STRUCTURED SEPARATION: A SENSIBLE ALTERNATIVE TO DIVORCE

Many couples reach the place where their marriage is not working. It could be that the relationship is not satisfying to one or both partners or it could be that the marriage has drifted into a place of mutual contempt, faultfinding and blame.

Whatever the cause of the relational breakdown, some people try to mend the rift through marriage counseling. And, if that doesn’t work, it is assumed, by many, that the only other option is divorce. At that point, lawyers are consulted and once legal action occurs, the slide toward divorce seems to increase in speed and intensity.

However, there is a better way, especially for Christ followers. In fact, Paul the apostle once said, And now I will show you the most excellent way (1 Corinthians 12:31). Paul then speaks about the way of love:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.... And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love (1 Corinthians 13:4-8, 13, NIV).

The words quoted above have been read in millions of marriage ceremonies around the world but the reality is, over time, a marriage
can be tried, tested and the love that enriched a relationship early on can eventually dissipate. Further, the couple can begin to show contempt toward each other, which is a sure sign of a marital breakdown. When serious problems occur and living together only increases the pain, rather than going down the road of divorce, it is better to agree on a “structured separation.”

Structured separation occurs when a married couple chooses to live apart for a specified period of time. This is not an impulsive, haphazard living arrangement where one person leaves because he or she can’t stand to be around anymore. Instead, it is an agreed-upon plan to live apart for some period of time, with the financial, social and family arrangements clearly spelled out in advance.

Some couples choose to live apart and they go through the process of becoming “legally separated.” A legal separation, which is allowed in many states, takes place when a complaint is filed in the domestic relations division of the local common pleas court. Or if there is no domestic relations division, a complaint can be filed in the general division of the common pleas court.

Simply put, a legal separation allows the couple to remain married while living apart. The parties seek to come to agreement on such issues as spousal support, child custody and visitation, child support, property division, and/or the payment of marital debts. A legal separation sets forth the rights and obligations for each spouse and both parties must abide by this agreement.

In contrast, a structured separation is not a legally binding arrangement and it does not have to involve lawyers, judges, and filing petitions in a court. For the purposes of this document, I am defining a structured separation as an agreement between a husband and wife to live apart for a period of time to grow as individuals and to grow closer as a couple.

The Bible is clear that God “hates divorce.” He hates divorce because He hates what it does to people. (Malachi 2:16). It hurts them!
The truth is there is no such thing as a pain-free divorce. For example, over 25 years ago Judith Wallerstein began talking to a group of 131 children whose parents were going through a divorce. She followed the experiences of these children as they grew into adulthood and reported her findings in her book, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25-year Landmark Study*. Wallerstein’s research demonstrates that children of divorce suffer great emotional distress over their parents’ divorce, the consequences of which only intensify as children enter into adulthood.

Wallerstein claims: “Divorce is a life-transforming experience. After divorce, childhood is different. Adolescence is different. Adulthood — with the decision to marry or not and have children or not — is different. Whether the final outcome is good or bad, the whole trajectory of an individual’s life is profoundly altered by the divorce experience.” (Wallerstein, pages 27-28) Divorce is painful and causes deep, long-term distress.

When problems occur in a marriage, it would be best to stay together and work them out. Especially, if there are children, ideally, you would want to keep the family intact while you’re getting help from a gifted counselor to work out your differences. But, if the tension and pain escalates to the point where it becomes intolerable for both parties to live together, certainly a structured separation would be a viable option to divorce.

In a structured separation, you may or may not have the help of lawyers. In fact, I would recommend not paying lawyers to draft this document. I would suggest you appeal to a pastor or a professional counselor who will help you come to agreement on the details of this new arrangement. Perhaps a team approach would be beneficial involving your pastor, a counselor, and a mature Christian friend who would assist you with the issues surrounding your separation.

In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul the apostle mentions that some of the Corinthian believers were taking their disputes to a secular judge and he rebukes them for taking this course of action. In verse 5-7, Paul says,* Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to
judge a dispute between believers? But instead, one brother goes to law against another — and this in front of unbelievers! The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already.

In Paul’s mind it brought glory to God when Christ followers were able to work out their differences without involving unbelievers. Paul chides the Corinthians for not finding some wise people in the church to help them settle their disputes.

I think this same principle applies to a structured separation. I would suggest that you only pay for an attorney if you absolutely have to. Instead, there are mature Christian people who could help you work through the details of a separation agreement.

The purpose of a structured separation is not just to slow the process down which inevitably leads to divorce. Instead, a structured separation should only be utilized if it is deemed to give the marriage the best possible chance to succeed. Many couples separate because one or both individuals are frustrated, angry, or deeply hurt. Without any ground rules, the separation, by itself, can irritate the relationship even more, leading to even greater pain.

It is possible, as the saying goes, that “absence makes the heart grow fonder,” but it’s foolish to think that a devitalized couple will make any significant progress when they’re not growing as individuals and they’re not having any substantive dialogue.

Therefore, when a couple comes to the conclusion that a separation would help them, there needs to be some structure associated with it. Their time apart should have a defined purpose and some established guidelines, which will vary somewhat, depending on the couple and what problems they’re facing. Below are examples of what structured separation might include:

1. A specific purpose for the separation should be spelled out in writing. From a Christian point of view, ideally, both individuals would agree to use this time to work on personal growth and to work toward reconciliation. This document would actually be
worded like a contract or a covenant and signed by both individuals.

2. Rather than an indefinite separation, a certain time frame should be specified (3 months, 6 months, or whatever), with regular checkpoints established along the way for the evaluation of progress. It should be agreed upon, that during this time, neither spouse will file for divorce.

3. Some division of assets is necessary, including money, stocks, bonds, CD’s, cars, and other possessions. Some couples decide to continue joint checking and savings accounts, and the joint payment of bills. Other couples choose to split the assets in a fair and equitable way, where each person opens up separate accounts.

4. If the couple has children, the welfare of the kids should be at the top of the list. Child support, child custody and visitation schedules have to be worked out. Assuming that the relationship is civil between the parents, it would be nice if some family outings were planned to keep things as normal as possible for the kids.

5. The conditions of disclosure should be agreed upon. The question is, who will be told about the separation and what is the best possible way to explain it.

6. During the separation, both individuals would agree to meet with a counselor to work on any personal issues detrimental to the marriage. It might be helpful for both husband and wife to learn about forgiveness and reconciliation from a biblical point of view. Also, a good resource to read is, *Hope for the Separated*, by Gary Chapman.

7. Along with receiving individual therapy, the couple would also agree to meet with a counselor to work toward reconciliation. The goal of this reconciliation is not just to get the couple to live together again. It is God’s desire for each individual to draw near to Him so they can receive His healing touch. He wants to set them free from the pain of the past and from the
grief and grudges that so profoundly affect them. As the Lord brings healing to the husband and wife as individuals, it gives them an opportunity to be joined with each other in a warm, loving marriage.

8. Should the couple talk or write to each other (cards, letters, email, or text messages) or see each other outside of the counselor’s office? Should there be sexual contact when they are together? Which one should move out of their residence into a different place? These details would need to be negotiated as well. Fun outings, holiday get-togethers, or eating out, where the couple agrees not to discuss marital problems, could be beneficial.

9. The couple would agree not to date or become romantically involved with other people during this time.

Structured separation is certainly not a cure-all for marriage ailments, but there are some good reasons to consider it:

- By removing themselves from the daily criticism and fighting of a troubled marriage, it gives each person time to heal from past hurts.

- By living apart, the husband and wife can step back and take an honest look at their own contribution to the marriage breakdown.

- During the separation, it reminds both individuals of what life is like without their spouse. It allows them to experience a foretaste of the social, sexual, economic and parental stresses that accompany a divorce. Some couples are so psychologically and emotionally intertwined they don’t even realize (until one person moves out) how hard it is to be disconnected from each other. Many couples report that their separation causes considerable anxiety, fear, sadness, and even depression. Structured separation allows people to experience the repercussions of living apart before the decision to divorce becomes finalized. It gives each person time to decide if divorce is what he/she truly wants.
• A structured separation encourages a married couple to slow the legal process down, since both parties agree, during this time, not to consult with lawyers or file for divorce. Once lawyers are consulted and a person becomes convinced that divorce is inevitable, it becomes much harder to change course after that.

• Some find structured separation beneficial so that they can still retain health benefits or other insurance coverage’s.

• Structured separation can function as a wake-up call to a wayward spouse. If there is substance abuse, serious financial irresponsibility, emotional, psychological, physical and/or verbal abuse, infidelity, etc., separation can cause a marriage partner to recognize the need for change.

• Jesus once said, “what God has joined together, let man not separate.” (Matthew 19:6) It is sad when Christian people feel that the only way out of a bad relationship is to get a divorce. It is better to take the step of a structured separation, which includes a plan for individual growth and concrete steps to be taken, to hopefully, rebuild the marriage.

To sum up, a structured separation can provide a couple with a reprieve from the ongoing tension and energy drain of trying to live together in a peaceful way. Also, a structured separation can jar both individuals enough to promote an honest assessment of their need for God and their need to change, if the marriage is ever going to improve.

Once an agreement is in place and without the pressure of attorneys, the couple can go through the process outlined in their separation agreement and, with counseling and prayer support, they can make significant progress. Hopefully, during this time, the couple will re-connect in positive ways and rekindle the desire to live again as husband and wife.

Rather than rushing toward divorce, please consider a structured separation. Go to a pastor or a counselor and let them help you craft a separation agreement that would be beneficial for both of you. Use
the list above as a roadmap for your discussions and seek to find common ground as you move forward with your decision to live apart.

And, above all, give God a chance to soften your heart by yielding yourself to Him, because when it’s all said and done, you can’t change your marriage partner. All you can do is allow the Lord to change you. He can heal your broken heart, comfort you, and give you His incredible love and peace, even in the midst of horrendous situations. By the grace of God and through daily reliance on His Spirit, set your heart to do what is right in His eyes no matter what kind of response you get in return.