

Stop the Divorce Train before the Wreck

In Malachi 2:16 God says, "I hate divorce." Why do you think God hates divorce so much? I believe it is because He knows the pain and suffering that divorce causes to so many people: husband, wife, children, extended family, friends and coworkers. Divorce causes pain to everyone it touches. With the divorce rate of first-time marriages hitting 50%, that's a LOT of pain.

Isn't there anything that we, as concerned Christian friends, can do to stop the divorce train before the marriage is totally wrecked? Many times I've heard people in my DivorceCare groups (www.divorcecare.org, divorce recovery support groups) say, "If I had known before I divorced how bad it would be, I would have worked harder at saving my marriage. I would have spent the money I spent on lawyers on a marriage counselor."

Once a couple starts having problems, their friends, family and even their own pastor may think the only solution is divorce. It seems that we are afraid we will be prying if we try to find a way to help them save their marriage. My own pastor told me that because my husband had committed adultery, I couldn't live with him anymore and I might as well get a divorce so I'd be free to remarry. I saw no alternative except to get a divorce and start a new life.

Why didn't someone warn me how much pain my family and I would suffer? I had no idea what the consequences of divorce were going to be on my children or my extended family; no one told me what would happen to me physically, emotionally, spiritually and financially during and after the divorce. I had to start working full time, leaving the children to come home to an empty house after school. I lost 30 pounds in two months. I felt as if God had abandoned me. My life was forever changed in a period of months.

University of Chicago sociologist Dr. Linda Waite says, "For most people, marital unhappiness is not permanent." Recent findings indicate that two-thirds of all unhappy marriages are repaired within five years.

Researchers examined data on 5,232 married adults and "found that 645 [of the] subjects reported marital dissatisfaction. When the unhappy spouses were surveyed five years later, those who had remained married were more likely than the divorced subjects to state that they were happy. In fact, the most miserable marriages had the most dramatic turnarounds: 78% of people who stayed in "very unhappy" marriages said that the marriages were currently happy." The study also showed that only 19% of those who had divorced were happily remarried.

George Barna reports that among all adults 18 and older, three out of four (73%) have been married and half (51%) are currently married. Among those who have been married, more than one out of every three (35%) have been divorced. One out of every five adults (18%) who has ever been divorced has been divorced multiple times.

The research confirms that among married born again Christians, 35% have experienced a divorce. That figure is identical to the outcome among married who are not born again.

Multiple divorces are also unexpectedly common among born again Christians. Barna's figures show that nearly one-quarter of the married born agains (23%) get divorced two or more times.

So what does that say to us, as Christian friends and relatives of couples whose marriages are in crisis? It says that we should get involved in peoples' lives. I believe the Lord expects us to keep our hearts open, for our walk with Him to be such that we will feel the nudging of the Holy Spirit as He puts people in our paths. We need to build relationships that are open enough so that we know what is happening in the lives of our fellow brothers and sisters. Then, when we see the early warning signs of a marriage in trouble, we have the opportunity, NO, the obligation, to try and help that couple realize what the consequences of divorce will be on them, their children, their extended family and the church. No one is left untouched in the aftermath of divorce. It permeates every fiber of a person's life. Life will never be the same. These people, on the fast track of the Divorce Train, need to know this! The grass is NOT greener outside the bonds of marriage. Life is NOT better after divorce!

I'm not saying that every marriage can be saved. Some are destined for divorce even before the vows are said. But if only one or two families can be kept together, it is worth our effort.

So what is the answer? We know the problem is sin of one or both of the parties. We know the answer to a sin problem is a change of heart, and that can only come through Jesus Christ. At this point in their lives, though, most are not even aware that Jesus is the answer. We have to point them to Him for healing of their marriage.

First we have to get the couple's attention so they will realize that their marriage is headed toward the disaster of divorce. Many couples head down the road to divorce without realizing what is happening. They just know they are unhappy, unfulfilled and looking for a way to find happiness.

Last week I had a young man come to my DivorceCare group, www.divorcecare.org, whose wife had left him and their three boys (13, 9 and 5 years old) after 14 years of marriage because she just didn't want to be a wife and mother any longer. She didn't feel fulfilled! The boys are angry and hurt; the father is devastated. She has been gone six months and doesn't even see the children. The sad part is that she will never find her fulfillment in the world she has chosen. She is going to feel guilt and pain as a result of her actions for the rest of her life.

What if a close friend, pastor or relative had been able to work with them a year ago to try and help them work through their differences? What if someone had said to her, "Your fulfillment is not in the world, but in Jesus?" What if someone had shown her what the consequences of divorce would be on her children and what the consequences would be on her--mentally, physically and emotionally? She might still have left, but at least she would have known that her choice might not be wise.

Church Initiative offers a program called "Choosing Wisely Before You Divorce," www.beforeyoudivorce.org, that is a crisis intervention program. It is a five-session video series utilizing interviews with Christian attorneys, counselors and three couples who have reconciled their marriages; the series shows the couple exactly what it is going to be like if they continue down the road to divorce.

The first session discusses the financial and legal aspects of divorce. It tells of the expense, the pain of divulging personal and financial information to strangers, the cost of doubling living expenses and the things a person will have to give up as a single parent. The experts on the video compare divorce to a war. The warriors are the husband and wife; the battlefield is the home; and the spoils are the children and everything the husband and wife have worked for. This is quite an eye opener for most couples.

Session two shows the emotional turmoil, the physical effects and what happens to a person's spiritual life if he or she continues down this path. It talks about how divorce consumes energy and creates stress, which can lead to heart problems, other physical illnesses and emotional problems such as anger, depression and losses that must be grieved. The biblical and non-biblical reasons for divorce are also discussed in this session.

The third session is about what the children will be facing if their parents divorce. Children on the video talk about how much they want their parents to stay together, how frightened they were when they heard about the divorce and how they prayed that God would bring their parents back together. Other topics discussed in this session are the effects of divorce by age group and gender, visitation, remarriage of the parents and the long-term effects of divorce on children. Children are the innocent victims whom the adults fail to consider when they're thinking that divorce is the better way.

Session four is about the importance of forgiveness. I always spend extra time on this session because without forgiveness there can be no reconciliation. This session discusses reasons for forgiveness, with a strong emphasis on biblical reasons for forgiveness.

If the couple does choose to go through with the divorce, it is important for them to forgive each other and anyone else who is involved in this process for the well-being of the children and for their relationship with the Lord. I have each of them make a list of the people they need to forgive and the offenses they need to forgive. This can be a real eye opener because many times they blame their problems on an in-law or the children. It always surprises me to find out that each one is blaming the other spouse's family for their marital problems, and they don't even realize it until they start communicating about it.

The last session is on reconciliation. It talks about the reasons to reconcile, the process of reconciliation and things that hinder reconciliation. The video experts talk about God being a God of reconciliation and how each person can reconcile to God. They also say each person facing separation or divorce has a choice: reconciliation (at some level) or a life of anger and bitterness.

A Bible study and journaling page is included with each session.

At this point, if the couple chooses the route of reconciliation, you should get them to agree to go to a good Christian counselor, who can help them work through their marital difficulties. It is also advisable to find a strong Christian married couple who will mentor them.

The main thing is to help them realize that if they don't get help, they will be right back in the same situation. The marriage didn't work before, and the same kind of marriage won't work the next time. I encourage them to get out of the "OLD" marriage and OLD ways and start over at ground zero with Christ as the foundation for their new life together. I use the illustration of a triangle with Jesus as the foundation, the husband on one side and the wife on the other. God is at the top of the triangle, and as they each draw closer to God, they grow closer to each other. This is the only way we are ever going to be able to help couples save their families. I don't see how any marriage could survive in today's world without Jesus as the foundation of the family.

The couples I have walked through this process with are almost always ready to work on their marriage instead of getting a divorce. I have seen several marriages saved, and even if the divorce happens, the couple at least knew some of the consequences. They made the choice with more knowledge of the situation.

If you have this material in your church, use it. If you don't have it, please consider making it available in your church.

Questions? Please visit www.beforeyoudivorce.org, email info@divorcecare.org or call 1-800-489-7778.

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1. Kary, T. "Don't Divorce, Be Happy." *Psychology Today*, v35 i6, 2002, p. 26(1). Retrieved June 9, 2004 from Expanded Academic ASAP.

2. Ibid.

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For further information about the Choosing Wisely: Before You Divorce resource kit, call 800-489-7778, visit www.beforeyoudivorce.org or email info@divorcecare.org.