

Pushing Back Against Divorce

13 February 2020



As of January the 10th, I have been gratefully married for 22 years. Some of my friends have been married much longer. But I also have believing friends who have gotten divorced during this time. They started full of hope, but for various reasons ended in hopelessness. This article has been difficult to write, because I have been a pastor long enough to see how difficult some marriages are and how tragic divorce can be. What is also tragic however, is to see some Christians at best being indifferent about divorce and at worst commanding it as God's will in certain situations.

The percentage of divorced or separated evangelicals almost doubled from the 1970s to the 2000s (25 to 46%)

Christian Divorces

We see this notable trend within the church of divorce becoming routine and accepted and the weight of it minimized – and the statistics prove it. 'The percentage of divorced or separated evangelicals almost doubled from the 1970s to the 2000s (25 to 46%).'^[i] Almost doubled! This shows that Christians have become too quick to look to divorce as a solution to a difficult marriage. And when the amount of Christian divorces are similar to the world, something is deeply wrong.^[ii]

A Loosening of Boundaries

The re-thinking of divorce as more acceptable has gained greater traction among some teachers in the church. Some say that the New Testament does not give us exhaustive reasons for divorce and therefore we shouldn't be too strict or prescriptive about it. One author, for example, writes, 'Jesus was not trying to set down a legalistic set of rules to determine when a divorce was allowable'^[iii]. They say the world we live in is much more complex than the ancient world and so we have to re-interpret the hard texts on marriage through the law of love.

This is a dangerous view because we then get to decide when divorce (and remarriage) is acceptable or not. We then set the moral standard and we essentially play God.

..marriage is not about our happiness but about our holiness.

Instead, we understand that God's moral laws are binding for all generations, rather than just for a specific time or culture. In other words, He sets the boundaries of how we are called to live, including His pattern on marriage. As we have wrestled with the issue of Christian divorce as local church elders, we have to be clear where Scripture is clear and have the courage to honour that position, even if we would prefer to be more accommodating and loose. When local churches work out their boundaries on what God's Word teaches, we cannot simply reinterpret what it says on marriage and divorce.

Divorce in Jesus' Day

Ironically, in Jesus' day among the Jews, there was an indifferent, loose attitude towards divorce. Before this point, Israel was also so lax in their attitude towards divorce that the prophet Malachi rebuked them severely: *'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. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless.'* (Mal 2:16).

Some of the Pharisees looked for loopholes in the law^[iv] and ways to actually endorse divorce rather than contend for godly marriage. For example, some went so far as to interpret Moses' divorce laws in Deuteronomy 24 as meaning a husband could divorce his wife 'if she did anything he disliked', even if she burned his food while cooking it."^[v]

Divorce happens because of our sinful attitudes and sinful actions.

At one time, the Jews tried to trap Jesus by asking him, *'Why then did Moses **command** one to give a certificate of divorce...?'* (Matthew 19:7). But Moses never commanded divorce, and Jesus corrects them and says, *'Because of the hardness of your heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.'*

I can imagine Jesus being exasperated with these teachers of the law. They are asking the wrong question. They are missing the whole point because their hearts were hard. God never commands divorce nor is He in favour of it. Divorce happens because of our sinful attitudes and sinful actions. The only time Jesus possibly permits divorce is in the case of adultery (Matthew 19:9), but even then, as we will see in the next section, the Lord Himself models covenantal faithfulness in the face of adultery. Possibly allowing divorce does not mean God endorses divorce.

Robust Marriages

Ezekiel recounts the covenantal relationship of God and His wayward people. The Lord marries Israel (Ezekiel 16:8), but she began to be unfaithful, *'played the whore'* and was rightly accused of being an *'adulterous wife'*. God had every right to divorce them, yet He pursued them and sought reconciliation with them.

Marriage is this glorious, covenantal, life-long, robust commitment which reflects Christ's relationship with us

Here is the thing: you and I have been unfaithful to God. We gave our hearts, in our sin, to the world and her affections. We are guilty and should be rejected, yet the Lord accepts and forgives us in Jesus. How can we then not forgive one another and contend for our marriages?

Marriage is this glorious, covenantal, life-long, robust commitment which reflects Christ's relationship with us, and so Jesus says, *'What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.'* (Mark 10:9). The Lord knows how difficult marriage can be, yet He still makes this statement!

This means that your spouse is God's choice for you, even if you sinned coming into your marriage or you were not a believer at the time. And this means that God is able to keep you in your marriage even when it becomes unimaginably difficult.

Finding Hope

You might be reading this feeling stuck in a marriage that seems impossible to salvage. I want to urge you to firstly put the idea of divorce out of your mind. Don't consider it. And settle that your spouse is God's choice for you. Secondly, speak to your elders in your local church who can offer support and godly counsel. In a volatile and abusive environment, sometimes a short-term separation from a spouse for a season can be a legitimate and radical step, but the heart must be to contend always for reconciliation, as the Lord does for us.

God is able to keep you in your marriage even when it becomes unimaginably difficult.

In closing, I do know that divorce has deeply affected many who are reading this. Can God heal and restore those who have been divorced? Of course He can. He is a redemptive, rescuing God. He is the God of hope. For those of us who are married, we do well to remember, as Gary Thomas said, that marriage is not about our happiness but about our holiness. When it gets painful, the answer is not escape from marriage, but pushing back against even the thought of divorce and a pressing into the presence and power of Christ, and ultimately to an eternal joy that won't disappoint.

^[i] Christians Are Hate-Filled Hypocrites . . . and Other Lies You've Been Told. Bradley R.E. Wright (sociologist)

^[ii] "Divorce among born-again Christians is "statistically identical to that of non-born again adults: 32% versus 33%, respectively" (Barna 2008).

^[iii] Foster R J 1985. Money, Sex and Power.

^[iv] Moses in Deuteronomy 24 teaches about divorce and more specifically the prohibition of remarriage to a former spouse. Certain laws, such as the divorce law in Deuteronomy were known as 'Case law' in which the laws are stated in the form of cases and if certain circumstances occur, then a certain law applies. So Moses never endorsed divorce with divine approval but simply acknowledged the reality of divorce and gave concession in certain sinful situations.

^[v] The New International Version Study Bible 1985 Matt 19:3 note