

Try Marriage Before Divorce:

A Confessional Lutheran Perspective



Introduction

In an age when divorce is often presented as the quickest remedy for marital unhappiness, Christians are called to a different perspective. From a Confessional Lutheran standpoint, couples should "try marriage before divorce." This phrase does not suggest treating marriage as an experiment. Rather, it means that before seeking to end a marriage, husband and wife should earnestly strive to live out the covenant they have made before God. Scripture reminds believers that marriage is not merely a human arrangement. When God joined Adam and Eve together, He established marriage as part of His good creation, declaring, *"Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh"* (Genesis 2:24).

Marriage as God's Gift and Calling

Marriage is a holy institution created by God for the blessing of humanity. Jesus Himself reaffirmed the divine nature of marriage when He quoted Genesis and concluded, *"What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate"* (Matthew 19:6). For Lutherans, this means that marriage is more than a legal contract or a romantic partnership. It is a vocation, a holy calling through which God provides companionship, mutual support, and the nurturing of family life.

The modern tendency is to measure a marriage by personal satisfaction. However, Scripture teaches that marriage is rooted in faithfulness rather than feelings. Saint Paul describes marriage as reflecting the relationship between Christ and His Church: *"Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her."* (Ephesians 5:22-25). The standard is not self-fulfillment but sacrificial love.

The Reality of Sin in Marriage

Every marriage encounters hardship because every husband and wife are sinners. Misunderstandings, selfishness, anger, and disappointment affect even the strongest relationships. Scripture acknowledges this reality when it says, *"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"* (Romans 3:23).

Yet the presence of conflict is not evidence that a marriage has failed. Instead, difficulties provide opportunities for growth in faith, patience, and forgiveness. Saint Paul urges believers to bear with one another, writing, *"Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love"* (Ephesians 4:2). The Christian response to marital struggles is not to seek the nearest exit but to seek God's help in reconciliation.

For this reason, couples should genuinely "try marriage" before considering divorce. This means prayer, honest communication, pastoral counseling, repentance, and a renewed commitment to the vows they once made.

Forgiveness at the Heart of Marriage

The central message of Christianity is forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Because believers have been reconciled to God through Christ's death and resurrection, they are called to extend forgiveness to others. Saint Paul writes, *"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you"* (Ephesians 4:32).

Marriage cannot survive without forgiveness. Husbands and wives inevitably hurt one another, sometimes deeply. The Gospel does not minimize these wounds, but it provides the means for healing them. Luther emphasized that Christians live daily in repentance and faith. In marriage, this means regularly confessing failures, asking forgiveness, and granting forgiveness.

The apostle Paul further instructs, *"Above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony"* (Colossians 3:14). Couples who rely on God's grace often discover that what seemed impossible becomes possible through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Perseverance Through Suffering

Scripture consistently calls believers to endurance. Saint Paul teaches that *"suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope"* (Romans 5:3-4). This principle applies to marriage as well. Difficult times do not automatically signify that God has abandoned a marriage. They may become occasions through which He strengthens faith and deepens love.

Likewise, Proverbs teaches, *"Many a man proclaims his own steadfast love, but a faithful man who can find?"* (Proverbs 20:6). Faithfulness is rare and precious. Christian spouses should strive to remain committed even when circumstances are difficult, trusting God's promises rather than their fluctuating emotions.

When Divorce May Be Permitted

Confessional Lutherans do not teach that divorce is never permissible. Jesus acknowledged the reality of the "hardness of heart" in some people who consistently and abusively break / abandon the marriage covenant. In Matthew 5:31 & 19:8, Jesus speaks specifically to the Pharisee's abusive practice of abandoning (mistranslated "divorce" in many Bibles) their wives without giving them a legal Certificate of Divorce and dowry – leaving them unprotected and destitute. There He acknowledged adultery as a grounds for divorce. Likewise, in Malachi 2:15-16 God chastises Judah for treacherously abandoning (again mistranslated "divorce") their wives). Saint Paul also addresses abandonment by an unbelieving spouse, stating, *"If the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so"* (1 Corinthians 7:15).

Even where divorce may be permitted, however, Scripture treats it as a tragic consequence of sin rather than an ideal outcome. God's desire remains reconciliation whenever repentance and restoration are possible.

A Witness to Christ

Christian marriage is also a testimony to the world. When husbands and wives love one another through trials and difficulties, they reflect Christ's steadfast love for His people. The Lord promises, *"I will never leave you nor forsake you"* (Hebrews 13:5). In a similar way, faithful spouses imitate God's enduring commitment through their own covenant faithfulness.

Jesus taught that His disciples would be known by their love (John 13:35). Marriages marked by forgiveness, patience, and steadfast devotion become powerful witnesses to the transforming grace of God.

Conclusion

The phrase "try marriage before divorce" captures an important biblical truth. Marriage is God's gift and calling, not merely a temporary arrangement based on personal happiness. Because God has joined husband and wife together, Christians should make every faithful effort to preserve their marriage through prayer, repentance, forgiveness, and sacrificial love. As Ecclesiastes reminds us, *"A threefold cord is not quickly broken"* (Ecclesiastes 4:12). When husband and wife are bound together with Christ at the center, they possess strength greater than their own. Though Scripture recognizes circumstances in which divorce may be permitted, the ordinary Christian response to marital struggles is to seek reconciliation first, trusting the God who is able to make all things new.

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