



*Divorce  
and also  
Remarriage  
in the  
Early Church*

**Marriage, Divorce, and  
Remarriage**

(Part 5)

by Dean Taylor

After the death of the apostles, Christianity continued to grow and flourish, even though it was beset by poverty and persecution. When we read the writings of the early Church, we enter a world that is in some ways very different than ours. Persecution and ridicule helped to keep the Church free of converts who would come merely to seek worldly advantage. Closeness to the apostles was strength. Some churches could even speak of the times when the apostles actually sat in their midst and explained the ways of Christ.

Language was also an advantage. Their faith was one that was “handed down,” more than one that was determined merely by studying ancient languages and trying to guess the root meanings of words. I find it kind of funny when I read of some university professor today, claiming that the ancient Greek plainly—and—emphatically says something, and then find out that the very people who lived in ancient Greece said just the opposite. With this advantage, the early Church often cuts through many of our longstanding facades and institutional excuses.

On the other hand, the early church was in many ways very much like we are today. A casual read through the book of Corinthians reveals that the early Christians certainly were not immune to the problems of worldliness, compromise, and sin. The early Christians clashed with their culture—and that clash came with many hard situations that forced the Church to seek the face of God.

And just as we are today, they were just regular men and women. Their words are not Gospel, authoritative, or inspired. In their day, as much as in ours, the words, life, and calling of Jesus stand without comparison or exceptions. Regardless of the changing times and opinions of men, the Word of God stands forever.

That said, the closeness to the apostles, the natural understanding of ancient languages and cultures, the purification of persecution—not to mention the sheer antiquity of their age, makes the early Church an invaluable commentary, to say the very least.

**Divorce—and also—Remarriage**

A few pointers in early Christian theology will help in understanding the ancient view of divorce and remarriage.

First, the early Church saw marriage as a lifelong, unbreakable bond until the death of one of the partners. You can’t miss this point and understand their view. Modern discussions about divorce and remarriage never seem to grasp this point.

The modern Christian frequently cries out, “Can’t my sin be forgiven?” The answer is, “Of course, Jesus can forgive your sin.” However, the modern mind misses an important point. The problem preventing the person from considering a second marriage is not the “sin” per se. Yes, the sin must be dealt with and repented of. However, as the early Church saw it, the actual barrier preventing the new marriage is not the “sin,” but rather the fact that the person is still married in the eyes of God.

To enter into another marriage would have been serial polygamy to the early Church. Jesus said, “Whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.” Today we ask, “Why does Jesus call the remarriage ‘adultery’ if the woman is legally divorced?” The early Church answered that it was called “adultery” simply because the woman was still married in the eyes of God—regardless of what divorce procedure she went through.

Second, the issues of divorce and remarriage are looked at as two separate entities. The title of this article is a bit clumsy to stress this very point. In our modern understanding, justification for a divorce also grants justification for remarriage—the early Church would disagree. As the Apostle Paul said, “But and if she depart [divorce], let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband” (1 Cor. 7:11). As we will read, the early Church did at times allow for separation. However, this understanding would harmonize with Paul’s teaching that the separated person was expected to “remain unmarried.”

When the early Church is considered as a whole, a conspicuous unity is seen considering the subject of divorce and remarriage. Heth and Wenhem, in their book *Jesus and Divorce*, say, “To list those who hold that remarriage after divorce is contrary to the gospel teaching is to call a roll of the best-known early Christian theologians...In all, twenty-five individual writers and two early councils forbid remarriage after divorce” (p. 38).

## Hermas

Heth and Wenhem tell us that the earliest Christian teaching on divorce is found in *The Shepherd of Hermas*.



## Hermas allowed for separation because of adultery, but like the apostle Paul, required that the man remain single in hopes of his wife’s future repentance.

Many of the early Christians quote from this work. In this book, Hermas is seen as a man questioning his heavenly guardian about what a man should do if he learns that his wife is guilty of adultery and persists in it.

I say to him, “Sir, permit me to ask thee a few more questions.” “Say on,” saith he. “Sir,” say I, “if a man who has a wife that is faithful in the Lord detect her in adultery, doth the husband sin in living with her?” “So long as he is ignorant,” saith he, “he sinneth not; but if the husband know of her sin, and the wife repent not, but continue in her fornication, and her husband live with her, he makes himself re-

sponsible for her sin and an accomplice in her adultery.” “What then, Sir,” say I, “shall the husband do, if the wife continue in this case?” “Let him divorce her,” saith he, “and let the husband abide alone: but if after divorcing his wife he shall marry another, he likewise committeth adultery.” “If then, Sir,” say I, “after the wife is divorced, she repent and desire to return to her own husband, shall she not be received?” “Certainly,” saith he, “if the husband receiveth her not, he sinneth and bringeth great sin upon himself; ... For this cause ye were enjoined to remain single, whether husband or wife; for in such cases repentance is possible.

Here it should be noted that Hermas allowed for separation because of adultery, but like the apostle Paul, required that the man remain single in hopes of his wife’s future repentance. He even quoted Paul in 1 Cor. 7:11 as support.

## Justin Martyr

Justin Martyr was an early convert to Christianity around the year A.D. 130. Patristic scholars suggest that Justin is quoting from some kind of ancient catechism. Whatever the case, Justin has some pretty strong words against remarriage. Commenting on the need for Christian chastity, Justin teaches on the different uses of the words “adultery,” as used by Jesus. Justin mentions Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount” warnings, as well as His teaching from Matt. 19 concerning the “eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven”. After discussing the problem of lust, Justin brings up Jesus’ words on remarriage saying:



**So that all who, by law, are twice married, are in the eye of our Master sinners... those words “twice married”...literally translate “double marriage,” or rather—bigamy. These are some challenging views for our modern times.**

*“And, Whosoever shall marry her that is from another husband, commits adultery. And, There are some who have been made eunuchs of men, and some who were born eunuchs, and some who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake; but all cannot receive this saying.*

*“So that all who, by human law, are twice married, are in the eye of our Master sinners, and those who look upon a woman to lust after her.”*

Look at those words “twice married” that I underlined. They are from the Greek words (διγαμία ποιούμενοι), which literally translate “double marriage,” or rather—bigamy. These are some challenging views for our modern times. Notice that he said that even though “by human law” the divorce was accepted, in the eyes of God it was sin.

### Athenagoras

In A.D. 177, Athenagoras from Athens wrote, “A plea for the Christians.” In this writing he says that a Christian:

*“Should either remain as he was born, or be content with one marriage; for a second marriage is only a fair-seeming adultery. ‘For whosoever puts away his wife,’ says He, ‘and marries another, commits adultery’; not permitting a man to send her away whose virginity he has brought to an end, nor to marry again.”*

In this statement, Athenagoras states that he recognizes that his culture is allowing remarriage so he called it “fair-seeming adultery.” Others have translated this statement as, “for a second marriage is only auspicious.”

### Clement of Alexandria

Clement of Alexandria, teaching some kind of a catechism class around A.D. 194, speaks out strongly on marriage saying:

*Now that the Scripture counsels marriage, and allows no release from the union, is expressly contained in the law, ‘Thou shalt not put away thy wife, except for the cause of fornication;’ and it regards as fornication, the marriage of those separated while the other is alive. ... ‘He that taketh a woman that has been put away,’ it is said, ‘commiteth adultery; and if one puts away his wife, he makes her an adulteress,’ that is, compels her to commit adultery. And not only is he who puts her away guilty of this, but he who takes her, by giving to the woman the opportunity of sinning; for did he not take her, she would return to her husband. (Stromata, 2:24).*

When debating against several heretical groups that were renouncing marriage altogether by quoting Jesus’ words on becoming eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven, found in Matt. 19:9, Clement defends the passage. He says that the passage is obviously teaching about what a man should do if his wife leaves him because of fornication.

*“Not all can receive this saying. There are some eunuchs who were born so, and some who were made eunuchs by men, and some who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven; let him receive it who can receive it,” they do not realize the context. After his word about divorce some asked him whether, if that is the position in relation to woman, it is better not to marry; and it was then that the Lord said: “Not all can receive this saying, but those to whom it is granted.” What the questioners wanted to know was whether, when a man’s wife has been condemned for fornication, it is allowable for him to marry another (Stromata, Bk. 3, Ch. 6)*

### Origen

Origen, another philosopher-turn-Christian, speaking sharply against remarriage said:

*Just as a woman is an adulteress, even though she seems to be married to a man, while a former husband yet lives, so also the man who seems to marry who has been divorced does not marry her, but, according to the declaration of our Savior, he commits adultery with her (Commentaries on Matthew 14).*

Even after the age of Constantine and his legalizing of Christianity in A.D. 312, the doctrine remained strong. Stephen Wilcox, in his article, “*The Authoritative Teachings of the Early Church on Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage*,” offers an impressive summary of the teachings of the early Church, and outlines the writers which spoke explicitly on that point. His summary goes beyond the Constantine era. However, I think the consistency and force of the later writers bears witness to the uniformity of this doctrine. Ironically, most of these later writers are venerated, even by modern Reformed theologians today. Quoting Stephen Wilcox:

### **Summary of Early Church Doctrine on Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage 90 A.D. – 419 A.D.**

*If a spouse persists in adulterous behavior and there is no other alternative, the marriage relationship can be terminated by the innocent party (Hermes, Clement, Jerome, Augustine).*

*Spouses that are divorced for any reason must remain celibate and single as long as both spouses live. Remarriage is expressly prohibited (Hermes, Justin Martyr, Clement, Origen, Basil, Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine).*

*To indulge in lust with the mind is to be guilty of adultery of the heart (Justin Martyr).*

*Whoever marries a divorced person commits adultery (Hermes, Justin Martyr, Clement, Origen, Basil, Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine).*



***“Marriage and affection with a remarried spouse while a former spouse lives is the sin of adultery.” “Marriage is a lifelong covenant that will never be invalidated by God while both parties live.”***

*Whoever contracts a second marriage, whether a Christian or not, while a former spouse lives is sinning against God (Justin Martyr, Ambrose).*

*God does not, and the Church must not, take into account human law when it is in violation of God’s law (Justin Martyr, Origen, Ambrose).*

*God judges motives and intentions, private thought life and actions (Justin Martyr).*

*The marriage covenant between a man and a woman is permanent, as long as both husband and wife are alive (Clement, Origen, Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine).*

*It is a serious offence against God to take another person’s spouse (Basil).*

*The Church must charge all persons who are in possession of another living person’s former husband or wife with adultery (Basil).*

*Marriage and affection with a remarried spouse while a former spouse lives is the sin of adultery (Hermes, Justin Martyr, Clement, Origen, Basil, Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine).*

*It is a serious mistake to believe that it is simply one’s right to divorce a spouse and take another. Even though human law may permit such a thing, God strictly forbids it, and cannot, and will not honor it (Clement, Origen, Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine).*

*Anyone who follows human customs and laws regarding marriage, divorce and remarriage, instead of God’s divine instructions should stand in fearful awe of God Himself (Clement, Ambrose).*

*All lawmakers, in and out of the Church are warned, to their peril, to hear and obey the Word of the Lord in regard to His commands on marriage and divorce (Ambrose).*



*Christians are to stop making excuses and trying to find justification for divorce and remarriage. There are no valid reasons acceptable to God (Jerome, Augustine).*

*A marriage is for life. No matter what a spouse turns out to be, or how they may act, what they do or don't do, or the sins they commit, the covenant remains fully in effect. A remarriage while a former spouse lives is not marriage at all, but sinful adultery. God does not divide the one flesh relationship except by physical death (Hermes, Clement, Origen, Basil, Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine).*

*Marriage is a lifelong covenant that will never be invalidated by God while both parties live (Hermes, Justin Martyr, Clement, Origen, Basil, Ambrose, Augustine).*

*It never has been lawful, it is not now lawful, and it never will be lawful to divorce and remarry. To say and do otherwise is to worship*

*and adopt the adulterous superstitions of a different God than the one to which we have to do (Augustine).*

How often we hear the cries and pining supplications for a return to early Christianity! How often we beat our chest and ask God “how long” before we will see revival in His Church like the days of old! How frequent do we amuse ourselves with complaints about “liberal influences” within the Church as we fashion ourselves the brandish of conservative crusaders! Are our conservative Christians today holding onto biblical truths, or just shifting a few paces behind the world? I remember hearing an old man once say, “I used to be in the middle of the road—but the road moved.”

Brethren, the road on which marriage, divorce, and remarriage has traveled has moved considerably throughout the ages. We can raise our head and dismiss the early Christians as fanatics, ascetics, or heretics; but when we find ourselves chipping away at the very foundations on which we stand, we might just find ourselves shouting from a crumbling facade... “If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?” (Ps. 11:3) ◻