

Should Actions Speak Louder Than Words?

Using the Past Deeds and Present Actions of Jesus to Unlock the Evangelical Debate on Divorce

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Abstract

This article is about evangelical divorce at the intersection of practical theology, ethics, and biblical hermeneutics. It aims to provide pastoral insights on a subject where scholarship has confused rather than informed ministry practice.

The article begins with current interpretations of Jesus' *words* on divorce in the Synoptic Gospels, showing many relevant voices are marginalised, and the dominant ones cannot agree. Despite occasional position changes by prominent scholars, there is no progress towards a normative consensus.

John's Gospel is then examined as a source of Jesus' historical *deeds*. Practical theological readings of two passages highlight his radical compassion and restorative

posture towards women with broken marriage covenants that challenge evangelicals to better imitate Christ towards the divorced.

Jesus' ongoing *actions* after his ascension are explored as a vital aspect of evangelical ethics and practical theology. However, the practicalities of discerning Christ's continuing salvific work amongst the divorced remain elusive.

Finally, a proposal is made to combine the *words*, historical *deeds*, and ongoing *actions* of Jesus into a normative symbiosis wherein each illuminates and moderates the others. Tentative implications for ministry to the divorced are offered after theological reflection on this basis.

Key Words: Normative Symbiosis, Imitation of Christ, Contemporary Actions of Jesus, Practical Theological Readings of Scripture, Evangelical Theology of Divorce.

Introduction

Evangelical theology of divorce has reached a stalemate. There are multiple, irreducible interpretations of the Bible on the subject that all claim to be uniquely true. Notwithstanding occasional new scholarly contributions, there is no sign of further convergence.

If divorce were a subject of merely academic interest, then perhaps this would not matter. However, marriage breakdown is a very real experience for a significant minority of evangelicals who marry. My pastoral work with *Restored Lives* in the UK (RL, 2022) suggests Christians of all kinds are often deeply affected by the theologies of divorce they are exposed to, especially when first considering separation and afterwards as questions linger about their moral position before God and the Church.

This article broadens the normative inputs to the divorce debate beyond Jesus' contested words to open a new dialogue. To do this, I have returned to the Gospels as a record of Jesus' historical deeds and the promise of his ongoing ministry through the Spirit after his ascension. For evangelicals, this should provide firm foundations for a new approach, even if the methods employed, such as practical theological readings of scripture, are not yet mainstream (Cartledge, 2015, pp. 44-46).

Evangelicalism is still best defined by Bebbington's *quadrilateral* as conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism (Noll, Bebbington & Marsden, 2019, ch. 6).

Considered inclusively and globally, the movement's centre of gravity has shifted from the West towards Africa, Asia, and Latin America in recent decades, fuelled by the rise of pentecostalism¹ (ibid., pp. 10-11). However, as will become evident below, most evangelical scholarship on divorce is yet to follow.

Nonetheless, pentecostalism's growing influence on biblical hermeneutics, with a greater emphasis on the illumination of the Spirit and discernment of the community (Oliverio, 2002), has proved helpful to my proposals, which are most naturally located in this dynamic branch of evangelicalism.

The Hermeneutical Challenge of Jesus' Words on Divorce

The Current Evangelical Debate

Evangelical interpretations of divorce employ scripture as the primary and often sole normative source (Reuschling, 2005). Only a handful of passages are usually referenced, including part of the creation account in Gen. 2:18-25, Old Testament divorce law in Deut. 24:1-4, God's divorce of Israel in Jer. 3, a call to marital faithfulness in Mal. 2:13-16, Jesus' words in response to the Pharisees in the Synoptic Gospels (see below), and the pastoral guidance of Paul in 1 Cor. 7:10-16. Even then, all other texts are usually placed into an interpretive orbit around Jesus' words, making them the absolute epicentre of evangelical ethical formulation on divorce. Yet, this focus has not led to a hermeneutical consensus, with Gushee noting a "staggering array of interpretations" (Gushee and Stassen, 2016, p. 273).

Of the gospel texts themselves, Matt. 19:1-11 is the most comprehensive passage on divorce. After locating Jesus in Judea, it begins in v3 with a question posed by the Pharisees, "*Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?*"². Jesus does not directly answer their question but instead sets the context of marriage in creation by summarising Gen. 1-2, culminating in v6, "*So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate*". The Pharisees then ask in v7, "*Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?*". Jesus answers that this was an accommodation to "*your hardness of heart*" in v8. The so-called *exception clause* follows in v9, "*And I say to you: whoever*

¹ I am using pentecostalism uncapitalised to include the Classical Pentecostal denominations and multifaceted charismatic movement.

² All scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.

divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery". In v10, the disciples consider this teaching hard and suggest it is better not to marry. Jesus lets his challenging words stand in v11-12, saying, "*Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given*".

The Mark 10:1-12 parallel passage adds the equivalent notion of a woman divorcing her husband in v12, "*and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery*". Also, Matt. 5:31-32 confirms the exception clause but adds in v32, "*whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery*". Luke's contribution is a single verse (16:18), "*Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery*".

Evangelical scholars share a rare consensus that marriage is intended for life, and divorce is a departure from that ideal. Most consider the marriage bond a covenant that can be broken by divorce, but a minority believe it can only be ended by death (Wenham, 2019, pp. 59-67). The exception clause appears to concede adultery as legitimate grounds for divorce, but a few scholars limit it to the betrothal period before marriage (ibid., pp. 49-55). Several scholars consider "any cause" in the Pharisees' question technical language related to the teaching of the Hillel Rabbinical School that marriage could be ended for any trivial reason, arguing Jesus' response should be interpreted in that narrow context (Instone-Brewer, 2002, ch. 6).

There is also debate about what Jesus' audience would have inferred from his words in their cultural and religious setting. Some argue his listeners would take for granted the continuation of the Old Testament principles of divorce in Deut. 24:1-4 (Instone-Brewer, 2002, ch. 6), while others say Jesus' teaching superseded them (Grudem, 2018, pp. 805-806). Many argue the innocent party would have an assumed right to remarry (Heth, 2006, pp. 66-67), but a minority do not (Wenham, 2019, pp. 59-67).

Paul is usually interpreted in light of positions already taken on Jesus' words. Most scholars uphold his exception for abandonment in 1 Cor. 7:10-16, but there are disagreements about the right to remarry (Wenham, 2019, pp. 97-104). Additionally, some consider there are legitimate exceptions not mentioned in scripture, especially for abuse (Keener, 1991, pp. 105-109). Grenz even argues against the very idea of exceptions, considering Jesus opposed all forms of legalism (1990, pp. 128-132).

Implications drawn from these passages regarding the divorce of Christian leaders range from no mandatory sanctions to lifelong disqualification, with the role of repentance highly variable. Wenham calls for the progressive removal of divorcees from evangelical church leadership (2006, pp. 39-41), while Keener argues there is no prohibition on divorced church leaders *per se* unless their conduct in the marriage breakdown warrants it (Keener, 1991, ch. 7). The “overseer” qualification in 1 Tim. 3:2 of being the “husband of one wife” is not usually applied to divorce (*ibid.*).

To further complicate matters, notable scholars have changed their positions significantly, sometimes more than once. Wenham and Heth, who co-authored *Jesus and Divorce* (1984), originally proposed that divorce is permissible only for adultery and without the possibility of remarriage but have since diverged. Wenham now advocates no grounds for divorce, only separation (2019), whereas Heth has expanded legitimate exceptions, firstly to include abandonment (2006) and, subsequently, abuse (endorsing Roberts, 2008), all with the possibility of remarriage. Similarly, in *Christian Ethics*, Grudem cited two biblical grounds for divorce of adultery and abandonment (2018, ch. 32). However, soon after its publication, he redefined abandonment to include any other morally equivalent reason, acknowledging his motivation was “horrible real-life situations” (2019).

From a pastoral perspective, almost all aspects of a divorce situation are therefore contested: whether and when a divorce might be permissible, what implications for Christian life and leadership will follow and whether, in due time, the possibility of remarriage exists. Even a trusted source cannot always be relied upon, given the scholarly revisions cited above. Exposing evangelicals facing marriage breakdown to theological disputes on almost every aspect of their situation is not just unhelpful, it adds to their suffering.

To gain further insight into this complex and brittle interpretive situation, I propose a simple model (Figure 1) comprising two broad methodological approaches to biblical hermeneutics on divorce (horizontal) and multiple interpretive lenses representing the reflexive locations of the various evangelical scholars (vertical). The vertical lenses intersect the horizontal, and some scholars span more than one. As with all such representations, simplifications are inevitable and deciding where to place the various scholars is based solely on my judgement.

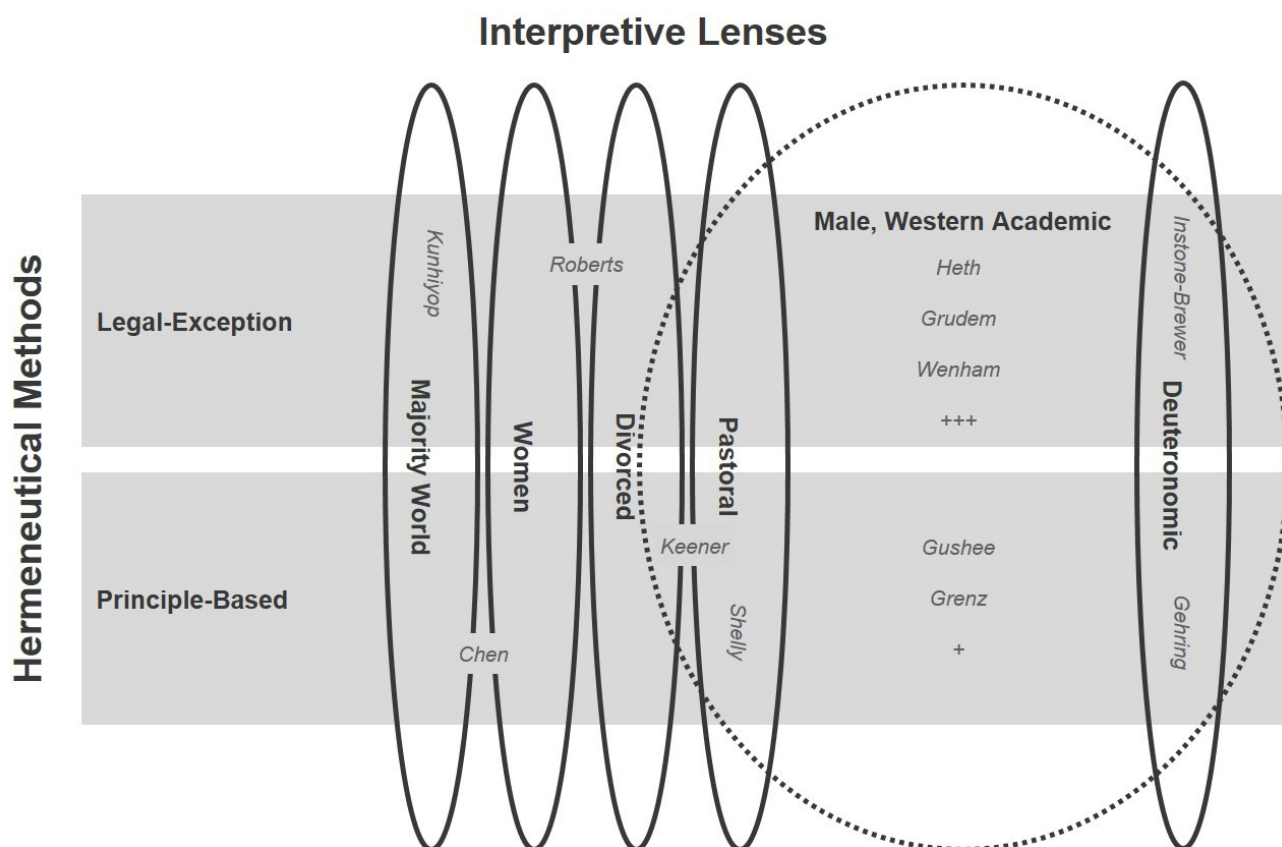


Figure 1: The Landscape of Evangelical Divorce Scholarship

Hermeneutical Methods

The most common horizontal is the legal-exception approach associated with the more conservative wing of evangelicalism, including Wenham, Heth and Grudem. Here, hermeneutical assumptions include the authority, clarity, necessity and sufficiency of the Bible (Grudem, 2018, pp. 85-102). The result is a search for universally binding ethical rules in the texts that transcend their immediate context. This approach has produced the greatest variety of positions on divorce, all sincerely claiming to be the Bible’s true teaching.

The alternate principle-based horizontal adopts a narrative reading of scripture to identify ethical principles that contextualise individual commands. On divorce, Jesus’ words are considered within a closed historical setting that was not universal or exhaustive. This approach is adopted by scholars such as Grenz (1990), Keener (1991), and Gushee (2016, ch. 14), but there is considerable variation in how far from the specifics of the texts these scholars are prepared to go.

Interpretive Lenses

The various vertical lenses represent a mixture of conscious and unconscious beliefs, judgements, and practices based on individual, cultural, academic, and religious factors. These predispositions may provide a helpful representation of certain groups and can arise from specialist knowledge, but they also risk blind spots and prejudices. As a result, disclosure and reflection are important antidotes to a pretence of interpretive objectivity.

Most scholars allude to the Old Testament and its interpretation by rival Hillel and Shammai Rabbinical Schools, but a small number develop this perspective to such depth it becomes the primary interpretive key to Jesus' words on divorce. This is the *Deuteronomic lens*. Instone-Brewer is a notable example on the legal-exception horizontal (2002), and Gehring is a corresponding instance on the principle-based horizontal (2013).

Evangelical contributions on divorce by *women* are extraordinarily rare, with Roberts on the legal-exception horizontal on domestic abuse (2008) and Chen on the principle-based horizontal with a feminist critique of divorce practice in the Taiwanese church (2003). When female theologians write on divorce, they tend to be distinctive in their treatment of the subject, so their scarcity is lamentable. In that vein, Ndioma contributes a compelling non-academic memoir shedding light on the lived experience of a female divorcee in an African Pentecostal setting (2015).

There are a few contributions by *pastor-theologians*. Shelly, on the principle-based horizontal, uses vignettes from his ministry experience to confound simple ethical formulations by complexifying their context (2007). Keener, also on the principle-based horizontal, declares a pastoral aim and grounds his exegesis in problems facing the church (1991, pp. 1-11). Shelly concludes, "While trying to be correct, we have sometimes been unmerciful. In our sincere efforts to follow the words of God, we may have abandoned the heart of God for his people" (2007, p. 20).

Roberts identifies herself as *divorced* (2008, p. 15), and Keener has co-written a book about his divorce and remarriage with his second wife (Keener & Keener, 2016). However, this is very uncommon amongst evangelical scholars in the field. The lack of theological reflection based on first-hand experience is compounded by a scarcity of

empirical data on the lived experiences of divorced evangelicals - research I am currently undertaking.

Evangelical divorce scholarship in the *majority world* is also rare. Chen has already been referenced from an Asian perspective. Kunhiyop provides a distinctively African ethical treatment, highlighting the primacy of procreation in his context and lamenting the progressive acceptance of Western values leading to what he sees as a form of “serial polygamy” (2008, ch. 18). Ndioma provides further insight about societal expectations of women regarding Christian marriage in Africa that differ markedly from the less complementarian context in the West (2015).

Now to the elephant in the room. If the previous lenses are so uncommon, who is currently interpreting Jesus’ words on divorce? The usual answer is *male academics in Western institutions who are not divorced*. The scholars selected for this article are deliberately more representative, but the vast majority fall into this category, with Grudem alone citing over thirty in the bibliography of his chapter on divorce (2018, pp. 839-841).³ This situation is rarely disclosed or discussed reflexively.

Conclusions

This brief survey of evangelical scholarship on the words of Jesus about divorce has shown many relevant voices are marginalised, and the dominant ones cannot agree. The lack of diversity could be addressed by broadening scholarship to include more women, divorced evangelicals, pastor-theologians, and majority-world academics. However, even though this enlargement would represent an important advance, it might actually expand the range of interpretive options rather than converge them towards a consensus.

After over a decade of studying evangelical interpretations of divorce, I have concluded the persistent lack of consensus among credible evangelical scholars, many of whom share the same methodological assumptions, may mean Jesus’ words on divorce cannot be *definitively* understood. If true, this implies that all well-attested evangelical exegetical options should be considered legitimate possibilities, something that I realise is antithetical to the evangelical instinct to argue for one correct interpretation.

³ The two women included in his bibliography are not theologians.

Irrespective of whether the theoretical limit of exegetical clarity on Jesus' teaching on divorce has been reached, there is no immediate way forward without something from outside his recorded words to illuminate and arbitrate between interpretive options.

Imitation of Jesus' Historical Deeds

The life of Jesus has been considered a source of ethical normativity for almost half a Millennium. The idea is usually traced back to *The Imitation of Christ* by à Kempis, first published in 1580 (1952) and was further popularised in Sheldon's *In His Steps* (1899). Sheldon also introduced the term "What Would Jesus Do?", most recently associated with a late-twentieth-century Christian youth movement (Bennema, 2017, p. 13).

In recent decades, there has been a resurgence of interest in imitation or *mimesis* in academic circles. Burridge's *Imitating Jesus* (2007) was the first significant work of this revival, adopting a biographical understanding of the four gospels in which the key to interpreting their ethical content is the person of Jesus. Burridge writes, "The gospels are ancient biographies, not coherent ethical treatises; therefore, they must be interpreted primarily as a portrait of a person through their deeds and words" (Ibid., locn. 914-916).

Burridge acknowledges complex issues in discerning the historical Jesus but argues persuasively that there is enough consensus amongst the various 'quests' to sustain Jesus of Nazareth as the starting point for Christian ethics (2007, locn. 591-637). Burridge further points to an apparent tension between Jesus as a "friend of sinners" and orator of some of the most demanding ethical teaching in history (Ibid., locn. 1143-1163). He never fully resolves this tension, commenting, "Seeking to follow Jesus in becoming both 'perfect' and 'merciful' as God is perfect and merciful is not an easy balance" (Ibid., locn. 1162).

Nolland finds much to agree with in Burridge's work but is rightly concerned about a lack of clarity on the moral response required of the recipients of Jesus' mercy (2008, pp. 351-353). Hood, representing the Reformed strand of evangelicalism, also worries Burridge and others "downplay or dismiss some orthodox teachings" (2013, p. 183), but he is clear about the biblical basis of imitation, asserting it "permeates all corners of the Bible" (Ibid., p. 209), claiming "Humans were created in the image of God to reflect his character and his actions. They imitate God's perfect image-bearer, Jesus" (Ibid.).

Imitation has been a particularly fruitful ethical key when applied to John's Gospel. Burridge and Bennema highlight the previous majority view of scholars such as Blount, Meeks, and Schrage that Johannine literature lacks explicit moral content (Bennema, 2017, pp. 15-32; Burridge, 2007, locn. 3740-3749). However, after noting a change in scholarly sentiment towards imitation after 2000, not least because of Burridge, Bennema concludes about the Fourth Gospel, "At the heart of the believers' dynamic Spirit-led relationship with the Father and Son we find not a list of do's and don'ts but mimesis as a creative, cognitive, and mnemonic process that directs the believer's conduct and character" (Bennema, 2017, pp. 27-28; 272).

Burridge and Bennema both consider imitation primarily an *intellectual* response to the historical Jesus (Burridge, 2007, locn. 1075-1163; Bennema, 2017, pp. 126-135), albeit assisted by the Spirit (*ibid.*, pp. 249-254). In his related book, *Go and Do Likewise* (2000), Spohn coins the helpful term "analogical imagination" to describe an indirect emulation of Jesus' moral perceptions, dispositions, and identity (*ibid.*, pp. 50-54). He also offers practical advice on imitation through participation in spiritual disciplines, community, and the eucharist (*ibid.*, pp. 112-175). However, his practices are generalised and do not help unlock any particular ethical subject like divorce.

It is here that practical theology as the study of *practice* is helpful. Cartledge proposes the idea of a practical theological reading of scripture that is "hermeneutically reflexive", attentive to the "explicit and implicit praxis of communities and individuals", observant of "agency and the relationship between the different agents", "holistic", and in the context of "contemporary questions and issues emerging from lived reality to the text" (2015, pp. 44-46). I have selected two passages in John's Gospel focusing on Jesus' interactions with women who have broken marriage covenants as a way to explore the imitation of Jesus on divorce.

However, before I begin, let me be attentive to Cartledge's first point about reflexivity by locating myself in these readings and broader discussion. On the one hand, I am yet another male academic in a Western institution. However, I am divorced and remarried, with extensive pastoral experience helping those facing marriage breakdowns. As a result, I have grappled with Jesus' words on divorce amidst painful lived experiences.

I remain an evangelical-charismatic, but exclusionary practices, especially around divorce, have caused me to question and sometimes reject aspects of evangelical

belief, practice and subculture. My experiences within the Anglican Communion and diverse research community at the University of Roehampton have been enriching through dialogue with people of very different backgrounds from my own.

In completing these readings, I will not consider the significant textual issues surrounding these passages, instead relying on their final form (Holmes, 2012, locn. 712-719). My purpose is not to provide an exegesis but rather to draw out Jesus' praxis and some initial questions on how it might be imitated. I will do this in a more conversational writing style.

A Woman Caught in Adultery (John 8:1-11)

Jesus is teaching a crowd at the temple early in the morning. Scribes and Pharisees bring a woman caught in the act of adultery to find a way to trick and charge him. The woman's situation is being used to further their religious disputes with Jesus, and the associated 'man' is notably absent (Keener, 2003, pp. 736-737). They tell Jesus that Moses said she should be stoned and ask what does he say? Jesus ignores the question and writes on the ground. We don't know what he wrote, but it isn't considered important enough to be mentioned in the story (despite all the theological ink spilt on the subject since). They keep questioning, and Jesus keeps writing.

Eventually, Jesus suggests someone without sin throw the first stone. Then he resumes writing. The people start drifting away, beginning with the elders, who acknowledge their sinfulness quickly until he is left only with the woman. Jesus asks who is left to condemn her, and she tells him, "no one" (v11). Then the only person without sin who could judge her without hypocrisy says he doesn't either. But Jesus also tells her to leave her life of sin.

The praxis of Jesus in this encounter is resistance to religious moralism, legalism, and hypocrisy. He refuses to condemn the woman in a situation of uncontested ethical failure. Instead, he points to the sin in everyone and rejects a hierarchy of unrighteousness. However, *after* Jesus has restored her future, he tells her she needs to take explicit moral action, demonstrating that a lack of condemnation does not mean moral indifference.

In considering contemporary imitation, this reading challenges evangelical beliefs and practices that categorise divorce differently from other moral failures, sometimes with

permanent sanctions irrespective of fault or repentance. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that some evangelicals also resort to moralism, legalism, and hypocrisy, given the uncompromising stance of many churches on divorce, whilst divorce rates amongst Western evangelicals are indistinguishable from their societal context (Pew Research Centre, 2014).

The Woman at the Well (John 4:1-42)

Jesus is travelling to Galilee via Samaria and sits at a well there in the noonday heat, tired from his journey. The disciples are absent from the story until later, intensifying the focus on Jesus as the primary agent. A Samaritan woman comes to the well to draw water at noon. Many commentators speculate she is avoiding other women, but Cohick argues there is no direct or contextual evidence of this (2009, p. 122). Jesus proactively engages her by asking for a drink, breaking several religious and cultural taboos of the day. Jesus talks to her about spiritual refreshment, and the woman primarily responds about physical water.

Changing the discourse, Jesus asks her to call her husband and return, but she answers she has no husband. Jesus reveals she has had five husbands and is not married to the man she is with now, noting her economy with the truth. In her cultural context, the woman could have experienced any combination of divorce by previous husbands, bereavements, or becoming a second wife or concubine (Cohick, 2009, pp. 122-128). Most commentators assume she is blameworthy for her marital history, but Jesus does not explicitly say so. It seems more likely she has experienced marital rejection, tragedy, or both. The woman acknowledges Jesus as a prophet but quickly asks a theological question about correct worship rather than dwelling on her marital history. Jesus engages seriously with her, culminating in revealing himself as the Messiah.

The disciples return and are “amazed” at what Jesus is doing (v27). The woman leaves and tells the town’s people she has met someone who told her “all that I ever did” (v29), indicating that her marital history has defined her life. He stays two more days, and many in the town believe.

In this passage, the overwhelming feature of Jesus’ praxis is proactive compassion moving beyond obstacles to bring about spiritual transformation. Jesus engages her when physically tired, moving beyond his need for rest. He breaks several taboos by

initiating the encounter, moving beyond religious and cultural acceptability. She doesn't comprehend what Jesus is saying, but he moves beyond his need to be understood and shifts the conversation to the circumstances of her life. She doesn't tell Jesus the whole truth, so he reveals it, moving beyond her reluctance to be fully honest. She changes the subject to a theological matter about which she is wrong, but Jesus moves beyond her doctrine and takes time to engage with her, culminating in a privileged disclosure of his identity. Finally, Jesus moves beyond his need to get to Galilee to spend two days with the people in Samaria, and many believe.

In considering contemporary imitation, the reading provokes questions about whether evangelicals demonstrate similar proactive compassion towards people traumatised, abused, or rejected in their marital history. It is easy to assume guilt on the part of those who are predominantly victims, in the way many commentators on this passage may have done (e.g. Osborne, 2018). Also, Jesus takes her seriously not only as a person in need but as someone with legitimate theological questions. Evangelicals can also imitate Jesus by affording everyone who seeks answers the same dignity of engagement, regardless of their starting point and circumstances.

Whatever theological clarifications need to be applied to Burrige's work, the pastoral priority of Jesus he advocates is palpable in these practical theological readings (2007, locn. 1478-1593). Evangelicals need to avoid winning technical arguments while missing this point. In that vein, it is humbling to reflect on whether evangelicals are actually most often imitating Jesus in these stories, or instead either the amazed disciples, unable to comprehend the lengths of Jesus' compassion; or worse, the religious people caught in disputes about the law and a source of moralism, legalism, and hypocrisy.

In conclusion, imitation has been shown to be a plausible biblical source of ethical normativity. Starting with the person of Jesus in the gospels provides a rich, embodied perspective on his moral deeds in contrast to the abstracted treatment of his words. Practical-theological readings in John yield significant insights into Jesus' ethical behaviour towards those with broken marriage covenants, behaviour that challenge prevailing evangelical attitudes and practices towards the divorced. However, the scarcity of relevant examples and their lack of context and completeness, compounded by limited insight into Jesus' moral reasoning, precludes a full theological

extrapolation on the subject. Imitating Jesus' historical actions challenges, but cannot universally underpin, an evangelical theology of divorce.

Discerning Jesus' Contemporary Ministry

There are moments amidst the tortuous debates about Jesus' words on divorce and efforts to understand what imitating his historical actions might mean in a given marital situation when it would be much simpler if Jesus were still present to guide and transform. Claims that this is precisely the case are made by both moral and practical theologians.

Eschatologically, there is a very real sense in which Jesus is currently both absent and present. After his ascension, he returned to his Father's right hand (Mark 16:19), where he intercedes for us (Rom. 8:34) in anticipation of his return (Acts 1:11). In this sense, he is absent. However, Jesus also said, "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). This dichotomy is best resolved by considering the Holy Spirit, sometimes referred to as the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9; 1 Pet. 1:11; Gal. 4:6), continuing the ministry of Jesus in ways that make him spiritually present to and through the body of Christ. Macchia writes, "The Christ of Pentecost is present in and among us, expansively so, through the [...] body incorporated into him through baptism in the Holy Spirit" (2018, p. 349).

As well as Jesus' presence in and through his collective body, he also remains present to each individual believer. Holmes considers union with the living Christ fundamental to the Christian life, claiming, "We through Christ and in the Spirit become capable of God, not simply in terms of imitation of God but also in terms of participation" (2021, p. 107). For Holmes, *participation* opens us to divine action as a basis for evangelical ethics (Ibid.).

Holmes' distinction between *imitation* and *participation* is not found consistently in the literature. The terms can be used interchangeably, sometimes in opposition, and occasionally presented with one a subform of the other. For this article, I will impose definitions to maintain the clarity of my argument, with *imitation* meaning the cognitive response to Jesus' historical deeds and *participation* defined as the ongoing transformational union of the believer with the living Christ.

Aligned with these definitions, Root argues for the *concurusus dei*, the free but unequal mutual participation between God and humans, as a form of hypostatic personalism (2014, p. 169). Like Holmes, he calls us to move “from *imitatio Christi* to *participatio Christi*” so that “divine action is freed from an inert tradition of interpretation or practice and can become a living personal reality” (Ibid., p. 80). Luhrmann has shown just how tangible this experience of divine presence can be, describing it as “hyperreal” in the lives of American evangelicals (2012, p. 301).

In light of the reality of the present Christ, Holmes asserts scripture cannot be “applied” to contemporary ethical situations because ethics is “a function of Christ’s ‘continually operative’ reconciling and revealing intervention” (Ibid., locn. 86). For Holmes, “Christ is present in the Spirit as One who indefatigably continues to do what the biblical narrative says he did” (Ibid., locn. 3343). In other words, we do not need to apply Jesus’ historical words and deeds to contemporary situations because Christ is already present in them to do a new thing.

Continuing this theme into practical theology, Root writes lucidly and movingly about the loss of a childhood friend and the effects on the child’s mother and himself (2014, ch. 1). In both cases, he recounts a dynamic and decisive encounter with God that met their deep need. Root argues this sense of divine encounter is characteristic of Jesus’ ongoing ministry (ibid., pp. 89-93). He builds on Anderson, his mentor at Fuller Seminary, who asserts, “Jesus still does stuff” (Ibid., p. 92).

However, there is a risk that both Holmes and Root depict the living Christ as a compelling alternative basis for Christian ethics and practical theology, respectively, but without ever articulating *how*. For example, Holmes asserts, “His presence is perspicuous and luminous, and it is his clarity that overflows onto us” (Ibid., locn. 150), but without explaining the way this “clarity” is received. Similarly, Root argues the meeting point of divine and human action is *ministry* (2014, pp. 93-98) but offers no pointers toward developing an associated pastoral praxis.

The applicability of the revelatory gifts of the Spirit in discerning the will of the living Christ will be evident to pentecostals. Parker offers a practical theology of discernment derived from studying a Pentecostal congregation making decisions in the context of their dynamic relationship with God (2015). He found a mixture of functional-rational and “Spirit-led” decision-making but with some difficulties amongst participants in discerning the source of their subjective experiences. Parker proposes a model for

discernment that embraces the intuitive-affective; shares these experiences within the community; adds multiple perspectives from tradition, theology, and psychology; and completes a conscious evaluation of all these inputs. Parker's reliance on Tillich may be problematic for some evangelicals, but the empirical data is illuminating, and the balancing of rationality, spiritual experience, and community in his proposed model is instructive.

In conclusion, rigorous practical insights into the discernment of Jesus' contemporary ministry remain elusive, even within the pentecostal tradition. However, Holmes and Root imply that in any situation of Christian marriage breakdown, Jesus is present and active. As a result, pastoral practice is part of *his* restorative mission, not the other way around. Further work is required to develop a deeper ministry praxis of ethical discernment in the light of these profound normative claims.

Combining Jesus' Words, Historical Deeds and Contemporary Actions

The *canonical narrative* theological reflection method proposed by Graham, Walton and Ward assumes the *words* and *deeds* of Jesus in The Gospels are "the key to interpreting not only the rest of scripture but also the unfolding events of human history" (2005, ch. 3). They further suggest, "The theological task is to discern how contemporary experience can be interpreted through the story [...] about Jesus and to identify forms of practice that are coherent with this narrative" (Ibid., locn. 1786-1789).

Combining Jesus' words, historical deeds, and contemporary actions in theological reflection is justifiable because they share a common Christological and pneumatological foundation. The same Jesus who spoke and acted in The Gospels is now present as the living Christ (Heb. 13:8). Equally, the same Spirit who inspired the scriptures and empowered the earthly ministry of Jesus makes the resurrected Christ continuously present to us.

However, despite common ontological roots, the three Christological sources of ethical normativity require various tasks to reveal their relevance to contemporary situations. Jesus' recorded *words* and *deeds* require different forms of hermeneutics to exegete his teaching and reflect on his *praxis*. Invoking his contemporary *actions* demands

discernment in the Spirit. However, the forms of normativity revealed by these tasks are not in opposition and do not require dialectical analysis. Instead, they should be seen as illuminating, confirming, and clarifying one another in a dynamic more accurately expressed as a *symbiosis*.

In nature, a trio of living organisms can interact similarly for mutual benefit. For example, researchers have documented the relationship between a panic grass situated in very hot soil, a fungus found growing on it, and a virus that infects the fungus (Márquez et al., 2007, pp. 513-515). The grass can withstand arid conditions and thrive when all three organisms are present. However, the other two organisms die if the fungus is 'cured' of the virus. Similarly, the grass cannot grow without the fungus, but there is no fungus without the grass. This is a dynamic where each organism benefits from the other two in a way that strengthens the collective – a phenomenon known as *three-way symbiosis*.

A similar *three-way normative symbiosis* can be achieved by placing each Christological ethical source into dialogue with the others on a given subject. The words of Jesus in the gospels are illuminated by his recorded deeds, while his contemporary actions create restorative possibilities in new contexts. Such a symbiotic dialogue is never complete, but I draw some tentative conclusions from my early reflective iterations.

Tentative Conclusions for Ministry Practice

Jesus' words on the lifelong ideal of marriage and rejection of casual divorce are uncontested amongst evangelical scholars and unmodified by Jesus' historical deeds. They remain guiding principles in all ministry situations of marriage breakdown, meaning all divorce involves a departure from God's ideal. Consequently, Gushee is right to call for a radical reorientation of the Church towards supporting unions and facilitating reconciliation rather than debating divorce exceptions (2014, p. 286).

Evangelical preoccupation with moral divorce abstractions derived from Jesus' words contrasts with his empathetic encounters with real women in the practical theological readings in John. While Jesus did confront sin, he also brought hope and opposed condemnation. In imitating Jesus, evangelicals should seek out the divorced to offer hope and acceptance in the first instance, with ethical engagement as a natural progression.

The practical-theological readings also show the historical Jesus engaging, protecting and restoring women (Gench, 2004, pp. 109-159). Therefore, interpretations of Jesus' words that risk harm to women, such as encouraging them back into dangerous and abusive marriage situations, are inconsistent with Christ's demonstrated deeds.

Given Jesus' refusal to condemn or rank sinners in those same readings, interpretations of Jesus' words that call for exceptional sanctions for the divorced, such as lifelong disqualification from leadership regardless of circumstances or repentance, are inconsistent with his historical deeds. Similarly, this argument can be extended to the possibility of remarriage for all parties after appropriate repentance.

The particularity of the circumstances found in John's Gospel related to broken marriages, and Jesus' counterintuitive actions of mercy towards those involved suggest simplistic legal-ethical formulations were not the basis for his historical practice. This observation points ministry practitioners supporting the divorced toward principle-based hermeneutical approaches, the 'equivalence' argument of Grudem (2019) or the continuing Old Testament principles espoused by Instone-Brewer (2002, ch. 11).

Furthermore, the ongoing ministry of Jesus reminds us God is present in all the complexity of modern-day divorce situations to guide those in professional practice and restore people broken by marriage failure. Pastoral practitioners should recognise themselves as agents in a restorative process initiated by God and actively seek to discern his insights through prayer and the gifts of the Spirit. The canon of scripture is closed, but the narrative of Jesus' salvific actions in the lives of believers is ongoing, including amongst the divorced.

No doubt there will be strong reactions to some of these proposals. My purpose is partly to reframe the current debate in a broader normative scope and stimulate new thinking, so this is to be welcomed. However, my main priority remains ministry praxis, and I hope these initial findings provide some beneficial insights for pastoral practice. I contend that by reuniting Jesus' words, historical deeds, and contemporary actions, ministry to the divorced can be more informed, compassionate, Spirit-led, and, ultimately, more biblical.

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