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**The Importance of Grace in
Compassionately Addressing Divorce**

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Introduction

A young pastor’s wife sits weeping uncontrollably in the Sunday morning worship service as the words “God hates divorce” spill all over the congregation. Three months ago, her husband abandoned her, their church and the gospel ministry when he was caught in adultery. With quivering lips she mumbles, “Lord, what must I do?”

The American divorce problem increased significantly in the aftermath of the 1960s sexual revolution, resulting in decades of the highest divorce rate in the world.² By 1999, the Barna Group researchers say that one out of every seven senior pastors surveyed had gone through divorce.³ This means that many church leaders and their spouses have experienced divorce—a crisis, that can suddenly disrupt a person’s daily routine, and a trauma (a wound) that needs time and compassionate care to heal.⁴ Divorce reflects moral decay in a society says Graham, who asserts that scholars studying moral conditions in Greece, Persia, Babylonia, and parts of the Roman Empire tend to agree that the greatest single factor contributing to the downfall of these nations was divorce and broken homes.⁵ Consequently, he warns that the divorce problem, if left unaddressed, could lead to the disintegration of American civilization.

² U.S. Census Bureau, “The 2012 Statistical Abstract of the United States,” Table 1336. Marriage and Divorce Rates by Country: 1980 to 2008, www.census.gov/compendia/statab/cats/international_statistics.html, (accessed 7 Oct. 2011).

³ “Pastoral Profile,” *The Barna Report*, October-December 1999, 8. The Barna Group is a market research firm specializing in studying the religious beliefs and behavior of Americans.

⁴ H. Norman Wright, *Helping Those Who Hurt* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2006), 55,70.

⁵ Billy Graham, “Mending A Broken Home,” *Decision* 46, no. 5 (2005): 2-5.

With divorce rates among Christian leaders mirroring the culture, it is no wonder Hayford says clergy divorce has reached epidemic proportions and is unquestionably an issue that must be addressed by the contemporary church.⁶ A decade after Barna's report, national marriage and divorce rate trends reveal a somewhat steady decline in both marriages and divorces.⁷ In spite of a reported decline in annual divorces from an estimated 944,000 in the year 2000 to 840,000 by 2009, the magnitude of the annual statistics when doubled to include both spouses indicates that millions need to understand the concept of grace with regard to divorce.

From a biblical-theological perspective, *grace* is a word about God, who freely demonstrates love and compassion to all. Green defines the biblical concept of grace, which appears some two hundred times in the Old Testament, as having multiple meanings that include, but are not limited to, 'to be gracious to, 'to show favor,' 'lovingkindness' or 'goodness.'⁸ Of 154 occurrences in the New Testament, the Greek term *charis*, which indicates favor on the part of the one who bestows an unmerited gift and thanks on the part of the recipient, appears one hundred times in Pauline correspondence.⁹ Grace connotes favor, usually by a superior being to an inferior, which is demonstrated by compassionate acts that arise out of affection and goodness toward those who are in need. Thus, the grace of God refers to the spontaneous action of a sovereign God to enter into covenant relationship with humanity, to care for those in need, to deliver those in distress, and to restore those who have been unfaithful to their covenant vows.

This paper discusses the importance of grace in addressing divorce—especially with regard to divorced Christian leaders. The author cites several others who help to emphasize the seriousness of the divorce issue and calls for a compassionate response from the Church. Couples undoubtedly need the grace of God to preserve their

⁶ Jack Hayford, "Don't Marriage Vows Matter Anymore?" *Charisma Magazine* 26, no. 7 (February 2001): 60.

⁷ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "National Marriage and Divorce Rate Trends," www.CDC.gov/nchs/nvss/marriage_divorce_tables.htm (accessed 3 Sept. 2011). Data excludes California, Indiana, Louisiana, and Oklahoma.

⁸ J. B. Green, "Grace," *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, eds. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 524-27.

⁹ *Ibid.*

marriage, but an increasing number of persons need grace to overcome divorce; often precipitated by adultery. This discussion of divorce begins with its prerequisite, marriage.

I. Grace in Marriage

“And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him” (Gn 2:18). “Marriage was needed because a man and woman needed each other,” says J. T. Johnson in the book, *Covenant Marriage in Comparative Perspective*. In response to their neediness, God, through grace, brings couples together to provide “meet help.”¹⁰ There’s a lack of consensus that the purpose of marriage is for companionship. Other purposes include procreation based on God’s command to “be fruitful, and multiply” (Gn 1:28) along with the production of legitimate offspring, legalized sex, and help in child rearing. However, scholars generally agree with Kniskern, author of *When the Vow Breaks*, that “marriage was made for humankind, not humankind for marriage,” and that God anatomically designed men and women with compatible body parts and gave them a sex drive to make “merciful provision for our weaknesses.”¹¹

Adams declares that the Devil’s attack on marriage through divorce is really an attack on the family (the basic sub-unit of the local church), which impacts the community, society, Christianity, God’s order in the world and in the Church, and ultimately God, who designed marriage as the foundational element of human society in the beginning.¹² Thus, before there was a church, God established, instituted and ordained marriage with this declaration in the Garden of Eden: “Therefore shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh” (Gn 2:24). This was God’s original intent for marriage.

¹⁰ John Witte, Jr. and Eliza Ellison, editors, *Covenant Marriage in Comparative Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 136.

¹¹ Joseph Warren Kniskern, *When The Vow Breaks* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1993), 59-60.

¹² Jay E. Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980), 3-5.

A. Competing Views of Marriage

Although a legal divorce allows the parties to remarry, there is a large percentage of the population whose marriages end in separation (about 67% for black women) because they do not go through the divorce process.¹³ When a marriage deteriorates to the point of having nothing left but legal form, or it becomes destructive to a Christian's ability to serve the Lord, the question may be asked, "Is this what God intended for the rest of my life?"

A high divorce rate indicates a loss of the sense of permanence in marriage, says Garland, author of the article, "Divorce and the Church." She expresses that the divorce problem revolves around the definition of marriage and the expectations people bring into the relationship. Marriage, formerly viewed as a permanent bond between husband and wife, seems to have been redefined in American culture as an agreement to live in friendship, support, and sexual intimacy with a partner.¹⁴ Since marriage was created for humans and not humans for marriage, people often feel compelled to terminate the marriage that does not serve its intended purpose. The specific action taken will vary depending on which view of marriage is preferred: marriage as sacrament, marriage as a covenant or contract, or marriage as a vocation or commission.

1. Marriage as Sacrament

Augustine influenced marriage doctrine by calling it a sacrament based on his interpretation of Ephesians 5:21-33. He equated human marriage to Christ's marriage to the Church and argued for the indissolubility of the marriage bond.¹⁵ In the book, *Theology of Christian Marriage*, Kasper asserts that church tradition regarding marriage is based on Augustine's doctrine of the bond of marriage.¹⁶ Marriage as a sacrament—a channel for grace—is based on three things. First, marriage as a sacrament is a sign of the baptized couple

¹³ "New Report Sheds Light on Trends and Patterns in Marriage, Divorce, and Cohabitation," National Center for Health Statistics: www.CDC.gov/nchs/pressroom/02news/div_mar_cohab.htm; Internet; accessed 21 February 2005.

¹⁴ Diana R. Garland, "Divorce and the Church," *Review and Expositor* 92, no. 4 (fall 1995): 422.

¹⁵ Dwight Hervey Small, *Remarriage and God's Renewing Grace: A Positive Biblical Ethic for Divorced Christians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 42-45.

¹⁶ Walter Kasper, *Theology of Christian Marriage* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1977), 49.

being in Jesus Christ and sharing in his death and resurrection through a continuous process of giving, forgiving, and being forgiven as the partners grow in love and transformation. Second, marriage as the sacrament of the Church symbolizes God’s love and faithfulness in Jesus Christ, and is present in the way Christians relate to one another. Third, marriage as an eschatological hope, symbolizes the gathering together and reconciliation of humanity at the end of the age and the establishment of peace on earth.¹⁷

The early church had no part in performing marriages until Christian couples began to seek the blessing of the church in the form of a benediction to seal their marriage, writes Small. He argues that, given Apostle Paul’s statement: “This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church” (Eph 5:32), the church later mistranslated the word *mysterion* (mystery) to mean “sacrament.”¹⁸ If this is indeed a mistranslation, the doctrine of indissolubility has created much distress to marriage partners throughout the centuries, for it means that the union between Christ and the church was no longer an analogy but became reality. Thus, Small holds that the marriage bond cannot be severed any more than the bond between Christ and the Church.¹⁹

Ironically, the same marriage bond that cannot be severed can be declared never to have existed by annulment, even after consummation and childbearing. Divorce (annulment) is a reality because the love relationship does not always survive repeated conflicts.

Although the general attitude of the Church Fathers was to forbid remarriage even after the death of a first partner, says Kasper, it appears that traditions were challenged by flexible practices in the Church, especially among leaders who viewed themselves as the innocent party following a divorce.²⁰ Authors Patton and Childs suggest that the view of marriage as a sacrament places greater emphasis on the expectations of the Church than on the love

¹⁷ Ibid., 31-42.

¹⁸ Small, 42-45.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Kasper, 54.

relationship between husband and wife.²¹ These views seem to ignore the fact that marriage preceded the Church.

According to Nelson in *God Hides in Plain Sight*, to have a traditional view of marriage as a sacrament means that when two spouses consider each other's interests more important than their own, their relationship embodies the self-emptying love of Christ. Consequently, marriage bears witness to a love far greater than the two individuals—the loving relationship between Christ and the Church, which is filled with selflessness, compassion, humility, and forgiveness.²²

2. Marriage as Covenant or Contract

Marriage is called a “covenant” throughout the Old Testament says Instone-Brewer.²³ This is significant because a covenant was cemented not only by blessings and curses (benefits for faithfulness and penalties for breaking stipulations), but also by a concept of mutual concern and loyalty. Some biblical scholars make a distinction between a “covenant” (a relationship based on grace and truth) and a “contract” (a relationship based on legalism), says Instone-Brewer who refutes their claim, stating that the same Hebrew word *berith* applies to both. He holds the view that the biblical “marriage covenant” and the “marriage contract” are the same since both involve a mutually binding agreement between two parties, are sealed with a document or a ceremony, and involve an exchange of goods or rights.²⁴

3. Marriage as Vocation and Communion

Authors Patton and Childs offer two additional views of marriage. One view is marriage by vocation, wherein God has called the couple to service in some God-ordained capacity such as missionaries at home or abroad. The common call to discipleship is expected to help stabilize the marriage. Another view is communion, a model of postmodern, egalitarian marriage that seeks to help

²¹ John Patton and Brian Childs, *Christian Marriage and Family: Caring For Our Generations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 82-83.

²² Dean Nelson, *God Hides in Plain Sight* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009), 133-134.

²³ David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 1.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 15-17.

partners develop as equal partners in intimacy with one another so that transformation to higher levels of living can occur. The communion model “encompasses the other three views of marriage in that it seeks to energize persons in their marriage and family relationships” so that couples will accomplish their vocations and live in covenant relationship according to the grace they have received from God.²⁵

B. An Illustration of God’s Grace in the First Marriage

The account of the fall of Adam and Eve, a couple given joint rule over all the earth (Gn 1:28), presents a picture of individual challenges of married couples, conflict in a marriage, and God’s compassion. In Genesis 3 the serpent (later identified as “the Devil” and “Satan” in Rev 12:9) dared to attack a couple that had close fellowship with God. Today the attacks still occur. In the article, “The Gays and the Divorced: Similar Scars,” Barnwell, a divorced and remarried Episcopal priest, shared how he had to stand before the congregation and hear himself condemned as an adulterer.²⁶ Prohibitions and condemnations would have destroyed him had he not found positive statements from Jesus’ teaching beneficial in his healing process. He shares how “God met Adam and Eve where they were, not where they should have been.” God knew the fig leaves could no longer adequately cover them from the elements they were about to face outside the Garden of Eden and thus made a suitable covering of animal skin for them before banishing them from the garden (Gn 3:8-24).²⁷ God showed compassion for the couple that retained joint-rule over all of creation in spite of their sin.

In the same way that God cared for Adam and Eve, He cares for fallen leaders, and has made provision for reconciliation through Christ’s sacrificial death. Stigmatization harms, but transformation heals. The story of Adam and Eve teaches that even in their fallen state God came to them, accepted them, loved them, forgave them, and provided whatever they needed. Surely the God who does not

²⁵ Patton and Childs, 82-83.

²⁶ William Barnwell, “The Gays and the Divorced: Similar Scars,” *The Christian Century* 95, no. 1 (1978): 29-30.

²⁷ Ibid.

change (Mal 3:6) will do nothing less for postmodern Christian leaders.

II. Grace in Divorce Law

“Unlike marriage, divorce is a human institution,” states Adams. He says that biblical evidence reveals that although divorce is recognized, permitted and regulated in the Bible, there is no record of an act of God, either directly, or through the prophets or apostles, where it is either established or institutionalized.²⁸ Under Jewish law divorce became a legal separation between a man and wife by a process regulated by Moses. Instead of speaking of divorce as a part of God’s order, Jesus specifically acknowledges the New Testament teaching as constituting a change by saying: “Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, suffered you to put away your wives; but from the beginning it was not so” (Mt 19:8). Moses simply permitted divorce. To allow a practice differs from originating, establishing, and instituting it.

In the same way that every individual faces the threat of sudden death at any time, every marriage between two human beings is subject to divorce on any given day. Even when both spouses work hard to preserve the marriage they still need God’s grace to succeed and will need grace to forge ahead alone if divorce becomes a reality. Consequently, John Bunyan’s apt description of what it means for a person to be saved by grace can be applied to both stable and failed relationships alike:

And therefore grace and the deservings of the creature are set in flat opposition one to another: “And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But, if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work,” Rom. xi.6.”²⁹

God’s gift of the Law was actually an act of grace. Grace is also reflected in the requirement that a written certificate of divorce be given to the woman so she could remarry and in scribes taking a while to write the document (thus giving the husband time to think about his decision and change his mind). Instructions found in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 provide recourse and direction for those whose marriages

²⁸ Adams, 27.

²⁹ Paul Bunyan, *Saved By Grace* (Swengel, PA: Reiner Publications, 1967), 24.

failed under the law and confirms that divorce does happen.³⁰ The New Testament teaching of Jesus on divorce is in response to the Pharisees' question, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for *just* any reason?" (Mt 19:3). Jesus' reply to the question is a summary of the law found in Deuteronomy 24:1-4:

¹When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favour in his eyes, because he hath found some *uncleanness* in her: then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house. ²And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's wife. ³And if the latter husband hate her, and write her a bill of divorcement, and giveth it in her hand, and sendeth her out of his house; or if the latter husband die, which took her to be his wife; ⁴Her former husband, which sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after that she is defiled; for that is abomination before the LORD: and thou shalt not cause the land to sin, which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance.

Some scholars believe this passage relates to a ruling on a particular circumstance. Here the word *uncleanness* in the KJV replaces the Hebrew words *erwat dabar*, which literally mean "the nakedness of a thing" or "a naked matter" with the word "indecentcy." The same word in Deuteronomy 23:14 literally means "the nakedness of a thing."³¹ Jesus cites this passage in New Testament teaching on divorce and remarriage.

Sprinkle, in *Biblical Law and Its Relevance*, compares divorce between a husband and wife in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 with God divorcing Israel in Jeremiah 3:1-8 in order to emphasize the absurdity of adopting a rigid church rule that permanently excludes divorced individuals from church leadership.³² Jeremiah portrays God divorcing adulterous Israel for lusting after idol gods. God divorced Israel and sent her into exile where she united with other gods. However, contrary to divorce law which states that the first husband (in this case, God) cannot take the wife back, God calls his backsliding Israel to come back to him. The question is raised: Does

³⁰ J. Carl Laney, "No Divorce, No Remarriage" in *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*, H. Wayne House, ed., (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 1990), 15-54.

³¹ Clifton J. Allen, ed., *General Articles Matthew – Mark, The Broadman Bible Commentary*, vol. 8 (Nashville: Broadman, 1969), 187.

³² Joe M. Sprinkle, *Biblical Law And It's Relevance* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2006), 145.

divorcing Israel disqualify God as leader of the Church?³³ Perhaps this passage serves to illustrate that there is room for grace in divorce.

The giving of a certificate of divorce is a cultural acknowledgement that some marriages simply do not work and that the woman not only has legal permission to divorce, but to remarry without being accused of committing adultery.³⁴ In Jewish history (and even now), the male prerogative in the law served as the basis for affliction, vengeance, and extortion by husbands. Jewish divorce law based on Deuteronomy 24:1-2, has left many women agunot (tied down). An agunah is a woman who cannot marry because she is still chained to her husband who is either unable or unwilling (out of spite) to give her a *get* (the written document designed to set her free so she can remarry).³⁵ Perhaps this matter of injustice explains why Jesus had much to say about divorce.

Gushee makes this statement: “Both in law and in cultural attitudes, divorce moved from rare exception to routine practice.”³⁶ Changing attitudes produced a series of revolutions—sexual, abortion, birth control, gay rights, illegitimacy, cohabitation, divorce—and challenged the perception on marriage as an institution.³⁷ Perspectives on marriage influenced the following perceptions on divorce: (1) no divorce, no remarriage; (2) divorce, no remarriage; (3) divorce for adultery and desertion only; and (4) divorce for a variety of reasons; all adequately described in the book, *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*.³⁸ Since many view adultery as biblical grounds for divorce, we now take a closer look at this renowned marriage destroyer.

A. Outrageous Adultery

In the article “Sex, Morality and Protestant Clergy,” Anderson states that marital infidelity is the fastest way to destroy families because adultery leads to divorce about sixty-five (65%) percent of

³³ Ibid., 145.

³⁴ Ibid., 130.

³⁵ Instone-Brewer, 204.

³⁶ David P. Gushee, *Getting Marriage Right: Realistic Counsel for Saving and Strengthening Relationships* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 35.

³⁷ Ibid., 36.

³⁸ H. Wayne House, ed., *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 33.

the time. He suggests that the best way to alleviate these marital pressures and prevent adultery is to ensure that the basic needs of each spouse (which includes sexual fulfillment for the husband) are met.³⁹ It is not surprising that adultery, most often viewed as consensual sexual intercourse between a married person and a person who is not his or her spouse, increases in a climate of rising cohabitation, while divorce decreases. Why? People who don't marry, don't divorce. But of those who do marry, estimates show that about 50 percent of first marriages end in divorce, 67% of second marriages, and 74% of third marriages.⁴⁰

Both male and female clergy should beware of any type of “immorality,” a term broad enough to include sex between two unmarried individuals as well as homosexuality says Keener, author of the book *...And Marries Another*.⁴¹ In a discussion of pastoral ethics, Noyce notes that male clergy appear to be more vulnerable than females to adultery.⁴² In the article “Avoiding the Scarlet Letter,” McBurney warns that male ministers in the church—often perceived as a female subculture—may become targets for seduction as they compassionately fulfill their ministerial duties.⁴³ Given the reality that some couples are clearly incompatible and that both men and women cheat, the Devil may send a customized seducing spirit to the minister with one specific goal—to thwart the work of the ministry.

What would have been the fate of “the woman taken in adultery, in the very act” (Jn 8:4) without God's grace? The Scribes and the Pharisees who brought her to Jesus said, “Now Moses, in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou?” (Jn 8:5). The religious leaders had not condemned the woman's sex partner even though God had commanded all the people: “Thou shalt not commit adultery” (Ex 20:14). If she had been a married woman,

³⁹ Kerby Anderson, “Sex, Morality, and Protestant Clergy,” www.Google.probe.org/docs/adultery.html (accessed 26 May 2005), 4-6.

⁴⁰ “Divorce Rate,” www.DivorceRate.org, accessed 3 Sept. 2011.

⁴¹ Craig S. Keener, *... And Marries Another: Divorce and Remarriage in the Teaching of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 28.

⁴² Gaylord Noyce, *Pastoral Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), 106.

⁴³ Louis McBurney, “Avoiding the Scarlet Letter,” *Leadership* (summer, 1985): 44.

then under Old Testament law the man also should have received the death penalty according to the following texts:

If a man is found lying with a woman married to an husband, then they shall both of them die (Dt 22:22).

And the man that committeth adultery with another man's wife, even he that committeth adultery with his neighbor's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death (Lv 20:10).

Given these consequences for adultery, any living individual who has ever committed adultery, either knowingly or unknowingly has experienced the grace of God. The question could be asked: If the woman had known that her sin was a capital offense, then why was she willing to risk being stoned? It is quite possible that she preferred to die rather than continue to coexist in either a sterile or abusive marriage.

In the book, *What Good is God?* Yancey points out that Nelson Mandela taught the whole world a lesson in grace when he was elected president of South Africa after serving twenty-seven years in prison. Mandela invited his jailer to be his guest at the inauguration and recruited white Afrikaner policemen as his personal bodyguards.⁴⁴ This is grace at its best.

Grace also allowed Mandela and wife, Winnie, to divorce but preserved the marriage of United States President Bill Clinton and his wife, Hillary. Both political leaders endured international scandal based on infidelity, but with completely different outcomes.⁴⁵ This indicates that grace is not a “one-size fits all” application. Grace, with its power to overcome differences in theology, offers the same hope to today's religious leaders that it did to the Scribes and Pharisees when they brought to Jesus a woman caught in adultery. Everyone is given the choice to either stone men and women who are caught in adultery, or follow the example of the living God “Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter [law] killeth, but the spirit [grace] giveth life”

⁴⁴ Philip Yancey, *What Good Is God?* (New York: Faith Words, 2010), 280.

⁴⁵ Lynn Duke, “Nelson Mandela Wins Divorce,” *Washington Post Foreign Service*, 20 March 1996, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/longterm/s_africa/stories/divorce0396.htm (accessed 6 Oct. 2011); “Key Player: Bill Clinton,” *The Washington Post Company* (2 Oct. 1998), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/clinton/players/clinton.htm> (accessed 6 October 2011).

(2 Cor 3:6). Jesus, who knew that the religious leaders' ulterior motive was to entrap him, replied, "He who is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her" (Jn 8:7).

Eric Law explains Jesus' reaction in *Inclusion: Making Room for Grace*, by saying, "They tried to force Jesus to narrow the grace margin in which his compassionate ministry resided."⁴⁶ By not answering the religious leaders directly, Jesus gave those who wanted the strict interpretation of the law time for self-examination and reflection as he wrote on the ground. Each one of the woman's accusers had time to ponder the question: "Have I done anything for which I should be stoned?"

If the life of her unidentified sex partner could be spared, should not also the woman's since both were created in the image of God (Gn 1:27)? "God offers justifying grace first and then beckons us toward greater spiritual maturity, says McMinn in the book, *Sin and Grace in Christian Counseling*. The words of Christ, offered to a woman caught in adultery, transcend generations to all who have experienced the grace of God: 'neither do I [condemn you]. Go and sin no more'" (Jn 8:11).⁴⁷

Based on arguments that a woman's adultery was punishable by either execution or loss of dowry, Sprinkle points out that adultery would be a major reason for a man to divorce his wife.⁴⁸ Should not the same grace applied in the politically charged situation with the woman caught in adultery be shown to contemporary Christians, especially church leaders, who ought to be perceived as persons in need of forgiveness rather than objects to be cast out? Should we stone adulterers as the law requires, or do we forgive them knowing that Jesus forgave the woman and told her to go and sin no more? It's no small matter that God himself showed grace to adulterous Israel by not executing her, but sending her away into exile with a certificate of divorce instead.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Eric H. F. Law, *Inclusion: Making Room for Grace* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 50.

⁴⁷ Mark R. McMinn, *Sin and Grace* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 65.

⁴⁸ Sprinkle, 132.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 131.

B. Important Lessons On Divorce

Lessons that emphasize the grace of God in divorce are important because people who suffer spiritually, physically and socially in marriage need to know that divorce may not bring an end to suffering at all. In fact, divorce can bring a new type of suffering, namely, grieving the death of a marriage. Jonah provides a good example of how God sees human affliction and hears our cries as we suffer in the midst of divine presence. God's grace was extended to Jonah, a rebellious prophet. After his life was spared, ~~he~~Jonah reluctantly went and preached to the people of Nineveh. Though grateful for his own salvation, he resented the grace extended to people that he considered "undeserving," that is, until God reminded him that grace is for all created beings (Jon 4:11). Jonah, who behaved like he had forgotten how God rescued him and gave him another chance to obey, serves to remind those who long for judgment upon the divorced of this passage: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph 2:8,9). The following section contains Jesus' teaching on divorce, a redefinition of divorce, the exception controversy, and Paul's teaching on the subject.

1. Jesus' Teaching on Divorce

A glimpse of Jewish culture during the first century aids in understanding the significance of Jesus' teaching on divorce. Family structure under the patriarchal system allowed a man to dismiss his wife analogous to the way he would dismiss a slave, although he must allege a reason such as having found something improper (indecent) about her. Countryman, author of *Dirt, Greed, and Sex* says during this era there was neither the belief in equality between males and females nor a deep conviction of the one flesh motif in marriage.⁵⁰

Jesus' reminder of God's original intent for marriage provided an unpopular interpretation of Scripture which meant that "the will of God as originally revealed in the act of creation could not be annulled by any rule communicated through (or even created by) Moses."⁵¹ He pointed out that the female was as human as the male and the two

⁵⁰ L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 173-177.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 174.

became one flesh at marriage (Gn 2:24). Although he neither instituted nor prohibited divorce, Jesus clearly stated that it was not in God's original plan for marriage (Mt 19:8). The Mosaic Law permitted divorce due to the hardness of [men's] hearts because rarely could a woman divorce her husband. Rather than being hardhearted like these men, every Christian is instructed to "be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph 4:32).

2. Jesus' Redefinition of Adultery

The term adultery can be misleading. Under the Mosaic Law, a man could only commit adultery against another man by having intercourse with a married woman. Jesus made the woman equal with the man by giving her a permanent claim on the husband as her sexual property and declaring her sexual freedom equal to his. With the husband's loss of absolute authority in the home, Jesus actually undermined the existing patriarchal family structure.⁵² By declaring polygamy illegal (Mt 19:9) and remarriage a crime against the first wife, Jesus made a significant step toward eliminating a societal double standard.⁵³

A strict interpretation of the law required an adulteress to be stoned (Dt 22:22-24). However, Hare points out that rather than subjecting the unfaithful wife to capital punishment, she was considered "dead" and was forsaken by her husband. He explains that under an adultery law introduced in Roman Society by Augustus, "husbands were forbidden to pardon adulterous wives and they could be punished for persisting in the marriage." He also asserts that the prohibition of divorce that existed in many states and nations until the twentieth century was an outgrowth of Jesus' teaching containing the exception clause found in Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9.⁵⁴

3. The Exception Controversy

And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality [porneia], and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery (Mt 19:9 NIV).

⁵² Ibid., 176

⁵³ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Mark* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 120.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 120-121.

The exception for *porneia* may refer to the provision found in the Torah for a man to reject a wife who was found not to be a virgin on her wedding night (Dt 22:13-21).⁵⁵ The consummation of such a marriage could be terminated because it was considered to be an invalid marriage.⁵⁶ This view of divorce is supported by Jesus' pronouncement in Matthew 19:9 and Matthew 5:32.

Although the wife was the property of the husband in Jewish culture, the reality of divorce was recognized, observes Rowatt who states that when a marriage failed in the New Testament era, the major dispute was not the fact of divorce, but the meaning of the term "uncleanness" or "indecency" taken from Deuteronomy 24:1-4.⁵⁷ He explains that during this period a debate over grounds for divorce prevailed between the conservative Jewish school of Shammai that granted divorce only on the strict interpretation of "indecency" as adultery, and the liberal school of Hillel that permitted divorce on any grounds by interpreting indecency as anything displeasing to the husband—such as burning a meal or appearing unattractive. In Mark 10:1-12, Jesus calls attention to God's original intent for marriage in Genesis 2:24 and concludes with a stricter view of divorce: if marriage is of God, then no [human] is to put it asunder (Mk 10:9).⁵⁸

By stating "whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality [marital unfaithfulness in the NIV] causes her to commit adultery" (Mt 5:32), Wilkins claims that Jesus provided for the protection of both the innocent partner and the institution of marriage. He also asserts that religious leaders of Jesus' day mimicked the culture by violating God's intention for marriage. Jesus counters the Pharisees' argument that "if Moses allowed divorce, then it must be a valid option for a marriage partner to consider," by reminding them that divorce was not God's original intent.⁵⁹

Wilkins suggests that since "adultery" is the translation of the word *moicheuo* in Matthew 5:27-28 and Matthew 19:9, "porneia" is

⁵⁵ Countryman, 175.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ G. Wade Rowatt, "Divorce: An Open Perspective for the Church," *Review and Expositor*, 74, no.1 (2001), 51-62.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew, The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 643-644.

probably not adultery, but something “more than frivolous but less than sexual immorality.”⁶⁰ In spite of having no specific meaning for “porneia,” it is apparently some type of sexual sin. He says that if Jesus had specifically used the word for adultery, then the controversy over the meaning of “porneia” could have been avoided. Instead, multiple descriptions of “porneia” and much speculation abound:

The semantic range of porneia includes whatever intentionally divides the marital relationship, probably including, but not limited to, related sexual sins such as incest, homosexuality, prostitution, molestation, or indecent exposure.⁶¹

A guilty party was no longer stoned to death in Jesus’ day, says Wilkins, who claims the rabbis declared that the offending partner must be divorced because adultery produced sexual impurity—a legal matter that dissolves a marriage.⁶² Perhaps it was this command of the rabbis that Joseph struggled to obey (Mt 1:19-20), or as Sprinkle suggests, Joseph found it difficult to choose between divorce or capital punishment for Mary.⁶³ Fortunately for everyone the God of grace intervened and revealed to Joseph that Mary was not guilty of sexual impurity.

According to Instone-Brewer, the exception clause which appears only in Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9 is not a contradiction to the parallel gospels of Mark 10:11 or Luke 16:18. It was understood that contemporary Jews of the day would have mentally added the exception phrase had Matthew omitted it. He argues that Jesus refers to “except for indecency” rather than “except for valid grounds” because he was referring to a question about the meaning of the phrase found in Deuteronomy 24:1.⁶⁴

One final comment about the wide range of connotations for the term “porneia” is appropriate in this postmodern era. Hebrews 13:4 reads, “Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge.” This text implies that the definition of “porneia” is broad enough to include any form of sexual

⁶⁰ Ibid., 642-645.

⁶¹ Ibid., 644. Wilkins cites Blomberg, “Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, and Celibacy,” 177; David Janzen, “The Meaning of Porneia in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9: An Approach from the Study of Ancient Near Eastern Culture,” *JSNT* 80 (2000): 66-80.

⁶² Ibid., 644-645.

⁶³ Sprinkle, 151.

⁶⁴ Instone-Brewer, 153.

sin or impropriety, including adultery. Jesus said, “Whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Mt 5:28). This statement makes it clear that matters of the heart are just as important as behavior. Spouses should “abstain from every form of evil” that would be detrimental to their marriage (1Thes 5:22).⁶⁵ In addition to physical and spiritual adultery, Christians should abstain from cyber adultery.

4. Paul’s Teaching on Divorce

The Corinthian church wrote a letter to Paul seeking clarification of marriage during a time when the pro-celibacy faction in the church encouraged people to divorce if they could not live with a spouse without having sex. In his response, Paul urged those who were married not to be in a hurry to divorce and those already divorced not to remarry, just in case they decided to restore friendly relations with (reconcile) and reunite with the former spouse.⁶⁶

Some believers contemplated divorcing the spouse out of fear of defilement by having sexual relations with an unbelieving spouse.⁶⁷ The words translated “separate,” “divorce,” and “leave” in 1 Corinthians 7:10-16 are used interchangeably as Paul advises the believer not to try to prevent the unbelieving spouse from leaving the marriage. His response infers that there is no guarantee that the unbelieving spouse will ever be saved. In fact, constant marital tension between two people with divided loyalties could even exacerbate the unbeliever’s alienation from the spouse and from God.

Note that “desertion” is the ground for divorce, not marriage to an unbeliever.⁶⁸ If –desertion by an unbelieving spouse is indeed a ground for divorce, then it seems reasonable to apply it equally to desertion by a believing spouse. Even some pastors abandon their mates.

The religious leaders during the Old Testament and New Testament eras, and even now, often focus on rules and religious rituals more than redeeming people who have gone astray. Some

⁶⁵ The researcher believes that this passage is broad enough to refer to cyber adultery, a postmodern marriage-destroyer that is also a ground for divorce.

⁶⁶ Craig Blomberg, *1 Corinthians, The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 134.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 138-139.

Christians believe that divorced leaders have fallen from grace and are no longer worthy to serve as ministry leaders. If Christians can believe that God raised Jesus from the dead, and that as the God of another chance he makes humans new creatures in Christ (Rom 5:17; 2 Cor 5:17), then why not believe that God can use divorced leaders?

Moses, Jesus and Paul considered the divorce issue worth addressing and so should the contemporary church. Responses to human sin that do not reflect the behavior of God are sinful, including silence in the congregation. To be fair, there is a tension between love and justice. On one hand God holds leaders accountable for adhering to higher standards set for them (Jas 3:1). The Bible also warns against condemning another brother or sister (Jas 4:11-12). On the other hand, God is merciful and desires that his people would also show mercy, for he says in Matthew 7:12: “Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them” (Mt 7:12).

C. An Illustration of God’s Grace in Divorce

Murder is definitely an alternative to divorce as evidenced by the history of King Henry Tudor and his six wives. In his biography of Henry VIII, Smith, emphasizes that it was the king’s objection to the Catholic doctrine of indissolubility that was a major catalyst in the birth of the Protestant church.⁶⁹ He reports that a main reason why part of the church broke away from the Roman Catholic Church was to enable the king to obtain a divorce from his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, and remarry. Henry was able to divorce (after more than twenty years of marriage) by passing the Act of Supremacy and assuming leadership of the Church of England.⁷⁰

King Henry’s “divorce” was not officially a divorce but an annulment, since the King maintained that he had not been legally married to Catherine in the first place.⁷¹ Assuming leadership of the Church of England did not prevent Henry’s hardness of heart or adultery. His marital history of two divorces and two executions of wives prove that power corrupts, but grace covers a multitude of sins. This church leader’s divorce/annulment challenged traditions by

⁶⁹ Lacey Baldwin Smith, *Henry VIII: The Mask of Royalty* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 57.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 105.

contesting the pope's authority, and laid a foundation upon which Martin Luther and other reformers could also challenge the authority of the pope.

God's grace in divorce was evident when Catherine was spared the tragic fate of the king's second wife, Anne Boleyn, whom he executed on charges of adultery.⁷² For Catherine, divorce proved to be a living way out of her tumultuous marriage and prompted her to find solace in prayer.

III. Grace in Divorce

What if Moses had not permitted divorce due to the "hardness of hearts" (Mt 19: 8)? Clark asserts that some interpreters hold that Moses opted for divorce because he feared that husbands would murder their despised wives if they were forced to keep them.⁷³

Can Christians whose hearts should have been softened by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit experience "hardness of heart?" Yes. The fact that Christians are still divorcing unwanted spouses indicate that the problem of "hardness of hearts" still persists. Therefore, divorce can be perceived as the lesser of evils (a form of grace) when contrasted with alternatives such as homicide, suicide, denial of conjugal love, abandonment, and other marriage destroyers. When forced to choose, many spouses prefer to divorce rather than serve a life sentence of unhappiness. Regardless of the individual's response, God's grace is at work in every situation.

A. Compassionate Inner Workings of Grace

While adultery, abandonment, and abuse are common causes of divorce, God's grace is at work helping spouses deal with other issues perceived as grounds for divorce: infertility, forced marriage (pregnancy), neglect, lack of communication, gross selfishness, addictions, illness, imprisonment, growing apart (having different goals), problems with in-laws, mid-life crisis, deception, financial challenges, immaturity, and other reasons that may be summed up under the legal term "irreconcilable differences." Only God knows how much a person can tolerate before divorce becomes the most

⁷² Tudorhistory.org, "The Six Wives of Henry VIII," www.TudorHistory.org (accessed 14 Sept. 2011).

⁷³ Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton University Press, 1999), 239.

viable alternative for finding peace. Below we point out that grace requires obedience, calls for repentance, provides forgiveness, liberates spouses, empowers ministers, and elicits gratitude for the strength to endure marital strife and separation or divorce.

1. Grace Requires Obedience

God's grace demands a response from the people of God who must choose to obey the laws and enjoy blessings of life, or disobey and experience the curses of the covenant and death (Dt 27-29).⁷⁴ Millar asserts that the collection of laws found in chapters twelve through twenty-six of Deuteronomy requires a response to the ethical demands placed upon God's chosen people.⁷⁵ With regard to the declaration of God's laws, he asserts:

“Law code” is an inadequate title for Deuteronomy 12-26, which is not a list of legal statutes, but law pressed into the service of theological preaching, law set in the context of a response to grace. In this respect Deuteronomy is the prototype of all of the Bible's subsequent ethical teaching.⁷⁶

Perhaps, the Pharisees interpreted Moses' teaching on divorce as a command or law to be obeyed because Deuteronomy 24:1-4 is included in the Deuteronomic code. They claimed the Law of Moses commanded that a husband give a rejected wife a certificate of divorce and send her away (Mt 19:7). Friedman renounces the practice of taking this passage as biblical law in favor of viewing it as the law governing a specific instance in which a divorced couple might want to reunite after the wife had remarried and divorced again or was widowed.⁷⁷ He says, “Divorce law in general has been derived in part from this case because of the curious fact that there is no law in the Torah telling how to get married and no law telling how to get divorced.”⁷⁸

It is possible that the absence of prescribed ceremonial procedures could imply that they are insignificant to God. Scripture provides specific instructions regarding the marriage relationship: the

⁷⁴ J. G. Millar, “Deuteronomy,” *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, eds. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 160.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁷⁷ Richard Elliott Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2001), 639.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

husband's treatment of the wife (Eph 5:22-33); the couple's relationship with their children (Eph 6:1-4); making one's spouse happy (Dt 24:5); and the prohibition against physical and spiritual adultery (Mt 5:27-28). However, based on the reported lack of compassion for disenfranchised women, the religious leaders did not seem to understand that the obedient response to God's grace is more clearly demonstrated by the way a person lives rather than by adherence to rules and religious rituals.⁷⁹

Christensen holds that the "bill of divorcement" literally means "severance," and probably referred to the symbolic act of cutting the wife's hem or garment based on an ancient divorce ceremony in Mesopotamia.⁸⁰ This ancient practice illustrates a lack of compassion for the marriage partner. Rather than choosing to publicly humiliate a rejected spouse, grace required the husband to do everything in his power to maintain a right human relationship by striving for justice and equality. When divorce is deemed necessary, New Testament Joseph provides a good example of how to show grace to the spouse. When he learned that Mary was pregnant, the Bible states, "Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly" (Mt 1:19). The description of Joseph as a "just" man (upright, blameless, righteous, one who conforms to God's laws and man's), indicates that God knows those who tried to do all the right things and still witnessed the deterioration of their marriage. Sufferers are encouraged to wait on God's timing.

2. Grace Calls for Repentance

In a discussion of the number of husbands in postexilic Judah who were dealing treacherously with the Jewish wives of their youth by divorcing them and marrying foreign women, the prophet Malachi articulates God's attitude.⁸¹ God condemned the practice that involved leaders preferring to "intermarry with foreign women who served pagan deities and produced offspring with diluted religious

⁷⁹ Millar, 163.

⁸⁰ Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 21:10-34:12, Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 6B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 567.

⁸¹ Frank E. Gaebelien, ed., *Daniel-Minor Prophets, The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 717.

beliefs.”⁸² In condemnation of this practice, the prophet proclaims, “For the Lord God of Israel says, ‘That He hates divorce’” (Mal 2:16). Instone-Brewer claims this proclamation followed the grievous reaction of Jewish men to God’s rejection of their worship and offerings because their divorces were motivated by selfish desires, one of which may have been “to marry rich foreign women” (Mal 2:13).⁸³

Although God is displeased with (or hates) those who characteristically practice evil (Ps 5:5b), “He is ready to forgive, and abundant in mercy” to the penitent (Ps 86:5). Instead of mourning their sins and discontinuing their evil practices, the priests were more concerned about the loss of divine favor and consequent blessing.⁸⁴ Malachi called to repentance the corrupt priests whose attitudes of indifference toward marriage vows and moral and ethical duties failed to set godly examples in their own marriages. The priests were not removed from office, but they were commanded to cease their wicked practices. They were challenged to understand and convey the message to the people that the retraction of marriage vows made in the presence of God represented fraudulent action against the Lord who had called them to leadership. Negative attitudes toward divorced clergy may be associated with the practices of these corrupt priests who were accused of dealing treacherously with their spouses.

Ezra and Nehemiah, contemporaries of Malachi, similarly called for Israelite husbands to divorce (put away) their pagan wives as a form of national cleansing, in an effort to return to covenant relationship with God (Ez 9; 10; Neh 13:23-27). The command to dissolve mixed marriages might have precipitated changed attitudes about the permanence of the marriage union. The command to divorce foreign wives probably helped to promote the divorce climate and the resultant attitudes toward divorce—if divorcing foreign wives is okay, then divorcing a Jewish wife is also possible. Some others suggest that today’s casual attitude toward divorce could have originated with the biblical call for national cleansing.⁸⁵ They point out that a nation’s

⁸² Jack W. Hayford et al., eds., *Spirit Filled Life Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 1385.

⁸³ Instone-Brewer, 55.

⁸⁴ Gaebelien, 717.

⁸⁵ Earl Radmacher, Ronald B. Allen, and H. Wayne House, eds., *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 1124.

rising divorce rate could be a symptom of the need for repentant hearts and attitudes toward the God who made monogamous marriage between a man and woman, and intends their unions to be permanent.⁸⁶

God's word to His children who realize that divorce is not the right way to resolve marital differences is, "Return [repent] you backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings" (Jer 3:22). The grace each of us has received from God should be extended to others for the Bible says:

Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him [her] back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins (Jas 5:19-20).

Believers are urged to repent of unproductive practices and bring their brothers and sisters to confession and repentance so they may find forgiveness and be restored.

3. Grace Provides Forgiveness

The penalty for every sin ever committed has been paid in full by the shed blood of Christ, for "in Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace" (Eph 1:7; Rom 6:23). This means that even wrongful divorces can be forgiven. Grace provides forgiveness for the Bible says: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn 1:9).

In teaching the disciples to pray, Jesus says, "and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Mt 6:12). This indicates that disciples of Christ need forgiveness as they continue in the faith, and they need to forgive others. Jesus adds, "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Mt 6:14-15). He summarizes all that was taught in the Beatitudes of Matthew 5:1- 7:11 by saying, "Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets"(Mt 7:12).

Those who submit to God will receive the grace to live according to God's will for their lives (Jas 4:6). Grace gives Christians the

⁸⁶ Ibid.

desire and the ability to forgive divorced leaders. Grace also leads the divorced to accept forgiveness and provides confidence that they are forgiven and useful servants of the Lord.

4. Grace Liberates Spouses

The word “gift” (*charisma*) is used as a reminder that both celibacy and marriage are abilities (spiritual gifts) graciously bestowed by God for the edification of the church (1Cor 1:7), according to Blomberg.⁸⁷ When marriage is understood to be a gift of God’s grace that some have and others have not received, no one can boast of making the marriage work. Many divorced Christians have received grace to start anew after a divorce that they were forced to accept. Those who have found joy in a subsequent marriage can also attest to God’s grace.

In the article, “A Theology of Divorce,” Sinks points out that the Great Commandment of Jesus calls for Christians to strive toward the most loving action possible within the context of any given situation (Mt 22:37-40).⁸⁸ Divorce may be viewed as the most humane way to terminate an unwanted marriage when contrasted with homicide, suicide, desertion, and separation.⁸⁹ Given these alternatives, even Christian leaders may consider divorce to be the most loving action possible.

Without compromising its essential commitment to the ideal of faithful, monogamous marriage, the church could help troubled partners by teaching that divorce is not God’s perfect will, but is permitted due to hardness of the human heart (Mk 10: 4-5). Knowing that God can, but often does not prevent leaders from divorcing or being divorced by their spouses, helps people to appreciate these encouraging words found in Romans 8:28: “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.” Grace liberates the divorced to persevere in their journey toward peace and self-actualization.

⁸⁷ Craig Blomberg, *1 Corinthians, The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 132-139.

⁸⁸ Robert Sinks, “A Theology of Divorce,” *The Christian Century* 94, no. 14 (1977): 376-378.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

5. Grace Empowers Ministers

The Christian leader can do all things through Christ who strengthens [him or her] (Phil 4:13), but there are some things they need not do; such as perform all of the work of the ministry alone. For example, Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, noticed how God's chosen leader was wearing himself out judging cases from morning until evening. He made this observation to Moses: Both you and these people who are with you will surely wear yourselves out. For this thing is too much for you; you are not able to perform it by yourself (Ex 18:2, 13-18).

Although God called Moses to leadership and spoke directly to him in Exodus chapter three, another human being advised him how to effectively engage in the type of ministry that would preserve him, the people of God, and consequently, his marriage. Fortunately, Moses listened.

Idolatry can destroy Christian marriages, says Malm in the article, "When a Ministry Threatens a Marriage."⁹⁰ He sees divorce as a grave crisis for Christian leaders in that sometimes the mistress or idol is the church or ministry. He states that at first the spouse may deny that the ministry is their enemy, but eventually will perceive God as the enemy also. He describes how the three classical enemies—the flesh, the world, and the Devil (1 Jn 2:16) work to destroy marriages of Christian leaders as follows:

The flesh in both the husband and wife seeks power, tries to manipulate for selfish purposes, shies away from pain and brokenness, seeks selfish pleasure and looks for the worst motives in other people. The world, with all its people and prizes, plays directly to the desires of the flesh, promising all that affirmation and pleasure and power. The devil, who in our time has brought age-old strategy to 'divide and rule' to unprecedented levels of intensity does all he can to sow seeds of division, with the very conscious goal of crushing as many marriages of Christian leaders as he can.⁹¹

In *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Willard proclaims that leaders and teachers in the Christian church will be responsible for the condition of the world in the future.⁹² They alone have the means to

⁹⁰ Magnus Malm, "When a Ministry Threatens a Marriage," *Transformation* 5, no.3 (1988): 16.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 245-247.

bring the world under the rule of God because of the power and commission conveyed to them by Jesus (Mt 28:18-20). God calls people to participate in the divine redemptive plan. The leader's task is to equip Christians until they are like Christ (Eph 4:11).⁹³ He asserts that Christian leaders ought not to focus on illusory goals of bigger churches and budgets—marks of success by the world's standards. Instead, he asserts:

Everyone who has a pastoral role to others, whether as an official minister or not, must strive for specific understanding of what is happening in the lives of those under his or her influence and pay close attention to their personal development.⁹⁴

When congregations effectively minister to separated and divorced leaders who, in turn, minister to others, their churches should grow. Persons in the community often seek a local assembly where people are being taught how to live and where needs are being met.

Rambo writes, “The hurts suffered by divorced Christians leave them raw, desperate for love, kindness, and forgiveness to be found in a community of people who love and worship the suffering servant Jesus Christ.”⁹⁵ When Christian leaders separate or divorce, both the couple and those around them may ask questions such as: “How could a loving and all-powerful God allow such suffering? Why did God refuse to heal the marriage? Why did this happen when I prayed and had faith that God would restore my marriage? What else could I have done?” This type of questioning may ultimately disclose repressed anger with God and the loss of faith.⁹⁶

It is especially during these times of wrestling with God and questioning the reality of grace and love that God may provide answers of hope and increased faith. Divorce causes pain and disruption in established patterns in personal lives. The proper attitude and response from the congregation can help divorced Christian leaders turn suffering into a transforming experience rather than a devastating one in which they lose faith and leave the church.⁹⁷ The

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Willard, 247.

⁹⁵ Lewis R. Rambo, *The Divorcing Christian* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), 41.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 42-44.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

Christian alternative to condemning divorced persons and ignoring the divorce issue is to implement church programs that make every effort to reach the growing population of divorced persons within the congregation. A divorced leader who has been restored can potentially share much about the grace of God.

6. Grace Elicits Gratitude

A proper response to grace is gratitude. “Gratitude,” a word derived from the root word for grace, is spontaneous in character for it exudes out of a thankful heart that delights in the gift of grace so freely bestowed upon recipients. Married Christians who consider the divorced no longer qualified for ministry should be grateful for the grace of God that preserves their own marriage. Those who never married can be grateful for not having to endure suffering in a destructive or sterile marriage. Christians who have experienced divorce can be grateful for the legal termination rather than some other ungodly alternative. God has freely given the universal gift of grace for which it seems reasonable to expect heartfelt gratitude.

In 1 Corinthians 15:10, Paul, who zealously persecuted the church of God prior to his conversion, became a forgiven and grateful apostle who taught on divorce even though his own marital status remains unclear to many. He says this about grace:

But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.

Paul, who understood that gratitude exuding from a thankful heart pleases God, also says: “In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you” (1Thes 5:18).

B. Grace Inspires Divorce Theology

Marriages often end in divorce for a variety of reasons. Many church pews, positions and pulpits are occupied by divorced individuals; each with a unique divorce experience. To label divorced people “disqualified from leadership” is tantamount to saying divorce is the unpardonable sin or leaders must be sinless Christians who are not subject to failure in human relationships. Neither of these perceptions on divorce is true.

Many pastors have found that one of the toughest problems in church leadership is dealing with difficult people in the congregation.

Similarly, church leaders, like many divorced Christians, often know the pain and agony that result from unsuccessful attempts to establish a harmonious relationship with an uncooperative spouse. Consequently, divorce becomes a reality that shows no respect for leadership. Since the gifts and calling of God remain after divorce, both the congregations and Christian leaders are challenged to find out what God is saying through these circumstances.

Divorce can also be viewed as a form of affliction. A destructive or dead marriage may become the catalyst for developing a deeper personal relationship with God. Divorce is not recommended for solving marital strife, but the loss of a human companion often leads people to seek answers from the true and living God. Biographies of the church leaders described below suggest that separation or divorce helped them to acknowledge the preeminence of Christ in Christian living. These stories serve to illustrate how Church doctrine was influenced by leaders whose service to God was enhanced, rather than terminated, by troubled marital relationships.

1. Augustine

Augustine confessed to the raging lusts he experienced from his youth and that he even cohabited with a woman for fourteen years, says Warfield.⁹⁸ He claims that Augustine’s unlawful wedlock was esteemed in heathen society of the time, and in certain portions of, if not, the entire Church.⁹⁹ When his Christian mother challenged him to either marry his concubine or put her away, he sent the woman away and surrounded himself with handsome young boys with whom he daily sat naked in bathhouses, discussing God, the good life, and the order of the universe. Separation from his concubine helped Augustine to see his pride and slavery to his lustful appetite that he apparently struggled with until he reached old age.¹⁰⁰

Although Augustine may not be considered a good Christian role model, Mursell asserts that his autobiographical *Confessions* “had an impact on the church far greater than all of his works of theology,” for his life story reveals that along with growth of knowledge of himself

⁹⁸ Benjamin B. Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine* (Philadelphia, PA: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1971), 353.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 353.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 359-360.

came a better knowledge of Christianity (divine awareness).¹⁰¹ Augustine's *Confessions* greatly influenced most future forms of Western Christian spirituality and gave the concept of "conversion" a high priority.¹⁰² Genuine confessions help others see the power of God at work in our lives.

It was Augustine who established the theological basis for the teaching that adultery is the only ground for divorce and that such a divorce does not permit remarriage because the marriage bond can be broken only by death. Thus, he influenced the foundational belief by the Roman Catholic Church that the marriage bond can only be dissolved by death. In spite of his lifestyle or because of it, Augustine's account of himself is that he sees running throughout his life a straight line of development, a constant growth, according to TeSelle.¹⁰³

2. Martin Luther

Martin Luther, a former friar in the Roman Catholic church, abandoned that faith and got married four and a half years later. This powerful reformer challenged the authority of the pope. He publicly protested the doctrine of indulgences which held that a person could be saved by paying remission for their sins either in this world or in the next. He expressed his belief in salvation by the gift of God's free grace through faith in Jesus Christ. When Luther nailed his "95 theses" to the door of the church at Wittenberg Castle, Mursell holds that his action led to the birth of the Protestant Christian movement.¹⁰⁴

Luther is described as a quick-tempered man who ate and drank too much, ordered his wife around, and criticized people too harshly. Luther's wife was a former nun that he allegedly had trouble marrying off, so he married her himself. She was described as a woman who "held her own" in a marriage that survived despite what some may have considered a case of spousal abuse. Todd holds that Luther had a great opportunity to practice virtues of marriage, about which he often

¹⁰¹ Gordon Mursell, *The Story of Christian Spirituality: Two thousand years, from East to West* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 70.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Eugene Te Selle, *Augustine the Theologian* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 194.

¹⁰⁴ Mursell, 170.

preached.¹⁰⁵ It was Martin Luther who influenced the Protestant church to allow divorce and remarriage for adultery and desertion only.

3. John Wesley

John Wesley, founder of the Methodist Church, was brokenhearted when his beloved Sophy married someone else. Later on he married Molly and traveled frequently, serving God as an itinerate preacher. Kendall writes that John and Molly had an unhappy marriage and that sometimes she would go to the place where he was preaching, and sit and cackle during the sermon.¹⁰⁶ Wesley undoubtedly received grace to endure his troubled marriage for he and Molly separated but never divorced.

Speculations abound regarding reasons that the couple never divorced. Perhaps they remained legally married for more than twenty years simply because John spent so much time away from home. It is also possible that Molly cackled to protest her role as a lonely preacher's wife. Maybe their marriage ended in separation rather than divorce due to the stigma of clergy divorce. It is unknown what type of ministry, if any, was offered to this fractured clergy family, but in the article, "Clergy Divorce: A Survey of Issues and Emerging Ecclesiastical Structures," Goodling and Smith state that John did not learn of Molly's death until several days after her funeral.¹⁰⁷ Did God's grace save Wesley from funeral drama?

Neither marital strife nor separation ended Wesley's preaching ministry. He became famous for teaching about God's prevenient grace, a universal benefit of the atoning work of Christ that removes the consequences of sin.¹⁰⁸ His personal experiences undoubtedly intensified his teaching on God's grace because experience is an excellent teacher.

¹⁰⁵ John M. Todd, *Martin Luther: A Biographical Study* (Westminster: The New man Press, 1965), 219-220.

¹⁰⁶ R. T. Kendall, *The Thorn in the Flesh* (Lake Mary, FL: Charism House, 2004), 130.

¹⁰⁷ Richard A. Goodling and Cheryl Smith, "Clergy Divorce: A Survey of Issues and Emerging Ecclesiastical Structures," *Journal of Pastoral Care* 37, no. 4 (1983); 280.

¹⁰⁸ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 634.

4. John Calvin

John Calvin, founder of the Presbyterian Church, was persuaded by his friends to marry in hopes that a wife would take care of his poor health and help to soften his irritability and impatience, writes Parker.¹⁰⁹ He accepted his friends' advice and married a widow with two small children. Calvin's wife, Idelette, became sickly and died, leaving Calvin to fulfill his vow to care for her two children and his other responsibilities.

John and his brother, Antoine, lived in the same house where the brother's wife was caught twice in adultery. Parker claims, the couple's marriage was restored after the first incident but the second conviction resulted in divorce. When his brother's wife was convicted of committing adultery a second time and his stepdaughter shortly thereafter, John was too ashamed to go out of his house for several days.¹¹⁰ John Calvin, who once believed the Old Testament death penalty should ideally be applied for adultery, was challenged to rethink old beliefs when divorce impacted his own household.¹¹¹

Protestant reformer, John Calvin, is well known for his emphasis on God's grace and freedom, and the mystery of God's divine love in calling humans into an eternal and intimate relationship with Himself, a union which resembles a sacred marriage, states Mursell.¹¹² Belief in his teaching on irresistible grace: That when God calls a person, His call cannot ultimately be ignored, was quite visible in his own life as he sought to do God's will amid personal illness and grief.

There are other prominent Christian leaders whose theology has been changed or greatly affected by marital discord, separation, and divorce—problems that may have helped them make significant contributions to theological thought about marriage and divorce. Their spiritual gifts remained operational and the burden of their calling motivated them to continue serving God by ministering to both the body of Christ and to lost sinners. Their personal trials left them feeling alone, lonely, disappointed, embarrassed, and misunderstood. Yet, their faithfulness and endurance enabled them to help others to

¹⁰⁹ T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (Philadelphia: The Westminster, 1975), 71-72.

¹¹⁰ Parker, 101-102.

¹¹¹ Instone-Brewer, 262.

¹¹² Mursell, -174.

understand God’s word about marriage and divorce. They probably learned to fully understand the meaning in this passage:

For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more (Lk 12:48).

On one hand, this passage could imply that those who were given spiritual gifts would have much work to do for the Lord. On the other hand, it could mean that those who are used mightily of God may endure much affliction. God’s grace is necessary in both instances. The stories of two resilient female Christians with restored ministries help to illustrate these points and confirm that there is no partiality with God toward divorced leaders (Rom 2:11).

5. Aimee Semple McPherson

Aimee Semple McPherson, Founder of the Foursquare Denomination, remarried twice after her first husband died, writes Liardon, author of the book *God’s Generals*.¹¹³ She separated from McPherson, her second husband, because he desired his wife to stay at home and fulfill a woman’s domestic role. They apparently grew apart because of God’s call and her commitment to fulfill the Great Commission. Her third husband, described as a man who did nothing to enhance her ministry, divorced her while she was away serving the Lord. In spite of her two divorces, God blessed McPherson’s ministry to become one of the fastest growing denominations.¹¹⁴ Her story confirms that obedience to Jesus’ command to “go” (Mt 28:19) can divide Christian couples that do not share the same ministry goals.

6. Katherine Kuhlman

Katherine Kuhlman, a miracle worker, experienced the stigma of divorce and the collapse of a ministry when news spread that she had married an evangelist who had left, but not divorced, his first wife.¹¹⁵ Quoting the first wife of the evangelist who deceived Kuhlman, Liardon states, “He believed that if you didn’t love your spouse at the time of marriage, then there was no covenant, making a person free to

¹¹³ Roberts Liardon, *God’s Generals: Why They Succeeded and Why Some Failed* (Tulsa, OK: Albury Publishing, 1996), 241, 246, 263.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 263.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 286, 291.

divorce and remarry.”¹¹⁶ Apparently, Kuhlman’s poor choice of a marriage partner was the greatest tragedy of her life. But God restored her ministry after her divorce, and added the gift of healing which brought her international fame.¹¹⁷

The aforementioned examples are used to illustrate how some Christians may disqualify church leaders from ministry because of negative perceptions on divorced clergy. Sometimes sin will result in the termination of a leader’s career while other times the person will remain in leadership. Biblical examples are Saul and David. God disqualified disobedient Saul as king (1 Sam 13:14), but allowed adulterous (but repentant) David to continue to reign over the people of God (2 Sam 12: 9-14). God chose both leaders, but the penalties for their sins were different. The fact that God chooses leaders who may be considered disqualified by human standards confirms the statement, “For the Lord does not see as man sees” (1 Sm 16:7). Humans see the outward appearance of a role model’s image tarnished by divorce, but the Lord looks at the leader’s heart.

Edwards says, “Men who go after the Sauls among us often crucify the Davids among us.”¹¹⁸ Instead of considering persons unfit for leadership because of divorce, this statement suggests that Christians should exercise caution in disqualifying divorced persons who seek to enter leadership as well as those who refuse to remove themselves from office. Rather than nullify the call of God, divorce could serve as a refining tool to qualify leaders for compassionate ministry to the people of God.

C. An illustration of God’s Grace In Clergy Divorce

An example of a congregation’s stigmatization of divorced clergy relates to Charles Stanley, pastor of First Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia and past president of the Southern Baptist Convention. In the article, “Stanley Dilemma Underscores Troubled Clergy Marriages,” Bird notes that Stanley’s divorce challenged the congregation to rethink a 157 year-old tradition that men are disqualified as pastors

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 284.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 289.

¹¹⁸ Gene Edwards, *A Tale of Three Kings: A Study in Brokenness* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1992), 46.

when they become divorced.¹¹⁹ After being abandoned by his wife of forty-four years, the church voted to keep Stanley, who confessed that he did not sense God urging him to step down from leadership. Stanley remained pastor of a thriving congregation throughout a five-year marital separation and subsequent divorce.¹²⁰ It often takes a personal experience such as Stanley's before some Christians understand that God's grace is available for divorce just as it is for the other sinful attitudes and behaviors of Christian leaders described in 1 Timothy 3:2,3 and Titus 1:6,7.

Author Ellens makes the poignant observation that pastors who have an excessive concern for adhering to rigid standards and ethical conduct are the most vulnerable to behaviors destructive to their ministry because they tend to seek affirmation and assurance of God's goodwill by trying to live a perfect life.¹²¹ Pastors who constantly care for others while receiving little care from close family and friends may fall prey to seductive nurturing, and end up sacrificing everything for the feelings of gratifying acceptance when they meet someone who also seeks self-fulfillment. Healing for this kind of suffering does not come by dismissing the leader from his or her role nor by condemnation for moral failure nor by demanding a public confession of sin nor by public chastisement nor by taking legal actions. Instead, he recommends that such a pastor be kept in the job as healer, and offers a suggestion that demonstrates the grace of God:

Such a wounded healer, who has been through the fires of humanness, inadequacy, failure, and restoration, is equipped for better care of others than those more perfect ones who have never found out about their own limitations and the flawed and tragic nature of their own humanness.¹²²

Kelch also finds visible grace in divorce in her qualitative study of divorced participants:

¹¹⁹ Warren Bird, "Stanley Dilemma Underscores Troubled Clergy Marriages," *Christianity Today* 39 (October 1995): 82-83.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ J. Harold Ellens, *Radical Grace* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), 114-115.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 115.

Divorce is often the catalyst to spirituality in some adults. Research has found that, while divorce can be painful, it can also elicit an emotional and spiritual growth process that leads to a more fulfilling and meaningful life.¹²³

Rather than nullify the call of God, the grace received in divorce could serve as a refining tool to qualify leaders for compassionate ministry to the people of God.

Conclusion

What is the importance of grace in compassionately addressing divorce? For those who obtain an illicit divorce, grace provides time to repent, seek healing, ask forgiveness, and experience selfless love from God and others. For those who are forced to accept an unwanted divorce, grace offers hope, healing, help, restoration, freedom and another chance to live again after the death of a marriage. Grace also warns against “Making the word of God of none effect through your tradition, which ye have delivered: and many such like things do ye” (Mk 7:13). For those who struggle with lust of the eyes, lust of the flesh, and the pride of life, Jesus says, “My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9). God’s grace is available for both the perpetrator and the victim for Jesus still says, “Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more” (Jn 8: 10).

The author of this article was the weeping young pastor’s wife who believed she was bound to her estranged husband “until death do us part.” But God set her free through divorce and commissioned her to tell others about the importance of grace in compassionately addressing divorce. Not only did the grace of God allow her to be admitted and graduate from a seminary that considered divorced persons disqualified for Christian leadership, but the same grace placed her under the mentorship of expository preacher/teacher par excellence, Kenneth C. Ulmer, pastor of the Faithful Central Bible Church, Inglewood, California. She marvels at his testimony of once being denied renewal of a teaching contract due to a past divorce, but later was elevated to President of The Kings College and Seminary by

¹²³ Amie Kelch, “Spirituality and Divorce: A Qualitative Study Exploring How Spirituality Assists Those Going Through Divorce” (MSW Thesis, California State University, Long Beach Department of Social Work 1999), 5.

the grace of God. “What shall we then say to these things? If God *be* for us, who *can be* against us?” (Rom 8:31).

Some religious leaders and laypersons alike respond to divorce as though it is the unpardonable sin. However, the author is convinced that God’s words are true: “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy” (Ex 33:19). What then is the proper response to the question: Does God’s grace extend to divorced Christians who serve as church leaders? Well, those who agree that grace meets every human being where we are and takes us to our eternal destiny in Christ may consider giving this response:

And now I say unto you, refrain from these men [and women], and let them alone: for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought: But if it [wounded healers ministering to wounded people] be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God (Acts 5:39).



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