



Frequently Asked Questions

JANUARY 19, 2015 | [COLUMNS](#), [BIG QUESTIONS](#)

Ethics

Q Jesus taught that adultery is the only ground for divorce (Matt. 19:3-9, [5:31-32](#); [Mark 10:2-12](#); [Luke 16:18](#)). Does this mean that you cannot divorce an abusive spouse?

A Whenever there is abuse, the first step should always be to remove the victim to safety. Jesus' teaching cannot be used to force a person to remain in an abusive relationship at all costs.

Jesus' statements must be understood in their original context. Normally, in ancient Judaism, only men could divorce their wives unilaterally. Only under extreme circumstances could a woman request a court to force her husband to divorce her. Hence, Jesus was entering into an ancient debate among Jewish rabbis that focused primarily on how easy or difficult it was for a man to divorce a woman. Within the framework of this debate, Jesus emphasized God's original intent for the marriage covenant, siding with the position that restricted divorce to only one extreme ground—that is, adultery or infidelity on the woman's part.

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In this historical cultural context, divorced Jewish women were vulnerable to becoming poor, marginalized, and disgraced. By siding with

the most restrictive position in this divorce debate, Jesus was also protecting Jewish wives from being vulnerable to a husband's whim. Jesus was defending the more vulnerable partner in his ancient Jewish culture's marriage customs.

In that spirit, I believe that Jesus would defend the abused partner and would not insist on anyone risking their well-being and their very life by remaining in an abusive marriage. This aligns with a long tradition in church history that recognizes Jesus' "exception clause" as applying beyond only adultery to other instances that are equally destructive to the marriage covenant, including abuse and abandonment.

—*Shiao Chong is a chaplain at York University in Toronto, Ontario.*

Relationships

Q My husband is an angry man who sometimes yells and throws things, also at me. Now that our children are grown I'm not sure I still want to be married to him. He says he doesn't know what comes over him, and he is always sorry when it happens. What can I do?

A The person struggling to know how to express anger must take concrete steps to understand and deal with this problem. You have a right to live in a house where you know you are safe. Anger is energy that needs to be discharged in a safe way. For example, chopping wood or yelling at an inanimate object away from others are safe; yelling at someone you love or putting a fist through a wall are not.

In a safe place like a restaurant, explain how difficult it is for you to have to worry when his anger might explode next, and tell him that you cannot continue to live this way. Be clear that from now on you will expect him to abide by a rule of nonviolence. If he won't agree, or refuses to take actual steps to get help, move out or insist (with the help of a lawyer and/or the police) that he move out for now.

If a separation is necessary, remember that having different addresses does not mean you are no longer married. Rather than thinking of it as ending your marriage, think of the separation as an incentive for your husband to take responsibility for his anger and as motivation (if he loves you) to take concrete steps toward change.

And pray together, if possible. Ask for help from the Holy Spirit, who is our counselor and comforter in times of trouble.

—*Judy Cook is a family therapist and a member of Meadowlands Fellowship CRC in Ancaster, Ontario.*

Church

Q At our last elders' meeting, we lapsed the membership of a large group of non-attenders. I believe there were 23 of them. Now I'm feeling a little guilty about this. Should I?

A It sounds like that feeling might be appropriate. It depends on whether the elders had truly done a thorough pastoral job while in contact with as many of these people as possible. If so, and if you made a decision on each person, one at a time, you're off the hook. But if not, and if, heaven forbid, this was a "cleanup of the records" done in one fell swoop, then you should share your feeling with your colleagues.

Synod insists on three conditions that must be met for elders to lapse membership. First, persons must "claim to be still committed to the Christian faith." Second, they must "claim to be worshipping elsewhere." And third, the consistory must not be "aware of any public sin requiring discipline" (Supplement, Art. 67, CRC [Church Order](#)).

If just one of these three conditions is not met, elders must continue their pastoral work so that no one "falls between the cracks." That further work should be of an inviting yet also disciplinary nature. Persistent shepherding is the order of the day. If the non-attenders reject Christ, they must know how serious that is. If they walk away from the church and its ministry, they must be reminded that regular worship is as important for their life of faith as watering is for their plants.

Yes, I do know that such shepherding is hard and time-consuming work often met with shrugs or threats. But it's far better and so much more satisfying than not having cared one bit.

—*Henry De Moor is professor of church polity emeritus, Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Mich. He's the author of [Christian Reformed Church Order Commentary](#) (Faith Alive, 2011).*