

DR. TORREY'S STATEMENT CONCERNING THE DIVORCE QUESTION

Does the Bible permit a man under any circumstances to divorce his wife and marry another while the divorced wife is still living?

It is perfectly clear that the Bible does not permit of divorce and remarriage on any ground but one, and that whosoever puts away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, "maketh her an adulteress" (Matthew 5:32), and that if he marries another he himself commits adultery (Matthew 19:9). This much is plain as day, namely that there is only one Scriptural ground for divorce and remarriage, namely, impurity on the part of the other party.

It is, however, objected to by some who hold that remarriage even on this ground is not permitted by Scripture; that in Romans 7:2, 3, it is stated without any exception that a woman who hath a husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth, and that if while her husband liveth she be married to another she should be called an adulteress. The answer to this seems evident, namely, that Paul in Romans 7 is not discussing the question of divorce but is simply using the matter of the marriage obligation as an illustration. The only point that illustrates is the point of death, and it would have been entirely out of his way to have gone into the matter of exceptions to the general law, as they had no bearing whatever on the question that he was discussing. The words of Christ seem to clearly imply that one may divorce his wife and marry another in this one case of infidelity, and be guiltless before God.

It would seem, however, that if one had contracted an unfortunate alliance of this kind, he would better remain single, at least until the death of the offending party, and thus avoid trouble in the flesh. But if one has divorced husband or wife on the ground of adultery and has already married another, there is no Scriptural reason why he or she should feel condemned.

THE BIBLE INSTITUTE OF LOS ANGELES

Divorce & Remarriage

February 10, 1941

Dr. Louis T. Talbot
Church of the Open Door
Los Angeles, Calif.

Dear Dr. Talbot:

In reply to your letter of February 6th, let me say that according to my understanding of Scripture, divorce is justifiable when either husband or wife has been unfaithful to the other. I also understand that the innocent party in such a case is justified in remarrying. Matthew 19:9

If, in the sight of God, the remarriage is justifiable, I do not see why that person may not render service in the Church in such capacities as you have mentioned; singing in the choir, teaching in the Bible School, etc.

I might go further and say that if the occasion really demanded it, I do not see why a man who is divorced on Scriptural grounds, should be barred from even serving as an officer in the Church.

Praying that the Lord will give to you and the Church officers definite wisdom in this perplexing problem, and that His plan may be worked out in individual cases, I am,

Cordially yours,

JOHN A. HUBBARD

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH

Minneapolis, Minn.

February 11, 1941

Rev. Louis T. Talbot, D. D.
558 South Hope Street
Los Angeles, Calif.

My dear Louis:

Your letter of February 6 at hand. This divorce question is a difficult one. I have tried to make each case stand on its own merits. In cases where I believe the man or woman has been sinned against, I personally, and the practice of my church is the same, try to treat him or her as if it has not occurred. For instance, we have a very fine woman in the Northwestern Bible School, one of our best teachers, who is divorced, but through no fault of her own. I feel that each case has to be separately judged.

Glad to hear your meetings are going well.

Most fraternally,

W. B. RILEY

THE MOODY MEMORIAL CHURCH

Chicago, Illinois

February 10, 1941

Dr. Louis T. Talbot
558 South Hope Street
Los Angeles, California

My dear Dr. Talbot:

Your letter of the 6th evidently crossed one I wrote recently to you in regard to the Torrey Memorial Conference in 1942. This is really an answer to my letter and on the strength of it I am going to set aside the month of January and the first week in February 1942 for a visit to the Pacific Coast, if God will. This will necessitate my taking a leave of absence for four or five weeks from the church here, but I am sure the Lord will make it up in some way, and I feel that His will has been clearly expressed through your letter coming to me before you had mine inquiring about this.

Now in regard to the question of Divorce. Undoubtedly, as conditions are in the world at present, this question will arise more and more frequently, and I do think that we who minister the Word ought to be united in regard to it.

I have never been able to accept the position taken by some extremists. Our Lord's words in Matthew 19 are to me absolutely conclusive, that the sin of fornication committed after marriage dissolves the marriage tie. The Christian, of course, is never to break that tie. When one enters upon it, it is with the understanding that it is for life. But if the other party breaks it, there is nothing that the Christian can do to restore it except, of course, where the guilty one returns and confesses the sin and the innocent one forgives. No one is under obligation to do this, but where grace reigns, this will doubtless take place. But where the other party has forsaken the innocent one and disregarded the tie completely, God does not hold any of His people responsible to recognize himself or herself as still married to one who has broken the tie. In other words, God does not sanction polygamy, and if the guilty one has gone off with another, it would be recognizing such a wicked relationship if the innocent one were still held bound. Scripture makes it perfectly clear that one cannot be one body with his wife and with a harlot at the same time. Therefore the innocent party in such a case stands before God as though not married at all and is free to be married again, only in the Lord. This question has come up again and again here in Chicago, and we have always taken this stand.

I know the view that some take, that the word "fornication" refers only to illicit sex relations between unmarried persons and that therefore the sin contemplated in Matthew 19 is only one that has been committed before marriage at all; but this is absurd on the face of it. Thousands have entered into the marriage relationship who had been guilty of illicit sex relationship before marriage. I Cor. 5 is absolutely clear that the word rendered fornication refers to any illicit relation,

whether of married or unmarried people, for there we have a man who had committed fornication with his own stepmother and she who was married to his father.

I hope I have made myself clear, I would not like to be misunderstood. I have no hesitation about putting this before anyone as to what I believe, and I would go even farther than you do. I would not think because of the unfaithfulness of one party having been forsaken by another and then having married again, it would disqualify one for even a position of office in the church. I know of no Scripture that intimates this.

Sincerely in Christ,

H. A. IRONSIDE

THE FIRST BRETHREN CHURCH

Long Beach, California

February 10, 1941

Dr. Louis T. Talbot
558 S. Hope Street
Los Angeles, Calif.

Dear Dr. Talbot:

Yours of the 6th instant is at hand.

I note that you are face to face with a problem that has bothered me in my own work more than any other. I think it is the most difficult problem with which the true preacher and pastor has to deal, and it is growing to be more and more of a problem every passing day. My understanding of the Scripture agrees, I think, with the majority of the truly evangelical ministers of our day. It seems to me the teaching of our Lord in the fifth chapter of Matthew is very plain:

"I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery."
(Matt. 5:32).

It seems to me that the entire matter of divorce and remarriage is involved in this passage. Within the will of God, there can be neither divorce nor remarriage except upon the ground of adultery or fornication. In case there has been adultery or fornication, I believe God's Word allows the innocent party to remarry. If divorce is allowed within the will of God, it seems reasonable that remarriage should be allowed within the will of God. Why be divorced if you cannot remarry?

An important passage that is usually overlooked by ministers wrestling with this problem is I Corinthians 6:13-18. Verse 18 of this passage certainly teaches that fornication is a sin of entirely different nature from any other sin that a man or a woman can commit.

Personally, I do not believe that it is a wedding license and the words of a magistrate or a preacher that really makes two people one flesh in the sight of God. Plainly, it is when two people come together in sexual intercourse that they are made one flesh, and that is marriage. "They twain shall be one flesh."

Now, Paul, in this passage plainly warns against "tak(ing) the members of Christ, and making them the members of an harlot" (verse 15). I think this confirms my statement just above.

Then, the apostle continues:

"What? know ye not that he which is joined to an harlot is one body? for two, saith he, shall be one flesh."

It seems to me that that teaches plainly that it is the sexual act that consummates a marriage and makes two people "one body." Now then, if a person is one flesh with Christ (Eph. 5:30-32), that is, married to the Lord (Rom. 7:4), and then, by committing adultery, becomes one flesh with a harlot, he does that against which the apostle protests--he brings together the body of a harlot and the body of the Lord, making them "one

flesh." This indeed would be serious, and cannot be allowed. Hence, the law of divorce.

Now, here I believe is the reason that adultery is a sin that is utterly different from any other sin. A man married to a wife is one flesh with her. If he then goes and joins himself to a harlot, he becomes one flesh with the harlot also. That being true, it would bring the innocent wife into a union that would make her herself nothing less than one flesh with the harlot. In other words, the three are joined together into one.

Now, that God would not permit. If He did, He would permit an evil-minded man to force his wife into a "one flesh" union with a harlot. Therefore, God gives freedom to the innocent party, and that means divorce. It does seem to me that this is reasonable and just. Adultery or fornication, is the sin that, because of its peculiar nature, sets the innocent party in the divorce case, utterly free. And this freedom would give the innocent party the right of remarriage, in my opinion.

Now, as to the further problem that you raise. Can this innocent party, divorced on the ground of adultery and remarried, render "such service as singing in the choir, teaching in the Bible school, and occupying positions such as president of a ladies Bible class or missionary organization"? Why not? If her divorce and remarriage was allowable within the will of God, what should bar her from serving her God in any capacity she can? God is certainly just. Is it thinkable that a just God would permit the act of an evil-minded man to bar a pure Christian woman from the privilege of serving the Lord Who died for her? I think not. Understand, I am not dealing with a guilty party, but wholly with the innocent party.

Now, Dr. Talbot, you wanted a concise statement. This statement isn't exactly concise, as my sermons never are, but I would not want to give you my opinion unless I also am able to give you a real scriptural basis for the opinion. Human opinion, apart from the Word of God, amounts to little.

If you find anything in my position that you believe is a flaw, I would certainly appreciate having you let me know. Strange to say, about a year ago when I was meditating on this very problem, I came very nearly writing to you, asking for your opinion, even as I have asked more than one minister.

I trust that what I have written may be of some help to you in your problem. However, from past experience, many people have made up their minds on this subject and nothing you can say changes them. As for me, I still pray: "Send out Thy light and Thy truth, O Lord, and let them lead me."

Yours in Christ,

LOUIS S. BAUMAN

REVELATION

A Monthly Magazine for Christians

February 13, 1941

Dr. Louis T. Talbot
Church of the Open Door
Los Angeles, Calif.

Dear Dr. Talbot:

Your letter concerning the problem of divorce has been received. This is a question that comes up very frequently in these days and I constantly maintain that it is impossible to lay down hard and fast rules, but that every case must be judged entirely upon its own details and merits.

In the first place, consider a case where people who are unsaved are married, divorced, remarried and then are born again. In such cases I believe that just as the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from all other sin, so this sin is cleansed also. There can be no doubt that a man who had lived in fornication, even with a dozen different women, and who was subsequently born again, would be cleansed from all sin and would be eligible for any place in the leadership of the Church of Jesus Christ. This is definitely proven by I Corinthians 6:9-11. The fact that there might have been some sort of marriage ceremony in the case of his relationships with one or more of these women would not change the matter in the slightest.

In the second place, take the case of two unsaved people who are married, and subsequently one of them is born again. Then following the salvation of the one, the other runs off into sin. This type of case is thoroughly covered in I Corinthians 7. The believer is told in v. 10 not to make any attempt to leave the unsaved spouse. If it became absolutely necessary for the believer to leave the unsaved because of danger to life, etc., the definite statement is made that the believer is to remain unmarried. Any departure from this is to be considered as any other departure from the will of God--sin that would be public sin, to be dealt with by the discipline of the church. But if the unsaved spouse spouse--man or woman--should abandon the Christian and run off with another man or woman, and should obtain a divorce by some means from the Christian, the believer is told to allow that one to depart. It is definitely stated that the believing brother or sister is not under bondage in such cases, (verse 15). This has been variously interpreted. It seems to me that the obvious interpretation is that the believer is not in bondage to remain single, but that remarriage is permitted within the fold of Christ. This is most certainly true, if the erring partner has gone off with another and is living in adultery, or has remarried.

In the case where a believer has been out of the will of God in early life and has disobeyed the Word by marrying an unbeliever, and later returns to the will of God, and is abandoned by the unbelieving partner, the same situation as the above holds true.

Where there are two born-again believers, I do not think there should be divorce under any circumstances, even for adultery. The marriage was for better or for worse, and if one of the believers, tempted, falls, the believing partner should forgive, restore and maintain true spiritual fellowship on the grounds of Gal. 6:1.

Now the question arises, what place in the church, or the leadership of the church, should be accorded to those who are in the various categories mentioned above. My answer may surprise some, but I believe that the question is very clear. Anyone who has been justified has been justified from all things (Acts 13:39). This makes them eligible to any place of leadership, even to the diaconate or the eldership, or even to the ministry. If such be not the conclusion then we are dividing among sins and are saying that some sins make one ineligible to be an elder, etc., while other sins do not. We had in our church for many years a man who had been a notorious drunkard before he was saved. I have known of men who were former prisoners who became ministers of the Gospel. Who is to say that one sin disqualifies? If the passage be quoted that an elder should be the husband of one wife, the answer, of course, is that this means one wife at the time. I was in Korea several years ago and I asked a group of missionaries what the greatest problems on their respective fields were. One man said that the greatest problem he had to face was with respect to the ordination as elder of a man who had four wives. The man had been married to all four at the time the Gospel was first preached in his village. He had been saved. You can't send three back home to mother, for mother won't take them in the Orient. If he had turned them out they would have become prostitutes, surely a course which a Christian could not follow. This believer first stopped living with three of them. He had children by all four. He chose one, and said that she would be his wife. But this was not enough in the sight of the community for the unbelievers would not understand, seeing four women under the one roof. It was only when the man, who was a large landowner, built another house at some distance from his home and lodged the three women and their children away from his house, supporting them,

of course, that it was believed by the missionaries that he was now in a position to be ordained to the eldership in that little church which was just coming into being. Most certainly the New Testament Church, planted in a pagan environment of this type, was talking about problems of this nature.

I have sat down at my typewriter and dashed this off at some speed after a hard day of meetings and interviews, but I trust that it will fulfill your desire of a word from me on the subject. Some may believe that I am too broad, but I believe I am within the breadth of the grace of God and within every interpretation of the Scriptures. I will change only if someone shows me something in the Scriptures which contradicts what I have said.

With kindest regards, I am

Yours in His faithfulness,

DONALD GREY BARNHOUSE

THE HARRISON SERVICE
Minneapolis, Minnesota

February 14, 1941

My dear Louis:

Cases such as you cite do not fall under any command or regulation of Scripture; they are rather in the realm of expediency.

Those who find themselves thus situated should consider what is expedient. They should prayerfully consider whether or not the circumstances of their marital relations place a natural limitation upon their activity in the church, both as to kind and extent.

On the other hand their presence in the church is a call for Christian people to exercise themselves in consideration. How would they wish others to treat them if they found themselves in like circumstances?

Thus the presence of these dear people in the church may be made a means of growth in grace and in Christian forbearance.

Sincerely yours, in Him,

NORMAN

THE SCOFIELD MEMORIAL CHURCH
Dallas, Texas

February 22, 1941

Dr. Louis T. Talbot
558 S. Hope Street
Los Angeles, Calif.

Dear Dr. Talbot:

I have your letter of February 6th and regret this delay in the answer, however, I have been suffering from an infection in one of my eyes and have not been able to carry on any of my work for several days. I feel relieved, however, to find that it is clearing up and I may soon be out again.

Regarding the question of divorce, I have threatened, warned and begged our young people to observe the highest possible standards for the home and, of course, with you and the other brethren, would not knowingly do anything to break down Christian standards, however, I do think that much of our teaching regarding divorce has been dragged over from the hard, un-yielding law of Moses and I realize that I must be watchful lest I draw my conclusions from the Old Testament and the Gospels, the very portion which the Seventh Day Adventists and other legalistic systems use.

Dealing with the question theoretically and facing it practically present two entirely different approaches. As an example, I have a young lady in our church who ran away from high school at 16 years of age and was married to a young man. He deserted and divorced her after a year. Since that time she has been gloriously saved, and no one can question this as they watch her walk. She is one of the most capable, attractive young ladies that I have ever met and possesses a very beautiful voice. Personally I would fight for her right to use this gift for the Lord.

I realize that some sins can never be corrected to permit public Christian ministry in certain places, nevertheless, it would be a cruel, legalistic Christian who would not spend much time in prayer before closing a door of service to one of God's children which would result in rich rewards for them as they exercise their gift.

It is glorious to know that God has taken care of a great many past mistakes in my life, and I think he has taken care of a great many mistakes made by other believers, which the flesh tries to remember.

I always feel that these Pharisaical Purists who are so ready to accuse another of breaking the eleventh commandment should memorize Matt. 5:28.

I have the deepest desire to uphold God's honest standards for the church and yet I think every year of Christian ministry brings an increasing amazement at the matchless grace of God that permits any of us to serve as His ambassadors. Frankly, I agree heartily with your position in this matter.

With sincere appreciation for your Christian fellowship, I am,
Sincerely in Christ,

HARLIN J. ROPER