

Preface

Divorce and wrongful remarriage are forgivable sins. We want to start here, at the heart of our faith in Christ. When Jesus died, He did not fail to atone for the misdeeds of His people in this critical area. Even the person who has acted as wrongly as possible in this matter may be fully forgiven, and may have a fulfilled life of service to God after repentance. Also, God mercifully blesses many second marriages that began sinfully. This is a mystery for which we can all be extremely grateful.

Most conservative Christian leaders take the view that divorce and remarriage are permissible when one spouse has committed adultery. Others add desertion by a disobedient spouse as an exception to Jesus' prohibition of remarriage after divorce. Still others go beyond that in terms of permissiveness, but this is not usually the case within more conservative evangelical churches. In this book we are moving the marker over to what we have come to believe is God's original intent and ongoing expectation for marriage. We are contending for a no-divorce, no-remarriage position, with no exceptions for adultery or desertion. We call our position "the permanence view."

Our view arose out of two years of study as a team of elders and interns of a new church. We knew that we did not have the luxury of having *no* opinion on this important aspect of church life, and we wished to have our view clearly in mind prior to any need for it. As elders we wanted to be prepared for whatever situation might occur, and to be able to instruct others according to what we believe to be the will of God.

Each of us came into this period of study with a view that allowed for divorce on the basis of adultery. Our former views, when consistently taught and practiced, were certainly conservative when compared with those of society as a whole, as well as those of more liberal churches. (Religious groups that advocate same-sex unions are hardly concerned about the issues we are dealing with here.) Our current view calls for a significant change in action on the part of the local church. According to our former position, divorce and remarriage are tolerated in cases of the destructive behavior of unrepentant adulterous spouses. According to our current view,

the same cases call for counsel against divorce and remarriage, and even church discipline if a church member disregards this counsel.

At first we dismissed what has now become our view. For months, in fact, we worked against it. Yet, as time went on, we came to embrace this position as the only way to harmonize the Scriptures. Further study with the men of our church brought us even more assurance as they probed us and helped us think through every detail. These men are well-studied, serious-minded believers. Next, we met twice with a group of pastors in our area. These were amiable and helpful meetings through which we gained valuable insight. Finally, we asked a number of pastors, professors, and Christian leaders from around the country to review our manuscript. They did not all concur with our conclusions, but their ruminations, questions, and challenges helped us to both confirm and improve our position so that we could present it in its most lucid form. We thank them for their kindness in the search for truth in this vital area of pastoral theology.

From the outset, we ask your patience with us. As soon as our permanence view is perceived as permitting *no* divorce, and *no* remarriage after divorce (unless former spouses have died), many will begin thinking, “What about this situation? What about that person? Where does this view leave *me*?” and so on. We have addressed questions related to these practical matters in the second part of the book. The first part is dedicated to the straightforward laying out of the biblical teaching. We ask, therefore, that you read the first part carefully before reading our counsel for practical application. What we *do* as Christians must be grounded on what we *believe* Christ commands or forbids. Until we are certain that we know His will for divorce and remarriage as the result of studying the applicable texts of Scripture, we cannot be certain that we are acting in a manner that pleases Him.

Some of the pastoral implications of our view may surprise you. For instance, we do not believe that divorce or wrongful remarriage automatically prohibits a man who has repented of these sins from becoming an elder or deacon in a church. We also do not promote the policy that every person in a church where the permanence position is adopted must necessarily concur with this position (though they must acknowledge that it will be taught and practiced). Additionally, we do not believe that a person in a

wrongful second marriage is committing adultery through each intimate act with his or her spouse. Lastly, we believe and teach that marriages that began sinfully are true marriages, that they can be healthy and happy, and that they should be nourished and cherished in a manner that honors Christ.

One of the most sobering realities coming out of our study is that even those conservative churches and leaders who hold less restrictive views are not immune to the difficulties related to divorce and remarriage. If the leaders of a local church draw a line *anywhere* on the continuum of permissiveness, action must be taken when that line is crossed by one of their members. Consider, for example, a local church where the agreed-upon position is that divorce and remarriage are permitted by God, but only in cases of adultery. What will be done in terms of church discipline when a member initiates a divorce for some other reason? What if a marriage involving a divorced member is being planned, but the member's former divorce would not have been permitted according to the church's current position? The leaders of such a church must act decisively and correctively in situations like these if they are to be consistent with their own convictions. Questions concerning church polity must also be faced. For example, will church membership be granted to those who formerly divorced and/or remarried for reasons other than adultery, yet who remain unrepentant because they believe their actions were allowed by God? Our no-divorce, no-remarriage position may lead to more struggles, but less restrictive churches and leaders will experience the same difficulties in the remaining cases. Whatever our view, we all have much to think about.

We also recognize the high stakes involved in stating an opinion such as ours. If our view is wrong, and if some are persuaded to act according to our conclusions, we will have prevented some marriages and divorces from taking place that should have been permitted. We would be grieved to discover that we were responsible for such an error and its consequences. But if more permissive views are in error, believers who promote and defend them are allowing a violation of Christ's command, "What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate" (Matt. 19:6; Mark 10:9), and are condoning an act of adultery by permitting remarriage after divorce.

You must come to your own conclusions. We are not presuming to dictate what you must believe or do. You will stand before God on this issue just as we will. We simply believe we are being obedient to Christ to lay out the results of our study for others to consider. We also recognize the complexity of the issue and believe that godly people can disagree. Therefore, differences between Bible believing churches on this issue must not be permitted to affect our fellowship with each other, since we all concur that the Word of God is our infallible final authority. Additionally, we ask this indulgence: If you find error in one part of our work because of our incompetence or blindness, please do not let this prevent you from considering the whole argument. We might be wrong on one part, but right on the main premise.

If we, by the grace of God, have arrived at a position that is closer to the mind of God, then we will be gratified to know that God has used us to help others whom we love dearly. We trust that we will in no way hinder what is permitted or give license for what is prohibited. We want God to be glorified and marriages to be saved.

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This book was originally a lengthy position paper on the subject of divorce and remarriage. Since it still bears some of the characteristics of a position paper, it may be adopted in general as support for a church's shorter policy statement. We have provided a brief statement churches may use or modify for adopting the permanence view (see appendix 3).

We hope to engage in a continuing dialogue on this subject. If you have further questions about what is written, please contact us through the website of *Christian Communicators Worldwide* at www.CCWtoday.org. Some of these questions may be added anonymously to an online dialogue page along with our responses.