

Dealing Scripturally With Abnormal Marriage Relationships

“¹⁰ And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband: ¹¹ But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife. ¹² But to the rest speak I, not the Lord: If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away. ¹³ And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him. ¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy. ¹⁵ But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace. ¹⁶ For what knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save thy husband? or how knowest thou, O man, whether thou shalt save thy wife? ¹⁷ But as God hath distributed to every man, as the Lord hath called every one, so let him walk. And so ordain I in all churches” (I Corinthians. 7:10-17).

There were four different kinds of marriages in the Roman Empire at the time of the writing of Scripture. Local churches would have to deal with these abnormalities throughout the Church Age.

1. The first was the CONTUBERNIUM. This means tent companionship. These were slaves that were allowed to live together by their owners. Many of the early Christians were slaves. Their marriages were abnormalities existing before their salvation and carried into their post-salvation lives. These relationships greatly effected their being able to live for Christ and allow Him to be Lord of their homes. Because of these difficulties, the Corinthian believers wondered if they should end these abnormal pre-salvation marriages to unbelievers. Through the Apostle Paul, God gives clear revelation to the Christian’s responsibility in these abnormal situations (see v10-12).

Verse 12 is new revelation coming through the Apostle Paul that had not previously been spoken to by Jesus before His ascension. It does not mean it is not inspired of God. Regardless the degree of social acceptance of the abnorm, it never becomes the norm simply because the abnorm is the majority. God’s Word always determines what is normal.

2. The second type of marriage was the USUS. This was marriage between the *common people* of the Roman Culture. This type was the majority of Gentile marriages. It was what was known as Common Law Marriage. If a man or woman lived together for one year, at the end of that year they became identified as husband and wife. The church would have to Biblically correct and deal with such relationships.

3. The third type of marriage was COEMTIO IN MANUM (marriage by sale). This existed in two forms. The first was more of a breeding arrangement between pagan slave owners. Usually these were short term arrangements for the purpose of producing off spring. Until surrogate motherhood entered our culture, we would never have thought the modern church would have to deal with this kind of relationship. The second form of this type of marriage was when a father would sell a daughter for marriage. Female children were a commodity in many cultures. It is still done in some cultures today.

4. The fourth type of marriage was the CONFARREATIO. These were sophisticated marriages of the noble families of the Roman Empire involving elaborate ceremonies of opulent wealth. Each would try to out do the other. Most of modern wedding customs come from pagan Rome. Some of these customs were elaborate cakes, meals and celebrations with music and dancing. The bride wore expensive gowns, had wreaths and surrounded herself with flowers.

Because a second century Roman writer (Aules Gellius, *Gellius 10.10*) stated the third finger of the left hand had a nerve running to the heart, it became the custom of placing a ring on that finger. People putting on these elaborate shows today aren't keeping up with the Jones. They are keeping up with the pagan Romans.

Local churches were filled with people saved, but with all these types of marriage backgrounds. These relationships and marriages would have to be re-established on Biblical foundations. The problem was culture in opposition to doctrine (truth); the world in opposition to the Lordship of Christ.

The doctrinal answer to a problem of such a complex cultural abnormality was the Scriptural teaching of the sanctity of marriage regardless of its form. Believers were to function within their situation correcting what they could when they could. That did not condone entering into such an abnormal and unscriptural union. Nor did it condone correcting the abnormality through divorce. Two abnormalities do not make something normal (*two wrongs don't make a right*).

Scripturally dealing with these types of abnormalities

There was a social chaos in the Roman Empire causing great stress on relationships and proportionate increase in the divorce rate. Chaos results from confusion in circumstances due to the loss of absolute norms. Without absolutes there is no way to determine what normal behavior is. If there is no such thing as normal behavior, there can be no such thing as right or wrong behavior. If there is no such thing as right or wrong behavior there can be no right or wrong response to behavior.

Due to this social chaos, divorce became so socially acceptable that some people were married over twenty times. William Barclay notes an historical document where a woman was getting married for her twenty-seventh time to a man who was going to be married for his twenty-sixth marriage. The only way to restore order to this type of society is to restore absolute norms.

“¹⁶ All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: ¹⁷ That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (II Timothy 3:16-17).

Historical factors contributing to a high divorce rate once absolutes are removed

1. Homosexuality
2. Polygamy
3. Concubines (household prostitutes)
4. Women's liberation movement

Women's lib is nothing new. In the Roman Empire women entered into competition with men in every arena. The Roman society ridiculed the women who would not, calling them weak and useless. Women even entered into competitive feats of strength with men in the sports. Women also became the sexual aggressors of their society. This confused the roles so badly that homosexuality increased.

There are two major social abnormalities perpetuating progressive abnormalities resulting from removed absolutes. Each of these will increase to the degree that abnorms are considered normal.

1. Sexual immorality and perversion
2. Violence and crime

All sexual abnormalities can be directly related to the abolition of Biblical absolutes (read I Corinthians 6:12-18). For the people at Corinth, sex was only a biological function (*this is the philosophy of present public sex education*). Without Biblical absolutes, people look at sex as if it is amoral. Without Biblical absolutes, it is neither wrong nor right to have sexual relations outside of a husband/wife relationship. It is like blowing your nose, if it needs to be done do it. Without Biblical absolutes, there can be no sexual behavior considered abnormal or deviant, resulting in alternative choices to heterosexual relationships.

The name Corinth was a descriptive word relating the nature of this culture. *Korinthiazestha* is the Greek word that Corinthia comes from. It means to live in drunken and immoral debauchery.

The Church at Corinth had divorced moral responsibility from salvation and law (absolutes) from grace. They had allowed their society to influence and distort their understanding of God's absolutes. Instead of being the positive example of what a society can be when the absolutes of God's Word are accepted, they were little more than a step behind their culture.

The Church that wants to force moral law upon a society when it is not even willing to do so in its own miniature is a farce. How can the Church expect a society to adopt its absolutes, when they don't believe them enough to practice them in their smaller community (the local church)? How can the Church tell a society not to hate and kill when their own community cannot even love one another?

Every local Church is an on going social example of their testimony of faith in God's absolutes and a model for all cultures/societies. When a church begins to live those absolutes in their everyday lives, they testify they believe they work. When they refuse to live by those absolutes, they are a living testimony to their world that the absolutes of God do not work.

When that happens they are telling everyone it is not important to allow Jesus to be Lord of our lives. He can be Savior, but not Lord. We can trust His Word for salvation, but apparently for little else. What a sad testimony for the Lordship of Christ!

Studies in the Epistle to the Colossians
Chapter Twenty

Dealing Scripturally With Abnormal Marriage Relationships

1. From the following list of the four types of marriages at the time of the writing of the New Testament, discuss how each should be dealt with Scripturally.

A. CONTUBERNIUM: _____

B. USUS: _____

C. COEMTIO IN MANUM: _____

D. CONFARREATIO: _____

2. Were all of these types of marriage relationships supposed to be honored by Christians according to Paul in I Corinthians 7:10-16? _____

3. Read I Corinthians 7:12. Was Paul saying that this statement was not inspired of God? What is he saying? _____

4. Even when abnormal things are accepted by society as normal, what is the only way to really determine what is normal? _____

A. Do you think you measure everything according to that standard? _____

B. Can you think of anything you may not be measuring according to that standard that needs to be? _____

5. Read I Corinthians 7:17. Since the context is one of dealing with abnormal marriage relationships, apply this instruction to the believer's responsibility in that abnormal relationship? _____

What should be his immediate goal and long term goal in that relationship? _____

6. To what can the chaos of abnormal relationships be traced in any society? _____

7. Read II Timothy 3:16-17. What is the only way to restore order to a society in chaos? _____

8. What are two progressive abnormalities that will increase proportionately to the degree a society moves away from Biblical absolutes?

A. _____

B. _____

9. Do you think your social example and that of your local church to society is a good one? _____