

October 13, 1967

861

518

PROBLEMS OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE  
(First of a Series)

## THE GOSPEL: INDIVIDUAL AND/OR SOCIAL

By T. B. Maston

Retired Professor of Ethics, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

There has been considerable debate through the years concerning the nature of the gospel. This debate has been revived to some degree and in some circles in the contemporary period.

For example, some Southern Baptists insist that we should be concerned exclusively with winning individuals to Christ and maturing them for Christ. They contend that we should not get involved in social issues.

It is doubtful if many Southern Baptists would say that we should be exclusively or even primarily interested in social conditions and problems. Many do believe, however, that Christians should be concerned with both the individual and the world in which he lives.

After all, the individual Christian does not live in a vacuum or in isolation. He necessarily lives in a particular cultural situation and in relationship to other people.

As a citizen of the world the Christian fulfills or plays numerous and sometimes complex if not conflicting roles. Whatever may be these roles he cannot escape the fact that he is a Christian. The word "Christian" should precede and define or limit every role he plays.

For example, he may be a husband and a father but he is a "Christian" husband, a "Christian" father; and the prefix "Christian" should make a difference. So it is with every role he plays. He may be a doctor or a lawyer, farmer or banker, employer or employee, teacher or pupil, legislator or judge. He may be a member of the Chamber of Commerce or of a labor union, a white man or a Negro, a citizen of the U.S.A. or of the U.S.S.R. If a Christian his faith should find a way to express itself in every role or area of his life.

This means that whether we like it or not the gospel we preach and teach inevitably must be applied to every aspect of our social situation. This has to be true if we are to meet the needs of individuals, if we are concerned about the way they express their Christian faith.

The church's concern for the world will be expressed primarily through the lives of redeemed men and women. There is no sound hope for a better world without better men and women and the only hope for the latter is to bring men and women into a vital, life-changing union with the resurrected Christ.

Redeemed men and women need, however, to know how they can apply effectively their Christian faith to the different areas of their lives. This means that churches, under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, should provide opportunities for the study of methods and strategies that can be used to influence the world and its structures for Christ and his Cause.

Our churches and our denomination should also be concerned with conditions in society because of the effect of those conditions on men and women, boys and girls. Conditions in the home and in the community in general may make it relatively easy or difficult to reach the individual for Christ. Environmental factors will very definitely affect his spiritual growth and maturity. This suggests again that even if we were exclusively concerned with the individual, we would have to be concerned with the world in which he lives.

The gospel we preach and teach is not "an individual gospel" or "a social gospel," it is a gospel that knows no limits in its application to life. It is a message for the total man, and because it is it is also a message for every aspect of the world in which he lives.



October 13, 1967

862

PROBLEMS OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE  
(Second of a Series)

574

PASTORS AND THE DIVORCED

By T. B. Maston

Retired Professor of Ethics, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

The pastor should maintain a wholesome pastoral relationship to divorced men and women, in his congregation and in the community.

The question arises whether or not a pastor should perform the wedding ceremony for the divorced.

There are four rather well-defined positions maintained by pastors. Each minister should think and pray through to a position that he can conscientiously defend and can maintain with reasonable consistency.

Some pastors insist that a minister is simply acting as an agent of the state when he performs a marriage ceremony. Hence, they will perform the ceremony for anyone who comes to them with a marriage license.

This does not seem to me to be a defensible Christian position. A pastor is not merely an agent of the state when he performs a marriage ceremony; he is also and primarily a minister of God. As a minister he is responsible to God for what he does in every area and activity of his life.

Other pastors go to the opposite extreme: They will not perform the marriage ceremony for anyone who has been divorced. Some do not believe the Scriptures justify marriage after divorce. Others contend that this is the most practical position for them. They say that they cannot in good conscience perform the ceremony for all divorced and it is difficult, if not impossible, for them to discriminate wisely. They believe that the best policy for them is not to perform the ceremony for any who have been divorced. They also suggest that this policy makes it unnecessary to explain why they will perform the ceremony for some who have been divorced and not for others.

A third position maintained by some pastors is that they will perform the ceremony only for those who have what is called the Scriptural grounds for divorce: fornication or unchastity. Most of those who follow this policy base their position on a belief that Matthew 19:9 would permit remarriage for the so-called "innocent party" where adultery has been committed.

A fourth position rather widely practiced by pastors, is that every marriage involving a divorced person should be treated as an individual case. In other words, whether or not the pastor will perform the ceremony will depend on whether or not he is convinced that the couple has a good chance of establishing a stable Christian home.

Any pastor who follows this last policy must be willing to take the time for one or more conferences with the couple before agreeing to perform the ceremony. Without such conferences he can seldom if ever know whether or not he should perform the ceremony.

I am not an ordained minister and have never performed a marriage ceremony. For many years, however, I suggested in my classes and elsewhere that if I were a pastor I would not perform the ceremony for anyone who had been divorced.

In recent years, my position has changed considerably. I believe now that I would follow the last position outlined: make each case an individual case.

Several factors have contributed to this change. A major one has been the rather extensive counseling I have done through the years, including many people who have been divorced. Also, as I have matured in years, wisely or unwisely, I have become more sympathetic and less judgmental of people who have made tragic mistakes regarding marriage. Furthermore, I am less legalistic in my interpretation of the teachings of the Scriptures concerning divorce and remarriage.

This is one of the many ethical questions that Christians face which the Bible gives no clear answer. Each one of us must struggle with the questions, weighing the factors and come to our own conclusions.

862

October 13, 1967

863

504

PROBLEMS OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE  
(Third of a Series)

STEWARDSHIP OF THE GRACE OF GOD

By. T. B. Maston

Retired Professor of Ethics, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

In the area of stewardship our churches and our denomination frequently start at the wrong end. The emphasis is usually on the material rather than on the spiritual aspects of stewardship.

Even in the area of the stewardship of material things, first consideration too frequently is given to tithing rather than to the broader aspects of stewardship.

It is possible for one to be a faithful tither and not be a good steward. I personally do not believe that one can be a good steward and not give at least a tithe of his income to the cause of Christ.

Furthermore, it is possible for one to be a good steward of money and things material and yet fail to understand and practice the stewardship of the spiritual. The spiritual aspects of stewardship are deeper and more inclusive than the stewardship of the material. Really the latter should be instrumental to the fulfillment of the former.

Peter suggests one aspect of the stewardship of spiritual things in the following words: "As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold ("varied" RSV) grace of God" (1 Pet. 4:10). Here Peter is referring primarily to the different tasks to which God through his grace has called men. Christians are to be good stewards of that grace. This aspect of the stewardship of the grace of God is expressed through service within, and through, the Christian fellowship.

The first call of God to us is to salvation, and this call is an expression of the manifold or varied grace of God. We are saved by grace through faith, it is the gift of God, "not of works lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). We are stewards of this phase of the grace of God as we are of his grace expressed in our call or task.

The stewardship of the grace that saved us requires that we open our lives for additional expressions of the varied grace of God. This grace will express itself in the quality of life we live for him. We are his workmanship or craftsmanship but we have been created in Christ Jesus "unto good works" (Eph. 2:10) or for, or with a view to good works. The good works express his grace but they are also a product of his grace.

We are not only stewards of the grace expressed in our salvation and in our particular call or task, we are also stewards of the grace of God contained in the gospel we preach and teach. There is enough grace in that gospel to save every man everywhere who will turn to God in faith. We who have been redeemed by that grace are responsible to God to share the good-news of his grace with the peoples of the world.

This good-news should be shared personally wherever possible, but there are limitations to personal sharing. By being good stewards of our material possessions we can have a part in sending the gospel of grace to peoples in areas where we can never go personally.

How wonderful that God can use our tithes and offerings, along with the gifts of others, to win men and women to Christ and to extend his Cause around the world! This glorifies our giving and can make the giving of things material a rewarding spiritual experience.