



A year or so later I stumbled across a group called Spirited Exchanges. This was a group of people on a faith journey who were not afraid to tackle some of the hard faith questions that come up when they are going

through hell, questions that you wouldn't *dare* ask in a church. The people at Spirited Exchanges seemed to have no agenda (like trying to get me back into "the fold") nor did they point the finger of judgment at my analgesic activities. This amazed me. I felt safe and understood. Thus began the journey toward restoration of my faith and shattered heart.

Years later, I still don't have all the answers to the whys, but through this experience my sense of self has strengthened and I am more

able to connect with my creator in a real and authentic way. I am, more than ever, convinced that God is passionate about our inner journey and sees way beyond behaviour to the core of who we are, and works patiently and lovingly with that sacred centre, drawing out the gifts and beauty that reside there. Because of this I am able to live each day more fully, freely and with greater compassion for myself and others.

Brenda Shearer

What's So Bad About Divorce?

How often do we hear Malachi 2:16 "For I hate divorce, says the Lord God Almighty"(NRSV) quoted in and around church, yet when do we hear Jeremiah 3:8 "I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of her adulteries."(NIV)? If you are a part of the church and have at some point in your life been divorced I'm sure you will have heard the Malachi verse; thought about this verse; hated this verse; and inwardly wanted to scream out 'I'll kill the next person who mentions that verse in my hearing'. I believe this imbalance leaves many church members with a distorted view of how God pictures divorce and divorced people and leads to a lot of unnecessary hurt and pain.

Let me give you an example. I know of a woman who ended up having to spend a lot of energy and effort fending off the advances of the men her ex-husband kept sending in her direction because his church

taught that the ONLY grounds for divorce and re-marriage was adultery and he had met a new woman and wanted to marry her. If this were not so tragic for those involved it might be funny.

The Bible does have a lot to say about divorce. The Old Testament clearly allows a man to give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away. By the time of Jesus this was being so abused that women were being sent off with nothing on the flimsiest of reasons. So Jesus added some constraints to the whole divorce issue. He clearly did allow divorce in the case of adultery. The apostle Paul in his later writings allowed divorce where a person had been abandoned by their partner. So clearly divorce is **not** the unforgivable sin that some Christians have made it out to be. The Bible is actually not a good book to look in for your specific case circumstances. If we search its pages for a reference we may well search in vain.

I suggest we look at the bigger picture. Is divorce God's ideal for your life? Clearly the answer to that is no. Would God rather we worked through our problems and if possible restore our marriages? That seems to be God's preferred option. But does this mean we are somehow out of favour with and abandoned by God if we divorce? Absolutely not! God has done and will do whatever it takes to have and maintain a relationship with us. Divorce cannot separate you from God. Only you can separate you from God.

Another question that comes up is the issue of remarriage after divorce. This can be a very complex question without a lot of clear direction in scripture. However I believe that God is a God of grace and mercy. A God who specialises in second chances and new beginnings. I believe that applies to divorce and remarriage as much as anything else. Is divorce God's ideal for us? No, clearly it is not. But does God condemn us to a life on our own after divorce? No, He does not.

Most people within the church are all too familiar with the verse from Malachi and Jesus teaching on divorce which seems to limit the acceptable circumstances for divorce to adultery. (I don't believe that adultery is the only scriptural grounds for divorce and re-marriage, but I don't have the space for a thorough examination of all the texts on divorce here.) Therefore when someone says that they are leaving their spouse and getting a divorce, or that their spouse has left them and they are divorcing, the reaction from those within the church is very often less than helpful.

Divorce is just about the most devastating experience that you can put a person through and expect them to survive. It has a massive negative impact on a person's self confidence and self-esteem and can literally leave a person incapable of functioning at a normal level for quite some time.

Divorce leaves a person feeling isolated and lonely and unfortunately the reaction of many people in church only makes that worse. I have heard from many women who have recently divorced, their stories of walking into church or a church event and watching all the women grab hold of their

husbands. Suddenly you go from being a friend to being a threat all in the space of a change of address. Then there are those who feel it is their bound duty as a 'brother or sister in Christ' to tell you that you are in danger of the fires of hell unless you return to the spouse you have just left. Never mind the years of emotional or even physical abuse that have caused you to leave in the first place. Unfortunately for many people the feelings of isolation and separation from others is only reinforced by the reaction of people within the church.

Not everyone within the church is negative and condemning however. There are those who want to do their best to help you when you are going through this hard time. Unfortunately, though well meaning, they can end up being very unhelpful indeed. Advice like "It's been three months now, it's time to get over it and get on with your life" can cause a great deal of pain and confusion for a person going through divorce. Or that "the pathway to healing is through forgiveness. All you need to do is forgive your ex-husband who just traded you in for his 20 something secretary." These can be extremely destructive comments. Forgiveness is a huge issue and not to be dealt with tritely.

Many church people seem to feel like they have to 'fix you' and therefore they end up offering a lot of unhelpful and sometimes even damaging advice. Many don't feel comfortable to just sit with you while you cry for an hour. They tend to want to do something to take your pain away. Just being there is the best thing they can do.

However, I believe the other side of that is that a good church can also be the best place in the world to heal from divorce. Not all churches see divorce as an unforgivable sin. Not all Christians condemn or try to fix you. Not all married Christians treat you as a threat to their partner.

Divorce can also be devastating to a one's spirituality. It can be so emotionally devastating that up to 85% of a person's energy is used up in emotional survival. This often leaves little or no energy for spirituality and a relationship with God. It is very hard to maintain a relationship with God when it's a

constant struggle to find the energy to get out of bed in the morning. Add to that negative reactions from others and divorce can have huge undermining effects on a person's relationship with God.

When self confidence and self image have taken the kind of hit that divorce causes it is very hard to accept that any other person could care for you, let alone God. When half of your friends have rejected you because they sided with your ex-spouse it can be hard to accept that God has not rejected you also.

Our spirituality, our relationship with God is one of the most personal and intimate aspects of our lives. For most of us we share the depths of that with very few people. The only thing that comes close to the same level of intimacy is a person's relationship with their spouse and they are often the only one's they share the depths of their spiritual relationship with. The two relationships can become linked and when one relationship is broken the other can also be very badly damaged.

When we get married most of us stand in church 'before God' in a sense and promise

to love and live with this other person for the rest of our lives. For those of us who are Christian at the time of our marriage, at a subconscious level I think we have this expectation of spending not just this life but eternity with this person we have married. When the marriage fails we feel like we have failed - we can easily feel like we have let God down and lost our eternal partner. This can be completely shattering. While God never leaves us on a human level we can feel like we have lost **both** of the most important and intimate relationships we have ever had. No wonder Gods says "I hate divorce".

"I hate divorce says the Lord God Almighty". Well I've been divorced and I hate it too! But, I believe the reason God says 'I hate divorce' is not because it's an unforgivable sin, but because of the pain and devastation it causes in peoples lives. I believe God hates anything which causes pain, suffering and distress in the lives of people, and in that respect divorce is no different from any other pain causing event.

If you have had books from the Spirited Exchanges library on loan for longer than a couple of months can you please send them back to us at: **PO Box 11551, Wellington.**

Some have been out for well over a year and others are waiting for them.

I have seen
no joy
today
and seen
no hope
today,
but experienced
a little faith

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