



WHAT WE BELIEVE  
ABOUT DIVORCE AND  
REMARRIAGE

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# WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

What exactly are Christ's standards regarding divorce and remarriage? When is divorce and remarriage permissible? And when is it not? This document seeks to bring clarity to these questions.

*(Over and above many conversations amongst the eldership of our church over the years, we want to thank Bethlehem Baptist Church, Journey Church, Mars Hill Church, and theologians Michael Eaton, Gordon Fee, Dallas Willard and John Stott for providing writings that shaped much of our own understanding and application of Christ's teaching – even if, as a result, we end up with an understanding that varies from theirs in some aspects).*

This document represents our first draft on the matter. We are open to revising it if we believe we have failed in any way to serve God's people and to affirm the clear teachings of Scripture. We are aware that some divorced people may feel wounded by some of the things mentioned in this document. We recognise that divorce is painful and that many people going through the journey of divorce, have tried their best to keep their marriage together.

## **OUTLINE**

- What's the big deal about marriage?
- What's the big deal about divorce?
- What are the biblical standards concerning divorce?
- What are the biblical standards concerning remarriage?
- Unpacking the teachings of Christ and Paul on remarriage
- Some further pastoral comments on divorce and remarriage
- Closing thoughts
- Next steps

## **WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL ABOUT MARRIAGE?**

Jesus answered, "But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female. For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united with his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." (Matt 19:6-9)

## **WHAT SIX THINGS DO WE LEARN ABOUT THE NATURE OF MARRIAGE FROM THESE VERSES?**

1. Marriage is originally God's idea. This is implied by "in the beginning". It's his institution/creation ordinance, and therefore, he is the one who has the authority to say both what it is, and how it is to work.
2. Marriage is between a man and a woman, where maleness and femaleness come together to complete the image of God (v6).
3. Marriage creates a bond greater than even the blood bond between parents and child. This is why a man needs to leave his own parents (v7). It's a way of saying that one's own spouse should be more valuable and cherished than even one's parents or children.
4. Marriage is the union of two people into one new entity. This entity is more than a legal contract or partnership between two people. It is the deepest bonding humans can experience, so much so, that they are now together described as "one flesh" (v8), which is another way of saying "a new human being". Jesus reiterates this with his powerful words, "so they are no longer two but one". Marriage is becoming one with another person, not just sexually, but also emotionally, spiritually, financially and in other ways too. A contract can bring two people to a place of partnership, but only a covenant can bring two people to a place of oneness.
5. Marriage is God joining a man and a woman (v9). God himself appears to be the "glue" that makes this one-flesh union.
6. Although humans can start a marriage, they are not free to end a marriage. This is what Jesus means when he says, 'Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.' Marriage is a life-long commitment to a living spouse.

## **WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL ABOUT DIVORCE?**

Since over half of adults nowadays have divorced parents, there is not much need to convince anyone of the untold devastation that divorce has brought to lives and society. Divorce is painful. It is emotionally wrenching. A divorce is often long years in coming and long years in the settlement. There is also often an agonizing place for children. Tensions over custody and financial support can deepen the wounds. Not forgetting the backwards-and-forwards lifestyle the children have no choice but to accept in joint-custody situations.

But, over and above the emotional and circumstantial devastation caused, divorce is a big deal when held up against the teachings about marriage in the Bible:

1. Divorce is a big deal to Jesus because marriage is a living union of two people joined together by God. It is more than a mere contract before human witnesses, which at best can make two people close. It is rather a covenant before God, which has already made two people one. It is a covenant made before God (Prov 2:16-17) that makes two people 'one flesh' in God's sight (Gen 2:23-25). As our marriages are meant to be a picture of Christ's marriage to his imperfect bride, the church (Eph 5:23-25), one's covenant to one's spouse is not a conditional covenant dependent on the partner's performance or commitment levels.

1. Marriage, especially Christian marriage, is a promise of a life-long commitment to a living spouse, regardless of the degree to which the other keep their commitment. Marriage is a living union between two people. It is a union confirmed by God himself. That is why Jesus said, 'What God joins together, let no one (not even the respective spouses) separate!' (Matt 19: 6). It is for this reason that we see divorce as a kind of tragic amputation - a living union torn in two.
2. Divorce is a big deal because marriage has been set apart by God to reflect the relationship between his Son and his bride, the church (Eph 5:21-33). This is why this bond is extraordinarily unique among all human bonds. Marriage is a human relationship ordained and instituted by God (Mal 2:14-16). His original design was one man and one woman united by covenant and sexual union for life (Gen 2:23-4). Marriage is also meant to symbolise the relationship God has between himself and his people (Eph 5:21-33; Isai 54:5; Hos 2:14-23; Eze 16; Jer 3:20). God hates divorce because it hurts people and shatters the picture of his own covenant with the church.

## **WHAT ARE THE BIBLICAL STANDARDS CONCERNING DIVORCE?**

A believer and unbeliever should not marry (1 Cor. 7:39; 2 Cor. 6:14-15), but if they do, the believer should remain committed to the marriage (1 Cor 7:12-14). Biblically, divorce may be permitted when the other spouse 1) deserts the relationship because they are not a Christian (1 Cor 7:15) or, 2) commits adultery (Matt 19:9).

### **1. Desertion**

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7 that if one spouse becomes a Christian, but their spouse does not, and the non-believing spouse abandons the marriage (i.e. one spouse deserts the other, and refuses to return) then the Christian divorcee who has been abandoned is no longer bound by the covenant and is free to remarry a believer (see v15). This may seem rare in our culture, as in most instances today one spouse coming to faith doesn't lead to the other leaving them. (But it could be applied to, for example, a Muslim woman converting to Christianity which could lead to her husband abandoning her and their marriage. In which case she'd be released to remarry another Christ-follower, should she desire to do so.) Just to be clear the bible doesn't teach that a non-believing spouse is a reason for pursuing a divorce, the Christian is to seek to stay in their marriage and do all they can to love their spouse, in the hope that their love will lead their spouse to faith in Jesus (1 Pet 3: 1-2).

### **2. Adultery**

From Jesus' teaching in Mark 10:11-12, Matthew 5: 32, Matthew 19: 9, and Luke 16: 18, we can conclude that adultery on the part of one spouse would mean the other spouse would be free to divorce, and then later remarry another believer, should they want to. That said, Jesus isn't commanding divorce in the case of adultery. There are many cases where the power of repentance and grace bring restoration to the broken relationship, and the marriage continues (the book of Hosea gives a beautiful example of this).

Though we have no Bible verse to directly support any addition to these two exceptions, we add another to this list that, in our view, so deeply devastates the marriage relationship that it can be beyond repair – namely, 3) dangerous, continuing abuse, that is legally and pastorally confirmed (and this would include other similarly weighty offences such as cruelty, humiliation, persistent refusal to provide requisite food or clothing, willful conjugal or emotional neglect).

A spouse who is being subjected to abuse could seek a divorce, with the help of biblical church leadership, on the grounds of desertion above. When a spouse is abusing another, although the abuser may profess to be a Christian, they are not behaving in a Christ-like manner. And importantly, subjecting a spouse to harmful abuse is really another way of abandoning the marriage. In these situations, it is vital to seek the help of godly church leaders. Matthew 18: 15-18 teaches us to involve church leaders in issues of sin where one party refuses to repent. The result of this refusal to repentance on the part of the abuser equates to abandonment of the marriage by a non-believer. (Note: we recognise there are some ‘leaps’ from these texts, but for pastors and theologians, this seems to be the best way to apply these scriptures in the very painful, and frankly, a dangerous instance of abuse).

Reconciliation between the two people is preferable to separation or divorce, even where adultery or abuse has occurred. Of course, this requires real repentance from the offending spouse and real forgiveness in the other. Think of Jesus’ teaching in Matt 18:21-22, “Then Peter came and said to Jesus, ‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?’” Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.’” Serious efforts, over a long period of time, if need be, should be made toward reconciling the aggrieved partners, involving the leadership of the church, before the marriage can be allowed to be regarded as irreparably broken. (We do recognise however that in abuse cases this may not be possible or advised).

Lesser reasons (other than abandonment by a non-Christian spouse, adultery and abuse) are not sufficient grounds for divorce. The secular cultural mindset about marriage is prolific and has often crept into the church too. To be a Christ-follower means we derive our morality and our values not from our culture, but from the teachings of the bible. The Bible and our culture differ on what the essence of marriage is. In our culture marriage is a contract whereby two people enter into for their mutual benefit. This marriage is a legally binding agreement. In this contract, when one party is no longer holding up their end of the bargain, or the union is no longer deemed to be mutually beneficial, the aggrieved party, or both parties, can get a divorce and move on with their lives. Admittedly, this is a very simplistic analysis - often there’s much counsel, hardship, and effort that goes into trying to fix the marriage first. But essentially when the marriage is no longer serving one or both parties or getting in the way of their happiness, people seek divorce.

For the Christian, marriage is not a contract but rather a “Forsaking all others, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, for all the days of my life” covenant.

It's not merely a civil union, but a joining together (two people becoming one flesh) by God himself - see Matthew 19: 7. As well as a cleaving together by the couple. The covenant is a vow of future love, regardless of the challenges we face, or the personal changes we may go through. It's a promise to say: A week from now, a year from now, a decade from now, decades from now - I'm committing to orientate my life around selflessly loving you. Everything else in my life may change - but this will not. It's a covenant.

Christian marriage is this way because it is an echo of God's nature and Christ's love for us. In that He selflessly loved us regardless of the love he was receiving back from us, He loved us not for his own good but for our benefit, at great personal cost to Himself. And we who are the recipients of this covenant love are in fact transformed into more beautiful creatures by and through his love for us.

This is why the bible says that if you are a Christian - you are to remain married to your spouse, and not be divorced. And if in fact, you have separated, we're to pursue reconciliation with your spouse. (1 Corinthians 7: 1-11) Reconciling the one flesh marriage through the transforming power of the Gospel is what the Christ follower should seek.

Following Christ does not guarantee short-term fulfilment or happiness - that is not the goal. Rather the goal is long-term growth in Christ-likeness, which will always flow over into long-term joy and eternal reward.

## **WHAT ARE THE BIBLICAL STANDARDS CONCERNING RE- MARRIAGE?**

Since death breaks the marriage bond (Rom 7:2-3), remarriage is permissible for a believing widow or widower.

The Bible speaks to remarriage after separation and divorce:

*'Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery.'* (Mark 10:11-12)

*'Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.'* (Luke 16:18)

*Paul applies the teaching of Jesus when he says: 'To the married, I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.'* (1 Cor 7:10-11).

Having said that, in some rare situations where we as elders have sufficiently discerned the restoring grace of God, we would endorse a remarriage of a person who failed their marriage some years or decades before. The next section is devoted to this subject.

## A CLOSER LOOK AT THE TEACHINGS OF CHRIST & PAUL ON REMARRIAGE

Let us consider the situation behind Jesus' teaching:

'I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.' (Matt 19:9)

We need to understand the specific context that Jesus was addressing in his teaching here. Jesus addresses a situation happening in ancient Israel, whereby a man would divorce his wife for any reason, and give her a legal document permitting her to remarry. Rationalising that since all was legal, all was right, he would then promptly find her replacement (assuming he hadn't found her already). When we consider this context, we understand Jesus' teaching to be saying, 'Do not think just because you've legally terminated a contract that all is fine. There is more than an earthly contract here. This is a covenant before God and a covenant that God was involved in. You can't just dispose of someone. It's wrong.

And remarrying someone off the back of it is nothing short of adultery, even if the law doesn't call it that.'

Secondly, let us consider the situation behind Paul's teaching:

*'To the married, I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife. (1 Cor 7:10-11)*

Notice how Paul here is emphatically addressing some women in the Corinthian church. Notice how he seems to mention the husband only as an afterthought. Why is this? Gordon Fee, in his commentary of 1 Corinthians, says that one key to understanding the teaching of 1 Corinthians 7 is to realise that it addresses an unusual situation that had arisen in the Corinthian church. Many women in the church believed that since they were saved, things such as sex and marriage were not spiritual, so they simply refrained from sex and walked out on their husbands – as though sex and marriage were the 'unspiritual old order' that they had been saved out of. Of course, as Paul would argue throughout this letter, they were totally wrong. Sex and marriage were part of God's original creation, and if anything, they were being redeemed not rejected by Christ. Having said that, we now understand what Paul is saying here: 'Wives, don't think you can walk out on your husbands. Remember the teaching of the Lord Jesus on the matter! If you already have walked out on him, be reconciled to him if at all possible. But don't think this is an opportunity to remarry someone else. It's not.'

If you are in a situation in which Jesus' and Paul's teaching on remarriage don't directly speak to, then what in the Scriptures does? The answer is the entire message of the Bible, which is the Gospel.

We believe that the essence of the Gospel is that sinners get forgiven, that no sin (including divorce) is unforgivable, and God is able to restore what is broken. The Gospel wonderfully presents to us the God of the second chance. This does not minimise the horrible realities of sin and the devastating realities of brokenness that result from sin. But it does mean that it is God's grace, not any sin, not even the sin of adultery or divorce, that have the last word on the matter. 'Sin doesn't have a chance in competition with the aggressive forgiveness we call grace. When it's sin versus grace, grace wins hands down' (Romans 5:20, The Message).

## **SOME FURTHER PASTORAL COMMENTS ON DIVORCE & REMARRIAGE**

What happens if a person remarries against the clear teaching of the Bible? Are we to declare this marriage illegitimate?

The answer is that we will affirm that the marriage is valid – a covenant is a covenant and must be kept. However, whenever we do anything against the will of God, we always come off second best. Obedience, not disobedience, is the way of God's highest blessing in our lives. And God is committed to dealing with any sin or hardness of heart in our lives until there is sufficient humility and repentance.

We believe it is the responsibility of every believer to be very diligent and teachable with regard to the spousal selection, pre-marriage preparation, and constant marriage enrichment. Impulsiveness in the spousal selection, or a refusal to seek counsel in this regard, signals great danger. We also believe that it is the responsibility of the church to do all we can to support people in these matters. By doing this, we're convinced that the divorce rate will significantly reduce. Since marriage is sacred, it deserves to be entered into very carefully and nurtured with great priority.

The number one deterrent to divorce is not making a vow never to get divorced, but rather a heart after God. For example, think about the first chapter of Christ's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5), where Christ forbids divorce (in v 32). A simple reflection of the teaching shows that if we were to take his teaching seriously in verses 1- 30, divorce would be totally unlikely. Chrysostom, an early church father, commented on this passage: "He that is meek, and a peacemaker, and poor in spirit, and merciful (Matthew 5:3-11), how shall he cast out his wife?" In other words, a person who takes Christ's leadership seriously, and drinks from Christ's transforming grace and wisdom, is very unlikely to get divorced. In the old order, people got divorced because their hearts were hard (Matthew 19:8), but in the new order, we can remain tender-hearted toward each other. As we are poor in heart toward God (Matthew 5:3), as we eliminate anger, contempt and insult from our lives (v21-22), as we cherish, guard and restore relationships (v23-26), and as we pursue sexual purity (v27-30), we also set up our marriages to succeed!



The point is that divorce is often symptomatic of a heart that has drifted from God. The best thing one can do to avoid ever being in danger of divorce is daily to seek first Christ and his kingdom, and everything else will be added.

Christians are people who trust in Jesus Christ as Saviour and as Lord. As such, we have the privilege and responsibility of living by the teachings of Christ. God's plan is that, in a church, we hold each other accountable to these non-negotiable standards. When one of God's children chooses to ignore or disobey one of Christ's clear standards – especially in a way that damages another and/or the witness of Christ – it is the responsibility of fellow believers and shepherd-leaders to lovingly call that person to repentance. If sadly, they refuse to repent and choose to go on sinning, Scripture commands us to put them under various levels of church discipline, which are all designed to lovingly bring an unrepentant person to repentance. Many people mistakenly think that loving care is incompatible with confrontation—that the tenderness of Jesus and the toughness of his demands can't both be love. But surely this is not right. Jesus was an extraordinarily caring person. This did not make him less confrontational. For example, his teaching on divorce and remarriage was firm: "What God has joined together let no man separate" (Mark 10:9). We believe Christ's firm and loving confrontation is a form of caring, far more so than leaving a person to sin unchallenged – causing untold pain down the line.

### **A pastoral perspective**

"In the three exceptions, I believe the victim in the marriage is released from the covenant and is free to remarry a Christ follower. That said, pastoral wisdom means, it would be wise to not rush into a new relationship. Seek help and find wholeness on the other side of divorce and I believe the church has a role to play in being the kind of community where healing and restoration are possible - on the other side of divorce. Aside from these instances, I believe we're to pursue reconciliation with our spouse.

Doing so in faith that Christ is able to help us build marriages and live lives that are godly. I really believe that following Jesus changes how we live and love others, especially our spouses. Even the most hardened of hearts, when yielded to Jesus, are renewed and new life comes to old marriages. This is the power of the gospel. This is why I'm reluctant to marry a divorcee until I've properly understood the grounds for their divorce. Whilst my conscience is clear in the above instances, a high view of the Christian marriage covenant, and the power of the gospel to change hearts, means I'm hopeful for reconciliation, wherever possible. Do I believe then that someone who was divorced, as a believer, not under the above exceptions can never remarry? This is a very sensitive issue because we've got to think both biblically and pastorally. I'm sticking my neck out a little to say I do believe they could. But this is not something that should be taken lightly. I believe every effort for reconciliation must be made. Forgiveness must be sought for the sins that led up to the divorce, the sins of the divorce and the breaking of the covenant. If reconciliation is impossible, forgiveness has been genuinely sought, and the person has walked a road to healing and wholeness in God.

Because I don't believe divorce is a sin that is unrecoverable from or irredeemable by the power of Christ's cross. I would be open to the possibility of remarriage. We are all broken human beings and God's grace meets us where we're at and he's able to transform our broken lives." (Luke Harper)

## CLOSING THOUGHTS

Our aim is not to cause pain, but rather a freedom in the people we lead. We urge you not to be defensive. We are not seeking to hurt anyone. We believe the most loving thing we can do is to simply offer people the truth, even if that truth hurts in some ways. If you have divorced or remarried another illegitimately, it is too late to do anything about it, so instead of defending yourself, own up to any mistakes, and drink Christ's mercy and grace. 'If we confess our sins, God is faithful and will forgive us and cleanse us of all unrighteousness' (1 John 1:9). This 'unrighteousness' includes illegitimate divorce and remarriage, both of which are not unforgivable sins. And if you are now married (despite Christ's teaching that you should not have remarried), then receive this partner as a gift from God, and love them as Christ insists you do. In dependence on Christ, make this marriage work – let it become an icon of grace in your own life. Remember, 'Where sin increases, God's grace increases all the more' (Romans 5:20).

## CLOSING THOUGHTS

- In some cases, a one-on-one pastoral conversation, where specific questions can be asked, would be the most helpful and if this is you, please move towards a member of our pastoral team.
- Our Redemption Courses and Support groups may also be another helpful tool. For more information please email [rosemary.farquaharson@commonground.co.za](mailto:rosemary.farquaharson@commonground.co.za)