

Christians & Divorce *Is divorce an unpardonable sin?* by Bill Perkins, Executive Director, Compass International, Inc.

God hates divorce. *Malachi 2:16*

With professing Christians getting divorced at the same or higher rate than non-Christians¹, something is amiss in the Christian world. Percentages of Christians filing for divorce have leveled, but not dropped, in the last 25 years. Desiring to get to the meat of this problem, we asked a Christian divorce attorney to speak at a recent *Steeling The Mind Bible Conference*. He opened a lot of eyes. More on that later.

But with such a large number of professing Christians in our churches who are divorced, what is their status? Can divorced men serve as deacons or elders? Can they teach Sunday School? Are they second-class Christians?

Based on what the Bible says, there is much confusion in the church over the "divorce" issue. Make no bones about it, divorce is horrible. God hates it. That is because God loves us, and divorce always hurts people. ALWAYS. Interestingly, despite God's vehement language forbidding divorce, it was permitted under the Old Testament law.

"When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out from his house." Deuteronomy 24:1

Jesus referred to that law when He said to the Pharisees, who were under the law:

"And it was said, 'Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce'; but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery." Matthew 5:31-32

Unfortunately, many many many pastors teach that if your spouse is committing sexual sin, you have, from the mouth of Jesus in scripture, permission to divorce.

But wait, does that verse apply to those of us living in the Church Age? **Absolutely not!** Jesus was addressing the Jews under law, not Christians living in the Church Age. Paul, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, addressed Believers in the Church Age, and said:

"Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it;" Ephesians 5:25

That is a hugely different scriptural command. Christ would never divorce the Church! So another dispensational doctrinal clarification comes into light. Jesus, when addressing the Jews under law, allowed divorce if the spouse was in sexual sin. This was apparently because those living under the law did not have God the Holy Spirit living in them. But later, Paul, speaking to Believers in the Church Age, said there is zero reason for divorce, even if the spouse is in sexual sin! Post-cross believers have the capacity to love and forgive

that those prior to the cross didn't have. We have the Holy Spirit from which to draw incredible power.

"I can do all things through Him who strengthens me." Philipians 4:13

So, Christians should never get divorced. Christ living in you has the power to overcome the vilest of problems. And with the Holy Spirit, there is always hope for change. If a couple is having marriage problems, regardless of what those problems are, the answer is never divorce. Never.

"Is anything too difficult for the LORD?" Genesis 18:14

However, many many Christians have been divorced. So where do they stand? God's word is very clear, yet many church leaders seem to ignore the instructions. Let's look at what God says about Christians and divorce.

First of all, it makes no difference if both spouses were Believers or nonbelievers at the time of the divorce, or if one was a Believer and one was a pagan. God's instructions to all are the same.

Sin is sin. There are no big sins and little sins. There may be ramifications in this life if you are a homosexual, or a murderer, or divorced, but nothing too large for cover with His blood. For Believers, ALL our sin was paid on the cross—past, present and future. If you are a Believer, as far as divorce is concerned, your sin is under the blood, just like the rest of your sins. It may affect you the rest of your life, but as far as God is concerned, it's paid for and over with.

"And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross." Colossians 2:13-14

There are several verses that God inspired for us to understand how to deal with specific situations. If you get divorced, regardless of the reason, the first thing God wants is for you to be reconciled to your spouse.

"but if she does leave, let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband." 1 Corinthians 7:11

But if reconciliation is not possible, it's BEST to stay unmarried in order to fully serve the Lord.

"...to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord." 1 Corinthians 7:35

"But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I." 1 Corinthians 7:8

"Yet such (divorced or widowed who remarry) will have trouble in this life, and I am trying to spare you." 1 Corinthians 7:28b

However, if two Believers fall in love, they should marry, divorced or not, and it is not sin!

"Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you should

marry, you have not sinned;" 1 Corinthians 7:27,28a

It is interesting that the Bible says, "But if you should marry, you have not sinned." That is consistent with this verse:

"But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn (in lust)." 1 Corinthians 7:9

God created us to be married. He gave us desires for the opposite sex. But divorce is of Satan and it horribly smashes God's model of marriage.

Therefore, if someone is divorced, their first step would be to reconcile. I'm sure a lot of people will roll their eyes over that one but how big is your God? But if they can't reconcile, they are to stay unmarried. And if someone is not able to stay single, which is the NORMAL case, it is much better to be married.

Keep in mind that to God, all Believers are sanctified, cleansed, pure—to the point that God can live in them, and they stay in that condition until they die or are raptured. Divorce doesn't change someone's sanctification. It's not the unpardonable sin. It was paid for on the cross just like all the other sin.

Some argue that 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6 show that there is a penalty for divorce in terms of church leadership.

"An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach," 1 Timothy 3:2

"...namely, if any man be above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion." Titus 1:6

This argument is not scriptural. In the original Greek, the phrase, "the husband of one wife," literally means, "a one woman man," and many who are divorced who are indeed "one woman men." "Not divorced" is not the qualification for church Elder leadership, but rather his maturity as a Believer.

The obvious exception would be if a divorce was a result of a man's poor leadership in his family, THAT would be a disqualification. But not the divorce in itself.

"He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?);" 1 Timothy 3:4-5

It has often been said that God can't use someone until they've been broken. Divorce rattles people to the core. Divorce almost always brings true humility, a Christian characteristic much revered by God. For someone to say that a divorced man is not fit for church leadership, based solely on his divorce status, is prideful in itself. They are adding to God's word, being legalistic and potentially missing great leadership and input.

So all this begs the question, "Why is the divorce percentage higher for Christians than non-Christians?"

As I mentioned, at our last Steeling the Mind Bible Conference, we had a retired divorce attorney speak. His story is amazing. Before God saved him, he drew up divorce papers for everyone who came in his office seeking a divorce. But once he trusted the shed blood of Jesus on the cross in payment for his sins, God opened his eyes to the definition of true agape love.

After much study in God's word, he began to see marriage and love in a different light. God had given him great insight into what God's love really is. He was burdened that most people were getting divorced because of a lack of knowledge. So he decided to share what he learned with those coming in for a divorce. He explained to each and every couple that he would draw up the divorce papers only after a two hour explanation of marriage and love based on the word of God.

That two hour pre-divorce conference resulted in 70% of those coming in to get back together, and they are still married today! Yes, you read that correctly! 70% who went to him for a divorce, are still married today! Wow!

I was so dumbfounded by that statistic I asked him to make a scaled down one hour presentation of his (God's) material, and the results have been absolutely phenomenal. There were five marriages, that we know of, that were turned around at the conference after hearing his presentation. Some churches are now requiring ANY couple in a marriage difficulty to view this DVD prior to any counseling. PTL!

If you know anyone who is having a marriage problem, get this DVD to them. It'll also take a good marriage higher. The title is *How to Love Your Spouse, Regardless!* And, as always, if you can't afford the DVD, we'll send it to you for free. You can't put a price tag on this! Please help us get this material out to as many as possible.



¹ U.S. divorce rates for various faith groups, age groups, & geographic areas" http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_dira.htm "Christians are more likely to experience divorce than are non-Christians," Barna Research Group, 1999-DEC-21.

² MacArthur New Testament Bible Commentary, 1 Timothy, page 104.