



Parunak, H. Van Dyke.

Except for Fornication: The Teaching of the Lord Jesus on Divorce and Remarriage

Critical Christian Issues 4

Gonzalez, FL: Energion, 2011. Pp. x + 85. Paper. \$9.99. ISBN 9781893729940.

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For nearly a decade I've had a nagging question about divorce and remarriage. I'm convinced that divorce is permissible, although not desirable, but the issue of remarriage has always given me fits. I can cite plenty of anecdotal evidence about people I know who have been divorced and remarried and who are happy and thriving and have successful ministries. On the surface, from such evidence, it would appear that God has blessed them in their second unions. But every time I come across Jesus' statements in Matthew 5:31-32 and 19:8-9 I struggle to understand how the second marriage isn't adultery.

In nearly a decade of pondering this issue I have yet to come across as clear an explanation as the one offered by H. Van Dyke Parunak (hereafter HVDP) in *Except for Fornication: The Teaching of the Lord Jesus on Divorce and Remarriage*. This slim volume is the fourth in Energion Press' Areopagus Critical Christian Issues series. It comes in at a scant 77 pages, not including bibliography & indices, but it's extremely focused and well argued even if at times technical.

HVDP spends chapter 1 explaining the interpretation of Matthew 5:31-32; 19:9 that says remarriage is permissible if the divorce was the result of fornication, a position that goes back to Erasmus and is subsequently referred to as "Erasmus' view." This creates a number of puzzles within the verses themselves, the local context, and the other Gospels, which omit the "except for fornication" clause.

Chapters 2 & 3 journey back to the Old Testament in order to examine exactly what the Law said about both fornication and divorce. Here HVDP surveys Deuteronomy 22:13-29, which deals with illicit sexual relationships and their consequences, and 24:1-4, which addresses divorce and remarriage but has been read in two opposing ways; one that allows for remarriage and one that does not. HVDP suggests that death, not divorce, is what terminates a marriage according to the Law, and that remarriage is permissible only in the case of death.

Chapters 4 & 5 return to the New Testament by examining Jesus' correction of Jewish errors and Paul's reaffirmation of Jesus' teaching respectively. HVDP is able to present an interpretation that eliminates the inconsistencies created by Erasmus' view in showing that Jesus upheld the Law's position on marriage being terminated by death. Paul upholds Jesus' teaching where Jesus speaks explicitly, and where he does not, Paul offers instruction to the Corinthians that is in line with what Jesus taught, that is, in the case of the abandoned believer, they are not free to remarry, even though they are no longer enslaved to their spouse in terms of performing marital duties.

Jesus' opponents had become lax in their view of the law and therefore allowed divorce. Some allowed it for any reason while others allowed it only for fornication. The world in general and the church in particular has adopted this same lax attitude toward divorce and remarriage. Chapter 6 is a brief commendation of marriage and God's ability to fix the rockiest of relationships. I can say with sincerity that HVDP has cleared up some nagging issues for me and for that I'm thankful.

I would have liked to have seen HVDP address the issue of forgiveness in situations where divorce and remarriage has taken place. Sure, he's established that the Lord did not support divorce, and that in the Lord's mind only death could truly terminate a marriage, but what do we do in situations where divorce and remarriage have taken place? The remarriage is adultery, at least according to Jesus, but is it forgivable? What do we tell people who have been divorced and remarried and have started new families? Is there hope for them or isn't there? I'd be curious to learn where HVDP comes down on this issue.

And if I had to lodge one criticism it would be in HVDP's statement that "The church is a spiritual organism, not a civil government with authority to define what constitutes a marriage" (58). The church is an extension of the God it serves and worships, and God has defined what constitutes marriage. Civil governments have no such authority. But this gripe aside, I can enthusiastically recommend HVDP's work as a helpful contribution to a difficult subject.