

## **Courtship & Marriage article 17**

Dear Young People:

It is my intention to end our discussions of courtship and marriage with the last couple letters, which I intend to devote to a short discussion of divorce and remarriage. I know this has been a troubling problem in the ERCS and has even caused division. I am not concerned about rehashing these past troubles, but for your own sakes and for the sake of the church of which we are a part we should know what Scripture teaches on this matter.

Let me say, first of all, that if a young couple takes the time of courtship seriously and if this couple marries in the Lord, there never is any need of divorce, much less, remarriage. The rule is that two such people grow in love for each other as the years pass, and the mere thought of any kind of separation is painful. Old people have said to me more than once when their spouse died, "Prof, part of me died too. I will never be the same." They understood that they had indeed become one flesh.

The separation brought by death is much more painful and filled with greater sorrow than is true of the death of a spouse of an unbeliever, even if two unbelievers have lived in the marriage state for 50 years. This greater sorrow is because the death of a spouse within a godly marriage is a greater loss than the loss of a wife or a husband: One who loses a spouse loses a dear and precious brother or sister in Christ, for both belong to the family of God. That is more painful.

Yet, in one of those blessed paradoxes of the Christian faith, this greater sorrow is also the comfort and joy that comes at death. It is true: if my wife dies, I lose not only a wife but a dear sister in Christ; but our "brother-and-sister" relationship we have in Christ is not affected by death, but continues on into eternity, even when the husband-wife relationship is terminated at death. I shall know her fully as I began to know her here in the world: a fellow saint and heir of the promises of God.

When we contemplate marriage, speak our wedding vows before God at the time of our marriage, and establish a covenant home, the more we must strive to make our marriage, not merely a relationship of husband and wife, but also a full, deep, joyful relationship of saint to saint. That guarantees that nothing but death can ever separate us – and nothing, not even death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

The changes that come with age make absolutely no difference. The husband grows bald and fat; the lines of age crease his face, he stumbles when he walks, and gazes around with half-blind eyes trying to find his cane or his necktie; he forgets why he goes from one room to another, and knows not what he did with his car keys. He asks people to speak more loudly and he wonders why a flight of 14 steps now numbers 20. He may be disfigured by surgery or an auto accident and can hardly bear to look at himself in the mirror. And a wife needs a wig to cover her nearly bald head, a set of dentures because she lost her teeth, a stainless steel knee and/or hip that makes walking difficult. She may try to struggle into a girdle to smooth out the bumps and bulges of a lost figure. But in a godly marriage, none of this makes any difference. One does not love his or her spouse because of good looks – although at the beginning that may have been, at least partly, the case. But one loves one's spouse because of who he or she is. They have shared most of their life together. They have cried together,

laughed together, prayed together, gone to church together, brought up their children together and married their children and held their grandchildren in their arms. They have weathered bitter storms in their lives that drove them into each other's arms and brought them to the cross of Christ. They have, in their pilgrimage in a world of trouble and sorrow, walked together to the cemetery, held each other's hands at the bedside of a dying child, wiped away each other's tears, climbed those high and cold mountains on rough paths as they journeyed to their eternal destination. They have sung together, clapped their hands, raised the laughter of their joy to heaven when God gave them pleasant, sun-filled meadows to walk through.

How could they separate from each other?

The problem of divorce and remarriage almost often arises out of the mission task of the church. If it arises out of the church itself, it is usually because two, trying to get a divorce, have not been brought up in the church, or have not, either in their courtship or marriage, made any effort to make their marriage a picture of the relation between Christ and His church.

This is probably truer today than it ever was. My son was pastor of a small congregation in Texas for a number of years. That congregation was finally closed because it did not grow. But, my son told me, they could have easily been a congregation of 20 or 30 families – if only they had agreed to take into their membership people who had been divorced and remarried. He spoke of one couple who got down on their knees to beg to be let into the church.

Let me tell you a story out of my own experience. I was on a mission field at one time temporarily, and mainly for the purpose of giving the Mission Committee advice on the viability of the field. One family, a father, mother and three children, wanted desperately to be a part of a Protestant Reformed Church, for, through reading, they had come to love the truth for which our churches stood. But the husband was divorced and remarried. His story went something like this. In the days when he was an unbeliever, he had married, but soon after their marriage, before they had children, he had come home from work earlier than expected and found his wife in bed with another man. He divorced her.

In the course of time, he met another girl and began to date her. But, during the time they dated, they were both converted by the work of a very conservative Presbyterian Church. They were encouraged to study the Bible together, which they did. But, in the course of their studies, especially of the New Testament Scriptures, they came to a mutual conclusion that the Bible condemned remarriage of a divorced person. (I might add, by way of parentheses, that this was not unusual. I have met others, divorced and pondering remarriage, who, also after they were converted, came to the conclusion that Scripture forbade their remarriage. This seems to me to imply that an unbiased study of Scripture, taking Scripture in its simple language, forbids remarriage.)

The couple, troubled and wondering whether they were not understanding Scripture aright, went to their elders to ask them. But, of course, the Presbyterian Church had as its confessional basis the Westminster Confession, which permits divorce

and remarriage of the innocent party if the grounds for divorce are adultery. So the church told them they were free to marry

Before the family committed itself to joining the fellowship where I was working, this same couple began to study the position of the PRC on the question of divorce and remarriage, and came to the conclusion that that position was correct. But they were married and had three children. The man involved, when he learned he could not be a member of our churches, said to me, "I agree with the position of the PRC. But we married because we sought and accepted the advice of those whom Christ had put over us to direct us in the way of holiness. They gave their approval to our marriage. We married in good conscience before God. Now we have children. I have a covenantal obligation towards these children, one I cannot fulfill if I leave my wife. What must I do?"

I reminded him that he himself had been convinced that their marriage was wrong on the basis of Scripture, in spite of what the elders said. "Yes," he admitted, "We have not ceased to be somewhat troubled by it all."

Because men openly condone divorce and remarriage in our day, the problems are constantly increasing. Anyone who works with unbelievers, knows both the endless problems (mostly without solutions) and the untold grief (especially for children) that divorce and remarriage bring – also into the church. A divorce leaves a trail of wreckage behind it, in the family, in the church, in the lives of children, in all the relations of life. It is a mystery to me why anyone would want a divorce. It has to be pure selfishness, or an unwillingness to be obedient to Christ.

With our love in the Lord,

Prof Hanko