



Marriage and Divorce

The issue of marriage and divorce among Christians has become very controversial in recent years as the divorce rate has skyrocketed. Currently about one of every two marriages in America ends in divorce. Unfortunately, the divorce rate among Christians is the same as the unchurched world. The Bible speaks very directly to the issue of marriage and divorce, and the purpose of this pamphlet is to guide you through the relevant passages of Scripture that address this issue, as well as to communicate Life Bible Fellowship's position.

The Old Testament

Genesis 2:24

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh¹.

Marriage was originally God's idea. It was not an invention of modern society. God created humanity as both male and female (Gen 1:26-27). God blessed the first husband and wife and gave them the divine commission to *"be fruitful and increase in number"* (Gen 1:28). Marriage is a crucial aspect of God's plan for humanity. Men and women were designed by God to desire intimacy with each other. Before the entrance of sin into the world, there was no need for divorce. However, when sin entered into the world as recorded in the third chapter of Genesis, the possibility of divorce entered along with it. It is important to realize, however, that God designed men and women to remain married for life in the beginning. Divorce is simply God's provision in a world where his original intention has been twisted and distorted by sin.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4

If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if she leaves his house, she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled...

Several principles about divorce and remarriage can be found from this passage, but at the outset it is important to note that this was part of the Old Testament law given by God to the nation of Israel. As Christians we are not under this law today. What we can learn from this section of Israel's law are principles about God's attitude toward divorce.

Divorce was an extremely popular practice in the ancient world. Being a male dominated society, only men could practice divorce. Women were looked upon as property, having no inherent rights or dignity. It is within this kind of culture that God spoke to his people about divorce. Essentially this law provides protection for the woman by providing her with a written certificate of divorce and by not allowing the husband to change his mind. Biblical scholar Walter Kaiser, Jr. notes that this passage "does not bestow any divine approval, or even implied approval, on divorce as such. It sought, rather, to soften some of the hardship and injustices that divorce caused for women in a society that persisted in this practice...Deuteronomy 24:4 is more concerned about protecting women from the whims of a fickle or vindictive husband, who without putting his declaration of divorce in writing, could resume or drop his married state."²

Many have wondered what the *"something indecent"* (v. 1) refers to. Opinions among Bible teachers vary. Everything from adultery to leprosy has been suggested. However, many lean toward an understanding that this *"indecent"* thing is some form of sexual impropriety or sexual sin.³ This is further clarified in the New Testament comments on divorce.

Jeremiah 3:6-8

During the reign of King Josiah, the Lord said to me, "Have you seen what faithless Israel has done? She has gone up on every high hill and under every spreading tree and has committed adultery there. I thought that after she had done all this she would return to me but she did not, and her unfaithful sister Judah saw it. I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of her adulteries. Yet I saw that her unfaithful sister Judah had no fear; she also went out and committed adultery."

In this prophecy from Jeremiah to the nation of Judah, God uses the metaphor of divorce to communicate his attitude toward his people. They had been unfaithful to God because they had worshipped other gods and been involved in the



sexual immorality that was so typical of the pagan religions of that age. God presented them with a certificate of divorce because their actions constituted spiritual adultery. Although this is only a metaphor, it gives us further insight about the grounds for divorce in the Old Testament. Spiritual adultery formed the basis for a spiritual divorce. It is important to realize, though, that God was always ready to receive back his people if they would come in repentance. Even after God serves this certificate of divorce, he goes on to say, *"Return, faithless Israel, declares the Lord, I will frown on you no longer for I am merciful, declares the Lord, I will not be angry forever. Only acknowledge your guilt--you have rebelled against the Lord your God"* (Jeremiah 3:12-13).

Malachi 2:14-16

The Lord is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not the Lord made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. "I hate divorce," says the Lord God of Israel, "and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment," says the Lord Almighty. So guard yourself in your spirit and do not break faith.

The context of this prophecy is that the Levitical priests of Israel had divorced their Jewish wives and had married women who were involved in worshipping other gods. This was a direct violation of the Old Testament law. These priests then wondered why God did not accept their sacrifices. In this passage, God provides the answer: He hates divorce. He allows it in certain cases because of the sinfulness of humanity, but he hates it nonetheless. This again points to God's intention in creation for marriage to be a lifelong relationship between a husband and wife. When that covenant is broken, God acts as a witness against the person who has broken it.

The reference to someone covering himself with a garment refers to the ancient practice of a man putting his garment over a woman to claim her as his wife (see Ruth chap. 3). Old Testament scholar Charles Feinberg notes, "Instead of spreading their garment to protect their wives, they covered their garment with violence toward their wives. The garment symbolized wedded trust and protection."⁴

The New Testament

Mark 10:2-12

Some Pharisees came and tested [Jesus] by asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" "What did Moses command you?" he replied. They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away." "It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law," Jesus replied. "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 to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let man not separate." When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. He answered, "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."

A parallel to this passage can be found in Matthew 19:3-12. Essentially there are two different settings: One with the Pharisees trying to trick Jesus and the other with the disciples asking Jesus for clarification. At this time there was considerable debate among Jewish rabbis about what constituted valid grounds for divorce. The rabbi Shammai, a contemporary of Jesus, restricted divorce to cases of adultery only. The rabbi Hillel, on the other hand, allowed for divorce for any reason, even a burnt meal.⁵ Jesus responded to the Pharisee's question by asking what the Scriptures taught, and they cited Deuteronomy 24:1-4. They were quite right in saying that Moses *"permitted"* divorce. It was a concession because of sinfulness.

However, Jesus gets to the heart of the issue by pointing out that it was only because their *"hearts were hard"* that Moses allowed divorce. Divorce was not part of God's original plan. Jesus appeals back to creation as the prototype for marriage.

The disciples were confused about Jesus's teaching, so in private he put it no uncertain terms: Divorce is forbidden. This is not the last word on the issue, but it points to the seriousness of divorce in God's sight. Interestingly, Jesus recognizes the possibility of women divorcing their husbands, a notion that was totally unknown in ancient Israel. Biblical scholar F.



F. Bruce notes, "The law was unequally balanced to the disadvantage of women, and Jesus's ruling, with its appeal to the Creator's intention, had the effect of redressing this unequal balance."⁶

Matthew 5:31-32

[Jesus said,] "it has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery."

This is probably the most important passage on the grounds for divorce and remarriage in the whole Bible. Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 24:1-4, but then He clarifies how this principle applies to Christians today. For Christ's followers, the only valid reason for divorce is "*marital unfaithfulness*." In this case, not only is this grounds for divorce, but also for remarriage.

Obviously the term "*marital unfaithfulness*" needs to be defined. Most likely this phrase is the New Testament equivalent to the "*something indecent*" in Deuteronomy 24:1. The Greek word used here is *porneia* (*porneia*), which is a general term that describes all kinds of sexual sin, including prostitution, incest, adultery, homosexuality, etc. *Porneia* is more broad and comprehensive than the Greek word for adultery. It always describes sexual sin with another person. Jesus is making an exception here for married people whose spouse has made a choice to be involved in sexual sin. He is not commanding divorce, but he is providing it as an option for the non-offending spouse's protection. Where there has been some form of "*marital unfaithfulness*," the non-offending spouse is free to divorce and remarry if he or she chooses.

Romans 7:1-3

Do you know, brothers--for I am speaking to men who know the law--that the law has authority over a man only as long as he lives? For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband for as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage. So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from the law and is not an adulteress, even though she marries another man.

Although the apostle Paul here uses marriage as an illustration here, we find in this passage another ground for remarriage as Christians. The law referred to here is the Old Testament law of no divorce, except in cases where "*something indecent*" is found (Deu 24:1-4). As mentioned previously, this most likely refers to sexual sin. Barring that scenario, a married person is bound to his or her spouse for life. However, when that spouse dies, the legal bond is severed, and the surviving spouse is free to remarry another Christian if he or she chooses.

1 Corinthians 7:10-11

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.

In this passage, Paul is appealing to Jesus's teaching about divorce. This is why he says, "*not I, but the Lord*" because he is appealing directly to the words of Jesus. Paul is consistent with the rest of the Bible, that Christians should not divorce their spouses. However, Paul introduces the concept of separation here. He does not spell out any particular reason why a Christian might seek separation; he simply assumes it is an option. It is crucial to understand the grammar of this passage in the Greek to understand its intention. Biblical scholar Gordon Fee says, "In this kind of construction...the previous sentence expresses the ideal situation (in this case, no divorce [or more precisely, no separation]), while the following conditional clause introduced by *de* ('but') describes the alternative possibility which is permissible but not ideal (in this case separation, but without remarriage)."⁷ Hence, Paul is saying that there may be certain cases where separation is permissible, even indefinitely. However, in this case the Christian should not remarry. If the person desires to be married, he or she should seek reconciliation with the spouse. Obviously if during the separation the one spouse has remarried or been involved in "*marital unfaithfulness*," the Christian is free to divorce and remarry another Christian if he or she chooses.

1 Corinthians 7:12-17, 20

To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her

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believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches...Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him.

This particular passage has been misunderstood by many Christians. Some have thought that Paul was merely giving his personal opinion since he says, "*I, not the Lord.*" However, this takes Paul's instructions out of its immediate context. He refers to his instructions as a "*rule*" that applies to all churches. Furthermore, in 1 Corinthians 14:37 Paul writes, "*If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command.*" All of 1 Corinthians is inspired by God and authoritative for Christians today. The reason why Paul says "*I, not the Lord*" is because Jesus (the Lord) never addressed the issue of a Christian married to a non-Christian spouse. Paul is giving new revelation on this issue, so he acknowledges that Jesus did not speak about it during His earthly ministry.

The basic principle here is that a believer should not initiate divorce from a non-Christian spouse. Indeed, if the non-Christian spouse will consent, they should live together as husband and wife. Rather than the Christian being defiled by such an arrangement, the non-Christian is "*sanctified.*" This does not mean the unbeliever becomes a Christian, but that he or she is more likely to respond to the good news of Christ because of the testimony of the believing spouse. Gordon Fee notes, "As long as the marriage is maintained the potential for realizing salvation remains."⁸ The same holds true for the children, who, in the case of a divorce, could possibly end up with the non-Christian spouse and no longer have a source of spiritual input in their lives. This obviously does not take into account a spouse who is physically or emotionally abusive to the Christian spouse, in which case separation would be an acceptable option (see 1 Cor 7:11).

However, if the non-Christian spouse abandons the marriage, either by initiating a divorce or simply by moving out and pursuing an independent life, then the Christian spouse is free from the marriage bond. In this case, the Christian is free to remarry another Christian.

The overarching principle for all of this is that a Christian should retain the place in life he or she was in when first becoming a Christian. This is not a law, for there are some exceptions (e.g., death of a spouse, marital unfaithfulness, etc.), but it is the general guideline for the Christian life. Thus if a person who has been divorced and remarried comes to Christ, he or she does not need to seek reconciliation with the former spouse. Paul's concern here is that Christians not initiate divorce in order to marry a Christian spouse. Instead, they should look at their circumstances as God's calling for their lives (v. 17).

2 Corinthians 6:14-15

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?

The immediate context of this passage is Christians who are participating in pagan festivals. Paul is telling these Christians that such practices compromise their faith in Christ. However, the principle here certainly applies to other circumstances in life where Christians could be "*yoked together with unbelievers.*" Obviously Paul is not forbidding all relationships with non-Christians, for that would contradict the whole idea of evangelizing the world. What he is forbidding is certain relationships with unbelievers, the most obvious example being marriage. In such a case, the Christian would be unequally yoked. The reason for this is not that the Christian is somehow better than the non-Christian, but they have a different blueprint for marriage. They live under different values. Because of this, Paul exhorts Christians to only marry other Christians.

Conclusion

When we put all these passages together, we see that divorce is a provision of God's grace that is only necessary in a sinful world. It was not part of God's original plan.

Divorce



Life Bible Fellowship will never counsel a person to divorce his or her spouse. However, we will support a member's decision to divorce *if* his or her spouse has been involved in marital unfaithfulness. In such a case, we would encourage reconciliation; however, if the non-offending spouse feels that the violation is too severe, we will support the decision to divorce. We will also support the decision to divorce in cases where a Christian has been physically abandoned by a non-Christian spouse.

We will recommend separation in circumstances where there is abuse, and in certain cases of alcoholism and substance abuse. In these cases we see separation as God's provision for the safety and welfare of the family. Separation can also be helpful at times in motivating a spouse to seek out help for such issues. Our prayer in such cases is always reconciliation.

Obviously if a Christian is unwillingly being divorced by a Christian spouse who does not have Biblical grounds, there is nothing that person can really do. In such cases we will support the person being divorced.

We will remarry people who have been widowed or who have been divorced on Biblical grounds. We will also remarry people who have been divorced on other grounds before becoming Christians. We will also remarry people who have been unwillingly divorced by their spouses.

Obviously the whole issue of divorce and remarriage is very complex, and each case is unique. As cases come to our attention, we always treat each one on an individual basis. Our commitment is to the authority of God's Word, while at the same time communicating an atmosphere of grace and acceptance. At times members of LBF go against our counsel on these issues. In such cases we will try as best we can to continue ministering to that person.

Notes

¹All biblical quotes are from the New International Version of the Bible.

²Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *More Hard Sayings of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), p. 10.

³Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), p. 202.

⁴Charles L. Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1970), p. 258.

⁵Merrill C. Tenney (editor), *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977), Vol. 2, p. 150.

⁶F. F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1983), p. 59.

⁷Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New International Commentary on the New Testament: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 295.

⁸Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 300.