

*Remarriage after Divorce in Today's Church – 3 Views*

(Counterpoints)

Gordon J. Wenham, William A. Heth and  
Craig S. Keener

Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006 161 pp., £8.99, pb,  
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SUMMARY

Three positions on remarriage are defended by the three authors: "No remarriage after divorce" (the traditional church position), "Remarriage for adultery or desertion" (i.e. remarriage after a valid ground for divorce), and "Remarriage for circumstances beyond adultery or desertion" (i.e. for valid grounds which are inferred from biblical principles). For the reader who wants a quick overview of the breadth of protestant biblical interpretations on remarriage, this single small volume covers everything of note up to the twentieth century.

RÉSUMÉ

Trois auteurs défendent trois positions différentes sur le remariage suite au divorce : 1) l'interdiction du remariage après un divorce (la position traditionnelle) ; 2) l'autorisation du remariage seulement lorsqu'il y a eu divorce pour cause d'adultère ou d'abandon par le conjoint (le remariage après un divorce fondé sur des raisons légitimes) ; 3) l'autorisation du remariage en d'autres circonstances (suite à un divorce jugé légitime en vertu de certains principes bibliques). Le lecteur qui veut se faire une idée des différentes positions au sein du protestantisme trouvera dans ce petit ouvrage tout ce qui mérite l'attention parmi ce qui a été dit jusqu'au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Drei Positionen zur Frage der Wiederverheiratung werden von den drei Autoren verteidigt: "Keine Wiederverheiratung nach einer Scheidung" (die traditionelle kirchliche Position), "Wiederverheiratung bei Ehebruch oder Verlassen der Ehe" (d. h. Wiederverheiratung bei einem stichhaltigen Grund für die Scheidung) und "Wiederverheiratung bei Umständen, die über Ehebruch oder Verlassen hinaus gehen" (d. h. bei stichhaltigen Gründen, die man aus biblischen Prinzipien ableitet). Für Leser, die einen schnellen Überblick über die Breite der protestantischen biblischen Interpretationen zur Frage der Wiederverheiratung suchen, umfasst dieser kleine Band alles Erwähnenswerte bis ins 20. Jahrhundert hinein.

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The biblical teaching on remarriage is an issue which touches every church minister and almost every family in each congregation. This book brings together three viewpoints, each presented by a different person and then, as in all the titles in this series, allows the contributors a brief response to each other's chapters. This is a very useful format and sometimes the most illuminating material is in these responses.

The three positions are "No remarriage after divorce" by Gordon Wenham, "Remarriage for adultery or desertion" by William Heth and "Remarriage for circumstances beyond adultery or desertion". These three have all authored substantial works on this subject, though the positions they defend in this book do not always represent the main thrust of their own teaching.

All three authors agree that the subject rests on just a few texts in which Jesus appears to disallow all remarriage (Mk.10.11f, Lk.16.18), and Jesus appears to allow remarriage for *porneia* (Mt.5.32; 19.9) and Paul tells someone desertion by an unbeliever that they are "no longer bound" (1 Cor.7.15). They all agree that *porneia* refers to marital unfaithfulness, though Keener thinks the definition may be slightly wider, and they all agree that if even if someone has remarried when they should not have done, the church should not seek to end that second marriage.

Their differences lie in the ways in which they deal with problems arising from these texts: Why does Jesus appear to contradict himself? And why does Paul appear to add an exception not mentioned by Jesus?

Wenham defends the position taught by all church leaders up to the Reformation, with very few exceptions, that Jesus allowed no remarriage after divorce unless a former partner died. Paul's phrase "no longer bound" confers freedom from marriage for someone who has been abandoned, but not freedom to remarry. Jesus' exception "for *porneia*" allows them to separate and possibly to divorce, but not to remarry. In his response to Heth, Wenham lists the three strongest arguments for this case: outside Matthew there is no verse which even hints that remarriage is possible; a no-remarriage view is the only one which explains why Jesus goes on to speak about living like a eunuch in Matthew 19; and the early church was virtually unanimous in this teaching.

Both Heth and Keener respond to the issue of early church teaching, pointing out that early Christians knew very little about the Jewish context of Jesus' teaching, and that they had their own ascetic agenda which caused many of them to promote celibacy for widows and priests as well as divorcees. They also point out that the phrase "no longer bound" (1 Cor.7.15) is closely related to the language on ancient divorce certificates: "You are now free to marry". Neither of them deal with the "eunuch" teaching, but perhaps they felt it was unnecessary, because it is not difficult to read this together with remarriage: Matthew says Jesus' disciples were dismayed to hear that they could not divorce a wife at a whim (as Judaism taught) and said "then it might be better not to marry!", to which Jesus answered that for some it was right to live as a eunuch.

Heth defends the position taken by most Protestant churches, that Jesus disallowed divorce with one exception (unfaithfulness) and that Paul added another (desertion by an unbeliever). He reads Jesus' teaching in the light of the Pharisaic dispute at the time, in which Hillelites propounded a new type of divorce for 'any



cause', whereas Shammaites allowed divorce only for adultery. He says that Jesus sided with the Shammaites, though they demanded divorce for adultery while he only allowed it. Matthew added the Hillelite phrases 'for any cause' and the Shammaite response 'except for *porneia*' because he wrote after Mark, at a time when this dispute was not so well known. Mark's readers would have mentally added these phrases, just as we mentally add to the question "Do you believe in the Second Coming", the phrase which makes this question meaningful: "of Jesus Christ".

Heth goes beyond the traditional Protestant position by allowing remarriage after a valid divorce. Jesus said that remarriage was adulterous in order to emphasise that the divorce was invalid – ie the person getting remarriage was still married. But if Jesus allowed people to get a valid divorce when their partner was unfaithful, then surely Jesus allowed those people to get remarried. He recognizes that some texts record Jesus teaching that all who remarry commit adultery, and he says that the exception must be read from one text into the others. Both he and Keener point out that Jesus often used hyperbole to emphasise his point. When Jesus says that "whoever says 'You fool!' is liable to hell fire" (Mt.5.22) we have to add "unless he has good cause" because Jesus himself used this insult (Mt.23.17). When Jesus says "whoever looks at a woman lustfully has committed adultery" (Mt.5.28) we have to add "unless she is his wife". In the same way, when Jesus says "Whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery" we have to add "unless she has a valid divorce".

Keener has the most difficult task when he presents reasons why remarriage might be allowed after divorces other than those specifically allowed in the New Testament. He starts from the standpoint of Heth, and argues that the two New Testament exceptions are instances from which we have to infer principles. Jesus mentioned unfaithfulness because this was the Shammaite position in the debate he was asked about, and Paul mentioned desertion because this is what was happening in Corinth. Neither of them addressed the issue of violence done to a partner or to their children, or the issue of drug addiction leading to impoverishment and illegal means of raising money. The fact that these and other situations did not arise or were not envisioned does not mean that Jesus or Paul would have been silent about them if they did. Unless we look for ethical principles in the Bible, we have no way of responding to problems like drug abuse, abortion or eugenics.

He also argues for the right of the guilty party to remarry, so long as their partner does not want them back, but he adds a serious caution to this. Remarriages are statistically less secure than first marriages, probably because the same mistakes are repeated, so he says that there should be sufficient time for the divorcee to go through counseling before remarriage. He says that these ethical discussions are outside his normal area of competence as a biblical scholar, but his sensitive approach

shows him to have a wise and pastoral heart.

This volume is invaluable as a brief and well argued defense of all three positions. Ultimately, however, the book has an unfinished feel. This is partly due to the inevitable lack of any conclusion – which is due to the nature of the book – and partly because each author is constantly referring to a work which came out after the structure of the book was conceived, and which is therefore missing. The missing work (*Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, Eerdmans 2002) presents many manuscripts and first century texts which had not been brought into the discussion previously, and came to new conclusions which both Heth and Keener have subsequently substantially agreed with. The fact that I, the reviewer, am also the author of that missing work means that it is difficult for me to assess this gap accurately, but the fact that it is referred to in one fifth of the footnotes is probably significant. I understand that some of the contributors wished to have this view represented fully, but the publishers felt it was too late to change the structure.

This deficiency is not as great as it might have been thanks to Heth who devotes a large portion of his space in order to represent some aspects of this work. Heth is a remarkable scholar for one outstanding reason – he is capable of changing his mind when he finds new evidence. He describes at the start of his chapter how he originally authored a book with Wenham (*Jesus and Divorce*) which argued the no-remarriage position, but pastoral experiences caused him to doubt this, and the new data in *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible* showed him that his previous conclusions were based on incomplete information. To publicly revise an opinion through which a scholar has established his own reputation is a praiseworthy example of scholarship and Christian discipleship.

For the reader who wants a quick overview of the breadth of protestant biblical interpretations on remarriage, this single small volume covers all the main issues up to the twentieth century.

David Instone-Brewer, Cambridge

### *Colossians and Philemon: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*

R. McL. Wilson

ICC ; London: T&T Clark/Continuum, 2005. xxxvi + 380pp. £50.00, hb  
ISBN 0-567-04471-8

#### SUMMARY

This commentary by Robert McL. Wilson is a technical but readable analysis of Colossians and Philemon with due attention given to the text, background, and arguments of these letters. The author gives good overviews of scholarship and excavates the text with learned precision. Wilson regards Colossians as pseudonymous, but not a forgery, and