

The *SBJT* Forum: Issues Relating to the Family

Editor's note: Readers should be aware of the forum's format. D. A. Carson, C. Ben Mitchell, Bruce A. Ware and Russell D. Moore have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

SBJT: To handle certain categories of divorce and remarriage cases within the congregation, some churches have established a kind of "ecclesiastical court." What biblical warrant, if any, exists for this practice?

D. A. Carson: For some people, the expression "ecclesiastical court" may be a little off-putting. It may conjure up images of the Inquisition, or at very least of a room full of black-robed, foul-tempered, rule-driven hypocrites, untouched by the mellowing influence of human compassion.

Rightly understood, however, the notion of an ecclesiastical court may be rather helpful. In some parts of the English-speaking world, a "court" is any group that gives a considered judgment on some matter within their purview. In such contexts, Christians sometimes speak of the "Deacons' Court" or the "Elders' Court." All they mean by the latter, for instance, is that the group of elders (pastors) in some church or other gives rulings on matters within the sphere of their responsibility. For instance, a church that practices church discipline must have some mechanism by which a decision is made as to whether or not some brother or sister should be taken before the entire

body to be excommunicated (as in the terrible situation described in 1 Corinthians 5).

How does this apply to the matter of divorce and remarriage? It applies in at least two ways. Most Christians hold that divorce, although always a sign of marital failure and therefore something that God hates in principle, is concessively permitted under certain circumstances that (they believe) the Bible spells out. A slightly smaller number of Christians, but probably a majority, also hold that remarriage under those circumstances is also permitted. Inevitably, difficult judgments arise as to whether or not a particular case falls within the defined bounds. Who makes this decision? Should it not be the spiritual leadership of the church, i.e., those primarily charged with teaching and upholding the Scriptures—those very Scriptures from which our understanding of these matters derives? And hence, we appeal to the elders' court (or, more generically, the "ecclesiastical court"—an expression that focuses less on the body that makes the decision, as in "elders' court," and more on the body for whom the decision is made).

In some ways, however, this is a fairly straightforward instance. When some

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people speak of an ecclesiastical court with reference to divorce and remarriage, they are thinking of a more complex problem. This problem is most easily seen with an example. Suppose A and B, both Christians, are married. Suppose A divorces B on biblically illegitimate grounds, and that neither has had an affair. The state grants the divorce (on the grounds of, say, "mutual incompatibility"), but because the church does not recognize these grounds, it does not sanction the remarriage of either A or B. Suppose further that a few years later A, having abandoned the faith, marries C. From the Bible's perspective, the church argues, A by marrying C has committed adultery: A has broken the one-flesh union with B. Consequently, B is now free to re-marry. But the only divorce that B has undergone has been the state divorce, on biblically illegitimate grounds. If one of the pastors of the church officiates at the (re)marriage of B to D, some eyebrows will be lifted. It is far better for the "ecclesiastical court" to issue a formal decision stating that the situation has changed since the state divorce, and as a result B now has biblically legitimate reasons to divorce A, and permission to re-marry, should he or she wish to do so. (Of course, there may be personal or other reasons why B should not re-marry; I am not here entering into discussion of the complexities of godly counsel, but merely the broader terrain of what is biblically conceded.)

Someone might well protest at this juncture, "But isn't this a lot of legal wrangling, and a long way removed from the gospel? Doesn't this sound like hair-splitting pomposity? What conceivable justification, biblical or theological or even practical, can you offer for such ecclesias-

tical courts?" It is a fair question—and here are some answers.

(1) Part of the complexity of the situation derives from the thorny history of marriage in the Western world. In medieval times, not only did the Roman Catholic Church understand marriage to be a sacrament, but because of that fact marriage could be performed only by the priest. Protestants dropped the language of sacrament with respect to marriage, but long protected the prerogatives of ministers of the gospel to officiate at weddings. Eventually justices of the peace or other non-ecclesiastical state-recognized officials were granted the right to officiate at weddings, not least to accommodate the non-religious among us. All sides recognize that these weddings are every bit as valid as a wedding celebrated at First Baptist Church.

In fact, I would argue that marriage is a creation ordinance, not a church ordinance. I'm not sure that ministers of the gospel should be involved in the legal matters of weddings at all. I rather like the practices that have developed in France (though I admit that they developed for all the wrong reasons). There, every marriage must be officiated by a state functionary. Christians will then have a further service/ceremony/celebration, invoking the blessing of God and restating vows before a larger circle of family and friends, brothers and sisters in Christ. Similarly, Christians seeking to be married may well undergo pre-marital counseling offered by the church. But the legal act of the wedding is performed exclusively by the state. That is one way of making clear that marriage is not a distinctively Christian ordinance (though it has special significance for Christians, including typological significance calling

to mind the union of Christ and the church); it is for a man/woman pair everywhere, converted or not, Christian or not—truly a creation ordinance.

Ideally, of course, the state should adopt the same standards for marriage and divorce as those demanded by Scripture. But where that is not so—whether by sanctioning marriages after prohibited divorces, or by sanctioning marriages between persons of the same sex, or whatever—Christians will be the first to insist that because we take our cues and mandates from Scripture, our own standards for what will pass for an acceptable marriage will not necessarily be those of the state. So our own members will observe the biblical standards, regardless of what the state permits. The tensions we feel on these occasions arise from one of the most obvious truths in the New Testament: we live in the period of inaugurated eschatology, in the period between the “already” and the “not yet.” As a result we have two citizenships. We owe allegiance to “Caesar,” to our country in this world, and we owe allegiance to the kingdom of God. But where the two allegiances conflict, we must obey God rather than human beings. In this light, and remembering the history of marriage in the Western world, ministers of the gospel who perform marriages (as I do) better remember that when they do so, they are not performing a sacrament, or making a marriage union more holy; they are functioning as officials of the state, licensed by them. They are discharging their duties as citizens of an earthly kingdom. Then, in the larger service in which the wedding is performed, they may also be discharging their duties as Christian ministers—assigning to marriage a much higher value than the state does, drawing

attention to Christian obligations for husbands and wives, reminding all present of the wonderful typological connection between Christ and the church, and so forth. In France, all of these Christian duties are separated from the legal marriage vows themselves; here, they are integrated (in church weddings) precisely because the minister is serving both as a minister of the gospel and as a minister of the state.

It is this intertwining of church-based and state-based obligations that makes some of these matters of divorce and remarriage so difficult. One of the purposes of the ecclesiastical court is to sort out the hard cases.

(2) In particular, the ecclesiastical court makes it clear that the church is not simply adopting the divorce/remarriage standards of the surrounding culture. It gives biblical reasons for its decisions. On the long haul, the trail of its decisions will protect the leadership of the church. For instance, if in the example given above a pastor decided to officiate at the (re)marriage of B, this time to D, on the grounds that B is now free to re-marry since A has committed adultery by marrying C, but that pastor does not first make it very clear that he would not officiate at the re-marriage of any and every believer who has been divorced for “mutual incompatibility,” sooner or later he will be charged with a double standard. Perhaps the daughter of his head deacon has been divorced for mutual incompatibility, without adultery on either side, and now wants to re-marry—and the pastor declines. Expect a nasty fight, unless the church leadership has made it clear why there is an exception in the case of the marriage of B to D, and no exception pertains in the case of the deacon’s daughter.

This is most easily done with a “ruling” or a “decision” that people understand.

(3) Similarly, the process of working through these cases, in the light of Scripture, not only spreads responsibility among the elders/pastors, but becomes the occasion of training for a new generation of young pastors. The church “leaders” who say, “Pastor, just tell us what to do,” and the pastor who goes along with them, are in a foggy conspiracy to keep these so-called “leaders” as ignorant as possible. It is precisely in the outworking of hard cases of many kinds that leadership is trained, and an entire church is helped to think about ethical and other matters in a deeply biblical way. Far from being a nasty revival of the spirit of the Inquisition, a properly run ecclesiastical court is nothing other than the training of new elders/pastors within the matrix of hard cases, and a means of informing the entire church what biblical texts and principles are driving the leadership to its joint conclusions.

SBJT: What is the relationship between the family unit and the preservation of democracy?

C. Ben Mitchell: Strong families can exist under any kind of government, whether totalitarian or free. The family flourished under Caesar as much as under other forms of government. The God-ordained institution of the family is extraordinarily resilient. Democracy, however, can exist only where the institution of the family is robustly protected and cultivated.

One of Carl F. H. Henry’s most recent but lesser known treatises is the slim but rich volume, *Has Democracy Had Its Day?*¹ The volume is an expansion of a lecture he gave at the Acton Institute in Grand Rapids in November 1995. In his essay Dr.

Henry reminds us that the American democratic experiment is just that: an experiment. It is a fragile institution.

The American democratic experiment began with a set of ideals that were shared by those who framed our republic. Those ideals provided the cohesion for a government that was *sui generis* in the world. Those ideals are summed up in the Latin expression, *E Pluribus Unum*, found on our one-dollar bill. “Out of many, One” expresses well the hope of our founders that the American experiment would result in a “nation” that would represent a “more perfect union.”

As Jean Bethke Elshtain puts it: “The great challenge for the Founders was to form a political body that brought people together and created a ‘we,’ but also enabled people to remain separate and to recognize and respect one another’s differences. Modern democrats face the same challenge.”²

Each year since the nation’s founding, the president of the United States has given a “state of the union” address, acknowledging at least the unconscious belief that these United States form a “union.” And I would suggest that both our founders and their progeny understood this union to be more than a joining together of parcels of land. That is to say, the “union” involves more than a uniting of the smaller states into the larger nation. This union represents a set of ideals, a set of core beliefs, a moral center of gravity.

Without family, democracy is impossible. Why? Because family and democracy when properly conceived share a similar set of ideals. It is in the context of family, for instance, that one first learns of the bonds of mutual obligation. Family is the institution ordained by God that begins with a covenantal relationship

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between a husband and wife. In the words of Genesis, “. . . a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Gen 2:24 ESV). This cleaving and leaving relationship requires mutual respect, shared obligation, and reciprocal love. Parents are to model for their children the covenantal obligations entailed in the context of family. Children are to learn from their earliest days that the family is a place where respect, obligation, and love are found.

This is not to say, however, that families are democratic institutions. In fact, families require clear lines of authority. Biblical family life begins with the confession that Christ is Lord and that God’s will is normative for all members of the family. Submission to authority is required of each individual and of the family unit as a whole. Similarly, democracy requires submission to appropriate authority. Without appropriate structures of authority, government becomes anarchy. Authority can also be found in totalitarian regimes. Yet under totalitarianism submission is not voluntary.

Necessary both to the fulfillment of mutual obligation and to submission to appropriate authority is the notion of self-restraint. One must voluntarily control one’s passions, desires, and other emotions if one is to act in ways that are morally responsible in both a family and in a democracy. Without self-restraint, self-government is not possible. Without self-government, democracy is not possible. Without strong families and the skills they teach and the obligations they entail, therefore, vigorous democracy is not possible.

Finally, it is in the context of family that one learns that sometimes self-sacrifice is

required for the common good. Individual family members sometimes sacrifice their own good for the common good of the family. Parents often do this (or should), but even children can learn that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts and that they themselves should be willing to give up their personal wishes or comforts at times for the good of the family. Here, the similarity with the democratic ideal is striking. In democracy, individual wishes sometimes must give way to the common good. For instance, even though the majority may desire a particular state of affairs (e.g., slavery), democracy exists to protect the minority from the tyranny of the majority. The “common good” takes precedence over individual desires. The common good requires that we treat all members of society with respect, not using them as a means to our own ends, but as imagers of God. Only in a context of mutual respect, mutual obligation, submission to appropriate authority, and self-sacrifice for the common good can democracy thrive. It is within the family that one first learns to cherish these ideals. Without these ideals democracy is not possible.

All of this is to argue that attention to the ideal of the biblical family is not merely self-serving. That is, protection and cultivation of the family is not only about my personal happiness. Sadly, most of today’s emphasis on family seems to appeal more to self-interest than to interest for others. In fact, attending to biblical family structures and ideals contributes to the common good, even to the lives of those who repudiate the biblical family. Without the existence of the biblical family, without the skills learned in the context of family, and without the ideals that inform the institution of family, American

democracy cannot long survive.

ENDNOTES

¹Carl F. H. Henry, *Has Democracy Had Its Day?* (Nashville: ERLC, 1996).

²Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial* (New York: BasicBooks, 1995) 66.

SBJT: Can questions of proper roles for men and women in ministry be separated from the question of the roles of husbands and wives in the home?

Bruce A. Ware: The short answer to this question is, no. Both arenas—the believing community and the home—are spheres in which a structure of authority and submission is inherent, and in which men and women alike are called to understand and embrace God’s good and wise design of male headship. What is not always appreciated is that *both* of these arenas exhibit something of the relationship of Christ with his bride, the church: *both* are spiritual communities reflective of a much greater and more glorious spiritual Reality.

Ephesians 5:22-33 (esp. vv. 31-32) makes clear that marriage has been from the very beginning a human and finite expression and reflection of a glorious spiritual Reality. As the wife submits to her husband, and as the husband loves his wife tenderly and sacrificially, both exhibit the spiritual dynamics and qualities that are characteristic of Christ’s relationship with the church. Christ lovingly leads, and the church respectfully submits, and marriage is the shadow of this greater and everlasting Reality. Given this parallel between human marriage and the Christ-church relationship, the notion of “mutual submission” in the home, as understood and advocated within egalitarianism, is unavoidably (even if unwittingly) an

expression of a fundamental spiritual rebellion and insubordination. Egalitarianism’s ideal of mutual submission in marriage pictures, not the church’s rightful submission to Christ’s Lordship, but her insistence on possessing and exercising supposed equal authority with Christ in their mutually submissive relationship. Here, marriage becomes a picture of treason. Whether intended or not, a marriage modeled after “mutual submission” subverts and distorts the true Reality of Christ’s authority and the church’s submission of which marriage is the God-designed shadow.

Paul is not alone in seeing marriage’s inherent authority and submission structure. Peter’s extolling of Sarah “obeying” Abraham and calling him “lord” shows just how serious Scripture is about this analogy (1 Pet 3:1-6). Submission and obedience to Christ need to mark the Church’s disposition toward her Master, and so wives’ embracing (not throwing off) submission to their husbands reflects this spiritual relationship. In like manner, Christ’s unsurpassed and unsurpassable love for the church must be mirrored by husbands’ genuine and deep loving care for their wives (Eph 5:25-27; 1 Pet 3:7). Where mutual submission is embraced, instead, the reflection intended by this spiritual Reality is mocked and defiled.

The church, too, is an arena in which Christ’s Lordship is to be mirrored. Christ’s choosing of 12 male apostles cannot have been accidental, nor can it be accounted for by appeal to cultural expectations or limitations. How can one say of the Christ who called the Pharisees “white washed tombs” and who drove money changers out of the temple, the Christ who traveled through Samaria and touched lepers and spoke with prostitutes and ate

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with tax collectors and sinners—how can one say of *this Christ* that he conformed to social expectations in choosing only male disciples. I'm sorry, but this view is only acceptable to those who have already made their minds up that the supposed true Christ came to liberate women from their positions under a false and sinful male headship. While it is true enough that Christ came to liberate women from all the sinful elements that touched their lives, as he likewise did for men, what this liberation looks like is not at all what egalitarians envision. Yes, Mary is commended for learning at his feet while Martha accepted the lesser value of attending to pressing duties at home; yes, women traveled with Jesus and participated in the support of his ministry; yes, women were the first witnesses of his resurrection as they told doubtful male disciples this good news. But none of this constitutes the abandoning of male headship, as exhibited in Jesus' own ministry, and in his commands for the church that would grow out of his life, death, and resurrection. And why was male headship retained? It is clear that just as marriage has an inherently spiritual dimension, so too does the church exhibit a fundamental spiritual Reality. Christ (who is male and could not have been female as our Messiah) is our Teacher and Leader, and he embodies the principle of male-headship in this role. So too, the disciples of Christ (all male) are charged with taking his teaching and instructing others after his ascension (John 14-16). Moreover, the responsibility of the on-going transmission of apostolic teaching for the church continues to be tied to male-headship as elders (always and only male) are charged with spiritual oversight and instructions, while women are forbidden

to teach or exercise authority over men—the two roles distinctive of elders in the church (1 Tim 2:11-3:7). So, from Christ, through his chosen disciples become apostles, to the elders who teach and lead in churches, male authority is part and parcel of the church's own expression of the nature of Christ's leadership over the church. As church memberships submit to the teaching and oversight of their God-ordained male leadership, they picture our relationship to Christ and honor the authority he has over our lives. As Peter instructs, elders function as shepherds over their flocks, and as such they mirror the greater Reality of Jesus the Chief Shepherd, of which human eldership is the shadow (1 Pet 5:1-4).

So, can one rightly separate the questions of gender roles in the believing community and in the marriage relationship? If we take seriously the shadow-Reality pictures involved in both arenas, we realize that great violence is done to our understanding of Christ's relationship to the church if in either sphere male-headship is abandoned. Like it or not, egalitarian marriages, and female pastors or elders, picture a church hostile to the rightful Lordship of Christ over her. May God grant us longings to embrace, not resist, that Lordship, and may this be made manifest by embracing, not resisting, the human shadows of that Reality. May our marriages and believing communities be finite and human portraits displaying the glorious spiritual Reality of Christ's lordship over his submissive people through responsible and loving male leadership.

SBJT: What are the theological implications of the current debate over homosexuality in the Cooperative Baptist

Fellowship (CBF)?

Russell D. Moore: The voices of sexual liberation on the Baptist left are speaking with southern accents, and that is perhaps the only difference between the homosexuality debate within the CBF and those within the other mainline Protestant denominations. The CBF General Assembly meeting in Atlanta in 2001 narrowly averted what its leadership warned would be a meltdown on the issue, when the group failed by a surprisingly close 701-502 margin to rescind the group's policy against employing openly homosexual missionaries and staff members. This controversy erupted at the same time that longer running sexuality debates continued in other liberal church bodies such as the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church (USA).

For the CBF, however, the stakes are much higher than for the rest of old-line Protestantism since the CBF seeks to reach out to what it considers to be disaffected "mainstream" Baptists for support. As such, CBF leaders at first tried to dismiss pro-homosexual activists in their midst as a tiny "lunatic fringe," unrepresentative of the group as a whole. This representation fell apart when the "lunatic fringe" had enough votes to plunge the entire General Assembly into a protracted controversy, prompting CBF Coordinator Daniel Vestal to plead with the gathering not to splinter apart over homosexuality. The homosexuality issue, however, is part of a larger problem of organizational identity and theological confusion on the Baptist left.

The crisis of organizational identity is largely a generational conflict within the movement. The older generation, led mostly by retired denominational bureaucrats, desperately wants to avoid contro-

versial issues such as homosexuality. In opposing the pro-homosexual "fundamentalists of the left," leaders such as former CBF coordinator Cecil Sherman are using the same arguments against a pro-gay CBF that they used against a biblical inerrancy SBC—namely, money. Baptist social activist groups "can take on any issue they want; they don't have to go to Baptist churches and meet a missionary payroll," Sherman argued to a CBF historical society. "CBF has to stay close to ordinary Baptist churches, because ordinary Baptists give the money that sustains missionaries."

This is precisely the tactic used by Sherman and the "Gatlinburg Gang" of SBC moderates against the "conservative resurgence" of the 1970s and 1980s. The denomination should avoid issues such as biblical inerrancy, they asserted, so that Baptists could unite behind the Cooperative Program and the Foreign Mission Board's "Bold Missions Thrust" program. Conservatives rightly discerned, however, that mission cooperation could not hold the denomination together when, among other problems, SBC seminary professors were teaching an entire generation of ministers that explicit faith in Christ is not necessary for salvation. The "moderate" movement is now experiencing what SBC conservatives warned them of years ago. A group cannot hold together long-term when its only consensus is on what it does not believe—namely, that Scripture is truth without any mixture of error.

The homosexuality controversy, however, is about more than organizational identity. It is at its root exactly what the biblical inerrancy controversy was in the SBC—a theological contest of visions. Baptist liberalism has been scattering the seeds of this chaos for over a generation.

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At the height of the inerrancy controversy, then-Southwestern Seminary president Russell Dilday commended the concept of “soul competency” as “autonomous individualism.” CBF leaders such as Carolyn Weatherford Crumpler have castigated the SBC’s 2000 confessional statement because it affirms biblical authority—an idea they say is in conflict with the authority of Jesus. A leader in the moderate-led Baptist General Convention of Texas denounced the *Baptist Faith and Message* assertion that women should “graciously submit” to the “servant leadership” of their husband as a “Near-dertal” statement, even though the wording was taken directly from Ephesians 5. CBF leaders have applauded Baptist feminists who argue that Paul was in disagreement with Jesus over the question of female pastors.

In fact, the CBF response to gender issues is very instructive of where it will go on the question of homosexuality. The Baptist left has not sought to marshal biblical and theological arguments for women in the pulpit. Instead, they have featured a litany of testimonies of women who argue that their calling is “between Jesus and me,” so no one can question it. When Pauline texts are raised, the CBF leaders have pointed instead to the fact that Jesus never spoke to the issue, and He, after all, is the authority. This has led to a confused younger generation of gay and gay-friendly Baptist activists who see themselves as applying consistently the principles they learned from the older generation.

How can the older generation awkwardly point to biblical authority against homosexuality when the very first point addressed in the CBF’s founding “Address to the Public” was a denial of

biblical inerrancy? What is the younger generation to make of the fact that Jesus never spoke of homosexuality, leaving the only NT texts against gay sex authored by Paul, a biblical figure, they have been taught, whose writings were often conditioned by a misogynistic, pre-modern culture? Why, they ask, do CBF leaders who cheer when the Baptist Women in Ministry group announces that we should listen to “God, not Paul” on gender issues not cheer when homosexual activists argue the same thing? If “there is neither male nor female” (Gal 3:28) is the end of any discussion on gender roles in the church and home, then why should it not be the end of a discussion on gay marriage? If one’s “calling by Jesus” as a woman to the pastorate cannot be questioned, then how can one’s “calling by Jesus” as a lesbian to the mission field be questioned? These are very good questions indeed—questions that increasingly are revealing that the opposition to homosexuality by the powers-that-be on the Baptist left are informed more by a residual revulsion toward homosexuality than by a coherent theological understanding of revealed truth.

Conservative political theorist Russell Kirk once noted that it is not the liberal we should fear, since he is living off the borrowed moral capital of past generations of conservatives. Rather, we should fear the liberal’s grandchildren. It is they who have forgotten the traditions of the past, and who consistently apply the theories they have been taught. The CBF leadership should be very worried by the wave of gray hair they saw stand to oppose the pro-homosexual position. After all, the liberal social activists in the CBF are not “fundamentalists of the left” or the “lunatic fringe.” They are just the

“grandchildren.” They have been listening, and learning, and they are not going away. In fact, they will soon be in charge.

The SBC’s resurgent conservatives should see the CBF homosexuality controversy as a warning. As our collective memory of the inerrancy controversy dims, there will be increasing suggestions that we soften our now robust confessionalism. There will be calls for less emphasis on theological unity, and more emphasis on programmatic unity. There will be the inclination to spend less time teaching the next generation about the issues for which we fought so hard—the total authority of Scripture, the urgency of evangelism, and the exclusivity of salvation found only in Christ. We should resist these temptations—and continually reinforce to the coming generations of Southern Baptists the faith once for all delivered to the saints. After all, we have “grandchildren” too.