

# **MARRIAGE, DIVORCE AND RE-MARRIAGE**

## **INTRODUCTION:**

Marriage, divorce and re-marriage are areas of great concern within the church of Jesus Christ. Within churches and Christian organizations, much has been said and debated and various views held. All of us are affected either directly or indirectly by the high divorce rate that plagues America. Divorce causes us to hurt as well as cause pain in others that can last a lifetime.

The Bible says much about how a person can have success in all areas of his or her life and how interpersonal relationships can yield blessings instead of pain. Yet, Biblical truth is being clouded & challenged in the area of marriage, divorce and re-marriage because we live in a relativistic world.

The purpose of this brief paper is limited to that of discussing the high standard with which the Bible views the institution of marriage and then to discuss God's allowances for divorce and subsequent remarriage.

## **MARRIAGE:**

Marriage is one of the highest and holiest of all God designed institutions. This is true for at least two reasons. First, God gave special attention to the creation of male and female so that man would not have to live alone, which he said was "not good (Genesis 2:18)." He then commanded "For this cause a man shall leave (rupture, sever, tear apart) his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh (Genesis 2:24)." The Hebrew word used in the text for "cleave" is the *dabeq* which means to stick, as things that are glued together."<sup>1</sup> Thus, permanent monogamous heterosexual union has been the Biblical plan from the beginning of creation.

Jesus Christ further comments on this Genesis passage by stating, "consequently they are no more two, but one flesh. What God has joined together, let no man separate (Matthew 19:6)." The New Testament Greek word for "joined together" in the preceding verse means to "yoke together or unite."<sup>2</sup> It carries the idea of two animals laboring in a field together in unity because of their being yoked to the same farming implement. Grammatically, God is the subject of the sentence and it is God who does the yoking together. In stark contrast, we are commanded that "no man" is to divide or separate the two that have been yoked together as one flesh by God Himself. This command to "not separate" would obviously apply to the husband or wife who are yoked together and could perhaps be wishing to divorce each other.

God invented marriage and those who participate in God's invention of marriage are thus "joined together" in the eyes of God. His rules regarding the successful maintenance or the dissolution of the marriage therefore apply.

The second reason why marriage is so high and holy in God's value system is that it is to be a living illustration of the relationship between Jesus Christ and His redeemed people, the Church.

"Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the Church, He Himself being the savior of the body. But as the Church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything. Husbands love your wives, just as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her; that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the Church in all her glory, having not spot of wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless (Ephesians 5: 22-27, N.A.S.B.)"

The picture of Christ and the Church portrays absolute love, fidelity, trust and devotion that is unbreakable. What comfort and trust this affords the church. This security and trust is to be the model for the Christian marriage with each of the partners following his or her role. Because the Christian's relationship to Christ is unshakable, the marriage relationship is to be unshakable also. Paul like Jesus, refers back to the book of Genesis to draw attention to God's plan of permanent, heterosexual, monogamous marriage, "For this cause a man shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh (Ephesians 5:31)."

#### DIVORCE AND RE-MARRIAGE:

Why then is there such a thing as divorce? Jesus answers this question by stating, "Because of your hardness of heart, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way (Mathew 19:8)." A hard heart therefore, is the reason God permitted divorce. We learn from scripture that there are two major manifestations of hardness of heart, which God states as allowances for divorce: sexual immorality and unbelief in Christ with a subsequent rejection of the Christian spouse.

First allowance for divorce with the subsequent right to re-marry: "Sexual Immorality." Regarding sexual immorality, Jesus says this, "And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another commits adultery (Matthew 19:9)." The following truths can be observed from this verse.

- Divorce without the cause of immorality and then a re-marriage to another person is not considered by God to be a marriage but rather "adultery". The verb tense (present active indicative) clearly indicates that the second "marriage" is literally a continuing state of adultery. While a government may say that a re-marriage is legal, God states that the couple is in an adulterous relationship (Cf. Matthew 5:31-32; Luke 16:18; Mark 10:11-12).

- In addition, it is noted that there is an exception to the rule that second marriages due to divorce are adulterous. This exception is the cause of sexual immorality. The words “except for the cause of” in Matthew 5:32, are the two Greek words *parektos logou*. The first of these, *parektos*, is an adverb, which means “to take out or to exclude from the enumeration or statement, besides or outside”.<sup>3</sup> The second word *logou* is defined as an “assertion or report”.<sup>4</sup> Thus, divorce can have a correct reason that allows a re-marriage to be truly marriage in the eyes of God and not adultery. Namely, the report of sexual immorality on the part of one of the marriage partners.
- The Greek word *pornea*, is the word that is used in Matthew 5:32 and in 19:9. It is the basis for our English word “pornography”. It is a broad term, which incorporates every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse, which includes adultery among married people, promiscuity among singles and homosexuality. Thus, divorce and re-marriage is not permissible unless one of the persons is involved in *pornea*, which allows the innocent party to initiate divorce and remarry without the Divine stigma of being called an adulterer. It is important to note here however that at no point is the innocent party constrained to exercise the divorce option (Ephesians 4:32; Matthew 18:22).

God has an extreme dislike for the failure to honor the sanctity of marriage. Hebrews 13:4 says, “Let the marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge.” The hardness of heart among people is one cause for Biblical divorce because “adultery destroys what, according to its original institution by God, constitutes the very essence of marriage, the union of two in one flesh.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, sexual immorality is a Biblical allowance for divorce according to Jesus Christ.

It is interesting to note that John the Baptist even viewed this principle as a “law” of God that even applied to non - believers. In Matthew 14:3-4, John the Baptist was arrested by Herod the tetrarch because he confronted him for taking his brother Phillip’s wife Herodias away from him, “For John had been saying to him, ‘it is not lawful for you to have her.’”

In Matthew 19:10-12, the disciples were so taken back by this very limited allowance for divorce as opposed to the liberal divorce codes within the Jewish culture of that day, that they exclaimed in response, “If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry.” Jesus responded in an unusual way. Instead of expanding His thoughts on God’s “limited” divorce policy, He retorted,

“Not all men can accept this statement (the disciples’ statement about not getting married), but only those to whom it has been given. For there are eunuchs (those who do not marry and remain celibate) who were born that way from their mother’s womb; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men (i.e. The Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8); and there are eunuchs who made themselves

eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven (i.e. Paul in I Corinthians 7). He who is able to accept this let him accept it.”

His point is that only a few can accept the disciple’s statement “that it is better then not to get married” that is *only those who are eunuchs*. This means that the rest of us cannot accept this statement and thus, marriage is God’s plan for the majority of people. Since this is the case, we are subject to God’s difficult views of marriage, divorce and remarriage.

Jesus then changes the subject and leaves the disciples with perhaps the same unresolved questions in their minds as we have today when we read various other topics of scripture, which seem to be difficult to understand. To be honest with ourselves, some of God’s “limited ways of thinking” or “narrow ways” have been contested, debated and chaffed at for centuries such as the very Gospel *itself* in John 3:16, God’s sovereign choices John 6 and Romans 9 and the “narrow gate” spoken of in Matthew 7:13-14 just to name a few examples.

The second allowance for divorce and subsequent right to re-marry: “Abandonment of a Christian by an unbeliever.”

The second manifestation of hardness of heart, which God states as the reason for divorce, is that of unbelief in Christ by one of the marriage partners and their abandonment of the believer. The Apostle Paul writing to the Corinthian Church says,

“...that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, let him not send her away (divorce). And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, let her not send her husband away. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy. Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace. For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife (I Corinthians 7:12b-16)?”

In this passage, we are dealing with marriages where one of the partners is not a Christian and the other one is a believer. It is clear from II Corinthians 6:14-18, that Christians are to not marry unbelievers. This is because a child of God who is holy in the eyes of God and walking according to Christ’s commands would be “yoking” himself or herself to someone who is unholy in God’s eyes and walking according to different goals, values and ideologies. Instead of walking together in unity, there would be conflict and strife at every turn in the road. Therefore, in the I Corinthians 7 text, the contextual backdrop would be that one of the marriage partners became a Christian *after* the couple was married as unbelievers. What is the Christian partner to do as their newfound faith in Christ leads them to baptism, growth, church membership, new relationships, new goals and new values? The key presupposition within this passage is that the Christian will

naturally *be growing* , become more holy and thus become different as opposed to staying at the maturity level of the unbeliever.

How should this kind of marriage problem be handled? Paul's answer is to let the unbeliever make the decision as to whether he or she wishes to stay with the Christian or not. On one hand, the unbeliever may decide to stay married even though they see their spouse growing in their new relationship to Christ. Paul tells the Christian, "let him not send her away (v.7:12)." Perhaps they may end up becoming a Christian because of the influence of their mate. This results then is a "waiting game" on the part of the believer in which they are not just cynically waiting for the partner to fall off the marriage platform, but rather trying to win them to Christ (II Peter 3:9).

On the other hand, the unbeliever may harden their heart to Christ and decide to leave the Christian. Paul says, "let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace (I Corinthians 7:15)." The word "bondage" in this verse is the word *doulao* and means, "to be enslaved or subject to" ... or in the verb form found here, it means, "to be bound as a slave is bound to a master."<sup>6</sup> So, as originally stated, Christian marriage is a permanent binding of one person to another, yet hardness of heart leading to unbelief in Christ and the subsequent rejection of a Christian as a marriage partner is the second Biblical reason why God allows divorce with the subsequent right to re-marry in Christ.

#### CONCLUSIONS AND PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS:

1. Marriage is one of the highest and holiest of all human institutions. It must not be taken lightly or entered into with a cavalier attitude as though it can be laid aside easily if things do not work out. To God, divorce is something he hates and thus we need to highly regard His guidelines and take heed of his warnings and do everything possible to make our marriages work. This requires humility, assistance and accountability from others and divine help.
2. Marriages should only take place where both persons are Christians and where the ceremony reflects the true Biblical definitions of marriage in Jesus Christ. Even in the Old Testament, the people of Israel were instructed to only marry within the faith and they were not to intermarry with people from other nations who had other religious beliefs. When they did, history shows that they always had problems. II Corinthians 6:14-18 says we are to "not be bound to unbelievers."
3. If a person has a divorce in their background prior to belief in Christ for salvation, this is not a matter of consideration in that "the old things have passed away, behold new things have come (II Corinthians 5:17)."
4. In order to honor God's holiness, the holiness of marriage couples should not live together or have a pre-marital sexual relationship prior to the ceremony. If a couple has faltered in this area, they can repent, experience God's forgiveness and grace and make a renewed celibacy commitment until the wedding. Pre marital sex often blinds people and they lose the capacity to see the red flags within the other person thus

causing them to miss injurious character flaws that inevitably will cause them pain down the road.

5. If one or both persons find themselves in a position of being divorced as a Christian for a reason other than those discussed above, a frank discussion is welcomed to investigate the circumstances, to evaluate options, and to take refuge in God's grace.
6. *Pornea* as grounds for divorce does not equal lustful adulterous thoughts or pornography (a common presenting issue within marital discord) as described in Matthew 5:27-28), as the word *pornea* describes illicit behaviors (sexual acts) with another person(s).
7. Many people who do not understand the historical context of this passage commonly misunderstand the words in this passage. In Matthew 5:27-28, He is challenging the *assumption of righteousness* held by the religious leaders as well as the populous at large. They assumed they were righteous before God based upon following the letter of the law. If this were the case then they would not need to trust in the upcoming substitutionary work of Christ on the cross. In His public address, He is exposing *matters of the heart* to show the crowd that they were indeed guilty before a Holy God and subsequently in need of a Savior. The standards of God were actually higher than the teachings of the religious leaders of Israel. The persistent challenging of the religious establishment by Jesus, ultimately lead their decision to crucify Him.
8. While abuse is certainly wrong, it is not listed within the Bible as grounds for divorce. Separation for securing physical and emotional safety for oneself and the children is the suggested course of action. This action would include police and legal interventions. Often, with strong measures taken and therapy, which addresses the injuries of the abuser, growth and change can occur. Some theologians may make a case that such behavior is "un-Christian like" so they default to the position that the person acting unbecomingly must not be a Christian, thus they are "abandoning" the believer which in turn gives the innocent party a Biblical basis for divorce. I do not personally hold to this view because Christians can do shameful acts and deeds and still be saved.
9. How do you handle the resistant, non-growing "Christian" spouse? Instead of getting sucked down into the drain of negativism and cynicism, keep growing in Christ and moving toward service, fellowship and personal growth.
10. How do you handle two Christians stuck in a stalemate where the marriage is dead in their eyes and past hurts seem insurmountable? Philippians 2 says there should be a "race to humility" where the other's interests are considered more important than your own.
11. How about two Christians separated or divorced without Biblical grounds who then are in a celibate standoff waiting for the other person to "morally fail" so that they can then claim they have a biblical grounds for divorce? Keep working on reconciliation and spiritual & emotional growth for God is undoubtedly desiring to use this "trial" to bring both partners into a place of maturity where they are more "perfect and complete lacking in nothing (James 1:1-5)."

Footnotes:

1. William Wilson, Wilson's Old Testament Word Studies, (McLean: MacDonald Publishing Company), p.79.
2. Walter Bauer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p.783.
3. Bauer, op. cit., p. 630
4. Bauer, op. cit., p. 478
5. Merrill F. Unger, Unger's Bible Dictionary, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), p. 272.
6. Bauer, op. cit., p. 205.