

DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

I consider it of paramount importance when addressing the grievous topic of divorce to first affirm the sanctity of marriage and the binding covenant it represents in the sight of God. The Bible teaches that marriage between a man and woman is intended to be a permanent union. Speaking of man and woman joined in marriage Jesus said, “*So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate*” (Mt 19:6). The OT prophet, Malachi, records that the Lord says He hates divorce (Mal 2:16). Despite Scriptural injunctions, divorce still occurred in Jesus’ day and does even more so in our own day. There are numerous cultural and sociological factors in our current day that influence the prevalence of divorce, even amongst evangelical Christians. We will not rehearse them here because aside from any contemporary influences, the root cause of all divorce is the same as it was in Jesus’ day: our sinful hearts. This was the answer Jesus gave in response to a “test question” from some Pharisees about the provision in the Mosaic Law that allowed for divorce. Jesus stated, “*Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way*” (Mt 19:8).

So, when is divorce a legitimate Biblical option and when is remarriage permissible?

Before proceeding to answer those questions I want to state an assumption: *When a divorce is deemed allowable, it is assumed that remarriage is allowed as well.* There is strong evidence that this was the case in most ancient cultures, including that of the Israelites. This was due to the fact that by and large most divorced people were remarried (particularly women, by necessity).

A divorce is permissible when one of the partners is guilty of infidelity.

The famous “except clause” of Jesus (Mt 5:32; 19:9) states that an offended partner who seeks divorce is not guilty of adulterous sin if the offended partner’s spouse has committed “immorality” (Greek: *porneia*, i.e. every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse). The sin of adultery would be committed if there was a remarriage without a legitimate dissolution of the previous marriage bond. Infidelity breaks the marriage bond because it ruptures the “one flesh” principle that is fundamental to the Biblical definition of marriage.

Even though divorce is permitted in such instances, it is not mandatory. If the guilty party is repentant, then the offended party should seek to extend forgiveness and pursue healing and restoration of the marriage (Eph 4:32). I have had the privilege in my pastoral ministry of seeing marriages that had been torn apart by sexual sin restored as the spouses relied upon the power of God’s Spirit and grace.

A divorce is permissible when there is desertion by an unbelieving partner

I Cor 7:12-16 records instruction from the Apostle Paul concerning marital obligations in the face of unbelievers who refuse to live with their believing spouses. The believer is to remain with the unbeliever if the unbeliever consents to stay in the marriage. If the unbeliever leaves and abandons the marriage, the believer is not “under bondage” (“bound”) and thus is free to remarry. Earlier Paul directed Christian couples not to divorce their spouses, and if they do they must remain unmarried (while not my view, it is possible that vs. 10-11 refer to something short of divorce, a separation perhaps...if so, each is to either reconcile or remain alone). Separation has become an increasingly unrealistic option because many states no longer have separation as a legal status for married couples. Thus, during a separation each partner remains legally and financially culpable for the actions of their spouse, creating a serious vulnerability for both.

I believe that the act of “desertion” is defined more broadly than the simple act of physical departure from the home/marriage. A person can desert a marriage and still be under the same roof with a spouse. Desertion can take the form of persistent substance abuse, physical or psychological abuse and deprivation due to a deliberate refusal to provide adequate financial support (I Tim 5:8). But, a warning is in order...as people who battle a sin nature we can rationalize our reasons for pursuing a divorce. We can too quickly dismiss the vows we made to remain together “for better or for worse”. A decision to divorce should be made with the prayerful guidance and counsel of the spiritual leaders of one’s local church. Too often a “believing” partner deserts a marriage and by doing so show themselves de facto, to be an “unbelieving” partner.

Dealing with divorced people in the Church

Divorce is not an unforgivable sin. We read in I Jn 1:9, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness”. If God forgives and views the sinner as cleansed, then so should we. I agree with a fellow pastor who once observed that divorced people should not be seen as “2nd class Christians” in the church.

However, we must not overlook or ‘wink’ at divorces that have been improperly obtained. In the case of those who have divorced on unbiblical grounds, they have committed adultery or set up their former spouse to commit adultery (Mt 5:31-32; 19:9). There is debate among Bible scholars whether this sin of adultery is an *act* or *continuous state*. In other words, does the individual who divorced and remarried unbiblically live with a perpetual status of adultery? Some scholars have noted that the grammatical form of Mt 19:9 does not necessarily mean a *continuity of action*, but rather an *act* of adultery. I am persuaded that such persons are not living in a continuous state of adultery. When someone with an unscriptural divorce comes into the church fellowship, they should be accepted if they acknowledge their past marital sin and demonstrate genuine repentance. True repentance brings forgiveness and a freedom to remarry.

If a person has been divorced without biblical grounds and they and their former spouse remain unmarried, they should be urged to seek forgiveness and make attempts at reconciliation with their former spouse. By God’s grace there could be a remarriage of the divorced couple. I have had the privilege of “remarrying” such folks.

I do not believe that a divorced person is necessarily permanently ineligible to serve as a pastor, elder or deacon. One of the requirements for elders and male deacons is being the “husband of one wife” (I Tim 3:2, 12). Literally, he is to be a “one-woman man”. This means that he is to be faithful only to his one wife, i.e. he can not be a practicing polygamist (which was practiced among the Romans and even in Judaism). If Paul had intended to exclude divorced men he could have stated that clearly. There are a host of sins that spiritual leaders may have been guilty of in the past (such as monetary greed, drug or alcohol abuse, violence, sexual promiscuity, explosive anger) but as new creatures in Christ, we are forgiven and cleansed by the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit and made fit for the Master’s use. The Apostle Paul was a former blasphemer and persecutor and approved of the killing of Stephen (I Tim 1:13; Acts 8:1), yet he was obviously greatly used by God. Divorce should not be singled out as the one past sin that disqualifies for ministries of leadership.

I have found divorce/remarriage one of the (if not the) most difficult issue in my pastoral ministry. There is much heartache and pain for all involved, family, friends, and congregation alike. It exposes the terrible consequences of sin and demands painstaking discernment in applying Biblical principles to people’s lives. Well known pastor, Chuck Swindoll, offers a welcome admonition: “Where God permits divorce and remarriage, humbly let us accept it without fear or guilt. Let us not call ‘unclean’ what He now calls clean. But neither let us put words in His mouth and make Him say what He, in fact, has not said. No matter how miserable we may be. There is something much worse than living with a mate in disharmony. It is living with God in disobedience”.