



GREAT COMMISSION LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

RAISING GODLY FAMILIES / THE DOCTRINE OF MAN AND SIN

Divorce and Remarriage

In working with churches throughout the United States, I (John Hopler) have been asked many questions on the issue of divorce and remarriage. There are many attending the church who have gone through, or are going through, a painful divorce. What is permissible in such situations? Can a divorced person be remarried? This article was written to answer the many questions that are raised on this issue of divorce and remarriage.



Divorce and Remarriage

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1. What does the Bible say about marriage?

The best place to start is in the Book of Genesis with the account of the very first marriage:

“The LORD God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. The man said, ‘This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh” (Genesis 2:22-24).

A few lessons to learn from this passage:

First, marriage was invented by God. Marriage is not a product of the civil government or of our culture. Rather, it was God who brought about the first marriage and He is the One who determines the rules related to marriage.

Second, marriage is a joining of two people. A “oneness” occurs that is holy and wonderful in the eyes of God. Marriage is not merely a contractual arrangement between two consenting adults. There is a union that occurs to the point where God says that the man and the woman “*become one flesh*” (Genesis 2:24).

This union is one that God intended to be for a lifetime. Jesus referred to the passage in Genesis in describing the nature of this union:

“Some Pharisees came to Jesus, testing Him and asking, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason 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 REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH? So 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).

As the above passage shows, Jesus was very strong on this point: Marriage is meant to be for a lifetime. In Jesus’ words, “from the beginning,” it was God’s intention that there be no divorce. “From the beginning” God’s plan was that a man and a woman would be married and stay married as long as they lived.

“I’ve never met a couple yet who, when they were walking down the aisle, said, ‘What we want is three years of happiness, two years of [torment], a messy divorce and 15 years of fighting over custody of the kids.”

*- Wade F. Horn,
assistant secretary at the
Department of Health and
Human Services*

This is confirmed in other passages from the Scriptures. One of the clearest is found in the last book of the Old Testament:

“Take heed then to your spirit, and let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth. For I hate divorce,” says the LORD, the God of Israel” (Malachi 2:15-16).

A few lessons from this passage:

First, God hates divorce. (Could this be stated any stronger?) Second, God views marriage as a covenant relationship. That is, each person in a marriage covenant is responsible to God and to his/her spouse to fulfill their covenant responsibilities, regardless of the circumstances or the actions of that person’s spouse. Marriage is a commitment, not only to the marriage partner, but also to God, to honor Him and to be a model to the world of our relationship with Christ. Thus Paul compares marriage to the relationship between Christ and His church (Ephesians 5:22-33).

“Marriage is far more important than most of us realize. It affects God’s reputation on this planet. That’s why He hates divorce. And that’s why it’s essential for you to set Jesus Christ apart as the Builder of your home.”

- Dennis Rainey

2. If it is clear from Scripture that God intended that marriage be for a lifetime, what do Christians teach as to divorce and remarriage?

The question on the freedom to divorce and remarry is an issue that Christians have debated for centuries. There are some Christians (such as Bill Gothard and John Piper) who would not allow for divorce, even in the case of adultery. Others would have a much looser policy. For example, Willow Creek Community Church has a divorce policy that allows for divorce and remarriage in certain cases involving immorality or desertion. (See “Participating Membership Manual,” Willow Creek Community Church, p.125, 1995).

From the above examples, one can see that there is quite a disagreement among devoted Christians on this topic. It is difficult at times to speak on this subject without it reflecting negatively on other Christians that we honor and love. But it is important for each of us to examine the Scriptures ourselves and develop our own convictions on this very important topic, regardless of whether our convictions differ with godly Christians we admire.

Further, as a leader in Great Commission Churches, I thought it important to express the following views on this topic for the sake of the association. In the GCC Core Values paper, the following statement was written:

We aspire to provide compassionate ministry to those who are divorced while at the same time teaching that God hates divorce and wants couples to stay married. Churches in our association (with some exceptions) generally teach that God permits remarriage after divorce in two instances—marital infidelity or if an unbeliever leaves a believing spouse (Matthew 5:32; 1 Corinthians 7:15).

As the above statement indicates, this is the general view of pastors in our association. I do not maintain that everyone in GCC agrees with every one of the following points or that no one in GCC disagrees with the major claims in this paper. Still, it is my opinion that this paper is representative of most of the pastors in GCC. As a result of this paper, it is my hope that it will encourage further dialogue and

studying of the Scripture so that each leader and believer will develop his/her own convictions on what God says as to divorce and remarriage.

3. What do we learn from the Old Testament as to God's view of divorce?

We already looked at the passages in Genesis 2 and Malachi 2, which show clearly that God intends marriage to be for a lifetime and that He hates divorce. Some other significant passages are the following:

“When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out from his house, and she leaves his house and goes and becomes another man's wife, and if the latter husband turns against her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her to be his wife, then her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife, since she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the LORD, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance” (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).

This passage might imply that divorce was an option for the man living under the Jewish law who “found some indecency” in his wife. Jesus, however, states very clearly in Matthew 19:8 that this was allowed because of the Jews’ “hardness of heart.” That is, God realized that the Jews would divorce their wives. This passage in Deuteronomy was written not to validate divorce, but to put some restrictions on those who have been divorced and then have subsequently remarried. The rule laid down by God was that a divorced woman who was remarried could not remarry the original husband. In summation, when pairing this with Jesus’ words in Matthew 19, Deuteronomy 24 does not give any freedom for God’s people to divorce.

Another passage that deals with marriage and divorce is found in Leviticus:

“If there is a man who commits adultery with another man's wife, one who commits adultery with his friend's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death” (Leviticus 20:10).

The point to make from this verse is simply this: If a person committed adultery under the Law, that person was to be put to death. Therefore, if a person’s marriage partner was put to death for adultery, needless to say, that person—as a widow or widower—was free to remarry. So, under the Mosaic Law, adultery was, in essence, a basis for the offended marriage partner to be free to marry another.

A final Old Testament passage is in Ezra 10. In this passage, the men of Israel had taken foreign wives—women who were not followers of the true God. Here was the response by God’s leader to this situation:

“Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, ‘You have been unfaithful and have married foreign wives adding to the guilt of Israel. Now therefore, make confession to the LORD God of your fathers and do His will; and separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives.’ Then all the assembly replied with a loud voice, That’s right! As you have said, so it is our duty to do” (Ezra 10:10-12).

“Enter marriage with your eyes wide open and put on the blinders after saying I do!”

- James Dobson

The point to make from this passage is that the rules on marriage changed when there were “mixed marriages.” That is, in the case of the people of Israel during Ezra’s day, as to a marriage between a believer and a non-believer, divorce was not merely allowed--divorce was commanded! At issue with the people in Ezra 10 was their obedience to God. The lesson we learn here is that the Lordship of God and Jesus Christ is primary, even to the marriage relationship.

“Many marriages would be better if the husband and wife clearly understood they are on the same side.”

- Zig Ziglar

4. What did Jesus teach on the subject of divorce?

The most famous passage on this topic is found in Matthew 5:32:

“...but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

This statement is repeated with similar words in Matthew 19:9, Mark 10:11, and Luke 16:18.

A few points about this verse:

First, the thrust of this passage is that there should be no divorce. The purpose for Jesus saying this, in the context, was to preserve the sanctity of marriage, and to condemn divorce. His purpose was not primarily to detail when divorce was permissible.

Second, it is clear that divorce is permissible when there is “unchastity” or “immorality” (Matthew 19:9). The word here is “*porneia*” which means “illicit sexual intercourse” [Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, W.E. Vine, Vol. II, p. 125, Revell Press, (1966)].

There has been much debate on the meaning of this term “*porneia*.” Some would argue that the term does not include adultery since it is a different word than adultery (“*moichao*”) used in the same verse. Further, the argument is made that it refers to other type of immoralities, such as sexual intercourse with another person after the marriage vows were made, but before the marriage was consummated. For example, in Jesus’ day, Mary and Joseph were betrothed and considered “married” (see Matthew 1:18-19), but had not consummated the marriage. In John 8:41, the word “*porneia*” is used to imply that Jesus was born of “fornication” (i.e., from immorality before the marriage between Mary and Joseph was consummated). The net of all this is that there are those who argue that Matthew 5:32 does not give a person whose spouse committed adultery liberty to divorce his/her spouse.

I respectfully disagree with this view for the following reasons:

First, I would point to the Old Testament Law, which was still in operation at the time Jesus spoke the words recorded in Matthew 5:32. Under the Law, the offended person would not have needed to divorce his/her adulterous spouse because that adulterous spouse would have been put to death! To argue that adultery is not part of the exception given in Matthew 5:32 does not square with God’s view of adultery in the Old Testament.

Second, the argument that “*porneia*” does not include adultery because it is a different word than is used for adultery is weak in my opinion. The word “*porneia*”, according to most commentators that I have read (including W.E. Vine), is a general word for immorality (including incest, fornication, homosexuality, as well as adultery), whereas the word “*mocheia*” is more specific to adultery. That is, the

“Between a man and his wife nothing ought to rule but love.”

- William Penn

word “*porneia*” was chosen by Jesus because there were other forms of immorality other than adultery (such as homosexuality or bestiality) that would be grounds for divorce.

This is not to say that God would automatically want a couple to divorce if adultery has occurred. There are numerous instances when a couple has been restored despite the unfaithfulness of one of the partners. My only point is that, according to Matthew 5:32, there is, in the eyes of God, liberty to divorce a spouse who has committed adultery or some other form of immorality.

5. What does the rest of the New Testament say about divorce?

The definitive passage in the Bible on the subject of divorce and remarriage for our culture today is 1 Corinthians 7. I say this for several reasons:

First, 1 Corinthians 7 is dealing with Gentiles who were not brought up under the Law. They were recent converts to Christ who had not been previously part of a God-fearing society/culture.

Second, as we shall see, the Apostle Paul is answering specific questions on the subject of marriage and divorce to these new Christians. How Paul answers these questions is the best indicator of how we are to answer the same questions here in the 21st century.

Third, Paul was writing after Moses and Jesus taught on divorce and remarriage. Therefore, his answers are built upon the foundation of what had been communicated by God earlier, and are shared through the lens of the gospel of grace to these new believers in Christ.

For these reasons, the next section of this paper will be a study of 1 Corinthians 7 in order to understand God’s attitude towards divorce and remarriage.

1st Corinthians 7: 1-16

“Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman. But because of immoralities, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband. The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. But this I say by way of concession, not of command” (vv. 1-6).

The main point to be made here is that Paul was evidently asked some questions related to marriage. This letter was written to answer those questions. In verses 1-6, Paul is affirming the goodness of being married and of each spouse fulfilling his/her marital responsibilities.

“Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am. However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that. But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I. But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn with passion” (vv. 6-9).

In these verses, Paul is urging the Corinthian “unmarried” and “widows” to remain single unless they do not have self-control. I would maintain that the “unmarried” in these verses refer to those who are divorced. My reasons are as follows:

1. There are two types of people: Married and those not married. For those that are not married, there are two types of people: Those who have been married before and those who have never been married (virgins). For those who have been married before but are not married now, there are two types of people: Those whose spouse is living (divorced), and those whose spouse is dead (widows.) These, then, are the four categories of people:

Married

Virgins

Divorced

Widows

So, who is the “unmarried” referring to in verses 6-9 above? It cannot be the “married” person (obviously). Nor can it be the widow since “unmarried” is paired with “widow” in verse 8. It also cannot refer to a virgin since “unmarried” is paired with “virgin” in verse 34. By the process of elimination, “unmarried” refers to someone who has been married before and whose spouse is still alive—that is, a divorced person.

2. The overall outline of the chapter (as we shall see) confirms this. The chapter can be best outlined this way:

Verses 6-9: Widows and unmarried (divorced)

Verses 10-24: Married

Verses 25-38: Virgins

3. Later in verse 11, Paul refers to someone who divorces her husband and says, “...if she does leave, let her remain unmarried.” This would confirm that “unmarried” is used to describe a divorced person.
4. Others would argue that the word “unmarried” would be a more general term used of anyone who is not married—divorced, widow, or virgin. This may very well be the case. Even so, it would include a person who is divorced.

So, it is important to understand that “unmarried” either refers to a divorced person or, alternatively, included those who are divorced. In light of this, look at verses 8-9 again:

“But I say to the unmarried [i.e., divorced or including those who are divorced] and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I. But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.”

Why is this so important that we understand that “unmarried” means “divorced?” For this reason, look at verses 8-9 yet again:

“The happiest people don’t necessarily have the best of everything. They just make the best of everything.”

- Unknown

“But I say to the unmarried [i.e., divorced] and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I. But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.”

Do you see what Paul is saying to the Corinthians? He is saying to the divorced people, “Let them marry!” That is, to these Corinthians who came from all sorts of messed up situations from their “before Christ” days, Paul is saying to them, “You can get married.” He is putting no restrictions on them. Rather, he is saying that if you have been divorced, you are free to be married. [Note: Later on he puts a restriction on one type of divorced person—a believer who is divorced from another believer. But in general, Paul gives liberty for divorced people to remarry.]

“But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband (but if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife” (verses 10-11).

A few points from these two verses:

1. Paul is now talking to married people, rather than to widows and to those who are divorced.
2. Paul says, “*I give instructions, not I, but the Lord...*” In other words, Paul is referring to the words that the Lord Jesus said about marriage. At this point, the verses in Matthew 5:32 and 19:1-10 would apply to what Paul is saying.
3. As we shall see when we look at verses 12-16, Paul is dealing with divorce and remarriage for believers. Paul affirms Jesus’ directives that a believer—one who is part of the people of God—should not divorce his/her Christian spouse.
4. Paul also states that if someone does leave (divorce) his/her spouse, remarriage is not an option (“*she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband*”). This is consistent with Jesus’ teaching that a believer divorcing his/ her spouse and remarrying is committing adultery.

But to the rest, I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her. And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must 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” (verses 12-16)?

Some insights from these verses:

1. In contrast with verses 10-11, which was instruction given by the Lord, Paul is giving instruction on matters that the Lord never dealt with (“*To the rest I say, not the Lord...*” verse 12).
2. Unlike in verses 10-11, Paul is dealing with a situation where the believer is married to an unbeliever.
3. Unlike in Ezra, where the believer was commanded to divorce the unbeliever, Paul urges the believer to remain married to the unbeliever if the unbeliever consents to live with the be-

“The most important thing a father can do for his children is to love their mother.”

- Theodore Hesburgh

liever. Implied in this is that the believer (be it the man or the woman) is setting the pace spiritually in the home, and that the unbeliever agrees to live with the believer under those terms.

4. If the unbeliever decides to leave, the believer is to let him/her leave. Remarriage for this divorced believer seems to be an option for three reasons:

First, God has called us to peace. This would imply that remarriage would be allowed.

Second, unlike the case of the two believers who are divorced (vv. 10-11), no directive is given to the person divorced from an unbeliever to “remain unmarried.” This would imply that remarriage is permissible.

Third, the general permission by Paul to the “unmarried” to get married (v. 9), would certainly apply to someone who was married at one time to an unbeliever.

“Love is one long sweet dream, and marriage is the alarm clock.”
 - Unknown

The Two Rules and the Two Exceptions

I have found that, in order to understand the biblical teaching on divorce, it is best to describe it in terms of two general rules and two general exceptions. The following chart will explain what I mean:

	<u>Speaking to Whom?</u>	<u>General Rule</u>	<u>Exception</u>
<i>Jesus</i>	A believing couple who has been brought up in a God-honoring culture	Divorce is not permitted. Remarriage after divorce is adultery (Matt. 5:32).	Divorce is permitted for the cause of immorality (Matt.5:32).
<i>Paul</i>	A new Christian who was brought up in a secular culture	Remarriage is permitted for those who have divorced (1 Cor. 7:8-9).	Remarriage is not permitted for divorced believers (1 Cor. 7:10-11).

Jesus gave a general rule to the God-fearing Jews: No divorce and no remarriage after divorce —with an exception. Similarly, Paul gave a general rule to those who had been saved from the cesspool of the world where there was polygamy, slave trading (where husbands and wives were separated), and gross abuses and immoralities: New Christians who have been divorced in the past can be remarried—with an exception.

Jesus gave an exception to the general rule of believers not divorcing, which is that divorce is permissible if there is immorality committed. Similarly, Paul gave an exception to the general rule that divorced Christians can remarry: A Christian divorced from another Christian cannot remarry.

Having laid a general outline based upon Matthew 5:32 and 1 Corinthians 7, let’s address some of the common questions related to divorce and remarriage.

Questions and Answers on Divorce and Remarriage

1. In general, how are we to counsel people who have been divorced?

Divorce is a traumatic experience. In many ways, divorce is more devastating than the death of a spouse, because the divorced person experiences not only the loss of the spouse, but a painful sense of rejection from the one person they expected would be a source of affirmation and love.

In helping those who have gone through a divorce, I think of how Jesus was “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). As believers who are called to minister to the hurting of this world, it is important that we be both gracious and kind, as well as bold with the truth. Empathetic listening must be combined with the clear teaching of the Word of God to truly minister to the divorced in your church.

“Divorce is not a solution, but an exchange of problems.”

*- Armand Nicholi III,
Harvard sociologist*

2. There have been glorious testimonies of a spouse who committed adultery and then, because of the grace and forgiveness extended by the other spouse, the marriage was preserved. Isn't this what God would want?

Certainly that would be ideal. God is glorified when there is forgiveness and grace. And where there is adultery, I would certainly pray, give counsel, and do all I could in hopes that there would be repentance by the transgressor and forgiveness by the offended spouse. But that is not the issue in this paper. The issue is not “what is ideal,” but what is permissible. There are those that would say that the offended spouse would not have the option to divorce in the case of adultery. I disagree with that stand. Marriage is a covenantal relationship, built upon mutual trust. Adultery is a breach of that covenant and trust. The Scriptures do not require a spouse to entrust himself or herself to a spouse once that spouse has committed adultery. One further point on this: Because the offended spouse is not required to take back the transgressing spouse, any grace and forgiveness offered will be that much more powerful in bringing restoration.

3. Concerning your interpretation in 1 Corinthians 7:8-9 that Paul is giving general permission for divorced people to remarry, isn't this a contradiction to Jesus' statements in the Gospels that divorce and remarriage is not permissible?

What is at issue here is the significant impact that the gospel has on our lives. Consider the following passage:

“And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest”
(Ephesians 2:1-3).

According to these verses, before a person comes to Christ, that person is dead, influenced by Satan and living in their lusts. The person who was married and then divorced, while dead in sin, I believe, is free to re-marry once he or she is born again as a new creation in Christ. This was Paul's perspective in 1 Corinthians 7:8-9 in his letter to these new believers.

Further, believers who get married are different than non-believers who get married. The believers understand that their marriage is a vow to God and is meant to be a reflection of our relationship with Christ (Ephesians 5:22-33) as part of our testimony to the world. The marriage of those who do not embrace Christ (obviously) is not intended by them to be a testimony of Christ. Thus, the prohibitions against believers getting divorced and remarried makes sense (1 Corinthians 7:10-11).

4. But wouldn't God be glorified if the new Christian went back and remarried his/her divorced spouse (particularly if the Christian was more in the wrong than the unbeliever)?

Certainly, I would agree that the Christian needs to go back and confess sin and share what Christ has done in his/her life with the former spouse. And certainly, it would be a glory to God if the spouse would also receive Christ and the two were re-married. May God have more stories like this! However, again, the issue is what is permissible and what is not. For example, the new Christian who is divorced on the day he receives Christ is not married. He is divorced. Yes, as a new believer, the first thing may be for him to make amends and restitution with his former spouse. But this does not mean he should marry her. As a divorced (unmarried) person, he is free to remarry in the Lord according to 1 Corinthians 7:8-9, 39. This is also confirmed in another portion of 1 Corinthians 7:

“Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you marry, you have not sinned” (vs. 27-28).

Paul is clear: If you are released from your wife and then marry again, you have not sinned. For believers who get married, they are not released and, therefore, to re-marry would be sin. They must reconcile as witnesses of the gospel of Jesus Christ. But an unbeliever who is divorced is released and is free to marry.

One final very important point. It is true that the Christian who is divorced before receiving Christ has liberty to remarry. It is also true that the new Christian is prohibited to marry his former spouse if he/she is an unbeliever (1 Corinthians 7:39 and 2 Corinthians 6:14). This points out that the main issue is the lordship of Jesus Christ and following Him, not restoring a “before Christ” godless marriage relationship. If a believer was mainly in the wrong in divorcing his wife before she was saved and she has not remarried, it certainly would be a glory to God if he confessed his wrongs to her and his wife came to Christ and they remarried. And if they had children, it would also be a glory to God if he provided for them financially. But if he and his former wife are already divorced, I would argue that he should not remarry her if she is not a believer. Some might argue that if a man is the primary one at fault in divorcing his wife and then later he becomes a Christian, that he should remarry his unbelieving wife because of what Paul instructs in verses 12-16 (concerning a believing spouse remaining married to an unbelieving spouse). Although I see the logic of this position, I would still be inclined to urge the believer to not remarry the unbelieving spouse because of the prohibition in verse 39.

What about the following situations?

“In cultures where divorce becomes commonplace or large numbers of men and women choose to live together or copulate without bothering to marry, untold millions of kids are caught in the chaos.”

- James Dobson

“Divorce causes a decrease in wealth that is larger than just splitting a couple’s assets in half. By the same token, married people see an increase in wealth that is more than just adding the assets of two single people. On the other hand, divorce can devastate your wealth. Divorce drops a person’s wealth by an average of 77%. ... If you really want to increase your wealth, get married and stay married.”

- Jay Zagorsky, Ohio State, Journal of Sociology, Jan. 2006

A man is divorced against his will before he is saved.

A man commits adultery while unsaved, and then after being divorced by his wife, he becomes a Christian.

A man abandons his wife before he is saved, and after she divorces him, he becomes a Christian.

In each of these situations, 1 Corinthians 7:8, 9 indicates that the man has freedom to re-marry.

5. Won’t this view of 1 Corinthians 7 bring down the sanctity of the marriage relationship?

Not at all. The marriage relationship is held in high honor in the Christian marriages that are founded upon the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel is what is most important. In this regard, what is unfortunate about more restrictive views is that man-made guilt is placed upon individuals. I recall counseling one Christian who had been divorced before receiving Christ and then re-married after being a Christian. Later on, this individual believed a more restrictive teaching of divorce, and came to the conclusion that it was sin to have re-married. This was an unfortunate and unnecessary burden for this individual (and his spouse) to carry. The words of Paul are strong: Let them marry (v. 9). That is a command, just like the command “Do not commit adultery.” We are not to commit adultery—in obedience to God—and we are to “let divorced people re-marry” in obedience to God as well, as long as the divorce did not involve two Christians.

6. Why does Paul tell believers to stay married, but then he seems to allow for ones to leave in v.10, 11?

Paul is not conceding that believers get divorced. Rather he is being pragmatic. He realizes that some will not heed his instructions to stay together. For those who do get divorced, Paul is simply saying, “You have taken a step in the wrong direction by getting divorced. Don’t take another step in the wrong direction by getting re-married. You must remain unmarried or else be reconciled.”

7. What if there is an abusive Christian husband? Doesn’t the wife have the liberty to divorce him?

Not if the man is truly a believer. In situations like this, a temporary separation may be called for, while help from family and from the pastors can be obtained.

If the husband continues to be abusive and unrepentant, it is possible that his Christian faith would be in question. My opinion is that if that is the case and the church subjects him to a church judgment that the verses dealing with marriage to an unbeliever (vv.12-16) would apply. In my opinion, an unbeliever consenting to live with a believer means living in a peaceful manner where there is a respect for the believer to live in a way that honors God. Note that vs. 13 says that “a woman who has an unbelieving husband who consents to live with her...” is not to send him away. The point is, she is the one deciding

whether he is being sent away or not. As a believer who is seated with Christ in authority over all the universe, she is to decide whether he is to stay. If he consents to live in a way that allows her to live out her Christian faith, then she is not to send him away. An abusive husband clearly would not fall into this category, and although he may “consent to live with her” in one sense, he really is just taking advantage of her and is not truly consenting to live with her. He is to live with her, not against her.

“Research has shown a child who sees his mother mistreated is more damaged than if the child himself is abused.”

- Steven Stosny

8. If a Christian is married to another Christian and then gets divorced, would there ever be a situation where remarriage to another person would be permissible?

There would be three possibilities:

- a. If the Christian spouse dies.
- b. If the Christian spouse re-marries. In the case of remarriage, in essence the Christian spouse would have violated the command in 1 Corinthians 7:11 to remain unmarried or to be reconciled, and would be committing adultery according to Matthew 5:32. Thus, the partner who was waiting for reconciliation would have the liberty to remarry, since his or her partner has committed adultery.
- c. If the “Christian” spouse is deemed by the elders of the church as only a “so-called” Christian. In such a case, the church, including the former spouse, would treat that person as an unbeliever (Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Corinthians 5:9-11). Then the passage dealing with marriage to unbelievers would apply (1 Corinthians 7:12-15), and the Christian spouse would be free to remarry.

9. Can a person become an elder if he has been divorced?

In 1st Timothy 3:2, Paul lays down the requirement that an overseer/elder be “the husband of one wife.” This literally means a “one-woman kind of man.” In other words, the key issue is that the man is one who is faithful to his marriage partner. If he is faithful to his wife, then he meets this qualification. If a man has been divorced and has remarried in a way consistent with the freedoms given in the Scriptures, this would not disqualify him for holding the office of elder in the church.

Conclusion

After completing this paper, I was reminded by my son of the story of John the Baptist who was executed because he rebuked Herod for an unlawful marriage. This is a sobering story. To think that a man of God would lose his life because he took a bold stand on the issue of divorce and remarriage! Although it is unlikely that you or I will die for our convictions on divorce and remarriage, it is nonetheless probable that our courage will be tested as we counsel people as to the biblical standards on divorce and remarriage. May God grant you wisdom, grace, and boldness in days to come as you speak the truth in love, helping to make the marriages in your church a glory to God!



DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

Exercise

1. Did you agree with everything in this paper? If not, with what points would you disagree?

2. How would you counsel a wife whose husband is beating her?

3. Are there any situations in your church, involving divorce and remarriage, that you would want to discuss with this mentor group? If so (without mentioning names), what are they?

DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE**Exercise**

4. What steps would you take if two non-believers asked you to perform a marriage ceremony for them?

5. How would you counsel someone who is married to an unbeliever? Be specific.
