

The Doctrine & Discipline of Divorce, as viewed by John Milton¹

We must “force nothing against the faultless proprieties of nature” nor allow ourselves to view the words of our Savior about divorce to be “congealed into a stony rigor inconsistent both with his doctrine and his office.” We should not respect, live by, honor – “love” – rules regarding divorce simply because they are a part of our heritage. Milton writes, “[We are not to] love whatever cause we find to loath ... a heinous barbarous act both against the honor of marriage and the dignity of man and his soul, the goodness of Christianity and all the humane respects of civility.”²

We here “prove first that other reasons of divorce besides adultery, were by the Law of Moses, and are yet to be allowed ... and the words of Christ are not thereby contradicted.” Second, “that to prohibit absolutely any divorce whatsoever except those which Moses accepted is against the reason of Law ...” Doing this we observe that God promises “help against loneliness, and those Words of Christ, that *his yoke is easy and his burden light* were not spoken in vain.

“Solace and peace” are God's will for us and the absence of this condition “is a greater reason of divorce than natural frigidity, especially if there are no children and there be mutual consent ... There is no greater nakedness or unfitness of mind than that which hinders the solace and peace of the married couple.”

As you read remember that Milton was a man and he lived in a culture where the man was ascendant in marriage. Should Milton be writing today he would doubtless use his/her in all contexts, rather than the male-only pronoun.

Here are Milton's ten considerations justifying divorce:

If you disdain divorce you may be³

1. **Perpetuating sorrow.** We are not to bind “a blameless creature to his own perpetual sorrow ... suffering his useful life to waste away and be lost under a secret affliction of an unconscionable size to human strength ... The pining of a sad spirit wedded to loneliness should deserve to be freed as well as the impatience of a sensual desire be providently relieved.”
2. **Honoring unkindness.** It is a “violent and cruel thing ... to force the continuing ... together, whom God and nature in the gentlest end of marriage never joined.” The Apostle Paul wrote, *It is better to marry than to burn.* ... It was not good that man should be left alone to burn.” This justifies “the desire and longing to put off an unkindly” mate. Wedlock is meant to be a cheerful arrangement. “It is needful against the sorrows and casualties of this life to have an intimate helper, a ready and reviving associate in marriage.” We need “the mutual enjoyment of that which the wanting soul needfully seeks.”
3. **Defeating remedy.** Without the remedy of divorce, “he who lives where he finds nothing but remedy-less offenses and discontents, is in more and greater temptations than ever before ... he will begin even against Law to cast about where he may find his satisfaction more complete unless he is heroically virtuous, not a common man.”
4. **Violating nature.** God values “love and peace in the family more than a compulsive performance of marriage.” Without these conditions “how do we find it possible to rejoice or to love ... [can we] glue an error together which God and nature will not join?”
5. **Respecting incompatibility.** “Nothing more hinders and disturbs the whole life of a Christian

1 To Read Milton's full original old-English text, click on http://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/ddd/book_1/ or Google Doctrine & Discipline of Divorce

2 Quotes are the words of Milton, edited into modern English.

3 Headings are the creation of the editor

than a matrimony found to be incurably unfit: such a union has the same effect as an idolatrous match ... What difference does it make whether she pervert him to superstition by her enticing sorcery or disable him in his desire to serve God through the disturbance of her unhelpful and unfit influence.” We learn from scripture that “father and mother, and wife also are not only to be hated, but forsaken if we mean to inherit the great reward promised ... Job, the most patient of men rejected the desperate counsels of his wife, and Moses, the meekest, being thoroughly offended with the profane speeches of Zippora, sent her back to her father ... No force should be used to keep them together while we remember that God commanded Abraham to send away his irreligious wife and her son for the offenses which they gave his pious family. And it may be that David for the like cause disposed of Michal.” We should reason, “If those whom God joins no man may separate, it should follow that whom he does not join man ought to separate. But the lawyers tell us that which ought not have been done, once done, avails. I answer this is but a stitching of law contrary to Scripture.” If we conclude that adultery should be the only basis for divorce, we “affirm the bed to be the highest value of marriage, a gross, boorish opinion.”

6. **Forbidding division.** “To prohibit divorce sought for natural causes is against nature.” It would be “to force a mixture of minds that cannot unite, and to sow the furrows of man's nativity with seed of two incoherent and uncombining dispositions,” By God's creative Word “his divorcing command [caused] the world first to rise out of Chaos.”
7. **Causing death.** “Sometimes continuance in marriage may be [the cause of] the shortening or endangering of life to either party. Both Law and divinity conclude that life is to be preferred before marriage and the intended solace of life ... The preservation of life is more worth than the compulsory keeping of marriage, and it is no less than cruel to force a man to remain in that state as the solace of his life, which he and his friends know will be either the undoing or the disheartening of his life. And what is life without the vigor and spirit full exercise of life?”
8. **Denying logic.** “It is probable, or rather certain, that every one who happens to marry has not the calling and therefore upon unfitness being found and considered, force ought not be used.”
9. **Refusing reason.** “All human society must proceed from the mind rather than the body, else we would be mere animals. Because marriage is not a mere carnal coition but a human social compact, [it follows that] where the minds cannot reasonably be accommodated, there can be no true matrimony ... Every covenant between man and man, bound by oath, may be called the covenant of God, because God therein is attested. So of marriage he is the author and the witness; yet it does not follow ... that [because] God joined them together, that it shall be found by their apparent unfitness that their continuing to be man and wife is against the glory of God and their mutual happiness. ... [God] has revealed his gracious will not to set the ordinance above the man for whom it was ordained: not to canonize marriage either as a tyranny or a goddess over the enfranchised life and soul of man. For, wherein can God delight, wherein be worshiped, and glorified by the forcible continuing of an improper and ill-yoking couple?”
10. **Ignoring differences.** A spouse who is joined to a heretical group should not bind a partner to remain. “It can be to no other purpose but of strife and hatred, a thing odious to God ... a thing so opposite both to marriage and to Christianity, it would perhaps be less scandal to divorce a natural disparity than to link violently together an unchristian dissension, committing to ensnared souls inevitably to kindle one another, not with the fire of love, but with a hatred irreconcilable, who were they severed would be friends in any other relation ... [This would be] as much cruelty in forbidding to divorce, as the Church of Antichrist does willfully in forbidding to marry.”

Edited and summarized by **Richard Palmquist**

12/6/2009

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