26. Marriage, divorce, annulment and contraception

Often heard: "An annulment is just Catholic divorce." / "Where does the Bible forbid birth control?"
Also heard: "Until 1930 every major church opposed contraception. What changed, Scripture or the culture?"

A lifelong covenant, but not a sacrament

HELD BY Lutheran | Reformed | Anglican remarriage by exception | Methodist | Baptist

Marriage is a lifelong covenant but not a sacrament. Most Baptists permit divorce for adultery and desertion, with remarriage allowed in those cases, though views vary widely. Contraception within marriage is generally considered a matter of conscience; abortion is opposed (and some forms of contraception that may act after conception are questioned).

VERSES CITED

Matt 5:32; 19:9 (exception for *porneia*); 1 Cor 7:15 (desertion by an unbeliever); Gen 2:24; Heb 13:4.

WHERE THE IDEA COMES FROM

Luther and Calvin denied that marriage is a sacrament and allowed divorce for adultery and desertion. Until 1930 all major Christian bodies opposed contraception; the Anglican Lambeth Conference of 1930 first allowed it in limited cases, and most Protestant churches followed. BF&M 2000 art. XVIII affirms marriage as one man and one woman for life.

Marriage a sacrament of Christ and the Church

HELD BY Catholic indissoluble; annulment | Orthodox permits second marriages

A valid marriage between baptized persons is a sacrament and cannot be dissolved by any human power. An annulment (declaration of nullity) is not a divorce: it is a finding, after investigation, that a valid marriage never existed because of a defect at the start (such as lack of consent or freedom). Divorced Catholics who remarry without an annulment may not receive Communion. Artificial contraception is gravely wrong because it separates the unitive and procreative meanings of sex; natural family planning is permitted for serious reasons.

VERSES CITED

Mark 10:2–12; Luke 16:18; Rom 7:2–3; 1 Cor 7:10–11; Eph 5:25–32; Gen 1:28; Gen 38:8–10 (Onan, cited traditionally).

EARLY CHURCH AND HISTORY

Hermas (Mandate 4.1) forbids remarriage after separation. Clement of Alexandria and Augustine (*On the Good of Marriage*, c. 401) teach marriage's permanence and its openness to children. Opposition to

contraception is consistent from the *Didache*'s ban on "magic potions" (2.2, often read as abortifacients) through Augustine.

CATECHISM AND COUNCILS

CCC 1601–1666 (esp. 1614–1615, 1640, 1650); 1629 (nullity); 2331–2400 (esp. 2366–2372 on contraception and NFP); Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae* (1968); Trent Sess. 24 (1563).

Across the traditions

How each major tradition answers this question, in its own words and from its own documents.

Catholic

A valid marriage between baptized persons is a sacrament that no human power can dissolve; an annulment declares that a valid marriage never existed, and artificial contraception is gravely wrong while natural family planning is permitted for serious reasons. The full case is set out above.

Sources: CCC 1601-1666, 1629, 1640, 1650, 2366-2372; Paul VI, Humanae Vitae (1968).

Orthodox

Marriage is a sacrament, an icon of the unity of Christ and the Church, blessed by a bishop or priest. The Church does not approve of second marriages, but after a church divorce, granted for adultery and certain other grounds, the innocent spouse may remarry; a third marriage is allowed only by exception with longer penance, and a fourth is forbidden. The Russian Church treats abortifacient contraceptives as abortion but does not equate other methods with it, while calling selfish refusal of children a sin.

Sources: Longer Catechism of St. Philaret, Q 361; Holy and Great Council (Crete 2016), The Sacrament of Marriage and Its Impediments I.2-3, II.2; Russian Orthodox Church, Bases of the Social Concept (2000) X.3, XII.3.

Lutheran

Marriage is not a sacrament of the New Testament: it was instituted at creation and its promises concern bodily life, though the Apology allows it to be called a sacrament if it is kept distinct from baptism and the Supper. The Treatise calls unjust the rule forbidding an innocent person to marry after divorce. The Lutheran confessions do not address

Reformed

Marriage is "between one man and one woman," but it is not a sacrament, since Christ ordained only baptism and the Lord's Supper. After adultery the innocent party may sue for divorce and remarry, and nothing but adultery, or wilful desertion that neither church nor magistrate can remedy, is cause enough to

contraception, and today's Lutheran bodies issue their own, differing statements on marriage.

Sources: Apology of the Augsburg Confession XIII.14-15; Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope 78.

dissolve the bond. The Reformed confessions do not address contraception.

Sources: Westminster Confession 24.1, 24.5-6, 27.4.

Anglican

Matrimony is a state of life allowed in Scripture, not a sacrament of the Gospel. The 1662 service gives three causes, procreation, a remedy against sin, and mutual society, help and comfort, with vows "till death us do part." Since 2002 the Church of England allows a divorced person to remarry in church in exceptional cases, at the minister's discretion. Lambeth 1930, Resolution 15, reversing 1908 and 1920, allowed methods other than abstinence for a morally sound reason.

Sources: Thirty-Nine Articles XXV; BCP 1662, The Form of Solemnization of Matrimony; General Synod July 2002 and House of Bishops, Marriage in Church after Divorce (2002); Lambeth Conference 1930, Resolution 15 (vote 193-67), cf. 1908 Res. 41, 1920 Res. 68.

Methodist

Matrimony is one of the five rites not counted as sacraments of the Gospel. The United Methodist Social Principles call marriage a sacred, lifelong covenant, accept divorce as a regrettable alternative when a marriage is beyond repair, and say divorce does not preclude remarriage. They support access to contraception and reject abortion as a means of birth control. These describe the United Methodist Church; other Methodist bodies set their own teaching.

Sources: Methodist Articles of Religion XVI; UMC Book of Discipline 2020/2024, Social Principles, The Social Community (Marriage, 3. Divorce; Reproductive Health and Abortion).

Baptist

Marriage is a lifelong covenant but not a sacrament; most Baptists permit divorce and remarriage for adultery and desertion, and contraception within marriage is generally a matter of conscience. The full case is set out above.

Sources: Baptist Faith and Message (2000) art. XVIII; Matt 19:9; 1 Cor 7:15.

Where it gets contested: Baptists argue annulments are granted too easily and, with other Protestants who allow remarriage after adultery (the Reformed, for example), that Matt 19:9 permits divorce. Catholics read *porneia* as an unlawful (invalid) union, and note that Mark and Luke give no exception.

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