**What I Wish Pastors Knew About Divorce**

Thirty years ago in February 1985, I got divorced. I’ve lived fifty-nine years. Without a doubt divorce was the worst season of my life.

Nothing I’ve suffered since that time even comes close. Not a wayward child, not a stroke, not the betrayal of a close friend, not job loss, not watching the collapse of a ministry, not the death of a parent, not a root canal when the Novocain didn’t work—absolutely nothing compares to the horrific pain of having a spouse choose, “I Don’t” after vowing, “I Do.”

So what do you do with that kind of pain and shame?

You give it to God. And He forms something beautiful out of the ashes.

God took the cinders of my shattered heart and created a new purpose. I learned that God does hate divorce, but not for the reasons we learn in most churches—it breaks His law. No, the Almighty’s root reason is much more intimate, more affectionate. God knows that divorce deeply wounds and attempts to destroy His precious Beloved. Divorce endeavors to steal, kill, and destroy God’s creation. Divorce tried to assassinate me.

That’s why God hates divorce.

When divorce does occur, God can use it. He is so mighty that the sins done to us—and the sins done by us—can be used for His glory, if we let Him. And that’s what He did for me. He gave me a passion for the hurting by bringing this verse to life;

*“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me, for the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to comfort the brokenhearted and to proclaim that captives will be released and prisoners will be freed. He has sent me to tell those who mourn that the time of the Lord’s favor has come.”* Isaiah 61:1-2a (NLT)

For more than twenty-five years I’ve ministered to the divorced through creating resources and leading support groups. And for those who have ears to hear, and the desire to have a heart like Christ, this is what I wish pastors and the church understood about divorce.

* **It takes two to get married, and only one to break the vow.**

Please stop placing both spouses under one sin. Just because a sin has occurred, it doesn’t mean both spouses sinned.

And as much as we would like to believe there is gender equality in the church, that rarely happens during a divorce. For some reason the church blames the wife when her husband chooses to have an affair. I’ve never witnessed a church saying to a man, “You should have given her more sex, and then she wouldn’t have left you for another man.” But I’ve lost count of the women who tell me this is what their pastor, or church leader said to them, after a husband’s infidelity.

That’s not to say men aren’t ostracized by the church when a wife leaves. Sometimes, they are ignored or tossed aside. But they typically aren’t criticized and reprimanded for a wife’s sinful decision.

* **There is usually more to the story.**

I’ve learned over the years how to detect when, “a piece is missing” in the marital account. Don’t assume you know the entire situation, because there are often hidden issues. And a manipulator is masterful at hiding those things, especially from church leaders.

* **Wake UP!! Admit there is a problem.**

After watching thousands get divorced I’ve observed three main reasons why marriages fail (hint: it’s not money). They are: addiction, adultery, abuse. Most of the church-related marriage classes focus on Venus and Mars, communication, respect, and intimacy. Those are great subjects for the couple who merely needs a “tune up.” However, when issues such as pornography, abuse, manipulation, drugs or alcohol, domestic domination, or an extramarital affair are involved those classes don’t work. Ironically, they can exacerbate the problem because the offender often uses the information to his/her advantage.

* **Minister to stepfamilies**

It breaks my heart that so few churches recognize the need to reach second marriages, and their unique needs. Many shun the idea saying, “It condones divorce.” Ridiculous. We need to decide if our church is going to be part of divorce problem, or the solution. Stepfamilies shy away from church due to shame. Isn’t this the entire reason Jesus came, to seek and save the lost? Stepfamilies are truly an untapped mission field. And ministering to them prevents another divorce!!

* **You don’t know-what you don’t know**

Most pastors don’t truly understand divorce, single parenting or remarriage. That’s a good thing. However, if we are going to be salt and light in today’s world, pastors need to surround themselves with people like me who do understand. I grew up with divorced parents and two stepmoms. I’ve been divorced, remarried and I’m a stepmom of twenty-nine years. I get it!! Let people like me teach you how to reach this hurting audience. They are panting for help, but do not see the church as a place to find it.

There will be some reading this article who will label me as “soft on divorce.” Nothing could be further from the truth. They will piously site bible verses and attempt to label me as unbiblical. Legalism is easy. Loving like Christ is much harder. It’s messy and inconvenient.

Divorce nearly killed me when my parent’s split, and then it attempted to murder me again when my husband walked out. You will be hard pressed to find anyone who hates divorce more than I do. But the truth is I love divorced people, because Jesus does.

And He sacrificed everything to prove it.

Will you? Will your church?

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Laura Petherbridge is an international author and speaker who serves couples and single adults with topics on relationships, stepfamilies, divorce prevention, and divorce recovery. She is the author of When “I Do” Becomes “I Don’t”—Practical Steps for Healing During Separation and Divorce, 101 Tips for The Smart Stepmom, and The Smart Stepmom, co-authored with Ron Deal. Laura is a featured expert on the DivorceCare DVD series. She has spoken at the Billy Graham Training Center and has been featured on Focus on the Family. Laura and her pastor husband of twenty-nine years, Steve, live in Summerfield, FL.