

Divorce, Remarriage and Reconciliation

By Bill Scheidler

This article is intended to be a simple, basic outline of the subject of marriage, divorce, remarriage and reconciliation. It is NOT intended to answer all the questions to this complex subject. Books have been written on this subject. What we are interested in more than anything else is what God's word says as it applies to this area.

I. What is the objective of this teaching?

A. Informative

The objective of this teaching is to help Christians to understand what the Bible teaching on this very important subject.

B. Preventive

The objective of this teaching is to underscore the permanence, solemnity and finality of the marriage bond.

C. Restorative

The objective of this teaching is to offer mercy, comfort and strength to those who live under condemnation as a result of divorce.

II. What are some key definitions that serve as a basis for this discussion?

A. Marriage

Marriage is the contractual, binding, commitment to live together in a relationship recognized morally by God and society, enacted verbally, validated legally, and consummated physically.

B. Divorce

Divorce is the breaking and forsaking of the marriage contract and all of its moral, legal and physical obligations.

C. Valid Remarriage

A valid remarriage is entering into a new marriage contract by or with someone who has been formerly married but is not in any way bound to the former partner or partners by any sort of marital obligation (those obligations having been dissolved through death, a God-sanctioned divorce or remarriage on the part of the former spouse or spouses).

D. Reconciliation

Reconciliation is the process of saying and doing the things necessary to restore and reunite a couple into the relationship that God wants spiritually and/or physically.

III. What is God's view of marriage?

- A. Marriage is a part of God's design for intimate relationship between opposite sexes (Gen. 2:24-25).
- B. Marriage is a covenant commitment that binds a man and a woman together in a special relationship of love and mutual sharing (I Pet. 3:7).

Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered.

- C. Marriage is blessed, sanctified and exalted by God because it speaks of Christ's relationship to the church (Eph. 5:22-33; Heb. 13:4).
- D. Marriage in God's mind is meant to be a permanent (I Cor. 7:10-11).

Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband. But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife.

God never intended that people should ever consider divorce as an option to an unhappy marriage (Mark 10:2-9). Marriage is a covenant or "contract" between a man and a woman to be held inviolable by both.

The Pharisees came and asked Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" testing Him. 3 And He answered and said to them, "What did Moses command you?" 4 They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce, and to dismiss her." 5 And Jesus answered and said to them, "Because of the hardness of your heart he wrote you this precept. 6 But from the beginning of the creation, God 'made them male and female.' 7 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, 8 and the two shall become one flesh'; so then they are no longer two, but one flesh. 9 Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate."

II. What does the Bible say about divorce?

- A. In the beginning: God intended that the marriage bond be permanent (Gen. 2:24-25; Mark 10:6-9).

- B. Under the law of Moses, God permitted divorce because of the hardness of their heart and unwillingness to accept God's high standard (Deut. 21:10-14; 24:1-4; Mt. 19:7-8; Mark 10:5).

They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?" He said to them, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so."
Matthew 19:7-8

- C. Even in the Old Testament God made it clear through the voice of the prophets that He hated divorce and that it is a reproach to His name (Mal. 2:14-16).

You cry out, "Why has the LORD abandoned us?" I'll tell you why! Because the LORD witnessed the vows you and your wife made to each other on your wedding day when you were young. But you have been disloyal to her, though she remained your faithful companion, the wife of your marriage vows. Didn't the LORD make you one with your wife? In body and spirit you are his. And what does he want? Godly children from your union. So guard yourself; remain loyal to the wife of your youth. "For I hate divorce!" says the LORD, the God of Israel. "It is as cruel as putting on a victim's bloodstained coat," says the LORD Almighty. "So guard yourself; always remain loyal to your wife."
Malachi 2:14-16, NLT

- D. In the Gospels Jesus came to bring honor to the institution of marriage by bringing us back to God's higher law.

Jesus clearly stated that whoever divorces for any cause, except fornication, commits adultery if they marry another and the new partner who marries them is guilty of adultery as well (Mt. 19:3-10).

Some Pharisees came and tried to trap him with this question: "Should a man be allowed to divorce his wife for any reason?" 4 "Haven't you read the Scriptures?" Jesus replied. "They record that from the beginning 'God made them male and female.' 5 And he said, 'This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.' 6 Since they are no longer two but one, let no one separate them, for God has joined them together." 7 "Then why did Moses say a man could merely write an official letter of divorce and send her away?" they asked. 8 Jesus replied, "Moses permitted divorce as a concession to your hard-hearted wickedness, but it was not what God had originally intended. 9 And I tell you this, a man who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery--unless his wife has been unfaithful." 10 Jesus' disciples then said to him, "Then it is better not to marry!" –NLT

- E. In the Epistles Paul made it clear to the Corinthians that God's command is that husbands and wives are not to divorce their respective mates (I Cor. 7:10-12).

Summary on Divorce

The Bible makes a clear statement that God's viewpoint underscores the permanence of the marriage vow with the strongest emphasis possible (Mt. 19:10). Divorce is not

an option to be considered even in the face of great unhappiness. Jesus only allowed for one possible cause for divorce and that is adultery. Even with this tremendous strain upon the marriage, divorce is not meant to be seen as a requirement. In God's mind the highest goal is always to forgive and reconstruct or build a God-honoring relationship.

III. What are the scenarios where it seems that God actually allows for divorce?

God seems to allow for divorce in the following two cases:

- A. When one of the parties commits ongoing immorality, the offended party may initiate a divorce.
 - 1. Divorce should not be initiated in the case of a onetime occurrence of immorality. Forgiveness and reconciliation should be the focus in such a case.
 - 2. There is no requirement to divorce in such a case. Whether a divorce is initiated depends on the heart and desire of the offended party.
- B. When one is married to an unbeliever who does not want to maintain the marriage and initiates a divorce (I Cor. 7:15-16).

But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a 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?

- 1. This type of divorce should never be initiated by the believer (I Cor. 7:13).

And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him.

- 2. By staying in such a marriage with a right spirit and attitude an unbelieving partner can be won to the Lord (I Pet. 3:1-2; I Cor. 7:16).

Wives, likewise, be submissive to your own husbands, that even if some do not obey the word, they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives, when they observe your chaste conduct accompanied by fear.

I Peter 3:1-2

- C. If believers get a divorce or separate for anything other than ongoing immorality they are to remain unmarried or else be reconciled (I Cor. 7:10-11).

Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband. But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife.

IV. Is divorce a forgivable sin?

If one initiates a wrongful divorce and later genuinely recognizes the error of his or her way and sincerely repents, he or she has the full assurance from God's word that he or she will be forgiven. The Bible makes it clear that only one sin is unpardonable, namely blasphemy against the Holy Ghost (Mt. 12:31). No true Bible scholar will assert that divorce is the unpardonable sin.

Thus divorce, a sin like any other sin, is washed away by the blood of Jesus and taken from the record of sins recorded against us never to be raised in this life or at the judgment day. We should forgive ourselves and others who have found themselves in this state even as God forgives us (Eph. 4:32).

The consequences of the sin of divorce, however, may not be able to be undone. Like many other sins that we commit, the law of reaping tragically exacts its toll in the memory and the circumstances as one watches the seeds of a broken home harvested. These consequences can only be lived through by the sustaining endurance found only in the depths of the grace and mercy of God.

V. What does the Bible say about remarriage?

There is very little direct reference to the concept of remarriage in the Scriptures but several passages allude to it indirectly.

- A. Remarriage under the law of Moses was an understood privilege just as divorce was liberally granted (Ex. 21:7-10; Deut. 24:1-4; Lev. 21:14). It should be noted that the High Priest could not marry a widow or a divorced woman but others could.
- B. Remarriage is spoken of in the Epistles as Paul makes clear that death finally, ultimately and absolutely dissolves the marriage contract. The living partner is free to remarry or marry again without condemnation (Rom. 7:1-3). Death of one partner ends all of the marital obligations of the other partner.

Or do you not know, brethren (for I speak to those who know the law), that the law has dominion over a man as long as he lives? For the woman who has a husband is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives. But if the husband dies, she is released from the law of her husband. So then if, while her husband lives, she marries another man, she will be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from that law, so that she is no adulteress, though she has married another man.

- C. The right of remarriage is implied in three passages of Scripture:

- 1. In the Old Testament under the Mosaic Law, Moses made it clear that the remarriage of one who is divorced prevents him from ever returning to his original partner. The original partner, since there can be no reconciliation, is free from any marital obligation to the original spouse and thus is free to remarry (Deut. 24:1-4).

2. In the Gospels Jesus seems to imply that whoever divorces because of the adultery committed by their spouse would not be committing adultery if they (the “innocent” party) remarried (Mt. 19:9). However, they might be guilty of hardness of heart.

And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.

3. In the Epistles Paul seems to suggest that those who were divorced by an unbelieving spouse were not under bondage to the original marriage covenant (I Cor. 7:15).

But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace.

If your husband or wife isn't a follower of the Lord and decides to divorce you, then you should agree to it. You are no longer bound to that person. After all, God chose you and wants you to live at peace. –CEV

D. A valid remarriage is one that fits the following criteria:

1. One partner dies leaving the other free to remarry.
2. One partner divorces another and remarries (wrongfully), leaving the other partner free to remarry (legitimately) since there can be no reconciliation (Deut. 24:1-4).
3. One partner divorces a spouse who has committed perpetual adultery which leaves the “innocent party” free to remarry. In any such divorce it is recommended that considerable time go by before a new relationship is established for two reasons.
 - a. To give the offended party time to heal and minimize the carry over into a new marriage.
 - b. To give God a chance to bring change to the situation opening the door to a possible future reconciliation.

As a general rule it can be said that God allows remarriage wherever He allows divorce to take place.

Remarriage is a very serious undertaking, as it once again is a solemn vow to remain with the new partner as long as both live. It should only be entered into with real caution and counsel in order to not repeat the mistakes of former relationships. Keep in mind that statistics show that second marriages have a higher failure rate than first marriages. Paul seems to indicate that in many cases it would simply be better not to marry again (I Cor. 7:8-9).

But I say to the unmarried and to the widows: It is good for them if they remain even as I am; but if they cannot exercise self-control, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

VI. What is the biblical basis for reconciliation?

- A. The general principle of reconciliation in broken relationships applies to any and all who have become estranged in some form or another from someone else (Mt. 18:15-20; Eph. 4:24-32).
- B. Specifically in the matter of divorce, Paul says that divorced Christian partners should remain unmarried or be reconciled. If one marries following divorce, there can be no reconciliation to the marriage and therefore the mistake of divorce cannot be rectified (I Cor.7:10-11). The honor of God's name is at stake in the divorce of two believers. Every effort must be taken to preserve that honor as a testimony to the world that Christians are fully able to keep their word to God and each other.

VII. What is meant by reconciliation?

There are two relevant kinds of reconciliation:

A. Spiritual Reconciliation

Spiritual reconciliation is the process whereby two estranged, divorced or separated people resolve the resentments, deal with unrepentant and unforgiven sins and cease from the divisive attitudes that have separated them (Mt. 18:15-20; Eph. 4:24-32). To fail to be reconciled in the Spirit is to give Satan further advantage and opportunity to reproach the name of God.

This type of reconciliation should even take place between a believer and an unbeliever as much as it is possible to enable the believer to reinstate his Christian witness (if it is tarnished), to rid himself of guilt and to give the unbeliever an opportunity to accept Christ as personal savior even if the estranged parties never re-unite geographically. This type of reconciliation should always be attempted (Rom. 12:18).

B. Physical or Geographical Reconciliation

This type of reconciliation occurs in the process of spiritual reconciliation. In such a case, the estranged couple chooses to forgive each other, repent of their sins, and move back together into the same dwelling. In the case of those who have already divorced, this will include remarrying each other.

VIII. Why is the truth of reconciliation so important to believers?

- A. It enables married or formerly married partners to break the power of sin in their lives (Jam. 4:6-7).
- B. It reinstates the testimony of the Church of Jesus Christ in an age of covenant-breaking (II Tim. 3:3).
- C. It underscores and re-emphasizes the permanence of the marriage bond (Mt.19:10).
- D. It testifies to the ability of the grace of God to conquer all human obstacles.