

A FABRICATED DICHOTOMY

by Bill Reeves

In the present controversy over M-D-R (marriage, divorce and remarriage), our over-scrupulous brethren, much like the “weak” brother of Rom. 14, present their dichotomy, or division into two opposing parts, and many press it to the dividing of the brotherhood (they disfellowship those who won’t accept their half of the dichotomy).

To the “weak” brother of Rom. 14, it was all a matter of don’t eat meat or be an idolater (if a Gentile convert, eating meat dedicated to an idol, 1 Cor. chap. 8, 10; or if a Jewish convert, eating some ceremoniously “unclean” meat): **take your choice!** He could not conceive of any Christian eating meat that in the market place had had some words of dedication to a god spoken over it by a pagan priest, or eating “unclean” meat, according to the Law of Moses to which he had been accustomed. If that meat was eaten, idolatry was committed, or some unclean meat was eaten, period!

The dichotomy of these over-scrupulous brethren in Rome, to which Paul directs what we call chapter 14 of Romans, allowed only two possible choices: **follow their scruple or be guilty of sin!**

Today the same thing is passing in the M-D-R controversy: over-scrupulous brethren have presented to the brotherhood their dichotomy, and we can all take our choice: either civil divorce proceedings in a courthouse of pagan judges, lawyers and laws, (with the divorce being granted to the spouse who first gets to the courthouse), **or** their so-called “mental divorce”, period! Take your choice!

Jesus has given divine permission for the innocent, vow-keeping, faithful spouse to repudiate the fornicator-mate and to remarry. However, according to these over-scrupulous brethren that divine permission is negated by humans if in a civil court a judge legalizes the divorce of the fornicator-mate who beats to the courthouse the innocent, faithful spouse to legally divorce him. This has God’s permission annulled by what human judges declare. So, we are told, if the innocent, vow-keeping spouse is beaten to the courthouse, and later he exercises the divine right, having the cause of fornication against his mate, he is guilty of “mental divorce,” since now he cannot take civil action against the fornicator-mate. So, in effect these brethren are saying: Take your choice, either get to the courthouse first, or you’re left with the only other alternative, the so-called “mental divorce” (which to them is equal to committing adultery).

What is wrong with all this is that their dichotomy is a contrivance of their own making. There is a third choice: exercising divine permission!

The “weak” brother of Rom. 14 was pressing his dichotomy. He recognized only two alternatives:

1. Don’t eat meat, or
2. Commit idolatry (or sin by eating unclean meat)

But, there was a third alternative:

3. Don’t eat meat but neither judge (condemn) him that does eat meat. (The meat-eater was to eat his meat but not to offense) -- Rom. 14:13-22; 1 Cor. 8:9-13; 10:31-33.

Our over-scrupulous brethren are pressing their dichotomy. They recognize only two alternatives:

1. Civil, legal divorce in a courthouse of the land (being granted to the first spouse to get to the courthouse with his case), or
2. So-called “Mental divorce”

But, there is a third alternative:

3. Exercise the divine permission to repudiate the fornicator-mate and to remarry, Mat. 19:9a.

The “either / or” presentation is a common tactic of false teachers. The situation-ethicist is well known for employing it. He presents a hypothetical case and gives two alternatives, pressing the hearer/reader to take his choice. For example: The mother of a starving baby--shall she steal some milk for her baby, or let it die? Many fall for this ploy, but there is a third alternative: cast your burden on the Lord for he cares for you (1 Pet. 5:7).

My mistaken brethren aren’t content with the divine permission that God has given to the vow-keeping spouse who has the cause of fornication against his mate. They want to give to a pagan judge the power to override the divine permission. They make the issue one of a race to the courthouse, and if the vow-keeping spouse loses it, he is stuck, bound to a fornicator-mate for as long as he lives. If he now exercises the divine permission, he is labeled a “mental divorcer.” This is their famous dichotomy!

But man doesn’t have power over God to annul what he has permitted. Human judges can’t rob the vow-keeping spouse of the divine permission that Jesus, by implication, revealed in Mat. 19:9a. Let us be satisfied with what Jesus permits, and not supplant it with what man legislates and assigns.