery of new material on divorce and remarriage in the Bible. The reason was not even a new interpretation of the words of Jesus and the apostles that the CRC had for many years appealed to in support of its condemnation of remarriage. But the reason was that the church found itself confronted by a dramatic increase of divorce and remarriage among its members. And those divorcing and remarrying were the sons and daughters of the members of the church, including the ministers and elders who made the synodical decision.

More sons and daughters of the faithful were getting divorced and were marrying again. Before World War II, the church could exclude such people on the assumption that they would very rarely be their own loved ones. After the war, however, local congregations discovered that persons whom they loved as brothers and sisters in Christ — and, yes, their own children — were doing it. And it was very hard to look their own sons and daughters in the eyes and say to them: "You will go to hell unless you leave your present spouse."

In light of these hard realities, the CRC deliberately revised its understanding of Scripture's teaching on marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Smedes puts it this way: "It (the CRC) factored human reality into its reading of the Lord's words."

With this new "reading" of biblical teaching, there was a much wider application of the mercy of God to adulterers. The wide mercy of God was extended to the professing Christian who unjustly divorced his own wife and remarried the wife of his neighbor. Proclaims Smedes, in his explanation and defense of the CRC's change of position regarding

remarriage, "The grace of Jesus Christ ... could bless and support remarried people in their second marriage."

This wideness of God's mercy is an important aspect of the CRC's acceptance of remarriage after divorce, as it is an important element in Smedes' argument for the acceptance of homosexual "marriage." It accounts for the title of Smedes' article: "Like the Wideness of the Sea." This is part of a line in a hymn that goes, "There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea."

This acceptance of remarried persons at the Lord's Table allows for, if it does not require, the similar acceptance of practicing homosexuals as members of the church.

Does the church's dramatic move from the exclusion to the embrace of divorced and remarried Christians provide a precedent for an embrace of homosexual Christians who live together in a committed partnership?

My answer to my own question is, Yes, it does seem to me that our embrace of divorced and remarried Christian people did indeed set a precedent for embracing Christian homosexuals who live together.

If the church, with appeal to the wideness of mercy, can accept remarried persons because members are in fact divorcing and remarrying, including the dear children of the church, even though Scripture clearly teaches marriage as a lifelong bond, then the church can also accept practicing homosexuals for the same reasons, even though Scripture plainly teaches that God wills sex only in the marriage of a man and a woman.

This is the argument.

It is valid.

The church that accommodates the Word of God to the painful circumstances of its members in the matter of divorce and remarriage should do so also in the matter of homosexual desire. Fact is, as Smedes shrewdly observes, "The biblical ground for excluding them (homosexuals) from embrace within the church is actually weaker than was its ground for excluding divorced and remarried heterosexuals."

How can ministers and elders say no to homosexual sons and daughters of the congregation, when they have not been able to say no to remarried sons and daughters? Much less, as is more and more the case, when these rulers in the church are themselves remarried.

If the mercy of God, in the thinking of the church, is wide to bless and save one who transgresses the seventh commandment in one gross way — adultery — why should that mercy strangely narrow so as to exclude another who transgresses the same commandment in another gross way-homosexual acts?

If sexual pleasure and the earthly comforts of life override Christ's demand for costly, sacrificial discipleship in the greater matter of marriage, why should they not override His demand in the lesser matter of mere sex?

Approval of remarriage after divorce is not only an argument. As Smedes correctly points out, it is also a "precedent." It has "paved the way" for the acceptance of homosexual "marriage."

The church that has forsaken the biblical teaching on divorce and remarriage cannot consistently prohibit homosexual relations. The church that has caved in to the pressures of the lawlessness of these last days in the matter of remarriage will eventually do so also in the matter of homosexuality.

This is by no means only or even mainly the CRC.

Smedes naturally pitches his plea, with its argument, toward the CRC. For this reason, I must mention the CRC often in this essay. But I will not have any reader suppose, or charge, that I like to point the finger at the CRC. Not here! Not whatsoever! This essay is fundamentally uninterested in the CRC. It is interested in an argument.

For the overwhelming majority of Protestant churches approve the remarriage of divorced persons. The overwhelming majority of churches that like to be regarded as conservative — Presbyterian and Reformed churches — approve the remarriage of divorced persons and welcome them to the Lord's Table. Their reasons are the same as those that moved the CRC to change its stand on remarriage. And their defense of this wickedness, when they are challenged, is also the same: the wideness of God's mercy.

Smedes' argument applies to them all.

When some of them waggle their finger at the CRC concerning an alleged "softness" toward homosexuality, they play the hypocrite.

The Argument Refuted

The argument for approving homosexual relations in the church is effectively answered by a church's faithful, biblical stand on marriage, sex, divorce, and remarriage. The plain teaching of the Bible is the authoritative rule for the thankful life of the believer in marriage. The difficult marital circumstances of some are not allowed to compromise, much less negate, the Word of God. The true church refuses to "factor human reality into its reading of the Lord's words."

Members of the congregation, including ministers and elders, look their own children and grandchildren who find themselves in such circumstances in the eyes and call them to a life of self-denial: being a eunuch for the kingdom of heaven's sake. The grace of Christ is sufficient. By the Spirit of Christ, their brief earthly life will be God-glorifying and rich. And the glory that will be their reward is so great that the present suffering is not worthy to be compared with it. Christ will eternally make up to them their temporal loss.

As for the wideness of God's mercy, who can sufficiently extol it?

Higher than heaven, deeper than hell, wider than the east is from the west!

Wide enough to forgive, bless, and save fornicators, adulterers, unbiblically divorced, remarried, and homosexuals! As it is wide enough to forgive, bless, and save those who are worse sinners than any of them: the proud!

In the way of our repentance!

Only in the way of our repentance.

The teaching that God's mercy saves impenitent sinners who go on in their sin is a false gospel. It is the heresy of antinomism. It invents a "faire and easie way to heaven," only to send the comfortable sinners to hell.

Wide is God's mercy.

But narrow is the way.

Does anyone remember anymore?

Narrow is the way.

