

Two Presidents: Defining Adultery.

In this essay we will not be beating the dead horse of disgrace to the Presidency and White House brought on by former President Bill Clinton. We will, however, look at his effort to justify his actions by defining adultery in lawful terms and hair-splitting definitions.

Former President Jimmy Carter publicly admitted that he had allowed himself to “look upon a woman to lust after her,” thus committing adultery in his heart. His humble confession came from deep religious conviction, yet it was based upon misunderstanding.

The media made the most sensational stories at the expense of the two men. One man was defensive and impenitent; the other was humbly sincere. With their cases as illustrations, let us look again to see what adultery really is and what it is not.

Looking beyond our traditional theological definitions of adultery, just what does it involve? To adulterate is to corrupt or debase, or make impure by the addition of a foreign or inferior substance. Who is an adulterer? Just as a farmer is one who farms and a singer is one who sings, so an adulterer is one who adulterates. Who, or what, is adulterated? The dairyman who adulterates the milk he sells does not adulterate himself; he adulterates the milk. In like manner, a person who sins by adding an impure element to his marriage does not adulterate himself or his spouse; he adulterates the marriage. Though the term “living in adultery” is not used in the Scriptures, we may rightly conclude that persons may live in an adulterated marriage even though it may not be detected by an unsuspecting spouse.

How is marriage adulterated? Now we get to the real issue. Is it only in the consummation of a normal sexual act, as Clinton maintained? Is adultery defined as a specific physical act with such technical legal definitions? Where is the law that defines it clearly? If a certain point reached in sexual intimacy could be defined as adultery, then any extra-marital intimacy up to that point would not be adulterous.

So throw out the law concept! Who wants a spouse who might be sexually intimate with someone else, always stopping just short of full consummation, then denying any corruption of the marriage? Even if we stopped this study right here, can you not see that we have been intent on defining liberties and limits by supposed law? It was to such legalists that Jesus offered his explanations about marriage, divorce, and remarriage. He was explaining the Law of Moses around which the rabbis had built and debated legal interpretations for centuries. Neither Paul nor Peter quoted Jesus’ teaching when giving their instructions to disciples later. They were not reinforcing the Law of Moses or enforcing new laws supposedly given by Jesus.

Jimmy Carter was more on target than Bill Clinton. He was looking at principle instead of law. But due to inaccurate translation or interpretation, he brought embarrassment because he missed the real definition. Most of us of conservative Christian upbringing, I assume, have had that same guilt-inducing misdirection.

Is marriage just a license for legal sexual expression so that it's purity can only be adulterated by sexual violations? The vows of marriage include the forsaking of all others in life-long commitment to love, honor, trust, and support one another through the yet unseen events of life. Thus marriage is holy, not just made so by God, but it is something dedicated and set apart, as two people dedicate and set themselves apart for each other. Is a sexual act the only element that can violate and nullify those vows and adulterate the purity and holiness of the marriage?

If affections are developed toward a third party so that one spouse feels, as the old song expressed, "One has my name; another has my heart," would that be adulterous? Can one spouse have secret sessions of intimacy and fondling with a third party short of completion of sexual conjugation without corrupting the marriage? Is an absentee husband not dishonoring his wife and marriage? Are separations or desertions without divorce debasing the principles of marriage? Is physical or mental abuse by a husband the injecting of something foreign into their union? If one spouse, purposefully and continually, refuses sexual fulfillment with the other, are the principles upon which their marriage was built being respected?

Again, to adulterate is to corrupt or debase, or make impure by the addition of a foreign or inferior substance. Does that definition apply only to such things as food and drugs, or does it not relate also to the purity of marriage and commitment of spouses? "*Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the immoral and adulterous*" (Heb. 13:4). Note that general immorality is given an equal billing with adultery as elements that defile and dishonor the sanctity of marriage.

Jesus indicated that adultery can be in the mind without accompanying action. "*You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart*" (Matt. 5:27). The adulterating element is the man's intention, though his intention may not be put into action. It is his intention rather than just being attracted sexually to a physically appealing woman. Here is where Jimmy Carter needed better insight.

These words of Jesus have been used to induce guilt where Jesus did not intend it. Because lust is defined as a strong desire, and every normal youth and man is attracted strongly to females, sincere men of all ages have been made to feel guilt unavoidably. It is strong sexual attraction that draws us into marriage. We cannot think that, at the wedding in Cana, Jesus might have said, "Son, I am glad that you are marrying this appealing young lady so that you will no longer be sinning by being aroused and yearning for her sexually outside of wedlock."

“Lust” and “covet” are translated from the same word. It means a strong desire of any kind, either good or bad. According to the judgment of translators, the word “aner” is rendered “man” or “husband,” and “gune” is rendered “woman” or “wife.” These are the words Jesus used.

He says there is adultery, not fornication, in the heart. Married people commit adultery whereas sexual activity by two unmarried persons is generally called fornication. So either the man who is lusting or the woman he is looking at, or both, are married. Jesus was actually only reinforcing the Tenth Commandment, “*You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife*” (Exo. 20:17). That had nothing to do with a youth looking at the girls or finding one of them to be sexually appealing. As sin, to lust or covet included desire plus consent of the mind to fulfill it. Jesus was saying that in coveting/lusting for another man’s wife/woman, the plans for adulterating one or two marriages were in his mind already. The man and woman could adulterate two marriages in one act. However, since the Seventh Commandment had already stated, ‘*You shall not commit adultery*’ (20:14), the Tenth evidently anticipated marriage of the two involved, and it would mean, “You shall not desire and plan to take your neighbor’s wife in marriage.”

Luke records Jesus’ words, “*Every one who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery*’ (Luke 16:18). How could he say that when he had already given the permissive “except for fornication” clause? It is commonly understood in our speaking that, when a second action is coupled with a former one, the second action indicates the purpose of the first. To illustrate: “I went to the store and bought some bread.” “And” couples two actions with the second action stating the purpose of the first one. So we understand it as “I went to the store in order to buy some bread.” That is a very common usage, and evidently it was used by Jesus in the above quotation. It should be understood, “Every one who divorces his wife in order to marry another.” His looking was more than a gawking or fantasizing, but evidently it was a developed intention to take the woman. So he divorces his wife in order to marry the coveted woman. That was what was forbidden according to Jesus’ explanation of the Law.

Since a healthy marriage is not built upon sexuality alone, but also on various other essential elements, we are proposing that it can be corrupted, debased, made impure, and adulterated by violations other than sexual unfaithfulness. Now, don’t jump on your horse and ride off in all directions at once! Consider what I am stating even though you may be shocked by it. I am presenting this for study rather than as dogmatic conclusions.

There is sufficient ambiguity in the meanings of “adultery” and “fornication” to lead the translators of different versions to use some less specific definitions, such as “unchastity,” “marital unfaithfulness,” and “immorality.” Some of these variations are within single versions. The two words are not necessarily synonyms, for Mark 7:21 makes a distinction between them by mentioning them separately in the same list of infractions.

Let us look again at “fornication” as a permissible “ground for divorce” (Matt. 5:32). Married people do not commit fornication; they may commit adultery. And sexual immorality was not a ground for divorce, according to Moses, but both parties involved were to be stoned to death! (Lev. 20:10; John 8:2-5). If the wife was the guilty one and she was stoned, the husband would be free to remarry, but he would not need cause to divorce his dead wife!

Was Jesus changing the Law of Moses? Definitely not -- in spite of what I have heard all my life! Read Jesus’ introductory remarks in this same chapter (Matt. 5:17-19) for yourself and reach your own conclusion. It is no wonder that different translations do not render the word as “fornication” here. Further, if an illicit sexual act were the only “legal” ground for divorce, how certain would a wife have to be that her husband did it? Would she have to see it? Or could she take the word of someone else? What if her husband lied in admitting his sin in order to get a divorce, or a jealous woman testified deceitfully that he went to bed with her? There are too many uncertainties from a legalistic standpoint.

Yes, any extra-marital sexual violation adulterates marriage. But does the husband who gives in to sexual temptation while on a business trip corrupt his marriage more than the one who habitually beats and demeans his wife, or becomes addicted to drugs or alcohol, or becomes a dead-beat dad/husband, or even lives with his wife without showing her any affection or honor? Any and all of such conduct corrupts, debases, makes impure, and undermines the marriage. They adulterate it. How would God’s will for marriage be promoted by forcing a woman to live in such an existence of unrelieved and hopeless misery?

God’s will concerning marriage is not to make it a miserable entrapment for the person who makes an unfortunate selection of a companion. His regulation of it is to protect it for the well-being and happiness of both the spouses and their children. The home is to be a haven of security and nourishment and a sort of heaven for the parents and children. Moral vices which work contrary to those purposes are undermining and adulterating. When the essential elements of marriage have been destroyed, how could binding civil legality be a spiritual factor demanding continuation of the union?

In a failed marriage, some couples stay together for the sake of their children. That may be noble, but modeling a loveless marriage before the children may be doing them no big favor in the long run.

Because a marriage has been adulterated does not mean that it must be terminated. In some devastated marriages, the couple continues to live in legal marriage rather than undergoing the traumatic alternative of divorce. That choice may be more practical than ideal, however.

Without being dogmatic, we will propose that one who has committed adultery and subsequently humbly and penitently pleads for forgiveness is no longer an adulterer. He was one but is now forgiven (see 1 Cor. 6:9-11). In such a case, may the wife still have cause for divorce, either by legality or by principle? To

say the least, the ideal remedial course is that of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

I doubt if Jimmy Carter actually committed adultery either in thought or act. Hillary Clinton chose to remain married to Bill. Regardless of their outcome, their cases have emphasized the need for a more accurate definition of adultery.

(For more, see FR 37: “Adulterating Marriage;” also FR 21 and 22 concerning marriage, divorce, and remarriage.)

(Cecil Hook; May 2002) []