

“Hope After Failure,” by F.I. Stanley
A Review
Keith Sharp

Someone important to me gave me the book **Hope After Failure** by F.I. Stanley. He wrote inside the front cover, “I’ve studied it with the Bible and believe it to be true.” So, I have read the book and now undertake to review it, first for the sake of the one who gave me the book but also for others who might be influenced by it. I will not attempt to answer every argument of this 173 page book but will reply to major arguments. I will mail this review to Brother Stanley with an offer to debate him on the subject.

Brother Stanley’s basic position is that all divorce, without exception, is sin but that a “bill of divorcement” corrects this sin and frees both parties to remarry with divine approval.

Yes, divorce is wrong in either man or woman. Therefore God has never endorsed it or commanded it (25).

God never made a law for divorce because this is man’s sin. However, God made a law for the removal of that sin, and this is called a writing of a bill of divorcement (32).

Basic to Stanley’s position is his contention that the law of Moses and law of Christ are identical on marriage.

Let us get off the false concept that Jesus departed from the Old Testament teaching of the law and told them how it was going to be under the gospel age.

That is not true (19, All emphasis throughout this review is Stanley’s.).

... Jesus did not deny the law of marriage given of God under the law, but simply taught the truth about it (20).

The author also makes a fine distinction between “divorce” and “a bill of divorcement.” “The writing of the bill of divorcement only corrected the wrong done in the divorce against the wife” (31).

According to Stanley the “bill of divorcement” nullifies the marriage, brings about forgiveness of the divorce, and gives both parties the right to remarry, but never to be married to each other again.

It completely dissolved the former marriage. It nullified and put an eternal end to it (23).

... God made a law for the removal of that sin, and this is called a writing of a bill of divorcement (32).

It set her free from the law of the husband and gave her the right to go and

become another man's wife (Ibid).

It gave her the liberty to seek the third marriage if necessary (24).

He may never take her again and she may never be his.... It is an abomination to return to each other (Deut. 24:1-4) (26).

Divorce and Bill of Divorcement

Stanley's distinction between "divorce" and a "bill of divorcement" is clever but has no basis in Scripture or fact (cf. 2 Peter 1:16). Read Deuteronomy 24:1-4. The "bill of divorcement" was the legal means by which they were to divorce their wives. Neither the Lord nor His apostles ever once mention a "bill of divorcement." The Pharisees asked Him about "a writing of divorcement," and He replied by talking about putting away (Matthew 19:8-9, **King James Version**), i.e., "divorce" (**New King James Version, New American Standard Bible, International Standard Version, English Standard Version**). Either the phrase "bill of divorcement" and the term "divorce" may be used interchangeably, or the Master did not answer their question. Stanley makes a distinction where there is no difference. In fact, he contradicts himself on this crucial point in his summary by recognizing "that God himself used the bill of divorcement to put away Israel (Jer. 3:8)" (157). So, just as I pointed out, the bill of divorcement is simply the legal means by which divorce is effected.

The blood of Christ, not a legal document demanded by the law of Moses and obtained in a civil court, removes the guilt of sin (Romans 5:9).

Shocking

Stanley's view of marriage is, quite frankly, shocking in its looseness.

Today some people just start living together. This is called adultery although it may be a common-law marriage, but two people who are legally married and living together have an honorable marriage, and their bed is undefiled (Heb. 13:4).

Living together in an unmarried condition is nothing new (cf. John 4:16-18). It is not adultery, but rather fornication (Thayer. 417, 531-2.). Two people cannot contract a common-law marriage without committing fornication. Just because the state approves a marriage doesn't mean God does. Herod Antipas had married Herodias, the wife of his brother Herod Philip (Mark 6:17). But John the Baptist, at the cost of his head, declared, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife" (Mark 6:18). The incest of this relationship is irrelevant to the point. Herod Antipas was married to Herodias, but John denied the lawfulness of the relationship. Civil law must give way to divine law (Acts 5:29).

But F. I. Stanley asserts that two people "who are legally married and living together have an honorable marriage, and their bed is undefiled (Heb. 13:4)." If this statement is true, then homosexual couples in Canada and Massachusetts may have an honorable marriage with an undefiled bed. Polygamists in Muslim countries have the same. I realize Stanley recognizes that

marriage involves “two people of the opposite sex” (8), but that just means he contradicts himself. Surely we must realize that Hebrews 13:4 is talking about a marriage God has authorized.

Stanley’s view of marriage is shocking in its carnality. He sees nothing but a fleshly relationship. “Marriage only joins the flesh, not the spirit or soul.... marriage is a carnal blessing for the needs of the carnal man to satisfy his carnal nature” (40). Indeed, in divinely approved marriage the husband and wife become one flesh (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:4-6). But the primary purpose for the marriage relationship is the human need for companionship (Genesis 2:18). Central to that companionship is the raising of godly offspring, and this involves the spirit (Malachi 2:15).

The author has a shockingly low view of human nature.

*Man could not remain wholly true.... God also knew there would be trouble in the **carnal** marriage as well as in the **spiritual** marriage; therefore, God made arrangements for the correction and changes in the carnal marriage for man. He called for another ceremony.... The ceremony He called a writing of a **bill of divorcement**” (42,43).*

God knew they would divorce each other (104).

This is beyond Calvinism! Calvinists falsely claim we are born with a sinful nature and cannot keep from sinning. If Stanley is correct, we can’t keep from divorcing. God forbids all sin (1 Corinthians 15:34), and He forbids divorce, including the legal part of it, the “bill of divorcement” (Matthew 5:31-32) except for the cause of fornication (Matthew 19:9). God is just and never requires of us what we are unable to do (Deuteronomy 32:4; 30:11-14). No one has to sin, no one has to commit adultery, and no one has to divorce.

F.I. Stanley entitled his book **Hope After Failure**. It should be entitled **Marriage, a Hopeless Relationship**.

And F.I. Stanley has a shockingly high view of a legal document issued by a civil government called a “bill of divorcement.” Not only does he parallel it with the blood of the Son of God, he sets it on a level plain with God approved marriage.

There is no difference in disrespecting the marriage that makes two one, designed and given by the authority of God, and in disrespecting the bill of divorcement, designed and given by the authority of God (43-44).

God Himself ordained the marriage relationship between one man and one woman in the very beginning (Genesis 2:18-24). He made no provision for divorce or its legal component, “a bill of divorcement.” Moses allowed divorce with “a bill of divorcement” (Deuteronomy 24:1-4) “because of the hardness of” heart of the Jews, but God never intended this (Matthew 19:8). Jesus forbids divorce, including the “bill of divorcement,” “except for sexual immorality” (Matthew 19:9).

The author has a shockingly low view of God. He asserts, “Nevertheless, he tolerated

man in sin” (115). The holy Lord God has never done such a thing (Habakkuk 1:13; Isaiah 59:1-2; Romans 6:23).

Self-Contradictory

As is almost always the case with false teachers, Stanley contradicts himself several times.

For example, after staunchly contending that all divorce is sin, the author amazingly states, “... fornication gives the sinned against party the right to end the marriage as though the fornicator were dead” (36). I agree (Matthew 19:9)! But what happened to his position that all divorce is sin? And yet he turns right around and reiterates that all divorce is sin, but that the sin is corrected by a “bill of divorcement,” and even has the blasphemous audacity to parallel this legal document to the blood of Christ! (38) Then, he later turns around and writes, “God never did sanction divorce; He never will, but He did one thing: He suffered it to be so. To suffer means He allowed it without condemnation” (115). So, it’s always a sin, but God “allowed it without condemnation”!

Stanley admits “women under the law did not have the right to divorce their husbands” (132). He doesn’t explain why they should now.

Christ and Moses

Are the law of Christ and the law of Moses identical on marriage? Stanley asserts: ***Jesus never contradicted Moses*** or anything that Moses said or wrote. For Him to have done so would have been nothing short of a denial of the inspiration of the Old Testament and the infallibility of God (19).

He sees the Sermon on the Mount as the correct explanation of the Mosaic law. “Jesus’ purpose in his sermon was to show what the law said, how to keep it, and what the results were if one did not keep it” (102).

Stanley betrays utter ignorance of the purpose of the law of Moses and New Testament teaching concerning its end as law.

What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made.... Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor (Galatians 3:19,24-25).

By appealing to Deuteronomy 24:1-4 as justification for a “bill of divorcement” and unlimited remarriages, the author is seeking justification by the law. “You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace” (Galatians 5:4).

No, Christ did not contradict Moses, but He did fulfill the law and replace it.
Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled
(Matthew 5:17-18).

This passage that is grossly misused to teach that the moral precepts of the law still continue actually proves the Mosaic law has passed away as law. If a union representative asserted, “Till heaven and earth pass away, we won’t go back to work until our demands are met,” what would the union do if its demands were met? The purpose of the law was to bring Israel to Christ (Galatians 3:19-25). In Christ the law’s demand for righteousness is fulfilled (Romans 10:4). When Christ died on the cross, He removed the law, all the Mosaic covenant, as a standard of righteousness (Colossians 2:13-17).

Stanley argues that Christ couldn’t have taught anything different from Moses, or the Pharisees would have condemned Him for heresy (19). He asserts Jesus appealed “to the law and to the prophets” (Ibid). The Master did indeed correct their traditions by which they contradicted Moses (e.g., Matthew 15:1-9). He did this to bring them to repentance toward the law so that the law might lead them to Him (Mark 1:14-15). But Christ did not rely on the law as His authority but taught by authority given Him directly from the Father (Matthew 7:28-29; 28:18; John 12:49). He did not just explain the law; He announced the principles of the kingdom of heaven (e.g., Matthew 4:23; 5:19-20). Certainly He taught those who heard Him during His ministry to keep the law, for they were still under it, and it would lead them to Him. And obedience to the moral laws of the heavenly kingdom would not cause them to violate Mosaic moral law, for the requirements of the Master are stricter than Moses (Matthew 19:3-9).

Certainly “the law was just, holy, and good” (20; Romans 7:12), within the context of its purpose as a tutor to lead to Christ (Galatians 3:19-25). But the point of the very passage Stanley misuses is to show that the Mosaic law has been removed as law (Romans 7:1-12).

If Deuteronomy 24:1-4 is applicable today, all the Mosaic law is applicable today. You can’t pick and choose which parts of the law you want to keep (Galatians 5:3). Moses also allowed polygamy (Exodus 21:10; Deuteronomy 21:15-17). He allowed a married man to lust after a woman other than his wife and to take her as a second (or third, or fourth) wife (Deuteronomy 21:10-14). Stanley’s argument, logically applied, would bring back the law with all its ritual, animal sacrifices, levitical priesthood, and lower moral standard.

Incidentally, Deuteronomy 24:1-4 did not forbid the woman given a “bill of divorcement” to return to her former husband. The first husband could not take her back after she had become “another man’s wife” (verses 3-4).

Paul specifically commands a divorced woman to “remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband” (1 Corinthians 7:11). He does not say, “unless her husband has given her a bill of divorcement.” The marriage is ended. She is “unmarried.” But, not only may she return to her

former husband, either doing so or remaining single are her only choices. The law of Christ on marriage is indeed different from the law of Moses.

Under the Mosaic law, only the husband had the right to divorce his wife (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). If this law is still in force, women have no right to seek a “bill of divorcement” even if their husbands are guilty of fornication. Stanley admits, “... women under the law did not have the right to divorce their husbands” (132). He doesn’t explain why they should now, even though this admission is part of his “explanation” of Mark 10:2-12. The Master applies the law equally to both the man and the woman (Mark 10:11-12).

Appeals to Irrationality

Much of Brother Stanley’s argumentation amounts to appeals to irrationality. He beats straw men to death, engages in name calling, and attacks motives. These tactics contribute nothing to the search for truth but serve only to throw up a smoke screen to hide its light.

He states, “If sins cannot be forgiven, then our religion is worthless”(vii). The Lord will forgive even the vilest of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15-16) but only if they repent (Acts 3:19; 8:22). One cannot persist in committing adultery and claim to have repented (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). The issue is not whether God will forgive the adulterer. The issue is what comprises adultery.

Stanley spends 22 pages accusing those who disagree with him of being full of “vengeance and hate” and comparing us to the younger brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son (47-68). Recently a woman where I am a member confessed to being guilty of lying, drunkenness, taking illegal drugs, and fornication. The congregation prayed for her, and she is now a fully accepted member again. Where’s the younger brother?

But two principles must be recognized. Forgiveness does not remove consequences in this life, and God does not approve our reaping the carnal benefits of our sins. The Mosaic law illustrates these principles. If an Israelite sinned against the Lord’s holy things, he had to offer a ram as a guilt offering to obtain forgiveness (Leviticus 5:14-15). But this didn’t end the matter. He was forgiven, but he still had to make restitution for whatever he had withheld and even add a fifth to it (Ibid). That’s not vengeance and hate. That’s justice and prevention of intentional sin.

A thief may obtain forgiveness of his thievery through the blood of Christ. But he can’t keep his ill gotten gains, and he may have to go to jail. Likewise, an adulterer may be forgiven by the cross, but he can’t keep that second wife without being guilty of adultery (Matthew 5:31-32; 19:9; Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18).

In a chapter entitled “SHEEP WITHOUT SHEPHERDS,” Stanley piles slander on top of slander and appeals to one emotion after another. He bemoans, “Elders were so sure that they knew the truth about Matthew nineteen that they punished many people by demanding that they live celibate to be true to God (forbidding to marry)”(108) The Master’s disciples also thought

His teaching recorded in Matthew 19:9 was too hard (Matthew 19:10). The Lord gave them two choices: keep it or live celibate lives (Matthew 19:11-12). Did Christ forbid marriage?

Stanley tries to dodge this bullet by appealing to 1 Corinthians 7:7, where Paul indicates some do not the “gift” to live a celibate life (117). This just arrays the Apostle Paul against the Lord. Paul was speaking of voluntary celibacy in the face of persecution (verses 7-9,26). He was not speaking of the results in this life of one’s sins. A murderer may repent and be forgiven, but he has still forfeited the right to physical life. A divorced adulterer may repent and be forgiven, but he has forfeited the right to marriage (Matthew 19:9).

Stanley accuses, “It makes it worse than murder, lying, stealing, believing in another god, or anything else that a person can do because all of these, they teach, can be forgiven, but not a broken marriage” (110). Hogwash! God will forgive any sin if we will repent (1 Timothy 1:15-16). But the sinner can’t go on committing adultery and claim to have repented (Matthew 19:9).

If One Free Both Free?

The author argues that, if the innocent party has the right to remarry, the guilty party, i.e., the one who has committed sexual immorality, must as well.

*How is it possible to separate the innocent party from the guilty without also separating the guilty party from the innocent.... **you cannot loose her and leave him bound....*** (10).

Oh? Stanley himself parallels the Lord’s divorce of Israel to a man divorcing his wife (35). Did the Lord sin when He divorced Israel (Jeremiah 3:8). Stanley contends all divorce, without exception, is sin. Did the Lord take Israel back? Did the fact the Lord gave Israel “a bill of divorce” give her the right to become the wife of another god? Was it a sin for Israel to return to the Lord?

We must have authority from the Lord Jesus Christ for all we do (Colossians 3:17). The only divorced person with a living former mate whom the Lord authorizes to remarry is the innocent party who divorced his/her mate because he/she is guilty of adultery (Matthew 19:9).

Thus, the Lord chooses not to allow the guilty party to reap the carnal benefits of his sin. This is perfectly harmonious with our recognized standards of justice. If a professional athlete violates his contract with one team to illegally play for another, the team that holds the contract is freed from obligations under it. But that doesn’t give the athlete the liberty to reap the carnal benefits of his unlawful acts by continuing to illegally play for the other team.

Matthew 5:31-32

Stanley asserts:

The bill of divorcement gave the woman in Deuteronomy 24 the right to remarry, but the woman in Matthew 5:31-32 did not have that right. Why? She was not

given the bill of divorcement! (30)

Of course Matthew 5:31-32 says no such thing. Stanley simply assumes and asserts his argument.

He further asserts, “There can be no question in our mind but that this passage is both the conclusion and explanation of *Deuteronomy 24:1-4*” (100). The Master stated:

Furthermore it has been said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery (Matthew 5:31-32).

Was the Master just telling them they needed to get a “bill of divorcement” and everything would be alright? The Pharisees knew Moses commanded a “bill of divorcement”! (Matthew 19:7) They could read! If Stanley is correct, Jesus and the Pharisees taught the very same thing on divorce. Verse thirty-two begins with the negative conjunction “But.” He is contrasting what Moses taught (*Deuteronomy 24:1*) with His law. Just as in Matthew 19:7-9, the Master uses the word “divorce” as a synonym for “certificate of divorce.”

Romans 7:1-4

Amazingly, Stanley appeals to Romans 7:1-4, a passage that neither mentions divorce nor a “bill of divorcement,” as proof for his position. He asserts, “The Jewish Christian cut the covenant (divorcement) of the law, just as God had divorced Israel” (94). Incredible! The passage never mentions divorce nor God’s divorce of Israel, but that’s what Stanley finds. That’s what happens when determination to uphold a theory colors all a man sees. The Jews died to the law by the body of Christ (Romans 7:4). Death severs the marriage bond and frees the wife to remarry (Romans 7:1-4). Thus, the Jewish Christians were married to Christ and could not return to the law (as Stanley does).

A Marriage Gone Bad

Stanley asserts without proof:

*We just can’t differentiate between the law of a **good marriage** and the law of a **marriage gone bad**. One was given to those who loved each other, while the other was given to those who hated each other* (115).

The idea the Lord has different laws for different kinds of marriage is another unproven assumption. I have dealt with husbands and wives in a lot of marriages gone bad, where love had turned to hate. I exhort the wife in this situation to love her husband (Titus 2:4). I admonish the husband to love his wife (Ephesians 5:25-33). Paul was not and I am not commanding an emotion. We are commanding an action (1 John 3:16-18; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7). I hope the loving action will restore the emotion, but whether it does or not, the loving acts must be there.

What Is Adultery?

Mark records that Jesus warned against adultery (Mark 10:11-12). But, commenting on

this passage, Brother Stanley asserts, “The sin committed in putting away a partner was not in a second marriage” (133). He recognizes the sin committed is “adultery” (Ibid), but contends that divorce is the sin (134), but that “a bill of divorcement... cut the matrimonial bond..., so neither he nor she will be living in adultery...” (134). It makes you wonder when adultery is committed and what adultery is. It’s not committed at the court house, for obtaining a bill of divorcement is “obeying a precept” (135). It’s not committed in bed in the second marriage, for the sin is “not in a second marriage.” Where and when, pray tell, is the adultery? Is walking out the door adultery? Is telling your mate to leave adultery? Thayer defines the verb “commit adultery” as “*to have unlawful sexual intercourse with another’s wife*” (417). The verbs are present tense. The **New American Standard Bible** (both original and updated) correctly translates Mark 10:12, “is committing adultery.” It’s not what she did when she left her husband, and it’s not what she did at the court house. It’s what she’s doing in the second marriage in the bedroom now. She is indeed living in adultery.

Huh?

In answer to the valid objection, ““So you think that a man can divorce as many times as he wants to and still get forgiveness of it?”,” Stanley replies, “The blood of Christ was not shed to forgive **willful sin**, and it will not (Heb. 10:26). Neither was the bill of divorcement designed to forgive **willful divorce**” (148). Pray tell, how does one unwillfully divorce? The blood of Christ will cleanse us of any sin of which we will repent (1 Timothy 1:15-16; Acts 3:19; 8:22). Hebrews 10:26 is talking about continuing in willful sin - “if we go on sinning willfully” (NASB). So, the objection remains, consistent with Stanley’s position, one could go on divorcing, obtaining a certificate of divorce, and remarrying indefinitely with divine approval. And then Stanley has the gall to warn about a “cess pool of fornication.”

Stanley contends that we make murder easier to be forgiven than divorce. He argues that if a man murdered his wife and repented, we would allow him to remarry, but, if he divorces her, we won’t allow him to remarry. If God’s law were followed, the murderer would be put to death, and remarriage would not be a concern (Genesis 9:6; Romans 13:3-4).

Conclusion

In his epilogue, F.I. Stanley objects:

It is taught by most preachers and members of the churches of Christ, that Jesus taught one could divorce and remarry again (sic) for only one reason, “because of fornication.” Therefore, our question is, ‘Why didn’t Jesus just tell the Pharisees that in answer to their inquiry?’ (164)

That’s precisely what He did! “And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery” (Matthew 19:9). It takes the help of a false teacher such as Stanley to misunderstand the Lord’s statement.

Since it is abundantly clear that F.I. Stanley twists the Scriptures to his own destruction (2 Peter 3:16), wherein is his appeal?

But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed.... They are spots and blemishes, carousing in their own deceptions while they feast with you, having eyes full of adultery and that cannot cease from sin, enticing unstable souls (2 Peter 2:1-2,13-14).

Stanley wants to give carnal hope to unrepentant adulterers determined to fulfill their sexual desires whether lawful or unlawful. The hope we have is the home in heaven (Ephesians 4:4; 1 Peter 1:3-5). Any sacrifices we make here, including a life of celibacy, are small indeed compared to eternal life (Romans 8:18).

Since I have not attempted to answer every quibble of this 173 page book in a review of less than 10 pages, I will be happy to meet F.I. Stanley in public debate for a full discussion of our differences. I will debate these propositions:

Resolved: All divorce is sin but a bill of divorcement corrects this sin and frees both parties to remarry with divine approval.

Affirmed: _____ (F.I. Stanley)

Denied: _____ (Keith Sharp)

Resolved: The only one who may divorce and remarry with divine approval is the innocent party who divorced his/her mate because of sexual immorality.

Affirmed: _____ (Keith Sharp)

Denied: _____ (F.I. Stanley)