

Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage

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I originally had to think through this topic when a divorcee asked me if I would officiate at her remarriage. I realised that having a number of rather vague views was not enough but I was being pressed for a decision. So it was that I researched the Bible as best I could. There are widely differing views amongst Christians whom I respect greatly and I submit this humbly as my thinking on this important issue.

These notes are intended to convey Bible principles and are not a counselling manual! I do hope however that the information will be a useful starting point for advising regarding Christian marriage.

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A. Marriage

This section is a summary of the essentials of marriage

1) What is Marriage ?

- a) Marriage was instituted by God. (Gen 1:27-28, 2:18-25)
- b) it is for companionship and friendship. (Gen 2:18)
- c) It is for mutual help.(Gen 2:18,20)
- d) Marriage is based on a covenant made before God . (Prov 2:16-17, Mal 2:14).
- e) It is a wonderful relationship of love. — The love of friendship and companionship (gk: philia), physical love (gk: eros) and most of all the deep spiritual love (gk: agape).which sacrifices and cares for another (1 Cor 13:4-7).
- f) It is a responsibility for another adult. We promise to love and care for this other person whatever might happen — we take on another dependant.
- g) It is sharing our life, our time, our ambitions, our service of the Lord (Acts 18:26, Rom 16:3), our resources and our bodies with another. (1 Cor 7:4-5)
- h) It is restricting as we are accountable to someone else and as we have less freedom to live an independent life (1 Cor 7:32-35)
- i) It is for continuance of the human race and bringing up children (Gen 1:27-28, Psalm 127:3-5)
- j) Man and wife become “one flesh”. (Gen 2:24)
 - i) “One flesh” indicates union of personalities as well as physical union. Jesus emphasised this in Mk 10:7-8 “The two shall become one flesh, they are no longer two but one flesh”.
 - ii) God’s mathematics: $1+1=1$
 - iii) In 1 Cor 6:16, Paul links “one flesh” with sexual union.
 - iv) In Eph 5:22-33, Paul emphasises the spiritual union: The relationship of a man and his wife being one flesh is analogous to the relationship between Christ and his church. The context is one of love, care, respect, sharing and order in the relationship.
- k) It involves leaving parents. (Gen 2:24, Matt 19:5, Mk 10:7). This includes leaving the emotional control of parents which can be a great threat to marriage.
- l) God joins together in a permanent union. (Gen 2:24 Cleave = stick, adhere) Jesus said “Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate(chorizo).”(Matt 19:6, Mk 10:9). When you are married, you are joined together by God. (chorizo (greek) = to separate, divide, put asunder, to depart from. It is used in Acts 1:4, 18:1, 18:2, Philm 15, 1 Cor 7:10,11,15.)
- m) Faithfulness is demanded. (Ex 20:14, Heb 13:4, Rom 7:2-3, Prov 5:15-23, Matt 6:27)
- n) Marriage is binding until death. Death frees you from your covenant. (Rom 7:2-3) and you are free to marry another. Marriage is not eternal and there is no marriage in heaven (Matt 22:23-33)
- o) There is godly order in marriage. Adam was created first and Eve was created from Adam(Gen 2:21-23). This order of creation is appealed to in 1 Cor 11:3,7-10 and 1 Tim 2:11-13 in the context of the different roles of men and women in marriage and in the church. The husband is the head of his wife as Christ is the head of the church — the challenging responsibilities of the husband as the head of his wife and the submission of the wife to her husband are developed more fully in Eph 5:22-33 and 1 Peter 3:1-7.
- p) It is yoking together. For the believer, it is unthinkable to marry an unbeliever — “What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?” (2 Cor 6:14-18). Next to our relationship with God, the marriage covenant is the closest relationship which we can have with another person. How can we enter this covenant with someone who does not share our relationship with the Lord? The Old and New Testaments expect believers to marry believers.

2) Preparation for Marriage

Many marriage problems can be intercepted by careful preparation for marriage. As a church we have a responsibility to help in this important area of life:

- a) Maintain high moral standards in the church. Exposing and dealing with immorality. Encouraging purity and virginity before marriage.
- b) Teaching about the nature and responsibilities of marriage. This should be included in the general teaching of the church and there should also be individual instruction and counselling available for those who are courting and preparing for marriage.
- c) Warning of the danger of forming close relationships with unbelievers of the opposite sex.
- d) Insistence that Christians only marry Christians.
- e) Frank appraisal of the suitability of a couple proposing to get married. We are in a position to advise - but not refuse - if two Christians wish to marry and there are no legal difficulties, obligations etc. with respect to previous marriages. We may strongly advise a couple to wait so that they are sure of their decision. Christians do well to listen to advice from their leaders, parents etc.

3) Levels of Marriage

Believers and unbelievers can be "married". What makes them "married" ?

a) Living Together

Two people living together on a temporary basis, having sexual intercourse but with no serious commitment to each other. This cannot be called marriage and is an immoral relationship.

b) "Common Law" Marriage

Two people living together on a permanent basis, having sexual intercourse and with a serious commitment to each other. No secular or religious ceremony.

Tests of such a "marriage"

- i) Have they set up home together in such a way that as to make it very difficult to divide into his and hers ?
- ii) Do they consider themselves joined as husband and wife ?
- iii) Have they covenanted informally ?
- iv) Are they interdependent in most areas of their lives ?
- v) Are they bringing up their children together as a family ?

The weakness of this type liaison is that it lacks security, commitment and responsibility. Those who become Christians in this situation should establish a more definite level of marriage as soon as possible. There may be considerable difficulties if only one partner becomes a Christian.

c) Legal Marriage

- i) Both Old and New Testaments assume and imply a public and legal binding contract. This is marriage as a social contract. There may be a religious element to the contract.
- ii) In a Registry Office ceremony the only legal statements required are "I take this woman to be my wife(husband)". No wide-ranging promises are made.

d) **Christian Marriage**

A public and legal contract plus a covenant made before God. A spiritual union of those who both belong to the Lord. Those who become Christians when they are already married may wish to confirm their covenant before God and the church.

4) **Marriage Ceremonies**

There are no ceremonies described in detail in the bible but there are certain customs which can be traced throughout the bible:

- a) A definite ceremony confirming the marriage
- b) Special bridal clothing, jewelry, and a veil (Ps 45:13-14, Jer 2:37, Gen 24:65)
- c) Special clothes for the groom (Is 61:10)
- d) Bridesmaids and friends of the groom (Ps 45:14, Judg 14:11,20, John 3:29)
- e) Procession (Matt 25:1-13, Ps 45:14-15)
- f) Marriage Feast (Matt 22:1-14, Gen 29:22, John 2)
- g) Blessing by parents and friends (Gen 24:60, Ruth 4:11)
- h) Covenant (Prov 2:17, Ezek 16:8, Matt 2:14)
- i) Festivities(one or two weeks!) with singing and dancing (Gen 29:27, Ps 45)
- j) Gifts / dowry (Gen 34:12, Ex 22:16, 1 Sam 18:25)

5) **Traditional Christian Vows**

These vows are from the Church of England prayer book — series 3:

1st Part

N, will you take N to be your wife(husband)? Will you love her(him), comfort her(him) and protect her(him), and, forsaking all others, be faithful to her(him) as long as you both shall live? I will

2nd Part

I, N, take you, N, to be my wife(husband), to have and hold from this day forward; for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish(and obey), till death us do part, according to God's holy law; and this is my solemn vow.

3rd Part

I give you(recieve) this ring as a sign of our marriage. With my body I honour you, all that I am I give to you, and all that I have I share with you, within the love of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

There are four main threads in these vows:

Love - caring, protecting, honouring, respecting

Faithfulness - to have no affairs outside marriage

Sharing - of lives, bodies and possessions

Permanence - until death of one of the partners

Often the covenant is sealed with a sign such as the giving and receiving of rings.

6) **Notes on Sex**

- a) A healthy active sexual relationship within marriage is encouraged (Gen 1:28, Prov 5:18-19, 1 Cor 7:1-5)
- b) Having sex does not make you married.
- c) Premarital sex is condemned in the Bible (Deut 22:20-21)
- d) If a man sleeps with a virgin, the honourable course is to marry her. (Ex 22:16-17, Deut 22:28-29)
- e) Sexual relationships with others, however casual, have a spiritual dimension — “Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one body with her. For He says ‘the two will become one flesh’”.(1 Cor 6:16). It may be necessary to break spiritual ties.
- f) Covenantal promises make marriage - “those whom God has joined together...” - this is usually quoted by the minister after the promises have been made, not after they have been to bed! In fact so called “consummation” may not be possible (e.g. if one or both partners are sick or physically disabled) but they have still made their marriage covenant.
- g) Marriage is not just a permit for sex.
- h) Adulterous sex with another does not necessarily annul a marriage — with repentance there is room for forgiveness and restoration. (Hosea)
- i) Expectations of sex are greatly exaggerated by the media.

7) Polygamy

It is clear that monogamy(one wife only) was God’s original purpose, see Matt 19:4-6. The whole sense of the two becoming one flesh is lost when there are several wives. God only gave Adam one wife. Polygamy was introduced with Lamech(Gen 2:16) and several significant people in the bible had more than one wife e.g. Jacob, David. There are no Old Testament laws condemning polygamy but there are regulations and there are lessons to be learned from the problems generated by having many wives(Deut 17:17, 21:15-17, 1 Sam 1:6). Jesus and the New Testament writers presume monogamy and this is a requirement for church leadership(1 Tim 3:2) along with other requirements which are general to Christians.

B. Divorce

1) God’s Attitude to Divorce

a) **Marriage is instituted by God — he did not institute divorce!**

Divorce is instituted by man but regulated by God. The fact that it is regulated does not mean that God approves! (Matt 19:3-8) Divorce was not there from the beginning, the law was added because of hardness of heart. This is a good example of Gal 3:19 - “the law was added because of transgression”.

b) **God hates Divorce (Mal 2:16)**

- i) Divorce always arises from the sin of one or both partners.
- ii) This does not mean that divorce is always sinful (there may be legitimate grounds, see later).
- iii) Nor does it mean that a divorcee is sinful with regard to the divorce.

c) **God is a Divorced Person ! (Jer 3:8)**

God initiated the divorce - he divorced Israel. He knows what it feels like to be rejected by an unfaithful partner in this way and he can fully sympathise.

2) **Divorce Words**

There are several greek words used for divorce

- a) **apo-luo** = a common word usually meaning to set free, release, let go, dismiss, liberate, redeem, deliver. The idea of releasing from a contract is conveyed.(Matt 5:31,32, 19:3-9, Mark 10:2-12, Luke 16:18)
- b) **apo-stasion** = a bill of divorce (Matt 5:17, 19:7, Mk 10:4)
- c) **aph-iemi** = a common word meaning to leave, leave alone, desert, neglect, allow, give up and also forgive(free from sin, offence etc.). The idea of leaving and separation is conveyed here.(1 Cor 7:11-13)

3) **Marriage Situations**

There are three situations for divorce/separation:

CASE 1 - The Christian Marriage

CASE 2 - A Christian married to an unbeliever

CASE 3 - Two unbelievers married

4) **CASE 1 - The Christian Marriage (1 Cor 7:10-11)**

- a) **“not I but the Lord” (v 10)** - Paul here is reminding us that Jesus(the Lord) taught about this case and he is summarising the teaching of the Lord.
- b) **“a wife must not separate(chorizo) from her husband” (v 10)**

Leaving your spouse is breaking your marriage vow(as is adultery). The command of the Lord(Matt 19:6) is “let not man separate”. Physical separation for a time may be necessary for job etc. - this is by agreement and does not constitute a break of marriage vow(1 Cor 7:5). See Moses(Ex 18:1-5)

 - i) We should not entertain separation/divorce among our people.
 - ii) We should do nothing to encourage separation e.g. provide sympathy, money, accommodation etc. for those wishing to leave their spouses.
 - iii) Counselling together is preferable to counselling separately.
 - iv) We should always counsel for reconciliation bringing the parties together again.
 - v) Married couples should not speak of separation or threaten their spouses with it in anger. To think of such things is sinful and we should repent if we sin in this way.
- c) **“If she does separate , she must remain unmarried(agamos)” (v 11)**
 - i) Notice that she is considered to be unmarried. - There is no equivalent of present day “separation” in the bible. Separation leads to frustration and temptation. The two solutions in the bible are divorce or reconciliation. If you leave your husband, you have broken your covenant with him and are effectively unmarried.
 - ii) Even though the separated woman is effectively unmarried, and even if she gets legally divorced, she is not permitted to remarry - to do so is adultery for her and the man she marries. She must remain unmarried.

- iii) See Romans 7:2-5, Matt 5:32, Matt 19:9, Mark 10:10-12, Luke 16:18. Just about every combination of man/woman is covered in these passages. The person who remarries is an adulterer and the person whom they get married to also becomes an adulterer.

d) “or be reconciled to her husband” (v 11)

Reconciliation is always possible for Christians if they are submissive to God, the word of God, and to their leaders. Their obligation is to be reconciled since they should not be separated or divorced - “let no man separate” - Jesus could say this because he had every confidence in God’s Resources for a Christian marriage.

e) God’s Resources for marriage preservation and reconciliation:

- i) Agape love (1 Cor 13:4-7)
- ii) Repentance - saying sorry and apologising
- iii) Forgiveness (Matt 18:21-35, Eph 4:32)
- iv) Covenant before God (Prov 2:16-17)
- v) Obedience to God (John 14:23-24)
- vi) The Holy Spirit within (Ezek 36:27, Rom 8:9)
- vii) Physical Relationship (1 Cor 7:5)
- viii) Headship and order (Eph 5:22-33, 1 Cor 11:3)
- ix) Church discipline (Matt 5:23-24, 18:15-17, 1 Cor 5:1-6:8)

f) Church Discipline

The application of church discipline can bring most cases to a successful conclusion: eg A Christian husband refuses to be reconciled to his Christian wife who wishes for reconciliation

Following Matt 18:15-17

- i) First she should confront her husband
- ii) Then she should confront with two witnesses
- iii) Then take it to the church
- iv) If he still does not respond, he should be treated as a pagan or a tax collector! i.e. as a non-Christian
- v) This then reverts to CASE 2 below where the unbelieving partner desires to separate. Action may continue in civil courts since they are no longer “brothers”(1 Cor 6:1-8). - Always church justice first.
- vi) When both partners are going on with God, every difficulty in marriage should be able to be resolved in the pastoral-discipline context of the church.

g) “and a husband should not divorce his wife” (v 11)

There is no preferential treatment, the situation is the same for both sexes.

h) Grounds for Divorce - The Pharisee Question

The question put to Jesus by the Pharisees in Matt 19:3 was about grounds for divorce: “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all (or for any and every reason)?”

The question reflected a current Pharisee debate about Deut 24:1-4

Hillel Pharisees - Liberal, you can divorce for any reason

Shammai Pharisees - Conservative, you can only divorce for adultery

- i) The Hebrew expression for “something indecent” is very wide — it does not relate particularly to adultery.
- ii) Jesus pointed out that this regulation did not constitute God’s approval for divorce.
- iii) The regulation was to make divorce difficult(certificat etc.) and to emphasise the finality of the act if your ex spouse remarries - you cannot have her back!
- iv) This squashes any kind of talk about being really married “in God’s sight” to your original partner. You are actually not allowed to return to your original partner. Although divorce is caused by sin, the covenant is truly broken. If your partner has married another, you cannot return to them and cannot be bound in any way by your previous covenant.

i) The “Exception Clause”

Jesus’ answer to the Pharisees’ question was NO! - you cannot just divorce you wife if you decide that you don’t like her! But in Matthew’s gospel, we do have a ground for divorce mentioned:

Matt 5:32, 19:9 “I say to you, whoever divorces his wife except for sexual immorality(*porneia*) and marries another commits adultery”

porneia (greek) = sexual sin of any sort, loose sexual behaviour(Gal 5:19), incest(1 Cor 5:1), prostitution(Matt 21:31, Heb 11:31), homosexuality(Jude 7), lesbianism, child abuse, deviant behaviour, bestiality, adultery.

Another greek word *moichao* is used for adultery only, but it is not used in the exception clause.

- i) If there are grounds for divorce, it does not mean that you must divorce.
- ii) God divorced Israel for unfaithfulness(Jeremiah 3:1-8).
- iii) God welcomes unfaithful Israel back when she repented(Jer 3:12-14, Hosea).
- iv) If your spouse has been immoral and returns and repents, you should forgive as your heavenly father forgives you(Matt 18:21-35).
- v) If there is no repentance, however, you can divorce your spouse since they have broken the the covenant. There is no sin on your part in initiating divorce, the covenant is annulled, the marriage is dissolved, you have no further obligations to your partner, and you are free to marry another without committing adultery.

5) CASE 2 - A Christian married to an unbeliever (1 Cor 7:12-16)

a) A Christian marries an unbeliever

- i) This situation should never arise. We are commanded not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers (2 Cor 6:14-18) in the same way that the Israelites were instructed to make no covenants with the heathen occupants of the land including marriage covenants. (Ex 34:12-16, Deut 7:3-6)

- ii) After the exile during the time of Ezra, it was recognised that the Israelites had been disobedient and had mixed with the surrounding nations(Ezra 9:1-4). When the people repented of their sin, they divorced their foreign wives and returned to the Lord. Here divorce is seen as carrying out the will of God(Ezra 10:1-4, 11) — it appears to be the lesser of two evils. The New Testament passages however suggest that if you find yourself in this position you should persevere in the marriage as in case(b)

b) One partner is converted

This situation will often arise and Paul addresses the issue in 1 Cor 7:12-16. This particular situation was not covered in the teaching of Jesus(the Lord) and Paul is bringing the word of God to bear on this case - it is still the word of God - we cannot take it merely as Paul's opinion.

- i) You have no right to divorce your unbelieving spouse just because they are an unbeliever(v 12-13). This can be a temptation when for example a woman with an unbelieving husband is surrounded by friendly, caring, single, Christian young men. It is our task to support wisely in these situations.
- ii) Your present state is in no way sinful or unclean(v 14) and in fact you have a sanctifying effect on your spouse and children though this does not save them(v 16). This means that your physical relationship with you spouse is in no way defiling and that you can live a holy and effective life for God even in this situation. You should do all you can by the grace of God to bring your partner to salvation(v 16). This will be achieved by your godly behaviour(1 Peter 3:1-6)
- iii) **“If the unbelieving partner wishes to separate, let it be so”(v 15)**. You should not resist separation and you are not bound(gk “enslaved”). You are free of further obligations and may initiate legal divorce. You will then be free to remarry.
- iv) A situation which unfortunately occurs quite frequently is that of a Christian partner who is mistreated or abused by her unbelieving spouse. The abuse may be physical, sexual, psychological etc. In these circumstances, it is for the church leaders to confront the unbelieving partner with a view to rectifying their behaviour; and bring them to the Lord. If there is no response and life becomes unbearable for the Christian partner, the only recourse is to the secular courts. The behaviour of the unbelieving partner is breaking any kind of covenant between the two people.

6) CASE 3 - Two Unbelievers Married

It may be possible to apply some biblical principles but there is no basis for appeal to scripture or obedience to God. Many of the Resources mentioned above are not available in the event of marital breakdown.

7) Dealing with current Marital Problems

Many people join a church with existing marital problems - they are separated, divorced, in divorce proceedings etc. The main question which we must ask before divorce or remarriage is contemplated is:

“Do you have any obligations regarding your partner ?”

Example 1

You and your partner are both Christians but you are separated or divorced and there is no immorality. Your obligation is to be reconciled. The leaders of your church need to work with the leaders of your partner's church to bring about reconciliation (and remarriage to each other if necessary). If your partner refuses to be reconciled, or to have counselling leading in that direction, then the disciplinary procedures above may be used.

Example 2

You are separated from your unbelieving partner and it is your fault either by your behaviour or you initiating the separation on unscriptural grounds (no immorality). You need to tell your partner about your faith, you need to repent of your wrongdoing and ask your partner for forgiveness. Take your partner back if they wish to return. If they do not wish to continue the marriage, then you are free (1 Cor 7:15).

Example 3

If you are divorced from your unbelieving partner on unscriptural grounds as above then the problem is much more complicated. They may wish to remarry you - but you cannot marry them because they are an unbeliever! You should repent of your wrongdoing to your partner and inform them of your dilemma. You should seek to bring them to salvation and refrain from making other relationships. Beware of false professions of faith. If your partner comes to the point of not wishing to remarry, then you are free (1 Cor 7:15).

Example 4

Your previous spouse is remarried to someone else. The covenant is broken, they cannot come back to you (Deut 24), and you are free to marry another without committing adultery.

C. Remarriage

Many instances have been covered above. As I see it, if there are no obligations regarding previous marriages and if they are irretrievable then there is no longer a covenant and you are free to remarry. How can you be bound by a covenant which no longer exists.... 1 Cor 7:27, 28a - literally "Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek release. Have you been released from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you marry you do not sin and if a virgin marries she does not sin."

In 1 Tim 5:11-14 Paul positively encourages widows to remarry for a number of reasons! These reasons are equally valid for young divorcees, they have the same pressures.

D. Attitudes

- All those involved in unhappy marital situations should seek the Kingdom of God and his righteousness first. and avoid selfishness. The quest is for righteousness, not happiness.
- The rest of the church must have much love, and patience with those who are suffering the pain of marital breakdown.

- Sins involving marital situations can be forgiven like any other and we must be prepared to put the past behind, forgive, forget and look to the future