

Neil Powell (Ed. Richard Collins)

Is a Christian permitted to divorce an abusive spouse?

Although there are many differing views on marriage and divorce among bible-believing Christians, the majority of evangelicals continue to maintain that biblical divorce is permissible on just two grounds.

1. Adultery (Matthew 19:9)
2. Abandonment by an unbelieving spouse. (1 Cor. 7:15)

The leading theologians of the 1640s set forth this position in the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 24:6:

Nothing but adultery, or such willful desertion as can no way be remedied by the church, or civil magistrate, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage.

If divorce is not possible for anything but adultery or desertion, then does that compel a spouse to stay in a relationship that is dangerous or abusive? What about an abusive marriage relationship?

Having conducted my own research, I have yet to find an author who defends the view that God requires his followers to remain within an abusive relationship. Don Carson goes so far as to say that 'if a wife lives in fear of physical harm because she has been threatened or even suffered physical abuse, the church is pastorally mandated to secure her safety.' Indeed, in certain

circumstances, it may even be right to call the police and seek to press charges. I've personally known spouses who have remained in abusive relationships for the sake of the children. One thing is clear, however. If you or your children are in danger of physical harm, the Bible does not command you to stay.

Yet, does an abused spouse have the right to divorce?

Some would say that a spouse in such circumstances does not have grounds for divorce. Rather he or she, having moved away from immediate danger, is given the task of working with the elders of the church to seek the repentance of the guilty party and a restoration of the marriage. She (it's normally 'she') may change the locks, call in the police, but she is not free from the marriage. Such a view is set forth by Don Carson, John Piper and Andrew Cornes, to name a few. However, that is not the view of the elders at City Church. Some make an appeal to the arguments presented by David Instone-Brewer, who references Exodus 21, a text which permits divorce for Jews in cases of neglect. Instone-Brewer talks about abuse as the most egregious form of neglect.

I myself am persuaded that in a situation where a spouse refuses to repent, and reconciliation is humanly impossible, divorce is permitted. It is the

logical and necessary deduction of the teaching we find in the New Testament. So, how would I justify divorce on the grounds of abuse from the Bible?

I believe that an abusive relationship in which there is no evidence of repentance, is a form of desertion by an unbelieving spouse. Theologians sometimes refer to it as constructive desertion. In the church, we are to take sin seriously, and that includes sin within a marriage. Jesus instructed his disciples how to respond when a brother/sister refuses to repent.

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that "every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

- Matthew 18.15-17

Jesus insists that sin, even sin between a married couple, is the responsibility of the church. The church's role is to call to account those who are guilty of willful, deliberate, and persistent sin. Those who refuse to repent are to be treated as unbelievers. Jesus says, 'treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.' In his first letter to Timothy, St. Paul writes,

If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

- 1 Timothy 5.8

At times, it is right to confront a brother or sister with the truth that their behaviour stands in stark contrast to the faith they profess. Consequently, they will be treated as an unbeliever. And that would seem to apply to spouses who abuse their spouses. It's important to remember that in such cases, the goal of church discipline is to restore a brother or sister and work towards rebuilding the marriage. However, especially when an abusive spouse has left the church, it seems right that the innocent party is able to divorce, having been abandoned by an unbelieving spouse.

One of the greatest Puritan preachers, William Perkins (1558 - 1602), wrote extensively on the Christian family. He wrote,

Like unto desertion is malicious and spiteful dealing of married folks one with the other. Malicious dealing is, when dwelling together, they require of each other intolerable conditions . . . if the husband threateneth hurt, the believing wife may flee in this case; and it is all one, as if the unbelieving man should depart. For to depart from one, and drive one away by threat, are equivalent.

I would argue that there are two grounds for divorce, but the second ground of desertion may extend to abusive relationships, even when both parties profess a Christian faith. If, after investigation by the church, the conclusion is that 'intolerable conditions' (Perkins' phrase) or abusive conditions are imposed on a spouse – and the guilty party is unwilling to repent – then the innocent party may seek a divorce.

That would certainly cover incidences of violence and threats of violence. It may also include extreme or prolonged psychological abuse or emotional trauma, intimidation, alcohol abuse, perhaps even a chronic gambling addiction.

Extending this second ground is fraught with difficulty, and there can be few, if any, hard and fast rules. Nevertheless, in the church where I minister, we have set out three sets of circumstances which we believe the bible would consider justifiable grounds for divorce. They are:

1. Adultery
2. Abandonment or desertion by an unbelieving spouse permits the believer to recognise the end of a marriage and to file for divorce.
3. Abuse which results in constructive desertion permits the believer to recognise the end of the marriage and file for divorce.

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