

Book Review

The Divorce Dilemma by James Woodroof, Nashville, TN: Christian Family Books, 1977, 76 pp.

The Divorce Dilemma was also published by Harold Scott in New Zealand in 1967.

The book contains a preface, four chapters, a summary and a bibliography. Chapter one gives an introduction and states the problem to be addressed by the author of the book. Chapter two gives the historical background of the prevalence of divorce in Greek, Roman and Jewish society at the time the church was established. Chapter three investigates the primary divorce legislation in the New Testament. Chapter four examines the secondary divorce legislation in the New Testament.

The main purpose of the book is to make application of the divine law on divorce from the viewpoint of the circumstances of the first century (1).

Chapter one is introductory in nature. Woodroof poses the following question, "What procedure was followed in receiving the divorced and remarried into the church in the first century?" (1). Were these persons required to separate upon conversion, or were they allowed to maintain their marriage status after conversion? (1). Woodroof then establishes a method of approaching this question and answering it. He divides the subject into two separate areas: (1) Primary divorce legislation and (1) Secondary divorce legislation. Primary divorce legislation refers to "the prima facie evidence of the Bible on marriage and divorce. Secondary divorce legislation refers to the divine application of the divine concept. The question to be explained is, "What was the attitude of the first century church toward the much married, much divorced ones in the world as they came asking, "What must I do to be saved?" (4). Woodroof affirms that this secondary legislation is not expressed in explicit terms in the New Testament, but in implicit terms (4).

Chapter two gives historical background concerning divorce in Greek, Roman, and Jewish societies in the first century. In Greek society, divorce was freely granted freely to both parties from the first century until 212 A.D. (7). In Roman society, divorce was unlimited at the time of the coming of Christ (8). In Jewish society, there were no restrictions placed upon the right of a Hebrew man to divorce his wife (10). Josephus divorced his second wife and married a third. Divorce was always the husband's act in the Old Testament (11). Woodroof gives Corinth as an example. Corinth was a Greek city under Roman law and was a "legend of immorality" (11). In I Cor. 6:9-11, Paul acknowledges the moral decay of this city out of which the church was formed through the power of the gospel (11).

Chapter three investigates the primary divorce legislation in the New Testament. Woodroof states, "The New Testament teaches that marriage is an institution established by God in the very beginning and is a union between one man and one woman (Matt. 19:4-6) to continue until death (I Cor. 7:39, Rom. 7:2) (17). The author considers: (1) Matthew's exceptive clause; (2) Jesus' relation to the Mosaic law; and (3) supplementary revelation (18).

Matthew alone contains the exceptive clause (Matt. 5:32; 19:9). The authenticity of Matthew's text is questioned by some scholars, but defended by Woodroof who maintains that it has held a position of prominence for 1800 years (20). First, Matthew

19:9 is strengthened by Matthew 5:32 which is supported by every available Greek manuscript without any variant readings (20). Second, the manuscript evidence for Matthew 19:9 is strong--no available manuscript omits the exceptive clause (20). Murray calls 19:9 "the most pivotal passage in the New Testament on divorce" (20). It is so because of the exceptive clause and the remarriage clause. Woodroof raises the question, "Does the exception extend to the remarriage of the divorcing husband?" He states that Catholic scholars say no. Woodroof disagrees with this position and affirms that the exceptive clause modifies both the divorce and remarriage (21). Finally, Woodroof defends the authenticity of the remarriage clause (22-23).

Next, Woodroof considers the relation between Jesus and the Mosaic Law. He affirms that Jesus is in conflict with Moses on the subject of divorce (23). He makes two points: (1) Moses was in conflict with God's marriage law which was given "from the beginning;" and (2) Moses was in conflict with Jesus. Moses permitted divorce for causes other than fornication (24). Woodroof explores the difference between two Jewish interpretations of Deut. 24:1. One view was represented by Hillel who permitted divorce for "any unseemly thing." A second view was represented by Shammai who permitted divorce for adultery. Woodroof rejects both interpretations as being extreme (26). Interestingly, Woodroof reveals that the RSV (Revised Standard Version) translated Deut. 24:1-4 in agreement with Calvin. Calvin maintained that the subject of the passage is not a bill of divorce, but the unlawfulness of the act of a man taking back a woman as his wife after having once divorced her (providing she, in the meantime, had been married to and divorced from another man) (26).

Woodroof proceeds to examine supplementary revelation and consider the relationship between Jesus and Paul. Do the writings of Paul conflict with the teachings of Jesus on marriage and divorce? Woodroof affirms, "It is this writer's conviction that they do not" (28). Woodroof mentions there are two difficulties. One is the problem of not enough being said (Rom. 7:1-6). The other is the problem of too much being said (I Cor. 7). He continues with an explanation of I Cor. 7. The key verse according to Woodroof is I Cor. 7:12. Former instruction (before v. 12) is given to Christians married to Christians. The latter instruction is directed to the Christian in a mixed marriage--a believer and an unbeliever (30). Regarding a Christian married to a Christian, Woodroof declares, "but at the same time allowance is made for possible incompatibility. Where such incompatibility exists between a Christian husband and wife, separation is allowed, but only on the condition that both will remain unmarried, or else be reconciled" (30). No divorce is permitted and no remarriage. Woodroof considers the meaning of the phrase, "But to the rest I speak, not the Lord?" What does it mean? First, Paul was inspired (I Cor. 14:37). Second, he is not repeating a teaching of Christ who is not likely to have said anything on the subject (Robertson and Plummer quoted by Woodroof). Woodroof asserts that Paul now addressed a topic that Jesus did not address during his earthly ministry, i. e. the existing marriage of a believer to an unbeliever (31). Woodroof further states, "Jesus did foresee the problems that would arise in such circumstances (Matt. 10:34-39), but he gave no specific instructions on how to resolve the difficulties" (31). Of course this means that Jesus' statement in Matt. 5:32 and Matt. 19:9 have no application to a believer married to an unbeliever.

Woodroof considers the import of I Cor. 7:15. Is Paul here introducing another cause for divorce? desertion by an unbelieving mate? (32). May an existing marriage

continue after conversion of one of the partners? Paul says it may if she is content to dwell with him. But if she depart, let her depart. In what sense is the unbelieving wife sanctified by her believing husband? Woodroof comments, "It could hardly be said in any meaningful way that the unbelieving mate was "sanctified" in the believer unless the standard of their association had been raised to the level of the believer..." (32). If she depart, what then? The deserted believer is *ou dedoulotai* -not bound." Woodroof quotes Thayer on the meaning of this phrase, "to be under bondage, held by constraint of law or necessity" (33). Paul says "you are free." Woodroof quotes James D. Bales who believes that the marriage bond is referred to by Paul (34). He then concludes (in agreement with Edwards that, "dissolution with the right to remarry" is the only explanation that does justice to the expression, "is not bound." (34). This makes Paul contradict Jesus in Matt. 19:9. The exceptive clause in Matt. 19:9 means "if and only if." Jesus gave fornication as the only grounds for divorce. Woodroof goes on to argue that Jesus' teaching in Matt. 19:9 was only partial and incomplete. He believes that Paul supplements the teaching of Jesus on divorce (35). This is why he does not believe that Jesus and Paul contradict each other. Amazingly, Woodroof states a disclaimer and says, "It would be hard to find, in twentieth century America, a true parallel to this case" (35). He explains, "Great care should be taken by every deserted believer to determine whether his or her mate deserted because of an aversion to Christianity, or because there existed in the Christian partner incompatibility, insubjection, and a lack of desire to maintain the home and preserve the marriage. This latter condition is not parallel to the case in I Cor. 7:12-15" (35). What is Woodroof saying? He is affirming that the only reason a believer could divorce an unbeliever is the unbeliever's aversion to Christianity. This would be an additional ground for divorce and remarriage given by Paul in contradistinction to Jesus' statement in Matt. 19:9.

Woodroof asserts, "the major application of the divine concept made by an apostle to an existing marriage problem is found in I Cor. 7" (36). Further, he claims, "It must be admitted, therefore, that the problem of divorce as it existed among the world in the first century was not dealt with in such a manner that the world would have known that, in order to become a Christian, one who had been divorced and remarried would have to remedy that situation upon conversion" (36). If this is true, then indiscriminate divorce would not be considered to be a sin. Another statement from Woodroof is revealing, "There is no such remedy prescribed by the apostles, that we have any record of..." (36). This argument from the silence of the Scriptures is not valid. For instance, we have no example of an apostle directing individuals in polygamous marriages as to the remedy for those marriage situations and yet, Woodroof admits that polygamy was practiced among the Jews. We do have general statements such as that found in I Cor. 6:9-11 in which Paul addresses homosexuality and adultery. If a marriage constituted an adulterous marriage as per Matt. 19:9, then in order to become a Christian, the adultery would have to cease.

Another statement from Woodroof's pen indicates that the marriage and divorce situation in the first century was beyond remedy. "But evidently, though the divorce situation of the first century was deplored, it was viewed in such a light as to have been beyond solving by any legislation as would have destroyed so vast a portion of society as to have resulted in chaos and confusion" (36). Even though indiscriminate divorce (divorce for any and every cause) is wrong, there is no remedy! If one type of sin is

exempted from the call to repentance and redemption through Christ, then why not others? This effectively negates the gospel.

Chapter four begins an investigation into the secondary divorce legislation. This represents Woodroof's attempt to define the application of the divine law on marriage and divorce. Woodroof applies some of the principles of historical criticism to the problem of divorce in the first century (41). Woodroof establishes the principle that the writings of an era reflects the thinking of those living in that era. In addition, he affirms a corollary, "The absence of such writings in any given era also reflects the thinking of that era" (41). This is an overstatement. It is not a defensible statement. Woodroof gives the solution to the divorce dilemma that he believes to be true, "The subject of divorce was so well understood (as to its prevalence in the social structure) that the immediate elimination of it by dissolution of existing marriages did not occur to the people as possible, and immediate elimination of it through such a course did not appear to God as mandatory" (42). Woodroof asserts that God failed to correct the corrupt nature of society with regard to indiscriminate divorce. To argue from silence as Woodroof does forces one into the area of supposition not implication. Implication involves drawing conclusions based upon explicit statements in the Bible. Woodroof is fabricating information rather than interpreting Scripture. He quotes O. C. Lambert, "The answer to the question must rest ultimately on supposition..." (44). However, Woodroof attempts to show his conclusion to be true by appealing to five principles, (1) Let each man abide in the calling wherein he is called; (2) God has called us in peace; (3) Let marriage be had in honor among all; (4) There are trespasses that cannot be undone; (5) Areas of restriction.

The first principle given by Woodroof is based on I Cor. 7:17, 20, 24. Paul states, "Let each man abide in the calling wherein he was called." Woodroof makes application of this passage to indiscriminate divorce and affirms that individuals in divorce situations who become Christians may continue in those marriage relationships without further sin. Woodroof writes, "There would have been nothing but an iconoclastic clash had God not condescended to meet man on the plane of those relationships that were inherently honorable, and sanctify man in those relationships, not because of what man was, but in spite of what man was" (45). Woodroof is affirming that these relationships are sanctified by conversion. This leads to the oft repeated phrase, "baptism sanctifies sinful marriage relationships." This interpretation of I Cor. 7:20 would place Paul in direct contradiction to Jesus' teaching in Matt. 19:9 where the Lord defines adulterous marriage relationships. Are adulterous marriage relationships sinful? If the relationship is sinful, then the only remedy required by repentance would be to cease participation in those relationships.

The second principle Woodroof gives is based on I Cor. 7:15. He asks, "Can a marriage that does not conform to Matt. 19:9 be continued without interfering with obedience to Christ? (47). Then, Woodroof proceeds to provide an example of how something forbidden by Christ and the apostles could be engaged in without guilt. He affirms that I Cor. 7:12-15 countermands an express directive in II Cor. 6:14. The statement in II Cor. 6:14 is, "Be not unequally yoked with unbelievers." Woodroof applies this passage to the marriage of a Christian to an unbeliever and states that Paul forbids such. How can II Cor. 6:14 be reconciled to I Cor. 7:12-15 where Paul states that if the unbeliever be content to dwell with the believer that they are not to divorce.

Woodroof provides the solution, "There is no conflict between the two verses once it is understood that in II Cor. 6:14 Paul is forbidding a Christian to go and join himself to an unbeliever in marriage; while in I Cor. 7:12-15, he is directing his remarks to a converted heathen (or Jew) whose marriage was already in existence prior to becoming a Christian" (47). Paul is addressing two different situations. Therefore, the idea that one passage countermands another is not valid. This would not be the case anyway. No two passages of Scripture contradict each other! Paul recognizes that the marriage contemplated in I Cor. 7:12-15 was legitimate as per Matt. 19:9. However, Woodroof again affirms countermanding of one Scripture to another when he asserts that Matt. 19:9 is countermanded by Paul in I Cor. 7:12-15. He states, "There is reason to believe that a similar ruling was allowed in this second case; i.e. Matt. 19:9 was not held as requiring the dissolution of that marriage (though contrary to Matt. 19:9) that was formed prior to conversion. Woodroof contradicts himself again, "This does not mean that Matt. 19:9 is not applicable and binding upon all, but that in view of an existing marriage, the ruling should be in favor of preserving that existing marriage" (48). Jesus says, "Whosoever" in Matt. 19:9 which is a universal intent and Paul would be modifying that intent if Woodroof is correct in his interpretation of I Cor. 7:12-15. A contradiction between Paul and Jesus would be evident.

The third principle is "let marriage be had in honor among all" (Heb. 13:4). Woodroof makes a qualifying statement, "The statement that "Christianity does not abolish existing relations; it sanctifies them," is true with one qualification: i. e. Relationships that are basically honorable are sanctified by Christianity; otherwise they are not" (49). Christianity does not sanctify extortion, reviling, drunkenness, covetousness, theft, homosexuality adultery, idolatry, or fornication (I Cor. 6:9-10). Clearly, some marriages are honorable and some are not. Some marriages are scriptural and some are not. Even Woodroof acknowledges this fact. Adulterous marriages are dishonorable. Does the word adultery mean the same thing in Matt. 19:9 as it does in I Cor. 6:9-10? Woodroof also addresses the meaning of *klesei* in I Cor. 7:20. Woodroof gives the term the following meaning, "has reference to certain conditions of life that impart to the Christian call a special form" (52). Some of the basic conditions of life he has reference to are: national distinctions, social or economic conditions and domestic conditions (52). Obviously, Paul does not mean sinful situations or conditions. Some marriages are sinful relationships, i.e. polygamy, homosexual, and adulterous.

The fourth principle put forth by Woodroof is "there are trespasses that cannot be undone." He mentions murder as an example. Then, he applies the principle to those married and divorced indiscriminately. Woodroof states, "It is evident that repentance is one of the keys, if not the key, to the solution to the divorce problem"(52). He then defines repentance as a change of mind that affect a change in conduct. But, he also states that it does not always require a change in relationship. The problem is that some relationships are sinful. The issue is not the sufficiency of God's grace. The issue is the nature of the sin and what is required when one repents.

The final principle Woodroof gives is consideration of areas of restriction regarding certain offices in the church or benevolent situations. Based upon his interpretations of I Tim. 3:2, Titus 1:6, I Tim. 3:12 and I Tim. 5:9 the restrictions regarding the marital status of bishops, deacons, or widows show that some marriages

were at least second marriages and this proves that the indiscriminately divorced were accepted based upon their conversion and God's grace into the church of Christ without having to dissolve these relationships. Woodroof makes an interesting distinction between collective polygamy and successive polygamy. Successive polygamy is "a series of marriages in which each marriage is terminated by divorce before another is contracted" (58). This definition is invalid. If the marriage is terminated by divorce, then how could you still have a polygamous situation? Polygamy is the act of being married to more than one woman at the same time. Woodroof states that collective polygamy was relevant only to the Jewish society in the first century (58). Yet, Woodroof says that the Bible discountenances it, its laws under Moses strongly implying monogamy (58). Polygamy would be a unscriptural marriage problem for the church in the first century. Yet, we have no directive from the apostles on how to treat a polygamous situation whenever the individuals desired to obey the Gospel. Are the polygamous also granted an exemption or allowance on this basis? Among the Greeks, monogamy was universal. Among the Romans polygamy was a crime which was entirely prohibited (59). However, Woodroof concludes that the restrictions concerning the marital status of elders and deacons given I Tim. 3 and Titus 1 apply only to successive polygamy as he defines it. Woodroof quotes Ambrose and concludes that a man who has married again...is disqualified for the prerogative of the episcopacy (59).