

All Saints Anglican Church of Southern Arizona, Inc. Septuagesima Sunday Sermon on 2018-01-28

What can a divorced & remarried “Christian” do to make things right with God?

by Fr Reed Merino

As I said last Sunday, I believe that it has been clearly established that the clear teaching of Jesus, of His apostles and of the apostolic churches is that remarriage under ANY condition is adultery, as long as the original spouse is still living. And, as I also said, this is a very serious issue: because God’s apostles tell us that adulterers (among others) do not inherit the kingdom of God: i.e., their destiny is that of Satan.

Since the coming of Jesus, any person who has violated that command against divorce & remarriage has the guilt of adultery. In the ancient church, if a baptized Christian divorced and remarried they were excommunicated as apostates. (This, of course, assumes that we are talking about marriages that God considers to be valid marriages: Valid annulments declare that no marriage ever existed: but that is another topic for another time.)

I am going to provide what I believe is God’s answer to this issue by imagining that we are in the time of the original and ancient churches, rather than in today’s Christianity. Back then there was only ONE Church and one discipline.

Surprisingly, there are no passages in the New Testament that address the SPECIFIC situation of what was done with people who had been remarried BEFORE they became Christians through baptism. Very few scholars or teachers address that specific issue. It is commonly assumed that, even though the guilt of adultery applies to both remarried Christians and pre-Christians alike, whatever “solution” applies to Christians must also apply to those who were not Christians at the time of their remarriage(s). “Lenient” churches apply lenient interpretations alike to both groups, just as the “strict” churches apply the strictest interpretation to both groups. In other words WHATEVER solutions today’s church’s apply to CHURCH members getting remarried, they apply the same lenient or strict solution to those who were remarried before becoming “Christians.” But this was NOT true of the earliest, apostolic church.

Those “strict” churches who address that issue interpret the clear and strict teachings of Jesus and the apostles against remarriage, so that those who come to true faith and obedience to Christ and had been remarried or polygamous while pagans are not simply forgiven of that sin (as they were of their murders, thefts, abortions, et cetera). Rather they are required to separate from their second wife and their children of that union.

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The reasoning behind that decision is that, to them, every continuing act of sexual intercourse is an act of adultery.

The fact of the certain existence of remarried candidates for baptism in New Testament times, coupled with the total absence of specific teaching in the matter of how to deal with those who had remarried while pagans seems (to me) to mean that the answer was SO obvious that it did not need to be addressed. Unfortunately for us, the answer was that either that it "of COURSE" required separation from your current spouse, or that "of COURSE" it does not, because your sinful decisions made in your darkened pagan past have been forgiven.¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." (2 Cor 5).

Which of these two "of COURSE" answers is correct? The most lenient solution is not necessarily "of course" the will of God; but neither is the most demanding solution the necessary solution. We should not want to be either more lenient than God, nor STRICTER than He is about ANY issue.

If these people, whether polygamists or remarried, had come to surrender to Jesus and wanted to be baptized, what were they required to do? Were they required to abandon their second wife (and children), or were they baptized and then required to live under the discipline of those who were not the "husband of one wife" (Titus 1:6).

There is ample Scriptural evidence that remarriages and polygamy were being practiced in Israel in the time of Jesus. Jesus was talking to such people when He taught that remarriage was adultery and that marriage consisted of one man and ONE woman being joined together as one flesh. Do you think those of them who repented of sin and submitted to His authority were required to abandon their wives and children permitted under the law of Moses? Even though God had a different will for marriage, He HAD made a concession to them because of "the hardness of your hearts" (Matthew 19:3-8). Is there any Biblical evidence that Jesus or the apostles required them to separate from their second wives prior to baptism? There is none. If GOD made a concession for the blindness and hardness of unregenerate JEWISH hearts, it is certainly not illogical that He would make the same concession for the blindness and hardness of unregenerate GENTILE hearts, is it? The fact that He had promulgated a NEW marital discipline does not alter the fact that the proverbial pagan first-century Mongolian, who had never known or heard of Jesus and His marital teachings, was in the same condition AFTER Jesus' teaching was given, as was the first-century B.C. Jew who had never heard of Jesus' teaching, but who was living under that concession God had made for those who are genuinely blind and hard of heart. That understanding is certainly in harmony with the evidence provided by the early churches' canons.

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In the "Blueprint for a Revolution," I describe the actual canons, which are from the fourth century. These canons are not the personal opinions of individuals, but the disciplines of all the churches in a geographical region. They indicate that remarried unbelievers were not expected or required to separate from their second spouses upon coming to faith and baptism.

These canons also reveal the PRINCIPLE that was used in dealing with these sometimes-complicated marital scenarios. Why, for example, in one canon, was a CATECHUMEN who remarried (i.e. one taking instruction for baptism) permitted to be baptized, but only after 5 years; yet, in another canon, a person who was remarried while an UNBELIEVER was admitted to baptism right away? I think the principle in use – a very Biblical principle – was based upon the teaching of Jesus: "And that servant who knew his master's will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more" (Luke 12:47-48). The church, following her Master, treated people according to the light that was in their conscience, not according to a simple and inflexible law: i.e., since remarriage is adultery ALL who have remarried must abandon their second marriages.

Another important point to keep in mind is that when it came to the marital discipline being applied to baptized disciples, these same churches were not in the process of some general lessening of the ancient discipline. No, they METICULOUSLY followed the simple and inflexible law that Jesus taught about Christians' divorcing and remarrying being adultery, and requiring excommunication until one was willing to sever that adulterous relationship. The principle was the same one quoted above: baptized disciples KNOW better and therefore from them "much will be required."

There is another line of reasoning that seems quite important to me.

1. I have come across a number of early lists of prohibited occupations and life styles that were impediments to being accepted for baptism. Perhaps the most famous of them is in the "Apostolic Tradition" of Hippolytus (ca. 200 A.D.), but there were others. They are quite specific: actors, politicians, prostitutes, etc. As I have mentioned, there were a great many remarried people in those days: certainly, FAR more remarried persons than actors and politicians. Now, if that stricter interpretation WERE being practiced, one would certainly expect that one of the requirements on those lists would have been that remarried people had to renounce their pagan remarriages and separate from their later spouses. And yet this NEVER occurs on any of those early lists. However, the churches

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during this time were faithfully maintaining the strict discipline about CHRISTIANS never remarrying.

2. Another important argument from silence is this: we have some records of the nature of the criticism that pagan leaders leveled against Christians. Perhaps the most well-known criticism is from a pagan named Celsus, somewhere around 200 A.D. Celsus presented the reasons why he saw Christianity as destructive of Roman society: no performance of civic duties, army service, etc. If the churches required remarried people to abandon their existing families upon baptism, and if there were as many remarried people as Tertullian states, that practice would have been WIDELY known because of the frequency of divorce. And those who would not abandon their existing families and so did not become Christians would certainly have made sure to complain about this "inhumane" requirement. In a culture given to much divorce and remarriage, this strict requirement would have been very disruptive of society. And critics like Celsus would have found it VERY valuable ammunition to use against Christians. And yet NONE of the pagan criticisms of Christianity mention that strict practice.

So, my understanding is that of the almost certain practice of the ancient Christians. The presence of baptized, accepted members of the New Testament churches, who were described as not being the "husband of one wife", the total absence of any requirement to separate from pre-conversion marriages in the early church AND the actual statement of those early church councils leads me to the following conclusion. In the ancient church, remarried people who were pagans, or who were judged by God to have been pagans even though they had considered themselves to be Christians, would have first been disciplined in the true way to follow Christ, and then would be baptized into Christ.

Well, has the last word been given about this subject? Can a (supposedly) "Christian" member of a (supposedly) "Christian" church stay with his second or third wife on the same ground as the ancients who were granted concessions because of their blindness and hardness of heart? Can he plead ignorance because of the false marriage teachings of his heretical church, and thus be able to qualify for that "concession" mentioned by Jesus and practiced by the ancient churches?

Now, remember carefully: that very "hardness of heart" for which God granted that "concession" was the same diseased heart that kept them out the kingdom of God. It was that same hardness that required a NEW birth from above (John 3:3-8). It was a hardness that was evidence that one was not yet "born of the Spirit." The "concession" is ONLY granted to those considered by God to have been living in the darkness and hardness of the unregenerate, because they were blinded by Satan. In other words,

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only those whom God has considered to be living in darkness qualify for this "concession" mentioned by Jesus. Does this tell you something about what YOU need to do?

This kind of concession and forgiveness by God for getting remarried requires on the part of the individual an understanding and an admission that he/she never WAS what God accepts as a Christian: a "disciple," a person "born of the Spirit." Only acceptance that one was a non-Christian can make sense out of his/her willingness to remarry even though he/she THOUGHT they were a Christian. And they may even have been ACCEPTED as a Christian by his heretical church, which – like him – does not believe Jesus' teaching.

This concession and forgiveness also requires that he/she be willing to become a TRUE Christian. A TRUE Christian is not merely one who "accepts Christ as Savior," and also corrects his previous justification for getting remarried. What makes us APOSTOLIC Christians in the eyes of God includes unconditional surrender to the general authority of Jesus and to the SPECIFIC teachings of Jesus – including His teachings about turning the other cheek, about sharing one's possession, and everything else that Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount and other places. An "accepting of Christ" that does not accept ALL that He taught in the plain sense in which He taught it is not an accepting of the REAL Son of God. He must be willing to accept that he was not a Christian (as GOD defines the term), and must accept the authority of the pastors of an apostolic church to decide whether they are convinced of his testimony, of his genuine repentance and his willingness to be baptized into Christ by them for the forgiveness of his sins. THEY MUST BE CONVINCED THAT THIS PERSON QUALIFIES FOR THAT "CONCESSION" PROVIDED TO THOSE WHOSE HEARTS HAD BEEN DARKENED AND HARDENED BECAUSE THEY HAD BEEN – IN TRUTH -- UNREGENERATE UNBELIEVERS. If a man insists that he does not need to be regenerated and baptized, then he is no candidate for that "concession."

The REAL problem in all of this was not the divorce and remarriage. The REAL problem was never having been a Christian in the FIRST PLACE! I repeat: The REAL problem in all of this was not the divorce and remarriage. The REAL problem was never having been a Christian in the FIRST PLACE! And THAT is what has to be corrected first!

If the God who is your judge and rewarder is the same God that is described in the New Testament, then THIS is what you must wrestle about with Him. He has stated His position: He is merciful, but He WILL NOT budge from it. WE must do the humbling, and submit to His teaching and discipline. You are ABLE to do it; are you WILLING?