

Observations and Experiences

Regarding Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage (4)

By Bill Cavender

Years ago I sat in a courtroom, listening to a divorce proceeding. The woman was a member where I preached. Her husband was an unbeliever. She was a nurse; he was an EMT. They had a beautiful little daughter about three years old. They met at the local hospital when he would bring patients into the emergency room. She was an attractive woman; he was a long-haired, shaggy, hippy-looking bum, but “nice and courteous and attentive.” He told her he had never been married and was “looking for a church.” They began a courtship, she fell for him, and they married (I did not know either of them at that time). No sooner did they marry than his drug and alcohol problems manifested themselves; his anger and violent temper, and his physical and emotional abuse of his wife began. She learned he had been previously married. She should have left him but she didn’t. They had a child. Conditions deteriorated, he began to keep loaded pistols in their house and under his pillow, and a hunting knife by their bed, threatening to use it on her if she did not submit to him and be silent about his conduct. He began an adulterous affair. Then he wanted a divorce but still she loved that sorry culprit and thought she could change him. He filed for divorce and I attended the trial. In spite of his craziness, pure meanness, and evil conduct, the judge granted him a divorce for “marital incompatibility” and gave him shared custody of their precious child. Later the child was taken from him and the custody nullified due to abuse of the child. He later died of drugs and alcoholism. That good woman, who made such a blunder, is still single. She was unjustly “put away” in a civil court of men by an ungodly mate but in the court of heaven she is innocent and could remarry if she desired to do so. But had he not divorced her, she would probably have been murdered, for I don’t believe she would ever have divorced him. Her child is a grown woman now. Be careful who you marry. Have a long and morally pure courtship. Know who the person really is and what his/her background is, before you allow yourself to become emotionally involved and agree to marriage.

One day long ago I was in the office of the church building where I preached, going about my studies and my work. The phone rang and a crying, hysterical sister was on the line, asking if she and her husband could come and talk with me. They did. Their problem was this: “Frank” (a fictitious name) was a bachelor, never married, an exceedingly fine and good man, a Christian since his boyhood days, coming from a family well-known in the church, his father being an elder for many years. “Susan” (a fictitious name), a widow with a grown daughter, a Methodist, had met him. He taught her the truth of the gospel and she obeyed. They began a courtship and decided to marry. After several years of happiness, she was at the “beauty shop” that day when their telephone rang at home. Frank answered the phone. A kinsman of Susan was on the phone, wanting to tell Susan that her first husband had died in a distant city and his funeral would be held in a couple of days. This news devastated Frank. He had no idea that Susan had had two husbands. She had only told him about the second one, the father of her daughter. When she came home from her appointment, Frank told her of the message. She was devastated and distraught. She had not intended to deceive Frank. She had married this fellow very early in her life, about age seventeen or eighteen; they lived together for a short while and divorced. She had long since laid this aside in her memory, so she said. When they arrived at the church building, they were both in great grief and flowing tears, sobbing almost uncontrollably. She told me this story, of that youthful marriage, and how she did not realize that this first husband of forty-five years or so before was even alive. She, literally, got down on her knees before her husband, shedding profuse tears of sorrow and sadness, repenting of her wrong, and telling Frank how much she loved him, and appreciated and respected him, and how she would not knowingly have hurt him for anything in this world. She was begging for his forgiveness and he forgave her. We talked, read Scriptures, and earnestly prayed. I never saw a more sorrowful, penitent person in my life than Susan was that day. It was never mentioned again as long as they lived, at least not to me.

Some are teaching the idea that a couple is not married until the “marriage license is recorded at the courthouse.” This is not true. The Testament of Jesus does not say or teach such an idea. Jesus did not teach that God joins couples together at the courthouses of men (in America or anywhere else on earth, but he does so in the courts of heaven; men

are trying to “Americanize” the teachings of Jesus and the apostles). This is binding where Jesus our Master did not bind. Years ago I said a “wedding ceremony” for a young couple, and after the wedding they went on their way to another city to live and to go to college. I completed the license, dropped it in the post office the next day after the ceremony, and thought no more about it. Some five or six weeks later the couple received a letter at the bride’s parents’ address, saying that the license had not been returned. They contacted me. I went to the courthouse and told the officials that I had mailed the completed license the morning after the wedding. The matter began to be investigated. The very night I had put the license into the mail earlier that day, a mail truck had wrecked with a tanker truck, and both vehicles had burned. Postal inspectors concluded the license would have been in the mail that burned. The couple had to come back to the courthouse, after six weeks or more of marriage and obtain another license. I had to go and complete my part of it, and then the license was duly recorded. I told this true incident to a preacher years ago. His conclusion was that the couple was living in the sin of fornication for six weeks, until the second license was completed and filed at the courthouse. He opined that they should publicly confess their sins!

Charles Hodge, in his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (334) correctly commented: “The State can neither make nor dissolve the marriage tie. It may enact laws regulating the mode in which it shall be solemnized and authenticated, and determining its civil effects. It may shield a wife from ill-usage from her husband, as it may remove a child from the custody of an incompetent or cruel parent. When the union is in fact dissolved by the operation of the divine law, the State may ascertain and declare the fact and free the parties from the civil obligation of the contract. But it is impossible that the State should have authority to dissolve a union constituted by God, the duties and continuance of which are determined by his law.”

Some years after the above mentioned event, Marinel and I began working with a church of some two hundred fifty souls in attendance. There was this nice college-age couple who had “courted” a while and planned to marry. They asked me to conduct the wedding service. The girl’s mother was also a member of the congregation, a godly and gracious lady. She wanted a lovely “church wedding” for her only daughter and the daughter wanted that also. The elders allowed the use of the meetinghouse for weddings (and funerals) provided no mechanical instruments were used and a faithful gospel preacher was in charge of the service. We had a “wedding rehearsal” on Friday night before the “real wedding” on Saturday night (I have always disliked “wedding rehearsals”). Saturday night came, the audience assembled, everyone was ready for the wedding, and I was still asking the groom for the marriage license. I wanted to see it before the wedding (he had previously been assuring me that he would give me the license before the wedding). About five minutes before we were to enter the auditorium for the wedding to begin, he said he needed to talk with me. He took me aside into a classroom and told me that he and his sweetheart were already married. They just couldn’t wait, they didn’t want to commit fornication (I appreciated that in their conduct), so about ten days before they had gone to a civil judge to be married, and the license was already filed at the courthouse. He begged me to go on with the “wedding ceremony,” as not to do so would “break the heart” of his mother-in-law and disappoint both their families and all their friends. I reluctantly did so but it gave me a good opportunity to preach them a good sermon, including the sin of lying. I’m sure that couple has never told anyone. They told me later they were sorry for having done this and asked my forgiveness. From what I have heard since, they are happily married and are good workers for the Lord.

In one congregation where I preached, a young, unmarried lady in the church wanted to talk with the elders. She was planning to be married to a man who had been married. She said that her husband-to-be had previously married a woman a few years before. After the wedding ceremony, he and his bride went to change from their garments into other clothing, to travel off to their honeymoon. He changed his garments and stood outside his changing room, waiting for his bride to come out of her dressing room. But she did not come out! She could not be found! Later in the night they learned why she disappeared. She had eloped immediately after the wedding, and reception, with his best man in the wedding! They were old sweethearts. The preacher, who officiated at the wedding, not knowing these events as they occurred after he had gone home, mailed the marriage license the next morning to the court clerk and it was recorded. So, she told us, her husband-to-be was never really married, never had a wife, never cohabited, later legally divorced his erstwhile bride, was free to be married, and she intended to marry him. She did. I did not participate in the wedding.

I was preaching in a gospel meeting in a southern state some twenty years or so ago. A lady and her pretty teen-age daughter approached me after the evening service asking if they could speak with me. After folks cleared out and we could go aside, she asked my advice regarding her problem. She was married to an alcoholic, abusive husband, an ungodly man. In recent months he was trying to abuse their daughter and molest her. She was planning to separate from her husband and remove the daughter from a father who would possibly try to sexually molest his own daughter. I advised her, if she was telling me the truth and these were really the circumstances in their home, to separate herself and the child from this man, to remove the girl from his presence. Shortly thereafter I learned that she did so. Some months later this man assaulted and raped a woman and was sent to prison, so I was told later. I believe the woman did the right thing, to protect herself and her child. This man was violating every principle and teaching regarding the conduct of a husband and father toward his wife and child (Eph. 5:22-33; 1 Pet. 3:1-7; Col. 3:18-21). I mentioned this true incident in a sermon some years later. The preacher, where I was holding the meeting, told me that I had sinned, that I told the woman wrongly, that she had no right to separate from her husband, and could not scripturally do so unless and until he actually raped his daughter, making himself a true adulterer. Then, and only then, could his wife have had God's approval to leave him! He opined further that, if the wife had not separated from him, it was possible that he would not have assaulted and raped the woman and been sent to prison! So she sinned in separating from her husband and I sinned by advising her that she should do so, for the protection of her child!

I have only "touched the hem of the garment" in writing of these few experiences. I could relate many, many more interesting, unique, twisted, convoluted, sad, sinful, and even humorous (if they were not so serious, for the consequences are eternal) marriage events. None of these affects anything that Jesus our Lord and the inspired apostles taught us regarding marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Every preacher has his own experiences as years go by, and we work with all kinds of folks who have all types of problems. My purposes in these articles are twofold: (1) to remind all of us that human relationships, involving marital problems and difficulties, are the most tenuous, the most ill-defined, the most difficult of all to deal with, the most insolvable, than all the matters we will deal with in life, the reasons being that emotions, faulty memories, failures unseen and unrealized, prejudices, good will and ill will, influences from others, and many other factors are involved; and (2) all of us are *only* teachers of the people; we are not investigators, police, and detectives examining the marriages, divorces, and remarriages of people. We can only help when we are called upon for advice, counsel, and teaching, and when such ones tell us the truth and only the truth. All we can tell anyone is what Jesus and the apostles said, without additions and subtractions. Each person is responsible to God through Jesus Christ for his own life and will give account at the last great day. Some marriages and divorces are obviously sinful and very recognizable; some are not sinful because Jesus gave a right of divorce to an innocent, moral husband/wife whose companion has been guilty of adultery; some are questionable and cannot be satisfactorily dealt with by people outside the marriage. Teach the word of God ahead of time. Preventive teaching is much more effective than trying to excise the cancer of error and sin after it afflicts its victims.

"Conservative" churches of Christ, with all our various issues, opinions, conscientious scruples, strains and stresses, seen and unseen schisms and parties, had best be very conscious and careful how we deal with one another. We are a very small group of brethren and local congregations ("non-institutional" and "anti" churches we are called by others), living in a great big world of about 6,750,000,000 (six billion, seven hundred fifty million) lost souls. I doubt not, considering our numbers, that we are one of the most divided, disturbed, debating group of religious people in the USA. We are not increasing in numbers and influence, but rather are rapidly decreasing and diminishing in both areas. As our older brethren pass on into eternity (that generation which fought battles for truth, the identity of the kingdom of God in a sinful world, and defined who we are as a people), we are becoming a more fractured, foolish, and fussing people, having little to offer a sin-cursed world by way of salvation and hope in Christ Jesus. We are not busy preaching the plain and pure gospel of Jesus Christ to lost souls about us. Instead we are crucifying our Lord afresh in our words, behavior, and deeds as we nail each other to our crosses of opinionism and extremes, traveling under the disguises of "soundness" and "contending for the faith." The "non-institutional" congregations which are prospering to any degree in numerical growth, in spirituality, in peace, in developing leadership and teachers, in solid internal teaching programs, in rooting and grounding brethren in the faith, in supporting the gospel in other areas of the lost world, are those churches which are "steering clear of" and ignoring, as much as possible, the fusses and debates among us having to do with a minority's extreme opinions. You cannot save souls and build strong churches for the Lord by fussing, fighting, crucifying your brethren, majoring in minors, and engaging in non-profitable, pointless arguments.

There are not many hard-working, visiting, Bible-studying, Scripture-memorizing, hospital-and-nursing-home-visiting, home-Bible-studies, preachers anymore. Most are too busy on the computers, on the Internet, on the golf courses, and watching the television, to be good builders of local churches anymore. Preachers used to arise from bed early in the morning, shave, shower, have breakfast, go to their office, study and memorize and write for several hours, spend the afternoons calling upon visitors to services, visiting the local hospitals and nursing homes, visiting shut-ins and aged members, be out in public meeting people in the community, and having a home Bible class a couple of nights a week. Preachers worked, people were baptized, churches grew in numbers and in doctrinal strength and peace, and the cause of Christ prospered. There is not much of that kind of good work going on among preachers anymore. Brethren are so lazy and ill-taught that they do not demand or desire hard-working preachers. They want people-pleasing-personality, non-offensive, short-sermons preachers, who never “rock the boat” or make any sinner uncomfortable, and who “get us out early” from the service so we can beat the “sectarians” to the cafeterias and restaurants before they get crowded.

Preachers who get side-tracked from their work of preaching the gospel of Christ and saving lost souls, who get off into extremes, opinions, unprofitable discussions, and who are not building the church in numbers and spirituality where they preach, need to be doing something else. We have great need of old-fashioned preachers, old-fashioned churches, old-fashioned elders and deacons, doing Jesus’ work of saving lost souls (Luke 19:10) and teaching the saved to “live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world” (Tit. 2:11-12). We will not prosper as a people until we truly return to the “old paths” in every facet of our relationship with our Father in heaven through Jesus our Savior, and to our love for the souls of those lost in sin (Jer. 6:16).

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