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A Missing Front in a Culture War? A Conversation about Divorce

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Divorce Culture

Thinking in Public--The Albert Mohler Podcast

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Mohler: This is "Thinking in Public", a program dedicated to intelligent conversation about front line theological and cultural issues and the people who are shaping them. I'm Albert Mohler, your host, and President of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

The issue of divorce is one that the church has confronted throughout its entire existence. It's one that is addressed thoroughly in scripture and in every single case divorce is condemned and put in its proper context by the fact that it is held over against God's expectation that marriage is one man and one woman for a lifetime. Evangelical compromise on the issue of divorce is not just something of interest to theologians and churchman, it's something that is being watched by the larger world. We now face something of a credibility crises on the issue of marriage not because of events that have taken place outside the church in the culture, no it's about how the culture has triumphed over Christian conviction on the issue of marriage and divorce. That's our topic for today and together we're going to be thinking in public.

Mohler: The issue of divorce has been of keen attention to the theologians and church leaders of course, to psychologists and psychotherapists, to the courts to lawyers but also to those who are taking a keen eye in understanding how we arrived at this moment, how marriage as an institution and divorce as a matter of public policy have arrived at this particular moment in this particular shape in this culture. Mark Smith who is Professor of Political Science at the University of Washington has done pioneering work in this and in an article published earlier this year in the Political Science Quarterly entitled Religion, Divorce and the Missing Culture War in America. I think Professor Smith actually lays bare some issues that no one else has yet made clear. I think he provides a part of the story and background that is really going to be foundational for our understanding of what's going on here.

Professor Smith let me ask you, how in the world did you come to write this article?

Smith: It's a little hard to trace back things because you can come to projects in a lot of different ways but I've been studying economic issues and American politics for some time. And I realized that there's this big chunk of the political world that I hadn't studied in great depth namely the social and culture and religious issues. And I started to work on kind of how leaders and their constituencies are related. And I thought divorce would be a great way to get some insight into those larger themes.

Mohler: Well let me tell you, your article title caught me immediately because you're talking about the missing culture war in America. And in good academic fashion you get into your article by documenting the fact that there has been recognized to be a culture war. There's a great conflict of values. And, you identify many of the fronts that are commonly recognized, most importantly and easily recognizably talking about abortion and issues like same sex marriage but as you insinuate in your title divorce has been missing from this list of the most contentious issues of the culture war over the last three to four decades.

Smith: Right, that's the purpose of the article was to try to get to the bottom of why is this missing because if you think about divorce in terms of characteristics of issues it actually has a lot of the same characteristics as abortion, as homosexuality, as going into previous generations as prohibition and alcohol and so forth in that it is talked about in the Bible, you can apply religious values to it and actually historically a lot of religious groups have been very actively involved in divorce and yet there's not much controversy about divorce now so it's not on the political agenda you don't see politicians taking stands on divorce, you don't see religious interest groups mobilizing around it, you don't see individual citizens and voters wanting answers through the political system, so my paper was trying to figure out well why is that the case?

Mohler: Well and in your paper you really, I think, well put a nice edge at a very tender spot in asking this question, I think evangelical Christians listening here will have to understand that this is not just a hypothetical question related to sociology. This is a question related to why we are who we are and why we do what we do. Let me read to you from your paper. You wrote, "From the standpoint of simple logic, divorce fits cleanly within the category of family values and hence hypothetically could represent a driving force in the larger culture war. If family values refer to ethics and behavior that affect, well, families, then divorce obviously should qualify. Indeed divorce seems to carry a more direct connection to the daily realities of families than do the Bellweather culture war issues of abortion and homosexuality."

Now I have to tell you Professor Smith, there's no way to refute that argument. That's almost just on its face true so that really does give an incredible amount of drama to the question you ask, how in the world could it be, given that, that divorce is not a central part of the culture war and divorce does not seem to be a central concern of even many of the Christian groups advocating in public policy?

Smith: Right. I wanted to put those statements out there to generate interest in the question and to put it out there that you would logically think divorce would be a subject of political controversy and yet it's not and then in the course of investigating this question what I discovered was there used to be a lot of political controversy over divorce and in fact when you trace it through in the historical development that will shed some light as to why it's not a prominent political issue today.

Mohler: Can you summarize that for us?

Smith: Sure, I mean if you had to put it in the most simple terms, we went from a status of fairly tight divorce law to gradually loosening them over time and here I'm talking about really over centuries and as many steps along the way you saw religious groups, especially those of evangelical orientation, stepping up to say hey wait a minute, you know, the bible is clear on this, divorce, is frowned upon in Mark and Luke, Jesus says there's no divorce at all, in Matthew an exception is allowed for marital infidelity and in Paul's letters desertion of a non-Christian spouse is allowed, but however you sort that all out it would lead you to much tighter restrictions on divorce than prevailed even as of 1800 and then if you move forward from 1800 to the present you got steadily looser laws especially as new states came into the union the states that we would think of mid-west at that time they were western states and as they came on board they tend to have looser divorce laws than did the eastern states and the southern states and so over time the laws were loosened. You had for example a cruelty, an allowance for divorce that tended to be interpreted more generously over time so that you could claim not just physical cruelty but mental cruelty, or you know, my spouse was demeaning to me and those sorts of things could be included. So you had a situation where there was a lot of interest in divorce reform and then there have been moments where the laws were tightened. At the end of the end of the nineteenth century there was about a twenty or thirty year period where the trend was going in that direction, but that's the exception to a larger pattern of looser divorce laws over time. And then by the 1920's, it was really no longer a political issue, really hasn't been a prominent political issue for the last eighty or ninety years.

Mohler: You know but I think a lot of Christians hearing you say that would think, well, I guess in the larger culture that makes sense. An accommodation to a reality of enlightenment ideals about marriage and divorce and personal autonomy we could imagine how those things would become part of the mix and chemistry of the larger society, but it's when you direct your argument to the church and to Christian organizations that I think, I feel the teeth in your argument and quite frankly appreciate the candor. For instance, in your article published in the Political Science Quarterly, you actually look at lobbying groups such as the Moral Majority and you point out that even the Moral Majority that was so intent on dealing in the public policy arena with issues like abortion and homosexuality and all the rest it seemed never to really take the issue of divorce with much seriousness.

Smith: Right and you can move that forward into the Christian Coalition and also the Family Research Council more recent lobbying groups and the teeth that you refer to is the following-I think the leaders of those organizations, as well as leaders throughout the evangelical community, recognize divorce as a major problem in American society, they know what the bible says on it. There might be some slight differences in interpretation, but largely everybody agrees that divorce should only be allowed under very specific circumstances generally adultery or perhaps desertion. And yet we have a public policy situation where you can get divorced for all sorts of reasons or even no reason at all in some cases. And the difficulty is that the leaders would like to make divorce a prominent political issue, but in a sense they have to respond to their members. So if you're a lobbying organization like the Moral Majority or the Christian Coalition or the Family Research Council, if you're leading that organization you need people to back you up, there's a famous quote from Franklin Roosevelt where, and I'm paraphrasing here, but he said the scariest thing as leaders is to think you're at the front of a parade to turn around, and there's no one behind you. So, divorce has become so accepted in American society, the stigma is basically gone from it, we as Americans tend to recognize it as well as an unfortunate reality for a lot of people that if the leaders were to try to take a hard line stand on divorce and say no, we gotta reverse it. We gotta call divorce a sin as unbiblical, someone who takes the vow seriously would say or we have to make divorce a prominent political issue. We need to lobby on this, mobilize people and try to change laws to make it harder to get divorced. You're going to alienate the very constituency you need in order to have a powerful lobbying organization that you can translate into political influence so that's the dilemma that the leaders find themselves in. Even if they recognize the realities and want to make divorce a prominent political issue, the fact that the mass public, even evangelical Christians in the mass public aren't likely to go along with that, that makes it very difficult to turn this into a political issue.

Mohler: You know I'm reading here again from your paper you say that "the absence of divorce in the culture war does not mean that Christian conservatives express indifference toward divorce, to the contrary, many of their most respected leaders take the subject seriously and attribute a variety of social problems to the instability of marriages." "Yet," you write, "with very few exceptions, leading organizations representing Christian conservatives have treated divorce as a private matter to be handled by individuals, families, and churches rather than a political question requiring legislative, executive or judicial action" end quote now I have to tell you Professor Smith, I have to take that argument further and say that you were generous in including the word churches in that list of those who supposedly deal with divorce. The reality is, I have to say, is that theologian and church men is that far too few churches actually deal with this within their own internal membership much less as a matter of public policy.

I am fascinated by several of the inferences you draw and implications you trace out, you talk about why covenant marriage this innovation, legal innovation of covenant marriage, didn't gain traction and remind us why that is so.

Smith: Well the, it passed in three states, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Arizona and looks like it might spread further, and that's kind of when the counter movement started to say well, wait a minute and there are a lot of American values that could be tapped into that people raise in objection to covenant marriages. So, some people say well isn't this going to trap people in marriages that are dysfunctional. Aren't we kind of violating you know individual rights to come out of marriages if it's not working out for you so this notion of rights, and each individual is autonomous that's, those are very powerful claims in American politics. They show up in a lot of different areas and for a lot of Americans they just find that persuasive. And you don't want government telling two members of a marriage the spouses that you can't get divorced, they just, a lot of Americans say well, that's something for the individuals themselves to decide on their own. So covenant marriage, it is certainly attracted a following. And it obviously got enough support in those three states to pass but then the movement stalled, and I think there's these fundamental American values that it came in conflict with.

Mohler: Yes, and I think the fact that three states adopted it is dwarfed as a story by the fact that forty-seven obviously did not and you know in your essay you make very clear the fact that you don't think divorce is going to now arise as a major issue of the culture war because at least as I read your article you're basically saying that conservatives, Christian conservatives in particular, have just more or less surrendered to the fact that it's a reality.

Smith: Exactly, they have surrendered to it probably because they're affected by it as much as liberals or moderates are. Divorce is a reality in American society across the board. I try to show in the article that there are some slight differences across religious groups in terms of their incidences of divorce. For example Catholics tend to have lower divorce rates than Protestants, and I don't have enough data in the article. But I suspect that Mormons would have very low divorce rates if you could measure that systematically. But overall in the American population religion doesn't make a whole lot of difference in a person's likelihood of divorcing. So if you look at the unchurched part of the population and the church part, there are not very big differences there so the argument of the article is essentially religious groups as well

as secular society have accommodated divorce. We've more or less come around to accept it, it happens, the stigma has erased. and if you look at for example at the churches, coming back to your earlier point, I think it's pretty rare to see pastors who will stand in front of their congregation and say divorce is a sin. You will sometimes hear references to divorce being a problem. But as far as calling it an actual sin, that's a lot less frequent. And if you, and this is again I think it comes back to the dependence that leaders have on their constituency so just like leaders of interest groups have people willing to support them well if you're a pastor of a church and you offend people, they might not come back next Sunday, and I think that poses a real constraint for the pastors in that it's hard for them to call divorce a sin even if they themselves absolutely believe that.

Mohler: I think it's very helpful to have a political scientist at the University of Washington make the observations. Mark Smith is Professor of Political Science at University of Washington. He's the author of books that include *American Business and Political Power* and *The Right Talk: How Conservatives Transform the Great Society Into the Economic Society*.

Dr. Smith let me just ask you, were you surprised by what you found in your research for this article? Did this surprise you in terms of your conclusions?

Smith: It didn't surprise me in that by the time I had invested some time into the project I kind of had a sense of where it was going but as it went on you know I sort of fleshed it out more and certainly learned a lot about the history of divorce in America and were able to put it together in a more coherent package.

Mohler: Well, thank you for joining me today for Thinking in Public.

Mohler: There is no shortage of irony in the fact that the mirror of divorce is now held up before American Christians and evangelical Christians in particular by a political scientist writing in the *Political Science Quarterly*. Professor Mark Smith has really given us a lot to think about here and you know when he makes the assertions that he affirms and documents in this essay, he really points to American evangelicals and says you have allowed the culture to triumph over your own convictions. I think he's right. I think we all know he's right.

Mohler: With me in the studio is Eric Bancroft, Senior Minister of the Castlevue Baptist Church in Indianapolis, Indiana. He is a man of multiple experiences in ministry. I first came to know him when he served on the staff at Grace Community Church in Los Angeles as pastor and elder. It was in March of 2008 that Eric and his family moved to Indianapolis and assumed this new responsibility at Castlevue Baptist Church. It is an honor to have Eric Bancroft here in the studio with me. I have come to know him as a pastor of tremendous conviction and someone who takes marriage and family very seriously because he takes them biblically.

Also here in the studio with me is Barrett Duke who is Vice President for Public Policy and Research and Director of the Research Institute at the Ethics and Religious Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. Barrett Duke holds a very important position in our denominational life and in the intellectual life of evangelicals, framing the very issues we're talking about here and so the question of divorce and specifically the pointed question of how it came to pass that evangelicals accommodated themselves so quickly to divorce. Well, here are two men in the studio with me who are very able to speak to that question.

Eric Bancroft let me just ask you pastorally, what in the world happened?

Bancroft: The church began to realize that it had started to compromise the message after the 1973 law passed of the no-fault divorce. Divorce became easy so the passion of the heart became accommodated in the cultural environment that allowed the church then to begin to consider whether or not it wanted to speak to the same issue and address the same topic so as a result of that we've now had decade after decade after decade where divorce is no longer exceptional. It's actually appears to be quite normative not only outside the church but now inside the church as the church has taken its cues from the culture-not from the scripture.

Mohler: Well let's just be very pointed here, we're talking about a scripture that is very clear that God hates divorce, very clear that the commitment to marriage is a lifelong commitment and very clear on monogamy. But, is it fair to say that many evangelical Christians and evangelical churches have accommodated themselves to what could only be described as something like serial or sequential monogamy?

Bancroft: Absolutely. What you have is you have the experience becomes king in the life of the Christian if they're not grounded in scriptures. When you have enough people in the context of a local church who respond that way, now the pastoral environment has to either learn to accommodate the people to the life that they're living or to lovingly, gently call them back to the expectation that God has set for his people in the word. And so unfortunately, you have an environment in which in the local church, it has not become something that they speak about from a distance but something they speak about from their own experience and while that is true, God speaks to that both in his word and in the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Mohler: Barrett Duke, as you deal with this question, you've got to deal with it at multiple levels. The cultural level just in terms of how people in this culture think of divorce and for that matter divorce. You've got to be concerned as a churchman for how the church responds to this, you have a legislative and legal interest as well, I want to test a theory with you-for some time now I've become more and more convinced that evangelicals, and our churches in particular, have allowed the law just as it is established by legislature or by congress and as it is interpreted by courts to establish to an unhealthy degree, what is right and wrong. Such that, in the divorce revolution, what happened is you started having these no-fault divorce laws passed in the early 1970's. You had a legal realignment of our judicial culture and the culture of our courts on the issue of divorce. You had a new normal then in the courts and before long it seemed to me that Christians just very unthinkingly said, well if that's what the law is, that's what the law is.

Duke: There's no doubt that the law provides a teaching component to the way people think, and I imagine to some degree they're using the law as an excuse to do what they want to do. It kind of gives them permission, they feel like all of a sudden this is an acceptable, there's not the stigma associated with it anymore and so I don't think there's any questions that people are allowing the law to give them permission to do something. But I think it's still in their hearts, they're looking for a way to do what they want to do, and they're finding that there's no restraint on them from the law so they kind of feel I think, additionally empowered to follow through with what they want to do.

Mohler: Yeah I think it's kind of, to use a language I would normally reject that kind of psycho-therapeutic language. It comes inconveniently now. You kind of have a co-dependency situation where you have enablers and morally I want to make the point I understand exactly what you're saying Dr. Duke you know when you say what we have here are sinners trying to justify their sin and but Barrett I come back and say look that's Genesis 3, that's all of us. So each in our own way is trying to do this. Romans chapter 1 describes sin as suppressing the truth in unrighteousness you know that is our human condition and you know very early on children learn how to rationalize and how to develop cover stories for our sin. But on the issue of divorce, I think the courts have really, and the legislators for that matter, have really helped that process of rationalization. You know the cover story now has cultural sanction and I think for that reason the only voice the church has on this, the only thing we've got left is where we should be in the first place which is a distinctively gospel centered, biblically driven voice.

Eric, how in the world has the church recovered that voice?

Bancroft: Church recovers the voice by recovering the word to the pulpits of the local church. For too often, too long, many churches have been tempted and a desire perhaps nobly in its original intention to reach the people that it became a point of accommodating the people, and so the message began to dwindle from the fullness and the whole council of God's word to now being partially and preferentially presented in such a way that might draw the largest amount of people and ask the least amount so that there is the biggest center of agreement. And as a result of that then when the word goes, so goes the peoples personal holiness. So you have a high view of God, you have a high view of holiness. You have a low view of God and his own word, you'll have a low view of responding personal holiness. And the culture stands by all the more happy and waiting to accommodate that adjustment because when the salt is not as salty, when the light is not as bright and the darkness doesn't seem as dark as it originally was.

Mohler: Barrett I want to ask you a very pointed question and this is one of those questions that will make us all wince just a little bit because we know I think the biting nature of this question. But you're in Washington, D.C. you have an assignment to represent Christians in speaking about what you know marriage to be. Do you find your job not made much more difficult by the fact that Christians and Christian churches on the issue of divorce are kind of pulling the rug out from under you as you're trying to speak?

Duke: Well we certainly lose our credibility when the people we claim to be representing are divorcing at the same rate as the rest of the culture. And people look at us and some of our messages that we're communicating in Washington

like our call for some kind of restraint and the whole sense of covenant marriage rather than contractual marriage, and as we're trying to make those arguments in Washington and trying to influence public policy, we certainly find ourselves vulnerable to that very claim that well the things that you're calling for here in Washington, D.C. your own people can't do.

Mohler: Exactly, I think with sympathy to your posture and role and responsibility I look to this and see that would certainly complicate the picture. But you know, Eric, I have to say for the pastor this gets very complicated because in many ways what you have is an awakening. Current issues on the culture have awakened the church to not only our dogmatic slumber, being asleep at the wheel on this as an older theologian put it, but it is basically awakened us to our moral compromise so your fairly new in a pastorate in Indianapolis over the last couple of years, there are a lot of men going into pulpits and all of a sudden are realizing I've got to speak to this. I've got to speak to it faithfully, biblically, truthfully. I'm not sure anyone's ever really done that from this pulpit before. What's your advice?

Bancroft: The advice is to not be perceived as being topically driven in such a way that it almost appears to be counter and antagonistic and adversarial. The responsibility of the pastor is as the term means to shepherd the sheep, to lead them and so a commitment of expositional teaching, book by book, passage by passage that is not saying this is an agenda of the new pastor, and he has a new insight on an old topic of today's culture. But he actually is speaking on behalf of the Lord and communicating his word, so he sequentially moves through in the context of scripture so that the people learn that this is coming from the Lord not from the personality of a new person in leadership.

Mohler: So in other words, it's not arbitrary. But rather it's driven by the text itself which is the way all preaching should be.

Bancroft: That's exactly right.

Mohler: Well we look at this and we see a lot of ground lost. I think by any estimation you look back not only to the early 1970's with the no-fault divorce revolution but even to the sixties. Some very crucial compromises were made and I think doing an autopsy of that it's very easy to look at it and say, you know there was something missing from the preaching of our churches in the forties and the fifties in order to arrive at the sixties and the seventies. It hauntingly makes me wonder what's missing from our preaching now that will show up in our own children and grandchildren. Does that worry you?

Bancroft: It does worry me that the challenges-when we try to say the only message we care about ultimately is the message of the gospel and therefore we think to say anything other than just to talk about Jesus is to confuse the conversation. We don't understand what Jesus said himself on the road to Emaus after his resurrection but all of the scripture speak of him from the very beginning in Genesis we begin to see the promise of a redeemer to come, to redeem us from our sins, but the problem is when you have accommodated the culture and therefore redefine what the bible has defined as sins, we no longer need redemption. There is no more sin to speak of, there are no problems that need to be addressed. There is no more relationships that need to be healed. There is no more lives that need to be put back together so therefore we don't really need Jesus anymore. And unfortunately too often the churches, in an attempt to simply be purely evangelistic you end up not being evangelistic at all because you have missed what have been both scripturally and culturally all of the end roads for conversations into the story of forgiveness in Jesus Christ of which I myself need as well.

Mohler: You know you also have the reality that all these broken families with all the woundedness, with all the abandoned children, and abandoned wives, with all the fathers who have been cut off from their own children, all of the horrible things that happen in the aftermath of this divorce culture, we are in a position pastorally where we just have to admit the human wreckage of this law has been huge. And Barrett as you're dealing with this issue, do people who actually work with this in public policy, do they take any responsibility whatsoever for the grave injury and damages done in the lives of so many people?

Duke: I don't think their even asking that question. I think they're basically just looking at the problems, and they're trying to address the problems as they come up rather than actually asking how can we prevent these problems. There's very little in the way of preventive maintenance that takes place in Washington usually the effort is just to figure out how to address what's going on, how to accommodate the people in their current circumstance. In terms of thinking about how do I actually stop something from happening, there's not a whole lot of that that goes on.

Mohler: You know to pick up on Eric's statement at the end, I've often thought that one of the things that marks the church in its age is what it knows that no one else knows. What it remembers that everyone else has seemed to have forgotten and maybe, indeed I think we can now see that it is, that in this strange post-modern moment in America in the 21st century, the faithful, biblically grounded, gospel drive, church of the Lord Jesus Christ might be just about the last people on earth, the last assembly of people, certainly in this culture who know what marriage is and why it matters. Thanks to Eric Bancroft and Barrett Duke for joining me for Thinking in Public.

Mohler: If anything the issue of divorce now arrives on the evangelical agenda as the unavoidable item. Not that we necessarily would put it there although convictions suggest that we should, but rather that the culture is going to throw it right at us. I mean we're on the receiving end of an enormous, cultural criticism directed at us that is cogent. It hurts. It's relevant. We know it. When we start talking about same sex marriage and we're the people who show up and say we know what marriage is, our credibility is being questioned by the larger world by the fact that we have accommodated ourselves to divorce. Professor Mark Smith gives us so much to think about in that essay he wrote on Religion, Divorce and the Missing Culture War in America. In his conclusion he writes this, "while the plain words of the bible could provide adequate rhetorical ammunition for Christians generally and evangelicals specifically to fight for legislation to restrict divorce, culture has ultimately triumphed scripture in shaping public policy."

Now that last line is what really caught my attention—"culture has ultimately triumphed scripture in shaping public policy." Now public policy is important and especially when you're talking about divorce, you're talking about something that is essentially a matter of public policy. Because as a legal institution, well divorce is a matter that is adjudicated by courts and is legislated by Congress and the state legislatures. You start looking at this and you realize. Yes, there is indeed a public policy aspect that is undeniable but when we think about the culture ultimately triumphing scripture in shaping public policy, I think the greater issue for our recognition is that the culture has trumped scripture and has triumphed over scripture in the church and our own accommodation to divorce.

You know if we're going to regain credibility to talk about the marriage issue, we've got to recognize the fact that even though there have been stalwart voices very clearly declaring among evangelical Christians and to evangelical Christians the truth about marriage, the fact is that the statistics indicate a huge problem. When evangelical Christians divorce at roughly the same rate as the non-Christian population, then you have to go back to exactly what Professor Smith said in the interview here. It turns out that statistically speaking religion is an insignificant factor in divorce rates. Well we ought to hear that for what it really represents. If religion in general and Christianity in particular makes no difference, is statistically irrelevant when it comes to divorce rates, something is horribly wrong. You know in his essay Professor Smith documents the fact that the scripture is very clear about divorce and as simple as the fact that the scripture declares God's own abhorrence of the practice of divorce, we have a theology of marriage that takes us all the way through the scripture and interweaves with the story of our redemption, the fact that in creation God has given us for his good and for our good and for his glory this marvelous gift of the institution of marriage. Marriage is a picture, a picture of Christ's love for his church. Marriage is an institution that is given to us not as a prison into which we are forced and sentenced but rather as an institution that is the amplification of human flourishing and happiness. It is the context in which human beings will be most happy and will flourish most abundantly. The reality is that a rebellion against marriage is never against marriage alone and as with every other institution God has given us, when that gift, when that good is rejected, it is an act of rejecting what the Creator has given and that's the Creator's glory as Paul defines in Romans chapter one, sin as robbing God of his glory. And it also betrays confusion about the gospel and that's one of the bigger problems here. If evangelical Christians are divorcing at the same rate as everyone else, well that gets right to the fact that we too are complicit in suppressing the truth in unrighteousness in robbing God of his glory, the glory that is his due and of bringing all this hurt and harm into the lives of people whose lives are infinitely, immeasurably, irrevocably damaged by divorce.

You know those who brought about the revolution of no-fault divorce laws did so because they said they wanted to make the people happier. They did so because they said it is cruel to bring people into legal proceedings where all kind of dirt has to be thrown in either direction and fault has to be proved and that's simply too injurious to the family. Well look at where we actually ended up. We ended up with the abandonment of families. We ended up with just one spouse being able to tear apart a family without cause or with any cause whatsoever, just no fault alleged, just no longer wanting to be married. We've ended up with children who are in so many cases the ultimate victims of this divorce as it's directly traced to harm and all the injury that comes, there's a whole system of social pathology, that is directly traceable to divorce. You have fathers who are robbed of any contact with their children because of the way the courts have interpreted not only divorce but custodial law and then we have of course the reality that we have so accommodated ourselves to this that we

are no longer even shocked by it.

You know when we're talking about divorce, we have to recognize that there must be some very important, urgent reasons why evangelical Christians have accommodated themselves to this issue. I think one of the issues is very clear—yes indeed there are these bigger changes out there in the culture. The changes that are documented by so many sociologists and observers that arrive at the enlightenment and enlightenment concepts of the human person and ideals of personal autonomy, we understand how all of that happens, that's there too. I think for many evangelicals the real reason is much closer to home. I think we have lost our voice on divorce because we have friends who have divorced. We have children who have divorced in so many Christian families. We have brothers and sisters who have divorced and as people we know have experienced divorce well it is very easy to decide that we can just decide not to talk about this, or we will have to redefine the way we talk about this because we do not want to hurt people's feelings.

You know the other thing we have to recognize is that the church even in the exercise of church discipline which is absolutely essential to the definition of the church, the New Testament does not know a church that does not discipline itself by the word of God. But the problem with much of this as we look back in history is that it was applied arbitrarily and it was applied in ways that were not fully biblical, and it was applied in ways that were understood to be driven by things other than Christian love for brothers and sisters in Christ. But the abuse of church discipline is no excuse for the absence of church discipline and it's just like saying that parental discipline is sometimes misapplied. Therefore we'll simply take away any responsibility and deny any obligation for parents who discipline their children. That would be abject nonsense. Well we're reaping the fruit of very bitter seed in terms of the church's abdication of our responsibility in church discipline.

We're also reaping something else and that is several generations of pastoral neglect, of preaching neglect on the issue of scripture, on the issue of divorce, on the issue of marriage, the absence of a clear and very comprehensive teaching from God's word about marriage and divorce has led to Christians in many cases not even actually knowing that there's a distinctive Christian understanding of marriage that we come to marriage and divorce with a completely different set of obligations and understandings because God has revealed in his word to us exactly what marriage is and why he made us for marriage and made marriage for us and why his glory and our happiness is so much at stake in any violation or subversion of this institution.

You know when you look at the issue of marriage you need to realize that this zone of privacy that so many Americans have carved out for themselves is now so tenaciously held by many Christians that they will resist any church declaration. They will resist any Christian intrusion as they see it into their private lives. Well folks it's not only on the issue of marriage and divorce that we need to recognize that as an absolutely false and dangerous assumption it's on any issue. We do not belong to ourselves. Our marriages are not our own. In his article, Professor Smith points out that only in very recent years, only in the last century or so, have people begun to think of their marriages as simply their own, as simply the union of two individuals with no greater common cultural or family concern. As he points out, in very recent history, marriage was considered a matter between families not just between individuals. And when it comes to the Christian understanding we come to fully understand that marriage is an institution given by God to his human creatures for so many goods that are interwoven with each other that we really do not know what it means to be human. We don't know what it means to reproduce and have children. We don't know what it means to relate to one another without reference to marriage. When we subvert marriage, whatever the way of its subversion, whether it be by the redefinition of marriage as is now being championed by so many or whether it be the subversion of marriage by divorce, the reality is that we are undermining our witness to the goodness of God and also to the power of the gospel.

You know one of the reasons why we back off of any issue that is related to sin is because we know that we ourselves are sinners, and we believe that we might set ourselves up for the accusation of hypocrisy by pointing to someone else's sin. So let's go ahead and deal with that—we are sinners, we come to this question and every question not as innocent parties looking at sinners from afar, but as sinners who are saved by the grace of God who are saying to others, it's important for us to know, it's vital, it's urgent, it's absolutely incredibly important that we know what sin is and that we know ourselves as sinners. And then we turn to God for the grace and mercy that is extended to us in Christ and by faith we come to know him but as we come to know him, and to be redeemed by his blood and to be incorporated into his church, we are also called to be his disciples, faith needs to be combined with repentance in terms of the experience of the Christian so that even as we are justified by faith alone the one who has come to a saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ responds with a true heartfelt repentance and that means from all of our sins including the sin of divorce, including the divorce of facilitating divorce, including the sin of taking no position on divorce, including the sin of simply allowing

divorce to become a reality in our midst.

This issue isn't going away as a matter of fact when we look at the culture war and the larger conversation in America, it's clear that what we now face is a credibility crisis for American Christians. The only way we can adequately address that credibility crisis on the issue of marriage is to make sure that we do not ourselves compromise marriage. We're the people who better show up saying we know what marriage is. We don't know because we're smarter than anyone else. We don't know because we're more sensitive or have powers of perception that are greater than others. We know what marriage is because God has told us what marriage is and why he established it and gave it to us for our good. We know what marriage is because by the grace and mercy of God we're seeking to show even in this world what marriage is suppose to look like. And we're going to hold ourselves accountable to that and we're going to encourage and exhort one another in that. And we're going to make very clear that when we talk about marriage it's not just so we know what marriage isn't it's so we know what marriage is.

Thanks for listening to Thinking in Public. I hope you'll go to my website at albertmohler.com for a wealth of resources that are available there to you. You can also follow me at Twitter at twitter.com/albertmohler.

Southern Seminary will be hosting its preview day on October 15 for meetings with faculty to sitting in on actual classes. Preview day will give you the opportunity to learn more about all that Southern Seminary has to offer. More information can be found at the Seminary's website at sbts.edu. Thanks for joining me for Thinking in Public. Until next time keep thinking. I'm Albert Mohler.

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