



2023 EDITION

BREAKING
THE SILENCE

BOOK
REVIEW

Book Review: *Not Under Bondage* by B. Roberts

Reviewed by John McClean – Previously published in [Crucible](#).

The following book review is helpful in thinking about and reflecting on the issues surrounding abusive relationships. Please note that this book review does not form part of the policy or process for dealing with or preventing abuse within the church but is provided as general information.

Barbara Roberts, *Not Under Bondage: Biblical Divorce for Abuse, Adultery and Desertion*, (Maschil Press, 2008).

The Christian church has been opposed to divorce, and usually decries the modern divorce culture. *Not under bondage* reminds us that this has had unseen consequences, forcing Christians (most often women) to remain in abusive marriages. Barbara Robert's book addresses the issue of divorce from an abusive marriage.

Although she writes from personal experience, the book has no autobiography or personal anecdotes. It is a carefully researched and argued book, dealing with the biblical, theological and pastoral aspects. It is a model of Christian ethical reflection, strongly grounded in Scripture and at the same time intensely engaged with the experience of life with obvious empathy for victims of abuse.

THE THESIS OF THE BOOK is that abuse, adultery or desertion are grounds on which a 'disciplinary divorce' should be allowed, and that after such a divorce remarriage is permissible. A fairly common Protestant view has been that a marriage is not an indissoluble sacramental bond but a covenant which can be broken by unfaithfulness.¹ The focus of the book on abusive marriage deals with a grounds for divorce which has not often been given sufficient consideration (a very helpful appendix outlines the history of the issue in the church).

¹ The Westminster Confession 24:6 states that "nothing but adultery, or such wilful desertion as can no way be remedied by the Church, or civil magistrate, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage".



THE FIRST CHAPTER deals with the identification of abuse, arguing that not only physical violence but the use of emotional, financial, social, sexual and spiritual power can “so undermine a person’s wellbeing that the result is abuse”.² This important observation is as close as the chapter comes to defining abuse. The burden of the chapter is to describe abuse and its patterns rather than to offer a technical definition. It may be argued that such a definition is not of any great practical help and that if we are properly sensitive, we know abuse when we see it. However, some reflection in this chapter on what constitutes ‘abuse’ may have helped victims, pastors and even abusers to properly name behaviour which is more than the usual conflict and disappointment of married life. The chapter finishes with a very clear warning about naïve assessments of abusive marriages.

CHAPTER 2 deals with the Biblical pattern of discipline. That may seem an unusual topic to which to turn, however Robert’s case is that divorce is a proper action of discipline. This approach gives a very helpful biblical perspective to the issue, and means that it is integrated with pastoral theology in a way that most books on divorce are not. Although she is talking about civil divorce, she approaches the question through the process of church discipline. Her argument is that disciplinary divorce is a special case of the general principle of separation (see 2 Thess 3:6,11-15; 1 Cor 5:4-5; 11-13).

CHAPTER 3 takes on more directly the question of divorce, especially on the basis of 1 Corinthians 7:10-16. Here Roberts uses Luck’s distinction between treacherous and disciplinary divorce.³ She argues convincingly that disciplinary divorce is proper in the case of an adulterous partner, or desertion or abuse. She also argues that 1 Cor 7:15 (“if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so, a believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances”) teaches that someone who has been treacherously divorced or has divorced an adulterous or abusive partner may remarry. It is from this passage that the title of the book is taken, as Roberts argues persuasively that “not bound” could be translated “not under bondage”. This does not change the basic implication of the text, but certainly suggests interesting connotations.

² Page 20.

³ W. Luck Divorce and remarriage: Recovering the biblical view. San Francisco: Harper & Row. 1987



Roberts also considers Paul's instruction that if a non-Christian spouse is willing (*suneudoke÷w*) to remain in a marriage then the Christian should not divorce (1 Cor 1:13). She argues that this cannot be held to mean that the non-Christian spouse may demand any terms in order to stay and hence that a Christian must remain in an abusive situation. This is right, although her suggestion that Paul's meaning could be glossed as "the unbelieving husband ... may approve of his wife and her godly values" is probably attempting to read too much into a single word. A better argument would be that Paul's statement here is not intended to be a principle which deals with all possible cases but should be seen as a contrast to the previous clause about his an unbelieving partner who does wants a divorce.

CHAPTER 4 deals more fully with the question of remarriage. It is interesting that it is at this point that church discipline is dealt with. Presumably this is because in Australia marriage is still often a church matter, while divorce is a civil process. Despite the legal situation I would like to see some consideration as to how the church might be able to render judgement at the point of divorce as well.

The rest of the book deals with various issues which "clear the ground".

CHAPTER 5 is a rebuttal of theological arguments that marriage is indissoluble. Chapter 6 argues that the Old Testament assumes remarriage after divorce.

CHAPTER 7 tackles the question of whether a Christian may break vows made at marriage, arguing that the marriage covenant has a conditional aspect.

CHAPTER 8 deals with the text of Malachi 2:6 arguing that it should be translated "For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the Lord, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the Lord of hosts" (as in the ESV) rather than "I hate divorce, says the LORD God of Israel, and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment, says the LORD Almighty" (as the NIV). That is the text condemns divorce which comes from a husband's lack of love or hatred (the Hebrew word is *sane'* which is usually rendered as hatred or enmity). The evidence marshalled from a wide range of scholarship (detailed in Appendix 7) makes a convincing case.



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CHAPTERS 9 – 11 deal with Jesus' teaching and the so-called Matthean exception that only adultery is a grounds for divorce. Roberts argues that Jesus teaching is in continuity with the Old Testament. The final chapter draws together the conclusions of the study and finishes with a thoughtful plea for Christians to be more careful about statements such as "God hates divorce" and for preachers and teachers to be aware of how victims of marital abuse would hear such statements.

Not under bondage is a useful and important book. It is a good model of Christian ethics applied to an agonising issue. It is recommended reading for pastors and those working in marriage counselling. It is also readable enough to be given to people struggling with these questions in their own lives and families. It is encouraging to see such a useful work produced by an Australian Christian and first-time author.

Review by John McClean

Book: Roberts, Barbara. *Not Under Bondage: Biblical Divorce for Abuse, Adultery and Desertion*. Ballarat: Maschil Press, 2008. notunderbondage.com

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