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Divorce and Celibacy in the New Testament and the Implications for the Church Today: One Interpretation: Five Conferences for New Camaldoli Hermitage

Scott Gambrill Sinclair

(Retired) Department of Religion and Philosophy, Dominican University of California,
scottgsinclair@hotmail.com

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Divorce and Celibacy in the New Testament and the Implications for the Church Today: One Interpretation
Five Conferences for New Camaldoli Hermitage

by Scott Gambrell Sinclair

Preface

- I. Traditional Church policy on divorce and remarriage has recently come under scrutiny.
 - A. Traditionally in the Catholic Church (and in my own Episcopal Church), divorce and remarriage were grounds for excommunication.
 - B. This traditional view often fit with the past attitudes of larger society which were that divorce was a disgrace.
 - C. The attitudes of society at least in the industrialized Western world have clearly changed. Divorce and remarriage are now socially acceptable.
 - D. This change in attitude reflects other social changes, including the availability of birth control, the rise of feminism, and the increasing focus on the individual.
 1. Birth control caused many marriages not to have children, especially, right away, and, consequently, divorce and remarriage often did not affect children.
 2. Feminism meant that wives felt more psychologically independent, and often wives as well as husbands had employment outside the home and could support themselves. Consequently, divorce could take place without major financial considerations.
 3. With the growing focus on the individual, achieving personal happiness was seen as more important (even more ethical?) than worrying about the effect of divorce and remarriage on others.
 - E. As the number of otherwise dedicated parishioners who divorced and remarried has increased, there has been pressure on the Church to moderate the traditional policy, and different denominations have responded differently. For example,
 1. So far the Catholic Church has officially resisted this pressure, but in practice there have been concessions and more may be coming.
 - a. “Annulments” have been frequent and often on generous grounds which to outsiders sometimes appear to be divorce under another name.
 - b. Pope Francis seems to be searching for a way forward despite conservative opposition.
 2. In my own Episcopal Church there now seem to be virtually no limitations on divorce and remarriage even by the ordained.
- II. At the same time celibacy continues to be an issue.
 - A. Traditionally, different denominations had very different attitudes on celibacy.
 1. Since the fourth century, the Catholic Church has required ordained people to be celibate, though there have been exceptions.
 - a. Married men could be priests in the Eastern Catholic tradition.
 - b. More recently the Catholic Church has begun to ordain married men to the diaconate.
 - c. And married priests in other denominations (including my own Episcopal Church) who became Roman Catholics were allowed to function as priests while remaining married.
 2. Eastern Orthodox churches have always ordained married men to be deacons

and parish priests and only insisted that one could not marry after ordination and that bishops much be celibate. Indeed, it was expected that parish priests would be married or widowers, and the Orthodox even listed the requirement for priestly celibacy as one of the errors of Rome.

3. Of course, both Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox have had celibate monastic communities for men and women.

4. By contrast, at the time of the Protestant Reformation, the Reformers rejected celibacy as a requirement for church leadership, and in practice monasticism all but disappeared in subsequent Protestantism.

B. We may note that there is a similar divergence over celibacy among non-Christian religions. For example,

1. In Theravada Buddhism the leadership is composed solely of celibate monks.

2. By contrast, in Islam it is expected that everyone will get married.

C. There is growing awareness within Christianity that traditional requirements for celibacy may not always be practical, and that other models may be possible.

1. The requirement of celibacy has in some places led to a severe shortage of clergy.

2. In practice many otherwise excellent church leaders have not been able to maintain celibacy.

3. At least there are experiments in which groups of married people form religious alliances which have recognizable similarities to traditional monastic communities.

4. Some Catholic leaders are advocating ending requiring celibacy for priests.

III. In the following conferences, I will concentrate on divorce and celibacy in the biblical tradition with a special emphasis on the New Testament but will occasionally venture out of my area of specialization to make a few general comments. It is noteworthy that

A. Christian treatments of divorce and celibacy normally refer to material in the Bible.

B. The Catholic Catechism explicitly justifies its teaching on the indissolubility of marriage and the vocation of celibacy by appealing to the teaching of Jesus, especially, two of his sayings:

1. Divorce and remarriage constitute adultery (e.g., Matthew 19:9-10).

2. Some are called to be eunuchs for the kingdom of God (Matthew 19:12).

C. There has been careful scholarly study of the biblical material about divorce and celibacy, and I am especially dependent on data summarized by John Meier.

D. However, in my opinion, the mainline scholarly conclusions about what Jesus taught regarding divorce and celibacy need serious modification, especially, because, as we shall see, the usual interpretation of the two key saying noted above is erroneous.

IV. It is important that we neither overestimate or underestimate the significance of what the New Testament has to say about divorce and celibacy.

A. Strictly speaking the New Testament is not the “Word of God” and must not be appropriated uncritically.

1. Theologically, only Jesus is the incarnate Word of God, and the center of Christian orthodoxy is not even the teaching of Jesus but his death, resurrection, and the coming of his Spirit.

2. The authority of the New Testament depends on Jesus, and whenever the witness of Jesus conflicts with a New Testament text, Jesus takes precedence.

3. The New Testament addresses a time and place very different from our own, and today we must always ask whether a New Testament text which made excellent sense in its own context still makes sense in ours.

4. Moreover, unlike Jesus, the authors of the New Testament were sinners like the rest of us, and sometimes the New Testament reflects not the virtues but the failings of its authors.

B. Nevertheless, the New Testament remains basically authoritative for the Church.

1. It is the primary way that we come to know Jesus.

2. As Christians we believe that God inspired the New Testament, though within the limits of human freedom.

3. The Church canonized the books in recognition of their great value.

4. Perhaps most important, the New Testament has provided the foundation for subsequent church policies, and so if we are to evaluate them, we must at least be aware of where they came from, and if that ultimate foundation is sound.

An outline of the coming conferences.

Conference 1: Marriage Divorce and Celibacy in the Jewish Tradition Prior to Jesus

I. The Old Testament regards marriage as the normal, almost universal, will of a loving God for human beings.

A. In the Bible the creation of Eve is necessitated by Adam's need for a more fulfilling companion than animals.

B. The creation of Eve, Adam's realization that she is of similar nature to him, and the institution of marriage are the culmination of the (second) creation story and a sign of the goodness of the created world and of the goodness of its creator.

C. Of course, in the Bible all humans are descended from Adam and Eve.

D. The Old Testament celebrates the beauty and power of heterosexual love (e.g., the Song of Solomon).

E. In the Old Testament there is no mention of celibacy.

F. Presumably, what the Old Testament records basically reflects the actual social situation in ancient Israel.

G. A major social and even theological reason for the assumption that normally everyone should marry is that immortality depended on a continuing line of offspring.

1. Not until the book of Daniel (c. 165 B.C.E.), the latest book to gain admission into the Hebrew canon, do we find an assertion that an individual can have a meaningful life after death.

2. Earlier biblical books (e.g., the Psalms) assumed that as the body decayed, the mind faded out in Sheol (roughly the grave).

3. Consequently, what immortality there was depended on having an everlasting name.

4. That name depended on the survival of the family and of the larger community which in turn depended on people getting married and having children.

II. In the Old Testament and even later Jewish tradition marriage was often as much an alliance between families as a relationship between individuals.

A. In the Old Testament communities are more important than individuals. An individual was primarily a member of a social group.

B. Often a father would choose a spouse for his child, and marriages could cement loyalties between larger communities.

C. Of course, it was expected that a husband and wife would love each other, but since we at least have stories of people getting married (e.g., Isaac and Rebecca) who had

- previously never met, it seems that in some cases love began only after the marriage.
- III. Ancient Jewish law and custom gave the husband great advantages over the wife.
- A. At marriage the woman moved in with the man and his extended family and at first was practically a stranger in the larger setting and was socially vulnerable.
 - B. The wife was normally expected to obey her husband. Indeed, one word for husband (Baal) also meant "Lord."
 - C. The husband had the right to marry additional women, whereas the wife could not marry additional men.
 - D. Adultery occurred only when the honor of some male was at stake (Bruce Malina). A husband could not commit adultery against his own wife.
 - E. And if the wife committed adultery the legal penalty was death both for her and her new lover (Leviticus 20:10).
- IV. Precisely because marriage was both a relationship of male dominance and ideally of mutual love, it was an appropriate theological symbol of the covenant between God (YHWH) and Israel.
- A. In the symbolism God is Israel's husband, and the worship of other gods is adultery.
 - B. Of course, this symbolism stressed that the relationship between YHWH and Israel was supposed to be intimate, exclusive, and lasting.
 - C. And was unequal: YHWH was Israel's Lord.
- V. In the New Testament patriarchal marriage then because a symbol of the unequal but loving relationship between the risen Christ and his Church (e.g., Eph. 5:22-33).
- VI. The Old Testament rarely mentions divorce (e.g., Deut. 24:1-4), but implies that the husband could divorce his wife but not visa versa.
- VII. Later rabbinic tradition discusses the grounds on which a man could divorce his wife. There is no mention of the grounds on which a wife could divorce her husband.
- VIII. The assumption in almost all sources is that a husband had the right to divorce his wife for any reason.
- A. In the Old Testament exceptions are made only under very unusual circumstances (e.g., if the husband was required to marry a woman because he had imposed sexual relations on her before marriage [Deut. 22:28-29]).
 - B. Only with the Mishna (early third century C.E.) do we find a written and explicit Jewish limitation on the husband's freedom to divorce (i.e., the divorce must be due to dishonorable behavior on the part of the wife), and this opinion is heterodox. The mainline position is that the husband can divorce his wife even for spoiling dinner!
- IX. The only general stipulation is that the man was expected to give the woman a written document confirming the divorce so that she could legally marry someone else.
- X. It is important to note that a divorced woman was in a precarious economic and social situation.
- A. In ancient Israel it was difficult for a woman to earn her own living without resorting to prostitution. We see the grim economic realities of single women in the book of Ruth.
 - B. Therefore, once divorced a woman either had to return to her father's house or get a new husband soon.
 - C. And returning to the father's house or getting a new husband might be difficult.
 1. The woman's father might be dead.
 2. Theoretically, responsibility for the woman's upkeep would then fall to the extended family, but the extended family might not be willing to shoulder the economic burden of another dependent. The frequent biblical admonitions to care for the widow and orphan suggest that frequently such care was not

forthcoming.

3. Finding a new husband would also be problematic, since the divorced woman was no longer a virgin, was now older, probably had dependent children, and had the stigma of a failed first marriage.

XI. The first appearance of celibacy as a religious vocation in Judaism seems to occur with the Essenes/Qumran Community from which we get the famous Dead Sea Scrolls.

A. Ancient authors (e.g., Josephus) record that the Essenes were male celibates.

B. Most modern scholars have concluded that the community at Qumran which produced the Dead Sea Scrolls were Essenes.

C. At least some of the leaders of the community lived in a community which we today might call a monastery which apparently consisted only of celibate males.

D. Since the “monks” certainly devoted tremendous energy to studying and explicating the Mosaic Law and copying sacred texts, we should assume that one purpose of celibacy was to have more time and energy for these tasks.

E. Nevertheless, the primary reason for celibacy was probably to preserve ritual purity.

1. According to Old Testament doctrine a woman was ritually impure during menstruation and immediately after giving birth, and impurity was contagious.

Anyone who touched the woman or even touched anything which she had touched was ritually impure (Leviticus 12:1-6, 15:19-27).

2. Men had to be pure to be in God’s sacred space or touch things that were holy (Exodus 19:15, 1 Sam. 21:4).

3. Therefore, since the Qumran Community was focused on being a human temple, the presence of women would have been a continual problem.

4. We may note in passing that the problem of impure women also helps explain part of the layout of the Jerusalem Temple during the time of Jesus.

a. The temple was surrounded by courtyards.

b. Gentiles, who were impure almost by definition, could only go into the outermost courtyard.

c. Jewish women could only go as far as the next courtyard.

d. Subsequent courtyards were reserved for men and then male priests only.

XII. As we will see when we turn to Jesus, he had a different understanding of women, impurity, and immortality all of which will have implications for divorce and celibacy.

Conference 2: Divorce and Celibacy in the Life and Teaching of Jesus

I. Historically, it would appear that John the Baptist and Jesus were celibate.

A. Admittedly, the evidence is primarily the silence of our sources about either man having a wife or children.

B. Nevertheless, it is very likely that John the Baptist could not have had a family with him in the wilderness and, at least, was temporarily celibate due to his religious vocation.

1. Popular gossip as repeated by Jesus suggests that John’s lifestyle was so ascetical that critics dismissed him as insane (literally demon possessed [Mat. 11:16-19]). Under such conditions it is hard to imagine that he was accompanied by a wife.

2. John’s decision to live in the wilderness probably reflected a theology that the wilderness was the logical place for the beginning of a new and more holy Israel.

We see that theology, for example, in Hosea and in the Qumran community.

3. Hence, in practice at least, John had adopted a celibate lifestyle in response to a divine mission.

C. Our knowledge of Jesus is much greater than our knowledge of John the Baptist, and the silence of our sources all but guarantees that Jesus was celibate from his adult baptism on and very likely had been celibate during his previous life.

1. Our sources tell us about Jesus's parents and his siblings and his disciples and on occasion even about their parents and wives.

2. If Jesus had a wife, we surely would have heard about her.

II. The celibacy of Jesus, unlike that of the Qumran Community, could not have been due to a concern for ritual purity.

A. Jesus associated freely with sinners.

B. On the one occasion where the gospels explicitly mention that he was touched by a bleeding woman, he instead of rebuking her commended her for her faith! (Mark 5:25-34).

C. He declared that food cannot make one impure (Mark 7:14-15). Meier, in contrast to most scholars, doubts that this saying goes back to Jesus; but since Jesus ate with sinners, he certainly acted as if food did not make one impure.

III. A saying of Jesus indicates that he unlike some contemporaries considered marriage only to be appropriate for life in this present world/age, not in post-resurrection life (Mark 12:18-27).

A. A question posed to him by the Sadducees clearly presupposes that if there were a coming resurrection, people would surely be married.

B. And we must suppose that the Pharisees who unlike the Sadducees did believe in a coming resurrection made the same assumption.

C. Of course, in response Jesus declared that in that age people neither marry nor are given in marriage.

IV. In the gospel record Jesus speaks about divorce on at least two occasions.

A. We have a story of him responding to the question of whether it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife (Mark 10:2-12, Mat. 19:3-12).

B. We also have a record of him making a statement about divorce apart from that story, either as part of the Sermon on the Mount (Mat. 5:31-32) or as an isolated saying (Luke 16:18).

V. In all cases there is a core statement that whoever divorces his wife and (except for Mat. 5:32) marries another woman commits adultery.

VI. It is clear that the core statement that whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery goes back to Jesus himself.

A. Paul, as we shall see, also knows the statement and explicitly attributes it to the "Lord."

B. The statement has no parallel in ancient Judaism and so could not have come from another Jewish source.

C. Matthew and Paul, as we shall see, make exceptions to the basic teaching, and, therefore, the saying in the early church was regarded as authoritative and yet problematic.

VII. In the gospel accounts Jesus also gives various elaborations to the basic statement. Here are perhaps the most important

A. Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 add the clause of "except on the grounds of unfaithfulness."

B. Matthew 5:32 says that divorcing one's wife forces her to commit adultery.

C. Matthew 5:32 and Luke 16:18 add that marrying a divorced woman is committing

adultery.

D. Matthew 19:3-12 and Mark 10:2-12 both stress that divorce and remarriage

1. Is permitted by Mosaic Law and custom
2. But violates the clear intention of the Creator who made us male and female and in marriage makes two people one flesh. Note: "One flesh" seems to include

- a. Physical union in intercourse.
- b. Becoming members of a single family.

E. Mark 10:12 adds that a woman who divorces her husband and marries another man commits adultery.

F. Mark 10:11 says that a man who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against the first wife.

G. In Matthew 19:6 and Mark 10:9 Jesus adds, "What God has joined together, let not a human [i.e., a spouse] separate."

VIII. It seems clear that Mark 10:12 which mentions a woman divorcing her husband does not come from Jesus but is a later commentary for Greek and Roman Christians.

A. As we have noted already, a wife did not have the right to divorce her husband in Jewish society.

B. And it seems most unlikely that Jesus would have bothered to condemn something that was impossible anyway.

C. By contrast, at the time of Jesus a wife could divorce her husband under Greek and Roman Law.

D. Hence, Mark, which may well have been written in Rome and certainly addresses Gentile readers, adds a commentary indicating that if it was unacceptable for a man to divorce his wife and remarry, it was, of course, unacceptable for a woman to divorce her husband and remarry.

IX. Whether the other elaborations listed above go back to Jesus or are later commentaries is unclear.

A. Perhaps Jesus on some occasions did elaborate, especially to defend his controversial stance on divorce.

B. However, it is equally possible that everything else (including even the story about someone asking Jesus about divorce) are later commentaries.

X. In any case,

A. The elaborations even if added by others were at least thought to be consistent with the teaching of Jesus.

B. In these sayings there is a noticeable sense of the equality of men and women, a sense that is striking given the patriarchal perspective of contemporary Jewish and Gentile society.

1. Mark applies the prohibition of divorce and remarriage to both men and women.

2. Whereas in the larger Jewish culture it was impossible to commit adultery against a woman (only against her husband), Mark and Matthew state that when the husband divorces and marries he somehow either commits adultery against the first wife (Mark 10:11) or makes her commit adultery (Mat. 5:32).

Apparently,

- a. She suffers from emotional adultery, since she still loves her husband.
- b. Economic circumstances will probably force her to remarry, despite any desire not to.

C. All the elaborations are somehow commentaries on the basic statement that

whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery.

- XI. It seems that this basic statement has normally been taken to be a legal declaration.
- A. The addition of, "What God has joined together, let not a human [i.e., a spouse] separate," in Mark followed by Matthew clearly prohibits divorce and remarriage.
 - B. The effort of Matthew to make an exception on the basis of a wife's infidelity seems to presuppose that already in the first century Jesus's statement was taken as a regulation which needed some alleviation.
 - C. 1 Corinthians forbids divorce and remarriage on the authority of "the Lord" (7:10).
 - D. Certainly in subsequent church history Jesus's statement that divorce followed by remarriage was adultery was treated as a commandment.
 - E. And modern scholars while commenting on the "radicalness" of Jesus's "prohibition" of divorce and remarriage, still seem to be assuming that Jesus was somehow giving a law.
- XII. In my opinion, however, the core statement was originally paradoxical.
- A. Jesus in general was suspicious of legalism, as his interchanges with the Pharisees show.
 - B. He felt that external obedience to law was often a mask for pretending to be better than one actually was and a pretext for despising those who could not keep the law ("sinners").
 - C. He was concerned about the heart (the hidden core of the personality; note Mat. 5:28).
 - D. Hence, we seldom, if ever, find specific legal statements in the teachings attributed to Jesus. We may note in passing that this lack of specificity has allowed Christianity to adjust to different cultures and historical epochs and been a great blessing!
 - E. Instead of specific legal statements, what we find in Jesus's teaching is
 1. General principles, such as the commandment to love God and neighbor.
 2. Extreme or ambiguous statements which point in a basic direction but are too wild or fuzzy to be taken literally (e.g., "If your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out" [Mark 9:47]).
 - F. As Bruce Malina pointed out long ago, the statement that whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery is false by definition.
 1. Adultery is only possible if someone is married, and divorce legally ends a marriage!
 2. Malina suggests that we compare Jesus's statement with something like the following: Whoever purchases a television, is dissatisfied with it, and exchanges it for another commits theft.
- XIII. The paradoxical statements of Jesus generally point in a clear direction, but force the hearer to come up with specific applications, since if taken literally the statements do not make sense.
- XIV. In my opinion, to interpret the paradoxical sayings correctly, we need to see them in the context of Jesus's larger message.
- XV. In his social teaching Jesus was concerned with at least three things:
- A. Lifting up the marginal, including the poor, women, and people regarded as sinners.
 - B. Changing people's hearts (core personalities).
 - C. Looking forward to a new era of justice (the coming of God's kingdom) which in a preliminary way was already present in his movement.
- XVI. The paradoxical teachings which pointed in a certain direction but could not be taken literally
- A. Made it impossible to separate the righteous from the sinner, since there were no

specifics.

B. Forced individuals and communities to struggle, to ponder the deeper meaning of the statements, and to look into their own hearts and situations to apply the paradoxes. Of course, the applications would vary.

C. Invited people to reflect on what might now or in the future be possible with the coming of God's kingdom.

XVII. I would suggest that Jesus's statement that whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery invited his original hearers

A. To recognize the rights of women. Adultery can be committed against a woman, not just against her husband. Note that the elaborations got this point.

B. To realize that adultery is not simply a legal matter but a psychological and spiritual one, and that divorce and remarriage can be psychological and spiritual adultery.

C. To ponder divorce and remarriage in light of the coming of God's kingdom which in part would involve restoring the world to the way that the creator intended it to be.

The elaborations also got this point.

D. To condemn the immoral life of the ruler of Galilee, Herod Antipas, who divorced his first wife in order to gain the hand of a woman who had been (?) still was (?) married to his half-brother. Mark's Gospel records that John the Baptist had explicitly condemned this union which was incest by Jewish Law (Mark 6:18; e.g., Leviticus 18:16). John's criticism led to his arrest and death, and Jesus did not explicitly attack Herod. However, given the situation, his audience did not need for Jesus to be explicit, since Josephus records that the execution of the Baptist outraged public opinion.

E. Would it be going too far to conclude that Jesus was suggesting that male dominance damages marital relations and can lead to men divorcing their wives and that if men treated women as equals marriages would be more healthy and last?

XVIII. Jesus's statement about becoming a eunuch for the kingdom of God (Mat. 19:12) also appears to have been a paradoxical statement originally.

A. In Matthew's Gospel the statement comes at the end of a section on divorce and seems to be a statement that after divorcing his wife a man should ideally be celibate (see below for justification and further discussion).

B. In subsequent church history, the statement was taken as a biblical basis for religious celibacy, and much modern biblical scholarship agrees.

C. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that these two interpretations ignore the crushing social fact that being a eunuch was a bitter disgrace.

1. The ancient Middle East was a patriarchal society in which honor was the dominant social goal.

2. The physical symbol for masculine honor was the male sexual organ. Notice that even in the contemporary United States we still hear people say about a man, "If he had any balls, he would . . ."

3. The Old Testament forbids eunuchs to join Israel (Deut. 23:1), though it does hold up hope for eunuchs to have honor in some ideal coming time (Isa. 56:3-5).

4. In ancient literature eunuchs are portrayed as effeminate and cruel (Francis Moloney).

5. Jews would probably associate castration with the worst of Pagan religion, since the goddess Cybele had castrated priests.

D. By saying that one could castrate himself for the kingdom of God, Jesus was making a statement that sounded both extremely offensive and ridiculous. Note that prior to this saying "eunuch" was not used figuratively of human beings (Gary Brower).

E. The saying must go back to Jesus himself and not be from later tradition.

1. Jesus loved to make outrageous statements, whereas for the most part his followers did not resort to such rhetoric.
2. The saying about eunuchs is attested, apparently independently of Matthew's Gospel, in early Christian writing (e.g., Justin Martyr, Apology, I,15,14).

F. It seems very likely that the core saying originally was independent from any discussion of divorce, and that it was Matthew who provided the present larger context.

1. The core saying ends with making oneself a eunuch for the kingdom of God.
2. The qualification that this saying is not for everyone but only for those who can bear it is typical of later exegesis which was concerned with softening the radical statements of Jesus and probably comes from Matthew.
3. The saying only awkwardly fits into a unit about divorce, and it was probably Matthew who inserted it there (see below for Matthew's reason).

XIX. I would suggest, following L. William Countryman and scholars of the Jesus Seminar, that the basic thrust of the originally independent statement by Jesus is that members of the kingdom must be prepared to give up male privilege and associate with the dishonored.

- A. As we have seen, Jesus was concerned about the marginal, and the marginal included women.
- B. Jesus, contrary to social norms, had female disciples.
- C. Hence, it must have been necessary for his male disciples to adjust.
- D. A principle of his teaching was that the first had to be like the last, and all special privileges due to such things as wealth and social prestige, including religious prestige, has to be given up.
- E. It is striking that before speaking about those who make themselves eunuchs for the kingdom that Jesus mentions those who are eunuchs involuntarily due either to a birth defect or to mutilation by others.
- F. Apparently, making oneself a eunuch for the kingdom is joining the fellowship of those who are defective or mutilated, that is associating with those who lack patriarchal honor and are disgraced. Perhaps Jesus was even thinking of the prophecy in Isaiah of a new time when eunuchs would be welcome and seeing that prophecy fulfilled in the kingdom.

XX. Of course, one (but, only one) way of giving up male privilege is to forgo patriarchal marriage, as Jesus himself seems to have done. Indeed, Moloney's thesis is plausible, that Jesus was himself heckled for being a "eunuch" and that his statement about being a eunuch for the Kingdom of God was a reply.

XXI. Hence, the traditional interpretation that the saying invites celibacy is not wrong.

XXII. But that interpretation is totally wrong if celibacy becomes just another form of male privilege, as it so often was in church history when only celibate men could be ordained and laywomen and nuns spent so much time obeying and serving celibate males. If Jesus was heckled for being a "eunuch," the accusation was not merely for being celibate but also for betraying the male code of honor by accepting women as equal with men.

Conference 3: Matthew's Gospel and the Problem of Divorce (and Celibacy?)

I. Although Mark and Luke each include a saying on divorce and remarriage, it does not appear that these gospels offer a detailed theology about them.

A. Luke

1. Gives us the basic saying that a man who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery and then like Matthew 5:32 adds that a man

who marries a divorced woman also commits adultery (Luke 16:18).

2. Luke understands the statement to be binding, since immediately before it he includes a saying that every letter of the law is eternally binding.

3. The fact that Luke prefaces the statement with the insistence that it is binding reflects that the prohibition of divorce was already seen as problematic.

4. Perhaps one can see Luke's expansion as also reflecting his general interest in women and his insistence that they must be seen as essential members of the church. But since the same expansion also occurs in Matthew, this point cannot be pressed.

5. I do not think we can deduce more than the above from the isolated saying about divorce in Luke.

6. In 18:29 Luke mentions the blessedness of leaving a wife (as well as other relatives and property) for the Kingdom of God, and it is striking that Luke added "wife" to his source (Mark 10:29). Apparently, Luke regarded a missionary vocation as a possible justification for abandoning a wife. But Luke also praised the work of the husband and wife missionary team of Priscilla and Aquila (e.g., Acts 18:2).

B. Mark

1. Gives us the story of Jesus responding to a question from the Pharisees if it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife (10:1-12).

2. In keeping with his interest in Gentiles readers, Mark goes on to say that a woman who divorces her husband and remarries also commits adultery. As we have already seen, under contemporary Greek and Roman law a woman could divorce her husband.

3. In Mark this section introduces a larger unit which deals with various categories of members of the church, children, the rich, and faithful disciples.

4. A theme of this larger section is that the demands of Jesus are radical.

5. The material of about divorce and remarriage certainly reflects this theme, since Jesus dismisses the Mosaic concession that one can divorce his wife as incompatible with the will of God made known in creation.

6. But as with Luke it is hard to go much further. However, we shall do a more detailed analysis of the story below.

II. Matthew spends more time on the problem of divorce than any of the other gospels. The theme appears in the infancy narratives (1:18-19), and in the Sermon on the Mount (5:31-32), and in a debate between Jesus and his critics (19:1-12).

III. It should be noted that Matthew has taken at least the last two passages from earlier sources.

A. The source of the first passage about Joseph contemplating divorcing Mary after he discovers that she is pregnant and not by him is unclear.

1. The material could be based on some historical memory.

2. Or on later tradition.

3. Or come from Matthew himself.

B. The saying in the Sermon of the Mount comes from Jesus, as we have already seen.

C. The story of Jesus answering a question about the lawfulness of divorce comes mostly from Mark's Gospel.

IV. Nevertheless, the changes that Matthew makes in the material that he borrows suggest that Matthew has himself thought deeply about divorce.

V. Like his gospel in general, Matthew's treatment of divorce has two different goals:

A. To discredit the Pharisees with whom the Church was in competition.

- B. To give pastoral guidance to Christians.
- VI. Both of the passages in which Matthew discusses divorce attack the laxness of (other) Jewish interpretation, and chapter 19 condemns the Pharisees for hardness of heart (i.e., closed mindedness) and ignoring the will of God in creation.
- VII. We may note that if the Mishna (early third century CE) is correct the Pharisees at the time of Jesus disagreed among themselves over the legitimate grounds for a man seeking a divorce.
- A. The more permissive school of Hillel, which in the Mishna is normative, theoretically allowed a man to divorce his wife for any reason (including spoiling dinner!), though in practice even the Hillelites discouraged divorce.
- B. The more rigorous school of Shammai made dishonorable behavior by the wife the only legitimate grounds for divorce.
- VIII. Nevertheless, it is clear that Matthew is concerned with the pastoral application of Jesus's teaching about divorce, since Matthew adds an exception clause, which certainly weakens his claim that the Pharisees are too lax.
- IX. The addition of the exception clause seems to be an application of Matthew's principle that the leaders of the church have from God the power to bind and loose, that is the power to interpret the demands of God and oversee church discipline (Mat. 16:19, 18:18).
- X. Since Matthew emphasizes the importance of having mercy on the least and the last, we seem here to have an illustration of using church authority to help victims (in this case, victims of sexual unfaithfulness).
- XI. Unfortunately, there is scholarly debate over the meaning of the clause "except for sexual immorality." To avoid the conclusion that Matthew is indeed weakening Jesus's demands, and to link the material to Deuteronomy 24:1-4, many scholars argue that here "immorality" means incest. Hence, Matthew is advocating that Pagans who enter the church should dissolve marriages which were incestuous from a Jewish perspective.
- A. In Matthew 19 the Pharisees appeal to Deuteronomy 24:1-4.
- B. And Deuteronomy 24:1-4 forbids a man from remarrying a wife whom he divorced and who then married someone else who divorced her. Apparently, we have an incest taboo. When the first husband and the woman got married, they became one flesh. To marry again would be to marry a near relative and be incestuous.
- C. And Gentiles culture did allow marriages which were incestuous by Jewish/biblical law.
- XII. In the context of these conferences, the issue is not whether Matthew would have regarded incestuous marriages as illicit and required that Gentiles who converted to Christianity end these unions. I suspect that Matthew would have taken this position.
- XIII. For us the issue is whether Matthew would also have included sexual immorality (and, especially, adultery) on the wife's part as legitimate grounds for a man divorcing his wife. And it is clear that Matthew did hold this at least in the case of outright adultery.
- A. In Jewish culture even the betrothal was legally binding, and it was normally expected that a husband would divorce an unfaithful wife (if she had not already been stoned to death! [e.g., Deuteronomy 22:23-24]).
- B. In his infancy narrative Matthew explicitly states that Joseph was "righteous" when he was engaged to Mary and decided to "divorce" her for being pregnant by someone else (1:18-19). Note that Matthew consistently portrays the behavior of Joseph as ideal, and that in deciding to divorce Mary but not disgrace her publicly Joseph models the ideal combination of justice and mercy.
- XIV. Another issue is the relationship between the discussion on divorce in chapter 19 and the immediately following comments on becoming a eunuch. (review) Traditionally, the

Church has interpreted becoming a “eunuch for the kingdom of God” as the vocation of celibacy, and most scholars seem to concur.

XV. Like a number of scholars, I think that there is little to be said for this interpretation in the context of Matthew’s Gospel (for the meaning of the statement in the teaching of Jesus, see above). In the context in which Matthew chose to place it, the saying surely refers to remaining celibate after a divorce. Note that typically in Matthew when the disciples comment about something which Jesus says and he comments on the comment, Jesus is correcting a misunderstanding. Hence, when the disciples respond that it is good not to marry, they are misconstruing what Jesus had in mind. Jesus was *not* talking about celibacy prior to a first marriage.

XVI. Matthew, alone among the gospels, states that when a man divorces his wife he makes her commit adultery (5:32). Apparently, this is Matthew's own commentary.

XVII. Apparently, then Matthew’s teaching about divorce is that

A. Marriage was part of the intention of the creator who made people male and female.

B. In marriage God himself joins a couple together. Were Matthew (and Mark) thinking of some Christian (or Jewish) marriage ritual in which the ceremony invoked the authority of God?

C. Consequently, in marriage there is an intimate union in which the couple “are no longer two, but one flesh” (19:6).

D. This union cannot be annulled. “What God has joined together, let no one separate” (19:6).

E. Consequently, when a man divorces his wife and marries another woman, he is

1. Violating his own created nature, since psychologically and spiritually the first marriage cannot be annulled.

2. Disobeying God's will.

3. Injuring the wife

a. She is psychologically and spiritually damaged

b. She probably must marry again either because

1). She does not have the gift of celibacy.

2). She must have economic support.

c. Consequently, the first husband is forcing her to become psychologically and spiritually an adulteress (i.e, a woman who is simultaneously involved in two exclusive romantic relationships).

F. We may note in passing that presumably the same logic would in Mark apply to a woman who divorces her husband and marries another man.

G. For Matthew the only valid grounds (other than incest) for a man divorcing his wife is if she already has destroyed the sanctity of the relationship by dishonorable sexual activity with another man (especially, adultery).

H. In such a case, the man ethically can (should?) divorce his wife.

I. Nevertheless, since the psychological and spiritual reality of the relationship still exists, the man ideally ought to remain celibate (literally, be a eunuch).

J. However, for those who do not have the ability to remain celibate, marrying another woman is permissible. Matthew explicitly adds a clause that not everyone can become a eunuch for the kingdom but only those “to whom it has been given” (19:11-12).

XVIII. Apparently, similar considerations explain Matthew's expansion (also found in Luke) that when a man marries a divorced woman, he commits adultery. Psychologically and spiritually the man has entered into a relationship in which the woman is involved with another man.

XIX. Even though Matthew is using Mark as a source, Matthew omits Mark’s statement that a

woman who divorces her husband and marries another man commits adultery (Mark 10:2).
XX. Presumably the reason that Matthew omits this is not because he thought that it was unreasonable, but only because he knew that the original saying of Jesus did not include this material.

XXI. Nevertheless, Matthew's larger theology certainly allows the church to be open to new developments which invite the consideration of the grounds under which women can divorce and other questions.

A. Matthew stresses that the entire law depends on the commandments to love God and to love one's neighbor (22:34-40).

B. In Matthew Jesus himself reinterprets the meaning of Old Testament regulations and other sacred traditions, strengthening some and setting aside others (e.g., 5:21-48, 12:9-14).

C. In the climax of one of the great discourses in Matthew, we read, "Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (13:52).

D. A major purpose of the power of church leaders to bind and loose, a power which Matthew emphasizes (16:19, 18:18), is precisely so the church can respond to new situations.

E. And Matthew's Gospel ends with Jesus sending out the apostles to convert the world and teach it Jesus's commandments. And as we have noted, in the Gentile world women did have the right to divorce their husbands.

F. And Matthew stresses the importance of mercy, especially toward the weak and the sinful (e.g., 9:10-13).

1. Matthew emphasizes the importance of maintaining standards in theory.

2. But he also emphasizes the importance in practice of moderating their application to the weakness of human beings.

XXII. I believe that when Pope Francis insists that mercy is justice he too is affirming standards in theory and emphasizing the necessity of making allowances for the limitations of actual human beings in real life.

Conference 4: Divorce and Celibacy in 1 Corinthians; the First Tentative Beginning of Communal Celibacy in the Pastoral Epistles

I. 1 Corinthians spends more space discussing divorce and celibacy than any other book in the New Testament.

II. As the letter makes clear (7:7-8), Paul himself was celibate at least at the time, and I believe that he had always been. Note that other church leaders, including Peter, were married.

III. In 1 Corinthians Paul exalts celibacy and downplays marriage in ways that today seem disturbing.

A. He sees marriage only as a means of containing lust (7:9), not as way of expressing deep Christian love. Note that Ephesians and the Pastorals have a more positive treatment of marriage, but most modern critical scholars do not think that Paul himself wrote these letters. Ephesians even regards human marriage as a metaphor for the love between Christ and his Church (Eph. 5:22-6:5).

B. Paul explicitly states that those who refrain from marriage do better than those who marry (7:38).

IV. In part we should see Paul's comments as reflecting his own fanaticism and that of the

Corinthians.

- A. By a fanatic, I do not mean someone who is psychologically unhealthy.
 - B. I only mean someone who subordinates all of life to achieving a single goal, which in Paul's case was either eliminating Christianity before his conversion or spreading it afterward.
 - C. For Paul, the great advantage of celibacy and the problem with marriage was that marriage would hinder his total dedication to his single goal.
 - D. As we shall see, the Corinthians also were advocating celibacy as mandatory for Christians, and Paul is anxious to meet them half way.
- V. In his discussion Paul is especially responding to specific problems at Corinth. Indeed, Paul in 7:1 explicitly states as he is about to introduce the topics of celibacy and divorce that he is replying to a letter which the Corinthians sent him.
- VI. The Corinthians seem to have thought that they had obtained total spiritual maturity. In 4:8-13 Paul mocks their pretensions and contrasts them with the struggles that the apostles have.
- VII. In their vast spiritual self-confidence the Corinthians believed that they were totally free.
- A. They felt free from any temptation. For example, some Corinthians apparently felt free to engage in the worship of idols, and Paul has to warn them against this (10:14).
 - B. They also felt free from following any regulations. One of their mottoes was, "All things are lawful" (6:12, 10:23), a saying that Paul repeatedly quotes and qualifies.
 - C. It is tempting to make a comparison between the attitudes of the Corinthians and some sophisticated people in contemporary California!
- VIII. In line with their enormous spiritual self-confidence, the Corinthians seem to have taken several diverse (even incompatible) perspectives on sex and marriage.
- A. On the one hand they defended the right of a member of the congregation to have a sexual relationship with "his father's wife" (5:1-2). Unfortunately, Paul does not supply crucial details (e.g., whether the father was still alive and still married to his wife).
 - B. On the other hand, the Corinthians seem to view celibacy as the ideal for Christians, and practically a requirement. Note the "yes but" with which Paul responds to a section of the letter which they sent him (7:1-4).
 - C. As a result, single people in love who would normally get married are refraining from doing so (cf., 7:8-9, 36), and married people are even refusing to have sex with their spouses (7:2-5).
 - D. And the Corinthians, and, apparently, especially, the women, were divorcing Pagans (7:10-13). Note that
 - 1. Paul first raises the problem of women divorcing their husbands and deals with it at some length and then only mentions men divorcing their wives (7:10-11).
 - 2. Paul appeals at some length to his Christian readers not to divorce unbelievers (7:12-16).
- IX. There were probably several reasons why the Corinthians were emphasizing celibacy and were getting divorces.
- A. A low opinion of sex. It appears that in the Roman world in general and in the church specifically there was an increasing discomfort with sex (cf. the Victorian period).
 - B. A view that a truly holy and liberating relationship could only be had with a Christian. This view may have been especially attractive to women, since they enjoyed a higher social status in the church than in Pagan (especially, Greek) society.
 - C. Paul's own celibacy (as well as Jesus's?). In this early period one learned about

Christianity primarily by paying attention to the missionary, since there were no Christian books or even long standing Christian traditions.

D. Perhaps the belief (also held by Pagans) that sexual abstinence facilitates contact with the divine. Note that Paul says that one legitimate reason for temporary celibacy is to devote oneself to prayer (7:5). Would psychologists today say that sublimated sexual desire can be used in the religious quest, and that the erotic imagery in the writing of celibate mystics proves this? As monks what is your own experience?

X. From Paul's perspective the moral situation in the Corinthian church was very serious, particularly since

A. Sexual morality was in danger of breaking down altogether.

1. Paul notes that some of the Corinthians had immoral backgrounds (6:9-11).
2. He points out that by approving of a man living with his father's wife the Corinthians are defying even basic Pagan morality (5:1).
3. He warns the Corinthians about the danger of seeing prostitutes (6:15).
4. He stresses the corrupting power of bad examples (5:6-7, 15:33).
5. He fears that if people who do not have the ability to be permanently celibate try to be they will end up having extra-marital sex (7:5).

B. Paul believes that sexual sin in this life will continue to have consequences for the resurrection life. I take this to mean that the spiritual damage of irresponsible sex will not end even at death.

1. Paul stresses that immoral persons sin against their own bodies (6:18), and that our bodies belong to Christ (6:15, 19).
2. God will raise up the body (6:13-14), and there will be a final judgment.
3. Fornicators will not inherit the kingdom (6:9-10).

C. Christians divorcing Pagans would antagonize society and be dangerous for the church and make missionary work difficult.

1. Christianity was not a legal religion, and, therefore, persecution could break out anytime at the discretion of local officials.
2. Women becoming Christian and then, due to that conversion, divorcing their husbands would certainly generate great resentment in the larger society.
3. In 1 Corinthians Paul when discussing tongues stresses the problem that outsiders might reject Christianity as irrational.

XI. In responding to the Corinthians Paul like a good pastor tries

- A. To affirm them as much as possible.
- B. But lay down sensible guidelines.

XII. He insists that married Christians must be faithful to their spouses, even if the latter are Pagans (7:12-16). Paul suggests that

- A. The marriage relationship may lead to the unbeliever's conversion. Note that Paul does not consider the opposite problem that the unbeliever may undermine a spouse's faith and participation in church life.
- B. Paul stresses that the presence of a Christian in a mixed marriage makes the spouse and any children "holy" (7:14). I take this to mean that the presence of a Christian makes God's gracious presence available to the rest of the family even though they themselves do not have faith.

XIII. The only acceptable reason for a Christian getting a divorce and marrying someone else is if the Pagan leaves and the Christian does not have the gift of celibacy. In that case, a Christian "is not bound" (7:15), since God has called us "to peace." Several things are to be noted about this exception. A Pagan spouse

- A. Would not be subject to discipline from the church.

- B. Probably would not share the same ethical perspectives.
 - C. Might be leaving because the spouse has become a Christian, and the Pagan might make giving up Christianity the condition for reconciliation. Paul assumes that loyalty to Christ must take precedence over other commitments.
- XIV. In forbidding divorce Paul
- A. Refers to the basic saying of Jesus in the form found in Mark (i.e., forbidding both wives and husbands getting divorced [7:10-11]). As we have seen, under Greek and Roman law a woman could divorce her husband, and Paul is writing to the church in Corinth. Corinth was legally a Roman colony and, of course, was in Greece.
 - B. Emphasizes that sexual activity produces a deep bond (making “one body” [6:16]). Here I take “body” (Greek: *soma*) to mean the self.
 - C. Counsels people who are having marital difficulty to separate for a time and then be reconciled (7:10-11).
- XV. In response to the enthusiasm among the Corinthians about celibacy, Paul stresses that celibacy is a gift, not an achievement.
- XVI. The test of whether one actually has the gift is whether one can be celibate without a constant struggle (7:37).
- XVII. Those who are constantly filled with sexual desire should marry, “for it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion” (7:9).
- XVIII. In line with the Corinthians’ infatuation with celibacy, Paul affirms that celibacy is a higher calling than marriage but only if it leads to a greater devotion to the service of God.
- A. Paul explicitly states, “He who marries his fiancée does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better” (7:38).
 - B. But the reason that those who do not marry do better is because the married are “anxious about the affairs of the world,” how to please their spouses
 - C. Whereas celibates are “anxious about the affairs of the Lord, so that they may be holy in body and spirit” (7:34).
- XIX. Paul also recommends celibacy (for those who have the gift!) on the grounds that the present world is about to end. Those who are married will have distress as this world ends (7:28)
- XX. Several implications seem presupposed, some of which we have seen already seen.
- A. Paul assumes that marriage imbeds (forgive the pun) people in the problems of this age.
 - B. And assumes (following Jesus?) that in the life to come people will not be married.
 - C. If the world were to last (as historically it certainly did!), marriage with the creation of children would certainly be important.
 - D. Forgoing marriage merely to have more leisure for worldly pursuits is not commendable.
- XXI. The first tentative beginning of a celibate community in the later New Testament witness.
- A. As noted above the Pastoral Epistles (1 & 2 Timothy and Titus) are not by Paul.
 1. Apparently, in ancient times students felt free to write documents under their teacher's name, especially, if the documents reflected what the teacher taught or perhaps would have taught in response to some new development.
 2. The Pastoral Epistles have a very different literary style than Paul, a different theology, and presuppose a later situation.
 3. The Pastoral Epistles come from around the year 100 C.E. and are among the latest books of the New Testament.
 - B. 1 Timothy indicates that at least in this period an order of widows existed and that

these widows devoted themselves to prayer and apparently took some pledge of celibacy (1 Timothy 5:3-16).

C. So we have a beginning of a monastic tradition in the New Testament.

D. But only a beginning since

1. It is assumed that these widows were previously married.
2. At least 1 Timothy restricts the order of widows to older women. Widows under the age of sixty are to remarry and raise children.
3. The primary purpose of the Order of Widows was to provide assistance to widows without family rather than to have an institution which serves the Church.

Conference 5: Some Possible Implications for Today

I. We may begin by summarizing some of the most important points about divorce and celibacy that the Bible in general and the New Testament in particular seem to make, whether explicitly or implicitly.

II. Marriage is part of God's call for most people.

III. Marriage and the love that it expresses are a sacramental sign of

- A. The goodness of the present world, a goodness which God calls us to enjoy.
- B. And of God's desire that this present world endure until the proper time for the end of all things (Genesis 1-2).
- C. And even of the love between Christ and his Church (Eph. 5).

IV. By contrast, celibacy is a special and less common gift.

V. A sign that one has the gift is that it is not a burden. Someone who is constantly struggling to remain celibate should get married.

VI. Celibacy is a sacramental sign that

- A. An individual's life and even the world as a whole will not last forever.
 1. Jesus taught that in the age to come there is no marriage.
 2. Paul urges people who can to be celibate because the present world will soon end.
- B. The primary purpose of this present life is to prepare the world for the life to come in which there will be no marriage.
- C. We make that preparation by using our time and energy in the service of God, whether in prayer or works of mercy.
- D. God particularly calls us to reach out to the marginal and the sinful. And celibacy allows people to help others without compromising the needs and safety of a spouse and children.
- E. Hence, celibacy is a sacramental sign that the present world is wounded, needs healing, and sacrificial ministry is required.

VII. Celibacy merely for the sake of self-indulgence is not a virtue, but instead an abuse of the gift.

VIII. Some brief reflections on involuntary celibacy in the Bible and today.

A. Jesus in Matthew 19:12 mentions three types of eunuchs:

1. Eunuchs by a birth defect.
2. Eunuchs by forced castration.
3. Eunuchs by the free choice for the kingdom of God.

B. We saw that the third type were those who surrendered masculine honor ("macho") to associate with the dishonored.

C. But what would Jesus's attitude be for the first two types of eunuchs?

D. As we have already noted

1. Being a eunuch was a great disgrace in the ancient Middle East, including in the Bible.
2. But there was a prophecy that God at some future time would bring salvation and honor to eunuchs (Isa. 56:3-5).
3. Jesus invited the dishonored and broken into the kingdom of God.

E. Presumably then, Jesus would have welcomed eunuchs into the kingdom which Jesus saw as the fulfillment of the promises in the Scriptures.

F. Today we realize that in addition to physical eunuchs, there are psychological eunuchs, people who because of psychological damage cannot have a sexual relationship.

G. The church is called to invite all eunuchs to be full members of the Christian community and to accept that they are honored by God.

IX. Marriage and the sexual activity that occurs in it produce a deep and abiding psychological and spiritual involvement of the spouses in each other.

X. This involvement does not end merely by taking the legal action of getting a divorce.

XI. Consequently, Christians should avoid divorce.

A. They should only divorce if the spouse breaks the relationship. At least two ways that this can happen is

1. Adultery by the spouse (Matthew).
2. Desertion by the spouse (Paul). I would add that if the person at fault for the marital problems is repentant, but the spouse is not willing to forgive and help him/her, that is a form of desertion.

B. Otherwise Christians should do everything possible to salvage a marriage, including, if necessary, having a temporary separation with the hope of future reconciliation.

C. A Christian should not even divorce an unbeliever.

1. A loving and faithful married relationship to an unbeliever may lead to the unbeliever's conversion.
2. In any case, a family receives the presence of God's grace through a Christian member.

XII. If there must be a divorce, a Christian should examine whether or not subsequent celibacy is a realistic option.

XIII. Nevertheless, for some celibacy is not an option, and, therefore, another marriage is appropriate.

XIV. However, the subsequent marriage probably will include some psychological adultery, since the legal divorce does not end all of the consequences of the first marriage.

XV. The question we must face today is how to apply the perspectives of the New Testament to our different social situation(s?). The first question that must be asked is whether the exceptional grounds on which Matthew's Gospel and Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians allow divorce (and remarriage) should be taken as exhaustive or only illustrative. Are these the only possible grounds for a Christian to get divorced and remarry? We may illustrate the problem using Paul's own logic.

A. Paul insists that one reason that a Christian should not divorce a Pagan spouse is that the presence of a Christian may lead to the spouse's conversion.

B. But suppose the reverse is the case. The Pagan is making it impossible for the spouse to continue to practice Christianity. Would Paul say that a Christian should give up the faith in order to preserve the marriage?

XVI. It seems to me that Christians must take seriously Matthew's insistence that the Church

has the authority from God to bind and loose and needs to use that authority to respond to new situations.

XVII. Determining a wise application of the New Testament perspectives to contemporary society must involve many other disciplines, including psychology, sociology, and general good sense.

XVIII. I would only hazard the following.

A. The church should not focus just on “annulment” (i.e., the determination that there never was a true marriage).

B. Instead, the church should also focus on whether a marriage has irretrievably died or even whether given the dire situation that a marriage *ought* to die.

C. The grounds for making this determination should not be limited to adultery and desertion. Adultery and desertion are illustrative of a larger category of things which destroy the integrity of a marriage.

D. I would certainly regard physical violence and even extreme psychological violence against a spouse and/or children as grounds for divorce if the perpetrator is unwilling to get help and change. Until the perpetrator changes, separation is advisable. Violence is the opposite of true love and negates the marriage bond.

E. The church should exercise the power to bind and loose pastorally by

1. Making general policies to which individuals must adhere to be members of the church (the Catholic approach).

2. Challenging people to consider the grounds of their own moral decisions (the Protestant approach).

3. Being especially concerned with the well-being of victims.

F. As the church considers how to respond to various situations, including the unique problems of any two human beings, the church should be mindful of Paul’s and Matthew’s observations that

1. A legal divorce does not end psychological and spiritual involvement, whether positive or negative.

2. Not everyone has the gift of celibacy.

3. God has called us to be at peace.

4. Jesus disliked legalism and emphasized the importance of mercy, especially, to the psychologically wounded, as Pope Francis has recently stressed.