

Church of God, The Eternal

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Divorce and Remarriage: Ministerial Administration

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Dear Brethren:

There is probably no more important—or potentially controversial—body of church doctrine than that related to marriage, separation, divorce, and remarriage. Since marriage pictures the Christ/Church relationship (Ephesians 5:22–32), and our only hope of salvation is through that holy marriage covenant, it is critical for all true Christians to understand, accept, and abide within God's marriage laws. Knowledge and proper application of these principles means life or death for each one of us. For that reason, it should not be surprising that Satan has sought to destroy the Church through perversion of marriage, perhaps more than through any other means. This includes both an attempt to water down God's laws and equally to confuse members about the proper administration of these critical principles. He hates God-ordained marriage and will do anything to corrupt and deceive God's people concerning these truths.

It will not be the purpose of this *Monthly Letter* to address the comprehensive subject of divorce and remarriage. We have several articles which document the technicalities of the original teaching which Christ delivered to His last-day church, including, *Divorce and Remarriage—What Should Christians Know?*, *The Truth About Marriage and Divorce*, and *The Doctrine of Divorce and Remarriage—How and Why It Was Changed*. These articles provide significant detail concerning the true sanctity of marriage and can be ordered from the church office or printed directly from our Internet website. These articles expose the fallacy of the corrupted teachings that were officially adopted by God's church in 1974—those that were instrumental in the fracturing and ultimate decimation of the Worldwide Church of God. Most of the fundamental principles first proclaimed by Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong—and confirmed with many Biblical proofs in our articles—will be referenced here as substantiated truth. What was that initial teaching about marriage and divorce which the entire church kept together as a cohesive body for almost forty years?

A Brief Doctrinal Summary

Marriage is a covenant relationship instituted by God. What God has bound cannot be put asunder—severed—by any act of man. God takes two and makes them one flesh. They each cease to be what they were before and now become a new entity, even as Christ is one and inseparable from His own Body—the Church. God binds the marriages of the converted and unconverted alike. Being uneducated or flippant about marriage at the time of a vow is no excuse. God holds all men accountable for their vows (Deuteronomy 23:21–23). Anyone who is bound in marriage by God can never be freed to remarry another by any means except through death of their mate. For that reason, anyone who remarries (or engages in relations with any other) while their true mate is still alive commits adultery.

The Apostle Paul was not addressing the topic of divorce and remarriage in 1 Corinthians 7. He was addressing the duties incumbent upon the *married*—those bound for life by God. The phrase, "not under bondage" in verse fifteen, does not mean "unbound and free to remarry," but refers instead to the obligations of the marriage relationship—*promised duties*—when one of them breaks the covenant. If an unbelieving mate separates and the converted mate cannot prevent it, that converted mate is not held responsible for the break-up of the marriage, or the inability to fulfill his/her *sworn duties* of matrimony. (More about this aspect later.)

The exception clause spoken by Jesus Christ (Matthew 19:9) does not relate to "unbinding" a bound marriage. Once bound by God, no act of subsequent unfaithfulness—even *porneia* (translated in the *KJV* as fornication)—will dissolve a binding marriage covenant. Christ was defining a case of pre-existent fraud which would have caused God to *withhold binding* the marriage to begin with. It contemplates a deceptive intent of heart and mind which was unknown to the innocent party at the time vows were exchanged. God does not hold an innocent party bound to the terms of a contract when the other party intends to defraud from its inception. In that case, God, knowing there exists no *mutual* intent to covenant in good faith, resists making them "one flesh." If however, when the innocent party *first discovers* the fraud, he/she does not *immediately* reject and separate, God at that instant binds it as a marriage and makes them one. If the innocent party stays in the relationship for even a moment after discovering the fraud, it tells God the fraud was not really paramount to the decision to covenant, and God then binds them for life. With this in mind, it is clear there are very few cases indeed that would ever legitimately be annulled by the exception clause, because it truly is a rare case when any party contracts without the *intent* to be faithful, and it is rarer still that the innocent party *acts immediately* when such fraud is first discovered.

What then is the administrative obligation of the ministry in applying these principles within the Church? That is the real focus of this *Monthly Letter*. It is a topic that has become the lightning rod of debate for a number of people over decades. Over the last-quarter century, there were many who took issue with Mr. Raymond Cole over his application of administrative policy

concerning marriage. Some felt we were too strict and lobbied for more leniency for those who had unwisely made a marriage vow which went bad. Others considered themselves even more conservative than the ministry and felt we were too liberal in allowing certain members to remain in our fellowship. In the end, we have seen many come and go over the issue of marriage, either from a liberal or a self-proclaimed "conservative" approach.

Administrative Responsibility of the Ministry

A number of different questions have come up in recent months regarding administrative principles in large part because of a significant increase in new members and contacts who are now seeking to understand God's truth about marriage. Mr. Raymond Cole established ministerial guidelines for decisions affecting marriage, divorce, and separation issues for our membership when Church of God, The Eternal was first formed in 1975. In the wake of Mr. Cole's recent death, it seems appropriate now to reconfirm our unswerving commitment to these same administrative guidelines. Lest anyone believe a different administrative philosophy might begin to emerge, let that question emphatically be laid to rest here. But for those who may not know or remember what those guidelines include—or how they came to be—the following history should bring those things into focus. First, we should begin by clarifying our overriding philosophy about church administration. Let a quote from our article, *Fundamentals of Belief of Church of God, The Eternal*, answer that:

We believe proper administration of church government does not include the exercising of authority over the personal lives of members. It is the responsibility of the ministry to proclaim the Truth, to maintain peace and harmony among the brethren, to stop heresy within the Body of Christ, and to remove blatant sin from within the Church if it occurs. The responsibility of the ministry is limited, therefore, to those areas which affect the church membership as a whole. Beyond that, it is the responsibility of each member to live up to his own conviction and level of faith. Each member, whether minister or lay member, will be judged as an individual before God (Rom. 14:12).

It is therefore not our desire—or God-given responsibility—to try and create a perfect church through fear and intimidation. That which is not of faith is sin (Romans 14:23). If a member of our fellowship is complying with God's law only out of fear of the ministry—and not out of a heartfelt desire to please God—that in itself is a state of sin and God does not accept it, because there is no legitimate faith. This is one of the bitter lessons the church should have learned from our experiences years ago. As the ministry slowly began to adopt an administrative philosophy which was more and more intrusive into the lives of members from the late 1950s onward, many members slowly began to turn over their personal responsibility of overcoming to men. They obeyed, not because they loved God's truths, but because they were fearful of being put out of the church if they did not comply. Where is our proof? Just look at the fruits! After

the ministry itself became corrupted and began to adopt perverted doctrines in the 1970s, did most of the body stand fast to the principles into which they had first been baptized? Or, did most just follow the ministry into error? Yes, that is precisely what happened. Eventually, this transfer of personal accountability to a ministry they expected to "get them into the Kingdom" backfired resoundingly. Many ended-up leaving the church and forsaking God's law altogether. If most had been truly focused on God and gaining ever more love and appreciation for His revealed Truth—willingly applying it in their lives—then the failures of men, even the ministry, would not have destroyed them. The ministry was initially well-meaning in wanting to purge the church of any vestige of sin or corruption, but they failed to take into consideration a very critical point. The whole purpose of the Christian experience is to write God's laws in our hearts and minds. "Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshly tables of the heart" (2 Corinthians 3:3). Notice also:

For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people (Hebrews 8:10).

Such true spiritual conversion does not occur in one's life because of coercion from any man, minister or otherwise. Personal faith can never be legislated in the life of another. The whole idea that we could ever create a perfect church through ministerial invasion of privacy was flawed from its inception. It certainly did not produce real spiritual character in any of the membership.

But did Raymond Cole come to this conclusion more than a quarter century ago because he wanted an excuse to avoid difficult ministerial decisions within the Body? Was his intent to abdicate responsibility as a shepherd commissioned to protect the sheep from ravaging wolves? Not at all! Please note that our belief about church government clearly states it is the ministry's duty to, "maintain peace and harmony among the brethren, to stop heresy within the Body of Christ, and to remove blatant sin from within the Church if it occurs."

There is therefore no question it is admittedly our responsibility to keep blatant sin out of the church. God will hold His ministers absolutely accountable for permitting any case of conspicuous sin within our midst which would set a bad example and weaken the faith of the flock. Our responsibility is the same as that exercised by the Apostle Paul:

It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife. And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you. For I verily, as absent in body, but

present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed, In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus (1 Corinthians 5:1–5).

In this case Paul was certainly dealing with blatant sin. Why was it blatant? It was not just a single act of carnal weakness (the kind of mistake that should be forgiven and covered), but an adulterous way of life that was being justified and defended. This couple had no intention of changing. There is no case where the marriage of a man to his stepmother would *ever* be acceptable in God's eyes. Given that this man and woman refused to admit their adultery and stop it, Paul had no choice but to put them out of the church. Had they been willing to admit it was wrong, repent, and separate, they could have been forgiven and allowed to remain within the body.

Have we likewise had necessity to exercise this same duty in past years? We certainly have. While the instances have been limited, Mr. Raymond Cole—as well as this continuing ministry—have made several difficult decisions to disfellowship certain ones who not only engaged in forbidden behavior, but sought to justify it as an acceptable lifestyle. Many of these cases have involved marriage, with one or more clearly bound mates seeking to claim freedom to remarry. When this ministry has been certain an original marriage was truly bound, we have allowed no remarriage, even when such unyielding rulings have brought accusation and persecution against us. We will make no allowance for any such blatant sin for the sake of avoiding hard feelings or making it easier on ourselves. Our goal has never been to gain more members at the expense of God's truth. We love and fear God who gave us charge over His priceless flock. We do not intend to allow wolves to destroy by our neglect. We are not only capable of acting but have shown our willingness and determination to do so in appropriate situations. That point should be clear and is easily verified.

Next, there is a whole separate classification of cases that do not involve confirmed—or blatant—sin. Ironically, these cases actually pose greater potential for confusion and misunderstanding. What about a couple who is called by God into the church with a cloud of a former marriage in their history? These were the cases Mr. Armstrong had to review and make rulings about from the very early years in the church. Was that former vow really a marriage, or was one party truly defrauded and therefore free to marry? Is the current marriage bound by God, or is it a state of adultery in God's eyes, assuming God actually bound one of the parties to a former mate? How do we know in any such case, and how should such decisions be resolved within God's Church?

Should Ministers Have the Gift of Discernment?

If God had given today's ministry the special gift of discernment—allowing us immediately to recognize when someone was telling a lie, or even perhaps emotionally deluding himself—there would be no problem in resolving difficult marriage cases at all. We would simply interview all parties and allow God to show us miraculously whether fraud had ever been involved or not. The minister would be able to make a determination and that would be that. This was the special gift God gave the Apostle Peter in his encounter with Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11). Peter knew by a divine miracle that they were lying about the price they had received for their property. There is no indication Peter interviewed other witnesses or looked up property records to obtain his proof. He simply knew, and then was able to act decisively!

But is having this special gift of discernment requisite for being a faithful minister? If a minister admits he does not have such a special gift, does this mean he is not really God's servant? We are not aware that Mr. Herbert Armstrong ever claimed to have such a gift from God. He made many rulings in marriage cases over decades—and taught the evangelists and other ministers to do likewise—but there is no evidence this review procedure ever included the divine gift of discernment. Mr. Raymond Cole admitted he never possessed this gift for purposes of reviewing marriage cases, yet he was among the earliest evangelists ordained by Mr. Armstrong in 1952. The procedure used in this age by God's ministry included weighing testimony by family members and making judgments based upon evidence gathered.

Was this lack of special perception indicative of a spiritual defect in those ministers? Only if the same was true about Timothy. Notice the instruction Paul gave the young evangelist concerning the judgement of difficult cases within the church. "Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses" (1 Timothy 5:19). If Timothy possessed a gift to discern hearts and minds, he would have no need of calling witnesses to decide a matter of accusation. Yet this is precisely what Paul told him to do. This instruction was predicated upon God's law concerning witnesses (Numbers 35:30). It is evident then Timothy was expected to resolve issues among the membership without the gift of special discernment. So it was also true of God's ministry in the last days.

A History of Administrative Marital Rulings

From the earliest years of God's Church in this age, the ministry did make rulings on questionable marriage cases. In most instances a previous vow was ruled to have been binding, and the party was not free to marry as long as that mate was alive. Even if that individual had been remarried before conversion, they were required to separate from that union deemed adulterous before becoming part of the fellowship. If young dependent children were involved in a "second marriage," it was permitted for the couple to live platonically in the same household

for the children's sake, but not as a married couple. These requirements bespoke the sanctity of God's true marriage laws, and certified that the laws of God were more important than the inconvenience and heartache resulting from poor human choices. There were many who truly became celibate to put God first and avoid adultery.

For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother's womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, *which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake*. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it (Matthew 19:12) [emphasis mine].

Yes, there were some in the first-century church who lived celibate lives, and some today who must also live celibate lives, because they are bound to a living mate who is not pleased to dwell with them, and any remarriage would produce adultery and forfeiture of eternal life. However, there were also cases where Mr. Armstrong—even from the early 1950s—made rulings to consider a former vow null and void due to fraud, and confirm the legitimacy of a subsequent marriage. Therefore, the exception clause was certainly important, and its application by the ministry certified the legitimacy of a number of cases over the decades.

How Was the Exception Clause Interpreted?

The question of how Mr. Armstrong originally defined the limits of the exception clause for actual ministerial rulings has been the source of much interest to some. Those who have accepted the perverted changes of 1974—to allow wholesale divorce and remarriage—care little about the original exception clause today because it is not material to them. But among those who deeply respect the original revelation of Jesus Christ, proper application of the exception clause He enunciated is vital.

A number of people over the years have assumed that the definition of the Greek word *porneia* (Matthew 19:9), and the Hebrew word *ervah* (Deuteronomy 24:1), referred only to a lie about one's sexual past. In most cases, it certainly is the revealing of a hidden sexual past that would most likely cause a prospective mate to terminate the relationship. However, the fact is, from the beginning Mr. Armstrong administratively applied the concept of fraud well beyond this narrow definition. This is surprising to some who have read his earliest writings on divorce and remarriage. The following text from his 1973 article, *Marriage and Divorce*, highlights the issue:

What is the meaning of the Greek *porneia* in this passage? The Church of God for 40 years has said it refers to an illicit sex act committed PRIOR to being bound in marriage, undisclosed to the husband until AFTER the marriage ceremony. . . . *Porneia* does mean sexual intercourse of an UNmarried person, as well as perversion, harlotry, many things committed prior to marriage. That is the ONLY meaning consistent with the context.

The focus of Mr. Armstrong's definition seems to be sexual sin alone. It is certainly understandable then how many might conclude that an undisclosed sexual past is the only kind of fraud which God would consider a legitimate exception. Yet Mr. Raymond Cole stated repeatedly that Mr. Armstrong taught him *from the beginning* to use a wider definition of fraud in evaluating and deciding marital cases in the church. For example, if a convicted murderer escaped from prison, assumed a false identity, and married a totally unsuspecting woman whom he lied to about his past, how does God view that? Mr. Cole claims Mr. Armstrong taught that God would not honor those vows, because it involved clear fraud, and God would not bind an innocent woman in that case. Yet, there is no sexual sin in this example. The first question then is, why is there an apparent inconsistency? Was Raymond Cole lying about what Mr. Armstrong practiced administratively, since his early writings do not seem to address anything except sexual sin? Are there any other writings by Mr. Armstrong that would substantiate what Mr. Cole asserts? There is indeed!

Jacob and Leah's Marriage Involved "Exception Clause" Fraud

Notice the Biblical account of Jacob's marriage to Leah.

And Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her. And Jacob said unto Laban, Give me my wife, for my days are fulfilled, that I may go in unto her. And Laban gathered together all the men of the place, and made a feast. And it came to pass in the evening, that he took Leah his daughter, and brought her to him; and he went in unto her. . . . And it came to pass, that in the morning, behold, it was Leah: and he said to Laban, What is this thou hast done unto me? did not I serve with thee for Rachel? wherefore then hast thou beguiled me? (Genesis 29:20–23, 25).

What are the facts of this marriage case? Jacob intended to marry Rachel. Laban absolutely defrauded Jacob by substituting a different woman in the place of Rachel. Leah was a virgin, so she had no hidden sexual past. She and Jacob exchanged vows and even consummated the union through intercourse, yet without Jacob knowing her true identity until the next morning.

If it is true Mr. Armstrong considered *porneia* as restricted to lying about pre-marital sex, then he should have considered the marriage between Jacob and Leah as binding, since there was no element of a hidden sexual past in this case. But notice what Mr. Armstrong said about this case, in the October, 1963 *Plain Truth* article entitled, *Here's the Plain Truth About Old Testament Polygamy*:

Laban supplanted Jacob's PROMISED and LOVED wife, Rachel, with his elder daughter, Leah. Leah was foisted on Jacob by fraud. According to God's marriage laws, Jacob could have rejected her—put her away as soon as he discovered the deception. In that event, he would never have been truly married to Leah—God would not have bound them as one flesh.

This should provide clear evidence Mr. Armstrong considered a non-sexual case of fraud to constitute *porneia*—that which caused God to withhold His binding authority. This is totally consistent with Raymond Cole's claim, and supports his contention about early ministerial rulings. But then the next question will be, since we know Mr. Armstrong administratively considered many forms of fraud—other than sex—under the exception clause, why was this not enunciated in the older articles?

We cannot say for certain, but one answer seems to be that Mr. Armstrong intentionally did not want to disclose to the laity the full administrative guidelines being used to evaluate and decide difficult marriage cases. Why would this be? Raymond Cole related a number of times that Mr. Armstrong told him in later years he wished the people did not know about the exception clause. The more the exception clause was disclosed, the more people were inclined to try and use it to their own advantage. Once people come to know there is a circumstance which provides a way for annulment of a previous vow, it is simple human nature to try and slant one's own case of broken marriage to fit that exception.

Making Qualified Decisions Became Impossible

In the earliest years of the church, it was probably much easier for the ministry to evaluate many marriage cases and make a credible conclusion. This is because the ministry understood the guidelines for applying the exception clause, but the laity was not so trained. People were more inclined to be honest and forthright about the real details of their past vows, not knowing what facts would support or detract from their eligibility under the exception clause. If the ministry could have preserved this knowledge to themselves and kept it close to the vest, it might have provided for more objective review of cases down through the years. But it was only a matter of time before the laity would become knowledgeable about the true technicalities of the exception clause. As the ministry ruled to confirm the validity of certain "second marriages" under the exception clause—which they certainly did—those cases would become scrutinized by other members. What was it about "their" case that made them eligible? Once the details became known, the criteria used by the ministry would be pieced together, bit by bit. And so it was.

By the middle to late 1960s, Mr. Raymond Cole admitted it was impossible for him to know for sure in many cases whether the couples counseling with him had a legitimate basis of fraud from a previous vow or not. They knew precisely how to couch their testimony to fit the

classic "exception clause" case. And since it often involved assertions about the heart and mind of a former mate who was not even available for interview, how could a credible decision be made? Remember, not having any special gift of discernment, many decisions had to be made based upon hearsay evidence presented by the very parties who had everything to gain by a favorable ruling. One high-ranking minister even admitted to Raymond Cole he began flipping a coin to make his own rulings! Mr. Cole finally told Mr. Armstrong he could not in good conscience continue to review and make decisions in these marriage cases, because he simply did not know. Mr. Armstrong accepted that and thereafter did not force Mr. Cole to handle these cases. But the rest of the ministry certainly continued to make rulings, by flipping coins or by whatever means they devised.

The Basis for Our Administrative Policy

Because of these experiences within the Worldwide Church of God, when Mr. Cole finally organized this remnant body in 1975, he made a decision he would continue to reserve judgement on marriage cases in which he could not be sure, even as Mr. Armstrong had allowed him to do in later years. If he did not know for sure that God had either bound or not bound a marriage, he simply refused to guess! Apart from God's direct intervention to show him, a qualified decision could not be made by any third party, minister or otherwise. And God apparently did not choose to give that power to these last-day servants, for His own reasons.

What did this mean to the church? Were couples now going to be left in limbo, not knowing for sure their status in God's eyes? Not at all! Raymond Cole continued to counsel individuals and couples, expounding the truth about God's marriage laws, including limits of the exception clause. He refused to approve any case as being outright eligible for the exception clause, but made the parties involved responsible for their own decision, with strong warning of the consequence for deceit. Does this create confusion? Not at all. In reality, the only party who really knows for sure is the one who was defrauded. Was that person really lied to about something they would never have accepted, or would they really have forgiven the flaw and married anyway? It is easy for someone to claim they were defrauded, but only they—and God—really know for sure. This is why Raymond Cole adopted the policy he did, and why we have upheld it for the last twenty-six years, as reflected in our article, *Fundamentals of Belief of Church of God, The Eternal*:

Employment of the exception clause is serious and must not be practiced lightly. The party who employs the exception clause lightly faces a terrifying future. Marriage is absolute. It must be honored and respected. Trivializing it for the sake of personal advantage is abominable in the sight of God. There is no remarriage.

Was this stance—to make the involved parties responsible for their own decision—intended to shirk ministerial responsibility to make it easier on us? We have already covered this point previously. There have been several instances over the years where Mr. Cole and others among our ministers have ruled emphatically in certain cases and defended those positions by putting someone out of the church who did not comply. Example: If two young people who both grew up in the church, knew each other well, both understood by parental and ministerial counseling what marriage was all about, were then married in the church but later tried to justify divorce and remarriage, this would never be tolerated. Any attempt to justify separation and remarriage would be blatant sin. And in more than one case over the years involving these very circumstances it was not allowed by this ministry! As well, in a case where a member thoughtfully considered his own personal status with full knowledge of the limits of the exception rule—determining in his own mind he was bound to a previous mate and not free to remarry—he would absolutely become guilty if he later changed his mind and attempted to claim the exception clause. Once someone admits they are bound and not free to remarry, there is no going back to reinterpret later. Such allowance would absolutely introduce blatant sin into the body and that has never been permissible. There has been more than one such case in which we have ruled definitively and never backed up. This is not the behavior of a ministry who is looking for ways to avoid accountability. Quite the contrary, it is the fruit of a ministry who takes marriage very seriously and will not take the chance of approving any union that God may deem adulterous. If anything, our administrative policy is in some ways more conservative than that used in our parent organization, because we have never officially approved *any* "second marriage," and the Radio Church of God certainly did.

Yes, we have allowed a number of couples within our fellowship over the years who had a shadow of a past vow in their histories, but this is not because we were looking for a way to water down God's marriage doctrine or wink at sin for the sake of gaining numbers. It is because we honestly could not be certain the exception clause *did not* apply, and therefore we warned the individual or couple that the decision they made affected their eternal life. If they then asserted they felt they were legitimately defrauded in the past, and the ministry had no evidence to the contrary, we reserved judgement and allowed them to be with us. According to the former administrative rules in the Radio Church of God, many of these cases would have been given ministerial blessing as a bona fide exception. These same couples would have been allowed within the fellowship. The fact we also allow them in our fellowship, but resist giving the union carte blanche ministerial approval, is actually a more conservative approach.

Although such individuals have been permitted to remain in our fellowship, this ministry has never and will never perform a marriage ceremony where there is even an inkling of doubt about a party's eligibility. As well, any man with a previous marriage vow, regardless of circumstance—or is married to a woman with a previous vow—is ineligible for any office of leadership in the church (1 Timothy 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6). This we have scrupulously enforced over all these years as a testament to our defense of God's marriage laws.

Are We Making Things Too Complicated?

Several different and well-meaning brethren in years past have felt we should easily be able to resolve any marital-case question. More than one have encouraged the ministry to adopt their "simple" rules for deciding if an individual is bound or not bound. But the reality is, it only seems simple to the one who has never been involved in review of marriage cases. We have never seen a formula yet that allows a third party to read the heart and mind of another individual. Remember, fraud by its definition is an *intent* to deceive. How does one unquestionably prove that someone intended *in his heart* to deceive? In some cases there might be concrete evidence, but in most cases there is only hearsay testimony.

Some have advocated a simple rule that would allow no union in our midst where a previous vow was ever involved. Since the chance of mis-diagnosing a legitimate exception case would be rare (because such cases are truly exceptions), it would be better—they say—to take the risk of dividing one eligible marriage if it would allow us to purge out all the other illegitimate cases. This philosophy can best be described as, better to sacrifice one for the good of the many.

The fact Jesus Christ enunciated the exception clause means there must be an occasional case—howbeit rare—to which it applies. Just for discussion's sake, let us assume a legitimate exception occurs only once in one-thousand contested marriage cases. We do not know which case it is, but we know for this example it exists. For the sake of purging out nine hundred ninety-nine cases all of whom are erroneously claiming the exception clause, should we be willing to break up one legitimate marriage? Is that a reasonable price to pay to be able to have a church absolutely free of adultery? Some have answered yes, but is this what God would have us do?

Little Understood Aspects of Adultery

Another of our important articles available for order is entitled, *Marriage and Separation—Facts You Should Know*. It was based upon material given in a series of sermons by Mr. Raymond Cole more than a decade ago. This article focuses, not on issues of divorce and remarriage, but on responsibilities between a husband and wife in honoring their marriage vows. When a man and woman covenant before God, they vow to perform specific *duties* of marriage. In the church marriage ceremony those responsibilities are defined by questions asked and answered by each party as follows:

Since marriage is a divine institution, and we are asking God to join you as husband and wife, it is fitting and right that each of you should faithfully promise before God to accept the sacred marriage covenant according to the divinely-ordained conditions imposed by Almighty God.

Do you then, _____, faithfully promise and covenant with God, in the presence of these witnesses, to take _____ to be your lawful wedded wife, and to cleave to her unto death—to love her, cherish her, honor her, and provide for her? (his answer).

And do you, _____, faithfully promise and covenant with God, in the presence of these witnesses, to take _____ to be your lawful wedded husband, for the remainder of your natural life, and, as God has ordained, to submit yourself unto him as unto the Eternal, to be subject to him in everything and to reverence him? (bride's answer).

Inasmuch as the Scriptural example in all cases of ordination, or setting apart, is by the laying on of hands, I now join your right hands, and by the laying on of my hands, ask the Eternal GOD to unite you as husband and wife.

What most do not understand is that even if a man or woman never engages in illicit relations with someone other than their mate, they become just as guilty of adultery if they fail to fulfill those promises made in the marriage covenant. *Separation* between a bound married couple *is adultery!* It is a violation of the seventh command as much as if one engaged in illicit relations with someone else. Even if neither one ever remarries, the *very act of separating* what God joined as one *is putting asunder* that marriage! It is a heinous sin in the eyes of God. The husband promises to love and care for the wife, not just avoid relations with another woman. The wife likewise promises to love and honor her husband, not just avoid entanglements with other men. Remember, marriage pictures the relationship between Christ and the Church. Christ did not just promise to eschew relations with all others. His most valuable promises were to love, care for, and protect His Church. If He ever failed to remain unified and one with that Church—His Body—He would become guilty of adultery—a breach of contract—and that He will never do.

This is why true unity between a husband and wife is so critical. This is what Paul was addressing in 1 Corinthians 7, the chapter that has been warped and twisted to try and justify divorce and remarriage, when its entire purpose is exactly the opposite.

Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto the husband. The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife. Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency (1 Corinthians 7:3–5).

As Mr. Raymond Cole stated, "Any separation is confiscatory." What does that mean? It means separation deprives one mate of what is legally theirs—a confiscation. The husband belongs to the wife, and the wife to the husband. When they marry they give up control of their individual rights. God makes them one flesh, and they can never be two again. To try and divide that union is theft of property which one does not own. And any such separation is adultery!

With that in mind, should we be willing to purge the church of any questionable marriage case for the sake of assuring we have no hidden cases of adultery in our midst? It cannot be done. Why? Even if we purge out nine hundred ninety-nine cases of secret adultery—from our previous example—we would be creating one new one, by separating that one bound marriage of which we were not sure. Which one of you is willing to bear responsibility for breaking up any bound marriage and creating a case of adultery within the church? This ministry certainly is not willing!

On top of that, there is always the possibility that hidden adultery can be present in the church. Mr. Cole also stated, "Estrangement, whether within the marriage or as a result of a separated condition, is a sin as great as separation itself." This means a married couple might still be living together in the same house, but if they are estranged behind closed doors, this is also adultery—a violation of the marriage covenant. In our zeal to purge the church of any vestige of adultery, should the ministry enquire to make sure every married couple in the church is submitting one to another behind closed doors? You see, when that logic is taken to its natural end, although it may be well-meaning, it is certainly not sound.

Wisdom Known by the Fruits

When accused by the Pharisees about His personal conduct, Jesus made an astonishing reply:

And the Lord said, Whereunto then shall I liken the men of this generation? and to what are they like? They are like unto children sitting in the marketplace, and calling one to another, and saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned to you, and ye have not wept. For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine; and ye say, He hath a devil. The Son of man is come eating and drinking; and ye say, Behold a gluttonous man, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners! But *wisdom is justified of all her children* (Luke 7:31–35) [emphasis mine].

They attempted to criticize specific behaviors as indications of hidden sin in His life. When He replied, wisdom is justified of her children, He was telling them He would be vindicated by His observable fruits! "Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them" (Matthew 7:20). And so He certainly was.

Likewise, concerning this remnant group's administrative policy on contested marriage cases in the church, the wisdom or foolishness of our position should be verified by our fruits over the last-quarter century. We have held our current policy throughout the entire existence of this group. What have been those fruits? For those who may have interpreted our unwillingness to make certain individual case rulings as an attempt to *appear* strong on marriage but leave a back door open for adulterers, is that what our fruits have demonstrated? If that is true, there should have been a gradual descent over the years into more and more laxity, and our ranks should have filled with more and more questionable marriage cases. But the reality is, we now have fewer questionable cases in our fellowship than ever before—very few indeed. Why is that?

If someone denies the truth about their own marriage state and attempts to pull the wool over the eyes of the ministry—and themselves—it is only a matter of time before they will run into other serious spiritual problems. All who have seemingly done so have eventually become offended for some other reason and left us. One who is quenching the Holy Spirit by justifying sin will become an easy prey for the adversary.

Instead, what we do have in our fellowship is a growing number of members who have sought us because of our strong defense of God's marriage laws. Our ranks are actually filling with more and more who admit they are not free to marry, willing to live celibate lives while their estranged mates are still alive. This does not bespeak a group that is saying one thing but doing another. The fact that *God Himself* has—over time—purged out those who probably were incorrectly claiming the exception clause, is a testament to His hand in these affairs. The wisdom of Raymond Cole's administrative approach has produced stronger and stronger fruits for us as the years pass. That approach will not change.

It is only a matter of time before a new case may arise which will again put these policies to the test. Before that occurs, it is deemed important to provide this explanation, so that any future decisions can be understood in the context of these Godly principles. The faithful ministers of God will be accused on every side. Adhering to sound ministerial policies will be viewed by some as harsh, and by others as liberal. But for those who truly understand the comprehensive factors involved, the "children"—fruits—of those practices will continue to manifest the wisdom of God's leadership within His Body.

May God grant us all the determination and perseverance to uphold His priceless commandments until the return of that glorious Bridegroom.

Your humble servant in Christ Jesus,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Jon W. Brisby". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned centrally below the typed name.

Jon W. Brisby