

**Grudem, Wayne. *What the Bible Says about Divorce and Remarriage*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2021. 93 pp. + 16 pp. (back matter).**

This is the fourth book in a series by Grudem focusing on a specific ethical issue facing the Church. These “booklets” are composed largely of excerpts from Grudem’s book, *Christian Ethics*.<sup>1</sup> The impetus for this book is a change of the author’s position on what qualifies as biblical grounds for divorce and remarriage (39). In 2020 Grudem published an article on his change.<sup>2</sup> In addition, portions of this booklet were adapted from an essay found in *The ESV Study Bible* (9).<sup>3</sup> This work brings Grudem’s most current understanding of the biblical data on divorce and remarriage into one source. In the introduction, five key questions are presented that require careful consideration (9).

According to the Bible, what are the legitimate grounds for divorce, if any?

Is divorce morally acceptable in the case of physical abuse or neglect?

If a divorce is granted for biblically legitimate reasons, is remarriage always allowed?

Can a divorced person become a church officer?

What reasons are given for the “no remarriage” view?

The booklet follows an outline format rather than chapters. Outline point A clarifies some of the misleading statistics concerning divorce and remarriage in American culture. The best reading of the data suggests that among unbelievers twenty to twenty-five percent of first marriages end in divorce (11). Grudem suggests that the divorce rate among evangelical Christians is less than five percent and that more than eighty percent of Christians would describe their marriages as “happy” (13). He provides several helpful studies to support these claims and rightly asserts that our culture would be greatly benefited to know that most marriages last a lifetime (11). Grudem then turns our attention to the tragic consequences of divorce upon the family. This includes the abiding anger in the hearts of divorcees toward their former spouses and the intense feeling of rejection experienced by their children (15–17). Only one out of seven remarriages proves to be stable, and nearly one-third of children between ages nineteen and twenty-nine have no ambition ten years after their parents’ divorce (17).

Outline point B examines God’s original plan for marriage. Grudem points to Jesus’ interaction with the Pharisees in Matthew 19, asserting that he avoided the debate raging between the rabbis while affirming God’s original plan for lifelong monogamous marriages (19). He suggests that any couple contemplating divorce should be asked, “Is it possible that this marriage can be restored and preserved?”

Outline point C presents OT examples in which divorce was allowed. The key text presented here is Deuteronomy 24:1–4. Grudem does not attempt to identify the “indecency” that gives rise to the

---

<sup>1</sup> *Christian Ethics: A Guide to Biblical Moral Reasoning* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> “Grounds for Divorce: Why I Now Believe There Are More Than Two,” *Eikon, A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 71–79.

<sup>3</sup> “Divorce and Remarriage,” in “Biblical Ethics: An Overview,” ed. Lane T. Dennis, et al. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 2545–47.

divorce nor offer any explanations for the abomination that would take place if the first husband took the divorced wife back after her second marriage ended (21–22). He simply asserts that the certificate of divorce gave the wife the right of remarriage and that the remarriage was not considered adultery (22). A series of other texts that mention divorce are cited as proof that divorce and remarriage existed under the Mosaic Covenant (Lev 21:7; Num 30:9; Deut 22:19; Jer 3:8). Grudem ends this section by declaring that the Mosaic Covenant does not have binding authority over this New Covenant age (23).

Outline point D documents two specific cases presented in the NT that allow for both divorce and remarriage. Grudem works through these texts: Matthew 5:32; 19:3–9; Mark 10:2–12; Luke 16:18; and 1 Corinthians 7:10–15. He supports his “brief summary” by demonstrating that the position is consistent with the Westminster Confession of Faith (37–40). He notes that the position of Jesus was far “stricter” than what was being taught by many rabbis in his day (24). At the same time, Jesus broke with the OT law, which called for the stoning of those caught in adultery (27). While the penalty for adultery is no longer physical death, Jesus teaches that adultery may bring death to the marriage (28). Grudem carefully demonstrates that the exception clause in Matthew 19:9 includes both divorce and remarriage. In the discussion of 1 Corinthians 7, Grudem asks and answers this question: “Would this passage apply to desertion by someone who professes to be a Christian?” He suggests that those in such a circumstance need wise counsel from the leaders of the church and where possible, “the steps of church discipline should be followed” (36–37). If the professing Christian is placed under church discipline, then “it would seem appropriate to treat the deserting spouse as an unbeliever” (37).

Outline point E asks if there are additional “legitimate grounds” for divorce and remarriage. This section begins with Grudem’s new understanding of 1 Corinthians 7:15 and is followed by a presentation of seven additional circumstances that “may” warrant the claim to being a biblical divorce. Grudem asserts that the historic understanding of “in such cases” is wrong. He suggests that the phrase “in such cases” was never researched and was assumed to be referring to the cases of desertion like this one (39). In his research Grudem found “several examples where this phrase clearly referred to more kinds of situations than the specific situation that the author was discussing” (40). He researched fifty-two examples of the Greek phrase *en tois toiousois*, “in such cases,” and chose three that establish his new position (40–42). Grudem offers this conclusion from his research: “He (Paul) implies that divorce is a legitimate possibility not only in cases of desertion by an unbeliever, but also in other circumstances that are similar to but not necessarily exactly like desertion” (42). He suggests that Paul reasoned that desertion by an unbeliever destroys marriage just as much as adultery (44). Thus, Paul added to Jesus’ teaching. As Paul reasoned to add desertion, we too can reason other cases that would break the marriage bond. The seven categories that come to Grudem’s mind are as follows (45–48):

- Abuse of the spouse (physical or emotional)
- Abuse of children
- Extreme, prolonged verbal and relational cruelty
- Credible threats of serious physical harm or murder
- Incorrigible drug or alcohol addiction

Incorrigible gambling addiction  
 Incorrigible addiction to pornography

Who gets to decide whether a believer's circumstances rise to the level of "in such cases"? Grudem's solution is for pastors, elders, and Christian counselors to seek wisdom as they prepare to discern which cases provide warrant for a biblical divorce (48). A biblical divorce means that the local church is saying that the innocent party is not sinning to obtain a divorce. Grudem answers several objections he anticipates to his expanded understanding of "in such cases" (51–52).

This section moves to two other suggestions for expanding biblical grounds for divorce that Grudem does *not* accept. He provides a detailed dismissal of David Instone-Brewer's assertion that material or emotional neglect are grounds for a legitimate biblical divorce (rooted in Brewer's understanding of Exod 21:10–11). He lists six reasons why Brewer's argument fails and should not be found convincing. Grudem strongly asserts that "Jesus did not teach that divorce was allowed for material or emotional neglect" (58). He concludes this point by showing that divorce cannot be justified on the basis of incompatibility or irreparable damage. He asserts that Craig Blomberg is wrong to suggest that the Church consider these as legitimate grounds for divorce (60).

Outline point F seeks to answer three specific circumstantial questions. The first question concerns the responsibility of those who have divorced on unbiblical grounds. Since their remarriage was an act of adultery, how do they now move forward? Grudem offers wise counsel warning couples not to pursue a second unbiblical divorce. They cannot undo their prior sin, but they can confess it and be cleansed (63). The second question asks whether divorced people can become church officers. Grudem suggests that the demands for pastors to be the husband of one wife does not exclude those who have been part of a biblical divorce/remarriage. He asserts that Scripture "refers to the present status of the man, either to his character of being faithful to his wife, or else to the fact that he is not a polygamist" (65). He dismisses the parallel often cited between the requirement for a pastor (1 Tim 3:2) and the requirement for a widow to be supported (5:9). He concludes that Paul is "not prohibiting from church leadership a man whose wife has died and who has remarried, or a man who has been divorced and who has remarried (these cases should be evaluated on an individual basis)" (71). The last question concerns the need to advocate for laws in society that reflect biblical standards. Grudem helpfully articulates that marriage is a creation ordinance and asserts that God's teaching on divorce and remarriage are not limited to believers (72). He concludes that God's standards for marriage and divorce are "ultimately best for all people" (72).

Outline point G provides a brief evaluation of the more restrictive views on divorce and remarriage. Grudem quickly dismisses Carl Laney's argument for a no-divorce, no-remarriage position. Such a position teaches that all divorces and all remarriages are sinful and should never be engaged in by believers. Grudem demonstrates that Laney's argument concerning the Greek word *porneia* meaning incest cannot stand up to honest exegetical or lexical scrutiny (75). The second position he refers to as the divorce-but-not-remarriage position: some divorces are not sinful, but all remarriages after divorce remain sinful. The only way a remarriage is not sinful, according to this position, is remarriage after the death of the spouse. Grudem addresses the leading advocates of this position,

Gordon Wenham and William Heth. Heth, as he notes, changed his position in 2002 and has written a lengthy article explaining his change.<sup>4</sup> Grudem provides a compelling discussion concerning the harm inflicted on the innocent party of an unbiblical divorce. The innocent party, according to Wenham, must pursue a life of singleness and can never remarry as long as their former spouse is alive. Grudem suggests that this wrongly forces the innocent spouse to be a continual victim (“enslaved”) of the sin of their former spouse (82–85).

Outline point H offers practical counsel to people who have experienced painful divorces. Grudem suggests that the Church needs to minister to them by providing opportunities for them to safely discuss their feelings and be helped to the place of genuine forgiveness (86). He encourages all who have been divorced and remarried, even those done unbiblically, to remain in their present marriage. He concludes with this admonition: “If you are married, you are now married to the right person, and God wants you to make that marriage a good one for the rest of your life” (88). The book ends with an appendix addressing the translation of Malachi 2:16 and a series of questions for personal application.

The strength of this work is its relative brevity in addressing this important issue. It carries a pastoral tone throughout and strongly encourages the Church to protect God’s institution of marriage and those victimized by abuse. Grudem clearly establishes that God’s plans and purposes for marriage are for the good of all people. God’s revelation concerning divorce and remarriage is for all people. All people need to hear it and would be helped if their culture honored it as well. Grudem is deeply concerned that the Church help any woman who has been victimized by abuse. All the cover-ups that have been exposed in recent years provide compelling reasons for the Church to move quickly.

In addition, this booklet provides a great primer to larger study of this important issue. Grudem documents well the various exegetical issues that are involved in most of the key texts dealing with divorce and remarriage. He does not shy away from the difficult questions. He provides a valuable interaction with the positions of both Instone-Brewer and Blomberg on the legitimate grounds for divorce and remarriage. The summary of the more restrictive positions on divorce and remarriage is very brief—providing an introduction to some of the arguments by a few leading proponents of these positions.

The primary weakness in this volume is narrow support offered for such an expansive suggestion concerning what qualifies as a biblical divorce. Grudem’s suggestion that Paul merely reasoned his way to desertion as a new ground for divorce and remarriage is rather insulting. Paul’s teaching on divorce and remarriage was far more than his personal reasoning; Paul is giving us the very Word of God. God gave the nation of Israel very clear instruction about marriage within the covenant community. The closest OT parallel to 1 Corinthians 7 would be Israel’s putting away of their covenant wives to marry pagan women. In both Ezra and Nehemiah, God commands the Israelites to put away their unbelieving wives. Malachi confronts marriage to pagans as an abomination (Mal 2:11) and a profaning of the covenant (Mal 2:10). Paul provides the Church much-needed clarity

---

<sup>4</sup> “Jesus on Divorce: How My Mind Has Changed,” *SBJT* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 4–29.

concerning the unequally yoked marriages that were taking place as people were getting saved. The Church needed divine revelation on how a new believer should respond to their unsaved spouse.

The suggestion that “in such cases” must allow for us to reason our way into other legitimate grounds for divorce and remarriage sets too much confidence on human reason and too little confidence on the sufficiency of God’s revelation. Grudem anticipates this objection to his new position and declares that he is not trying to open the flood gates but to “save thousands of sincere Christian believers from suffering horrible abuse for decades” (52). It should be said that his reasoning regarding what he calls possible grounds for biblical divorce will provide “justification” in the mind of many believers for an unbiblical divorce, which as Grudem notes, God hates.

The new categories suggested by Grudem as potentially legitimate grounds for divorce are sins the Church should confront through the divinely ordained means of church discipline. Grudem repeatedly urges those considering divorce for these other grounds to consult their church leaders. While encouraging church leaders to make reconciliation a first goal, Grudem taxes those leaders with the responsibility to determine what qualifies as “in such cases” (30n25). It is far better to admonish the Church to be serious about the responsibility of member care/discipleship that includes the practice of church discipline. Church discipline is hard work, but we have clear revelation from God on how to navigate this hard work. Sin confronted through the process of church discipline brings a decisive response on the part of the ones sinning. They will repent and be restored or continue in their sin and be removed. Instead of creating hypothetical categories that *may* resemble desertion of an unbelieving spouse, the Church is better served to hold fast to the revelation that it already possesses.

A second weakness is Grudem’s handling of the “husband of one wife.” His argument that this text was meant to prohibit polygamy has very little support. He acknowledges that polygamy was not a significant problem then or now, yet he limits the significance of the qualification to that issue. He places the emphasis on pastoral qualifications as dealing with their present circumstances and not their past. The ideas of blamelessness, ruling one’s house well, and having a good reputation with those outside the church cannot exclude one’s past. In fact, novices are excluded from the pastoral ministry because there is not enough data on their life to discern their qualifications. A church holding that a divorcee could serve in the role of pastor/elder or deacon must establish that the divorce was biblical. This would need to be done before the congregation so there would be no question as to the blamelessness of the candidate. It would be impossible for one who had sinfully divorced his wife to have a good reputation with those outside the local church (which includes the ex-wife).

The title of this booklet is *What the Bible Says about Divorce and Remarriage*. There are certainly some valuable discussions in this volume that help any reader to understand more about the issue. However, Grudem’s reasoning to new legitimate grounds without divine revelation makes this volume more of what Grudem has to say about divorce and remarriage than what God has said.

### **Billy Gotcher**

Professor of Church Ministries and Theology | BJU Seminary