



“STILL MARRIED IN THE SIGHT OF GOD”

how this expression has been
used in Christendom.

“Still married in the sight of God” has been virtually a slogan, a piece of Christian jargon, for centuries. Like other slogans (e.g., “God hates divorce”) it has been a cause of injury and entrapment to many victims of domestic abuse — as well as to those who have suffered other kinds of marital violation. This article only discusses the history of the phrase “still married in the sight of God” as it has been applied to divorced (or separated) people. Those who have questions about the phrase’s truthfulness and applicability are referred to chapter five of my book *Not Under Bondage*.

Use by the Church Fathers and the Roman Church

It is not certain when the phrase “still married in the sight of God” first came to be used, but similar expressions were used by the church fathers. About AD 400 Jerome (who translated the Latin Vulgate — the only Bible available in Europe for centuries) said,

A husband may be an adulterer or a sodomite, he may be stained with every crime and may have been left by his wife because of his sins; yet he is still her husband and, so long as he lives, she may not marry another.¹

Around the same time, Chrysostom explained the scripture “the wife is bound by the law as long as her husband lives” (Rom. 7:2) by saying,

...wives, even if they have left their husbands, have the law in the form of a chain which condemns them, accusing them of adultery, accusing those who take them, and saying: ‘Your husband is still living and what you have done is adultery.’²

Roman Catholic Canon Law no. 1141 states: “Marriage which is ratified and consummated cannot be dissolved by any human power, nor by any cause save death.”³

Use by Protestant Theologians

Protestants have used the phrase “still married in the sight of God” in various ways. Some have taught there is no such thing as a dissolution divorce.⁴ According to this view, the Bible permits divorce for adultery, but divorce never dissolves the marriage bond. The marriage still exists, so remarriage is only allowed if the ex-partner dies. The Anglican Church held a view like this for several centuries.

In his book *Divorce — the Unforgivable Sin?*, the family lawyer Ken Crispin relates the story of a woman who had been divorced from her husband for ten years, during which time the ex-husband remarried and had three children to his new wife. The relationship between the woman and her ex-husband was trouble-free. Then a Protestant minister explained to the woman that:

her husband’s second marriage really constituted nothing more than adultery. Accordingly it was her Christian duty to do all she could to break up the relationship.⁵

Though she felt the lives of three children should not be disrupted, the minister’s authority caused her to doubt her own opinion.

Other Protestants apply the expression only to unbiblical divorce — whatever they conceive that to be. Charles Spurgeon, the famous Baptist preacher, said,

...a woman divorced for any cause but adultery, and marrying again, is committing adultery before God. ...persons once married are in the sight of God, married for life, with the one exception of proven fornication.⁶

John Murray, the respected Presbyterian theologian, explained Matthew 5:32 by saying,

The only reason for which this remarriage can be regarded as adultery is that the first marriage is still in God's sight regarded as inviolate. The divorce has not dissolved it. Illegitimate divorce does not dissolve the marriage bond and consequently the fact of such divorce does not relieve the parties concerned from any of the obligations incident to marriage.⁷

Craig Keener says, Matthew 5:32, then, claims that the marriage is valid in God's sight until one party dissolves the marriage through unfaithfulness.⁸

Use by ordinary Christians

“Still married in the sight of God” is a short and memorable phrase. Ordinary Christians sometimes employ it (or its variants) glibly without any appreciation for the fine theological balance required in interpreting divorce texts. The debate about biblical grounds for divorce has been so hotly contested, so complex, and so inconclusive that some people have latched on to simplistic phrases hoping they provide certainty amidst the confusion. Well-meaning Christians have used this phrase to urge fellow Christians not to divorce by saying, “If you divorce you will still be married in the eyes of God”. If the recipient of this advice has an active (but under-informed) conscience, this advice may have a restraining effect. After all, if every couple's marriage were indissoluble other than by death, remarriage after a civil divorce would be divinely prohibited. A Christian contemplating separation or divorce would thus be constrained to a life of celibacy and singleness.

A survivor of abuse told me that a Baptist layman had asserted that she was “still married in God's sight” while she was separated from her abusive husband. The Baptist had been “getting alongside” the husband because the husband made pretenses of becoming a Christian (which he always did every time his wife left him). The Baptist apparently thought that he was doing both husband and wife a Christian service by trying to encourage their reconciliation. This woman had separated and reconciled with her husband more times than she can remember. Every reconciliation saw a return of the abuse.

There is a testimony on the internet of a woman who converted to Christ during the time she was married to an abuser. She eventually discovered that her husband was a serial murderer and rapist. With little church support and despite many obstacles, she turned him in to the police and he was eventually sentenced to prison. Fearing she was committing the unpardonable sin, she divorced her incarcerated husband. She was then told by the murderer's parents, as well as by the Catholic priest who had officiated at her wedding, that her marriage still existed in the sight of God.⁹

It can be chilling when abusers use the phrase against their wives. An example can be found in the movie *Chocolat*, where a woman flees from her abusive husband and takes refuge with the owner of the chocolate shop. When the husband tracks his wife down he shouts at her, “We are still married in the sight of God!” to try to browbeat her into reconciliation. The abused woman cleverly retorts, “Then God must be blind!”

The phrase “still married in God's sight” encourages unthinking, ham-fisted responses to the complex questions of Christian divorce and remarriage. I pray that the expression falls into disuse and that the Christian community will show a more finely nuanced (by which I mean more biblical) approach to divorce and remarriage.

Endnotes

1 Jerome, Letters, LV: To Amandus 3–4.

2 Chrysostom, Second Homily on Marriage, “De libello repudii”.

3 http://www.intratext.com/IXT/ENG0017/_P43.HTM viewed 29 Oct 2007.

4 For example, William Heth and Gordon Wenham in *Jesus and Divorce*; first published London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1984; Biblical and Theological Classics Library edition, Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster, 1997.

Note: Heth has since changed his mind on divorce and remarriage. See “Jesus and Divorce: How my Mind Has Changed.” *Southern Baptist Theological Journal* 6/1 (2002): 4–29. Also at http://www.sbts.edu/pdf/sbjt_2002Spring2.pdf

5 Ken Crispin, *Divorce — the Unforgivable Sin?*, Sydney: Hodder and Staughton, 1988, p. 5.

6 Charles Spurgeon, *Popular Exposition of Matthew*, Zondervan, pp. 29, 160; cited in Guy Duty, *Divorce and Remarriage*. Bloomington, Minnesota: Bethany Fellowship, 1967, 1983, p. 120–121. See also J. Carl Laney, *The Divorce Myth*. Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1981 (p. 116) who says, “Since divorce is not instituted by God, it is in almost every circumstance not recognized by him; hence, divorce and remarriage is adultery since the original marriage is still intact from God’s perspective.”

7 John Murray, *Divorce*, Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1961, p. 25.

8 Craig Keener...*And Marries Another: Divorce and Remarriage in the Teaching of the New Testament*, Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991, p. 35.

9 Ceci’s Testimony, www.angelfire.com/journal/familyabuse/ceci.html (follow links to part III of the testimony). Viewed 29 Oct 2007.