

Moderator, fathers and brethren, first of all I must apologise for the accidental omission of an important part of the Study Panel report on page 105 of the Reports from 3.6.3 onwards to the end of section A. This apparently happened due to an electronic glitch during the printing of the reports. I'm glad to say that the full report went on to the Free Church website with the other reports. I hope you have had time to read and digest the conclusions of this missing part of the report which has now been distributed.

The Study Panel was appointed in 2008 to look initially at the Biblical teaching on marriage, divorce and remarriage in light of recent research and the changing legal and social situation and to prepare material helpful to ministers in dealing with pastoral problems in this area. It might appear that we are making only slow progress, but I think the report speaks for itself as to the amount of thought and effort that have been expended on this important topic. We are a small group and most of us are very busy in various aspects of the church's work. Also, in the last few months we have lost the services of Rev Kenny Stewart as a member of the Panel. We were sorry to lose him from the Panel as had made a substantial contribution to the work of the Panel.

Because previous reports gave extensive coverage to the Biblical teaching on marriage, section A of the report concentrates on divorce and remarriage. Special attention is paid to the recent research of Rev Dr David Instone-Brewer on the Jewish background to the Biblical material on the subject. He is a research Fellow of Tyndale House, Cambridge, who specialises in the languages of the Ancient Near East and the background to the Bible. The Panel is convinced that Dr Instone-Brewer's work casts fresh and helpful light on the interpretation of the Biblical data. The report also studies the concept of accommodation. My seconder will deal with the research of Dr Instone-Brewer and the interpretation of Biblical texts and I will say a few words about accommodation.

### **Accommodation**

With regard to accommodation, this is a concept, well known in Biblical interpretation from ancient times, which has come into renewed prominence in recent decades, particularly in Calvin studies. The late David Wright of New College, Edinburgh, wrote extensively on it and Jon Balsarak, who studied under David Wright, has published his own PhD thesis on this subject.

As the report shows, John Calvin used the concept not only to explain how God revealed himself and his will in human language and supremely in the incarnation of the Son, but also to explain God's seeming inconsistency in legislating for practices which were contrary to his revealed will, such as divorce. To my mind this is an aspect of God's common grace. When our first parents fell into sin, they were not immediately consigned to hell, but God graciously permitted them to continue living. He announced not just the dire effects of the fall on creation and on human beings and their relationships with creation, with each other and with God, but also announced his intention of sending the seed of the woman who would bruise the head of the serpent. Alongside this thread of special, saving grace running through the Old Testament in the form of covenant and coming to fulfilment in Christ, there is a

constant revelation of God's common or general grace in his dealings with Israel and all humanity.

In permitting divorce under certain conditions God was making allowance for the hardness of the human heart in order to mitigate the effects of the resulting social breakdown and to provide a remedy for otherwise intractable situations. We know only too well that law cannot change people's hearts; only the grace of the gospel can do that. But law can limit evil and mitigate, to some extent, its harmful effects on human life.

Probably because of a reaction against both the easy divorce allowed in Judaism following the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD and the licentiousness and easy divorce of pagan Roman times, the Roman Catholic Church did not allow divorce at all and thus Calvin was a real innovator in Geneva as he applied his teaching in the civil realm and allowed divorce in cases of proven adultery, with allowance for remarriage as detailed in the report. The Westminster Confession adds the condition of wilful desertion as just cause for divorce. The modest suggestion of the report is that this can be understood to cover persistent abuse and neglect, which are also Scriptural grounds for divorce.

Much care has to be taken in our explication of the concept of accommodation. I have heard reliable reports of Christians justifying their illicit behaviour and relationships by claiming that God accommodates to their behaviour. The note we should sound here is "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect". We are not to be pressed into the mould of this world, but rather we must be transformed by the renewing of our minds in every area of our lives. We are to put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh, the sinful nature. We are not to make accommodation for the world, the flesh and the Devil. Rather we are to keep ourselves unpolluted from the world, put to death the sinful nature and resist the Devil. When Christians fall below the high standards set by God's word, the church must deal faithfully and pastorally with them, endeavouring to lead them to repentance and restoration.

It must be stressed that the intention of the Panel is not to make divorce easier. Rather it is to safeguard the sanctity of marriage, while at the same time providing a Scriptural course of action when marriages sadly do break down, including Christian ones. The emphasis should be on attempting to achieve repentance, reformation and reconciliation as far as possible, but where there is repeated, persistent and incorrigible breaking of the marriage covenant, an orderly divorce should be allowed. The pastoral consequences for all affected, including any children of the union, have to be carefully followed up. Sadly this is often difficult, as under these circumstances people often distance themselves from the church due to shame and the fear of criticism and rejection. This is tragic, as we are called to minister faithfully and graciously to such people.

Can we apply this concept of accommodation in our attitude to current divorce laws which are in contradiction of Scripture? This is the area that the Panel will look at in greater detail during the coming year. At the moment the Panel does not regard accommodation as particularly helpful in this regard. We have to function as the Christian church in the present situation which is far from satisfactory, recognising the law of the land while maintaining our position on the sanctity of marriage and the allowance of divorce under certain conditions defined in the report. If divorcees

request a remarriage following divorce on unscriptural grounds, they should be led to see their error and the necessity of entering this new union with full commitment.

### **Marriage Preparation**

This matter was added to the Panel's remit in 2009 and we are indebted to Rev Donnie G MacDonald for researching and preparing the material in the report. He already uses this course and we await his report on its use and the preparation of the complete course. As section B of the report points out, the state of marriage in Britain today, as one of the foundations of a stable society, is in a critical condition. We have to face the fact that where society leads, the church all too often follows and we are seeing an ambivalent attitude towards relationships and marriage among many professing Christians. As generations grow up without good role models of marriage to follow and as they are affected by the self-centred, pleasure-seeking pressure of society, they are less prepared to enter the life-long commitment of marriage.

Ideally the best preparation is being brought up by parents in a secure marriage relationship and gaining an understanding of the Biblical basis for marriage, so that, on attaining adulthood, young people are ready to enter responsibly into meaningful relationships. This highlights the need for the church to help parents in this area and for regular preaching and teaching on the subject in a way appropriate for each age group. So good preparation for marriage begins long before the publication of the banns! We can no longer assume that even Christians naturally think of marriage as being an exclusive union for life and the only valid expression of sexual love.

With regard to marriage preparation courses, it is difficult to find convincing evidence that they are actually effective. However, this does not absolve us from the pastoral responsibility involved in officiating at a wedding ceremony. Although here we do have the responsibility of conducting and registering a marriage on behalf of the state, we are not mere civil servants carrying out a perfunctory rite. We are servants of God with the heart of the Good Shepherd, and every opportunity must be taken to witness to the gospel and its relevance to every area of life, including marriage and the family.

The course we envisage is eminently adaptable to couples of different backgrounds and experience and it would be up to the individual minister whether he carries it out in full, only partly or not at all. Getting people to think and talk about these issues is a good start, but it is only a start. It is during married life itself that the true learning experience takes place! That's why it's so important to have a good foundation so that couples enter into marriage with complete commitment and not harbouring a get-out clause at the back of their minds.

The Panel is asking that this report be sent down to Presbyteries for careful study and response to the Panel before the end of January 2012. The Panel intend to produce a definitive report, including material on the current legal position and practical pastoral advice for ministers for next General Assembly.