

# **Divorce & Remarriage: Practical Problems for Those Who Say Non-Christians are Not Amenable**

**By Martin Pickup**

One of the most heart-wrenching situations for any evangelist is talking with a couple about the gospel of Christ when that couple is in an unscriptural marriage. True repentance demands that any sinful behavior be ceased; there can be no divine pardon otherwise. But our hearts go out to people of the world who have failed to live by God's word, have divorced and remarried illicitly, yet now say they want to seek God. Doing so will be especially hard for them because it will demand that they dissolve a marital union that is inherently sinful.

Over the past year alone I have studied with four couples in precisely this circumstance. In all cases, they could see that their current marriages were in conflict with what the Bible said, yet all parties save one were unwilling to end their union in order to be right with God. My heart ached for these people, but I could do nothing other than "speak as the oracles of God" (1 Pet. 4:11). I could not baptize persons unwilling to repent, nor could our congregation accept them into our local fellowship.

But many brethren affirm that this is an incorrect way to handle these cases. They say that non-Christians are not amenable to Christ's marriage law. I believe that this view is unscriptural and that it has been refuted in many fine articles over the years. Yet many brethren remain unconvinced; abstract argumentation has a hard time overcoming in their minds the harsh reality of what unscripturally married couples must face. I write this article with these brethren in mind. They reason like this: people of the world do not know the Bible, so how could they be held accountable for failing to live in accordance with its teaching on

divorce? It's just not fair for non-Christians to be amenable!

This kind of reasoning is largely ad hominem, yet it has force because it addresses the practical circumstances that occur often today. But there are also practical circumstances on the other side of the issue that the non-amenability position tends to ignore.

One of the persons with whom I recently studied had happened upon a liberal church of Christ while he was a young single man, and he learned the Bible's teaching about baptism for the remission of sins. After he was baptized, however, the congregation failed to teach him what Jesus said about divorce and remarriage and the man subsequently wound up in an unscriptural marriage. He did so with the full blessing of his congregation and, as far as he knew at the time, with the full blessing of God. Now all of us would agree that this Christian man was amenable to Jesus' teaching on divorce despite the unfortunate fact that his liberal brethren failed to instruct him properly. But consider this: I also studied this year with a man whose circumstances were precisely the same as the first individual except that he had happened upon a Baptist congregation who baptized him unscripturally. Now according to the non-amenability view, though the first man's current marriage was illicit, the second man's marriage was not illicit because, having been *unscripturally* baptized, he was not a true Christian and was therefore not yet obligated to abide by Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage. Now I ask you, if "fairness" is the standard for determining truth, what's fair about that?

But someone responds, "The first man was at least baptized scripturally and the second man was not. That makes all the difference." So one who is baptized properly is a Christian and amenable to Jesus' divorce law, but one who is not baptized properly is not amenable. Then let me raise this real-life scenario. It is not uncommon for Christians of many years to question

the validity of their baptism and want to be immersed again. Let's say this is the case with a Christian who unscripturally divorces and then marries again, but at some point he sincerely decides that when he was immersed at 12 years of age, he didn't understand what he was doing and now needs to be baptized properly. Do you see what the non-amenability position would demand? We now would have to say that his divorce and remarriage occurred *before* he became a Christian, so his new marriage was not illicit after all! If a Christian who unscripturally divorces and remarries can sincerely affirm that his baptism may have been invalid – *voilà!* – his congregation is forced to accept his (formerly) unlawful marriage.

“But all we are trying to do,” says the non-amenability advocate, “is to address the practical reality that people in the world today are not taught the truth about divorce. It wouldn't be fair for God to hold non-Christians accountable to Jesus' marriage laws.” But if that position is correct, what about the woman I studied with this year whose denominational church *did* teach her the truth on divorce and remarriage, but she divorced and remarried anyway. This woman may have been baptized unscripturally, but when she divorced her husband and married another man, she knew very well that it was contrary to what Jesus taught. She just didn't care. Now she wanted me to baptize her scripturally, yet she wanted to stay in her current unscriptural marriage. According to the non-amenability view, this woman would not need to dissolve her current marriage – even though she knew when she entered it that she was willfully violating what Jesus said! Does such a scenario square at all with what Jesus taught about repentance?

Again let me say that all of us agonize with people who are in unscriptural marriages. But appealing to the emotional difficulty of certain cases does not prove that Jesus' teaching on

divorce doesn't apply to non-Christians. As I have pointed out here, ad hominem arguments can be offered both ways. The bottom line is that we must preach what Jesus said about the permanency of marriage, something God set up for all mankind from the beginning of creation (Mark 10:6-12). Then we must wait for good and honest hearts to manifest themselves by showing whether they are willing to comply with God's teaching or not.