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“Christian Morality, Gay Marriage and Divorce”
Paul V.M. Flesher

While the U.S. Supreme Court considers whether it should legalize gay marriage, the debate continues over whether Christian business people, and others holding religious disagreements over gay marriage, have a right to deny gays wedding services like cake baking, celebratory flowers and photography. This debate centers on laws called Religious Freedom Restoration Acts (RFRA) recently passed by states such as Indiana and Arkansas with the intended purpose of providing that ability.

It is impossible to predict the high court's decision or even the future of RFRA laws, but there is another way to address the issue of whether Christians need such an exemption. Of course, not all Christians object to gay marriage; those who do tend to belong to denominations and independent churches that claim to base their beliefs on the Bible.

This type of American Christianity, often called evangelical or born-again Christianity, believes that Jesus -- God in human form -- provides salvation to humanity, and his teachings are paramount. Evangelicals who object to gay marriage claim to be following moral beliefs laid down by Jesus. But, are they really?

Not obviously. Jesus never expresses an opinion about homosexuality, let alone gay marriage. None of the gospels give so much as a hint.

But, born-again Christians, as a group, believe that Jesus would have disagreed with gay marriage if he had said anything about it. Given this belief, how should modern Christians act with regard to gay marriage?

Jesus had clear views on one aspect of marriage, namely, divorce. The gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell us his view; and Matthew does it twice. Jesus is against divorce. A look at how modern Christians handle Jesus' views on divorce should reveal a model for Christian behavior with regard to gay marriage.

Jesus holds that God does not approve of divorce. Moreover, divorced people who remarry, according to Jesus, are guilty of adultery. In Mark 10:11, Jesus says, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." This view is reiterated in Luke 16 and Matthew 19.

Given Jesus' clear and strong statements about the sins of divorce and remarriage, born-again cake bakers, flower

arrangers and wedding photographers should be refusing to participate in the weddings of divorcees.

No such refusals have come to light.

Why not? Because evangelicals, born-again Christians and other biblically based Christians divorce frequently. Indeed, their divorce rates seem higher than those of other Americans.

According to a 1998 study by the evangelically oriented Barna Research Group, 29 percent of Baptists, by which the study means Southern Baptists and independent Baptists, have been divorced. Only members of non-denominational Protestant churches, mostly Pentecostal or evangelical, divorced at a higher rate: 34 percent.

By contrast, only 21 percent of atheists, Catholics and Lutherans had been divorced. They were below the national average of 24 percent.

Christian organizations heavily criticized Barna for this study for not taking into account mitigating factors. Most born-again Christians marry much younger than other demographic groups, have less education at the time of marriage and are often poor. All these known factors make divorce more likely.

When Barna studied divorce rates again in 2008, they changed their survey methodology. This resulted in an average overall divorce rate of 33 percent, and most Christian groups registered within a point or two of that number. Only Catholics were significantly lower, at 28 percent. (Atheists were at 30 percent).

Both Barna studies of American Christians and divorce indicate that Christians get divorced as frequently as, or perhaps more frequently than, non-Christians. Jesus' express views on the matter make no difference to divorce among today's Christians. A third of them willingly violate his explicit statements.

So, if modern Christians engage regularly in practices that Jesus forbade, then those Christians should not have the right, based on their religious beliefs, to deny services to people who engage in practices that Jesus neither forbade nor even expressed an opinion. As Jesus said, "Take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye" (Matthew 7:5).