

REPORT  
OF THE  
**STUDY PANEL**

The Study Panel met twice during the year and the members kept in touch by email. The following two sections of the report represent what is hoped will be the penultimate stage in fulfilling the remit of the Panel. The first section covers the Panel's findings with regard to Biblical teaching on divorce and remarriage in light of recent Biblical research and the second section consists of recommendations with regard to material for preparation for marriage. The Panel is asking that these be sent to Presbyteries for their comments and suggestions which should be forwarded to the Panel by 31st January 2012. The Panel intends to produce a definitive report for next year's Assembly. It is intended that this will include practical advice to ministers on dealing with various situations they may encounter in their pastoral ministry.

**(A) DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE**

1.1 **Introduction** The Study Panel was appointed by the 2008 General Assembly with the remit "...to examine, in the first instance, the implications of the Public Questions Committee's report on Marriage and Divorce, to formulate guidelines for ministers in view of Biblical teaching and the present legal situation and to report to a future Assembly..."

1.2 It is hoped to fulfil the second part of the remit in the very near future. This Report is concerned with the remit "to examine, in the first instance, the implications of the Public Questions Committee's report on Marriage and Divorce". This is referring to the Report to the 2008 Assembly which raised questions about some areas of the traditional understanding about marriage and divorce in light of recent Biblical research.

1.3 The 2008 Report outlined the traditional view (as understood from the Westminster Confession of Faith) thus: "...according to the traditional Scottish Presbyterian view, divorce is allowed, but only on two grounds – adultery and wilful desertion – and the divorced party is allowed to remarry."

1.4 The Report then went on to summarise the new research which has emerged in recent years, as follows:

1.4.1 *However, a different perspective has emerged in recent years. One of the leading exponents of this view is David Instone-Brewer. He has written two books, one more academic (Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible) and one more popular (Divorce and Remarriage in the Church). Methodologically, his approach differs from the traditional ones, in that he looks at the relevant Biblical texts against the contemporary historical background. Much more has been discovered in recent years about Judaism, the teaching of the Rabbis and Pharisaism than was known in even the first half of the twentieth century. Such new discoveries, and the new emphases that emerge from them, have to be treated with some caution, as is shown by "the new perspective on Paul", for instance.*

1.4.2 *However, it would be utterly wrong for a Bible-believing church such as our own to ignore anything that can throw light on the meaning of the Biblical text. We lay great emphasis on our ministers being able to understand Greek and Hebrew, the languages in which the Bible was originally written. But we also need to appreciate that those languages were used in a particular historical and cultural milieu. For instance, until Greek papyri were discovered in Egypt, classical scholars thought that the New Testament was written in very bad Greek. In fact it is written in the Koine (common) Greek of the first century.*

1.4.3 *Instone-Brewer argues that the Old Testament, as understood by the Jewish Rabbis and Jesus' contemporaries, teaches that there were a limited number of grounds for divorce:*

- *Adultery (in Deuteronomy 24:1, affirmed by Jesus in Matthew 19)*
- *Emotional and physical neglect (in Exodus 21:10-11, affirmed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 7)*
- *Abandonment and abuse (included in neglect, as affirmed in 1 Corinthians 7)*

*Those who divorced on these grounds were entitled to remarry. He argues that the expressions “free” or “not bound” were clearly understood in this way.*

1.4.4 *Interestingly, he also argues that these grounds were based on marriage vows which made a commitment to clothe, feed and love (found in marriage certificates discovered near the Dead Sea). These have formed the basis of marriage vows ever since, even to the present day – reflected in such phrases as “love, honour and cherish” or “love, comfort, honour and keep”. The same idea occurs in Ephesians 5:29, where Paul is dealing with marriage and he says that husbands are to love their wives as their own bodies (v.28). He continues: “After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the Church”. There is the same emphasis: love, feed and care for.*

1.4.5 *The implication is that where these commitments are broken, divorce is permitted. Notice, Instone-Brewer says “permitted”, not mandatory. This is important, as in first century Roman society, divorce was considered mandatory...*

1.4.6 *If Instone-Brewer is correct, we need to rethink our position on divorce and remarriage. However, even if he is right, this does not mean that we can simply accept the present civil legal position as being correct. While Instone-Brewer maintains the idea of fault or guilt in grounds for divorce, the present legal position does not. It is obvious that this area requires more study, and it would appear that the time is ripe for the General Assembly to set up a special committee, along the lines of the previous Study Panel to look at the subject in the light of these recent studies.*

1.5 Subsequent to that Report, the Study Panel’s attention was brought to Calvin’s concept of accommodation and its relation to the question of divorce. Accommodation is dealt with first in this Report.

2. **Accommodation** While the concept of accommodation is chiefly associated with John Calvin in his writings in his Institutes and in his Commentaries on Genesis and the Gospels, nevertheless accommodation was not original to Calvin. We can trace the origins of the concept to the writings of some of the Early Church Fathers. We shall, briefly consider four examples of the application of accommodation in early Christian writings.

### 2.1 **Accommodation in the Early Church Fathers**

2.1.1 *Justin Martyr (c.100 –165)* used the concept of accommodation to explain that God through Moses had given to the Jews laws on circumcision, Sabbaths, sacrifices, and many other laws because of the hardness of their hearts. However, his use of accommodation sought to bring in a hermeneutic that had no support in Scripture itself. We can see this in his interpretation of the reasons for the sacrificial system. He wrote that God, “accommodating Himself to that nation, enjoined them also to offer sacrifices, as if to His name, in order that you might not serve idols.” According to Justin Martyr God did not want the Jews to offer sacrifices, but because of their tendency to idolatry, He accommodated Himself to them by commanding them to bring sacrifices, but only to Him and not to the idol gods.

2.1.2 *Origen (c.185-c.254)* finds divine accommodation in Scripture and in the incarnation of Christ. Because of human weakness, Scripture comes to us in a “poor and humble style.” Several times throughout his writings Origen describes divine accommodation by picturing God as speaking “baby-talk” to us like a father to his little child or like a schoolmaster uses “little language” to his pupils (Calvin, himself, would suggest much the same in the Institutes). For example, in his comments on Jeremiah 18:6-10, where it seems that God changes his mind and “repents” of a certain contemplated action, Origen assures us that “when divine providence is involved in human affairs, God assumes human intelligence, manners and language.” Furthermore, in regard to the Incarnation, Origen applies accommodation. For Origen, “The incarnate Lord, like the written revelation in inspired scripture, is a veil that must be penetrated. It is an accommodation to our present capacities in this life.”

2.1.3 *Chrysostom (c.347-407)* It seems that of all the church fathers Chrysostom used accommodation extensively in his interpretation of Scripture. For example, in his work, ‘On the Incomprehensible Nature of God’ Chrysostom uses accommodation to explain the passage in Ezekiel 1 where both Ezekiel and the cherubim “approached the divine essence in itself and in its pure state.” Chrysostom argues that such language as used of the cherubim “hiding their faces with four wings” and

of the appearance of heaven presented by Ezekiel in which “the appearance of the likeness of the glory of God” was revealed speaks of God’s “accommodation of condescension.”

2.1.4 Moreover, as with Origen, he stressed the fact that God in the plan of redemption accommodated Himself to human weakness. “That he who is God was willing to become man, that he mightly suffered to accommodate himself is too great to comprehend.” However, sometimes his application of the concept of accommodation seemed to go beyond the clear meaning of Scripture. Chrysostom argues, for instance, that God had intended for Adam and Eve a state of virginity, and that marriage is a divine concession or accommodation to their changed condition after they had sinned.

2.1.5 *Augustine (354-430)* taught that the language of scripture was accommodated to the understanding of ordinary readers because it was not intended to teach the theories of natural science. According to Augustine, the original writers of scripture accommodated their physical statements to the capacities of ordinary people by describing ‘sensible’ phenomena as they would appear to any observer. Therefore, according to Augustine, physical references should be interpreted in terms of those things that are immediately obvious to the senses.

2.1.6 For example, Genesis 1:16 refers to the creation of the "two great lights – the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars." Augustine asks, “Does this teach that the Moon is larger than the stars, since the stars are not among the "great lights"?” Augustine suspected that the stars were small enough to be set in daily rotation by the rays of the Sun, but nevertheless he insisted that this verse teaches nothing about the Moon’s actual size. Rather, adopting accommodation Augustine affirmed that it only referred to the *relative* appearance of the Moon and stars to the eye.

2.1.7 As we can see, even from this brief summary of accommodation found in the writing of the Early Church Fathers, the concept of accommodation was used as a tool to interpret Scripture where divine writ appeared to be compromised and where accommodation helped the reader understand the purposes of God behind such apparent compromise. Thus, for the writers above, readily understood language by the common man is used in the Bible as a means of making sense of the incomprehensible; thus such language becomes the key to the understanding of Scripture, particularly in such areas as creation, the incarnation and the description of God.

2.2 ***Accommodation in John Calvin*** We now turn to the possible relevance of the doctrine of accommodation in Calvin to the ethical, social and legislative aspects of marriage and divorce.

2.2.1 The doctrine of Divine Accommodation, outlined by church fathers such as Augustine, Origen and Irenaeus and emphasised more famously by John Calvin, expresses the position that in all God’s dealings with his people, God adapts himself to our feeble capacities. This doctrine is considered in relation to God’s accommodating himself to finite human capacities through divine self-revelation and in God’s accommodation to the sinfulness of his own people.

2.2.2 In two separate but connected comments on the Mosaic permission of divorce – Deuteronomy 24:1-4 and Matthew 19:3-9 – Calvin reflects on the accommodation of God in permitting divorce. He lays out the divine parameters that indicate the development from divine prohibition to divine permission. As Calvin declares in his comments on Deuteronomy 24, the divine prohibition on divorce was “a perpetual and inviolable rule” and “God has declared, once for all, that the bond of union between husband and wife is closer than that of parent and child; wherefore, if a son cannot shake off the paternal yoke, no cause can permit the dissolution of the connection which a man has with his wife.” But as Calvin states, the Israelites’ “perverseness” was such that they “could not be restrained from dissolving a most sacred and inviolable tie.”

2.2.3 Thus Calvin indicates what might be considered pragmatic grounds behind the divine permission for divorce: there is the consideration for the well-being of the woman wronged by the divorcing husband. Calvin continues: “God chose to make a provision for women who were cruelly oppressed, and for whom it was better that they should at once be set free, than that they should groan beneath a cruel tyranny during their whole lives.”

2.2.4 Complementary to his discussion of Deuteronomy 24:1-4, Calvin, in his comments on Matthew 19:3-9, likewise attributes the accommodation of God in the matter of divorce to the

“obstinacy” of the people. Calvin discusses Jesus’ response to the Pharisees’ question (Matthew 19:3) *“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”* Calvin points out the distinction between God’s lawful enactments and Moses’ permissive legislation. As Calvin states regarding Jesus’ reply regarding Moses’ granting the certificate of divorce, “Moses permitted it on account of their obstinacy, and not because he approved of it as lawful.” This is highlighted in Jesus’ words to the Pharisees that “it was not this way from the beginning.” Thus the inviolability of the creation ordinance of marriage is established; and as Calvin continues, “it follows that whatever swerves from it does not arise from its pure nature, but from the depravity of men.” But the question remains: why did Moses enact something that in itself was “bad and sinful”? – to which Calvin replies “in an unusual sense of the word, he is said to have permitted what he did not severely forbid; for he did not lay down a law about divorces, so as to give them the seal of his approbation, but as the wickedness of men could not be restrained in any other way, he applied what was the most admissible remedy, that the husband should, at least, attest the chastity of his wife.”

2.2.5 Thus, extrapolating from Calvin’s comments on God’s accommodation with respect to divorce, it can be seen that God’s permitting of divorce does not equate with God’s approval of divorce. Marriage, as a creation ordinance is the divine ideal and the God-given structure for family life. Any deviation from that ideal is contrary to God’s intention for marriage as a life-long commitment between a man and a woman. Moses’ *permitting* of divorce was just that: a sufferance, an allowance because of the “hardness of heart” of sinful man. Permission does not imply approval; but permission is granted as that pragmatic response to the callous nature of the human heart.

2.2.6 Now, in terms of relating the possible relevance of the doctrine of accommodation to the ethical, social and legislative aspects of marriage and divorce we must abide by the principle set forth in that doctrine in relation to divorce, *viz.* God accommodating to human sinfulness. Thus, for example, the church cannot impose a legislative imperative on marriage that denies divorce. If God accommodates to the sinfulness of the human heart, then the church, likewise, must seek to exercise a pragmatic, realistic allowance for divorce to occur that enables release from an unbearable marriage. Lord Hailsham’s Memoirs emphasises this position:

*“I continue to think of marriage as.... a life-long obligation of mutual fidelity. But the fact is that marriages do break down, sometimes from the fault of one only of the parties, sometimes of both, occasionally as the result of circumstances outwith the control of either. In such cases, I believe that to impose an obligation of life-long celibacy on either or both of the parties terminable only on what has become an irrelevant duration of the other’s life is in the interest neither of public nor private morality, nor indeed of religious observance.”<sup>1</sup>*

2.2.7 This position is echoed by David Instone-Brewer who comments that “too many generations of husbands and wives have been forced to remain with their abusing or neglectful partners and have not been allowed to divorce even after suffering repeated unfaithfulness.”<sup>2</sup> Both Instone-Brewer and Lord Hailsham would appear to reflect the consequences of divine accommodation in the practical outworking of an irrevocable breakdown in marriage, seeking to address the matter of how to make the unavoidable consequences of a broken marriage more tolerable to parties and children and at the same time protect public interest in maintaining the permanence of the marriage bond.

2.2.8 And it is that latter aspect that must be emphasised within the parameters of accommodation. The permitting of divorce in fact must be seen within the greater good of maintaining the primacy of the marriage union. Divorce will be permitted under the aegis of accommodating to the sinfulness of the human heart but divorce, at the same time, should be avoided whenever possible. The highest ideal is the creation ordinance of marriage; permissive legislation allowing divorce must never be confused with accepting divorce as of equal validity to marriage.

2.2.9 ***Adultery and Divorce in Calvin’s Geneva, 1541-1564*** The extent to which Calvin adopted accommodation in the work of the Consistory of Geneva when dealing with matters of divorce can be gauged by examining contemporary records extant for the period 1541-1564 when Calvin was based in Geneva. While there is no direct evidence of any overt mention of accommodation *per se* in Calvin’s involvement in the various cases he was concerned with, nevertheless there is sufficient evidence that he did practice the principles behind accommodation, namely the accommodating to human sinfulness that permitted divorce whilst not approving of it.

2.2.10 The Consistory was an organisation of elders and pastors whose purpose was to control the behaviour of the citizens of Geneva. Its chairman was Calvin himself unless he was bringing a case to the Consistory, as we shall see below. While the Consistory had no executive power it acted as an investigating body, examining cases brought to it and preparing a final report for the secular government's 'Small Council' to pass judgement on.

2.2.11 In Calvin's time in Geneva only 26 divorces were granted for adultery. Nevertheless, there is sufficient evidence contained in the (often illegible) minutes of the Consistory records to gauge Calvin's position regarding adultery and divorce. One such case involved his brother Antoine. Antoine was married to Anne Le Fert. Twice, in fact, Antoine filed for divorce on the grounds of his wife's alleged adultery, first in 1548 and then in 1557. The 1548 case was dismissed, there being insufficient grounds for concluding adultery, but Antoine and Anne were ordered to go through a reconciliation ceremony. The second case did end in divorce. What is interesting is that John Calvin was involved in both cases as a joint pursuer of divorce for Antoine. Without going into the details of the allegations, it is clear that Calvin was fully supportive of his brother receiving a divorce because of his wife's alleged (and in the second case, proven) adultery. Furthermore, on the basis of his divorce, Antoine was permitted to remarry.

2.2.12 Calvin's support of his brother Antoine and his subsequent granting of divorce on other occasions appears to have stemmed from a pragmatic response to the moral calamity of adultery: permitting divorce without in any way questioning the inviolability of marriage. As Roger Kingdon notes of Calvin and the members of the Consistory, "they felt that marriage was a holy state in which almost all people should live. They felt that this holy state was destroyed by the sexual betrayal involved in adultery or the wilful disruption of marital life caused by desertion. They were accordingly prepared to recommend that a marriage compromised by either be dissolved."<sup>3</sup> This observation, coupled with Calvin's own actions in and towards the Consistory, seems to concur with Calvin's written attestation of God accommodating himself to the sinfulness of the human heart in permitting though not approving of divorce as a pragmatic response to the callousness of the human heart.

2.2.13 Certainly the general observation regarding the Protestant Reformers can be applied to Calvin in particular, namely that it was only with the Protestant Reformation in Europe that divorce became legally possible. This is the more pertinent in that it was the Consistory in Geneva that was at the forefront in pressing for the secular authorities (which were often more reluctant to grant divorces than the clergy) to enact legislation permitting divorce. That Calvin was the leading figure in the Geneva Consistory in its early years would suggest that Calvin did practise the principles outlined in his 'doctrine' of accommodation.

2.3.1 **To what extent did 'accommodation' influence later Reformed thinking?** When we examine later Reformed thinking on accommodation we can detect a drift away from what we might call the orthodoxy of Calvin to the liberal theology of the Enlightenment. This can be observed during key periods of teaching at the Academy at Geneva (founded by Calvin in 1559) chiefly in the works of father and son professors of theology - Francis Turretin (1623 -1687) and, more particularly, Jean Alphonse Turretin (1671-1737).

2.3.2 While in the work of Francis Turretin, there was no substantive change from that of Calvin in terms of his understanding of accommodation, when we analyse the position of his son Jean Alphonse Turretin on accommodation and Scripture we discover a significant development towards enlightened rationalism with Scripture placed below reason in determining truth.

2.3.3 Jean Alphonse accepted, with Calvin, the view that God accommodated his revelation to the mental capacity of mankind. However, Jean Alphonse argued that such revelation could only be accepted as historic truth if it accorded with what any reasonable individual could accept. Thus historic accuracy was only considered if verified by eyewitness accounts and fulfilled prophecy. For example the accounts of creation, the Tower of Babel and the Flood narrative were considered a form of revelation inferior the rest of the Old Testament because they could not be verified by eyewitness accounts. Reason rather than the inspiration of the Holy Spirit was considered the determining factor in interpreting early Genesis. According to Jean Alphonse, God accommodated to the limited state of the Hebrew people in transmitting these accounts in order to teach moral lessons rather than historic truth.

2.3.4 Moreover, Jean Alphonse argued that God holds individuals responsible for knowledge of the truth only in accordance with the mental capacity of the individual. If God accords less light to a people then fewer essentials are necessary for salvation. Notwithstanding, Jean Alphonse did attempt to protect the fundamental beliefs concerning salvation through Jesus Christ alone but adopted a rationalistic defence of the Christian faith against the proponents of deism and atheism. Scripture was still deemed valid for the spiritual good of mankind but where rational critique superseded historic veracity by reason alone, Jean Alphonse would argue that such revelation was accommodated to the limited level of the people and only provided a moral dimension.

2.4.1 **Critique** To what extent can we extend accommodation to human laws and customs which blatantly contradict Scripture? From the above, admittedly brief, historical survey above we might suggest that the use of accommodation to human laws and customs that blatantly contradict Scripture is fraught with difficulty. The propensity to use accommodation as a lever to explain away aspects of biblical truth which reason alone does not verify, would suggest that accommodation could likewise be used to justify laws which Scripture does not sanction. For example, accommodation might be used to justify euthanasia on the basis that it is reasonable to end a life from a subjective perspective based on rational criteria devoid of any Scriptural teaching on the sanctity of life.

2.4.2 Indeed, the use of accommodation as a tool to lessen the absolute nature of truth for a pragmatic, utilitarian approach to Scripture could be used to adopt a pragmatic, utilitarian approach to justifying much that is in fact contrary to biblical truth. The whole moral law could likewise be categorised as a relic of a primitive, pre-scientific society with the developments of socio-economic and cultural advancement re-shaping a moral code according to the spirit of the age. To extend accommodation, then, to human laws and customs which blatantly contradict God's moral law runs the risk of relativising truth and making subjective reasoning of more value than Scriptural truth.

2.4.3 In spite of this, we do believe that the concept of accommodation is a helpful one when applied to divorce in two regards. First, it illustrates the struggles which theologians have had with what Instone-Brewer believes is the Church's misunderstanding of Scripture on this issue from the earliest times. Second, it shows that the concession of divorce is Biblical.

3. **David Instone-Brewer** Instone-Brewer's approach to the subject is very much that of understanding the whole matter in its historical context, asking how the original hearers/readers would have understood what was said. He draws on his study of Rabbinic literature for this.<sup>4</sup> He writes:

3.1 *"Suddenly realizing how a 1st century Jew would have understood these texts wasn't due to a blinding flash of inspiration, but was the result of three years of hard work for my PhD which suddenly came together: three years of reading huge sections of Rabbinic literature, digging into the Mishnah, Tosephta Talmud, Philo and the Dead Sea scrolls; analysing the texts – especially to see how they interpreted the Old Testament – and comparing my findings with medieval and modern scholars. At the end of all this I could think and interpret like the ancient Rabbis themselves and I was able to unpack the highly abbreviated accounts of their debates.*

3.2 *When I read the words of Jesus and Paul, I found details which would have been recognized by a contemporary Rabbi, but which are meaningless to most modern readers. Both Jesus and Paul used the language and terminology used by the Rabbis – especially when speaking about divorce, which was a hot topic of debate at the time. I suppose it's not surprising that they did so because Jesus was, after all, answering questions which were being posed by Pharisaic Rabbis, and Paul said that he had been trained under Gamaliel, who was a foremost Rabbi of the time."*<sup>5</sup>

3.3 **Difficulty** His main argument is that the Christian Church, in all its branches, has been guilty of seriously misunderstanding the core New Testament texts dealing with marriage and divorce. The reason for this misunderstanding lies in an inadequate knowledge of the social and religious milieu in which these texts were first uttered and then recorded. Indeed, there is still a wealth of untranslated material which may shed further light on these issues. In any case, on the basis of the wealth of material already unearthed and translated towards the end of last century, he is calling for a major review of the church's teaching and practice in the area of divorce and remarriage.

3.3.1 This kind of argument seems on the face of it implausible for at least two reasons: Firstly, the notion that the whole Christian communion has been in error on some points – and that for the first two thousand years of her existence – is hard to take. The possibility that *all of the church* has been mistaken on these points *all of the time*, to the misery of countless people, raises very difficult questions. However, it should be said that, as Reformed Christians, we believe that the bulk of the Church was wrong on the question of justification for the best part of a thousand years.

3.3.2 Secondly, the notion that a significant Bible teaching is likely to be misinterpreted without external evidence sits uncomfortably alongside the perspicuity of scripture. Of course, it is one thing to obtain additional light by way of corroboration or confirmation from external sources. But it is quite another to say that, with the Bible in your hands, you are likely to err in the absence of such sources – which is what Instone-Brewer appears to be saying and which would, naturally, explain why the whole church has got it so badly wrong.

3.3.3 However, the issue is not that simple and that, again, for two reasons: Firstly, there is a long-standing impression abroad in the church, probably throughout all its branches, that there is something elusive about the marriage/divorce doctrine as it appears on the face of the New Testament – a sense of something being missing somewhere. The reason for this lies in the sheer difficulty experienced in reconciling certain passages of Scripture. Undoubtedly, most Old Testament passages are plain and, apart from the phenomenon of polygamy, they conform to our classic understanding of marriage – particularly in respect of the permanence of the marriage union and the abhorrence of divorce – but there are two passages which provide a difficulty.

3.3.4 In Deuteronomy 24:1ff, which deals with the famous 'bill of divorcement', one of the areas of difficulty has to do with the meaning of 'uncleanness'. It seems strange to argue, as many traditionally have done, that this 'uncleanness' – which provides a valid ground for divorce – is a reference to adultery, when it is well known that the punishment for adultery was not divorce but death. Therefore, on the face of it, there seems to be a possibility here that *something short of adultery is given as a valid ground of divorce*.

3.3.5 In Exodus 20:10f, permission is given to a woman to leave a marriage on the ground that food, clothing and conjugal rights are being denied to her. Although the wife spoken of here appears to be a slave, she is still a married slave – or, 'concubine' – and it remains the case, therefore, that in this situation also, *something short of adultery is given as a valid ground of divorce*.

3.3.6 These two passages, both of great importance for Instone-Brewer, indicate that the issue is not as straightforward as it seems in terms of the interpretation of the Biblical data itself.

3.3.7 Secondly, and in relation to all that, it would go a long way to mitigating the difficulty in accepting the new position, if the missing interpretive key were to be found *within the pages of scripture itself*, as opposed to within extra-biblical sources. Instone-Brewer's claim is that extra-biblical source material forces us to look at the evidence in a new light and re-interpret it accordingly. What is much more interesting is whether extra-biblical material provides an impetus towards a rethink of the evidence in the old light of the scripture itself, and whether a simple re-examination of the Biblical material yields unexpected results. In this connection, it is important to remember that the scripture is to be taken as a *whole* and *systematised*. In attaining to a clear view of doctrine, it is never enough to look at the explicitness of, say, Mark, without noting the subtle qualification of Luke.

3.4.1 **The argument** Instone-Brewer's contention is that the question Jesus was asked about divorce in Matthew 19:3 was not "Is it right for a man to divorce his wife?" but "Is it right for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?" In this, the Pharisees were "testing him." The Jews knew that Moses commanded divorce along with a certificate of divorce according to Deuteronomy 24:1

(Matthew 19:7). Jesus, in His reply in Matthew 19:8, corrected them by saying that Moses permitted divorce because of the hardness of men's hearts. However, that had not been God's intention from the beginning. Since that was the situation, it would have been nonsensical to ask Jesus if a man could divorce his wife full stop. That wasn't in contention. It was the grounds on which he could do it.

3.4.2 The ground in Deuteronomy 24 is "some indecency". This Instone-Brewer says could be translated "a thing of nakedness" or "a cause of sexual immorality".<sup>6</sup> It was the ground on which a man could divorce his wife, according to Deuteronomy 24, that was in contention. One rabbinical school followed Shammai, who held that "a cause of sexual immorality" meant "sexual immorality" and nothing else. The other school followed Hillel who asked the question: 'Why did Moses use the phrase "cause of sexual immorality" when he could simply have said "sexual immorality"?' Hillel reasoned that the seemingly superfluous word "cause" must refer to another, different, ground for divorce and since this other ground is simply called a "cause", he concluded that it meant "Any Cause".<sup>7</sup>

3.4.3 Instone-Brewer also says that there were three other grounds for divorce about which there was no dispute. These are found in Exodus 21:7-11. They are the provision of food, clothing and conjugal rights. The latter would include love and tenderness and not simply sex. He says, "...*adultery is not the only sin that can end a marriage. Many marriages are ended by neglect or abuse... why is adultery a more valid reason for divorce than cruelty? Why wouldn't God allow divorce in these situations (cruelty, abuse, neglect)? And why wouldn't the victim be allowed, at the very least, the choice of being able to leave such a marriage? In fact the Bible does have a law which addresses this situation. Exodus 21:10-11 is a text which is usually forgotten, but it provides precisely what is needed because it allows the victim of abuse or neglect to be freed from the marriage*".<sup>8</sup>

3.4.6 The slave wife was entitled, if her husband took another wife and withheld from her food, clothing and conjugal rights, to leave the marriage with no penalty. The Rabbis derived a principle from this which they said applied to all marriages. "*They reasoned that if a slave wife had the right to divorce a husband who neglected to supply food, clothing and conjugal love, then a free wife would certainly also have this right. And they argued that if one of two wives had this right, then so did an only wife. Furthermore, if a wife had these rights, then a husband was also entitled to the same right to divorce a wife who neglected him. The Biblical principle which is established, therefore, is the right of someone to divorce their partner if they neglect their vow to give you food, clothing or conjugal love.*"<sup>9</sup> (This would be an example of deducing matters from Scripture by good and necessary consequence.)

3.4.7 Instone-Brewer goes on to say that the four grounds for divorce corresponded to the vows couples took in marrying. "*They promised to feed, clothe, exchange conjugal love and be faithful to each other. The man agreed to provide food and cloth, and the woman agreed to cook and sew, and they both agreed to share conjugal love and be faithful.*"<sup>10</sup>

3.4.8 He adds, "*Abusive situations were covered by these laws because physical and emotional abuse are extreme forms of neglecting material support or physical affection*".<sup>11</sup>

3.4.9 The discussion about "any cause" as opposed to "for sexual immorality only" dated from farther back, but was still live in Jesus' day even although most divorces were on the grounds of "any cause", which is why His opponents asked the question. They were trying to show him in a bad light as too narrow. However, as time passed, the Shammaite view faded and, after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple and the dispersal of the Jews, only the Hillelite view survived. It was this Judaism that the early church knew.

3.4.10 Jesus was never asked, so far as we know, about the other three grounds of divorce. The reason would be that these were never in contention. Given by God through Moses, they continued. It was the "any cause" divorce around which debate centred. Thus, there were these four grounds for divorce accepted by all Jews as Scriptural.<sup>12</sup>

3.4.11 There is a difference between gospel writers as to the question Jesus was asked. Mark (10:1-12) gives the impression that the question was about divorce, full stop – the Pharisees "began to question him whether it was *lawful for a man to divorce a wife*". (The wording of Deuteronomy 24 makes the husband the one who divorces, whereas a wife could do so on the other three grounds).

Jesus' response to his disciples about this was that any man who divorced his wife and married another woman was committing adultery against his wife, and the same went for a wife. Therefore, it looked as if when people did divorce, they could not remarry.

3.4.12 Mark wrote his gospel earlier than the others. At that time people would still be familiar with the debate over "for any cause" and they would automatically add "for any cause" to the question, "Can a man divorce his wife?" Jesus' reply would then mean that "any cause" would not be a lawful ground for divorce.

3.4.13 However, when Matthew wrote, the "any cause" divorce was the order of the day so he had to add "for any cause" to show what exactly Jesus was being asked. Jesus' reply was that, in the context of the dispute, sexual immorality/adultery was the only lawful ground.

3.4.14 In answering his questioners, Jesus made it very clear that the focus of all should be on maintaining the marriage bond. When two become one in marriage this is following God's plan for the human race and no one *should* separate what he has joined. However, it is not *impossible* to separate what God has joined. Whichever party to the marriage breaks the marriage vows is guilty of separating/breaking up the marriage. Divorce by the "innocent" party is simply legally recognizing what has already been done.

3.4.15 By speaking of the hardness of men's hearts as the reason for God permitting divorce, Jesus was meaning persistent, unrepentant breaking of the marriage vows. The example in this was God. When unfaithful Israel prostituted herself with the gods of the nations and wouldn't listen to the entreaties of Yahweh her Husband, he wrote a bill of divorce and put her away (Jeremiah 3 especially v.8). Following God's pattern, forgiving and seeking to save the marriage would be the way until persistent breaking of the marriage vows made this impossible.

3.4.16 To come back to the overall picture, if this was the way the Jews of Jesus' day looked at the matter, why has the Christian church lost sight of the Exodus 21 element? Instone-Brewer says that the destruction of Jerusalem changed the whole world of Judaism and cut off Christianity from its Jewish roots. Only Hillelite rabbis survived and "any cause" divorce was simply called divorce. As above, it was this Judaism which the early church knew. This explains why the 2<sup>nd</sup> century Christian church had a partly different view on divorce and remarriage to that of Jesus, the apostles and the early church.<sup>13</sup>

3.4.17 Instone-Brewer's explanation is that language changes and former usages become forgotten or misunderstood. He gives various examples, including how in youth slang "wicked" has changed from meaning something evil, to something good.<sup>14</sup> Anyone who wasn't aware of the meaning "wicked" had in the past would understand it only in today's terms. In the same way, Matthew's "is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" was (mis)understood as "is divorce *ever* lawful?" not as a question about who was right, Hillel or Shammai.

3.4.18 This is why, in seeking to understand Scripture, we need to know how it would be understood by people of the time and, for that, we need to understand their culture and circumstances, and this is what the Church fathers of the second century did not understand. We have so much more information and background evidence today and so can better understand the situation.

3.4.19 Instone-Brewer also says that "*...the 2nd century Roman world was dominated by corrupt and degenerate sexual practice... sexual immorality was all-pervasive ... the sexual act was despised and feared by the church as a source of corruption and spiritual disease and the church ended up being suspicious of conjugal relations within marriage*" As for remarriage after the death of a spouse, "*...if a widow or widower remarried it was regarded as evidence of lasciviousness because they had done their sexual duty by being married before... the church gradually elevated celibacy higher and higher until, by 9th century, the Roman church had decided that priests must be unmarried, that celibacy within marriage was a pious attitude, and that sexual relations without the goal of having children were sinful. This trend, which started in the 2nd century, was largely based on the misunderstanding that both Jesus and Paul taught that virginity was superior to the married state and that remarriage was always impious and often sinful.*"<sup>15</sup>

3.4.20 Instone-Brewer also says that it is right to apply the principles behind God's command in Old Testament to NT situations. This would mean that divorce is lawful for Christians where there is physical or mental cruelty, the failure to love and cherish (including normal sexual relations) and the failure to provide sufficiently.

3.4.21 With regard to marriage after divorce, Instone-Brewer says that the certificate of divorce among the Jews always declared that the divorced person was free to marry. In NT times, remarriage after divorce was the norm in Roman society across the empire. This was without ceremony. A person either left the home or was ejected from it. They were now divorced and free to remarry. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 7:10-15, gives us the example of the unbelieving partner to a marriage leaving. That was divorce Roman style. The Christian partner was now free to remarry but "only in the Lord."<sup>16</sup>

3.5.1 ***Instone-Brewer's position*** Instone-Brewer argues that the marriage contract (a term which he prefers to use rather than covenant) of the Old Testament shares the same characteristics as marriage contracts in the surrounding Ancient Near Eastern cultures. In these contracts, there are clearly defined rewards for entering into marriage and clearly defined penalties for failing to keep its obligations. Instone-Brewer argues that the Old Testament information on marriage is rather scanty, simply because the general situation regarding marriage was well understood—indeed, he argues, the only time specific reference is made to marriage is when legislation is being enacted which is different in some respect to that prevailing in the surrounding culture. Invariably, this legislation grants greater rights to the woman within marriage and, inevitably, greater rights to her on its dissolution.

3.5.2 For example, according to Instone-Brewer, the right of a woman to a divorce – and to a subsequent remarriage — is a right granted by Mosaic law but denied in the surrounding cultures. This right is plainly stated in the controverted passage in Deuteronomy 24. The main purpose of this passage has been understood to lie in forbidding remarriage to a former spouse – usually for dowry reasons – but Instone-Brewer argues that the right of divorce and remarriage is, itself, enshrined in the passage and ought not to be overlooked. Furthermore, the right to remarry is fundamental to the issuing of the certificate: the certificate is a declaration of the woman's right to marry whoever she wishes. If a husband was not willing to issue the certificate, and if the woman's ground was valid, he could be compelled by the authorities to do so.

3.5.3 In keeping with other cultures, however, Instone-Brewer argues that both parties, within an Israelite marriage, had legitimate ground for divorce in the case of emotional or physical neglect. The key passage here is the one already referred to, found in Exodus 21:7-11 – particularly verse 11 – which appears to teach that a wife is free to leave her husband if he fails to provide 'food, clothing and marriage rights'.

3.5.4 The significance of these passages – particularly the latter – is that they were both recognised as constituting valid grounds for divorce by the Rabbinic School of Shammai, who were – unlike the opposing school of Hillel – opposed to a "for any cause" divorce. The school of Hillel, which became by far the majority Rabbinic school by the time of Christ, had come to interpret Deuteronomy 24:1ff in a particularly lax way: for them, it was allowable to divorce for 'any cause' or 'any matter'. For the school of Shammai, the divorce was only allowable in the case of a 'matter of indecency' (*lit.* nakedness of a matter/thing) being found in the wife. This was understood by them much as it has been traditionally by the Christian church – if not a reference to adultery, then at least something approximating to it. In this way, it was held by the school of Shammai that, in the context of Deuteronomy 24, divorce was lawful on the basis of 'indecency' – but this was not considered to be in any way inconsistent with there being other lawful grounds for divorce.

3.5.5 From this, Instone-Brewer argues that the best way to understand Christ's pronouncements regarding divorce is to see them as a ruling on a contemporary debate between the two Rabbinic schools. In this debate, between those who approved of divorce for 'any cause' and those who approved of it for 'indecency of matter', Christ upheld the latter and pronounced accordingly. Therefore, to act on the basis of 'any cause' divorce would be spiritually invalid (even if not illegal) and, in the event of the subsequent remarriage of either party, would involve adultery for all involved – presumably on the ground that the original marriage was somehow still in force. According to Instone-Brewer, Christ went further than the School of Shammai here, in that they tended to accept the rulings of Hillel-dominated courts even if they did not agree with them. Instone-Brewer argues, however, that we should not assume that Christ disapproved of the other Old Testament grounds for divorce. Rather,

like the Rabbinic school with which he sided, he gave a ruling on the verse in dispute without commenting on other related issues. In this way, and especially by a comparison with Paul's treatment of sexual and emotional neglect and desertion (which is really a form of neglect) in 1 Corinthians 7, Instone-Brewer concludes that the legitimate grounds for divorce are wider than they have traditionally been held to be and include *physical and emotional neglect* as well as *adultery and desertion*.

3.5.6 Divorce on the grounds of Exodus 21 was not a matter in dispute, but was accepted by all Jews without exception, whereas other matters were not accepted by all. Therefore, the issue doesn't come into the gospels.

3.5.7 Paul accepted this as still valid: *"Paul referred to the Jewish law when he taught Christian sexual morals to the Corinthians. Perhaps he did this because many of the Christians in Corinth came from a Jewish background, but it is more probable that he did it because he based all his moral teachings in the Old Testament. Although many commentators have missed the reference to Exodus 21:10-11 in this passage, others have noticed it... [T]he rabbis found three grounds for divorce in this passage, based on the three obligations of providing love, food and clothing. They divided these into two groups: emotional obligations and material obligations. He has dealt with the emotional obligations in these verses (1 Corinthians 7:1-7.) In verses 32-35, Paul deals with the material obligations."*<sup>17</sup>

3.5.7 *"Paul described the material obligations, like the emotional obligations, in terms of exact equality of men and women. This equality is emphasized almost to the point of repetitiveness. The rabbis also taught that the obligation of material provision applied to both men and women, even although it only applied to the man in the original legislation of Exodus 21:10-11. Presumably they felt that if a slave wife had a right to food and clothes, then so did the free wife, and so did a man. As seen in chapter five, the rabbis carefully defined both the amount of food and clothing the husband had to provide, and the tasks that the wife had to perform in preparing the meals and clothes. Paul did not speak in such legalistic terms. He referred to the husband and wife who wished to 'please' each other. He said nothing negative about these material concerns, even though they are 'of the world'. This is an obligation within marriage that he recognized in the Law."*<sup>18</sup>

3.5.8 The only other ground for divorce was adultery (sexual sin) as Jesus made clear to those who asked Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife 'for any cause'?"

3.5.9 Instone-Brewer makes it clear that Jesus and Paul taught that divorce was not obligatory. Forgiveness and reconciliation were to be tried first. However, in the face of persistent breach of the marriage contract due to hardness of heart, the wronged spouse could divorce and remarry.

3.5.10 In the context of divorce on the grounds of adultery, Jesus taught that remarriage was lawful. Paul, speaking on the basis of Exodus 21:10-11, in v.15 of 1 Corinthians 7, *"quotes from a standard Jewish divorce certificate ..... You are free to marry any Jewish man you wish"* adapting it to the Christian context – "she is free to be married to whom she wishes; only in the Lord."<sup>19</sup>

3.6.1 **Assessment** How far should we accept Instone-Brewer's argument and how would this relate to the Westminster Confession of Faith's teaching on divorce? If his argument is Biblical, which it appears to be, we should accept it. To make it clear to others is perhaps more difficult. For instance, it is notoriously difficult to make the seemingly abrupt, unambiguous pronouncements of Christ on this matter mean anything other than adultery alone being the only lawful ground of divorce. And, on the basis of these words alone, the possibility of there being other grounds is often dismissed out of hand. However, it is strangely overlooked in such reasoning that, in subscribing to the Confession of Faith, we already accept another ground for divorce—desertion. The consequences of this are really quite far-reaching. Unless we suppose additional apostolic revelation on this issue which effectively overtakes the word of Christ – which is problematic – we must acknowledge that adultery is, in fact, *not the only ground* on which divorce can be granted. In other words, we already acknowledge, essentially, the position which Instone-Brewer is advancing—that Christ's words are somehow limited in application by the context in which he spoke them.

3.6.2 The Westminster Confession of Faith gives adultery and desertion as the only two Biblical grounds for divorce (24.6). But neglect and abuse – not looking after a spouse's material and emotional

needs properly – is an abandonment of the promises involved in marriage, a rejection of the other. In essence it is desertion. This could fit within the terms of the Confession.

3.6.3 It was, of course, possible that good men of the past could miss the significance of the Biblical passages. Even the commentator Matthew Henry, in commenting on Exodus 21 said, “The laws recorded in this chapter relate to the fifth and sixth commandments; and though they are not accommodated to our constitution, especially in point of servitude, nor are the penalties annexed binding on us, yet they are of great use for the explanation of the moral law, and the rules of natural justice.” The only lesson he draws from verses 7-11 is the general point: “Thus did God provide for the comfort and reputation of the daughters of Israel, and has taught husbands to give honour to their wives (be their extraction ever so mean) as to the weaker vessels, (1 Peter 3:7).”<sup>20</sup>

3.6.4 He seems to be saying, “This is what the Bible says and is part of the moral law of God, the practice is just and according to natural law, but we have different ideas and customs, so we ignore the specifics of Exodus 21”.

3.6.5 This is not a valid position for those who take the Bible seriously. Instone-Brewer’s position does much more justice to passages like this which the Church has found difficult, and the Panel recommends his position to the careful consideration of the Church.

3.7.1 **Conclusion** It is quite clear from Scripture that marriage is regarded as sacred and is intended to be lifelong. The key passage appears first in Genesis 2, with regard to the first married couple: “A man shall leave his father and mother, be united to his wife and they will become one flesh” (v.24). It is quoted by Jesus in Matthew 19, where he adds, “Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate” (v.6). It is quoted again by the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 5:31, where he is using the marriage bond of love as an illustration of the relationship between Christ and his Church. If husbands are to love their wives as Christ loves the Church, that love is to be permanent.

3.7.2 However, we have to face the reality (and the Bible faces the reality) that married love between sinful human beings is sometimes not permanent. Because of the hardness of human hearts, the marriage bond is destroyed by adultery, desertion, neglect or abuse.

3.7.3 In such cases the Bible allows for divorce. However, it must be recognised that although it may be a remedy for an intolerable situation, it is not a cure. Once the marriage bond is broken, nothing can put *everything* back together again. This is particularly true where there are children involved. God’s design is that children are brought up in the stable, loving and safe environment of their parents’ marriage. While it is true that through death children may be brought up by a single parent or parent and step-parent, that situation is different, because their other parent is not still around. Inevitably, in divorce children are caught up in the tensions, the arguments and the divisions, not only of their parents, but of the wider community of family and friends. It is not impossible that, by the grace of God, children may not only survive such a situation, but develop normally, but the odds are stacked against them.

3.7.4 But this is not only true with regard to the children. Separation and divorce tear at the very heart of husband and wife. They are hurt at the most vulnerable place of all — the place of love and compassion and tenderness. God has declared that they are one. They cannot simply be separated back into the same two individuals they were before.

3.7.5 Nevertheless, it must be recognised that the Bible does allow for the remedy of divorce and remarriage, and it appears from Instone-Brewer’s study in particular that the Bible allows for divorce not only in the cases of adultery and desertion, but also in the cases of neglect and abuse. But it must be stressed that divorce is not mandatory, even in the case of adultery. Hosea was commanded to redeem his adulterous wife as an illustration of the forgiving grace of God for a spiritually adulterous Israel.

3.7.6 It should also be stressed that there is no indication in Scripture that there is any instance where divorce is permitted, but not remarriage. Both Old Testament and New make it clear that where divorce is permitted, remarriage is also permitted (Exodus 21:11, 1 Corinthians 7:15). “Free” and “not bound” mean “free to marry”.

3.7.7 What about the “guilty party” in a divorce? The whole concept of “guilty party” is no longer recognised in civil law, as the only ground for divorce now is “the irretrievable breakdown of marriage”. However, in the eyes of God, the person who commits adultery or deserts or neglects or abuses their spouse is guilty.

3.7.8 But is the guilty party free to remarry? It is difficult to see why not. If a true Biblical divorce is granted, then the marriage is ended and both partners are free to remarry. However, if a Christian marriage is being sought by the person responsible for breaking the original marriage, there should be genuine evidence of repentance.

3.8 **Where do we go from here?** The Study Panel is proposing that this report be remitted to Presbyteries for their careful consideration and responses in good time for the Study Panel to report to the 2012 General Assembly, which Report will also relate the Panel’s findings to the legal situation today and will include practical guidelines for ministers.

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- <sup>3</sup> Robert Kingdon, *Adultery and Divorce in Calvin’s Geneva*, Harvard University Press 1995 page 177
- <sup>4</sup> David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church (DRC)*, Intro IX
- <sup>5</sup> DRC p.4 para. 3
- <sup>6</sup> DRC p.20 para. 2
- <sup>7</sup> DRC p.37. para.3
- <sup>8</sup> DRC p.20 paras. 3,4
- <sup>9</sup> DRC p.21 paras. 3,4
- <sup>10</sup> DRC p.22 para. 3
- <sup>11</sup> DRC p.22 para. 4
- <sup>12</sup> See whole section DRB pp.184-7
- <sup>13</sup> DRC ch.12
- <sup>14</sup> DRC p.111
- <sup>15</sup> DRC p.121 second half
- <sup>16</sup> DRC p.82
- <sup>17</sup> DRB p.194, last para.
- <sup>18</sup> DRB p. 196, first para.
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## **(B) MARRIAGE PREPARATION**

1.1 **Introduction** Prevention is better than cure. We lament the number of broken marriages in society, yet a small survey of ministers in the Free Church revealed that on average about two hours were spent discussing marriage with couples planning to get married. As ministers of the Gospel we can spend ten hours or more preparing one thirty minute sermon for a Sunday. It begs the question whether two hours with a couple is sufficient to prepare them for a lifetime of marriage.

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1.2 The need for marriage preparation is striking. In Scotland during the year 2010 there were over twenty eight thousand marriages, but there were also ten thousand divorces (figures from National Statistics). It is reckoned that two out of every three marriages will end in divorce. It is undoubtedly the case that many enter into marriage with the possibility of divorce in mind if things do not work out as they had hoped. Such high divorce rates demonstrate that there is a great need for people to be better prepared for the demands of married life.

1.3 Because of the high rate of divorce there is a generation of children being brought up in broken homes. Previous generations, even if there were no marriage preparation courses, did have a model of marriage (good or bad) presented to them in the home. With an increasing number of children being deprived of that, we are left with a society that is uneducated as to what marriage is meant to look like. A child's painful experience of parents separating can lead them to conclude that marriage is more trouble than it is worth. Some young adults have a very warped view of marriage because of what they have witnessed and experienced in their own homes.

1.4 There is also an increasing tendency by parents to leave all moral teaching to the education system. Sex education is taught in a supposedly amoral context. Sexual experimentation is encouraged and homosexual and bisexual behaviour is taught as legitimate alternatives to heterosexual. A variety of sexual experiences and partners is considered normal. Marriage is presented as an option, but not necessarily a preferred option. At the same time children are seeing high profile celebrity weddings and the appeal of the hype and glamour of these events is making marriage trendy again for some. When couples come asking to be married, the motivation behind it may well be that Will and Kate got married, rather than because that is what God requires. There is a need for biblical re-education.

1.5 Marriage preparation for those who wish a Christian marriage ceremony has to be the responsibility of the Church. When we agree to perform a wedding service we are encouraging and facilitating the couple to enter into the marriage covenant. In agreeing to perform a marriage service we are enabling a man and woman to enter into a relationship sanctioned by God. We are encouraging them into a relationship designed for the raising of children and the wellbeing of society. We are legitimising a relationship of amazing intimacy. We are creating a covenant between two people and God which carries with it life-long commitment and huge responsibilities for which they must give an account. We are leading them into a relationship that is intended to reflect the relationship between Christ and his church. If we do not do all that we can to prepare people for something so important, perhaps we become party to the guilt of marriage breakdown. It could be argued that by merely glancing at the issues with the couple intending to marry we are actually communicating to them that marriage doesn't really matter that much. By apologetically skimming over what the Bible says about marriage the sub-text may well be that the Bible and what it says about marriage can be ignored. In his *Premarital Counselling Handbook*, H. Norman Wright claims that, "*For too many years it has been too easy to get married. Unfortunately in many cases the church has contributed to the divorce problem of our nation by promoting easy weddings. People have spent more time preparing to obtain their driver's license than in preparing for their marriage*" (Wright, 21).

1.6 The importance of marriage preparation is also seen in the teaching of Scripture. To be ready and prepared is a scriptural command. For example in the story of the ten virgins the foolish were unprepared for the bridegroom coming, the five wise were prepared. Although the story is not about marriage as such, it does provide the principle that those who are wise prepare for future events and that seeking to prepare for an event after it has taken place is pointless. Preparation for marriage needs to be done before the event not after the marriage takes place.

1.7 Also when we look at the picture of Christ and the church, which all marriages are meant to mirror, we see preparation. Jesus speaks of going to prepare a home for his Church (John 14:2-3). The work of redemption is viewed as Christ taking his church as his wife-to-be, and "*cleansing her by the washing of water through the word to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless*" (Ephesians 5:26-27). At the end the church comes "*out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband*" (Revelation 20:2). Jesus prepares his church before there is the marriage feast. It would seem strange that Christ would take so much care and attention to ensure that all is prepared for that final and greatest of all weddings in heaven while we treat with a measure of indifference the need for preparations for weddings here on earth. The example of Christ would suggest that marriage preparation is essential.

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2. **Marriage Preparation Course** The Study Panel has examined a number of published marriage preparation courses but it was felt that they were either Biblically weak, culturally inappropriate, over-intrusive, or excessively demanding. It was agreed to attempt to prepare something that could be easily used in various situations. The aim in general terms was to produce something that could be adapted:

- To suit different age groups
- To suit different church backgrounds
- To suit different relationship histories
- To suit different levels of Christian commitment

It was felt that the course needed to be

- Biblical
- Simple
- Not too long
- Not over-intrusive

It was agreed that a marriage preparation course should involve no more than three sessions. However it may be beneficial to invite the couple for a meal before the first session just to get to know them a little better. The three sessions would look at:

### 1. **Marriage and God**

Essentially the aim of the first session seeks to cover (or uncover) the couples belief in God and view of Christ. It introduces them to the Bible as God's book to guide in all things. It emphasises commitment and accountability. Finally it gives a taste of what marriage preparation will involve.

### 2. **Marriage in the Bible**

The aim of session two is to make the couple focus on the Bible's teaching on marriage and to get them to think seriously about the practical implications of what the Bible teaches.

### 3. **Marriage service.**

The third session will focus on the order of service and the wedding day, but the main focus will be on the vows and the content (readings and praise) of the wedding service.

## **SESSION ONE - Marriage and God**

The aim of the session is to help the couples realise that we are not just providing some kind of professional service that enables them to fulfil a romantic dream or a nice tradition. It is designed to make them see that God is real and that they should take him seriously, and that we take what we do seriously.

1. **Church Wedding** – The fact that a couple have asked for a church wedding suggests at the very least a belief in God. This allows opportunity to discuss:

- Their own church history
- Church attendance
- Taking God seriously
- Recognising the fact that God does not appear for a wedding service and then disappear.

2. **Christian Service** –The couple are asking not just to get married but to have a Christian marriage, conducted by a Christian minister. Discuss:

- Why not civil ceremony?

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- Why is it important to have Christ's blessing on their wedding day?
  - What it means to them have Christ's blessing in their married lives not just their wedding day.
- 3. Marriage vows** – The couple will make vows to each other at their wedding service but also take them before God.
- The celebrant's sense of responsibility and accountability.
  - The couple's sense of responsibility and accountability.
- 4. Marriage guidance** – God does not leave us without marriage guidance. He has given us his Word. Look at:
- Their understanding of the Bible
  - Introduction to some Bible passages about marriage
  - The place the Bible already has in their lives.
- 5. Marriage Preparation** – No one would go out driving on the road without getting lessons and passing a test. It would be considered dangerous to just let someone get behind a wheel without preparing them for all that they will encounter on the road. Yet somehow we think that we can go into something much more serious, like marriage, without any preparation or instruction.
- What influences their understanding of marriage
  - What examples they have seen (good or bad)
  - The purpose and aim of marriage preparation

## **SESSION TWO – Marriage and the Bible**

Rather than use several passages of scripture this session focuses mainly on Genesis 2:18-25

1. Marriage designed and gifted by God.
  - Marriage is God's idea. He designed it for a purpose. Must refer to God to understand marriage. Reflects his nature.
  - Look at the story of creation. It is good, it is good, it is good.... It is not good for man to be alone. Marriage intended for companionship/helpmeet.
  - Adam and Eve brought together by God. No accident. Adam is God's gift to Eve, Eve God's gift to Adam. Discuss how the couple met. Realise that it was no coincidence. Need to recognise each other as God's gift. This should affect the way they view each other and treat each other throughout marriage.
2. Marriage involves a leaving
  - Leaving home - In an ideal situation this means leaving the parental home to live with each other in marriage. Living with each other is meant to be after marriage not before.
  - Leaving parents - means more than leaving the family home. While maintaining strong relationships with families they must not have priority over wife/husband. This deals with the topic of in-laws and close friends. Looks at need to resolve problems without interference from outside, etc.
  - Leaving singleness – looking at how it is impossible to maintain the single lifestyle in marriage. Discuss the 'invasion' (pleasant though it may be) into their life of another person. (For co-habiting couples this would take on a slightly different slant).
  - Leaving personal ambition – look at careers, etc. When work plans/ambitions take priority leads to problems. This will be dealt with in Session 3 also.

Point of this is to recognise that in marriage that a person's priorities must change. The husband/wife must become the focal point of each others attention/affection.

3. Marriage means holding on

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Genesis 2 gives the picture of hanging on tightly. Speaks of:

- Faithfulness – sexual. Commitment to have no intimate or physical relationship with anyone else.
  - Faithfulness – in a broader sense. Unfaithfulness may also involve alcohol abuse, domestic abuse, the lack of support or affection. Vows include much more than just sexual faithfulness.
  - Commitment – back-bone of a relationship. This ‘covenantal’ aspect is what makes the difference between marriage and living together. Consider the ‘what ifs’. What if illness, financial troubles, can’t have family, depression etc? Vows are for better, for worse.
  - Permanency – ‘till death us do part’. No get out clauses. Marriage not to be entered into ‘to see how it goes’. Life-long commitment being made.
4. Marriage involves two becoming one.
- Sexual union. Bible not prudish. Gift from God but only in marriage. Deal with temptations before marriage. Expectations after marriage not to be dictated by magazines, TV, books etc. (May also be the time to introduce a Christian perspective on contraception)
  - Social union. Becoming Mr and Mrs ... look at the wider implications of this.
  - Union of hopes - look at dreams, aspirations. Have the couple thought about and discussed family plans, work plans, all future plans?
  - Spiritual union – This becomes more difficult if a Christian is marrying a non-Christian, but still needs to be confronted. For a couple who are both committed Christians it would deal with service, hospitality etc. For uncommitted couples it would cover church attendance, place of Bible and prayer in marriage, children attending Sunday school and so on. They need to be sure that they are pulling in same direction.
5. An example for marriage (Ephesians 5:21-33)
- Mutual responsibility
  - Husbands love – Look at the idea of headship and what that means by way of selfless sacrifice
  - Wives submit – to the love and sacrifices of a caring husband.

### **SESSION THREE – Marriage service**

In this session the couple would be given the relevant documentation and guidelines for applying for their marriage schedule. The minister would talk them through it and then would deal with the couple’s plans for the service itself.

Sample order of services would be considered, e.g.

1. Singing.
2. Proclamation and call for objections.
3. Short prayer.
4. Brief address to explain that marriage is a divinely ordained institution.
5. Vows.\*
6. Declaration that the couple are man and wife.
7. Exchange of rings.
8. Prayer.
9. Signing of Schedule. (If you prefer this can be done at the end of the service)
10. Singing.
11. Scripture reading and brief address. (This may be done earlier in the service.)
12. Singing.

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13. Benediction.

\* There is no set form of vows in Scotland. It is therefore possible for the couple to have an element of choice as to which vows they wish to take, provided they are acceptable to the celebrant. Sample vows would be provided and each element talked through, for example:

*I call upon those present to witness that I.....take you..... to be my lawful wife/husband, to have and to hold from this day forward for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, honour and cherish, according to God's holy will, until he separate us by death and this I faithfully promise.*

Also this session would introduce couples to various Bible passages on marriage some of which could be used for their wedding service. The idea is that they will go and read the passages of scripture themselves and perhaps choose one or more for the reading at the wedding service. This is intended not just to get them thinking about marriage but to get them reading the Bible together. The minister would quickly run through the passages giving brief comments and then ask them to read them before the arrangements are finalised. Below are some suggested passages:

Genesis 2:18-25 (to remind us that marriage is from God)  
Song of Solomon (to show that God is not prudish)  
Proverbs 31:10-31 (to correct any wrong ideas about the woman's role)  
Matthew 5:27-32 (deals with faithfulness)  
Matthew 19:1-12 (deals with divorce)  
1 Corinthians 7 (Paul on many aspects of marriage)  
1 Corinthians 13 (the nature of love)  
Ephesians 5:22-33 (political incorrectness that needs explaining)  
1 Peter 3:1-7 (the weaker partner?)  
1 John 4:7-21 (love's greatest gift)

Finally in this third Session a check-list of other things to think about regarding arrangements for the wedding day and the wedding reception needs to be brought to the attention of the couple.

This is only a brief outline of the contents of the proposed marriage preparation course. It would be produced in such a way that it could be adapted to suit different couples and different situations but it would give a platform for ministers to work from. Before a fuller version of the proposed course is developed it was felt that any comments regarding the format or content would be useful from those who would be using the materials.

### **PROPOSED DELIVERANCE**

1. The General Assembly receive and adopt the report of the Study Panel and thank the Panel, especially the Convener.
2. The General Assembly direct that the report of the Study Panel be sent to Presbyteries for their comments and suggestions which should be sent to the Study Panel by 31st January 2012.
3. The General Assembly renew the remit of the Study Panel and direct the Panel to report to the 2012 Assembly.

DONALD M. MACDONALD, *Convener*