

To: CFBC assistant pastor and deacons

Re: Biblical and Philosophical view of marriage, divorce, and remarriage

Date: 8-16-13

Brothers,

In response to a church member's inquiry, I have written a condensed biblical and philosophical view of my position on marriage, divorce, and remarriage. For helpful summation I will simply offer a modified viewpoint of the last position authored by Fr. Lawrence O. Richards in *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*. Dr. Carl Laney is one of the authors in this series and I agree with much of his exegesis but I would disagree with his more rigid application of the Scriptures. Once again my interpretive methodology is historical/grammatical/contextual and historically conservative but...it is often laced with more Grace than Law. Brackets are additions that are not reflected in Richard's thoughts.

First, I would affirm that God's goal in marriage is a lifelong union [between a man and woman] within which two people love [and respect] one another and enrich one another's lives [becoming more like Christ]. Successful lifelong marriage is possible for any two people willing to follow Jesus' [and the apostles'] guidelines for developing a supportive personal relationship. [The Genesis account found in chpts. 1 and 2 speak of the marriage relationship but also conveys such a relationship was formed within the Paradise of God in the midst of a perfect relationship with God, creation, and spouse. It is therefore to be considered the ideal. This was conveyed by Jesus' teaching in Mt. 19, Mk. 10 – "from the beginning." Passages such as Malachi 2:13ff (God hates divorce) speak to the ideal. It, however, does not speak to conforming to a rigid law but to the heart issue behind the covenant: respect and love for God and for each other].

Second, because human beings are marred by sin [Gen. 3], it will not always be possible for marriage to achieve this ideal. God tells us to be holy and perfect as well but the struggle is still there and in some cases we head the opposite direction. In some cases, hardheartedness may so distort the marriage relationship that a divorce is the best one *can* do [to live in and at peace with each other. This difficulty is not an excuse for entering into marriage pessimistically or to treat it trivially but realistically and with the intent of daily work and striving for what God has called a husband and wife to become: one.] (Cp. Rom. 12:18)

[This hardheartedness is manifested early on through the writing of 'permissive' divorces. Moses "permitted" divorce (Deut. 24; cf. Matt. 19/Mk 10) and portrayed God's mercy and grace in dealing with the sinfulness of the heart although His desire is still the ideal. Divorce is always a human destruction of a God-given creation and we must never enter into it lightly. As followers of Christ we are to strive for the ideal, seek the ideal, and live life together to bring praise and glory to God through attaining the ideal through the regenerative power of the Holy Spirit. Divorce is not the ultimate solution to a marriage in trouble; reconciliation with God and each other is. And two individuals yielded to the regenerative power of the Holy Spirit can experience that healing reconciliation. The reality is that not everyone is willing to yield and repent of their sin. Once again God is patient and waits.

Historically, commentator Peter Craig states in regards to Deut. 22, “The verses do not institute divorce, but treats it as a practice already known, which may be either a matter of custom or of other legislation no longer known.”¹ The passage context is regulating certain types of “remarriage” and implies that other types of remarriage were taking place but without criticism.]

Third, hardheartedness may be displayed in a variety of ways, including mental and physical abuse, sexual abuse, repeated adulteries, and emotional and spiritual abandonment of the relationship, even when two persons live in the same home. In such ways, the marriage covenant is already abandoned by one or both parties whether or not a legal divorce takes place. [I have stated this publically: Two people living in the same house *does not* make a marriage. It is the covenant bond between them and their willingness to pursue the life of Christ that makes a marriage. Perhaps we should be concentrating on defining just what the covenant entails rather than on what constitutes a divorce. Perhaps couples entering into marriage *should* write their own vows - that way it will be their words violated instead of the preachers.

I understand the subjectivity of this “hardheartedness” and therefore would encourage a pastor or leaders to help in giving counsel to a marriage that is suffering with the indignities of mutual sin. **Our goal** is “no divorce.” I also realize that the Scripture speaks of “exemptions” to the marriage covenant, i.e. sexual immorality and abandonment of an unbelieving spouse. However, taken in the context written (Matthew 5; 19, Mark 19; I Cor. 7) these are not solely legal issues. With Jesus it is always a matter of the heart. Adultery, for example, is not violating a particular law but draws attention to the lust in one’s heart – a love of something other than one’s spouse and God – coveting someone else instead of giving thanks for the gift that God has given to you.

Adultery, the act itself, does not have to end in divorce and I have often seen couples recover and have greater marriages through honest conversation and a willingness to work things out. Forgiveness can set people free to begin again. But sexual sin is also set out as a uniquely damaging sin to the “oneness” principle (Gen. 2:24; 1 Cor. 6) and I believe this is why Jesus allows for the exemption.

In regards to abandonment, Paul talks about allowing a non-Christian to stay in the marriage if they chose and by doing so come under the witnessing influence of the believer. Just as there are exceptions in leaving, there are also encouragements in allowing people to stay.

The “exemptions” given in both Matt and Mk are in response to legal challenges by the Pharisees and the various opinions of the teachers of the Law, but Jesus always took them back to the ideal. The Law was not the ideal. The Law per Galatians was the school master that taught humanity their frailness and inability to accomplish legal rules of moral conduct. When we speak of “when according to the Law” or “when, according to the Bible, can a person get divorced?” we are already defeated. The issue is not “when” can a person divorce his or her spouse but what personal relationships do we need to keep addressing so that people don’t get to that point. The issue is not divorce; the issue is the failure on a person’s part to follow Christ. The goal is “no divorce.” By the way, if...we want to follow the Law, adultery was punishable by death and so were a host of other relational offenses.]

¹Craig, C. Peter, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1976), 303-304.

[If we look at Jesus in the debatable text in John 8, (the woman caught in the act of adultery) we do not see Jesus going against the death penalty. It was the Law. But...the Law was based on principles of the heart. “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.” They all left. And Jesus, full of love and grace, spoke to her heart and said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin.” He did not dismiss or trivialize the sin. He addressed it and provided the solution. Condemnation of the sin was accompanied with grace and mercy for the sinner.

In matters of divorce we should be affirming the ideal, the heart of God, which is that He hates divorce and desires that two people seek to follow Christ in relationship to each other. But... we should also be offering grace and mercy to those caught in sin (their own and their spouse’s) not trying to simply apply rigid rules without context. Contrary to my critics, this is not emotionalism overruling God’s will and authority. I am simply recognizing and implementing the actions and teachings of Jesus as I see him deal with sin, i.e. with much grace and mercy while exhorting them to live holy lives.]

Fourth, it is the sole responsibility of husband or wife or both to determine whether or not the marriage is really over and it is time to divorce. [The Church, however, has been instituted by Christ to be an arbitrator and guide in Body life matters, cf. Matthew 18. Where sin is concerned in the life of the body, God has designated elders to help sort through and offer reconciliation practices. We must understand that divorce does not just affect the two people or immediate blood family but also the spiritual family of God –the Church. And therefore the Church has a measure of authority and a responsibility to help restore the broken relationship. Ultimately, it will be up to the couple but it is not done in isolation. As part of the Body, it will affect the Body.

When two people get married in a church before witnesses they are simply affirming publically what they have already determined privately – that they will offer themselves to each other in a covenantal relationship before God. Legally, this is done before witnesses but in the heart one does not need a pastor or witnesses for such a covenant to take place. If we hold to marriage as instituted before God, then we must hold a Genesis 1 and 2 position that states marriage is God simply uniting two hearts into one in His presence. This is why Jesus said in Mark 10:8b, “Therefore what God has joined together let man not separate.” This is the ideal. This is the command. But as He did in the Old Testament He grants people mercy in going against His will due to the hardness of their hearts. As a side note, the word “man” is the word “anthropos” and speaks of mankind. It is not the more specific word “aner” meaning male.]

It is, however, the responsibility of spiritual leaders to give guidance [in restorative and reconciliation issues]. They are also to prayerfully support those willing to keep on trying to restore that which is broken. It is also the responsibility of the spiritual leaders to provide a safe place for both to come and worship corporately. Church is not a place to “publicly” ambush the other spouse who desires not to see or associate with the other spouse. Church is first and foremost a place to come and set aside our selfish desires, not a place to fulfill them.]

[By way of who can divorce whom, the statement has been made, “Only the man can divorce his wife.” This is not true. Upon further study of I Corinthians 7:10, the words “separate” (*cwriscgenai*) and “divorce” (*aqietw*) have the same meaning. “A wife must (may) not separate or divorce her husband” (ideal). But...if she does (permission), she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And... a husband must not divorce or separate from his wife. (ideal). (Implied is the “permission” to divorce as well.)

In the Jewish custom a man was the only one who could initiate a divorce but we know from historical record that changed. And by the time the Gospel came to the Gentile church, equality between men and women was already being pursued in lawsuits in general as well as divorce. (See *The Household of God: The Social World of the Pastoral Epistles* by David C. Verner; dissertation).

Once again this question of “who can divorce who” is the wrong question. The question itself reveals the legality and control a person desires. It does not address the heart questions of “Why is this person desiring to leave?” “What role did I play in the dissolution of my marriage?” Granted, a person can conceivably do all the right but imperfect things and the spouse still choose to leave. The weight of that decision will bear upon the person who chooses to trivialize the marriage covenant. If anything, strong teaching on marriage and its covenant agreement should be taught with fear and trembling. Perhaps there would be fewer divorces in the family of God if more time were spent challenging them on the covenantal agreement and their role to pursue Christ individually and collectively. We are asking this question because we seek to slow the caustic direction of more and more marriages falling into the abyss of irreconciliation, but we must also maintain a realistic view of brothers and sisters who are not “perfected” in their spirit and body.

For clarity, to leave for any and every reason as the Rabbi Hillel taught in the time of Jesus is not supported biblically and is not supported personally. Divorce is not a license to undermine the will of God for marriage, to trivialize it, or treat it carelessly. Marriage images the oneness of the Triune God (Gen. 1:26-27). Marriage offers us a picture of Jesus and the Church (Eph. 5:32). Those images become blurred and even denied due to the casual nature of both marriage and divorce by some even within the Church. One must stand before God and give an account for such decisions so they should be carefully considered and made with rightness of heart.]

Fifth, in regards to remarriage, spiritual leaders have a responsibility to engage those seeking to enter into another marriage. They are to lead each divorced person to verbally and specifically accept responsibility for the failure of the first marriage, to confess the sin involved to God, and to enter another marriage only upon clear and definite leading of the Lord [and in connection with their spiritual counselors]. Ultimately the church would desire reconciliation between husband and wife who have divorced per 1 Cor. 7:10 (ideal) but we know that this cannot always happen, e.g. remarriage by the other spouse, the other person moves to a far away location, blatant unrepentance of the spouse, etc...]

Sixth, Persons who have divorced and are remarried have the right to be fully involved in the life of the local church, without prejudice. Their spiritual gifts are to be recognized and affirmed, and they are to be encouraged to find the place of service for which their gifts equip them.

[The only caveat to this service is found in 1 Timothy 3:1ff regarding who can be an elder and deacon. I understand the text as I do the above issue; not as the letter of the law but according to the spirit from which it is given. “To be the husband of one wife” or literally “a one woman man” does not mean that a divorced man is automatically disqualified for the office of an elder or deacon. It does, however, mean that sufficient time must pass so that the other elders and church Body can testify to his dedication and Christ-like attitude and actions toward his wife and family. For example, if a man gets married in his early twenties but ends up getting divorced before his second year of marriage for irreconcilable reasons, but then remarries at the age of thirty and stays married for the next twenty years proving to all his love, care, and Christ-like mannerisms, should this man then be exclude from being an elder? My opinion is “no.” He has more than demonstrated the spirit of the text by being a “one woman man” who exemplifies the person of Jesus. Juxtaposed to this, a man may not be divorced, keep all the visible requirements found in 1st Timothy 3 but privately be found verbally and emotionally abusive to his wife and children. He is not divorced, and by some “controls” his home, but he does not fit the spirit of the text, which is to be like Christ to His Body. This man, in my opinion, is not to be considered for either position.]

Regarding, others coming into a fellowship to minister, e.g. outside speakers or trainers, it is up to the leadership of the church to navigate those circumstances according to biblical standards and cultural sensitivities. In my personal opinion, outside speakers who are divorced and/or divorced and remarried according to biblical allowances and have been found to have followed through with reconciliation efforts to the best of their ability are not disqualified from serving in such capacities. At times these broken and restored individuals can actually bring a message of hope and healing to those who are struggling with divorce or contemplating divorce. In certain circumstances wisdom would seek to wait for a period of time (a year or two) to see if underlying sin issues or relational issues have surfaced or resurfaced. However, if the person has had a public witness of integrity and humility throughout the struggle and others can testify to this authenticity, the risk might well be worth the rewards of seeing a tangible display of God’s grace, mercy, and blessing.