

# State of the UNION:

*A Christian's View of  
Marriage and Divorce*

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CROWN FINANCIAL MINISTRIES



## MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE...

A Christian's attitudes about each

**R**aising discussions on the subject of marriage and divorce is to risk misunderstanding or criticism. My intention is not to condemn, judge or put guilt trips on anyone. Of all people, I have no right to do that. Thirty years ago I initiated a divorce from my first wife for no reason other than selfishness, pride and self-centeredness. I was not saved then, but that, in no way, excuses the deed.

I would venture to say that most, if not all believing men and women, know a couple, or even a couple of couples, who are thinking about or planning to divorce.

For too long, most churches have kind of danced around this vital issue for fear of offending those in the congregation who have gone through a divorce or not wanting to hurt their children. But ignoring

the subject. . . putting on a happy face and declaring the glass half full. . . is not what God would have His people do about a problem of such grave importance.

Divorce is a blight. . . a cancer on our nation. It is contrary to God's Word, and will. And, according to researcher George Barna, there is slightly more divorce among Christians than among unbelievers!

The institution of marriage was ordained and instituted by God at creation. Christ sanctified it by His presence at the wedding feast of Cana and by His instructions via His apostles in the New Testament. God's Law defines the meaning and legitimacy of marriage.

All of us have a visceral understanding that marriage is good and produces tangible benefits. But we usually are not able to be specific about what those benefits are. Research shows that adults in traditional marriages are significantly happier, safer, and longer lived. They enjoy higher levels of physical and mental health. They recover from illness quicker. They earn and save more money. They are more reliable employees. They suffer less stress.

The children of intact traditional marriages are also much healthier in body, spirit and mind. . . more successful in school and life. . . and much less likely to use illegal drugs and alcohol or run afoul of the law. They do better in all measures of intellectual and academic development. They tend to be more sympathetic toward others. They are much less likely to be in trouble in school, engage in

violent behavior or be involved in premarital sexual activity or have children out of wedlock. One statistic that does not receive enough attention is that it is uncommon for kids who live with married parents to live in poverty or be victims of physical or sexual abuse.

Married people are more likely to have and invest in children. Parents have an extra measure of motivation not only to live longer, but to embrace a future that extends beyond their lifetimes . . . into eternity. Married Christians know that their saved children will be with them in heaven. Christian parents pass on to their children virtues and eternal truths from scripture.

The benefits of marriage are modeled and then transmitted to future generations, because children raised by married parents are less likely to cohabit or to divorce as adults. Traditional marriages dramatically reduce public welfare costs, raise government revenues, and produce a more engaged citizenry. So it is the responsibility of all Christians to be involved in seeing that marriages remain intact and that divorce is discouraged.

What is the state of the Married Family in the United States? Marriage is still breathing but not healthy. “Nuclear family in a meltdown” read a headline in the Colorado Springs *Gazette* a while back. Indeed marriage is in crisis. High rates of divorce and illegitimacy have eroded marriage norms and expectations. In inner-city neighborhoods 70 to 90 percent of babies are illegitimate, driving up poverty, crime, more teen pregnancy, welfare dependency, drug

abuse and mental and physical health problems.

Today marriages are breaking up at an alarming rate and with unprecedented intensity. The average duration of a marriage in the United States is 9.4 years. Every 27 seconds a couple divorces, totaling approximately 7,000 divorces per day affecting some 10,000 children. Divorce rates have doubled since 1965 and demographers predict that half of all first marriages will end in divorce as well as 60 percent of all second marriages.

Even though divorce rates have stabilized, albeit at a rate that is much too high, the marriage rate is in a 50 year decline with people waiting longer and longer to get married.

The number of children living in single parent families has escalated. . . . A third of all babies are now born to unmarried women. . . . and the percentage is rising. In fact, in 1960, the total number of children living in fatherless families was fewer than eight million. Today, that total has risen to over 24 million.

Tragically, this year (2006) between 1.1 and 1.3 million couples will divorce. Is it any wonder that God thundered, "I hate divorce," says the Lord, the God of Israel. . . . 'So guard yourself; always remain loyal to your wife.'" This is part of a long and strong admonition about

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In 2006 in the United States, between 1.1 million and 1.3 million marriages will end in divorce.

divorce from the Lord recorded in the Old Testament Book of Malachi (Chapter 2, verse 16, NLT).

Why does God hate divorce? Because it works against the natural, spiritual and social order He established for humans. Divorce negatively affects the adults involved, children, extended families, society and the church. For adults, it leads to pain, poverty and a host of unintended consequences. Some have described the grief attendant to divorce as worse than the death of a spouse. For children, divorce causes even greater hurt and distress. Five years ago, the report of a 25 year longitudinal study conducted by divorce research expert Judith Wallerstein and Julia Lewis, a psychology professor at San Francisco State University, was released.

The study traced the effect of family breakup on 26 adults who were age 2 to 6 at the time of divorce. It showed that divorce is a cumulative experience that produces stark emotional scars and shapes the attitudes and behavior of children into adulthood. These children of divorce were still struggling with it 25 years later. Half of those studied became seriously involved with drugs and alcohol. Many of the children, especially the girls became sexually active early in adolescence. Most of the fathers did not provide full financial support and did not have regular contact with the children.

Researchers said the children suffered with loneliness and a serious loss of parenting. Lewis noted that the long-lasting effects of their parents' divorce caused adult children to become "very, very anxious

about marriage and fidelity. They don't trust their own picture of marriage, because they remember how unhappy one or both of their parents were. They fear that their own adult relationships will fail like those of their parents."

Mrs. Wallerstein wrote, "The delayed impact of divorce in adulthood is a revolutionary finding and a stunning surprise. We thought that the children of divorce would be able to work through the issues related to divorce by the time they reached late adolescence or left home." Instead, the study revealed that many adult children of divorce struggle mightily with internal expectations of failure, as well as lifelong fear of loss, change, betrayal and loneliness. She said that "divorce is a life-transforming experience."

Of course, we must temper these findings with the recognition that some children are able to overcome the difficulties and others are better off outside highly dysfunctional or abusive situations.


Another study, conducted six years ago by the Institute for American Values, came up with another conclusion that runs contrary to conventional wisdom—divorce does not make people happy. A research team interviewed 645 adults who reported being unhappily married. After five years, these same adults were resurveyed. Some of these people had divorced or separated. Some of them had stayed married. The results were astounding!

The Institute for American Values study found that divorce

frequently fails to make people happy. While it may provide relief from the pain associated with a bad marriage, it also introduces a host of new complex emotional and psychological difficulties. They include child-custody battles, emotionally scarred children, economic hardships, loneliness, future romantic disappointments and so on. Indeed, the biggest cause of poverty in America is divorce.

Want to be shocked? Listen to this... Of the unhappy spouses in the original survey who divorced, only 19 percent were happier five years later.

Suprisingly (and this is the good news), the study revealed that a full two-thirds of the unhappily married spouses who stayed married were actually happier five years later. Among those who initially rated their marriages as “very unhappy” but remained together, nearly 80 percent considered themselves as “happily married” and “much happier” five years later. Dr. Linda Waite, lead author of the study, said “Staying married is not just for the children’s sake. . . . results like these suggest the benefits of divorce have been oversold.”



Nearly 80% of people with “unhappy” marriages, but who stay together, say they are “much happier” or “happily married” five years later.

Another researcher explained the findings this way: “The conventional belief is that when a marriage is down, it is done. . .

But what we are seeing with these data is that there are couples who are basically down, but the relationship bounces back.” That new understanding should give hope to marriages on the precipice. When Christians factor God into the equation, the “hope rate” goes way up.

This is the kind of information that people in troubled marriages need to hear. It is up to the church to communicate both the pitfalls and the possibilities when couples are contemplating divorce. So what do we do? We make regularly praying against the spirit of divorce a part of our prayer regimen. We are intentional about doing some practical things to lessen the incidence of divorce among our fellow believers, family and friends. You may want to work within your church as well as individually.

Here are some steps that you might consider:

1. Be willing to speak the truth. Bite the bullet. Counsel against sex outside marriage and out-of-wedlock baby-making.
  - a. True Love Waits is a great program to encourage abstinence among teens.
  - b. Be sure your children’s public schools are using abstinence-based sex ed programs.

Tell young people and adults the truth about cohabitation outside marriage. The truth is that living together before marriage increases a couple’s likelihood of divorce by 50 to 80 percent. Of 100 couples who begin cohabiting, only 15 are married after a decade. It’s a bad

arrangement that unfortunately has been applauded as desirable, or at least acceptable, by society.

According to Mike McManus, founder of Marriage Savers, half of all children will spend some time in a cohabiting family before age 16. Sexual and physical abuse of children in these situations is significantly higher than in intact families. Warn adults about this.

2. Encourage your pastor and elders to develop a program to see that marriages in you congregation start out well and end well. It's important to get involved on the front end of the engagement/marriage process.

I suggest that you check out the [MarriageSavers.com](http://MarriageSavers.com) Web site. Mike McManus, a newspaper columnist and writer started the Marriage Savers Ministry twenty five years ago. It is designed to help churches and communities fight divorce. You'll find tools and training materials to help your church.


For example, you can enlist Marriage Mentoring Couples to counsel engaged couples and newly married couples. Another valuable approach is to employ premarital assessments to help engaged couples determine if they're well matched and identify issues that are likely to cause difficulties or need strengthening in a marriage relationship. These inventories are over 80 percent accurate. They are not unlike [E-Harmony.com](http://E-Harmony.com) . . .but more extensive and biblically based.

Another critical approach is to conduct marriage preparation or marriage enrichment Bible Studies. Use Crown's *Money In Marriage* materials for a marriage seminar . . . or with individual couples in a smaller church. All of Crown's church programs are good for strengthening marriages and keeping people out of the divorce court.

Don't be reluctant to approach cohabiting couples who are planning to get married . . . or not. Don't forget, you are equipped with God's Word, empowered by His Spirit, and reflect His love, so you are approaching them in a godly way.

What about couples who are ready to split?

First, ask the Lord to give you discernment about those marriages that may look good on the outside, but are decaying underneath. Don't pry, but pray that God will open up an opportunity for you to offer love and support in an effort to bring truth and transparency into the situation. For couples you know who are moving toward divorce, consider doing two things: Intercede in prayer and Intervene in love. The question is, "Will you risk losing a friendship to help save a marriage?" I hope the answer is yes, but it probably won't be necessary. Usually one or both of the marital partners are involved in some transgression of God's Word. Sometimes one or the other is deeply engaged in sin, often infidelity.



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What is our justification for intervening? You'll find it in Galatians 6:1, "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently" (NIV) or Luke 17:3, "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him" (NIV).

Here's some final advice: Don't think that anyone's marriage is beyond attack, including your own. "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8, NIV), so stay prayed up and don't open yourself up to temptation.

Pray for your pastors and the church staff. Satan loves to bring down Christian leaders.

Summing up, marriages are worth saving. Divorce is a painful, pervasive plague. Don't leave a stone unturned or a prayer unspoken to fight against the divorce of a brother or sister in Christ or unbelievers as well.

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## Endnotes

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8. Linda Waite, et al., "Does Divorce Make People Happy? Findings from a Study of Unhappy Marriages," (Institute for American Values. 2002)
9. Ibid
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