



Charis Counseling Centers
Christ-Centered Counseling for Massachusetts and Rhode Island

Position Paper on the Matters of Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage

One of the more difficult challenges for counselor on staff at Charis Counseling Centers involves how to respond biblically to clients' questions regarding the issues of marriage, divorce and remarriage. It has always been, and always will be, the policy of Charis counselors that we never counsel towards divorce. By this I mean that we never begin couples counseling by assuming that the marriage is completely irreparable and that divorce is the only and the best option. We always start with the belief that even the most serious marital problems are not beyond the possibility of healing, reconciliation and continued growth. We hold marriage in a very high regard, as instituted by God, and intended to mirror the intimate relationship between God and his people.

Unfortunately, we are often confronted with situations that threaten not only the particular marriage bond, but also the concept of marriage itself. One common scenario would involve a couple which does not necessarily share our Christian faith perspective and has a very "low" view of marriage. As problems arise in their lives together, they view their particular relationship as becoming too painful, too difficult, too inconvenient, or increasingly irrelevant. Many clients coming to us have told stories about previous marital counseling in secular settings. Apparently, common advice from such counselors is to move out of a relationship when it is no longer "right" for either or both spouses. The focus is upon the "well-being" of the individual, as if that transcends in importance the health of the marital relationship. The "teaching" of general society regarding marriage seems to be that it is a fine institution as long as it meets the needs and desires of both individuals, but if that no longer becomes the case, then it is commonsensical to dissolve the relationship and move on. Any understanding of the term "commitment" is conditional, based on the comfort level of the participants.

The growing popularity of "pre-nuptial" agreements in our country highlights this approach to marriage. Such agreements are in fact business contracts with various contingencies: in the event that either spouse no longer fulfills their agreed upon duties in the relationship (the primary one being to "make the other happy"), then the other is free to leave, and do so without risk of losing their financial investment. I summarize this approach to marriage as, "I'll scratch your back as long as you continue to scratch mine, and if you cease to do so, so will I." While most couples do not sign a formal written

document, the spirit of such pre-nuptial agreements is implied at the altar (or Justice of the Peace's desk).

Some couples we work with, therefore, are all too quick to jettison a relationship that no longer fulfills what parties consider to be their important needs, and no other criteria or standards for evaluating the longevity of a relationship need be considered. Perhaps more common, however, are the cases in our offices which involve couples who do profess faith in Christ and God's Word as revealed through the Scriptures. They have usually been taught that there are only two Biblically valid reasons for divorce – adultery (Matthew 19: 2-12; Mark 10:2-12) and “desertion” by an unbelieving spouse (I Corinthians 7). It is interesting to note that even when such conditions are met, some spouses still cling to the spouse who has clearly violated the marital bond and shows no remorse, or intention towards healing the bond. We as counselors then find ourselves confronted with how to respond to such a remaining spouse.

Another very common scenario involves a professing Christian who clearly understands these traditional Biblical views on divorce, but is strongly influenced by emotions and psychological factors. For example, a woman may say, “I know my husband has not committed adultery, he doesn't beat me, he is basically a good father to our children and a good financial provider – in fact, he is basically a nice guy – but I don't have feelings of love towards him anymore.” A sad but true statement often heard in our staff meetings about such cases is, “People are going to do what they are going to do.” In other words, such a woman is apt to treat the marital commitment just as lightly as the non-believer, and ultimately adhere to a secular model of marriage – “It is great as long as it is “working” for me, and if not, then it is not only desirable to leave, but my right to do so. After all, doesn't God want me to be happy?”

There are many variations of these two situations that I have just outlined. We counselors at Charis Counseling Centers, who ourselves profess faith in Jesus Christ and who appeal to Scripture as our ultimate authority and source of truth, need to articulate for ourselves and for our clients a clear, consistent and coherent model of marriage, divorce and remarriage. It would be from such a model that we could then respond intelligently and biblically to the unique concerns that married spouses and divorced individuals present to us.

As a starting point for such a model, we must understand that marriage is not a contract, but a “covenant.” Gordon Huggenberger states, “A ‘contract’ involves a relationship of obligation between individuals and, sometimes, involves privileges as well. The relationship is conceived, however, in linear or horizontal terms between two parties. In contrast, a covenant is not a linear relationship; it is a triangular one. It adds a third party to the arrangement, and the third party is God (from his article in Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary's *Contact* magazine, Summer 2004, Vol. 34. no. 2).

In his book, [Getting Marriage Right](#), David P. Gushee (Baker Books: 2004) includes a very helpful chapter entitled, *Covenant as the Structural Principle of Marriage*. Looking

to Genesis chapter 9, he outlines several key ingredients of a covenant as understood in the Old Testament:

- A covenant is initiated by someone, often the stronger party (in the case of Gen. 9, this is God)
- It establishes or ratifies a relationship between two or more parties; it creates or restores community, and is recorded by a public document to which all participants are held accountable.
- It spells out mutual responsibilities on the part of all parties.
- It involves the verbal declaration of sacred promises or sworn oaths that publicly symbolize the commitments being made.
- It is marked by a sign or symbolic action (Gen. 9 = rainbow) to communicate its significance.
- It is declared to be lasting, enduring or “everlasting.”
- God is viewed as both the witness and guarantor of covenants, so any breaking of the covenant is a sin, not only against a covenant partner, but also against God.
- God will enforce the consequences for breaking the covenant and offer great rewards for keeping it (blessings and woes).

While God initiated various covenants with the nation of Israel, Scripture also emphasizes that marriage between a man and a woman is to mirror the covenantal relationship between God and his people. The single most important text which identifies marriage as a covenant is in Malachi 2: 10-16:

Another thing you do: You flood the Lord's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask, "Why?" It is because the Lord is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her; though she is your partner; the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not the Lord made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. "I hate divorce," says the Lord God of Israel, "and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment," says the Lord Almighty. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith.

Just as the Old Testament compares the marriage relationship with the covenant between God and Israel, Paul in the New Testament likens the relationship between husband and wife to that between Christ and his Church (Eph. 5; 2 Cor. 11). Jesus used the image of bridegroom to refer to himself (Matt. 9:15), refers to the kingdom of heaven as a wedding banquet (Matt. 22) and to believers waiting for the King to return as virgins prepared to meet the bridegroom (Matt. 25). Finally, the book of Revelation describes the Church as the bride preparing for the sacred wedding to her divine Husband (19:7, 21:2,9, etc).

David Gushee parallels the covenantal nature of marriage with the characteristics of a biblical covenant delineated above:

- *Marriage is a covenant because it is a freely entered agreement between two people.*
- *Marriage is a covenant because it publicly ratifies a relationship between a man and a woman and subjects it to objective standards and social responsibilities.*
- *Marriage is covenant because it spells out the mutual responsibilities and moral commitments that both parties are taking on in this new form of community.*

- *Marriage is covenant because it is sealed by various “oath signs” that publicly symbolize the solemn commitments being made (exchanged vows and rings, and consummation through sexual intercourse.)*
- *Marriage is covenant because it is a lifetime commitment. If the promise is not a lifetime promise, it is not a covenant and it is not marriage.*
- *Marriage is a covenant because God is the witness and guarantor of its promises.*
- *Marriage is a covenant because there are dire consequences for breaking its terms and great rewards for keeping them.*

When marriage is understood and acknowledged as a covenant, it provides a protective sheath of safety for each spouse. We need such protection because of our innate self-centeredness, which threatens to hurt others and makes us vulnerable to hurt from others. In contrast, “If I am involved in a trustworthy covenantal marital bond with another, I can relax enough to both give and receive love. I can try and fail and try again to develop communication and sexual skills. Our mutual confidence in the permanence and exclusivity of our bond allows us to give ourselves away, and only as we give ourselves away can we maximize our progress toward human intimacy as God intended it.” (Gushee, pg. 139).

The question then arises as to when and how such a covenantal bond can be broken. No student of Scripture would seem to challenge the cases of physical adultery and physical desertion. These are overt, observable behaviors, yet they, like all behaviors, originate from a set of motives and attitudes. These inner, non-observable psychological processes predate the actual behavioral act. No one just impulsively commits adultery, without developing what may have been years of frustration and dissatisfaction with his or her current marriage. Sin always begins at the level of the heart. We can do the right thing for the wrong motives, or the wrong thing for the wrong motives (I don’t believe we can do the wrong thing for the right motives – i.e., “situational ethics”).

Is it possible, therefore, for a covenant to be broken on a motivational/attitudinal level while maintaining the “letter of the law” behaviorally? Certainly, God challenged the Israelites in the Old Testament regarding their sacrifices. David declares in Psalm 51: “*For thou hast no delight in sacrifice; were I to give a burnt offering, thou wouldst not be please. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise*” (vs. 16,17 RSV). In the New Testament, Jesus challenged the Pharisees, known for their outward display of “righteousness,” to “clean the inside of the cup” and not just the outside. He exposed the hidden hatred and lust of the heart in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5: 21-22; 27-28). Covenants can be broken on both the behavioral and attitudinal level. As Christian counselors, our biggest challenge is to discern when and if an infraction has occurred on the second of these two levels.

While we cannot read the inner intent of a person’s soul in the way that God can, we can make reasonable deductions about one’s motives and attitudes based on patterns of behavior. For example, if one claims to love Christ, but rarely if ever attends church or engages in any disciplines of the Christian life, then it is probably safe to assume that his verbal expression of such love is not matched by a true heartfelt sentiment. Likewise, if

some one claims to love his wife, but rarely if ever displays that in observable ways, we would have to question his commitment as well. Just as with other biblical covenants, I believe that the covenant of marriage can be broken on the level of motivations and attitude – i.e., the level of the ‘heart’- even if a formal act of adultery or physical desertion has not occurred.

I propose the following set of steps that should be considered by our clients and ourselves as counselors before a final decision should be made: first, when couples come for counseling, it is important to include in the initial intake process the levels of commitment that each has towards reconciliation and growth. Again, each can say they want the marriage to continue, but their inner attitudes may not match their stated desire. The key to discerning a spouse’s true motivation is their level of humility regarding their own contribution towards the marital conflicts. One husband clearly failed this test, even when I gave him as much help as I could. I asked him, “Even if you think your wife is 99% at fault, what is the 1% that you are responsible for?” At first I was encouraged when he responded, “Oh, I can easily answer that question.” However, he then added, “My fault was in trusting her.” The context, by the way, was that this abusive alcoholic’s wife had taken out a restraining order on him for the second time. After the first, she had promised that she would never do so again and thus, she broke her “promise” when she when back to court again after his abuse had resumed.

This illustrates a lack of humility that is necessary for any marriage to grow, no matter “how much bad water has gone under the bridge.” In examples like the one just mentioned, I know that I am not going to be doing marital counseling, but eventually helping the wife continue to grow, assuming she is humbly willing to do so. I can cite other cases, however, with multiple extramarital affairs, but due to humility on both spouses’ parts, those marriages recovered and continued to flourish.

Thus, the first step in determining when and if a marriage should end, especially when there have been no incidents of physical adultery or desertion, is to assess respective levels of humility. Using the first example given above, we can then move through a series of steps towards a final decision. In this case, the husband’s lack of humility eventually proved itself through his unwillingness to continue counseling. Some spouses, of course, never do come in to our office, which is in itself an indication of their lack of humility. The wife in our example, however, was willing to continue the process. Her humility was then expressed through her desire to understand more about herself, which included insight into her own hitherto hidden motives for marrying such a man. I routinely tell clients that we get married more for unconscious motives than for conscious ones, especially when we are relatively young and thus lacking in self-awareness. Over several months of working together, she was able to heal sufficiently from her own abusive past to the degree that her longstanding codependent tendencies were much less ingrained.

At this point, this wife was ready to move to the next step. But first, let me emphasize that getting to this stage can be arduous and painstaking for many spouses, and some decide to drop out of the process before it is completed. If they hang with it, however,

they develop what I have called an “inner sense of resolve.” Deep in their souls, there is now a renewed strength, based on their deepened relationship with Christ, and not on their attempts to win others’ approval. To heal from the past means to acknowledge how others have hurt us, but also how we have attempted to heal those wounds on our own – e.g., trying to assert our value and worth by playing a caretaking role towards another hurting person. As clients, married or single, now realize these dynamics that have been hidden beneath their choices and behaviors, they have the opportunity to begin depending more deeply upon Christ for their sense of identity and self-worth, as well as relational and even financial security.

As this transition is made, then the wife in our example can begin to challenge her husband to take full responsibility for his unhealthy and self-centered behaviors. Again, sometimes these behaviors are clearly sinful and dysfunctional, such as substance abuse, physical and sexual abuse towards the spouse or children. Other times, they are more subtle. An example could be a husband who has repeatedly put his own personal desires before legitimate needs of the family. Expensive hobbies, when kids need school clothes, are common amongst husbands, but it could also be the wife whose drive to lose weight through obsessive exercising causes her to neglect her kids and husband. While individual incidents involving such behaviors are in themselves not grounds for separation or divorce, a perpetual pattern overtime calls in to question the primary motives and attitudes that a spouse really has towards his or her family.

Thus the second step in the process is for the spouse who has already worked on her own “stuff,” to begin challenging her spouse to become more mature, responsible and ultimately more Christ-like. This stage can have many “sub-stages” and varies tremendously from case to case. My general rule of thumb is for my client to ultimately believe that she has given her husband an adequate number of clear, manageable steps that he could take to move towards growth and reconciliation. For the spouse who has refused counseling, agreeing to receive help would obviously be one major step. I have seen spouses take this step, but only just to say that they did, because after a few sessions their lack of humility becomes clearly evident. As long as they continue to place the primary blame upon their spouse, rather than looking at who they are, how they got that way, and how they can change, then they are not ready to progress.

I coach spouses, such as the woman in our example, to emphasize the issue of personal choice. Help the husband to see that he has made a series of unhealthy choices that have hurt the marriage as well as the family. Then give him a series of steps towards healing and growth that he could choose to take, or choose not to. If the latter occurs, then she lays out a set of logical consequences that will naturally occur. Thus, if physical separation or legal divorce does occur, she may have to be the one who initiates it, but it would simply be a true and valid response to the choices he has made to end the marriage on an emotional, relational, and spiritual level.

David Gushee uses an analogy of a hammock to illustrate the marriage covenant (p. 144-145). As a couple builds their marriage, it is like weaving together individual strands until they feel comfortable lying down in it: *“After a while this hammock has multiple*

strands of increasing toughness and durability. When it is completed, not only you but your spouse and even your little kids can all rest in it together. Covenant breaking is like one partner – or sometimes both – taking a knife to these hammock strands and slicing them, one at a time.” Major events such as adultery and physical abuse cause the entire hammock to come crashing down with disastrous results. However, the individual strands can be sliced one at a time, so that over time the bond of marriage is progressively weakened. When one spouse has humbly acknowledged ways in which she has “sliced strands,” then she can lovingly confront her husband about his doing the same, though perhaps in much different ways. His repeated refusal to sincerely face responsibility constitutes his choice to cut more and more strands and eventually destroy the hammock. Physical separation, legal separation and eventually divorce if necessary, should therefore be the third and final step in the process, only after the other spouse has proven himself to have broken the marriage covenant on the level of the heart. Many Christians, including church leaders, tend to focus only on the outward manifestations of covenant-keeping and do not consider the attitudinal level at all. Thus, a woman may be disciplined by her church if she filed for divorce when the husband has never committed adultery and has not physically abandoned the marriage. What the church fails to see in such a case is the numerous incidents, either throughout passive lack of involvement in the marriage or the active infliction of emotional pain, which have in essence broken the covenant long before the legal declaration is made.

Ultimately, whether to leave the marriage or not is the client’s decision and not ours as counselors. I encourage my clients to humbly ask God to purify their own motives towards an irresponsible spouse. Human nature, and secular counsel, would tell a wife to “get rid of the bum...you deserve better...move on with your life and be happy.” We know as Christians that God does not call us first and foremost to be happy, but to be loving in a Christ-like manner. So when a wife challenges her alcoholic abusive husband to seek help for himself, it is out of love for him, just as a loving parent challenges and disciplines her child to become more mature and Christ-like. Our primary purpose in challenging anyone to “clean up their act” – whether we spouse, parents, church leaders – is to draw their attention to the benefits for them of becoming more Christ-like. If they respond positively, the result is always to our benefit as well. But, the primary focus of Christlike agape love is for the betterment of the other, not me.

With this principle in mind, I have seen some clients stay in marriages when other spouses in similar marriages have left, having followed through with our three major steps. Only God knows the true motives of our clients, but when a woman who has followed the steps tells me she still believes God would have her stay with her husband, then I praise her for that decision. Why, because it is made in faith – faith that, at least for another season of time, God will sustain her in her continuing to challenge her spouse. On the other hand, when a woman has patiently and humbly followed the same general steps, then I believe she is not bound (just as Paul says one is not bound to an unbelieving spouse), and she divorces with God’s blessing as well. Why? Because she also has acted in faith towards God and love towards her spouse. Her response of legal separation or divorce, to his years of prideful irresponsibility, can be the ultimate challenge for the husband to get his life right with God.

This is the same principle, by the way, that is used in godly parenting or church discipline. After several steps are offered and refused, then an ultimatum must result that means loss of fellowship. A 25 year-old son who will not work but expects food and shelter should be given an ultimatum for his sake! Likewise, an unruly and unrepentant church member may be asked to leave so that through the pain of estrangement he might see his need for sincere change. I sum this up by telling clients that sometimes we have to love people enough to risk losing our relationship with them. Easy to say; hard to do, but that is the essence of real Christlike love.

Finally, I would offer a relatively brief statement about re-marriage. This topic, like divorce, has been hotly debated throughout the history of the church – both Protestant and Catholic. The most conservative renderings of Scripture would argue that one can remarry only after the death of the spouse. No divorced person is technically permitted to remarry, whether they filed for divorce themselves or their spouse did. Also, the most conservative interpreters would add that even if a believing spouse leaves an unbeliever, she or he must remain single indefinitely. For our purposes here, I chose not to document the various ways in which specific biblical passages have been interpreted, because I again want to focus primarily upon the issue of motive and intent.

In our offices, we frequently counsel people who are widowed and divorced, and now desire to remarry. They often ask our opinion about this matter, especially if they come from a more conservative tradition. I usually ask in return whether they have spoken to their pastor or priest and what their counsel has been. While not desiring to either mimic or contradict such clerical advice, I chose to focus once again on underlying motives. Why does my client want to remarry? and why this particular person?

Statistics bear out the fact that second and third marriages have a higher rate of divorce than first marriages. The reason is because once a first marriage ends, a person who has not grown in their knowledge of self and God, desperately seeks a new relationship in which they can find ultimate fulfillment. This idolatrous search for self-affirmation via a human relationship is doomed from the start. Each time such a relationship ends, the search becomes more desperate. Desperate people are attracted only to people who are similarly desperate and this is a formula for failure.

Clients ask how they can avoid making a poor marital choice in the future. On one level, I respond by mentioning outward signs of immaturity and irresponsibility – or “red flags” to avoid. Traits to be wary of would include being overly possessive, controlling, domineering, and manipulative (even in a kind way). However, I tell clients that the best defense against returning to unhealthy relationships is a good offense: the more that you grow in your relationship with God, the more that you depend upon Him for your sense of self, the more likely you will be to attract a future spouse who is at the same level of growth.

In contrast, the client who is still caught up in using a relationship to verify their own worth is not really mature enough to have a healthy relationship. For many, this growth

can occur only after a season of being single and learning to lean upon God more than anyone else.

To summarize, it is tempting to try and “split hairs” when interpreting biblical passages involving divorce and remarriage. Some situations are quite clear biblically, such as adultery being grounds for divorce or the command to not be unequally “yoked” with an unbeliever. Other situations are more “gray”: one couple who intended to marry scoured the Old Testament to prove that they were not committing incest—the wife-to-be was the former daughter-in-law of the husband-to-be. Since they were both divorced and not blood-related, they argued that no incest would be involved and thus they were free to remarry. They received a variety of responses from various clergy. As their counselor, I approached the matter from the standpoint of how healthy – emotionally, relationally and spiritually- the new union would be. Eventually, the woman realized that her attraction to the man was based more on unhealthy codependent tendencies than a mature love, and as she grew in her relationship with Christ she called off the marriage plans.

While not at all negating the role of clergy and the authority of the Church in the lives of our clients, our primary role as Christian counselor is to challenge clients to look beneath the surface of their stated desires and ask God to clarify and purify their motives. Whether clients stay in challenging marriages or leave them, and whether they remain single or remarry, our task is to draw attention to the attitudes of the heart and not just the outward behaviors of covenant-keeping.

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November, 2005