

Church of God, The Eternal

P. O. Box 775
Eugene, Oregon 97440

Raymond C. Cole
Director
Bryce G. Clark
Asst. Director

Offices in:
Canada
Philippines
Switzerland

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Dear Brethren,

Divorce and Remarriage Decisions

No commandment of God has sensitized members of the Church of God as has the seventh one—the proscription against adultery. Flagrant violations of other commands in some respects go virtually unnoticed though they are not necessarily condoned and approved by others. Simply stated, most just do not become mentally and emotionally involved in the problems of others. A quick response might be: "Do not bother me with their problems—what happens in their lives does not affect me."

What God Joins Is Absolute

Let us take a look at marriage. The basic premise of marriage has not changed. Nor, will it change. What causes most confusion and ill-feeling today is the exception clause instituted by Christ. The scope of technical, philosophical, and personalized questions and feelings generated, if all were written out, would fill a major library. Yet, the battle rages on. Voluminous writings of men will not change the naturally contentious orientation of men—especially if there is a personal involvement, if human sensitivities have been enflamed, or if the problem exists in a previously created syndrome. The major question confronted at this moment is this: Can we lay aside all prejudices, sensitivities, and personalized feelings and face the issues involved objectively? No, we are not even remotely suggesting a surrender to change from "the faith once delivered." As ministers, we were involved in hundreds of cases of divorce and remarriage, with Mr. Armstrong and other ranking ministers. And at times assigned the leadership role of a committee which handled such issues. Much was learned. That knowledge has formed the foundation of our evaluation of cases today. For reason, Mr. Armstrong never felt the basics for such decisions should be put in print and broadly distributed. That decision has substantial merit even today.

From Your Point of View

Please refer to our article entitled, "Divorce and Remarriage—What Christians Should Know." It is our feeling that you, the chosen people of God, should know and understand why, in this context, we do the things we do. For that reason, let us begin at the beginning and succinctly explain in this letter the cardinal issues involved—an explanation that is general and will not involve the specifics of any one particular individual. As ministers what is discussed with us individually must remain confidential. It is almost a criminal act to divulge the information gained through the office of the ministry. We shall guard the right of privacy of any and all who come to us.

The cardinal principles upon which decisions are made is quite another matter. It is our intent to make plain those basic premises.

1) Marriage Is of God

As Creator of humankind, God determined all appropriate relationships, of which marriage is one. The marital relationship as instituted by God is an agreement between one man and one woman. It is bound by God. The length of its duration is from the moment of agreement unto the death of one of the mates. And what God binds man is commanded not to set asunder. Divorce is not acceptable. Remarriage is honorable only if a mate is deceased. These are facts—inexorable facts. Therefore, from the beginning remarriage was allowed only if a mate is dead. We will not address other technicalities at this time.

2) Marriage Is a Covenant

Animals, as created by God, indiscriminately mate, generally speaking, and reproduce after their kind. Though men are biological entities, they were created in the image of God and with capacity of mind. They can think on the basis of intelligence. As intelligent creations they were instructed relevant to life, responsibility, and duty. Yet, often men have acted and behaved more like animals than intelligent human beings. In this careless orientation the fundamental concepts and requirements of all social behavior have been spurned, altered, and finally rejected altogether. Those God-given obligations which relate to the marriage covenant have been relegated to the trash bin of antiquity. Unexpectedly, men will yet have to face that which they perverted and then rejected.

If honesty and integrity had prevailed, the marriage covenant would not have been a problem. But, considering the deceptive and dishonest nature of men, inevitably the opportunity for exploitation and abuse of fellow human beings would surface. This is the very tendency Christ addressed in the exception clause. We will cover the concept at the appropriate time.

At this time let us cover only the concept of a covenant. A covenant is an agreement between man and man or God and man. Logically, where God is involved—as in the case of marriage—would God bind an unsuspecting individual to one who planned to take advantage of the other party? Is not this the essence of what Christ addressed in Matthew 19:3–12? Some may contend that Christ refers to the issue of premarital sex only. At the appropriate time an explanation will make it clear that the issue is much broader than that—even to the extent that the issue *is of itself* not limited to fornication.

In the eyes of God a covenant is of force and binding only when elements of honesty and integrity are involved—especially when more than one person is involved. To believe anything else would make God a party to the injury of others. Where deception and abuse were planned, God gives opportunity for redress. Tragically this act of mercy and kindness has been so badly abused that the very concept of an "exception clause" given by Christ raises doubts, fears, agitation, and even contempt.

A covenant involves intent of heart and mind. Only God can read the hearts and minds of human beings. But, some will say: "The Bible says, we shall know them by their fruits." Indeed, the fruits borne do reveal general intents and purposes. Yet, in attempting to evaluate problem areas, are we not often found with a larger and more complex situation than a mere acceptance of a generalized belief, by their fruits we can know them? Specifically what do the fruits reveal? In some minds, the fruits indicate a particular defect, problem, attitude, or whatever? Such presumption is judgment in raw form. Most fruits borne reveal to other members no more than a generalized weakness. In turn this simply reveals that the troubled ones are yet sinners. Since all who are called of God are yet sinners, attempting to overcome, the most that such fruits can reveal is the need for greater effort and more prayer and fasting. Only Christ, at the appointed time can judge specific fruits—applying them to specific problems or weaknesses. As we all know, judgment does not belong in the revealed responsibilities incumbent upon men during this time of mastery and overcoming. It is our duty to do good, both to the righteous and the evil.

We have no problem with the concept that marriage is of God and the covenant agreement binding until broken by death. Yet, that unalterable fact does not address the

exception clause given by Christ. It does not address the matter of what a legitimate marriage agreement is in the sight of God. For instance, is a common-law arrangement binding and valid in God's sight? There are other ponderables. Simply acting on a subjective, "I believe" or "I do not think" is woefully inadequate. Solutions and answers come only by arduous study, and fervent prayers—both predicated on an intense fear and respect of God. And as indicated above, the bedrock foundation of any discussion on marriage is the unalterable decree "what God has bound let not man put asunder." Yet, from Christ's own implication, it would be erroneous for us to assume that every "marriage" as we know them today is bound by God. Make no mistake about it, most of humanity is probably accountable for the marriages into which they enter. And, there are several Biblical reasons for that accountability. That issue is beyond the purview of this letter. In general we are told, this is a wicked and adulterous generation. That just about says it all. Still the instructions of Christ are relevant and therefore must be addressed. Let us make every attempt to understand. Prejudice will not help. Individualization will not produce the results we all hope to see and understand. Only wisdom, honesty, and objectivity will aid us in this quest.

God Defines

God, as Institutor of marriage, and the Creator of man has every right to determine conditions, limits, and regulations which affect His creation. Marriage by definition is between men and women. It is between one man and one woman. It is for life. It is a covenant. As a covenant it involves both intents and purposes of heart and mind. Considering the depth of meaning involved, God laid down very stringent and far-reaching instructions which should be read, understood, and applied during what in modern terms is called the dating period. During that period of time it behooves the couple to really know one another. How can anyone who is not concerned initially about the marriage conditions legitimately use exception clause conditions in the future if and or when fraudulent intent is uncovered? Indeed, as stated earlier, each party of the couple should come to know the other individual—to know those secret intents and purposes of the heart. All issues of deep interest should be discussed prior to marriage. Then the obligations of covenant significance will have meaning. The major problem the ministry has encountered over the years is an attitude of indifference toward the marriage agreement. The couple is so enamored with one another physically that the intellectual and emotional aspects of the future relationship are not even considered. Rarely is there a well-defined agreement which logically fits the exception clause advanced by Christ. Yet, the clause is still very significant even in this context. There are those who do take marriage seriously and

attempt to establish some parameters for the marriage. Surely these are the people to whom Christ extends the mercy of Matthew, chapter nineteen.

Let us repeat once more: This ministry believes in the absolute sanctity of marriage. What God has bound is bound. Yet, remembering all of that, we cannot overlook the statement of Christ. Someone bears the responsibility for explaining it.

Based on tradition as practiced by the Church for years, we feel forced to evaluate problematic marriage cases. However, we have often wondered if such evaluation were ever intended by Christ. The context of Christ's statement leads us to believe His instruction was to the people themselves—not to the ministry. That approach would then harmonize with the attitude displayed toward the other nine commandments—in fact, how we treat all commands, laws, and judgments of God. Why should one commandment necessitate a special orientation not applicable to any other? Is it not the duty of the ministry to preach the Word—to preach it with conviction and loyalty? Conversely, it is the duty of the people to evaluate their lives on the basis of that Word spoken (James 1:21–25). The *Moffatt Translation* makes the matter very clear. "[S]o clear away all the foul rank growth of malice, and make a soil of humble modesty for the Word which roots itself inwardly with power to save your souls. Act on the Word, instead of merely listening to it and deluding yourselves. For whoever listens and does nothing, is like a man who glances at his natural face in a mirror; he glances at himself, goes off, and at once forgets what he was like. Whereas he who gazes into the faultless law of freedom and remains in that position, proving himself to be no forgetful listener but an active agent, he will be blessed in his activity." There is no specific example or command for the ministry to apply the intent and purpose of the Word of God to the lives of the people in some specific and judgmental way. The command of God to the ministry is: Preach the Word (2 Timothy 4:1–2). And on the basis of what is *known* (Romans 2:16; 1 Corinthians 4:1–5) to render some limited judgments regarding matters which affect the Church in general. Sometimes the line between that which affects the group as a whole and that responsibility which belongs to the individual is a very fine and delicate one.

Human Beings Are Carnal

God created mankind of flesh. Flesh is very weak and bent toward evil. It is anti-God (Romans 8:7). And very strongly defensive for self. The orientation, direction, and response of the heart and mind is not generally or comprehensively realized or understood by man himself (Jeremiah 17:9). In other words, man does not know himself. He is unaware of how or why he responds as he does.

With this volatile, hateful orientation, how could any individual ever really trust the promise, agreement, assurance of any other individual? All the more reason for knowing each other. At this point, it is imperative to make certain factors clear. The general weaknesses, or human traits of another is *not* the basis for the mercy extended by Christ. To that later. What is obvious is this, the general weaknesses, differences, problems are the creation of God and therefore circumstances which must be addressed by the couple with love and mutual understanding. All human beings are flesh. They individually will manifest traits, characteristics, and ways which offend the mate. Mastery of these differences and learning to accept the other is a part of the marriage agreement. The exception clause addresses something totally separate from these generalized problems.

The Exception Clause

The evil, injurious heart and mind of flesh, mentioned above, manifested itself when the Pharisees came to Christ with trickery in mind, asking: ". . . Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?" (Matthew 19:3). True to Christ's nature—the way of truth itself—He went right back to fundamentals. He said: "Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (Matthew 19:4–6). Could Christ have made it more clear? Divorce, at anytime, or for any reason is not acceptable. What God has joined is bound for life. From this context, it should be very clear, the exception clause Christ later mentions is *not* a divorce. It is the recognition of that which God never bound in the first place. Since God reads hearts and minds, any intentional fraudulent purpose would have been known to Him. Knowing the deception involved, He would not have bound the marriage. The couple would have been living outside of the sanctity of marriage. When God accepts the covenant agreement of a couple that marriage is bound the two become one and that is for life. Any sexual contact outside of marriage—no matter what the conditions or circumstances—is either fornication or adultery. Jesus said: ". . . And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication [Greek is *porneia*], and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery" (Matthew 19:9).

Some have attempted to interpret the above use of *porneia* as fornication—and fornication only. However, in the light of an earlier Biblical command such a narrow interpretation is impossible. For Moses was inspired by God to write, "If a man find a damsel that is a virgin, which is not betrothed, and lay hold on her, and lie with her

[fornication], and they be found; Then the man that lay with her shall give unto the damsel's father fifty shekels of silver, and she shall be his wife; because he hath humbled her, *he may not put her away all his days*" (Deuteronomy 22:28-29). If Christ's exception clause refers strictly to physical fornication while Moses was inspired to write that premarital sexual relationship was reason for forcing a marriage, we have a conflict. We have a reason for both a fraud and for a required obligation. There simply is no conflict in the Bible. Since it is very clear that fornication is the basis of the command in Deuteronomy, chapter twenty-two, the definition of *porneia* in Matthew, chapter nineteen, is not limited to that involved in Deuteronomy. Matthew 19:7 refers specifically to Deuteronomy 24:1. The "uncleanness" or "matter of nakedness" is very broad, far exceeding physical fornication. See also Exodus 21:7-8. A marriage (betrothal) is invalid where deceit was involved. Without addressing the matter technically let us review and emphasize what came through God's end-time servant. It was his consistent opinion that two things are involved: (1) Fraud. (2) Qualification. In the case of fraud, it involved some sexual deviation that would have affected the original agreement. The factor of qualification is broad and very real. It involves factors which very well could be such that the involved party is not an acceptable party to a covenant agreement. In a sense the qualification factor involves the element of fraud also. It must be some condition, if known or understood would never have been accepted by the other party to the agreement. As ministers involved in many early decisions, we can attest to the validity of the two concepts mentioned above.

The Decision

People will seek counsel about issues which are or seem to be contrary to that which they have come to understand as a result of God's call. They go to the ministry for counsel. However, the only people involved in a marriage is the couple. Who else is going to know the intents and purposes involved. Even if a minister is to make a decision it must be predicated on the information given by one or both who are involved. Once the ministers have heard the case and deemed the factors involved warrant an exception clause application, logic dictates the decision be made by those involved. Who else knows and understands the total involvement in the marriage? In the final analysis making such a decision is no different than the decisions which members make daily, weekly, and yearly involving the Sabbath, holydays, and any other Laws of God. When one is truly called and converted, changes will occur in the spiritual growth process. That growth must occur in the lives of the ones called. It cannot be coerced or demanded. Is this not the way of all spiritual growth? Why else would God require the older members to bear the burdens of the younger? In such situations, God is not condoning wrong—sin. He is granting

essential time for growth. If God grants us all time to change and put on the divine character, surely we as sinners, too, must grant time for people to grow and change. Such mercy is not condonation of wrong. It is a manifestation of kindness and mercy.

Back to the issue of decision-making. How can a minister, from a purely technical or mechanical perspective make a decision on an issue which involves intents and purposes of minds and hearts? After handling many cases of this very nature, we are compelled by circumstance to use a two-step program in correctly applying the exception clause instituted by Christ. Without doubt, the first step should be a thorough analysis of the case by the ministry. If the relevant factors are clear and not impacted by fraud or deficiency of character, a decision can be ascertained by the minister and the couple—or individual if only one is present—at the time of the counseling. Few, indeed, are the cases, however, which lend themselves to that approach. Most are very complex involving intents and purposes of one or both. In such cases, where the minister has no knowledge of the couple prior to marriage or is unaware of character, the orientation of life, along with other factors which affect the ability to enter into an agreement, any decision would be completely arbitrary. Here, is where the minister should require the individual or couple to make the decision. They are the people who lived the circumstance, and the only ones who could know the hearts and minds at the time of the marriage. They should make the decision and will thereby be held accountable for it.

Succinctly the two-step program is this: First, through counseling a determination can be made whether the case even warrants an exception clause consideration. Second, if the factors are clear and precise a decision of the clause's applicability can be made on the spot. Or, if the more subtle components of heart and mind come into play, then the individual, or couple, after much prayer and fasting, can determine the status of the marriage. Nothing else makes sense. As asked earlier, who else was involved? Even if a minister makes the decision, he will make it on the basis of what he was told.

It is more responsible and in accord with individual accountability to hold the couple, or individual, responsible for the final decision. The ministry has already determined that the case warrants the application of the exception clause.

Member Response

Based on the facts known, we all must accept the decision made by any such couple or individual. The rightness or wrongness of the decision will become apparent in due time. This is no different than the circumstances which surround every command, law,

or statute of God. The final judgment of God is for the very purpose of determining whether we, individually, made the right decisions or not.

Make no mistake about it. Employment of the exception clause is not a condonation of adultery. The reason for the decision process in the first place is the fact we do not know precisely what the facts are. If we *knew* the previous marriage was binding before God, no right of applying the exception clause would have been given. How can anyone categorically call any such remarriage adulterous if we do not know the validity of the earlier marriage? Some things must be left to God. In the meantime, others in the body of Christ should accord such people with respect and acceptance. If any form of hypocrisy is involved, time and circumstances will reveal all. When we know the truth we then must respond on the basis of that truth.

It would be tragic for the ministry—honestly seeking the will of God—to grant someone the right of applying the exception clause only to find condemnation by fellow-members of the church. Please, no sin, of whatever dimension, will be knowingly allowed to exist in the church. Weaknesses of the flesh are another matter. If we were to apply stringently the concept of no sin in the church, there would be no one left. We all are sinners—daily.

Another factor needs to be emphasized here. An exception—granted for reason—does not become a model or example for anyone and everyone who wants to justify some circumstance in his own life. Each individual circumstance must be evaluated and appropriate decisions made.

In conclusion, let us again emphasize: This ministry believes and preaches the absolute sanctity and permanence of marriage. Yet, we are obligated to apply the exception clause instituted by Christ. The exception clause is not a justification for divorce. It is a belated recognition of a marriage which God did not bind for reasons mentioned above. Such marriages cannot be labeled adulterous unless we know that hypocrisy was involved in the decision-making process.

In due time God will make these matters known. The judgment is yet to come. Matters of heart and mind require major input from God. The Apostle Paul stated it clearly: "Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment: yea, I judge not mine own self. For I know nothing by myself; yet am I not hereby justified: but he that judgeth me is the Lord. Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord

come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts: and then shall every man have praise of God" (1 Corinthians 4:1-5).

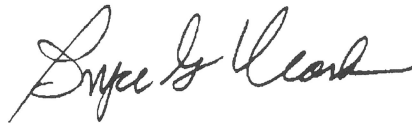
Brethren, what we do not know, we do not know. We dare not act on presumption. Thanks for understanding.

As there were remarried couples in the Church in Paul's day, (1 Timothy 3:2) even so there will be in our day. Remarried couples attended the Church services but they were not allowed to hold any responsibility within the Church. To bear responsibility would have given an unacceptable impression. Remarriage is wrong; but, in *doubtful situations* such offices could not be held. So it will be practiced today.

Your Servant's in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Raymond C. Cole".

Raymond C. Cole

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bryce G. Clark".

Bryce G. Clark