

## 8. THE DIVORCE DIVISIONS

THE Birmingham trouble (the subject of our last instalment), having been widely and thoroughly discussed, many ecclesias throughout Great Britain and America made it a matter of fellowship, and withdrew from those who decided to remain in fellowship with the Birmingham (Temperance Hall) ecclesia. It was then very sincerely hoped that the brethren and sisters who had separated themselves from what they regarded as an unscriptural element in their midst, would be able again to devote themselves to the work of edifying one another in love, and of preaching the Truth.

The brethren and sisters had passed through a period of acute contention, very necessary for the preservation of the Truth, yet nevertheless distasteful, and not at all conducive to growth in the things of the spirit. For about two and a half years this period of quietness continued: and then again trouble descended upon us. In the world at that time (1926), divorce had become a great and rapidly growing evil, and it was perhaps inevitable that sooner or later the evil would obtrude itself upon the ecclesias.

If all in our midst had the mind of Christ, whom we profess to follow, this would not be so: but in the inscrutable wisdom of God, false brethren are now and again permitted to mingle themselves with the true saints, and to bring into the ecclesias these evil practices such as divorce, no doubt with the Divine object of testing us and of making manifest those who are the true sons and daughters of God.

### **How it arose**

So far as the Clapham ecclesia is concerned, the earliest references to the subject of divorce were occasioned by the receipt of a letter from a brother, dated November 7th, 1925, addressed to the late Bro. F. G. Jannaway, in reference to the trouble in one of the London ecclesias (not Clapham) upon this subject, and asking for the advice of the Clapham brethren. We mention this fact because of the false view held in some quarters that Clapham was responsible for the subject being forced upon the attention of the brethren and sisters. It was not so.

The Clapham Presiding and Managing Brethren very carefully considered the matter, and a reply to the letter of November 7th, 1925, was sent, which, it was hoped, would end discussion on this subject. Unfortunately, however, this hope was not realised. Agitation continued: printed letters and pamphlets were circulated amongst the brethren; and then, on March 19th, 1926, the Clapham ecclesia, in an earnest endeavour to set the minds of the brethren and sisters at rest, issued what was at that date the only statement of any kind on the subject emanating from them. In this statement, the following proposition was set out:

*“That suing at law for the enforcement of any right whatsoever is to be shunned by a servant of Christ as being out of harmony with his teaching as exemplified by precept and example (Matt. 5, 39; 1 Cor. 6, 1; 2 Peter 2, 21, 23). We refuse to discuss the question of divorce (which is now agitating the ecclesias) as being a thing which should not be so much as named among us, as becometh saints (Eph. 5, 3).”*

At a subsequent Business Meeting of the ecclesia, on April 8th, 1926, this was moved as an amendment to a proposition “to leave the subject of divorce an open question,” and was carried by a large majority of those present. A few brethren and sisters who opposed it then resigned from the Clapham ecclesia and formed a new meeting nearby.

It was a matter of the deepest regret to very many that brethren and sisters whom we held in the greatest respect and love for their work in the Truth were now separated from us.

We have now to consider a later phase of the divorce trouble. Subsequent experience made it clear to us that the statement issued by the Clapham ecclesia on March 19th, 1926, was not sufficiently comprehensive to deal with certain important aspects of the divorce matter which began to force themselves on the attention of the brethren.

We were all agreed that if a brother or sister should sue at law for divorce, then such action would be a clear breach of Christ’s commandment, calling for withdrawal of fellowship from the offender. But the attention of the Clapham brethren was drawn to a case in our fellowship which went far beyond this. The details are set out in a booklet entitled “The Facts,” published at the time by the Clapham ecclesia.

### **A case in Los Angeles**

Briefly they are as follows: A sister in the Los Angeles (Hope Street) ecclesia obtained a legal divorce from her husband on the grounds of desertion. On account of this action, the ecclesia withdrew fellowship from her. Soon afterwards the sister brought to the meetings a man whom she had interested in the Truth. In due course he applied for baptism, but the Los Angeles brethren pointed out to him that the sister in question had been withdrawn from, owing to her breach of Christ’s law in the matter of her divorce; and therefore, if he married her, he would be involved in an act of disobedience to the same law. He recognised this and, following his assurance, he was baptised. Later, however, the couple married and the Los Angeles ecclesia then withdrew fellowship from the brother. Up to this point the attitude of the Los Angeles ecclesia in the matter had been unquestionable.

The couple attended the meetings, although not partaking of the emblems. Some years later, sympathisers began to feel that the couple should be re-admitted to fellowship. On September 24th, 1938, the couple made a written application for re-fellowship, and, in due course, by a majority vote, the Arranging Brethren decided the couple should be received back into fellowship. They were, in fact, in fellowship with the Los Angeles ecclesia for about five months, but were withdrawn from by a majority vote of the ecclesia following considerable opposition from many in the ecclesia who contended that a mere expression of repentance was insufficient, and that so long as the brother and sister continued to live in adultery, fellowship should not be extended to them (Rom. 7, 1-3; 1 Cor. 6, 9-10).

In view of the fact that the minority were allowed to remain in fellowship, prolonged controversy ensued, during which the Los Angeles (Hope Street) ecclesia was split into a number of different groups. It was during this period that the Clapham ecclesia became involved in the dispute, but it should be noted that division had then already occurred in Los Angeles, and has, in fact, continued down to the present time.

During 1939 the Clapham brethren continued to receive personal letters from various brethren and sisters in Los Angeles, all indicating a state of confusion and disruption in the Hope Street ecclesia. At this time they also heard that some in Los Angeles were contending that they had the support of Clapham in their view that the couple should be received back into fellowship while still living together as man and wife. It was found they were relying on advice contained in a letter from the Clapham Presiding Brethren written in 1933 concerning another case of a somewhat similar kind in California. The Presiding Brethren in 1939 found they were unable to endorse the advice given in the 1933 letter and immediately advised the Los Angeles brethren of the fact, at the same time regretting any difficulties which might possibly have arisen from this cause.

Efforts were continued to deal privately with the correspondence that developed over the Los Angeles case, but the task became too great. Therefore, the Clapham brethren decided that the best course would be for them to set out as clearly as possible their own position concerning Marriage, Divorce and Re-marriage, and by this means to try to identify those who were of one mind upon the important Scriptural principles that had been called in question.

### **Our Position**

Accordingly, after long and careful consideration, the pamphlet entitled "A Brief Statement concerning Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage" was prepared and submitted to the Clapham ecclesia for approval, together with the following proposition, on June 6th, 1940:

- (a) Suing at law for the enforcement of any right whatsoever, including divorce, is contrary to the teaching of Christ, and is therefore to be shunned by all of his brethren and sisters.
- (b) A brother or sister of Christ who, being divorced after becoming responsible to the law of Christ, takes another husband or wife during the lifetime of the former partner commits adultery; and in such circumstances no profession of repentance can be recognised whilst the sinful alliance continues.
- (c) An applicant for immersion who is legally married should be accepted (notwithstanding the annulment of any previous marriage), subject to a good confession of the faith and an undertaking by the applicant thenceforward to uphold the law of Christ in this as in all other respects.
- (d) The South London (Clapham) Ecclesia will not knowingly extend fellowship to any who hold views contrary to the foregoing, or who, although themselves not holding contrary views, are prepared to fellowship those who do so."

The pamphlet was approved and the Resolution passed without dissent.

Three decades have now passed since the Resolution was adopted. The passage of time has demonstrated the wisdom of having such a Resolution based on clearly defined scriptural principles. All right-minded brethren and sisters desire to be assured that those with whom they are in fellowship are of one mind on this important subject. The Clapham ecclesia therefore asked brethren and sisters at home and abroad to signify that they endorsed, in principle, all four clauses of the above mentioned Resolution.

The great majority of the ecclesias in fellowship in Britain took the right stand, but we regret that very few in the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand were moved to announce their allegiance to the foregoing Scriptural principles. Those few in the above countries who did take the right stand, have been very faithful in their determination to maintain the purity of the Faith.

In the large Central/Suffolk Street community, very divergent views on this subject of divorce are held. It may interest readers to know that we repeatedly receive requests from members of the foregoing community for copies of our booklet "Christ's Teaching on Divorce and Remarriage". Correspondence has revealed that in most cases, those who make the request fully endorse the booklet and agree with the first three clauses of the Resolution quoted above. But they are not prepared to carry the matter to its scriptural conclusion and endorse clause (d). This is the clause that states that fellowship must be withdrawn from those holding views contrary to the divine principles underlying the first three causes. It is a pleasure to record that there are others, however, who have had the courage of their convictions, have withdrawn from other fellowships, and after interview have been received into our own fellowship. They have proved to be brethren and sisters of an earnest type who are devoted to the preservation of the Truth in its purity in these last days.