

## COMMITMENT TO MARRIAGE VOWS IS THERE A LIMIT TO WHAT IS EXPECTED ?

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### TRADITION

The traditional wedding vow reads:

*I take thee [ name of spouse to be] to be my wedded [ wife / husband] to have and to hold from this day forth, for better , for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness, and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part ....*

[ref. ECA Minister's Manual]

Accordingly, the traditional church position has been to look unfavorably on divorce- a position still adhered to by the Roman Catholic Church as well as many fundamentalist Protestant congregations.

### THE BIBLE

Biblically, divorce is frowned on. Christ, when queried on the subject, replied:

*MAT 19:3 ¶ Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"*

*MAT 19:4 ¶ "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female, '{Gen. 1:27}*

*MAT 19:5 and said, For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh' {Gen. 2:24}?*

*MAT 19:6 So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate. "*

*MAT 19:7 ¶ "Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"*

*MAT 19:8 ¶ Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.*

*MAT 19:9 I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery. "*

Likewise, The Apostle Paul wrote extensively on the matter saying:

*1CO 7:10 ¶ To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. 1CO 7:11 But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.*

*1CO 7:12 ¶ To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. 1CO 7:13 And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him.*

Now Paul did leave an "out" by making the following proviso:

*1CO 7:14 For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. 1CO 7:15 ¶ But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. 1CO 7:16 How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? 1CO 7:17 ¶ Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches.*

So basically, the Bible's [ sic. God's ] position is this : Divorce is permissible only for two reasons. First, one of the partners is unfaithful, and refuses to repent. The second is, one is an unbeliever who walks away from the marriage.

### **NOTE HOWEVER THIS VERY IMPORTANT FACT**

**Modern issues of Abuse (Mental and Physical), mental illness (eg. Severe Depression) and prolonged suffering impacting quality of life were never addressed owing to the way such things were viewed in the Biblical period of history. Mental problems were attributed to demonic forces while “abuse” or “cruelty” was a fact life. Life was harsh –even cruel - for all but the wealthy. The disabled were largely homeless and**

**had to beg for meager handouts. Slavery was a common practice as were horrendous, nightmarish military campaigns. Entire cities were annihilated. People were surrounded by death ( public executions and crucifixions were a common means of control under the Romans, while other nations practiced beheading and impaling the heads in public view). Hence “Abuse” per se was not uncommon nor considered problematic as the masses – for the most part – were desensitized . Our modern concepts of compassion, mercy, rights and values were not part of their world view or paradigm (an issue we have even today in dealing with the cultures of such countries as Afghanistan and Iran)**

### **GOD PREFERS MERCY OVER LEGALITY**

Contemporary Bible Teacher, Charles (Chuck) Swindoll, who is now 71 and chancellor of Dallas Theological Seminary, writes : **No Christian should aggressively seek the dissolution of his or her marriage bond, but in certain cases, against the wishes and efforts of [ a ] committed mate, the marriage bond is destroyed beyond human ability to restore it. God in his grace, and as a divine concession to human weakness, then allows divorce (ref. Christ's comment : "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard." ) ( from Christian Counselor's Handbook , Dr. Gary Collins).**

It has also been pointed out by other experts on the subject of marriage that certain personalities are truly incompatible. Passion and infatuation may lead couples to marriage (*love is blind [hormones are blind] and infatuation covers over many a blemish*), but once the euphoria wears off they realize they have made a major mistake.

Rev.Dr. James Boice , author of *"The Sermon On the Mount - An Exposition"* (1972), holds that "technically" individuals who were unbelievers at the time they made their marriage vows, are not bound by those vows - should they desire to divorce - because they were essentially ignorant of the legal ramifications of the vows before God. That is, they would not have taken the decision to get married had they known how seriously God views those vows. Conduct prior to our Christian conversion experience is forgiven and not held against us.

**Boice also stresses that God always values peace, harmony and mercy over the Law. ( 1Cor. 7:15b ; Matt.9:13)**

Furthermore, Divorce , he emphasizes, IS NOT the unforgivable sin ( a point that Swindoll and Collins also stress) (The unforgivable sin is to attribute to Satan, work that is God's doing [ Matt.12:31]).

## **WHAT OTHER'S HAVE TO SAY**

"Love" does not erase abuse, meanness, bullying, violence, addiction, or controlling behavior . ( Dr.Laura Schlessinger : *Ten Stupid things Women Do To Mess Up Their Life*)

A good test of quality of character is to ask yourself: "Would I introduce this person as perspective mate to someone in my family or to a close friend ?" (ibid Schlessinger)

There are two powerful motivators for trying to make things work with our partner even if its going horribly wrong : Attempting to avoid hurt (rejection) and attempting to avoid risk (insecurity, loneliness). (ibid Schlessinger)

Cloud &Townsend : *Boundaries in Marriage*

Each spouse must take responsibility for the following things-

Feelings

Attitudes

Behaviors

Choices

Limits

Desires

Thoughts

Values

Talents

## **LOVE**

We ARE NOT meant to be at the mercy of our spouse's behavior or problems. We must establish healthy, reasonable personal boundaries . These are nothing more than setting limits to what we will tolerate as intrusions on our physical self, our mental self, on our time and on other personal aspects such as finances.

There is "Right" Suffering and "Wrong" Suffering. Right suffering is "Godly" Suffering while "Wrong" suffering is Ungodly.

Right suffering leads to growth, maturity, and character development.

Wrong suffering perpetuates wrong behavior, cover-ups, stagnation, and hurtful wrongs.

**THE BIBLE DOES NOT ADDRESS ISSUES OF VIOLENCE OR ABUSE.** This is because the Bible is a product of a time and a culture that - by today's Western standards - was violent, non-democratic, autocratic and patriarchal. The Bible even sanctions things that, if done in Western society today, would lead to imprisonment, if not, the death penalty. Some of these things are :

Stoning to death a person who blasphemes (*LEV 24:16 anyone who blasphemes the name of the LORD must be put to death. The entire assembly must stone him.* )

Stoning to death a disobedient child (*DEU 21:18-21 ¶ If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who does not obey his father and mother and will not listen to them when they discipline him, his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him to the elders at the gate of his town. They shall say to the elders, "This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a profligate and a drunkard." Then all the men of his town shall stone him to death. You must purge the evil from among you. All Israel will hear of it and be afraid.*)

Condoning and promoting genocide (*NUM 25:4 ¶ The LORD said to Moses, "Take all the leaders of these people, kill them and expose them in broad daylight before the LORD, so that the LORD's fierce anger may turn away from Israel." NUM 25:17 "Treat the Midianites as enemies and kill them, NUM 31:17 Now kill all the boys. And kill every woman who has slept with a man...)*

Condoning and sanctioning slavery (*EPH 6:5 ¶ Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. EPH 6:6 Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. COL 3:22 ¶ Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord.*)

Even encouraging the slave to put up with harsh treatment (*1PE 2:18 ¶ Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. 1PE 2:19 For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God.*)

The status and treatment of women was culturally different. Women were viewed as property, as were children. The father was the absolute authority in the home; he was lord and master (*baal and adon*) with the legal right to punish anyone in his household - even condemning to death if he so wished where they had committed a crime. His sons and daughters were his absolute property. The wife owed her husband total fidelity, although - unlike the children and family possessions - she was not his legal property. She was, however, accorded a lesser rank in society. She did not eat with the men, was expected to serve them while they ate, and to keep her distance when moving about in public and at the Temple. Moreover, although not technically her husband's property under the law, he could divorce her quite readily for the slightest impropriety or infraction of household rules. (Henri Daniel - Rops : *Daily Life In The Time of Jesus* ; Hawthorn Books, 1962 , p.127 -129 )

We even see a hint of this harsh cultural thinking in Jesus in His treatment of the Canaanite woman. Remember, even though Jesus was the Son of God, his fleshly existence meant that He was also a product of his environment and culture of the time. In this Gospel account we see a hint of that culture with its racial and tribal divides as well as the place of women :

*MAT 15:22 A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession."*

*MAT 15:23 ¶ Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us."*

*MAT 15:24 ¶ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."*

*MAT 15:25 ¶ The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.*

*MAT 15:26 ¶ He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."*

We only have to look at the Middle East and predominately fundamentalist Islamic nations today to get a glimpse of Biblical society of 2000 to 2500 years ago.

### **SO IN SUMMARY WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN ?**

**IN CONCLUSION:** A review of the facts would suggest that divorce is a legitimate option where either abuse or other self-destructive behavior is being engaged in by one or both spouses and the central perpetrator has a prolonged history of refusing treatment. This conclusion is reached on the basis that :

While the Bible records the Word of God, it is also a product of a time and culture far removed from Western democratic customs that respects the rights of the individual.

It reflects a society that treated women differently than today and also condoned customs, behaviors and social structures that we would now view as harsh and even criminal. Therefore the Bible's position on the rights of women and human rights in general - including divorce - is largely culturally biased and rooted in a time of traditions when many of our concepts of rights and personal liberties were unknown. We know from observing similar cultures in existence today, that women who flee abusive relationships are either forced back into the relationship or are killed so as to save the family from what they perceive as disgrace.

Moreover - and this is an important point to note: so please read carefully - the same Paul who was staunchly against divorce also condoned slavery. In short, Paul was careful not to significantly challenge the major social structures or conventions of his time apart from the issue of circumcision – which was a Jewish religious issue of little concern to the Gentile population he was attempting to reach.

It is also worth noting that Biblical scholars have for some time been suspicious that certain sections of Paul's epistles have been tampered with or added to. They note that certain passages concerning the conduct of women in church, and those limiting the role of women in church are inconsistent with what Paul practiced. Based on comparing existing copies of the Epistles, covering a span of centuries, they have concluded that it is highly probable that wording changes have been made and additional text inserted so as to support the authority of a total male hierarchy. This would in effect curtail the aspirations of ambitious gentile women.

The issue of Biblical authorship aside, we do know that God always favors mercy over sacrifice and justice over injustice. The Bible does condone divorce wherever the sanctity of the marriage has been violated, or wherever an unbeliever desires to opt out of the union. Most importantly though, the intent of the Law is Love. It is NOT to be used as a chain or yoke around someone's neck. *Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law (ROM 13:10) . ; The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." {Lev. 19:18} GAL 5:14*

Marriage - at least in Western society - is intended to be the voluntary union of two consenting adults who are committing to a shared responsibility and a shared vision. The ultimate product of such a union should be a sense of something that can be called an "Us" or a "We". We must therefore assume that a marriage that lacks this sense of "Oneness" will invariably have one partner, or perhaps both partners, putting their self-interests ahead of the marriage entity. This is called "selfishness". Marriage becomes unhealthy whenever one spouse assumes a parental; role to other and is assuming responsibility for the other. The spouse who is being immature and irresponsible avoids facing the consequences of their wrongful actions, while the rescuing spouse becomes an enabler and reinforces

the wrong behavior. Using coercion, playing on one's conscience via using religious guilt and fears, so as to force someone to stay within a unhappy, unsatisfying union IS NOT LOVE. It is legalism and it will stifle – even kill – any feeling of love and life in that relationship.

As one final point, the matter of the safety of the abused spouse - the victim (be it male or female)- must always be of primary consideration. This most often means removing herself ( or himself in some cases - for men are also abused) from the premises and having an escape plan where physical harm - even death - is a real possibility.

Ultimately , we must live with our decisions. That means living with our "**conscience**". But even here we must be careful: for we can have either a hardened conscience, capable of rationalizing and justifying any and all actions - even immoral ones (for example German SS officers were desensitized to violence and trained to turn-off emotion). Or , we can have an overly sensitive conscience that is extremely prone to guilt - even false guilt.

False guilt is caused in part by trying to live to impossible moral standards and taking on other people's responsibilities. We experience guilt when we feel we have failed them in some manner. The irony is that in the rush to save them from their folly , we prevent them from learning from their mistakes. The person we "save" never has to live with the consequences of irresponsible behavior.

## **SO HERE IS MY POSITION as a Marriage Counselor and Therapist**

First of all, we come back to the very words of Christ :

***Do to others as you would have them do to you. (LUK 6:31)***

By this, I take it to mean: If you were the unhappy one (miserable, depressed, discontented, perhaps even fearful and anxious) in the marriage, and you saw no hope for it ever working, would you not want to have an amicable “ending” to the relationship such that you would be free to find happiness and contentment elsewhere ?

Now, that being said – or posed for contemplation – I do believe that counseling is the first step and that Divorce is the last resort. Here is the process I follow with my clients :

- (1) You have to give marriage a chance when it hits “speed bumps”. Divorce is a last resort when all EARNEST attempts to repair it have failed . By EARNEST attempts I mean at least 3 tries at professional counseling entailing a minimum of 20 sessions each (i.e. 60 sessions over a 2 year period which

equates to 3 sessions a month plus assigned homework.). The focus I on the fundamentals of marriage : Expectations ; Roles ; Core Beliefs; Communication ; Conflict Resolution and Emotional, Intimate Connecting.

- (2) Secondly, where there is abuse (mental and / or physical) physical separation is highly recommended for safety reasons and to reduce the exposure of children to fighting and domestic violence. During this period of separation the couple - depending on the severity of the “abuse” in question - attend counseling, go on “dates” together, book time to do assigned homework together and engage in planned “family activities”.
- (3) In case where there has been serious domestic violence, initial counseling addresses the cycle of violence and contact is limited solely to the counseling sessions until such time as the abused spouse feels safe with dating. Often , in cases of serious violence Children’s Aid (CAS) is involved and family contact has to be supervised.
- (4) Frequently individual counseling (therapy) has to be concurrent with couple’s counseling to address underlying personal issues that contribute to the couple dynamic.

If this process is followed, and problems persist- particularly those of a serious violent nature – then permanent Legal Separation and perhaps eventual Divorce need to be given serious consideration. I believe divorce is permissible where long-term mental and / or physical abuse is highly probable (prolonged chronic anxiety and depression would fall within criteria). Sentencing someone to a marriage in which he or she foregoes long-term personal contentment and achieving life-long fulfillment does not sound like a loving Christian relationship. Lastly, there is the matter of allowing the departure of an “Unbeliever”. My view on this is that whenever two people are at opposite ends of the religious spectrum – fundamentalist / evangelical versus liberalist / secularist- and it is making for an unhealthy union, then they should go their separate ways. It is evident that they do not share the same belief and hence one or both qualifies as an “unbeliever”. Better to part amicably then “sentence” each other – and any children involved– to years of bitter squabbling.

What matters most is a **HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP** which a colleague and mentor defines as having the following characteristics:

1. An overall sense of safety, freedom, trust, and enjoyment in the presence of the other.
2. Growing, personal freedom to express thoughts, feelings and impressions in a way that is non threatening and non rejecting.
3. Growing, personal freedom to hear the thoughts, feelings and impressions of the other without defensiveness.

4. The ability to work through conflict and angry feelings in a way that affirms the value of the other and of the relationship. This necessitates flexible expectations and the willingness to negotiate and defer.
5. The ability both to give and receive feedback - to be significantly informed by its verbal and non verbal forms.
6. A satisfactory balance between separateness and togetherness - definite boundaries around the marital unit, but permission, within the agreed-upon parameters, for independent functioning.
7. The ability to laugh and have fun together.
8. A mutually satisfying sexual relationship.
9. A mutually satisfying level of affection and relational warmth that does not necessarily lead to sexual activity.
10. High levels of respect, courtesy and appreciation - explicitly and tangibly expressed.

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Prepared By:  
Insights Counseling  
Rev. Ron Howard Ph.D.  
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#### References and Recommended Reading

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