



EXTRACT FROM THE

PUBLIC QUESTIONS REPORT

TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2008

ON MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

There is a crisis concerning marriage in our society. We do not need to quote statistics to prove that. Not that long ago, we thought that the breakdown of marriage was restricted to America, or to cities, or to the non-Christian world. Our illusions have been completely shattered. There is not one community throughout our land, including the Highlands and Islands, where marriage breakdown is not a reality. There is hardly a congregation of the Free Church where marriage breakdown is not a reality. We all know that we only need to look at our own marriages and those in our own families to know the pressures that exist in this whole area.

The purpose of this report is to examine the pastoral implications of the widespread breakdown of marriage, and to try to give some biblical guidance and practical counsel as to how ministers, in particular, ought to approach the subjects of marriage and divorce today. One of the harsh realities of all this is that normally a minister first becomes aware of a problem in this area when it is far too late – when the relationship has broken down, often, it would appear, irretrievably. Or it will come to the minister's attention when a couple approach him for marriage and he discovers one of them has been married before, and a lot of discussion has to take place at that point.

This tells us that we really must be far more proactive and preventative in our pastoral care. "Prevention is better than cure" is the well known saying and, often, it is so much more effective than attempting (to change the metaphor) "to lock the stable door after the horse has bolted".

Lest all this sounds too negative, we ought also to remember the positive aspects, not least of which is the fact that marriage is one of the few areas where the minister not only has a statutory role, but also is willingly given a spiritual, pastoral and evangelistic opportunity, and that at a most intimate stage of people's lives, as they get married.

This report will look first at some of the *pressures* on marriage today, then at the *principles* from a Christian perspective (understanding, for example, what the Bible teaches about marriage and divorce), and finally, at what all this suggests for *pastoral practice*.

Pressures

First of all, what are the pressures? There is a whole complex of pressures in connection with family, work and finance. There are pressures in connection with the use of money. There is the pressure of materialism today, for people to have the "latest" and the "best" and to overspend. There is the pressure on both spouses to work because of that, or perhaps for other very necessary reasons. There is the pressure of debt that may result because of this. There are also pressures that come from the use of time or the wrong use of time – perhaps too much time spent away from home in the company of members of the opposite sex. It is good to have hobbies, interests, sports and so on, but, for instance, it is possible for one spouse to begin to have special friends of the opposite sex and that can be very dangerous in terms of the marriage relationship. But, also, it may be that there is simply not enough time spent together or at least not enough "quality time" spent together, sharing experiences. It is from these shared experiences that couples then have shared memories. How often in our family life, and in particular when the children are growing up, we remember things that happened, and these are shared experiences that bind the family together. But if you are not sharing very much experience, then you are not going to have those shared memories – the binding together is going to be loosened.

This also raises the whole question of relationships with the children. Again, this is an area of tremendous pressure. There are two particular stages in life when marriage breakdown is most prevalent: first, soon after the first child is born or when the children are young; and then, second, after the children have left home. Now, in the early stage, the husband perhaps cannot cope with the pressures of family life, or he feels he is no longer the centre of attention, perhaps, as he once was. He maybe does not like having his routine disturbed. Perhaps the wife's loss of interest in sex might contribute. These are pressures which can come about in the early stage.

In the later stage, breakdown may be the culmination of years of problems that were suppressed for the children's sake. This may not be as common as it was in the past, but it is still there. Perhaps the couple had stopped really communicating years before. They had developed totally different interests and it was only the children that were really holding them together. This can often coincide with the

menopause in women and what is called the male menopause in men. It is a time of re-assessing and a new stage in life, and people sometimes do not know how to handle it. It is, of course, entirely possible at other stages, for instance, when the couple disagree over the raising of children, particularly when children reach the teenage years. There can often be difficulties and tensions then about being too strict or too lax, and simply the pressures of badly disciplined children. All of these can contribute to the pressures on marriage.

A second whole area of pressure involves gender roles. There has been a new situation in our society in the last half century, due to women's liberation or feminism. And now, a kind of reaction has set in to that, so we get a "lad and ladette" culture. The outcome of all this has been that equality now means that it is acceptable for women to behave as badly as the worst men, instead of what surely would have been the ideal result: men being lifted up to the best of women's behaviour – selflessness, care, conscientiousness and so on. But through all of this, there really is a resultant confusion of gender roles and it is often very difficult for couples to work this out in marriage. There is a pressure on the wife to be Superwoman and excel in high pressure employment, perhaps, plus be Supermum at home and, all the time, look like Catherine Zeta Jones! Caroline Simon, who is an American Judge, said that "a woman had to look like a girl, act like a lady, think like a man and work like a dog!" That gives some idea of the kind of pressures that exist.

Also, there are corresponding pressures on the husband to be Superman, at work, at home with the kids, to be a fitness fanatic, to look good. He is expected to be masculine, but the whole idea of being the head of the home is actively discouraged. So, again, there are tremendous pressures there.

Another area of pressure is addiction: gambling, alcohol abuse, drug abuse, addictive sexual behaviour, including pornography (especially now internet pornography), and violence. People can have a violent streak or addiction to violent behaviour through things that have happened to them in the past, or it may be the result of frustration, the inability to talk (often on the part of the man), bitterness, pent-up anger, resentment. All these things may lead to violent behaviour, which can in itself become a kind of addiction, a way of resolving problems that does not really resolve them at all. These are often among the causes of breakdown and divorce.

However, behind all of that, there lies a paradigm shift in world view. We need not deal with this at a philosophical level. It is obvious at a popular level. The following sound bites will illustrate this: "What's right for you is not necessarily right for me." This is in the area of morality. No longer is there an accepted moral code in our society.

Often in the breakdown of marriage another motto recurs: "I need my space" - more often on the part of the man, but sometimes on the part of the woman too. This is in the area of psychology, this whole influence of selfism: "I need my space or I need to give priority to my needs."

A third area is the "sex is god" mentality. Sexuality is viewed today as something intensely personal. No one has the right to tell someone that what they desire is wrong, except maybe the two things which most would outlaw: child abuse and rape. These are the only two areas which would be outlawed, but when you try to ask why exactly they (and only they) are outlawed, it is difficult for people to come up with a rational answer. But the whole area of sexuality is another area of pressure on people because of the surrounding consensus.

The fourth area in the paradigm shift of world view is what may be called "feeling before honour". If you are in love, or you fall in love, or you fall out of love, that comes before everything else, and there is an attempt to separate this from the rest of life, so that, in the area of relationships, it is alright to put feeling before honour. You may have taken solemn vows to a woman or to a man, to be with him or her for the rest of your life, but feelings come before honour. But how can you really separate that from the rest of life? How can you really trust a man who fails to honour his solemn promises? If you need someone to stand by you in a time of trouble, either in business or in politics or in your personal life, can you really trust someone who has not stood by his word in another area of life?

These are just some of the pressures on marriage today.

Principles

We look next at some of the principles of marriage from a Christian point of view – trying to understand marriage and divorce.

Understanding marriage – from the Bible

For a Christian trying to understand marriage, a knowledge of what the Bible has to teach – the Biblical background – is essential.

The origin of marriage is in the doctrine of the image of God in Genesis 1. Right from the beginning we are told that God created the human race in the image of God and that both male and female are in the image of God. There is this essential equality of both man and woman being in the image of God. Also the fact he created the male and female together in the image of God and told them to be fruitful and to multiply means that the community of marriage and family has this amazing nobility that is given to it, right at the start. It is this community of marriage that reflects the God-head. It is this community of marriage that reflects the community of the Trinity, because in marriage and family you have this community of persons bound together by love, and it's a reflection (maybe a pale reflection) of the God-head. This places marriage in such an honourable and noble position. The result is that marriage is extraordinarily important, socially, spiritually and in terms of personal development. That's why it is so crucial, not only for the Church but also for society, that marriage is re-invigorated in our society today.

More detail is given of what is involved in marriage in Genesis 2:24, where it said “therefore a man will leave his father and mother, cleave to his wife and the two will become one flesh”. This is expounded in detail in the book *I Married You* (Walter Trobisch), where he argues that Genesis 2:24 (cited by both Jesus and Paul) really sums up the three sides to marriage. First, there's the *leaving* which speaks about the public, the social and the legal side of marriage. Even in those earliest times there was the emphasis that a new home was being set up. When a man loved a woman and they became married, they were leaving their parents' home and setting up a new home. In every society, no matter how primitive or how advanced, there is some kind of public recognition or (in our modern societies) legal recognition of this fact and that is an important aspect of marriage.

Secondly, there is what is translated in the older version by the word “cleave”. *Cleaving* means to be united, to be joined together. This speaks about the commitment side of marriage, love, not just in the sexual side of marriage, but love in its fullest sense, in the total commitment to one another to be united as a new unit.

Thirdly, there is the area of *one flesh* which includes the whole area of being one emotionally and one sexually, and the Bible in general, and particularly in the Song of Solomon, is completely unashamed of that.

These are the three aspects of marriage we find in Genesis 2.

A Definition of Marriage

So can we come up with some sort of definition of marriage from this Biblical material? Lord Penzance, a 19th Century English Judge, summed it up very succinctly: “Marriage is the voluntary union for life, of one man and one woman”. It's an excellent definition of what marriage is, and particularly what is a valid marriage. It's a more succinct version of the more long winded version in the Westminster Confession of Faith, but saying exactly the same thing. There are certain aspects that we would have to emphasize and perhaps to add. There's *permanency* – “for life”. “What God has joined together let no man separate”, Jesus said. There's *consent* – it has to be a voluntary union. This is also a Biblical emphasis. In Genesis 24, Rebecca is asked, “Will you go with this man?” So it would appear that even in that very early society there was an emphasis on the consent of the woman. The family arranged the marriage, but there had to be the free consent of the woman. This also has a general theological basis. In the New Testament marriage is compared with the relationship of Christ and his church. Just as there is consent in becoming a Christian, in loving the Lord Jesus, so in the same way there ought to be consent in marriage.

But there is another area that isn't dealt with, of course, in that very brief definition of marriage, and that is that it must not involve the committing of incest. There are the laws of consanguinity and

affinity. Consanguinity refers to people who are related to oneself, like one's mother, sister and so on. Affinity refers to people who have a similar type of relationship of consanguinity, but to one's wife or ex-wife or one's deceased wife. The Westminster Confession adopts generally the Scriptural position from Leviticus 18, also 1 Corinthians 5:1. The present civil legislation is rather different. There is now quite a difference between what is forbidden in the Old Testament and what is allowed in legal terms. For instance, modern legislation allows marriage to a wife's sister, not just to a deceased wife's sister, but to a divorced wife's sister. Also marriage to a wife's aunt or a wife's niece is no longer forbidden. So there is a difference in the modern legislation concerning forbidden marriages in cases of consanguinity and affinity, whereas the Biblical position and the Westminster Confession position is that it's identical for both. It is a valid question as to whether we are justified in the wholesale adoption of Old Testament law in this regard, while we do not do so in other areas of law.

There are various passages of the New Testament relevant to a consideration of marriage. One is the emphasis in Ephesians 5:22-33 on married love and Christ's love and the comparison made between them – the marriage relationship and the relationship between Christ and his Church. It surely speaks supremely of the great nobility of marriage that it is even spoken of in the same breath as the relationship between Christ and his Church. But also it emphasises that there are *different roles in marriage*. We have already stressed the emphasis the Bible has right from the beginning on the equality of man and women before God being equally made in the image of God. However, there is also an emphasis in the Bible on the headship of the man and the submission of the women. It is interesting to compare this again to the Doctrine of the Trinity, because essentially there is the co-equality of the persons of the Trinity, but in the incarnation of the Lord Jesus there was a willing submission to the will of the Father and this is actually used in the New Testament as illustrative of submission in marriage. Just as the man is the head of the woman, so Christ is the head of the Church and God is the head of Christ. So there is a headship of the husband, but it is a particular kind of headship. It is not some sort of domineering, tyrannical headship. It is the headship of Christ, so husbands should ask: How does Christ act as head of the church? Similarly, the kind of submission that is required of the wife is not some kind of slavish fear. It's the submission of the Church to Christ. So the whole thing is bound up in love, Christ's love for his Church and the Church's love for Christ. Evangelical feminists, of course, point to Ephesians 5:21, "submit to one another", and deny any special submission of wife to husband. Some conservatives say that verse 21 is not relevant and there is a break after 21. Verse 21 is relevant, and the following verses explain how that submission is to be put into effect in the realm of marriage. The husband "submits" himself to his wife as Christ gave himself up for the Church. This further defines headship in marriage.

Another emphasis in the Biblical teaching about marriage is the emphasis in the New Testament about *marrying in the Lord*. This is an area that can provide great difficulty. Often the text that is used to prove this is the wrong one: "be not unequally yoked with unbelievers". The context of that in 2 Corinthians 6:14, is not marriage, but idolatry. However, there are other passages that do speak about this area. For instance in 1 Corinthians 7:12ff. Paul is speaking about a Christian who is already married to a non-Christian. This would have happened quite often in New Testament times. A wife or a husband would be converted, but the other partner was not converted or not yet converted. So what does Paul say about that situation? He says that if the unbelieving partner is willing to remain, to stay in the marriage, then the Christian should stay. In other words they should stay together. However, this same passage speaks about what is desirable. In 1 Corinthians 7:39, where Paul is talking about a Christian widow whose husband has died, he says she is free to marry again, but *only in the Lord*. This means that she should marry a Christian; she should enter into a relationship that is in relationship with the Lord. So there is clear guidance from Scripture, but the pastoral situation may be very unclear. What does the minister do where Scripture has not been followed, or where it is not being followed? He has to try to handle that situation sensitively.

Understanding Marriage – the historical perspective

We should also look briefly at the historical perspective on marriage. Here the booklet on *Marriage and Divorce* (Free Church of Scotland Study Panel, 1988) is very helpful. Marriage has a complicated history in Europe in general and in Scotland in particular. In first century Greek and Roman society the situation was very different from today. There wasn't the emphasis on legal documentation for marriage. There were some documented marriages, but that was only when a lot of property was involved. Most marriages were undocumented, yet they were recognised socially and publicly. Of course, there was betrothal and there was some kind of ceremony and social, public celebration. The New Testament situation was very complex as we know from 1 Corinthians, and yet we have no

practical guidance as to how the apostles viewed the various kinds of marriage situation that there were. They simply seemed to view the marriages people were in when they became Christians as valid.

Following that there was the whole medieval development of Canon Law which is extremely complex. But it is clear that in some ways the church was moving far beyond what the Bible says, for instance in their development of the concept of consanguinity. The Canon Law excluded cousins of the sixth degree. In other words, you couldn't marry your sixth cousin. And of course divorce was absolutely prohibited.

Then with the Reformation, there was the rejection both of the sacramental status of marriage (marriage was viewed and is still viewed by the Roman Catholic Church as a sacrament) and there was the rejection of the absolute indissolubility of marriage. However, Scotland has been slightly different in many ways from the time of the Reformation. For instance, alone amongst all the nations of Christendom it retained some principles of Canon Law until quite recent times. The distinction between regular and irregular marriages was recognised by the State up to 1940. *Irregular* refers to a couple simply giving consent before two witnesses, and both the Church and State recognised the validity of that marriage. This was abolished in 1940, but nonetheless it remains part of the folk memory of people as they think about marriage, and so the situation in Scotland can often be quite different from other parts of the world. Also, all matters relating particularly to divorce were dealt with by a commissary court, and its proceedings were secret, so there is a great lack of academic knowledge about what actually took place in relation to marriage and divorce during that period.

In this context the Study Panel booklet warns:

...we as a people or a Church cannot slough off the past and forget it. That is why we must be very careful in reading books on marriage and divorce by authors of a different background - e.g. English or American - which may be excellent in other respects.

An example of this occurs in *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church* by David Instone-Brewer:

People have interpreted what the Bible says about divorce and remarriage in two main ways (although there are many others):

- 1. There are two valid grounds for divorce, but remarriage is not allowed unless one of the couple has died.*
- 2. There are no grounds for divorce or even separation.*

However, in Scotland since the Reformation a different position has been held: that there are two valid grounds for divorce (adultery and desertion) and that remarriage is allowed.

Understanding divorce – the historical perspective

As has been just noted, at the Reformation there was a rejection of the absolute indissolubility of marriage. It recognised divorce on two grounds, adultery and desertion, and that was the way things continued right up to 1938, until the Divorce (Scotland) Act added cruelty, sodomy and bestiality as grounds of divorce, and also the concept of a no fault divorce was introduced in that same act, with the addition of incurable insanity among the grounds for divorce. But the major piece of legislation which has had far-reaching effects is the Divorce (Scotland) Act 1976. It provided that irretrievable breakdown was the sole ground of divorce, and it had to be evidenced by one of five sets of facts: adultery, desertion, unreasonable behaviour, two years separation plus the defender's consent to divorce, or five years separation without consent.

There have been subsequent changes to the law. The two years mentioned above have been reduced to one year, and the five years to two years. There are now two grounds for divorce (or dissolution of a civil partnership) in Scotland: *irretrievable breakdown* and *gender recognition* (sex-change). Irretrievable breakdown can be established only on the basis of one of four "fact situations". These are:

- Adultery: This ground does not include adultery condoned or connived at.
- Unreasonable behaviour: Unreasonable behaviour includes activities ranging from financial irresponsibility, violent actions and nagging, to ignoring a spouse's emotional or sexual needs.
- One year's non-cohabitation by the spouses where both consent to the divorce.
- Two years' non-cohabitation by the spouses where there is no mutual consent to the divorce. Non-cohabitation means living separate lives and not living together as a normal married couple would.

The second ground for divorce is for a transsexual who has an interim *gender recognition* certificate.

Understanding divorce – from the Bible

There are no doubt many different positions on divorce and remarriage in the Christian church, ranging from a “high” position that would virtually outlaw all divorce, possibly allow separation, but not remarriage, to the “low” position where divorce and remarriage would be merely regarded as civil rights. In Scotland, historically, and in our own particular denomination, we have another position: divorce is allowable for adultery or desertion, and remarriage is allowed.

Each of these positions would claim Biblical support. The “high” view would refer to Jesus’ apparent banning of all divorce in Mark 10:2-12. The “low” view would possibly argue that the Bible’s teaching on matters like marriage and divorce are cultural, and cultures change. The traditional Scottish Presbyterian view would refer to Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 19:3-9 and Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 7:15.

Traditional Scottish view

The traditional view is that divorce was tolerated in Old Testament times – Jesus said that Moses allowed divorce for the hardness of their hearts. John Murray (in *Divorce*) held that God never in any way commanded divorce, but there is an allowance that if a wife is divorced, this is what happens. At any rate, divorce was tolerated in that society right up to the time of Jesus, and one school amongst the Jews says that divorce could be on very trivial grounds. However, right at the end of the Old Testament, God says that he hates divorce (Malachi 2:16). This is a passage both about the marriage relationship and God’s relationship with Israel, and in that context, God says, “I hate divorce”. The traditional understanding is that this is the position that the Lord Jesus takes. In Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 he appears to take what is almost an absolutist position about divorce: “What God has joined together, let no man separate”, but then he adds the only ground for divorce is adultery or fornication.

Then in 1 Corinthians 7:15, Paul appears to introduce another ground. The context is that of a Christian married to a non-Christian spouse. If the non-Christian is prepared to stay with the Christian spouse, Paul says they should stay together. But if the non-Christian spouse is unwilling to stay, if they leave, then the Christian partner is free. The question is what does that mean? Does he mean simply free from the obligations of that marriage, or free to re-marry? John Murray restricted this to separation (he uses the phrase from the canon law (separation “from bed and board” – *a thoro et mensa*) and held that it gave no right to remarry. He also held that this freedom to separate was strictly limited to the situation where a non-Christian deserted a Christian. However, in terms of equity, you can’t have a law that’s just for Christians. Marriage is available to everyone and the Westminster Confession is right to include desertion in the grounds for divorce.

So 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.

Different perspective on divorce

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

Does this mean that divorce could be had for almost any reason? Instone-Brewer answers in the negative, and he finds that the incident described in Matthew 19:3ff deals with this very question. The Pharisees ask him "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?" Jesus' answer has traditionally been understood to be: No, there is only one ground for divorce and that is sexual immorality (adultery). In fact, Instone-Brewer shows that the Pharisee's question was something much more specific and referred to a contemporary controversy which would have been understood by everyone present. They were asking if Jesus believed an "any cause" divorce was lawful. The background to this is a dispute between two schools of thought among the Pharisees. The school of Hillel understood Moses in Deuteronomy 24:1 to have given two grounds of divorce – adultery and "any cause". This meant, in practice, a man could divorce his wife for virtually any reason at all. The school of Shammai, on the other hand, held that that passage only referred to adultery. Jesus in his answer agreed with the Shammaites. Because the parameters of the debate were limited to that particular matter, Jesus' statements should not be understood as outlawing any other kind of divorce (as becomes plain when we consider Paul's teaching on desertion (1 Corinthians 7).

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.

Pastoral Practice

Pastoral Practice – Marriage

There is a very positive pastoral opportunity in the area of marriage. The first emphasis needs to be on preaching. Marriage should be regularly dealt with in our preaching, not necessarily having a whole series on marriage, or even treating marriage as a discrete subject, although sometimes that's very appropriate, but also as a minister preaches through Scripture he should bring out these emphases. We need to constantly remember that there are people in our congregations who may need to hear that emphasis. It is not unspiritual to talk about these matters. In fact, it is linked in to the most spiritual thing of all – the relationship of Christ with his Church.

There is also, of course, a great pastoral opportunity when a couple approach a minister for marriage. There is an opportunity to explain what is involved in the Christian view of marriage. They may be Christians, they may not be, but it's an opportunity to explain the Christian view of marriage. Marriage, and even Christian marriage, is not just for Christians. Marriage is for everyone, and if people

understand the vows they are taking before God and understand the Christian emphasis and want to have that kind of ceremony, it is good to do it. The minister should explain it is a Christian ceremony. It is different from a civil marriage conducted by a Registrar. The vows are taken before God, so the people involved must believe that God exists and at least they must be sympathetic to the Christian world view. This gives an opportunity to explain what that is.

Of course, the minister has to ask the couple if either of them has been married before. If so, he must obtain details of the divorce and discuss it with them. If he is not sure what to do, he should not agree to anything until he has sought advice. He can seek advice from his Presbytery, for instance. It is, however, much better to have one's position on divorce thought out beforehand. Matters may not be entirely clear, but that does not absolve the minister of having thought out his position clearly in Biblical terms, so in good conscience he can explain to people what he believes the Biblical position to be; and if he feels that he cannot in all conscience marry a couple, then at least he can give good reasons.

The minister may also have to explain to the couple the legal side of things. Some people are *au fait* with what they have to do, but others don't have a clue. The minister is often the first port of call, so he has to ensure that they know that he cannot carry out the wedding without a schedule from the Registrar. Only the bride and groom can obtain that, but the minister may have to give any help or information that they might require in doing this.

It is not essential, but it is desirable to have a rehearsal. Here it should be noted that there is a growing tendency for the couple, or the parents, or some of the people involved, to try to arrange everything including the service. Could you imagine going to a surgeon and telling him how to do the operation! But some people seem to have no compunction at all in telling the minister how things should be done. This kind of situation has to be handled authoritatively but sensitively, without being overbearing. The minister can only be authoritative if he has thought things out well and has a good reason for what he does, but he should make clear that after discussion of whatever points are involved, the decision must rest with himself. He is the presiding minister and only he can conduct the ceremony. Particularly when he has had experience of officiating at weddings, he knows how things are best done and how things are not well done. At the same time, he must remember that it is the couple's big day and he should not spoil it by being overly fussy about things that do not matter at all.

In the wedding ceremony itself, the minister should try to ensure that everything is done "decently and in order". It can be very upsetting on an important occasion like this if the ceremony is chaotic or embarrassing. But at the same time there should be a relaxed and a welcoming informality about the ceremony. It is supposed to be a happy occasion, and not as one minister once said at a wedding, "This is indeed a sad and solemn occasion"! It really is a happy occasion, and the way the minister conducts the service and smiles should communicate this to people. We need to remember that, for many people, this will be one of the few times that they are ever inside a Church building and we should want to make it a positive experience for them. In connection with this, the address the minister gives is very important as well. This is not the time for a class on sex and marriage! Such things should have been discussed long before then, if necessary. Nor is it time for a paper on the theology and the history of marriage! It shouldn't be pitched at too high a level. However, equally, it is not the time for pious platitudes. A theme that is pastoral, practical and passionate should be picked, and what better theme can there be than love – human love and God's love! There is room for practical advice and evangelistic appeal. This has to be done sensitively, but it is a great opportunity.

Pastoral practice – Divorce

Prevention is better than cure. We should try to be aware of situations developing. We are to look out for warning signs: how a couple react to one another, even their body language, any cooling off spiritually on the part of one partner or another. We should try to involve such couples more in the life of the congregation, because often the trouble is this cooling spiritually and not being involved. Whether that is a symptom of the problem or the cause of the problem is often difficult to detect.

If one spouse comes to the minister with worries, what does he do? These may be very clear worries or they may be more general. He must try as soon as possible, obviously with the permission of the person who has come to him, to speak to the other spouse as there are always two sides to every story, and it is important from an early stage to try to resolve the issues. It is also important that he see them together as soon as possible and assure them he is not there to find fault or be judgemental but to help them. If

things are obviously quite difficult, he should seek permission to involve someone else: an elder, his wife or another mature Christian woman to speak to the wife particularly.

He should try to get to the real problems. This may be impossible if people aren't prepared to be honest. There may be things like debt, addiction, depression, unfaithfulness, and the minister may have to get specialist help in some of these situations. Above all, the husband and wife have to be encouraged to talk, because often at the root of the problem is that they have not been able to talk through the issues or to talk about the problems.

If necessary, the minister is called to support one or other or both of them through what may be a very messy separation or divorce process, and throughout the whole thing he must try and be as impartial as possible. This may be extremely difficult. There is often fault on both sides, but it is not always so. Sometimes it is so obvious that one person has really acted abominably, but the minister must try to maintain impartiality.

Conclusion

The Church today has to make a concentrated effort to do everything in its power to support marriage in our communities and in our Church. We must encourage our young people to think seriously about marriage. We are bombarded all the time with everything that goes wrong in marriage, and so we should be encouraging our young people to see the positive side of marriage. We need to encourage our parents to give a positive experience of marriage to their children, because that is often the most influential thing – what a young person sees as they grow up. We need to encourage strong Christian commitment and involvement of the parents in the congregation.

But above all we ought to pray for our married couples and families in the enormous pressures that they face today. The Church must make this a priority in the life of our congregations.

Resources

Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible, David Instone-Brewer, Eerdmans, 2002
Divorce and Remarriage in the Church, David Instone-Brewer, Paternoster, 2003
Divorce and Remarriage, Andrew Cornes, CFP, 2002
Divorce, John Murray, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1961
Marriage and Divorce, Study Panel of the Free Church of Scotland, 1988
Love Minus Zero, Alex MacDonald, CFP, 1989
I Married You, Walter Trobisch, IVP
Sixty Minute Marriage, Rob Parsons, Care
No Longer Two, Brian Edwards

David Instone-Brewer's Websites:

<http://www.instone-brewer.com/>

<http://www.tabs-online.com/Tyndale/Staff/Instone-Brewer/index.htm>

Marriage in Scotland (General Register Office)

<http://www.gro-scotland.gov.uk/files/rmltext.pdf>

Divorce (Scotland) Act 1976

http://www.opsi.gov.uk/RevisedStatutes/Acts/ukpga/1976/cukpga_19760039_en_1

Marriage (Scotland) Act 1977 - http://slcc.strath.ac.uk/scotslawcourse/hw/reg/hwregstatutes_1.htm

Marriage (Scotland) Act 2002 - An Act of the Scottish Parliament to amend the Marriage (Scotland) Act 1977 to enable civil marriages to be solemnised in certain places approved by local authorities; and for connected purposes.

http://www.opsi.gov.uk/legislation/scotland/acts2002/asp_20020008_en_1

Family Law (Scotland) Act 2006:

http://www.opsi.gov.uk/legislation/scotland/acts2006/asp_20060002_en_1#pb1-11g1

DesktopLawyer.co.uk

<http://www.desktoplawyer.co.uk/dt/browse/law/index.cfm?fuseaction=ViewContent&sid=75927&aid=35179>

Weddings.co.uk

<http://www.weddings.co.uk/info/scotland.htm>

The logo for the Free Church of Scotland, featuring a stylized, overlapping leaf or flame shape in shades of grey. The text "free church" is in a bold, lowercase sans-serif font, and "of scotland" is in a smaller, lowercase sans-serif font below it.

free church
of scotland

EXTRACT FROM THE

PUBLIC QUESTIONS REPORT

TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2008

TELEVISION AND THE INTERNET

TELEVISION AND THE INTERNET IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The last 20 years has witnessed a phenomenal technological revolution which has transformed our lives – and our homes. We now live in a television world of cable, satellite, digital, videos, DVDs and camcorders; a computer world of PCs, laptops, computer games, PlayStations, iPods, the worldwide web and email; and a world of mobile phones, text messaging and camphones. Faced with this electronic technological revolution, how do we react? This article will look at some of the Biblical principles which should help us govern our thinking with regard to Television and the Internet; the ways these media are impacting our lives – especially the effects they are having on our children; and suggest ways in which we as Christians, as Christian parents and as a denomination should be addressing the challenges which they present.

Some Biblical principles

1. *Scientific research and invention should be seen in the context of obeying the Biblical mandate to subdue the earth.* [Genesis 1:28; 1 Timothy 4:4]

The product of scientific and technological advances, when developed in accordance with God's revealed will and used for the benefit of humankind, will be God-glorifying. The potential exists for such blessings to be beneficial or to be abused and this is certainly true of Television and the Internet.

2. *The Christian is called to die to sin and to live to righteousness.* [Romans 12:2; Colossians 3:5, 10; Romans 12:9; Colossians 3:2; Titus 2:11-12]

Christians are urged not to let the world 'squeeze them unto its mould' but to be transformed by the renewing of their minds. They are urged to put to death what belongs to their earthly nature and to put on the new self which is being renewed in the knowledge of God. They are to hate what is evil and cling to what is good, to live holy lives. Their use of Television and the Internet should never hinder their sanctification.

3. *The Christian is called to be salt and light.* [Matthew 5:13-16; Philippians 4:8]

What use he or she will make of Television or the Internet, therefore, must aid in this witness, not detract from it. The programmes we watch (or make) should be 'true', 'right', 'pure', 'lovely', 'admirable' and 'praiseworthy'.

4. *The Christian is in the world, but not of it.* [John 17:15-19; 2 Corinthians 1:12; Ephesians 6:10-18; Philippians 2:15]

Christians must engage with the world. Indeed, they cannot escape from it. Television, the Internet and other media continuously propagate ideas and lifestyles which conflict with the Christian ethic. So Christians must pray for sanctified critical judgement to address these issues.

5. *Moderation is a Christian grace.* [Galatians 5:23]

Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit. Nowhere should this virtue be exercised more than in the time we spend watching television or surfing the net.

6. *The family, an institution created by God, must be honoured and preserved.* [Genesis 2:22-24; Ephesians 5:22-6:4; Colossians 3:18-21]

There are few things better able to encroach upon family time and family relationships than television. A high view of the importance of the family and the Biblical principles on which it is based and on which it should operate, will do much to regulate our attitudes to this medium.

7. *The church must obey the Great Commission.* [Matthew 28:18-20]

Television and the Internet, especially the latter, present the church with a means of unprecedented potential to preach the gospel and to make disciples. We should never underestimate the value of the many good Christian websites which exist and not be slow to utilize this amazing medium to propagate Christian truth and Christian teaching.

Some Television Facts

Television and the Internet can provide magnificent educational resource, opening up new worlds and cultures with powerful, beautiful and moving images of a wonderful world. Television can entertain. It can provide positive role models for our young people. It can enable children to see how other people live and empathise with them. But of course there is the negative side: it has become, for many young

families, an electronic babysitter and, as children get older and watch TV unmonitored in the privacy of their own bedrooms, it has produced the “splintering family” and what has been described as the “toxic childhood syndrome”.¹ Our screens are hit with information and images which are unedifying, distasteful and indecent. “By the age of 75, most of us will have spent more than twelve-and-a-half years of 24-hour days watching television. It has become the industrialised world's main activity, taking up more of our time than any other single activity except work and sleep.”²

According to the market research agency ChildWise, almost all 5 to 16 year olds in the UK have access to multi-channel TV; 84% of them have a TV in their bedroom and watch 2.4 hours television a day.³ The same survey, based on 1,147 children in 60 schools in England, Scotland and Wales found that two-thirds watched TV before going to school, 83% after getting home, and 58% watched TV during their evening meal. When other screen viewing is included, such as the Internet and computer games, the figure is higher. Children aged 11 to 15 now spend 53 hours a week watching TV and computers — an increase of 40 per cent in a decade. Television has become an integral-can't-do-without apparatus which governs our daily routine. It is claimed that children now spend more time watching a television screen than they spend in school. By the time he reaches the age of six, the average child will have already watched television for nearly one full year.⁴

Some Television Effects

A trawl through the internet will reveal literally thousands of articles and studies into the effects which television viewing is purported to be having on children and adults in the UK and across the Atlantic. Such studies should be viewed with caution; it has been shown that their methodology is not universally robust; and that sometimes conclusions may be drawn unfairly from limited evidence.⁵ Nevertheless, there are a number of helpful publications and studies which are referred to in this article.

Dr Aric Sigman, an Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society, claims a direct link between excessive television viewing and a host of health problems. He believes he has found that even viewing moderate amounts of television:

- May damage brain cell development and function.
- Is the only adult pastime from the ages of 20 to 60 positively linked to developing Alzheimer's Disease.
- Is a direct cause of obesity — a bigger factor even than eating junk food or taking too little exercise.
- Significantly increases the risk of Type 2 diabetes because of its link with obesity.
- May biologically trigger premature puberty.
- Leads to a significantly elevated risk of sleep problems in adulthood, causing hormone changes which in turn increase body fat production and appetite, damages the immune system and may lead to a greater vulnerability to cancer.
- Is a major independent cause of clinical depression (of which Britain has the highest rate in Europe).
- Scientists report 'deleterious effects' on mathematical ability, reading recognition and comprehension in later childhood.⁶

Other studies have claimed a link between television viewing and Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). For every hour of television a child watches a day, a nine per cent increase in attentional damage was noted.⁷

¹ Sue Palmer, *Toxic Childhood How the Modern World is Damaging Our Children and What We Can Do About It*, Orion Books, 2006, 15.

² Aric Sigman, *Daily Mail*, 1 October 2005.

³ ChildWise Monitor Report, 2007.

⁴ Aric Sigman, *Remotely Controlled: How Television is Damaging our Lives and What We Can Do About it*, Vermilion, 2005.

⁵ David Gauntlett, “Ten Things Wrong With the ‘Effects Model’”, in Roger Dickinson, Ramaswani Harindranath & Olga Linné, eds, *Approaches to Audiences – A Reader*, Arnold, 1998.

⁶ *Daily Mail*, 1st October 2005.

More controversially, many studies have sought to show a link between media violence and aggressive and violent behaviour in the viewer, especially the young viewer.⁸ In 2000, the American Medical Association, the American Psychological Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics jointly stated “At this time well over 1000 studies ... point overwhelmingly to a casual connection between media violence and aggressive behaviour in children.”⁹ A review of some of this research evidence (all from US studies) which appeared in *The Lancet*, concluded that “From a public health perspective, there is evidence that violent imagery has short-term effects on arousal, thoughts, and emotions, increasing the likelihood of aggressive and fearful behaviour. However, the evidence is less consistent for older children and teenagers. Long-term outcomes for children viewing media violence are more controversial, partly because of the methodological difficulties in linking behaviour with past viewing. Nevertheless, a small but significant association persists in the research with an effect size that has a substantial public health effect. ... However, there is only weak evidence from correlation studies linking media violence directly to crime.”¹⁰

Whatever the correlation there might or might not be between media violence and violent behaviour, the bottom line for Christians and Christian families surely must be that film violence – real or concocted – is rarely edifying and almost always degrading and often gratuitous, and can have a traumatizing effect, especially on younger viewers. Furthermore, it might well desensitize youngsters to pain and suffering which, in turn, might contribute to the apparent increase in bullying. The same can be said for programmes in which sexually explicit scenes are depicted as normal and acceptable. However controversial the link between these and premature sexual behaviour in young people – as many studies claim¹¹ – any viewing which arouses sinful thoughts and desires should be avoided and dealt with in terms of such texts as Matthew 5:27-30.

Some Internet Facts

Computers are now a key part of our lives. The World Wide Web has revolutionised global communication and has made it possible for information of mega-encyclopaedic proportions to flood into our homes instantly at the click of a mouse. The Internet allows us to do our weekly shopping online, book our holidays, sort out our finances, get all sorts of advice from medical matters to DIY, play games, listen to music, watch missed TV programmes, and chat to our friends.

As with television, the benefits are enormous, but so are the dangers. 93% of children have a computer at home and a third have their own PC. Users are spending an average of 1.9 hours per day on line.

Some Internet Effects

Childnet International, a charity concerned with children’s Internet safety, categorises the dangers of the web for children into “Content”, “Commercialism” and “Contact”. The easy access to inappropriate content poses dangers for adults as well as children, but the recent surge in social networking sites present particular concerns for parents. Nearly three-quarters of youngsters have visited networking sites like Bebo and MySpace, with half of them setting up their own profile, some as young as eight years old.¹² A *Panorama* programme, “One Click Away From Danger” (7th January 2008) highlighted the dangers of such sites which are used by adults with dubious intentions posing as teenagers.

The Internet has become an insidious medium for pornography. “Internet pornography is easily accessible, affordable and anonymous, and can appear secret and safe. No Internet application is immune from pornography which is why it is so important to be careful when surfing alone.” Although primarily affecting men, increasingly women are being drawn into Internet pornography and chat rooms. It has been estimated that 1 in 5 Internet UK users are logging on to sexually explicit sites, with 40% of all searches being conducted from the office. About 3.8 million British home users logged on

⁷ For example, “Early Television Exposure and subsequent Attentional Problems in Children”, *Pediatrics*, Vol. 113, No. 4, April 2004.

⁸ *Developmental Psychology*, 2003, 39:201-21. *Science*. 2002, 295; 2468-71.

⁹ Quoted in Palmer, *op cit*, 261.

¹⁰ “The influence of violent media on children and adolescents: a public health approach”, *The Lancet*, Vol. 365, February 19, 2005, pp 702-710.

¹¹ Collins R L, Elliott M N, Berry S H, Kanouse D E, Kunkel D, Hunter S B, Miu A. “Watching sex on television predicts adolescent initiation of sexual behavior”, *Pediatrics*, 2004, Sep;114(3):e280-9.

¹² ChildWise Monitor Report, 2007.

to an adult site in June 2001. Evidence seems to point to internet pornography being addictive for some. It has produced a new word – “cybersex” – any form of sexual expression which is accessed through the Internet. Some researchers believe that 1% of the population “have a fully blown cybersex compulsion”.¹³

The Internet has major repercussions on church administration at national and local level. The church is able to communicate with the world through its various web sites. Visitors to the websites of local congregations can find out the times of the services, listen to sermons and view other useful information with ease. Church committees and congregational church courts can exchange information easily and quickly. But this comes with a health warning! E-mail can very easily be abused and should never replace face-to-face contact, especially when communicating sensitive information. There is also the whole question of confidentiality to consider, bearing in mind that other members of one’s family may be able to view outgoing and incoming emails. The immediacy and accessibility of emailing should never be an excuse for sending impolite or hurtful messages.

How do we Respond?

This article has highlighted the concerns which Television and the Internet have produced. How should we respond to these concerns? Getting rid of one’s TV and PC is a drastic measure which may well be appropriate in some circumstances, but seeking to find ways of moderating and controlling the amount of daily screen time, though difficult, may in the long term, prove a better alternative. The American Association of Pediatrics has recommended that children under the age of two should not watch any television at all, while Aric Sigman has raised this threshold to three,¹⁴ but this ignores the evidence that limited, good educational TV can actually aid toddlers’ language development.¹⁵ *Cbeebies* – the BBC channel for pre-school children – “avoids cartoons and ‘montage telly’ (cutting rapidly from shot to shot, as on many US children’s channels), instead aiming for gentle pacing, language appropriate to the age group and plenty of real-life presenters speaking directly to their young viewers.”¹⁶ As for older children, Sigman’s “Recommended Daily Amount” is one hour a day for children under 13; an hour-and-a-half for teenagers; and two hours for adults.¹⁷

The key factor here, of course is parental involvement and control of children’s viewing. Parents should attempt to watch programmes with their children and discuss what is seen. A good idea is for a family to discuss and plan which programmes should be watched, and so forestall or reduce family squabbles! Meal times should be a TV-free occasion to allow family discussion and the kids should not really be trying to do their homework with the telly on. Family routine should not be dictated to by the programme listings! All writers with a concern for the moral, spiritual and physical health of children are all adamant that children under 16 should not have a TV or internet access in their bedrooms where they can view or surf in unmonitored isolation. Having a supply of wholesome DVDs and videos can provide good alternatives to the “daily TV dose” and having access to non-screen entertainment (books, puzzles, board games, sport etc) and being able to work on hobbies and crafts, helps parents to think “outside the ‘box’”. Above all, it is essential that parents set their children a good example by what, and by how much, they watch themselves. It has been suggested that there is abundant evidence that “there’s nothing to be lost by watching less television but much to be lost by continuing to watch as we do. And the good news is that many of the ills and consequences attributed to television can be dramatically reduced or eliminated immediately by simply controlling how much and what type of television programmes we watch.”¹⁸

As well as being willing to complain to the television companies when they broadcast offensive programmes, we should not be slow to compliment them for showing wholesome and edifying material.

The Free Church should consider organizing conferences or workshops to deal with the issues raised in this article. Its web site should include guidance and support for individuals and families who may be

¹³ “Internet Misuse” on the Care website www.care.org.uk

¹⁴ Sigman, op cit, 262.

¹⁵ National Literacy Trust, as quoted on BBC News, 2005.

¹⁶ Palmer, op cit, 255-6.

¹⁷ Sigman, op cit, 262.

¹⁸ Sigman, op cit, 259-260.

struggling to control viewing habits. Its members should be aware of the many useful publications, resources and web sites in existence.

Much the same advice can be offered with regard to the Internet. Having the PC in a family space permits regular monitoring of what information is being seen or what games are being played. The installation of filtering software to prevent young people entering inappropriate sites is advisable, but such technology is rapidly outdated and outsmarted by determined hackers. The CARE website (www.care.org.uk) has an excellent section on *Internet Misuse* containing good practical advice for helping those being affected directly or indirectly by Internet pornography.

Finally

Television and the Internet present some of the greatest challenges facing us as individuals, as families and as a society. These media provide a useful means of communicating news, accessing information, providing educational support and wholesome entertainment, yet at the same time they have the potential to damage our physical, psychological, social and spiritual health. What better touchstone is there, when considering what we and our families watch, than the words of the apostle, “whatever is true, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.”¹⁹

Further reading

Bartley, Jonathan and Lucy, *The Parentalk Guide to Your Child and the Internet*, Hodder & Stoughton, 2003.

Children and the Media: Learning by Example? Mediawatch-uk, 2007.

Goodstein, Anastasia, *Totally Wired: What Teens and Tweenies are Really Doing Online*, St Martin’s Press, 2007.

Magid, Larry and Collier, Anne, *Myspace: Safe Online Networking for Your Kids*, Pearson Educational, 2007

Internet Safety: A Parent’s Guide, published by NCH, available on www.nch.org.uk/itok/internet_safety

Orange, Teresa and O’Flynn, Louise, *The Media Diet for Kids: A Parent’s Survival Guide to TV and Computer Games*, Hay House, 2005.

Palmer, Sue, *Toxic Childhood: How the Modern World is Damaging Our Children and What We Can Do About It*, Orion Books, 2006.

Palmer, Sue, *Detoxing Childhood: What Parents Need to Know to Raise Happy, Successful Children*, Orion Books, 2007.

Parsons, Rob, *Teenagers! What Every Parent Has to Know*, Hodder & Stoughton, 2007.

Postman, Neil, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, Heinemann, 1986.

Sigman, Aric, *Remotely Controlled: How Television is Damaging our Lives and What We Can Do About it*, Vermilion, 2005.

Useful websites

www.care.org.uk (A Christian research and educational organisation, with helpful material on a wide range of issues)

www.chatdanger.com (A magazine approach to issues, including phones, chatrooms and instant messaging)

www.childnet-int.org.uk (International campaign to make the Internet safer)

www.cyberangels.org (An international parents’ organisation)

www.kidsmart.org.uk (Basic safety advice)

www.mediawatchuk.org (Christian media pressure group)

www.nch.org.uk (Good advice for parents on internet safety)

www.unicef.org/magic (ideas for children)

¹⁹ Philippians 4:8