

Should We Acknowledge Divorce Due To Physical or Emotional Abuse?

-- Preface --

In my pastoral ministry, I was blessed to have only a few couples come to me who were considering divorce. I served them by reminding them of the commands and promises of God regarding marriage and was pleased to see the Holy Spirit working through this Word of God.

I have, however, had occasion to speak to dozens of people over the years in connection with my secular jobs. Because of my background as a pastor, people often came to me as a sounding board or to unload their frustrations. Many of these had to do with abuse in their current or previous marriage. It became painfully obvious how destructive these abusive situations were to the victim (spiritually, physically and emotionally/psychologically). Guilt was also involved, since they (the victim) were often blamed for the failure of the marriage because they had initiated the divorce and “had not tried hard enough”. Guilt of all kinds had been laid on them by the spouse and (many times) the family of the spouse, as well as by their church.

I attempted to turn these “counselling” sessions into an opportunity to share the comforting Word of God to the victims and point them to their Lord and Savior as the true source of comfort and encouragement. To do this, I also needed to have a clear understanding of Scriptural teachings about marriage and divorce and how it affected their situation. Thus began my study of the subject.

I recently became involved in a situation in which I was asked to elucidate my stance regarding marriage/divorce/remarriage. The accompanying article is my answer.

-- Glenn Oster 04/01/2024

Should We Acknowledge Divorce Due To Physical or Emotional Abuse?

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There appears to be a difference of opinion among pastors as to what entails a valid divorce. Some believe a divorce is valid only if adultery is involved. Most pastors also consider a divorce valid in cases of abandonment or the refusal of physical intimacy. Other pastors consider ongoing physical, verbal or emotional/psychological abuse to also be valid reasons to seek a divorce. It is understood by all that divorce for the petty issues that enter marriages or to seek another relationship are not valid.

What is interesting is that despite the varying opinions by pastors, their actual pastoral care often produces the same result. When we know that abuse or abandonment is involved, we many times accept the victim's decision to divorce – or at least we do not prosecute (Matt 18:15-18) the victim when they file for divorce or live as if they are divorced (which, if we were to be consistent, we should do). Why do we not force this issue? Because we instinctively know that it is not God's desire that we allow and enable evil behaviors while punishing the victims of that evil. This instinct is based upon Scripture: *"But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people."* (2 Tim. 3:1-5. Cf. also Eph. 5:3-7: **"Do not be partners with them"** and 1 Cor. 5:11-13 **"Purge the evil person from among you. . . Do not even eat with them"**).

Although these verses do not speak specifically of marriage or divorce, if a person is treating any believer (which would include their spouse) in an evil way, the Bible is clear on how the believer should react – *"Have nothing to do with them", "Do not be partners with them", "Purge them from you", "Do not even eat with them"*. God makes it quite clear in these Bible verses that His believers are not to remain in relationships that are dangerous to their bodies, minds or souls. Nowhere in Scripture does the Lord exempt Christian spouses from this protection. **(Footnote #1)**

It is said that "God hates divorce." The Bible also clearly states that "God hates abuse."

Divorce was not part of God's perfect plan for mankind.

In the beginning, God set up marriage to be a permanent co-dependent union, with the husband primarily responsible for the general welfare and protection of the family and the wife primarily responsible for maintaining the home and caring for the children. Each had a role to fill. In order to prevent chaos and ensure a peaceful union, God established the husband as the leader of the family and commanded that the wife recognize that headship (i.e., submit to it). *"The LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him" (Gen. 2:18). "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." {Matt. 19:5-6}. "Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church" (Eph. 5:22, 23). "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself" (Eph. 5:25-28).*

Throughout the Bible God emphasized that marriage was to be a permanent, co-dependent and peaceful union, and showed the importance of faithful marriages to meet the needs of both the husband and wife and for the proper development of their children. Just like everything else that God created, marriage was very good.

Sin shattered God's perfect creation

And then entered sin. The perfect relationship between God and mankind was shattered. The perfect partnership and trust between husband and wife was also shattered (as we saw with Adam immediately blaming Eve for getting them into the mess [Genesis 3:12]). Clear-cut responsibilities became blurred. Abuses entered into marriages with the wife rebelling against her husband's headship, and the husband abusing the submission of the wife. God needed to remind his people again and again the importance of remaining true to the marriage covenant and of the damage caused by not doing so. Because of the "hardness of men's hearts" – their refusal to properly honor the covenant of marriage made with their spouses – God also recognized the inevitability of divorce (Deut. 21:10-16, 24:1-4). He never approved of divorce, but did acknowledge it happening and required safeguards for women who were being divorced.

Our Pastoral Ministry

An important part of pastoral care in our congregations has always been marriage counselling. Two people come to the pastor looking for help to mend their shattered partnership. Using God's commands and promises, we show them the partnership that God desires for them. We remind them of their responsibilities towards each other and the resulting promises God has given for their marriage. We remind them that although there will be sin in their marriage towards each other, their marriage should also be one of continual repentance and forgiveness.

But, what if one of them does not want to heal the broken marriage nor fulfil their obligations in the marriage covenant (to be faithful, love, honor, nurture, cherish, respect)? What if he or she narcissistically continues in the way that crushes the spouse? Should we continue to encourage the victim to "forgive" and "work harder" at appeasing the abuser, or recognize the physical/emotional/psychological and spiritual harm ***that Scripture tells us*** the unrepentant abuser is doing to the victim (2 Tim. 3:1-5, Eph. 5:3-7, 1 Cor. 5:11-13)? Pastors usually do recognize this, and call such abuse "abandonment (or malicious desertion)" of the marriage covenant.

It should be noted that, as pastors, we can never "approve" a divorce, since it is clearly God's will that *"what God has joined together, let no one separate"* (Matt. 19:6, Mark 10:9). Like God, however, we can acknowledge when a divorce has happened because one or both of the couple has broken/abandoned their marriage covenant.

It is not always easy to determine, however, if the marriage covenant has truly been broken. Since the abuse happens inside the marriage, not visible to the pastor or others, and the couple may be throwing accusations at each other, we may not know who to believe. How then do we deal with the person who has initiated the divorce when they cannot prove their accusations of abuse from their partner? Do we continue treating them as a fully redeemed child of God, or due to the lack of proof do we follow the discipline steps of Matthew 18:15-18 to force them back into the marriage? How do we determine non-visible and unproven abandonment of affection or emotional / psychological / financial / verbal / physical abuse? Can we comfortably say "if abuse cannot be proven, it didn't happen"? This is where counselling sessions with the couple are imperative, and their responses will help determine the path to move forward. A refusal to attend counselling or to follow counselling advice can very well indicate guilt and an unrepentant heart.

Protecting the wife as the “weaker vessel”

Women can and have abused their husbands. Scripture, however, indicates special concern about men taking advantage of their “headship” over the wife God has given them, and has issued commands for the protection of wives. There are both physical and emotional differences between men and women, and based on these differences the Bible calls the woman the “weaker vessel”. Since the wife has put her life, trust and heart into her husband’s hands, the husband is tasked with protecting her life, trust and heart. ***“Husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel”*** (1 Peter 3:3-6). ***“Husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church”*** (Eph. 5:28-29).

The makeup of the marriage covenant is clearly defined in Scripture, and Scripture clearly shows that this covenant includes much more than sexual faithfulness. It is not only adultery that breaks this covenant. Paul furthermore warns in his first letter to Timothy, *“If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially his own household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever”* (1 Tim. 5:8). When a wife is suffering ongoing emotional/psychological, verbal or physical harm from the man whom God has commanded in the marriage covenant to **love, nourish and cherish** (Eph. 5:28-29), he has broken/abandoned that marriage covenant. Can we refuse her relief? Can we with good conscience tell her that it is her responsibility to save the marriage by trying harder to appease her abuser?

“Grounds” for divorce

There appears to be among some pastors such an emphasis upon having “grounds” for divorce, that if we cannot fit a situation into that neat cubbyhole, the divorce cannot be acknowledged. Are we forgetting that we represent Christ when we *“repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted”* (2 Thess. 1:6)? Jesus, when healing the crowds, quoted from Isaiah *“a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory”* (Matt. 12:20-21). We are also told to be *“ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life”* (2 Cor. 3:6).

Specific Situations: When the Bible does speak of divorce, it is speaking to specific situations:

- In His “Sermon on the Mount” (Matt. 5), Jesus is giving several quick clarifications of the OT Law. He touches on divorce (v. 31, 32), referring to when Moses allowed divorce for the protection of women (because of the “hardness of men’s hearts” - Deut. 21:10-16, 24:1-4) – Jesus here speaks specifically to the past and current Pharisaic distortion of Moses’ words, emphasizing that this “hardness of heart” (creating excuses to divorce in order to marry someone else) would result in their wives being falsely considered guilty of adultery (**Footnote #2**).
Jesus puts the situation in “black and white” terms to avoid any misunderstanding. Their claim of divorce “for any reason” is not acceptable! Those with such a mindset should only consider divorce if their spouse actually commits adultery. (**Footnote #3**)
- In Matthew 19, Jesus has the opportunity to say more about this subject. The Pharisees pointed out that Moses had approved divorces “for any reason”. Jesus recognized this as them simply tiring of their wives and looking for an excuse to pursue another love interest, and again uses “black and white” terms to shut down this mindset immediately: *“I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”* Mark describes Jesus’ response in a little more detail, *“Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery”* (Mark 10:11,12). Jesus was clearly responding to the specific abuse by the Pharisees to divorce over trivial issues as an excuse to marry someone else. To eliminate any justification they may try for their actions, He simply says *“adultery only”*. (**Footnote #3**).
- Paul, in 1 Cor. 7, is responding to *specific* questions about marriage, divorce and sexuality. One response revolved around divorcing in order to marry someone else. *“Not acceptable!”* He says.

Because Jesus and Paul in these verses were speaking to specific examples of a widespread Pharisaic abuse of finding excuses to divorce for the purpose of marrying someone else, we should consider that they were not at these times giving the definitive answer as to permissible divorces.

Another thing that is of interest in these situations is that Jesus and Paul do not emphasize the divorce as the sin, but the divorce *and remarriage* (it is the remarriage which breaks the “one flesh”, and becomes adultery). This is pointed out in 4 of the 5 NT verses which speak of divorce (Matt. 19:9, Mark 10:11-12, Luke 16:18, I Cor. 7:10-11). To anyone considering divorce “for any reason”, Jesus/Paul make it clear that an ensuing marriage to someone else would be adultery – speaking to the specific reason they want the divorce. If they divorce, marrying someone else is not permitted.

Some may point out that God calls divorce a sin in Malachi (2:13-16), but it must be noted that God there calls “treacherous” divorce the sin (again, in order to protect women) - in this case it is the treachery which is the sin, not the divorce. Likewise in Deut. 21:10-16 and 24:1-4 God shows His desire to protect women from treacherous men. Divorce is not God's will, but neither is abusive treatment of other people. As the apostle Paul reminds us, we are called to be “*ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life*” (2 Cor. 3:6).

Evil doers will destroy you

Paul, in his various letters, clearly tells believers that, in order to protect themselves, they are to **have nothing to do with evildoers**, to **not partner with them**, to **purge them from your midst**, to **not even eat with them** (2 Tim. 3:1-5, Eph. 5:3-7, 1 Cor. 5:11-13). Do not these verses speak directly to this subject, even if the words “marriage” or “divorce” are not mentioned? **(Footnote #1)**

Could it perhaps be understood from Scripture that the abused Christian wife is required to “*no longer partner with*” an evil man to protect herself? Or, is a Christian wife exempt from the protection commanded by Paul to believers who face abusers? Has not an abusive man already broken/abandoned the marriage covenant to love, honor, nourish and cherish his wife? How can a pastor with a good conscience tell a woman she must remain in an abusive situation *which Scripture says* will be detrimental to her spiritual, emotional, psychological, and/or physical wellbeing? Do we not contradict Scripture which tells believers to protect themselves by getting out of abusive situations when we tell women they should rather work harder to appease the abuser? In those situations, it is not adultery that has broken the partnership, but, as Paul says to Timothy above, the evil actions towards the believer - therefore “*do not partner with them*”. Old Testament examples show that God handled this type of marital abusive situations similarly (Deut. 21:10-16, 24:1-4).

What if the abuser repents?

If the abuser repents, and the previously abused person (victim) wishes to show grace and return to the marriage, all is well. Pastors should encourage this, as well as follow up with **frequent** counselling / encouragement. ***Do not neglect pastoral follow-up – it is imperative that the husband and wife receive ongoing counselling to deal with the possibly unresolved issues!!!***

There may be situations where the abuser verbally repents and is forgiven, but distress and shattered trust remains with the victim. In this situation, only “fruits of faith/repentance” will repair that trust (Matthew 3:8, Galatians 5:6, 22-23, John 15:8, James 2:17, Colossians 3:12-15). The pastor can support the victim’s desire to take time to heal and verify the fruits of repentance while separated from the former abuser. The apostle Paul’s words may apply here: “*Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer...*” (I Corinthians 7:5). The former abuser, if repentant, should be willing to permit this separation.

If the abuser does not show fruits of his/her repentance, the victim may understandably refuse to return to the abusive and broken relationship and proceed with a divorce.

What if a person lies about abuse, or is self-centered/narcissistic and falsely believes their spouse is verbally abusive when they are actually requiring accountability or responsibility?

I understand the concern of many pastors that people may seek divorce for the wrong reason (just as the Israelites did in Moses' and Malachi's time, the Pharisees did at Jesus time, and the Corinthians at Paul's time). Multiple counselling meetings between the couple and pastor/elders will usually determine if the accusations of abuse are true or if the "victim" has merely tired of the marriage. A refusal by one or the other to attend these meetings will also help determine the truth.

"Nagging" (i.e. asking the spouse to be accountable or take responsibility) is usually not abuse in itself, but yet requires counselling to help the couple learn communication skills.

If the "victim" insists upon seeking a divorce despite there being no evidence of the marriage covenant being broken, the pastor should point out Jesus' and Paul's command that if he/she follows through with the divorce, he/she are not to marry anyone else (Matt. 19:9, Mark 10:11-12, Luke 16:18, I Cor. 7:10-11). This may cause them to reconsider their desire to divorce.

The Lord has our back in these difficult decisions. If, by chance, the "victim" did mislead the pastor, we are reminded that the Lord, who can see into their heart, will deal with their deception. *"It is impossible that no offenses should come, but woe to him through whom they do come!"* (Luke 17:1). Yes, there will be people who "play the system", but they will face God's wrath for doing so. *"Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap."* (Galatians 6:7). Also, *"Vengeance is Mine, and recompense; Their foot shall slip in due time; For the day of their calamity is at hand, And the things to come hasten upon them."* (Deuteronomy 32:35). The apostle Paul also warns: *"Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off"* (Romans 11:22).

Despite our best efforts to be good stewards of the counseling gifts God has given us, we may be misled. We realize *"the sins of some men are obvious, going ahead of them to judgment; but the sins of others do not surface until later"* (1 Tim. 5:24). It is not the pastor's responsibility to become a detective in "he said / she said" matters, but to trust that God who can see into hearts, will judge according to their heart. We are guided by the apostle Paul's reminder to be *"ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life"* (2 Corinthians 3:6). Let us not occupy our time second guessing our pastoral ministry, but have confidence that God, in His wisdom, guides our actions and will carry out the proper resolutions in His proper time.

FOOTNOTES:

1. For those who insist that we cannot infer a reference to divorce if the words "marriage" or "divorce" are not actually used in the Bible verse, it should be noted that we already do base one of our doctrinal positions upon inferences. We rightfully infer infant baptism from several Scripture passages which do not mention "infant".
2. Jesus in Matthew 5:31-32 states that if a man divorces his wife for any reason other than sexual immorality, he is causing her to be guilty of adultery. Not only will the husband's action give her the stigma of adultery, the woman, who has not desired divorce and is still devoted to her husband, will in her heart be committing adultery by remarrying. The husband who divorced her is forcing her to make the choice of (1) remarrying and committing adultery in her heart or (2) living the rest of her life alone. However, God does not blame her if she decides to remarry, but the husband who divorced her and *"makes her commit adultery"*.
3. Jesus also uses hyperbole elsewhere to make specific points, eg: *"If anyone comes to me **and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple**"* (Lk 14:26, also Mt 10:37). *"If your right eye causes you to stumble, **gouge it out and throw it away.** . . If your right hand causes you to sin, **cut it off and throw it away.**"* (Matthew 5:29-30). *"If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, **turn to him the other also**"* (Matthew 5:38, 18:8-9). Note that Jesus' comments about divorce in His Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:32) are placed between these last two hyperbolic verses – the question may be asked if, from the context, this verse can also be considered hyperbolic.

Some other thoughts on marriage/abuse/divorce....

A man shall leave his father and mother...

Once in my ministry, I came across a father encouraging his son to divorce a lady because he did not consider the wife good for his son's career. Our Lord who has ordained marriage stated, "*a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife.*" Parents should not get involved in their children's marriage. Parents, especially, should not get involved in putting asunder what God has joined together. Just as it is sinful to be a party to murder, stealing and adultery, a parent encouraging their child to put away their spouse is as guilty as their child in causing that separation. Jesus said in Matthew 18:7, "*Woe unto the world because of occasions of stumbling! For it must needs be that the occasions come; but woe to that man through whom the occasion cometh!*" The person who causes anyone to put asunder what God has put together because he is encouraging his child to unlawfully put the spouse away is in serious trouble with the Lord.

Christians who treacherously desire to "put away their wives".

Twice in my ministry, I ran across men from prominent Christian families who I suspected had tired of and "wanted to put away their wife", but didn't want the culpability of being the one to initiate the divorce. Through emotional and psychological abuse they attempted to make the marriage so abhorrent to the wife so that she would be the one to initiate the divorce and he would then be free to marry someone else "with a clear conscience". The apostle Paul speaks to this: "*There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God— **having a form of godliness but denying its power.** Have nothing to do with such people.*" (2 Tim. 3:1-5).

"For Better or for Worse, in Sickness or in Health".

This is a good commitment that spouses make to each other in their wedding vows. In it they promise to stand by and support their spouse through everything that life throws at them. This becomes difficult if one of the spouses develops a permanently debilitating illness or injury. Some people may have chronic emotional or psychological issues, and the spouse has likewise promised to support and encourage their spouse through these difficulties. In such situations the spouse must remember and fulfil their wedding vow to the afflicted, secure in the knowledge that the Lord will provide blessings through these difficulties (James 1:2-4, 12. I Peter 1:6, John 16:33 Romans 8:18,28,35, Romans 12:12, Proverbs 3:5-6, I Peter 4:12-13, I Thess. 5:16-18, I Cor. 10:13, Phil. 4:6-7,19, Psalm 55:8-9,22, Romans 5:3-5, Mark 4:17, James 4:7, 2 Cor. 1:3-4, Isaiah 41:10).

Satan may at times, however, tempt the afflicted to use their affliction as an "excuse" to avoid responsibilities to their spouse and marriage. Satan may also use the illness or injury to turn the afflicted into an angry and/or abusive person. The illness/injury at no time justifies such reaction from the afflicted, nor should they use their injury/illness as an excuse for such action (James 1:2-4. I Peter 1:6, John 16:33, Romans 8:18,28, Romans 12:12, James 1:12, Proverbs 3:5-6, I Peter 4:12-13, I Thessalonians 5:16-18, I Corinthians 10:13, Philippians 4:6-7,19, Psalm 55:8-9,22, Romans 5:3-5, Mark 4:17, Romans 8:35, James 4:7, 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, Isaiah 41:10).

When Satan has entered a person's heart with deceptiveness, anger and/or vileness, and he/she refuses to repent, Scripture speaks directly to this situation: "***Have nothing to do with such people***" (2 Tim. 3:1-5), "***Do not be partners with them***" (Ephesians 5:3-7), and "***Purge the evil person from among you***" (I Corinthians 5:11-13). As indicated in the previous article, we can (and should) extend this protection to the married victim of such abuse.