

Is Marriage Still Sacred?

Many high-profile preachers are ending their marriages—at a time when the divorce rate among Christians is higher than ever. What's behind this epidemic?

Last August, within a single 48-hour period, breaking stories about two ministry couples lit up the news with headlines like these that appeared in newspapers, magazines and Internet reports across the country: “Georgia televangelist assaulted by preacher husband in Atlanta”; “Co-pastors of Tampa megachurch split.”

Not surprisingly, the details of the two separate stories fueled plenty of TV talk shows, blogs, radio broadcasts and office water-cooler huddles. What was surprising, however, was that these stories involved prominent Christians respected by many people for their nationally popular ministries.

Televangelist Juanita Bynum alleged that she was beaten, choked and kicked August 22 in an Atlanta hotel parking lot by her pastor husband, Bishop Thomas W. Weeks III. She and Weeks married in 2002 in a private ceremony but held a million-dollar wedding celebration in 2003 televised by Trinity Broadcasting Network and watched by an estimated 80 million viewers.

One day later, on the evening of August 23, pastors Randy and Paula White announced to their 22,000-member Without Walls International Church in Tampa, Florida, that they planned to divorce after 18 years of marriage, withholding an explanation for their split.

Since then, Bynum too has filed for divorce, claiming her marriage was “irretrievably broken” due to cruel treatment and irreconcilable differences, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported. Weeks was to stand trial in March for the alleged attack.

Meanwhile, he has continued with his Georgia-based Global Destiny Church and its international ministries and in February was to hold a conference with his Faith-Based Network addressing the effects of domestic violence. He told the Journal-Constitution in December that during his marriage to Bynum he had been physically abused—"struck on the face and in the head" and "choked"—by her.

The Whites have gone their separate ways. Randy White has stayed on as pastor of Without Walls, and Paula White has continued with her multifaceted outreaches and businesses that include Paula White Ministries, Life by Design Empowerment Center in New York City, and a part-time leadership position at Family Praise Center in San Antonio.

Each of the four ministers has been divorced before.

Domino Effect

While a stunned church nationwide was still dealing with the sting from these reports weeks afterward, the ministers involved were returning to their pulpits and conference engagements as if nothing had happened.

But something had happened, according to several Christian leaders Charisma spoke with. They say the negative impact of divorce among Christian leaders is felt in the church long after the ministers have ceased their confessions and the media have moved on to fresh stories.

When a preacher's marriage fails it says that "our [gospel] message isn't quite as powerful as we claim it to be," says Tony Evans, senior pastor of Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship in Dallas and host of The Alternative With Dr. Tony Evans radio and television broadcast.

He adds that the line between Christian values and a valueless world is further blurred, and it calls for action by the church: "The world has entered the church with its weaknesses. We've got to reverse its influence."

The U.S. Census confirms that just about half of all marriages end in divorce. And a 2004 study conducted by the Barna Research Group, which tracks lifestyle trends from a Christian perspective, suggests that Christians divorce at the same rate as nonbelievers.

Bynum and Weeks and the Whites are part of a growing list of present-day Christian ministers, authors and entertainers who have divorced or divorced and remarried. They include, to name a few, former Southern Baptist Convention president Charles Stanley; Marriage Plus Ministries founders Ray and Arlyne Mossholder; author Hal Lindsey; preachers Noel Jones, Clarence McClendon, Mario Murillo and Ray McCauley; evangelists Jim Bakker, Larry Lea and Richard Roberts; and entertainers Amy Grant, Michael English, Hezekiah Walker, Sandi Patty and BeBe Winans.

The reaction of shock and disappointment by a public that feels betrayed is to be expected, says Jimmy Evans, co-host and founder of the MarriageToday TV program and pastor of Trinity Fellowship Church in Amarillo, Texas. The results of the hurt feelings vary—from inability to trust godly leaders to justification of personal shortcomings.

“It is devastating because it translates as, ‘If someone as anointed and godly as them can’t make it, then neither can I,’” Evans says. “You lose the ability to believe in someone who gave up like that.”

There is also a “domino effect” in the ranks of the church at large when godly leaders divorce, according to George O. Wood, general superintendent of the Assemblies of God, who says those leaders then become scapegoats for other couples whose marriages also are rocky. “When you see leaders fail, you’ll also see couples who use the leaders’ failure as a resignation of their own,” Wood notes.

Psychologist Richard D. Dobbins, founder and retired CEO of

Emergence Ministries in Akron, Ohio, saw the same thing, saying his clients often pointed to others to justify their own shortcomings.

“When I tried to encourage people in troubled marriages to soften their hearts and reconcile, they’d have a whole litany of ministers that they pointed to to rationalize their behavior,” he says.

Historically among Christians the marriage union has been upheld as sacred. Still, most church circles allow for two circumstances as justification for divorce—adultery, in which one spouse has sexual intercourse outside the marriage; and abandonment, in which an unbelieving spouse leaves the marriage. Verses often used to support these positions are Matthew 5:32 and 1 Corinthians 7:10-15. But the bar has always been set higher for ranking church leaders, in light of texts such as 1 Timothy 3:2,12, which admonish a leader to be the husband of one wife. So why so much more divorce now—from the pew to the pulpit?

Some believe it’s due to the superstar status afforded to ministers whose wealth and influence make them bigger-than-life figures like movie stars.

“That’s a big mistake that the institutional church makes,” Dobbins claims. He says ministers many times see themselves as “exceptions” for whom God “makes allowances” that He doesn’t make for the average believer.

Others believe the stage is set for conflict when both partners in a high-profile marriage or ministry are pastors or when their spousal roles aren’t in line with the Bible. Blind ambition is to blame, others suggest. “There is a group that is driven so much that they have separate lives and no time for each other,” MarriageToday’s Evans says.

He believes that was the case with the Whites. Randy planned at one time to start a church in Malibu, California; Paula was

expanding Paula White Ministries; and they planned to continue their home church in Tampa. "They were doing too much," he observes.

Having a balanced ministry requires having a balanced marriage, Evans says. He notes Joyce Meyer, who was divorced before her conversion, and her current husband, Dave Meyer, as prime examples.

"There's a high-profile woman and her husband who travels with her. Someone has to yield; otherwise it doesn't work," says Evans, who speaks on his Web site about the difficulties he and his wife worked through early in their own marriage.

But unrealistic expectations are most often to blame for a minister's failed marriage, he adds. "Part of what ruins ministries is the demand that the church puts on them." In many pastorates the husband "has to marry everybody, bury everybody, be there for the young and the old, and his wife has to be a church butterfly."

Divorce scenarios are becoming so common in the church today that denominational leaders are being forced to rethink ordination policies.

The Assemblies of God last August adopted a new restoration process that allows ministers who have been divorced and remarried to move into ministerial positions. "It was obvious that the Lord was calling and equipping people for ministry," Wood says. "If a person was abandoned, we didn't want to set them up as a victim a second time so that they couldn't hold [ministerial] credentials."

Other actions or choices can strain a marriage greatly, though Wood doesn't believe Scripture necessarily suggests divorce as a solution for them.

"There are situations where there's egregious spousal abuse; where, mistakenly, pastors have told wives to submit even with

beatings, or in the case where there are drugs, bipolar issues or other malfunctions,” he says.

“In those situations, I think the believer is called to be at peace if they can no longer live with the spouse, but I don’t see any Scripture [advocating divorce] under those circumstances or a call for remarriage.”

Ministering Hope

Most of the ministers Charisma spoke with believe reconciliation should be the goal for any couple. And, they add, ministry leaders must be accountable to others.

“Many churches are not part of an organized body. There’s a top-down leadership and a handpicked board, and often there is no real accountability,” Wood says of head leaders in churches or ministries who decide to marry, divorce and remarry—often without biblical cause. “The leader presents himself as God’s person for that role, and boards can very easily succumb to the pressure.”

Although a leader sometimes is the victim of his or her spouse’s actions, what Wood has witnessed more typically during his career is marriages ending for the sake of one partner’s personal convenience. “What I’ve seen over the years is that [ministers] get tired of one marriage and get another—and a gullible public follows them.”

Tony Evans has taken the unique approach of utilizing “church courts” to deal with marital grievances in his congregation. The court comprises church leaders, judges and lawyers who hear cases weekly.

Participating parties agree to abide by a ruling before the case is ever reviewed. The rulings are not legally binding, but Evans says legal courts have sometimes used the church court decisions as part of their own deliberations.

If the church court finds that there is a biblical reason or

basis for a separation, a bill of divorcement is written. Evans says this happens in only about 25 percent of the cases. He believes it makes more sense to involve the church before a court of law when the future of something so biblical as a marriage is on the line.

“We go to the church to get an OK for the wedding but to a judge for the OK to divorce,” he points out. “The responsibility of the church is to teach and manage the marriage process. It’s got to be clear that the sin has been addressed—and that shouldn’t be decided by the two people involved.”

Evans and others Charisma spoke with say that any minister who divorces should undergo a restoration, or a cool-down period, and be expected to answer to a governing or accountability body.

Jack Hayford, president of the Foursquare Church and the founding pastor of The Church on the Way in Van Nuys, California, says marital growth shouldn’t be treated as an afterthought. “Sustaining and growing a marriage union,” he says, “is a qualifier for ministry.”

Divorce has become so common in the body of Christ, and the need so dire, he says, that the Foursquare Church is “moving aggressively” to get a pastoral-crisis intervention program up and running. In its infancy, the program will set out to nurture pastors who have marital problems and are suffering from burnout.

Divorce has been an issue at the top of the list for the Charismatic Leadership Council, a body of about 100 major Christian leaders who gather once a year to discuss pressing matters affecting the church. Hayford has served as moderator for the group the last four years.

“The leadership council began meeting four years ago because of this very issue [divorce],” Hayford points out.

The Assemblies of God already had procedures in place before it adopted the policy addendum last summer for considering whether to grant ministerial credentials to people who had divorced before they became Christians.

But the new policy allows those who have divorced or divorced and remarried since their conversions to be considered for re-entry into ministry if infidelity or abandonment by an unbelieving spouse caused the divorce.

Credentialed ministers who have been sexually immoral, Wood adds, also can apply for rehabilitation—a process that includes professional counseling, mentorship and quarterly reports. Still, a minimum two-year suspension from ministry is required during which the minister is removed from all duties the first year, and duties for the remainder of the probationary period are restricted.

Dobbins believes God can continue to use a divorced minister for ministry, but he also believes divorced ministers inevitably “leave a trail of disappointment, frustration and cynicism.”

“I’ve known of several instances where God in His grace has chosen to use [divorced ministers], but in every case when a minister’s marriage is broken by divorce, an ideal is compromised,” he explains. “I lived through the ’80s during the fall of megaministers. Here we are 20-plus years later, and the same thing is happening.”

All those interviewed by Charisma agreed on one thing: There is hope and redemption for a troubled marriage.

To minimize future divorces, Wood advises broaching the subject early with youth. “Teach young people while they’re single,” he says. “If the local church will do its best to minister on subjects of marriage and family and to provide counseling, that can be a great help.”

Dobbins says that church members play a pivotal role, too: “First, ask God for forgiveness for elevating a minister to an unrealistic lofty position. Next, learn the difference between the theatrics of the ministry and the servitude of ministry.”

MarriageToday’s Evans says it’s imperative that a minister has nights at home with his or her spouse or family. “We decided we’re not going to build a church on exhausted men and women,” he says. “Church is built on strong marriages.”

He further advises that ministers be transparent with their members.

“I’ve told our congregation that I’m going to step off the pedestal before I get knocked off,” he says. “I want to be a good example, but I’m not perfect. It’s unfair to allow people to believe that.”

When it comes to ministers and Christian leaders—because so many people look to them as examples—Evans says there is a marriage standard to maintain. “You can be human. But you can’t give up.”

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