

Westboro Baptist Church
3701 West 12th Street
Post Office Box 1886
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July 29, 1980

Calvary Baptist Church
The Baptist Examiner
Post Office Box 71
Ashland, Kentucky 41101

Dear Brethren:

As we understand it, Calvary Baptist Church publishes The Baptist Examiner. We refer to your issue of June 14, 1980, being Vol. 50, No. 23, WHOLE NUMBER 2278, and particularly to the lead article therein by Joe Wilson entitled: "The Divorced and Remarried Preacher – A Proposed Solution."

Brother Wilson indicates that he has put away the wife of his youth and that Brother Fred Halliman has done likewise. Each of those brethren apparently thereafter took another wife, and each notwithstanding desires to preach. Brother Wilson writes in vindication of the entitlement of a man to preach who has put away the wife of his youth and taken another.

Westboro Baptist Church looks upon such a thing as a very serious matter requiring careful and prayerful attention. Brother Wilson's article is not exhaustive. Substantial questions remain unanswered therein. We believe the subject should be thoroughly aired, and that honest dialogue and possibly debate is indicated.

Brother Wilson's article is too simplistic. It hangs entirely on Matthew 19:9 and 1 Corinthians 7:15. He says there are two Bible grounds for divorce and remarriage: (1) adultery (Matthew 19:9); and, (2) desertion (1 Corinthians 7:15). He then leaps a great chasm and concludes that therefore he and Brother Halliman are entitled to preach. He nowhere states that he divorced the wife of his youth because she committed adultery or because she deserted him. He nowhere states that Brother Halliman divorced the wife of his youth because she committed adultery or because she deserted him.

Furthermore, neither Matthew 19:9 nor 1 Corinthians 7:15 provide that a man who is divorced and remarried to another may be a preacher. Hence, even if Brother Wilson's interpretation of Matthew 19:9 and 1 Corinthians 7:15 were correct (which we will otherwise demonstrate hereinafter), that would not entitle either Brother Wilson or Brother Halliman to preach. At most, those brethren would possibly be justified in putting away the wives of their youth and marrying others.

The qualifications for preachers set forth in 1 Timothy 3 require that a preacher rule well his own house having his children in subjection with all gravity. Brother Wilson's house consists of himself, the wife of his youth, and the children of that union. If Brother Wilson has put away the wife of his youth and the children of that union, he obviously is not ruling his house well. The same applies to Brother Halliman. If a man know not how to rule his own house, how can he take care of the church of God?

We of course do not know why Brother Wilson was unable to rule his house well, but he is the head of that house and the savior of that body (Ephesians 5:23). The same applies to Brother Halliman.

It appears that John Gill and Matthew Henry in their commentaries both agree in part with the position of Joe Wilson on Matthew 19:9 and 1 Corinthians 7:15. However, Gill, Henry, and we presume even Brother Wilson and Brother Halliman would all agree that the matter of putting away the wife of one's youth and marrying another is a most grave and extraordinary action that must be done if at all only under the most extreme and aggravating circumstances. The following is found at Volume VIII, p. 647, of Gill's Exposition of the New Testament:

"The believing party being threatened with a desertion, ought as much as possible to seek for peace and reconciliation, and do all that can be to prevent a departure; for saints are called by the grace of God, to follow after and cultivate peace, not only with one another in their Christian communion as saints, but with all men, even their enemies, and especially with such as are so nearly allied; wherefore the departure should not be easily admitted, or a new marriage be suddenly entered into, reconciliation, if it can be obtained, being most eligible and becoming a Christian."

Moreover, those circumstances in each particular case must be scrutinized very closely and painstakingly by the church involved. The church of the Lord Jesus Christ is a judicial body exercising judicial powers and functions over its members (1 Corinthians 5:12 and 1 Corinthians 2:15).

Such a judicial inquiry by the appropriate local church would include questioning in the following areas:

(a) What are the facts regarding the wife of his youth, her name and age, date and place of marriage, place of current residence, number and ages of children, date and place of divorce, statement of charges in the papers of divorce and final decree of divorce, what grounds were alleged, did the husband or the wife seek or petition the court for a divorce, etc.?

(b) Did Brother Wilson sue the wife of his youth for divorce? What grounds did he allege for such divorce in the petition he filed with the court? What grounds for divorce were found by the court to exist in the formal decree of divorce? Was a counterclaim filed by the wife? What grounds were alleged by the wife on the counterclaim? Did the wife dispute or deny that she committed adultery or deserted the plaintiff husband? Was a trial on the merits had with each side represented by counsel and thoroughly entitled to present all of the facts?

(c) More importantly perhaps, did Brother Wilson dwell with the wife of his youth according to knowledge, giving honor unto her as unto the weaker vessel? (1 Peter 3). Did Brother Wilson love his wife properly as Christ loved the church and gave himself for it? (Ephesians 5). Did Brother Wilson properly forsake his father and his mother and cleave to his wife? (Genesis 2:24 and Matthew 19:5).

It is obviously not enough for Brother Wilson merely to announce that the wife of his youth committed adultery and he therefore had Bible grounds to put her away and marry another. It is obviously not enough for Brother Wilson merely to announce that his wife deserted him and he had therefore Bible grounds to put her away and marry another. When Brother Wilson or any other person makes his plea to the church of the Lord Jesus Christ that he has put away the wife of his youth and has married another on Bible grounds, he thereby invokes the jurisdiction of that church and subjects himself automatically to the closest kind of adjudicatory processes known to man. The church of the Lord Jesus Christ begins with the proposition announced in Malachi 2:14-16:

“Yet ye say, why? Because the Lord hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously; yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant. And did not he make one? Yet had he the residue of the spirit. And why one? That he might seek a godly seed. Therefore, take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth. For the Lord, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away.”

Thus, the ultimate question to be decided by the church is whether or not Brother Wilson, Brother Halliman, or any other person similarly situated, dealt treacherously against the wife of his youth.

Westboro Baptist Church does not believe that Matthew 19:9 authorizes one to put away the wife of his youth and marry another on the grounds of adultery. The word adultery is not used in Matthew 19:9. Fornication is not the same as adultery. (Galatians 5:19). Fornication involves illegitimate sexual conduct prior to marriage, and adultery involves illegitimate sexual conduct after marriage. The fornication matter is set forth in Deuteronomy 22:13-21. If a brother takes a wife and discovers on the marriage bed that she does not have the tokens of virginity, Matthew 19:9 authorizes him to put her away for fornication, meaning her improper conduct prior to marriage. It constitutes fraud upon the marriage bed and entitles the offended brother to an annulment. It is far different from adultery.

The great point of the matter appears to be that if the man is ruling his house well, dwelling with his wife according to knowledge and giving her honor as the weaker vessel, loving her as he ought, exercising all of his powers and duties as head of the home, as shepherd and husbandman, and walking in the fear of the Lord, it is virtually inconceivable that a wife under those circumstances would either commit adultery or desert such a husband. Hence the burden upon Brother Wilson or Brother Halliman to demonstrate to the church of the Lord Jesus Christ that he had Bible grounds would be a heavy burden indeed. Brother Wilson in his article made no attempt whatsoever to bear such a burden and demonstrate that either he or Brother Halliman had Bible grounds to put away the wife of the youth and marry another.

Westboro Baptist Church does not believe that 1 Corinthians 7:15 authorizes a man to put away the wife of his youth and marry another on the grounds of desertion. Not a word is said about marrying another in that passage. Not a word is said about putting her away in that passage. The passage merely provides that a brother may let the infidel depart and is not under bondage to grovel after her to stay. But again, the point of

the matter is why would any woman desert a husband who is dwelling with her in all respects as the Bible requires?

Brother Wilson makes several other emotional arguments for his proposition, all of which are inapposite. If he cannot prevail on Matthew 19:9, 1 Corinthians 7:15, and 1 Timothy 3, no policy arguments can save his lost case. To suggest, even rhetorically, that it would perhaps be better to simply kill the wife of the youth, or live with her without marriage, is a frivolous argument. Likewise, to suggest that Brother Wilson and Brother Halliman should somehow be excused because of the good works they have accomplished is a frivolous argument, and begs the question.

Westboro Baptist Church sincerely desires to fellowship Calvary Baptist Church, and to support the work of Calvary Baptist Church and The Baptist Examiner. Brother Wilson and Brother Halliman are closely connected with that work. The collateral jurisdiction of Westboro Baptist Church has been invoked by Calvary Baptist Church in the promulgation of Brother Wilson's article. We therefore believe that we are entitled to inquire whether a duly constituted church of the Lord Jesus Christ has ever made appropriate inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the event of putting away the wife of the youth and marrying another relative to Brother Wilson and Brother Halliman.

If such an inquiry and adjudication has been made we would like to know what church of the Lord Jesus Christ made such an inquiry with respect to each of these brethren. We would like to know the findings and conclusion. If such an inquiry and adjudication has not been made, we respectfully suggest that it should be made. The burden of proof is on Brother Wilson to affirmatively demonstrate that he put away the wife of his youth and married another because of adultery or desertion, and that he did not deal treacherously against the wife of his youth and merely uses the adultery and desertion arguments as a pretext. The same applies to Brother Halliman. Only when that has been done will it be time to discuss whether or not those brethren are entitled to preach. If that has been done then the churches of the Lord Jesus Christ are entitled to know it. We shall await your advises in this regard.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

Sincerely,

WESTBORO BAPTIST CHURCH

By: Fred W. Phelps, Pastor

emp

cc: Brother Joe Wilson
Brother Fred Halliman