

Becky Bereans Hot Button Issues – Divorce in the Church

Introduction

Before we begin, let's take note that this is a *very* sensitive topic. It directly impacts many within our church and the universal Church. Our discussions are likely to trigger strong emotions and painful memories. Therefore, this evening let us keep in mind the words of Jesus...

34A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. 35By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” John 13:34-

35 [ESV]

The most important thing I learned in researching this topic for this evening's discussion is that “common knowledge” like friendly fire isn't (knowledge that is). Some of the things that are spoken about divorce in the Church from pulpits across the USA, and some of the things I myself have said about divorce in the Church here in this very room are – to put it frankly – just plain false. More on that later.

Like child abuse and its associated cover-ups by the leadership of almost every Christian denomination, divorce might be considered one of the Church's dirty little secrets – something we're uncomfortable discussing, and even uncomfortable thinking about. God knows none of us who are married wants the divorce “contagion” to infect our own marriage. But like physical infections of the body, issues like these within the Body of Christ are most dangerous to the life of the Body if left hidden. They need to be exposed and treated before the Body can heal from them. So it is well that we should be considering divorce in our discussion this evening.

Statistics on Divorce Within the Church

It has famously been said that there are three kinds of lies – lies, damned lies, and statistics. It is common knowledge (there I go again) that statistics may be manipulated by the unscrupulous to lend credence to forgone conclusions that the raw numbers don't fully support. Such is the case – if I may be so bold as to say so – with the numbers about the divorce rate in the Church.

A widely-referenced study of telephone interviews conducted in 2008 by the Barna Group – <https://www.barna.com/research/new-marriage-and-divorce-statistics-released/> – concluded that the divorce rate among Americans professing to be born-again Christians was indistinguishable from that of people not claiming to be born again – roughly 1/3. Christians were rightly shocked at these results, and the Barna Group study has formed the foundation for a multitude of words on the subject preached from Christian pulpits and written in Church publications.

***In the multitude of words sin is not lacking,
But he who restrains his lips is wise.*** Proverbs 10:19 [NKJV]

However more recent research by Professor Brad Wilcox of the University of Virginia would seem to indicate that the divorce rate among American Christians is significantly (over 25%) lower than among the general US population – <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/december-web-only/marriage-divorce-cohabitation-religious-americans-study.html>.

How can we reconcile these conflicting conclusions? The problem is that – as with all statistics – it is practically impossible to find an unbiased report. Furthermore, the Internet has democratized the ability to publish so much that practically anyone can post practically any opinion on the web without any citations, making it almost impossible to call into question. In the particular case of statistics on

Becky Bereans Hot Button Issues – Divorce in the Church

divorce within the Church, the main problem lies in determining who is actually a born-again follower of the LORD Jesus Christ, and who just plays one on TV. Of course, this problem extends outside the question of divorce within the Church to all manner of what might be deemed “unChristian” behaviors.

Therein lies the problem with the Barna study. In the telephone interviews, the survey respondents were merely asked about their Christian beliefs, without any exhibition of the fruit of their professed beliefs. After all, studies by the Pew Research Center in 2007 and 2014 indicated that roughly 70% of Americans identify as “Christians.” (<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/>). Of course, [Lia Thomas](#) is living proof that “identifying” as a particular type of person doesn’t actually make someone that type of person. But I digress (actually regress to last week’s discussion).

Professor Wilcox’s research delves a little deeper, to ask people about some of the details of their “Christian” practices – e.g. church attendance, prayer, Bible study, etc. Of course, we all know (there I go again) that church “membership” does not a Christian make. In fact, it is impossible for Professor Wilcox or anyone else to see into the true character of any other person’s heart, but at least Professor Wilcox’ research makes the attempt to discriminate between those who say they are Christians without any real focus upon discipleship in their lives, and those who are at least committed to routine “Christian” practices day-by-day. It is these latter “true” Christians among whom Professor Wilcox says the divorce rate is significantly lower.

What Does the Bible Say About Marriage and Divorce?

Please hold discussions until we finish examining the Word

Deuteronomy 21:10-14 – Special case - prisoner of war taken as a wife.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 – Special case - man forbidden to re-marry a wife he has divorce who re-married.

First and only mention of certificate of divorce in the Old Testament.

Re-marriage of divorced wife compared to Israel’s idolatry in Jeremiah 3:1.

Ezra 9-10 – Special case – Exile returnees commanded to divorce wives taken from various “ites.”

Malachi 2:10-16 – Decries intermarriage, and divorce in general.

¹⁰Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers? ¹¹Judah has been faithless, and abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem. For Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the LORD, which he loves, and has married the daughter of a foreign god. ¹²May the LORD cut off from the tents of Jacob any descendant of the man who does this, who brings an offering to the LORD of hosts!

¹³And this second thing you do. You cover the LORD’s altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. ¹⁴But you say, “Why does he not?” Because the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. ¹⁵Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit

Becky Bereans Hot Button Issues – Divorce in the Church

in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth. ¹⁶“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.” Malachi 2:10-16 [ESV]

³¹“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³²But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Matthew 5:31-32 [ESV]

³And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” ⁴He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, ⁵and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? ⁶So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” ⁷They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” ⁸He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. ⁹And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”

Matthew 19:3-9 [ESV]

See also Mark 10:2-12, Luke 16:18

¹⁰To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband ¹¹(but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.

¹²To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. ¹³If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. ¹⁴For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. ¹⁵But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. ¹⁶For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? ¹ Corinthians

7:10-16 [ESV]

Becky Bereans Hot Button Issues – Divorce in the Church

Discussion Questions

1. Should we distinguish in the Body between BC and AD divorce?
2. Exactly what constitutes the divorceable “sexual immorality” Jesus spoke of...
 - a. Heterosexual adultery?
 - b. Homosexual adultery?
 - c. Pornography consumption?
 - d. Abandonment of the marriage bed?
3. Is re-marriage or first marriage to a divorcee adultery?
4. What constitutes abandonment of a marriage
 - a. By a Christian spouse?
 - b. By a non-Christian spouse?
 - c. Does it make a difference if the partners still cohabit?
5. Should a Christian divorce her/his spouse for reasons other than sexual immorality...
 - a. Physical abuse of the Christian spouse?
 - b. Mental/emotional abuse of the Christian spouse?
 - c. Physical abuse of the children?
 - d. Mental/emotional abuse of the children?
6. Should divorced Christians be allowed to serve in ministry? – See 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.
7. What should the local congregation policy be concerning divorce among us?
8. How should individual Christians interact with divorcees among us?
9. What should the local congregation policy be about pending divorce among us?
10. How should individual Christians advise brothers and sisters regarding pending divorce?