

Standing for God's Ideal

Remaining True to the Marriage Vows

Randy Langham

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To God be the glory.

Unit 1

Truth

Chapter 1

The Need for Truth

*Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you,
which comes upon you for your testing, as though some
strange thing were happening to you;*

1 Peter 4:12

“Holy nightmare! What have I gotten myself into?” Joe is sitting paralyzed. “Seems like everyone was telling me how wonderful marriage would be. Guys would say how much they enjoyed marriage. Society was saying, ‘Marriage is the greatest experience in life!’ What happened to me?”

Joe is thirty years old. He has grown up in the church and done everything he knew he was supposed to do. Everything he did turned to gold, so he thought. Yet now, on the night of the wedding his life turns to terror. Right before his eyes he sees the reality of what his marriage is to become. He is numb.

Joe does not know what to do. He is confused. He decides to go outside and sort out matters. Bodily, he goes outside. Mentally, he goes nowhere. He is emotionally petrified. His mind is frozen. He knows that marriages have their difficulties, but something seems extra strange about this relationship.

Joe decides to give it a go, with days turning into weeks, and weeks into years. At times his life feels like a runaway roller coaster jumping the track and speeding faster and faster out of control.

He finally decides to open up to others. As he does he is told to dump her because she is a loser. He doesn’t think that is right, but what should he do?

Eventually his worst fear becomes a reality. While at work in his office a man in a suit and tie walks up to him and asks, “Are you Joe Smith¹?” With a reply of yes Joe receives an envelope and watches the mysterious man walk away quickly. Once again, he is

stunned. Like a drowning swimmer grasping for anything to hold him up, Joe calls a friend. “Hey, my wife has filed for divorce. What do I do?” The friend lets out a big laugh, and says, “Good. Now you can go find a prettier wife.” Again, Joe sits stunned, thinking, “So much for help in my drowning. How nice of my friend to throw me an anchor.”

Joe goes to you for counseling. What lifeline can you throw to Joe?

It must be your day for marriage counseling. As soon as Joe walks out of the room, in walks Jen, and she tells her story.

Jen and Ben were active teenagers. After four years of living together and having two kids they decided to get married. Everything seemed normal until Jen became a Christian. She was thrilled about her new relationship with the Lord. She finally had real purpose for living and joy for life. It seems like everyone knew about her change because of her constant talking about Jesus.

Her husband noticed it too and wanted nothing to do with it. In a few weeks Ben filed for divorce. He said he had to go to church when he was young and didn’t want anything else to do with it now that he is grown.

Jen is sitting across the room from you in tears, pleading for some wisdom to save her marriage, hoping it could return to the way it had been. What do you recommend?

After you give your best words of wisdom you pray and she leaves. As she goes out the door a familiar face enters your room. You have known Juliet for years. She was raised in the church and waited for years in hopes of finding her Romeo. In her midthirties she finally found him. With all her experience in children’s ministry she looked forward not only to her knight in shining armor, but also to having her own kids and raising them as an example for others to follow.

After the initial greeting she unloads. Her marriage began well but several months later she discovered Romeo’s riotous past and present. She sits stunned, saying to herself, “What is going on? What just happened? What’s going to happen in the future? What do I do? I thought God promised me success and that all things would go well? What about God's promise to me that if I obey and

honor my parents as a child I would live a long life, and things would go well for me?"

You are silently taking in Juliet's situation. The work at the church has suffered terribly. Life is bad enough at the home front. Now the church people are noticing her deficiencies and are raising their voices at her. Of all the emotional and mental hurts encountered over the years, the worst have come from people she hoped would help. She told others "things are not right in my marriage," and the majority of comments thrown at her included "Juliet, if you were only mature these problems would not be taking place!" "Juliet, you need to realize that both of you were single adults for many years, and both of you are set in your ways!" "Juliet, you need to quit telling people your problems. Every marriage has its difficulties. Work them out yourself!" "Juliet, it's all your fault!"

She is drowning in pain, occasionally chancing another exposure in hopes of hearing wisdom, but usually hearing only an onslaught of "Juliet, don't you think you need to change [in this or that]?"

Only a few people know the details of her marriage problems. Oddly, the demands from her advisors outnumber the number of her advisors. One suggested she initiate the divorce because she had grounds. Another said she should stand her ground. One said she should keep her vows. Yet another said, "You need to dump the bum and get on with life!" Still others said, "Dr. Soandso on the Christian radio program says your marriage no longer exists because he broke his vow." "Doesn't your pastor want you to fight for your marriage?" "Juliet, you deserve better!"

Juliet finally ends her story with tears streaming down her face and stares at you with fear wondering if you too are about to beat her with a verbal club. What words of comfort would you give her?

After Juliet leaves your office you notice no one else in the waiting room and you slump with exhaustion. Then the phone rings. It's your old friend Bill, and he drops another bomb on your day.

He says he and Jill enjoyed years of bliss. Then one day something snapped inside her. She withdrew from life. Often for hours she would curl herself into the fetal position in the corner of a room. She was not herself.

They thought it would pass, but the severity worsened. The doctors prescribed pills, but that led to a dependence on drugs. Then she would disappear from the house for days. By then, she was not fulfilling any of her marital or motherly responsibilities and the financial losses were mounting.

Bill has done everything he knows to do. What would you suggest?

Sometimes you need to give the best possible advice. In other times you could delay in giving answers and wait until you do your homework. If you are brand new to this subject matter where would you go for answers?

The Approach for This Book

The libraries, counseling offices, and even pastors have a variety of viewpoints on divorce and remarriage. After you do your homework from these sources you may discover two common approaches that the authors and speakers give for deriving their conclusions.

One popular approach comes from the personal experiences of the authors or from the experiences of those close to the authors. For many who are Christians, additional scientific research and Bible verses are often sprinkled throughout their presentations.

Another popular approach comes from ministers and/or biblical scholars who evaluate the dozen or so scripture passages directly related to divorce. The authors suggest a biblical understanding of marriage and divorce comes from the study of these selected passages.

Then you come across this book. The approach in this book is very different. The first part of this book pursues where truth originates. This becomes the true foundation for building any faith structure. The next phase of this book looks at the big picture of truth and how it relates to life and eventually to aspects of

marriage. After presenting the big picture this book moves to the third phase which looks at the details of some related passages.

To add to the effect of this writing, I am a pastor and have had the painful experience of a marriage breakup. Yet, I still believe in the sanctity of marriage and in keeping my vows. My desire for you is that you will look beyond the black and white perspectives of dos and don'ts and move to the life of living color which God makes available to each of us when we put our trust in Him and apply His principles.

As you read this book you will find God's principles to be practical and not a bunch of rigid rules. His truths lead us to an abundant life filled with relevance.

Real-Life Story

In my first pastorate in Florida about three decades ago I met a wonderful couple. Prior to my meeting them they had had failed marriages. They later became Christians, regretted their past, and moved to Florida to start over with life. That was when I met them and invited them to a seven-week course designed for people who were separated, divorced, or remarried. They even accepted the invitation to host it at their house.

In the second week, his anger exploded, letting all of us know how upset he was at the course and that the material was "just a bunch of poppycock!" Somehow we continued, and even more amazingly, he applied the principles. Within the next few weeks the lives of both him and his wife changed dramatically. Every day the community knew when they returned home from work. This couple would sing loudly from the car about how much they loved Jesus. Wherever he was, if someone asked about his past, he would light up with excitement, and say, "Yes, my marriages failed, but now I'm a rebuild! Let me tell you what God has done for me!"

Back to Me

God did a great work in the lives of the Florida couple, but what about the rest of us? I had no idea what God would do with my life years into the future. I was struggling with what to do each

day. I made a vow before and on my wedding day that I would remain true to my word. I knew I should remain true to my vows, but I was unable to explain to others why it was the right choice.

What I needed was the right starting point, the absolutes, and build on that. I also needed to check to see if my convictions were correct. So what is the starting point for understanding what's best in marriage? Better yet, where can I find a source where every statement is always true?

In the next chapter we will look at common sources from which people draw their conclusions, and more importantly we will emphasize the one source of truth that is always right.

¹ All names in this chapter are fictitious.

Chapter 2

Sources of Truth

A man with one watch knows what time it is,
and a man with two watches could never be sure.
Segall's Law

When two different people tell you the time (hour, minutes, and seconds) on their wrist watches or on their grandfather clocks you never get the same answer. So which time is correct? Should time be determined by opinion polls? That is, should we ask several hundred people to note the time at a given instance and then declare the real time by that which exists on the most watches? Should the time on the oldest watchmaker in the room be declared the right time because he should know best? Or should we zero our watches to the newest watch in the room because it should be the most advanced and the most accurate?

When two different people tell you their convictions about marriage, divorce, and remarriage you rarely ever get the same answer. So which belief or conviction is correct? Should truth be determined by public opinion polls? That is, should we ask several hundred people what they believe and declare the truth to be whatever the majority believes? Should the beliefs of the oldest scholar and the one with the most number of educational degrees be declared truth because he or she should know best? Or should we zero our beliefs on what the youngest person believes because times change?

Let's go back in time to the first paragraph of this chapter. Be serious with your answer. How is the correct time in America determined? Because no two watches or clocks in the world run at the same speed identically a standard time has to be determined by declaring only one clock as the standard.

In the United States, engineers and government leaders have declared the standard clock to be the atomic clock in the

National Institute of Standards and Technology in Boulder, Colorado. Cell phones and computers regularly check with this clock to obtain the correct time. You can get the official time from the Colorado clock by going to www.time.gov.

Ok. You might say that was exciting to learn the true starting point to determine the right time in America. But what is the true starting point to determine the ideal for difficult and broken marriages? Who gets to determine the rightness or the wrongness of these topics?

Before we go further with this book, we must establish a common standard. Otherwise we have a “He said, she said” scenario. You can’t compete in athletics fairly if the two teams have different rule books. Neither can people discuss the topic of broken marriages sensibly unless they go by the same rules. Without a common standard, discussions go nowhere. So let’s dig in and see where truth is.

What person, place, or thing is always correct, always right, always accurate? Where can we go to be guaranteed a right answer every time about every subject matter? For sure, not the weather forecasters. For sure not the politicians. Not even the Internet is 100% reliable.

In the search for truth people often go to one of five areas. Four of these can be helpful ways to come to the truth, but only one is always right. Therefore, let’s discover what is the one and only source of truth. And then, we will dig deeply in that source to obtain the answers to our problems in life. So now, let’s first look at a few possibilities for sources of absolute truth.

Experiences

What often happens when you tell people your physical problems? Do they immediately tell you they had a similar problem and you need to do exactly what they did? How easy it is to conclude everyone else’s situations are identical to yours.

What often happens when you tell people your marital problems? Do they immediately tell you they had similar problems

and you need to do exactly what they did? How easy it is to conclude everyone else's situations are identical to yours.

Past experiences are good teachers for future decisions. It takes only one time to learn not to run from a dog. It takes only one time to learn not to grab a hot tray in the oven. When you experience pain, you learn to avoid circumstances which produced pain. When you experience pleasure you often seek to repeat those experiences to get the same high. God designed our lives so that we could learn from our past occurrences in life. But He never established experiences to be our standard for absolute truth.

The problem is not the experiences because those events are real. The problem is the misunderstanding of those experiences.

Listen to the speakers at a marriage seminar. If their points are not based on absolute truth, they will usually draw from their experiences and tell you to do what they did, and your marriage may be guaranteed to be just as happy. They even make your seminar easy by telling you to follow their seven easy steps. Hmm. How many of those speakers can truthfully say that 100% of all their obedient conferees who applied all seven steps have restored their broken marriages? The only point I am hitting here is that experiences are not the ultimate source of truth.

People can misunderstand their experiences in other ways. I was with some teenagers and their youth minister. As the conversation continued the woman minister found out I had recently graduated from Georgia Tech. Instantly her countenance changed. She went from jovial to bitter, and with a glare she said to me, "You graduated from Tech? My ex was from Tech, and he was obnoxious. You must be obnoxious too!"

It appears her ex was obnoxious. It appears her ex was from Tech. But to say everyone from Tech is obnoxious is an illogical conclusion. Yet we hear this line of reasoning regularly.

Hurting women may claim, "All men are stubborn!" Hurting men may say, "All women are controlling!" Really? Have they actually interviewed all men or women in the world and found all to be guilty as charged? Convincing them otherwise is hard.

They had an experience, and they think they know exactly what the cause was.

Sit in a room with adults who are watching a movie containing a troubled marriage. Something amazing takes place when you ask them afterwards if anything in the movie bothered them. In many cases the men in the room will complain about how the wife in the movie acted, and the women in the room will complain about how the husband in the movie acted. The viewers had the same experience. Same room. Same movie. Different perspectives.

Experiences are always real, but the explanations for them are not always true, especially when pain is involved. One day I talked to one of the most prominent women in a small city – a woman whose oldest son had divorced and remarried. Somehow our discussion changed, and she sternly said, “We have always been against divorce and remarriage, but when it hit home, we believed differently.” So what did her statement mean?

My counseling experiences while pastoring in Florida were interesting. I was a never-married, single adult, and for some unknown reason virtually all of my counseling sessions dealt with troubled marriages. It seemed no one had post traumatic stress disorder. It seemed no one had problems raising their kids. It seemed no one had financial problems.

At first I did not know what to say other than what little I had learned over the years. Knowing answers was easy. Telling other people in a nice way what I believed they needed to do was a different story. Nevertheless, with great fear and trembling I gave my best advice. The result? Every marriage was restored.

Wow, that was awesome! After a few years of this, people would approach me about their marriage problems, and I would beam from ear to ear, thinking, “Yes, another opportunity for the Lord to do a great miracle!” I wonder why companies thousands of miles away were not paying me to tell them the secrets to my counseling experiences? I had a perfect track record. The results of my experiences were impeccable. Shouldn’t that have proven I knew the truth?

In the first church I pastored I came to see broken marriages through rose-colored glasses. My experiences made me optimistic. Children of divorced parents often see life through gray colored glasses. Some are so discouraged, they might be wearing blinders.

Then things changed. Since my first pastorate I have had fewer people come to me about marriage problems. And very few of those marriages have been restored. What happened? My approach has not changed. Didn't I have the truth because I had experiences?

If a person has an experience which leads to good results can we always attribute the results to those experiences? Let's give an example. Your neighbor goes through a terrible divorce and remarries this time in a community park. This time she has a marriage with less stress and concludes it is because they married in the park. If a large corporation in another country invites you to speak on healthy marriages, would you tell the citizens of that foreign country that they need to get married in a park because your neighbor had a good experience? If not, then you agree that experiences are not the true source of absolute truth.

Our experiences become a major help for future decision making, but if we misunderstand the real cause and effects behind those events we will draw the wrong conclusions. Back to the original question. Where do I find absolute truth so I can know confidently what to do for my marriage situation? Based on everything in these last few pages, I cannot find absolute truth in my experiences nor in the experiences of others. And just because "everyone's doing it" doesn't make an activity to become the standard for all mankind.

It is great to conclude that absolute truth is not realized through experiences, but if it isn't there, where do we go from here? I wonder if truth exists in the beliefs of others?

Beliefs of Others

Getting wise counsel is good advice. If you are trying to buy the right vehicle many people are willing and ready to give you a truck load of recommendations. But how many sales reps are always truthful and accurate in their advice?

Ask a variety of people what the truth is about divorce and remarriage. Forget the truck. You will now need a dump truck to grasp the variety of beliefs. Here are some of the more popular beliefs from different pastors, biblical scholars, and professors:

There are no biblical grounds for divorce or for remarriage.

There are grounds for divorce, but none for remarriage.

Divorce is permitted only when adultery takes place.

Divorce is permitted only when adultery or desertion takes place.

Divorce is permitted only when adultery or desertion-by-an-unbeliever takes place.

Divorce is permitted only when incest takes place.

Divorce is permitted when incest, homosexuality, or the breaking of betrothal vows occurs.

Divorce is permitted if the other spouse fails to meet the needs of the family.

Divorce is permitted when abuse takes place.

Divorce is permitted if one of the spouses is unhappy.

Divorce is permitted if one of the spouses is stubborn and unrepentant.

Divorce is permitted if an unrepentant church member is excommunicated.

Divorce is permitted if flirting takes place.

Divorce is permitted in the case of polygamy.

Divorce is permitted if at least one person was a non-Christian on the wedding day.

Divorce is permitted because we no longer live under the law of the Old Testament.

Divorce is permitted because God forgives and we live in the New Testament age of mercy.

Divorce is permitted when the husband and wife determine the marriage should terminate.

Annulment is permitted if the marriage was not consummated.
Annulment is permitted when church leadership deems it so.
Remarriage is permitted only after the death of the spouse.
Remarriage is never permitted even after the death of the spouse.

Remarriage is permitted if you had a divorce.

Remarriage is permitted if you had a divorce and you were the “innocent” party.

Remarriage is permitted if your divorce was before you became a Christian.

Remarriage to the former spouse is permitted only if neither has been married to someone else.

Remarriage to the former spouse is permitted only if the spouse has become a Christian.

So who is right? When you go to twenty different advisors and they give twenty different beliefs, which belief is the correct one? When you hear your prognosis from your medical doctor and you don’t like it, you may go to another doctor to get a second opinion. Should we do the same with advisors on divorce or remarriage? If we don’t like what the first person says, should we get a second opinion and pick the best option?

Many people have come up to me and said, “Randy, regarding your marriage, I believe you need to do such and such.” I hear what they say, and I add it to the pile of other demands from people over the years. Now I need to weed through the pile and determine whose beliefs are 100% accurate all the time. That’s it! I’ll start with someone with credentials. I could start with ...

Someone with a Doctor’s Degree

Authors and speakers are often introduced as being qualified because they have doctor’s degrees. Do these degrees always produce absolute truth about any given subject matter? No. The degrees hopefully equipped the scholars with greater wisdom and resources for researching the truth, but having this degree does not guarantee infinite wisdom about any subject matter.

Now we have another problem. Remember Segall's law at the start of this chapter? Something similar takes place when you seek truth from two different people with this advanced degree. You get a pair-a-docs.¹

Someone Educated at a Particular Institution

A graduate of Harvard, Yale, or any of the other Ivy League schools gains extra credentials. Students graduating from these elite schools are sometimes geniuses. But graduating from the school does not equate to having infinite knowledge about any subject matter. The same can be said about a graduate from any Bible college or seminary. Having a particular degree from an accredited school of higher learning can gain credibility, but it does not ensure infinite knowledge.

Lawyers

Every vocation has good representatives and bad ones. The same is true for attorneys. One woman discovered her husband flirting with another woman, so she went to a lawyer to get advice. Can you guess what the lawyer's advice was? If he were selfish and greedy he would persuade her to get a divorce—so he could make more money. That he did, and she divorced her husband. Afterwards the divorced husband married the other woman. Later on the woman and her ex-husband talked out the situation and discovered she never wanted the divorce, and his only reason for marrying the other woman was because of the divorce. Many lawyers are wise, but truthfully, not even the most brilliant lawyers have absolute truth.

Relatives

Getting advice from relatives can be good or bad. The only point to mention is that not even relatives have absolute truth about a matter. If the subject matter is divorce, you can almost guarantee the husband's family will disagree with the wife's family. Too many emotions exist to produce quality decisions.

People with the Loudest Anger

Have you ever fallen trap to the belief that if you raise your voice, then somehow what you are saying becomes absolute truth and must be obeyed? Be honest. Turning your debate or discussion into a shouting match does not produce greater impact. In fact, “he who throws dirt loses ground.” Many controversial discussions on topics like divorce and remarriage end with great intensity. Sometimes people raise their voices as if it adds weight to their point.

Scholars in the Majority

A subtle deception about truth is “the belief of the majority.” When the majority consists of biblical scholars, you now have a super powerful statement of truth. ... or do you?

In the literature of divorce and remarriage, the “majority view” is the belief held by a majority of conservative, protestant Christians today. This popular position declares adultery and desertion to be the only two biblical grounds for divorce and remarriage.²

However, the “patristic view” believed adultery was grounds for divorce only, not for remarriage.³ Do you know what is interesting about that? The patristic view was the majority view of the early church fathers (those in the first many centuries after Christ).

So which majority group is right? Some scholars trump their beliefs by declaring the majority of conservative evangelical scholars today believe a certain way. Yet other scholars trump their beliefs by declaring virtually all the scholars in the first 15 centuries believed the same, and they were closer to the days of Christ. Both groups claim the majority.

Can we trust in the beliefs of others to be absolutely true if the majority of the scholars share these beliefs? No.

Scholars Who Share One’s Own Beliefs

A very common (and hilarious) practice of people is to quote the names of the most popular and distinguished scholars who share their beliefs. If possible they also try to list more of the popular and supporting names than people of other persuasions are

able to associate with their beliefs. This is nothing more than mortal man putting more trust in numbers and in individuals than in truth. A million supporting scholars cannot override simple truth, if by chance those two are different.

It is interesting the Pharisees suggested that Moses believed the same way they did (Matt. 19:7) Wow! If you can put Moses on your side, you can force your comments to be greater than those of Jesus! I like the way Jay Adams states this, "The popularity of teachers who may espouse the theory is no basis for its acceptance."⁴

Church Traditions

A Roman Catholic could hold to the traditions of Catholicism. A Protestant could hold to the Erasmian view (the present-day majority view named after Erasmus, a 15th century theologian). Which side would be right? What about a religious group other than the Catholics and the Protestants who hold to their traditions? The question for this chapter is not, "Which denomination/faith is more correct?" The real question is, "Which religious group has a belief system that is always correct?" That's easy. None of them!

Speaking of traditions, did you hear about the young girl who asked her mother why she had to cut off the ends of the turkey before baking? The mother replied, "I guess to make the turkey absorb more juices. I have always done it that way. My mother always did that." When the little girl asked her grandmother why she cut off the ends of the turkey before baking, the grandmother answered, "My child, fifty years ago the oven was too small to bake the entire turkey." Traditions are not always true.

Society

While flying in an airplane I got in a conversation with the guy next to me. Based on an earlier conversation, I asked him, "Do you believe in absolute truth?" He said, "Absolute truth is what people believe it to be." I replied, "What if two people have different beliefs. Who is right?" He then replied, "Truth is whatever society determines it to be."

He said he was from Russia, so my mind drifted towards World War II. I asked, "If the entire German society decides it is good to murder Jews, would that be the right thing to do?" He said no. I said I was confused and did not understand because he earlier said society dictates what is right. He then said, "Murder is wrong." I asked, "Says who?" Regarding murder he said, "It is a universal law."

I could have gone further with the conversation, but my only purpose was for him to see that people cannot determine what is right and wrong – not even a society.

Consider this. Even though no-fault divorce existed in forty-nine states by 1985, each of the fifty states also listed grounds for divorce. The following number of states in 1988 considered these acts legal grounds for divorce.⁵

Bigamy	37	Separation	25
Impotence	31	Alcoholism	23
Adultery	30	Nonsupport	17
Desertion	30	Drug Addiction	14
Cruelty	29	Unknown pregnancy	13
Insanity	28	at marriage	
Felony conviction, imprisonment	26		

How can all these states (societies) have absolute truth about divorce and remarriage when they don't even agree? Based on the diversity of their lists, I seriously doubt any of the states contained the truth and nothing but the truth.

Someone Who Knows How You Feel

Come on you have to laugh about this one. You tell your friends about your misery and immediately they tell you they "know how you feel." They've "been through the same thing." Then they tell you what they did in their misery. The comical part? They are often still in their misery. So what good does it do you to follow their beliefs? Kinda like an inmate talking to his cell buddy about wanting to get out, and the buddy says, "I know how you

feel. Just do what I did!” Hey, the buddy is still in jail and in his misery, so what good is his advice?

Summary

In my search to know what to do about my marriage situation, I have not found the beliefs of others to be my source of absolute truth. While much of the advice contains glimpses of wisdom, the overall advice has been a whirlwind of confusion.

I cannot trust everything others believe. Maybe I should look to myself.

My Opinions

Maybe I should trust in my own beliefs, my opinions. By “opinions” I refer to pure speculation based on my desires and gut feelings.

In the seventh grade I was taught to use this approach to discover truth. Schools call it the scientific method. At the start of the method you state the problem. The next thing you do is make a hypothesis. Do you know what a hypothesis is? It is a guess. If the guess is based on other research or conclusions, then the hypothesis is a scientific hypothesis, which is another way of saying an educated guess. The Merriam-Webster definition is “an idea or theory that is not proven but that leads to further study or discussion.”⁶ So how are we taught in science classes? We start with a guess and set out to prove it.

Ask a scientist if every hypothesis has always proven to be correct. His or her answer would be no. To find the solution to their problem, the scientist must continue by trial and error—making more guesses and conducting more experiments. The only point to be made in this section is that guesses are not always accurate. If they were they would not need to be proven through experimentation.

There is nothing wrong with giving an opinion or making a guess. In fact everyone is entitled to have an opinion. In America everyone (well, almost everyone) has the freedom to express his or

her opinions. However, opinions are not always right and therefore cannot be a valid source of absolute truth. Regarding divorce and remarriage, everyone has an opinion.

- “I think everyone should have the right to do whatever he or she wants to do!”
- “Well, I believe if a couple can get along they should stick out the marriage!”
- “I don’t think I have the gift of celibacy, so, oh well, I guess I have to get remarried!”
- “Jesus didn’t say anything about that topic, so He must approve of it!”

We don’t realize how much our opinions affect the way we view life. “When people read the Bible with the biases of their own preconceptions or fleshly appetites, a perplexing picture is the only possible outcome. The cause of so much confusion lies not with God but with the fallen sinfulness of the human race.”⁷

Like all the other sources for truth mentioned so far (experience and beliefs of others) giving a personal opinion is a right everyone has. But back to the real question. Can we trust our own opinion as a statement of absolute truth? No.

Opinions are appreciated. But in my quest for absolute truth, I need something other than opinions because different people are coming to different conclusions, based on their guessing. If opinions are not substantial foundations for truth, then what about basing decisions on observed data and facts? We could then use reasoning to produce truth.

Reasoning

One approach for deriving new truth (answers to new situations) is to start with previously established forms of truth and build on those logically. A properly done research project will always reveal the truth. But we usually see the same problem.

Different people searching for answers to the same questions often obtain different results.

Consider this question: “What percentage of marriages end in divorce?” Sounds like an easy question to answer. In fact most people give approximately the same answer: 50%. Dr. Phil gives the following statistics on his web site:

- 59 percent of marriages for women under the age of 18 end in divorce within 15 years. The divorce rate drops to 36 percent for those married at age 20 or older. *"Cohabitation, Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage in the United States," M.D. Bramlett and W.D. Mosher*
- 60 percent of marriages for couples between the ages of 20 and 25 end in divorce. *"National Center for Health Statistics*
- 50 percent of all marriages in which the brides are 25 or older result in a failed marriage. *"National Center for Health Statistics"*⁸

Wow these are amazing statistics! But they don't compare. The first statistic says 36% and the second says 60%. Other people have very different conclusions.

Shaunti Feldhahn spent eight years researching for the answer to this same question and obtained quite a different conclusion:

72% of those who have ever been married, are still married to their first spouse! And the 28% who aren't, includes everyone who was married for many years, until a spouse died. No one knows what the average first-marriage divorce rate actually is, but based on the rate of widowhood and other factors, we can estimate it is probably closer to 20–25%.⁹

TruthorFiction.com gives more contradictory results:

Some researchers have relied on surveys rather than government statistics. In his book *Inside America* in 1984,

pollster Louis Harris said that only about 11 or 12 percent of people who had ever been married had ever been divorced. Researcher George Barna's most recent survey of Americans in 2001 estimates that 34 percent of those who have ever been married have ever been divorced.¹⁰

How can researchers come up with so many different conclusions? Obviously they use totally different techniques and resources.

Let's research another question: "How does divorce affect the children?" This question is much more nebulous than the previous question considered, but the results from research should be consistent. They aren't.

In the year 2000 Judith Wallerstein published her book on the affects of divorce on children. Two years later, in 2002, Mavis Hetherington published her book on the same topic.

Both Judith Wallerstein and Mavis Hetherington are psychologists who earned degrees at the University of California at Berkeley. Their careers started at roughly the same time; they are in their late 70s, and are closing their careers with major books cataloging their work. Each has been married for nearly 50 years (husbands are professors), never divorced and both have married, never-divorced children. Both are grandmothers, colleagues, and friends.¹¹

Yet the results of their decades long research contradicted the other's. Wallerstein concluded, "Contrary to what we have long thought, the major impact of divorce does not occur during childhood or adolescence. Rather, it rises in adulthood as serious romantic relationships move center stage.' When it comes time to choose a life mate and build a new family, the effects of divorce crescendo."¹² Hetherington, on the other hand evaluated children of divorces twenty years later, and concluded,

The adverse effects of divorce and remarriage are still echoing in some divorced families and their offspring twenty years after divorce, but they are in the minority. The vast majority of

young people from these families are reasonably well adjusted and are coping reasonably well in relationships with their families, friends, and intimate partners. Most are moving toward establishing careers, economic independence, and satisfying social and intimate relationships.¹³

Here are two authors with very similar backgrounds producing books with quite different conclusions. Which one is right? Are either of these right? With only this much information, can we trust scientific research to provide absolute truth? (I bet you can come up with the right answer!)

The purpose of this chapter has been to discover the true source of absolute truth. I have now discovered at least one absolute truth: you cannot always trust the results given from scientific research.

The Truth

We have looked at four different sources of authority and found them all lacking in absolute truth. Experiences, beliefs of others, personal opinions, and reasoning all fail to provide truth 100% of the time.

The real source of truth is God. God Himself is truth. He is the root source for absolute truth every day of the year and is the unchanging standard for truth in the universe. There is no standard greater than God (Heb. 6:13).

Jesus called His Father true: *He who sent Me is true* (John 8:26).

Jesus called Himself the truth: *I am ... the truth* (John 14:6). Elsewhere God says, *grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ* (John 1:17).

Jesus called the Holy Spirit truth: *when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth* (John 16:13). *The Spirit is the truth* (1 John 5:6).

Jesus called God's words to be true because He is truth. Every word He speaks is truth (John 17:17). He cannot tell a lie

(Num. 23:19; Psa. 89:35; Hab. 2:3; Mal. 3:6; Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18). While everything in the Bible is 100% true, we should use the words to lead us to the Author of those words. What did Jesus say about this matter? Speaking to the religious leaders He said, *You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me* (John 5:39).

Regarding salvation, Paul expressed the same point as it relates to the law. The law exists to move us to Jesus Christ: *Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith* (Gal. 3:24). Elsewhere he adds, *Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes* (Rom. 10:4).

Regarding topics like marriage, we can discover truth by looking at what God has said, but to obtain the fuller picture we must also look at who God is. Our character should emulate His character. We know truth when "ultimate truth is to be found in, and in relationship to, Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ of God."¹⁴

The Five Sources in Matt. 19

In this chapter we have seen five sources of authority where people base their decisions: experiences, the beliefs of others, personal opinions, reasoning, and God. Look at Matt. 19:3–10. Can you see some of these in that passage? In each of the boxes to the right insert which of the five sources of authority is probably being used.

<i>3 Some Pharisees came to Jesus, testing Him and asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?"</i>	1.
<i>4 And He answered and said, "Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 5 and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife,</i>	2.

<i>and the two shall become one flesh'? 6 "So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate."</i>	
<i>7 They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?"</i>	3.
<i>8 He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart</i>	
<i>Moses permitted you to divorce your wives;</i>	4.
<i>but from the beginning it has not been this way. 9 "And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery."</i>	5.
<i>10 The disciples said to Him, "If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry."</i>	6.

Beliefs of Others

The Pharisees begin the conversation in Matt. 19. While they do not state the origin of their question it is strongly believed the background deals with the two major rabbinical beliefs in their day.¹⁵ The Shammai school of thought said divorce was permitted primarily on grounds of adultery.¹⁶ The Hillel school of thought was much more lenient and permitted divorce for simplistic problems like burning the food. Sadly, the more lenient view of Hillel was the more prevalent view for divorce in the first century.¹⁷ With these two positions as the most prevalent, the Pharisees appear to have asked Jesus which set of beliefs He embraced—beliefs established by other men. The answer to box 1 above can be “beliefs of others.”

God

Look at verses 4–6. Jesus’ focus was on God and what He said in the scriptures without taking the passages out of context. Verses 4–6 and 8c–9 (boxes 2 and 5 above) contain conclusions drawn from God. In verse 9, Jesus’ words are truth.

Experiences

Look now at the comments from the Pharisees in verse 7 and in the second portion of the three segments in verse 8. The religious leaders referred to scripture, but only to pick a passage they wanted to highlight. They used Moses’ “command” and “permitted” as statements of truth. This would be similar to someone looking at the lives of Jacob, David, and Solomon, and justifying polygamy. The Pharisees are using the experiences of Moses to justify their beliefs. The answer for boxes 3 and 4 above can be “experiences.”

Reasoning

Verse 10 of Matt. 19 gives a good example of reasoning. It is not a wrong conclusion, just like the other sources of authority do not always produce wrong conclusions. The disciples are so shocked at the answer given by Jesus they make a logical conclusion about the importance of marriage. Box 6 above refers to “reasoning.”

Chapter Summary

Yet another passage in the Bible resembles the focus of this chapter and challenges us to seek the Lord: *See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ* (Col. 2:8). When you read through this book or any other book on any subject matter, put on your Son glasses and filter the things you read. Are the comments from God, or are they derived from experiences, the beliefs of others, personal opinions, or from reasoning?

As we transition into the next chapter we need to ask ourselves some important questions. How do I extract truth about divorce and remarriage out of God, since God is truth? Where do I go or what do I do to obtain specific answers to my specific problems?

I discovered God has ways to reveal His truths to all of us. The biggest is knowing God as He reveals Himself in scriptures. Thus we come to a simple yet profound reality. The starting point for knowing truth about any subject matter is knowing God.

¹ paradox.

² Haddon Robinson, "Sex Marriage and Divorce: Results from a 1992 Christianity Today readers' survey," *Christianity Today*, Aug 31, 2000, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/augustweb-only/45.0c.html?paging=off> [accessed August 7, 2014]. This survey resulted in a response of about 1,000 with 73% believing in fornication as grounds for divorce and 64% believing in desertion as grounds for divorce, with less than 40% believing in additional grounds for divorce.

³ Regarding the early church writers up to the end of the fifth century, "In all, twenty-five individual writers and two early councils forbid remarriage after divorce. Crouzel, however, has identified one exception to the general picture Ambrosiaster," Gordon J. Wenham and William E. Heth, *Jesus and Divorce*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009), 38. Also Andrew Cornes, *Divorce and Remarriage: Biblical Principles and Pastoral Practice*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1993), 223–231.

⁴ Jay E. Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1980), 56.

⁵ *The World Almanac and Book of Facts, 1989*, (New York: World Almanac Books, 1988), where the data was compiled up to March 18, 1988. quoted in US News and World Report.

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- ⁶ hypothesis, Merriam-Webster dictionary, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hypothesis> [accessed May 20, 2015].
- ⁷ John MacArthur, *The Divorce Dilemma: God's Last Word on Lasting Commitment*, (Leominster, England: Day One Publications, 2009), 5.
- ⁸ Phil McGraw, "Marriage and Divorce: The Statistics," entry posted December 7, 2003, <https://www.drphil.com/advice/marriage-and-divorce-the-statistics/> [accessed April 19, 2019].
- ⁹ Shaunti Feldhahn, "Busting Cultural Myths about Marriage and Divorce," <http://www.shaunti.com/2014/05/busting-cultural-myths-marriage-divorce/>, entry posted May 29, 2014, [accessed July 23, 2014]
- ¹⁰ "Fifty Percent of American Marriages End in Divorce – Fiction," entry posted March 16, 2015, <http://www.truthorfiction.com/rumors/d/divorce.htm#.U8-ztkAaypB> [accessed April 19, 2019]
- ¹¹ Don Herrin, University of Utah, "Peterson Gallagher Notes," <fcs.utah.edu/~herrin/petersongallagher.notes.rtf> [accessed July 22, 2014]
- ¹² Judith S. Wallerstein, Julia M. Lewis, and Sandra Blakeslee, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25 Year Landmark Study*, (New York: Hyperion, 2000), xxix.
- ¹³ E. Mavis Hetherington and John Kelly, *For Better or For Worse: Divorce Reconsidered*, (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2002), 252.
- ¹⁴ Ray Summers, "Contemporary Approaches in New Testament Study," *Broadman Bible Commentary: General Articles Matthew–Mark*, vol. 8, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1969), 48.
- ¹⁵ Babylonian Talmud (*Talmud Bavli*), tractate *Gittin*, 90a. http://come-and-hear.com/gittin/gittin_90.html [accessed Dec 23, 2015]. Another Rabbi listed in the Babylonian Talmud, Rabbi Akiba, says divorce is permitted if the husband finds a "woman more beautiful," but this has not been accepted as a reputable interpretation for Deut 24.
- ¹⁶ According to some the Babylonian Talmud says some Shammaites considered the "*erwat-dabar*" of Deut. 24:1 to include "going outside with hair unfastened, spinning cloth in the streets with armpits uncovered, and bathe with the men" (Tractate *Gittin*, 90a–b). Thus, some Shammaites believed divorce was permitted for more than just adultery. F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1977), 59, believes Rabbi Shammai interprets "indecent" as premarital unchastity.
- ¹⁷ Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus: An Investigation into Economic and Social Conditions during the New Testament Period*, F. H. Cave and C. H. Cave, trans., (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1969), 370.