



## WHAT ABOUT DIVORCE?

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## WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT DIVORCE?

Bible believing Christians agree that God's Word provides us with the guidance we need to live. Even so, there is much disagreement over what that will be regarding divorce.

Some of the difficulty may stem from the fact that the Bible is not organized like an encyclopedia; we cannot simply look up a single text to answer every question we might pose. Instead, we must weigh every reference which deals with a subject, carefully applying principles of interpretation to the best of our ability. For example, biblical law may be stated in one context as an absolute rule that lays the foundation for our understanding. Exceptions to the rule may be mentioned elsewhere to deal with special circumstances. In addition, we may be given related examples or cases which help us to apply the law justly. (Some issues treated with all three elements include the Sabbath, the taking of life, obedience to authority and promises regarding prayer).

Perhaps a more substantial handicap when dealing with socially explosive issues like divorce is our tendency to let preconceived notions color our reading of Scripture. If our social or religious group has a very conservative stance, that is what we tend to "see" in the Bible. If we are already convinced that a more liberal position must be true, then we notice and interpret verses accordingly.

What follows is the best attempt of one group of Church Elders to understand biblical teaching on the subject of divorce. We appreciate that good Christians honestly differ on various points. However, since each Church must shepherd and discipline its members according to an understood standard, it is only appropriate to make that standard as clear as possible.

### THE RULE

The biblical rule regarding divorce is clear.

*Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery; and he who marries one who is divorced from a husband commits adultery.*  
(Luke 16:18)

This is God's design from the beginning.<sup>1</sup> Marriage is a covenant, a binding relationship, which was designed by God, not mankind. When two people

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<sup>1</sup> see Genesis 2:24, reaffirmed in Matthew 19:8 and Mark 10:11.

marry, they are actually joined *by God<sup>2</sup>* in a union that is not to be broken. Therefore, the destruction of this relationship is not only a crime against a marriage partner or against society, it is an offense against the Lord.

This rule describes the permanence of marriage as it was in the Garden of Eden before human sin. The rule itself did not explicitly exist then because it would never occur to sinless people to abandon a marriage. The fall of the human race into sin, however, changed all that...

## THE EXCEPTION

Because of sin, divorce became a reality.

*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...*  
(Deuteronomy 24:1)

Moses said that divorce was sanctioned when an offending marriage partner did “something indecent.” Fallen human nature can lead a married person to do something so contrary to the covenant of marriage that for the sake of righteousness and to protect the offended party, divorce becomes an acceptable option. Divorce is never commanded in the Bible, and divorce for insufficient grounds is abhorrent to God.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, sufficiently indecent behavior creates the possibility of a divinely sanctioned divorce.<sup>4</sup>

In the time of Christ, certain religious leaders claimed that the “something indecent” that justified divorce was determined by each person. Jesus rejected this interpretation in a confrontation over this issue...

*And some Pharisees came to Him, testing Him, and saying, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all?”*

*And He answered and said, “Have you not read, that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘for this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh?’*

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2 see Matthew 19:6...

Jesus states regarding marriage, “what God has joined together, let man not separate.”

3 Malachi 2:13-16.

4 We know that divorce is justified under appropriate grounds because the Lord Himself at one point “divorced” Israel as His people, although He later took Israel back. see Isaiah 50:1 and Jeremiah 3:8.

*“Consequently they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.”*

*They said to Him, “Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away.”*

*He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.”*

(Matthew 19:3-9)

Jesus taught that divorce was not part of God’s initial plan for marriage, but that there are serious sins which lead to situations that make divorce a valid option. Jesus then spelled out the sort of “hardness of heart” which may lead to divorce: immorality. The term used here to interpret the Old Testament term “something indecent” describes a category of sin characterized by sexual unfaithfulness.

The only legitimate reason to sue for divorce is if one’s marriage partner has sexually violated the marriage. These grounds are very limited, and normally imply adultery or fornication.

However, specific cases may require an extension of the concept as justice demands...

## AN APPLICATION

Consider this specific case mentioned by the Apostle Paul.

*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 has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her 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?*

(1 Corinthians 7:12-16)

This case involves believers married to unbelievers. Believers in such marriages must not feel that their marriage is invalid, or could never be blessed by God. A believer is therefore bound to honor marriage vows to an unbeliever as to a believer.

The issue of divorce is raised when the unbelieving spouse abandons the marriage.<sup>5</sup> In that case, the believer may let him or her go in peace. Believers are not expected, and neither should they themselves expect to win their spouses to faith by fighting to keep the marriage intact against their spouse's wishes. They must recognize that a divorce has taken place against their wishes, and God no longer requires them to be bound to a marriage that no longer exists.

Since the only grounds allowed for divorce is immorality, the Apostle Paul apparently interprets desertion as a form of sexual unfaithfulness. That makes sense in the context of 1 Corinthians 7. Paul began the chapter teaching that a husband and wife each have sexual needs and rights in a marriage which may not be denied. To do so is a grave sin because it subjects one's spouse to Satan's temptations.<sup>6</sup> Desertion permanently robs a spouse of all intimacy and therefore becomes a serious sexual sin. When an unbeliever deserts a marriage, there is no reasonable hope that he or she will return. The deprivation becomes an intolerable bondage and a righteous divorce is allowed.

The application of God's law regarding divorce is somewhat different in the case of two confessing Christians...

*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 Corinthians 7:10-11)

In the case of two believers, we again see the general rule that divorce is not possible outside of sexual unfaithfulness.

But what happens when one confessing Christian abandons a marriage with a Christian spouse?<sup>7</sup> Why is this abandonment not grounds for immediate

<sup>5</sup> Not an uncommon occurrence when one spouse becomes a new person in Christ, see Matthew 10:21-22; Luke 21:16-17, etc.

<sup>6</sup> One thinks of Jesus' comments that unlawful divorce "causes" the wronged spouse to commit adultery, see. Matthew 5:31-32.

<sup>7</sup> Note that differing words are used in the Bible to describe what we call divorce: separate, put away, send away, leave, etc. The ancient world, however knew nothing of our modern

divorce? The difference is that *both* parties are confessing Christians. Spiritual motivations cannot be assumed in unbelievers, but people who share the Spirit of God will work to reconcile.

Before we go on, note that this situation is different from one in which a Christian spouse were unfaithful through a specific act like adultery. In that case, the sin would be fully accomplished and the only question would be how the offended spouse chooses to respond. Personal forgiveness is always essential, though the offended spouse would have the option to end the marriage if he or she elected to do so.

In the case mentioned above by Paul, however, one confessing Christian has *left* or abandoned another (we assume not in response to adultery). However, he or she might return to reconcile, since the parting was not over biblical grounds. In this case, the marriage cannot be assumed to be over immediately, since it is anticipated that the parting will end. Some time must pass to allow the absent partner to reconsider and for both to seek the Lord's grace.

What happens if the absent partner refuses to return, even after every reasonable attempt is made for reconciliation? This eventuality is not explicitly discussed by Paul, so we can only fill in the blanks by using the principles we do have.

It seems reasonable to assume that at some point, a spouse's leaving must be considered actual desertion. At this point in the discussion, consider the PCA's denominational standards...

*Although the corruption of man be such as is apt to study arguments unduly to put asunder those whom God hath joined together in marriage: yet, nothing but adultery, or such willful desertion as can no way be remedied by the church, or civil magistrate, is cause sufficient for dissolving the bond of marriage: wherein, a public and orderly course of proceeding is to be observed; and the persons concerned in it not left to their own wills, and discretion, in their own case.*

(Westminster Confession of Faith Ch. XXIV, §VI)

Note that it is our conviction that a couple undergoing such turmoil must not be "left to their own wills, and discretion, in their own case." Remember that in Matthew 19, Jesus rejected the notion that grounds for divorce are determined by the parties involved. It is the responsibility of the church, through the local Session of Pastors and Elders, to exercise responsible oversight for the sake of the couple and for the sake of the church's purity and category of separation as distinct from divorce. To separate was to renounce the marriage.

reputation.

Divorce may be contemplated only in response to genuine desertion, “such...as can no way be remedied by the church, or civil magistrate.” The state imposes various waiting periods in an attempt to encourage reconciliation. The church can and must do much more, providing sympathetic counsel and biblical instruction to both hurting parties. Sin must be faced (often by both husband and wife) and the marriage must be saturated with the love and hope of Christ.

If the fleeing spouse resolutely refuses to honor his or her marriage vows, then the church must exercise formal discipline.<sup>8</sup> Church discipline is a careful, measured process designed to clarify what it means to truly trust Christ. Truly trusting Christ as Savior implies trusting Him as Lord.<sup>9</sup> With instruction and encouragement, a born again individual will want to choose obedience to God’s revealed will over his or her independent preferences.

Putting this desire into practice may take a lot of time and lot of work, but our faith requires us to believe that the effort will be successful if both parties are determined to live as the Lord directs. All of the church’s best Christ-like qualities must be called upon to encourage reconciliation and restoration based upon the cross and resurrection of our Lord. Our Lord understands what is involved in personal sacrifice and perseverance, and He knows how to bring forth new life as a result.

However, if a professing Christian resolutely refuses to pursue his or her marriage vows, even after patient and clear instruction from the church’s Elders, then his or her Christian confession must be challenged. The book of 1 John makes it quite clear that no one has a right to claim the name of Christ who consciously and finally chooses sin over righteousness.<sup>10</sup> It is the responsibility of the church to treat such a one as an unbeliever.<sup>11</sup> A congregation’s recognition of valid Christian testimony is reflected in its official membership roll, and the membership rolls of a congregation are kept by the church’s Session. They are responsible to discern credible testimonies of faith from false professions, and adjust the membership roles accordingly.

<sup>8</sup> It is instructive to read Matthew 18:15-18 from the perspective of a Christian couple charging one another with sin.

<sup>9</sup> Trusting Christ as Savior means that we believe that God took flesh and died for our sins. The desire to obey is simply the inevitable result of believing that Christ is GOD. How can a person honestly believe somebody is God without trusting Him in a practical way?

<sup>10</sup> see 1 John 2:3-11; 2:28-3:10.

<sup>11</sup> God alone knows the true status of that person in His sight, but Christ told us that we must proceed under the assumption that the person is not a true believer (Matthew 18:17), and Paul makes it clear that doing so, although painful, may result in that person’s true salvation (1 Corinthians 5:1-5).

Once a Session rejects the validity of one spouse's testimony due to unrepentant sin (irreconcilable desertion), the marital situation changes. No longer is it a matter of one Christian leaving another. After the state and the church have done all they reasonably can to encourage reconciliation, it must be assumed that a believer has been truly deserted by an *unbeliever*. In such a case, the divorce should be accepted and the abandoned believer is no longer bound in God's sight to the marriage.<sup>12</sup>

This is a particularly clear example of the value of church discipline, by the way. Without discipline, the deserting partner could maintain a false confession of faith indefinitely, and the forsaken spouse would be in ongoing bondage to the "Christian" marriage, at least until the deserting spouse openly committed adultery.

Of course, the discipline process must be respected by the deserted spouse, as well. He or she should prayerfully and honestly make every effort possible to encourage reconciliation until the process is complete. To do otherwise would be to mimic the abandonment which the church is trying to reverse in his or her spouse.

It is our belief that in this case, as in that of open adultery, such a biblically allowed divorce releases the offended Christian to remarry another Christian if he or she so desires.

## FURTHER APPLICATION

We have seen that Paul applied the exception of sexual unfaithfulness in a way that includes desertion. Desertion may be thought of as sexual unfaithfulness because it permanently deprives a mate of all that a one-flesh union promises.

May this sort of application be extended further, and if so, how far? What if one spouse creates a situation which makes cohabitation impossible — for example, when a crime results in a lengthy jail term or court injunction to stay away? May such gross and willful misbehavior be viewed as an effective desertion of the marriage? In this case, desertion may not have been intended, but is nonetheless the result of criminal negligence. We are referring here to offenses ordinarily<sup>13</sup> punishable by the state, including criminal spousal abuse.

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<sup>12</sup> It should be noted in passing that simply fleeing the church in an attempt to avoid discipline will not avoid its consequences, since such disrespectful behavior is itself grounds for excommunication.

<sup>13</sup> There may be intolerable sins which the state will not punish. Each situation must be evaluated by the Session.

Certainly, any spouse suffering from criminal behavior should not hesitate to contact government authorities, which have been established by God to forcibly restrain sin.<sup>14</sup>

What other forms of irresponsible or gross behavior render cohabitation virtually impossible? There is no easy answer to this question. So many lesser forms of abuse are prone to develop in our broken relationships, such as thoughtlessness, unkindness and ill feelings. Christians are not immune to these weaknesses. God has not promised us that our marriages will be easy or pleasant if one or both partners indulge urges to sin instead of persevering in righteousness. However, such unhappiness is not a justification for divorce. Our marriages are the condition in which we are called to serve Him<sup>15</sup> by demonstrating His love to our spouses whether or not that love is returned as we would like. Christians hope in the present power of the Holy Spirit to work in themselves and in their mate, and in a coming eternity of wholesome relationships with every Christian brother and sister.

On the other hand, one can imagine outlandish situations too bizarre for a godly person to tolerate – certainly difficult enough to make reasonable marital intimacy virtually impossible. Would such circumstances constitute an effective “desertion” of any biblically recognizable marriage commitments? Each case must be handled with wisdom, prudence and compassion by the local Session. As circumstances become increasingly grotesque, formal discipline may be brought into play in order to deal with sin, guard the Church’s reputation, and protect victimized parties.

## SUMMARY

Divorce is an acceptable biblical option only in very restricted circumstances: adultery or effective desertion. Even in these cases, the church must be involved to give godly guidance, support and protection. In all other cases, Christians must rely on God to help them build marriages that honor Him.

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<sup>14</sup> This is not to imply that the church should not be involved in its counsel, support and discipline. But God has given the state an authority to forcibly restrain sin which He has not granted to the church.

<sup>15</sup> see 1 Corinthians 7:17-24.



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