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## Broken Church for Broken Couples: How the divided church should take care of divorced persons

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## **Broken Church for Broken Couples: How the Divided Church Should Take Care of Divorced Persons**

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### **Abstract**

This article challenges the radical anti-divorce attitude embraced by most churches in Asia. Although such an attitude is based on Jesus's saying, it contradicts what Jesus really meant. Jesus resisted the Jewish tradition of easy divorce for the sake of the victimized, particularly the wife. It is, therefore, suggested that instead of falling into legalism, the church's approach regarding divorce should start from its own reality as a broken fellowship that yet still attempts to be a channel of the Good News.

### **Keywords**

Divorce, remarriage, Christian realism, family, church

### **INTRODUCTION**

Recent research on the family shows that the meanings and features of families in twenty-first-century Asia have undergone a significant shift from their traditional image. For example, Stella Quah's study of families in East and Southeast Asia covering seventeen countries indicates that the family structure in the region has undergone changes marked by, among other things, a higher percentage of divorce and an increase in the average age of marriage.<sup>1</sup> Many factors have been mentioned as the causes of

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1 Stella Quah, "Major Trends Affecting Families in East and Southeast Asia" (New York: UN Programme on the Family Division for Social Policy and Development Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2013). See also Premchand Dommaraju and Gavin Jones, "Divorce Trends in Asia," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 39, no. 6

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divorce, including the weakening of patriarchal culture in which wives are expected to stay in unhappy marriages to avoid social pressure and negative economic consequences. Today's situation, with the number of women entering the professional world equal to that of men, makes wives less dependent on their husbands economically as well as socially, and thus the choice for independent living becomes more rational. Yang and Yen suggest that the nature of marriage in East Asian societies has shifted from primarily institutional to more personal and individual so that the aspects of emotion, companionship, gender egalitarianism, and self-actualization are given priority.<sup>2</sup> Studying the situation in Indonesia, Mark Cammack and Tim Heaton also find a similar phenomenon. Their research shows that modernization has affected Asian families in different ways. In the early stage, in the case of traditional families that previously practiced arranged marriages, the number of divorces was reduced as marriage became more love-based and therefore the bond between wife and husband was stronger than in arranged marriages. However, in the case of modern families more exposed to global media which promotes a flexible attitude toward divorce, the number of divorces increases.<sup>3</sup> The situation of today's Asian families, therefore, is becoming similar to that of their Western counterparts in terms of nuclearization, gender egalitarianism, and the wife's economic independence. The ideal of marriage has now changed from that of the traditional one, which allows little room for personal and individual interests, particularly that of the wife. An increase in divorce is a consequence of an increase in the sense of freedom from the constraints of the traditional community.

Traditionally the church upholds the principle of permanent monogamous marriage. In that principle there is no room for divorce. The Roman Catholic Church even considers marriage as a sacrament and, for that reason, applies the doctrine of "indissolubility."<sup>4</sup> Protestant churches

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(2011): 725-750.

2 Yang Wen-Shan and Yen Pei-Chih, "A Comparative Study of Marital Dissolution in East Asian Societies: Gender Attitudes and Social Expectations towards Marriage in Taiwan, Korea and Japan," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 39, no. 6 (2011): 753.

3 Mark Cammack and Tim Heaton, "Explaining the Recent Upturn in Divorce in Indonesia: Developmental Idealism and the Effect of Political Change," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 39, no. 6 (2011): 777-778.

4 The term "indissolubility" was introduced by the Council of Trent in the sixteenth

are not much different in holding the principle of indivisible marriage, although they do not regard marriage as a sacrament.<sup>5</sup> Such a principle encourages the church to prepare Christian marriages carefully. Most churches set certain preconditions to ensure that the marriages of their members have been carefully considered and that no one has been harmed. Not all Christian couples survive, however. In the case of divorce, many churches in Asia tend to be passive if not negative, letting members facing divorce solve their own problem. Churches do offer pastoral care, but such ministry is not always effective because the situation of couples facing divorce has usually reached a serious stage when brought to the attention of the church.<sup>6</sup> Church ministers often face the dilemma between, on the one hand, the official doctrine of the church, which rejects divorce, and, on the other hand, pastoral considerations, which takes into account that divorce can offer a reasonable way out for particular couples who have been suffering for quite a long time.<sup>7</sup> Within the Roman Catholic Church, there is also a “disconnect” between the anti-divorce doctrine and what is called “*sensus fidelium*,” that is, the belief of the majority of believers that

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century. According to Himes and Corden, it was more a church legal term than a moral one. See Kenneth R. Himes and James A. Coriden, “The Indissolubility of Marriage: Reasons to Reconsider,” *Theological Studies* 65, no. 3 (September 1, 2004): 453-499, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056390406500301>. The rejection of divorce in Roman Catholic canon law is actually not absolute. Referring to 1 Cor 7:12-16 as an exception of the indissolubility principle, the Roman Catholic Church may approve certain cases of divorce by the so-called Pauline Privilege. See V. Indra Sanjaya, “Ketidakdapatceraiannya Perkawinan Dalam Ajaran Gereja Katolik,” in *Perceraian Di Persimpangan Jalan: Menelisik Perjanjian Lama Dan Tradisi Abrahamik*, ed. Robert Setio and Daniel Listijabudi (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2015), 229. For Lawler and Salzman, the Pauline Privilege is based on Paul’s contextual “re-reception” of Jesus’s saying about divorce. See Michael G. Lawler and Todd A. Salzman, “Catholic Doctrine on Divorce and Remarriage: A Practical Theological Examination,” *Theological Studies* 78, no. 2 (June 1, 2017): 341, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563917698954>.

- 5 The radical anti-divorce policy of Protestant churches is in fact inconsistent with Calvin, who accepted divorce for the reasons of adultery and faith difference. See Lauren F. Winner, “Lectio Divina and Divorce: Reflections in Twelve Parts about What Divorce Has to Teach the Church,” *Anglican Theological Review* 97, no. 2 (April 1, 2015): 293, <https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1P3-3681467071/lectio-divina-and-divorce-reflections-in-twelve-parts>.
- 6 Robert Weise, “Marriage the Divine and Blessed Walk of Life,” *Concordia Journal* 40, no. 1 (September 17, 2015): 46-57, <https://scholar.csl.edu/cj/vol40/iss1/6>.
- 7 Himes and Coriden, “The Indissolubility of Marriage”: 455.

perceives divorce as not affecting the quality of faith.<sup>8</sup> Lawler and Salzman therefore call for the church to review its anti-divorce position, learning from the cases of usury, slavery, and religious freedom, in which a sort of realist approach is employed that would result in the revision of the church doctrines concerning those issues.<sup>9</sup>

This article examines the church's position concerning divorce not only by reviewing the biblical resources on which the principle of indivisible marriage is based, but also by departing from the reality of the church itself. Since the family and the church share an essential nature, namely, as a form of fellowship of faith, the church's attitude and policy concerning the family should be consistent with those regarding the reality of the church itself.

### THE FAMILY AS SMALL CHURCH

Theologically, the family, just like the church, is a community of faith. Puritan theologian Jonathan Edwards accurately names the family the "small church."<sup>10</sup> In similar fashion, the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church refers to the family as the "domestic church."<sup>11</sup> For the Puritans, every household is a fellowship of faith in which every father serves as the priest for his family. The Puritans followed Martin Luther, who refused to separate the sacred life and secular life. What is practiced in Sunday worship should be realized during the rest of the week in the family. In the Puritan tradition and many other Protestant groups, family worship is a daily activity. Luther himself referred to the family as the form of the kingdom of God on earth in which parents educate their children according to the Law of God.<sup>12</sup> The tradition of worship in the family is, in fact, not a new invention of the Puritans. The roots of that tradition

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8 Lawler and Salzman, "Catholic Doctrine on Divorce and Remarriage."

9 Lawler and Salzman, "Catholic Doctrine on Divorce and Remarriage": 330.

10 Peter Beck, "The 'Little Church': Raising a Spiritual Family with Jonathan Edwards," *Puritan Reformed Journal* 2, no. 1 (2010): 342.

11 Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* #11, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html).

12 Jeffrey C. Robinson, "The Home Is an Earthly Kingdom: Family Discipleship among Reformers and Puritans," *Journal of Discipleship and Family Ministry* 3, no. 1 (2012): 18-21.

can actually be traced back to the people of the Old Testament. In ancient Hebrew society, family worship was an older tradition than that of public worship, which was then centered in the Temple. In later developments, both traditions affected each other in accordance with the dynamics of the relationship between the role of society and the role of the family.<sup>13</sup>

Today, such traditions are still preserved by many Christian communities. Daniel Frei's research shows that the concept of the family as small church is also present among Pentecostal churches in Chile.<sup>14</sup> Such an understanding is part of the contextual approach of the church to the local community, which is not much different from the Asian communities in term of prioritizing family. Thus, both the family and the church are the loci of the spiritual devotion based on God's covenant. In that sense, both institutions rely on the mercy and work of God's renewal.

Given the shared nature of the family and the church, the ideal picture of the family should be comparable to the ideal picture of the church. As a fellowship, the family is designed to be a united, just, joyful and peaceful community, as well as a place for the education and practice of the spirituality of its members, just as the church is meant to be a fellowship of God's children with Jesus Christ as its center.

### THE FAMILY AND THE CHURCH AS A REALITY

The peaceful, joyful, just, united, and holy community of God's children can only be understood eschatologically. Such an ideal fellowship is hard to find in the present world. Every form of fellowship encounters problems such as painful conflicts, injustices, quarrels, hypocrisy, and even violence. Some communities can solve their problems, yet many others are not able to survive without getting worse. The church is not spared such problems, and in fact the church also experiences divisions at the universal, denominational, and local levels.

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13 Robert Setio, "Keluarga Dalam Masyarakat Israel," in *Perceraian Di Persimpangan Jalan: Menelisik Perjanjian Lama Dan Tradisi Abrahamik*, ed. Robert Setio and Daniel Listijabudi (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2015), 10-11.

14 Daniel Frei, "The Pentecostal Church as a Family—the Pentecostal Family as Church," *PentecoStudies: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Research on the Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* 10, no. 2 (October 25, 2011): 239-57.

Just as the church was unable to avoid fragmentation, so many families have been unable to resist divorce. Christian families are no exception. A Barna Group's research finding indicates that the divorce rate among Christian couples from the evangelical tradition in America, which is known to uphold family values and therefore is strongly anti-divorce, is no less high than that of other Christian traditions.<sup>15</sup> Himes and Coriden's observation concerning divorce among Roman Catholics also demonstrates more or less the same result,<sup>16</sup> as does the research carried out by Lawler and Salzman.<sup>17</sup>

Because the family has an essential parallel with the church, the attitude toward divorce should be consistent with the attitude toward church disunity. Both divorce and division of the church are far from ideal, and therefore should be avoided wherever possible, but in certain cases they need to be accepted as an inevitable reality. A possible response to this reality is for the church to help the divorced couple re-form their relationship. If they can no longer love each other as husband and wife, they could still be encouraged to build a new respectful relationship less exclusive than marriage.

### CHRISTIAN REALISM APPROACH

Such a realism attitude does not mean ignoring or forgetting the ideal picture. The ideal picture is necessary as an inspiration and vision. Yet, as Don Browning et al. note, Protestant theologians from Luther to Reinhold Niebuhr have warned not to use the ideal image as the basis for moralistic acts of violence and justification for spiritual pride.<sup>18</sup> Christian realism recognizes the dialectic between upholding the ideal image as an encouraging and inspiring vision, and accepting the present-day situation that is not ideal but still deserves to be an imperfect mirror (1 Cor 13:12) of that ideal image. Approaches that recognize such dialectics can be called

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15 Bradley R.E Wright, C. Zozula, and W.B. Wilcox, "Bad News about the Good News: The Construction of the Christian-Failure Narrative," *Journal of Religion and Society* 14 (2012): 1-19.

16 Himes and Coriden, "The Indissolubility of Marriage": 415.

17 Lawler and Salzman, "Catholic Doctrine on Divorce and Remarriage": 339.

18 Don S. Browning et al., eds., *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 272.

realism approaches. Such an approach is evident in Jesus's ethical stance. On the one hand, he tells his disciples to be perfect "even as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Mt 5:48), but on the other hand, he affirms that "no one is good except God alone" (Lk 18:19). In term of Jesus's attitude concerning the family, he also uses a realism approach. Jesus reaffirms the Old Testament view that the family is part of God's creation. Hence, he regards the sacredness of family integrity and rejects the habit of divorcing wives easily (Mt 19:4-6). Jesus also celebrates a wedding at Cana and performs his first miracle there (Jn 2:1-11). In addition, wedding is also used as an image of the kingdom of God (Mt 22:1-14). Jesus also teaches, however, that in reality the family often becomes an obstacle for people who really want to work for the kingdom of God; thus he relativizes the family: "Whoever loves his father or mother more than me...and whoever loves his sons and daughters more than me, he is not worthy of me" (Mt 10:37). The relativization of the family in light of the kingdom is implicitly demonstrated in Jesus's own choice for singleness. The apostle Paul also employs a realism approach in his advice concerning family life. He values marriage and emphasizes the importance of maintaining loyalty in the family. However, he assumes that in the particular situation he is contemplating, single life is better for the persons who can tolerate it (1 Cor 7:1-16).

The realism approach in respect to the family can also be seen in the Old Testament. The family portraits in the Old Testament are, in fact, ambiguous. Biblical traditions are generally family-based.<sup>19</sup> Biblical stories show that the family is an integral part of human civilization. The creation narrative depicts God as the creator of the human family, and God makes the fellowship of the husband and the wife so intense, involving all dimensions of the human being,<sup>20</sup> that it is called "one flesh" (Gn 2:18-25). Nevertheless, the biblical portrait of a family that fulfills the ideal image of a fellowship is extremely rare. In contrast, most families described in the Bible are problematic. Even the first family experienced the killing of a younger brother by his own sibling (Gn 4:1-16). The first spouse has committed a fatal mistake that causes prolonged suffering (Gn 3:1-19).

19 Hugh Pyper, ed., *The Christian Family: A Concept in Crisis* (Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 1996), 15.

20 Richard P. Olson and C.D. Pia-Terry, *Ministry with Remarried Persons* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1984), 14.



The subsequent families face the problem of betrayal, infidelity, fraud, or other crimes. As Paula Cooley argues, the notion of an ideal family is a “nostalgic idealization of family life” based rather on eisegesis of the Christian conservative camp than on thoughtful biblical hermeneutics.<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that throughout those biblical stories, the themes are not the weaknesses and failings of the family, since the essence of the stories is the great mercy of God that enables the less than ideal families to experience God’s forgiveness.

In short, the biblical picture of the family is more or less equal to that of the community of God’s people. Both are created by God, affirmed by the covenant of God’s steadfast love, and in that sense, both the family and the people of God are holy. In reality, however, families and the people of God on a whole fail to fulfill their part in the divine covenant. They repeatedly invite disasters and sufferings because of their failure to be faithful to the God who loves them. Yet, God always forgives them and gives them new opportunities. That is why the ideal future is not dependent on the perfection of the human side, but on the mercy of God alone.

### MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE IN THE BIBLE

In terms of marriage and divorce, the Bible does not present a consistent picture. Bernard Jackson’s study shows that, at least until the time of Ezra, marriage in Hebrew society was a purely social event and not included in the worship ceremony.<sup>22</sup> The law on marriage also places greater emphasis on economic considerations than what is now known as “the sanctity of marriage.” Generally speaking, in both the Old and the New Testaments, divorce is not taken lightly but is not always forbidden. God approves of Abraham’s divorce with Hagar (Gn 21:12); the law of Moses opens the possibility of divorce under certain conditions (Dt 24:1-4); Jesus also allows

21 Paula M. Cooley, *Family, Freedom, and Faith: Building Community Today*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 17.

22 Bernard S. Jackson, “The ‘Institutions’ of Marriage and Divorce in the Hebrew Bible,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 56, no. 2 (October 1, 2011): 221-251, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jss/fgr002>. See also Listijabudi’s study stating that marriage at that time was a private contract signifying the inclusion of the wife into the husband’s family: Daniel Listijabudi, “Perkawinan Dalam Kehidupan Israel Alkitab: Tinjauan Sosio-Teologis,” in *Perceraian Di Persimpangan Jalan: Menelisik Perjanjian Lama Dan Tradisi Abrahamik*, ed. Robert Setio and Daniel Listijabudi (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2015), 35.

divorce for adultery (Mt 19:9); and Paul permits divorce of unbelieving spouses if initiated by the unbeliever (1 Cor 7:15). According to Jackson, the rule of divorce in the Bible, especially the Old Testament, is not intended to limit divorce itself, but rather to prevent the misuse of divorce.<sup>23</sup> In general, the permission for divorce in the Bible is always accompanied by efforts to make the parties concerned continue to experience blessings, peace, and justice. In the case of the divorce of Abraham and Hagar, God's approval of Sarah's demand for the divorce and God's promise to Hagar were an attempt to free Hagar from the prolonged suffering she experienced as a foreign woman and slave.<sup>24</sup> In the case of the divorce concession for the Corinthians (1 Cor 7:15), Paul's purpose was also for the peace of the parties concerned. From that case it becomes clear that Paul did not promote marriage to be preserved at all costs.<sup>25</sup> From the perspective of Paul's theology of salvation, living in peace is more important than maintaining a marriage without a mutually shared spiritual basis.

Although the biblical passages concerning divorce always permit divorce as an exception, many Asian churches tend to impose absolute denial of divorce. The basis of the church's rigid position is usually a quote from the words of Jesus that "what God has joined together, let no one separate" (Mt 19:6). It should be noted that the saying is part of Jesus's dialectic about divorce, on the one hand affirming his appreciation for marriage and, on the other hand, giving consent to divorce in the case of adultery, given the fact that there are families that have become so damaged by adultery. Richard Olson and C.D. Pia-Terry suggest an interpretation of the passage that recognizes the hyperbolic nature of Jesus's words, which were intended to challenge divorce as a common practice in his society.<sup>26</sup> They also believe that Jesus's criticism of the tradition of divorce in his society was based not on a concept of the family as a sacred institution, but rather on the concern for the fate of the weaker party, usually the woman,

23 Jackson, "The 'Institutions' of Marriage and Divorce in the Hebrew Bible": 241.

24 Monike Hukubun, "Abraham Menceraikan Hagar: Memahami Kejadian 21:8-21 Dari Perspektif Korban Kekerasan," in *Perceraian Di Persimpangan Jalan: Menelisik Perjanjian Lama Dan Tradisi Abrahamik*, ed. Robert Setio and Daniel Listijabudi (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2015), 69.

25 Ruth Schafer and A Freshia, *Bercerai Boleh Atau Tidak?: Tafsiran Teks-Teks Perjanjian Baru* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2013), 180.

26 Olson and Pia-Terry, *Ministry with Remarried Persons*, 25.

which was the object of divorce in that patriarchal society.<sup>27</sup> Concurrently, Richard McCarty advises today's readers not to ignore the peculiarities of the cultural background of the time of Jesus. He points out that Jesus's saying in Matthew 19 was addressed to the patriarchal society that gave men the right to divorce their wives easily. On the contrary, the wife's chance to initiate divorce was very small because of the complexity of the prerequisites that they had to fulfill. The social context of Jesus's saying was also colored by the tradition of polygamy and the right of male ownership over his wife(s) and all family members.<sup>28</sup> In such a context, Jesus's saying can be understood as a criticism of the patriarchal tradition and an attempt to defend women as the weak and disadvantaged party in divorce cases. Furthermore, Richard McCarty states that the marriage ban for divorced men shows Jesus's rejection of a tradition that gives men a one-sided right of ownership over their wives.<sup>29</sup> With this prohibition, Jesus intended to claim the wife's ownership rights over her husband so that the right of ownership in the household would no longer be one-sided. Ruth Schafer and Freshia Ross even interpret the divorce prohibition in Matthew 19 as a statement of Jesus's nullifying, not just limiting, the privileges of husbands in the Jewish marriage system.<sup>30</sup> It should also be noted that Himes and Coriden's research suggests that although Jesus rejects the tradition of divorce, there is no passage in Scripture showing Jesus denouncing a divorced person in the same way as he condemns the hypocritical religious leaders.<sup>31</sup> Employing the historical-critical approach, Lawler and Salzman believe that the phrase pertaining to adultery in Matthew 19 is not originally from Jesus but Matthew's editorial addition intended as a contextual "reception" addressed to the Jewish community in which divorce was widely practiced. They believe that today's "re-reception" of the verse is needed in order for the text to remain contextual.<sup>32</sup> As Simon Joseph notes, Jesus's saying

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27 Olson and Pia-Terry, *Ministry with Remarried Persons*, 25.

28 Richard W. McCarty, *Sexual Virtue: An Approach to Contemporary Christian Ethics* (N.Y: SUNY Press, 2015), 122-123.

29 McCarty, *Sexual Virtue*, 125.

30 Schafer and Freshia, *Bercerai Boleh Atau Tidak?: Tafsiran Teks-Teks Perjanjian Baru*, 147.

31 Himes and Coriden, "The Indissolubility of Marriage": 468.

32 Lawler and Salzman, "Catholic Doctrine on Divorce and Remarriage": 341-342.

forbidding divorce, which belongs to the Q source, is an eschatological statement. It was not intended as an alternative to the Mosaic law.<sup>33</sup>

Overall, Jesus's criticism of the common practice of divorce and remarriage as recorded in Matthew 19 was a part of his struggle for justice and compassion for those who were easily harmed in the society of his day. The pattern of marriage in today's society is undoubtedly not identical with that in the time of Jesus.<sup>34</sup> Yet, contemporary divorce carried out carelessly, abusing those in the weaker positions, still needs to be confronted with Jesus's ethical statements. Those statements, then, must not be employed as a theological reference for taking marriage lightly so as to support divorce for any reason. Divorce and remarriage disregarding the principle of justice and peace are an assault on family existence and a denial of the future kingdom of God. At the same time, the absolute denial of divorce and remarriage without mercy and empathy, much less simply because "it is written in the Bible," is also far from Jesus's intention when criticizing divorce. The literal and legalistic application of the biblical verse without considering the complexity of today's household problems does not reflect the gospel of Jesus Christ, which pictures God as a Father who, with his unlimited love, embraces his children, especially those facing a dilemma and difficult situation.

### **BRINGING GOOD NEWS FOR DIVORCED PERSONS**

Pastoral policy, both in the case of pastoral care for the divorced and that of pastoral assistance for those considering divorce, should always be made with the spirit of bringing the Good News to the parties involved. Consistently, it is not always easy for pastors and church leaders to decide whether or not a particular case of divorce is worth supporting. They may need to go through fresh reflection as well as thoughtful theological consultation. They should not assume that the church's traditions and policies have always been consistent with the biblical witness. Reflecting on the situation of the Roman Catholic Church, Himes and Coriden state that

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<sup>33</sup> Simon J. Joseph, "'For Heaven and Earth to Pass Away?,'" *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 105, no. 2 (2014): 177, <https://doi.org/10.1515/znw-2014-0011>.

<sup>34</sup> Cooley, *Family, Freedom, and Faith*, 16.

Jesus's teachings are not exactly the same as the teachings of the church, though this does not mean that the church teaching violates the biblical witness. What they emphasize is that the church's attitudes and policies should not be held to be the only position that is biblically justifiable. In the case of divorce, the compatibility between the doctrine of indissolubility and the New Testament's theology of marriage, including Jesus's resistance of the divorce tradition, should not be taken for granted.<sup>35</sup> In order to connect with the present reality, the church needs to take into account alternative views from biblical sources. Certainly, the church must not abandon its commitment to defend the weak and the victimized. In that case, a firm rejection of particular cases of divorce should be maintained. It should be noted that the injured party in today's divorce is not only the wife, but also the husband<sup>36</sup> and especially the children. Therefore, Julie Rubio suggests that marriage should be understood not just as "two being one flesh" but "three being one flesh" by putting children into it.<sup>37</sup> A recent research on divorce in Asia reveals that children of single-parent families tend to perform poorly in education, social relationship, and general wellbeing.<sup>38</sup>

What also needs to be explicitly rejected is the development of an "easy divorce" culture. Stephen Post distinguishes between divorce caused by high-level conflicts and divorce caused by low-level conflicts. He refers to a study showing that 70 percent of divorces in America are caused by low-level conflicts that can still actually be overcome.<sup>39</sup> Such a phenomenon is an indication of the rise of a divorce culture that is clearly contrary to the concept of the faithful family implied in Jesus's statement.

On the other hand, the church needs to reject equally firmly a culture that resists divorce even in situations of oppression, violence, gender discrimination, and humiliation in the family. The concern of the church should be addressed not primarily to marriage as an institution, but to

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35 Himes and Coriden, "The Indissolubility of Marriage": 468-470.

36 Stephen Post shows the data indicating that divorced men make up a significant portion of the psychiatric patient list. See Stephen Garrard Post, *More Lasting Unions: Christianity, the Family, and Society* (Eerdmans, 2000), 14.

37 Julie H. Rubio, "Three-in-One Flesh: A Christian Appraisal of Divorce in Light of Recent Studies," *Journal for the Society of Christian Ethics* 23, no. 1 (2003): 53.

38 Dommaraju and Jones, "Divorce Trends in Asia": 746-747.

39 Post, *More Lasting Unions*, 14-15.

family members whose fate is affected by the church's attitudes and policies about divorce. In expressing its firm stance, the church needs first to realize that it is itself guilty of the "divorce" of the fellowship of Christ's disciples who should be holy and one. The church needs self-consciously to affirm that its approach is based not on its own perfection or superiority, but on the surrender, faith, and openness to God's love, forgiveness, and work of renewal. In determining a policy with regard to divorced members, the church needs to balance its biblical reference to the anti-divorce saying in Matthew 19 with Jesus's realism approach, such as in the case of a woman caught in adultery (Jn 8:1-11). When the scribes and Pharisees dragged before Jesus a woman caught in adultery, Jesus's response was not based on the ideal concept that was reflected in the prevailing traditions and laws. By tradition and law, it is clear that the woman had no hope of escaping punishment. All that Jesus did was to make the crowds who dragged the woman to question the state of their own lives. It became clear that no one had lived an ideal life without sin. The question of Jesus was actually to challenge the attitude of the crowd, who first acted like a flawless community in which there was no place for a sinner like that woman. With his question, Jesus shifted their attention from the ideal image of a sinless community to the imperfect reality in which they themselves belonged. Having made aware of imperfection in one's own self as the starting point, no one dared to carry out the death penalty for the woman accused of adultery.

Divorced people are often in a position similar to that of the woman. If the church's attitude toward them is merely for the preservation of a tradition and for the sake of church order, there will be no good news for them. A self-aware church should avoid misusing the ideal family image as a justification for being judgmental or spiritually abusive against people who are unable to avoid divorce. A proper attitude is to make the church itself an example of how a nonideal reality can still be a venue for the presence of "signs of the kingdom of God" that heal, promote peace, and fight for justice. As Paul notes, the presence of the kingdom of God in the contemporary situation can be likened to such a precious treasure in a cracked and fragile clay vessel (2 Cor 4:7). The same imagery can be used for divorced people. Divorced families, like church divisions, do not need to produce hostile and hateful relationships. Churches that are already

fragmented can build mutually respectful relationships, make peace with one another, and even work together on joint mission projects. Divorced people need to be helped to build similar relationships. For those who have children, the church can be a facilitator in order that, once they are no longer husband and wife, they are continuing their commitment to their parenting functions.<sup>40</sup>

At the same time, the church can learn a lot from divorce cases. Lauren Winner describes how experiences with divorced people can teach the church to live out in real life situations great themes in the teachings of the church itself. The themes include the fragility of humans, the grace of God, the difference between humans and God, resurrection, and loving the enemy. The divorced couples' experience can help the church to articulate its doctrines in grounded and optimistic ways without getting caught up in utopianism. Thus, the church can develop pastoral approaches that are more sensitive to the bitter realities of life.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, instead of acting like a judge behind his black gown that conceals his personal flaws, the church should be present as a faithful companion to divorced persons, with no arrogance, no punishing spirit, and no burden to protect its own reputation.

### **About author**

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40 Rubio, "Three-in-One Flesh": 66.

41 Winner, "Lectio Divina and Divorce": 281-290.