

# Divorce and Remarriage<sup>i</sup>

## **1. Situational—*the world as it exists...***

1. (Re)marriage and divorce in the wider society.<sup>ii</sup>
  - a. What are our culture's general attitudes toward marriage, divorce, and remarriage?
2. (Re)marriage and divorce in the Christian context.<sup>iii</sup>
  - a. How has the church addressed divorce and remarriage?<sup>iv</sup> Why might it be biblically allowed? And when?
  - b. Today, how do we as Christians sometimes follow the wider culture in our view of marriage and divorce?

## **2. Normative—*What does the biblical text say? What does the Lord reveal to us regarding marriage and divorce?***

1. To understand the biblical view of divorce we need to understand the biblical view of marriage, both as it ought to be and as it is:

### **a. The pre-fall universe and relationships—Genesis 1-2**

- i. What type of *relationships* existed in the pre-fall world?
- ii. What is marriage in this context (Gen. 2:15-24)?

### **b. The post-fall universe and relationships**

- i. The reality of sin and broken relationships.
- ii. The covenant and function of marriage:
  1. Westminster Confession Chapter 24: II. “Marriage was ordained for the mutual help of husband and wife, for the increase of mankind with a legitimate issue, and of the Church with an holy seed; and for preventing of uncleanness” [*This is based on several biblical passages, esp. 1 Cor. 7*].<sup>v</sup>
- iii. The sinfulness of the covenant people and the faithful presence of God/Christ.
- iv. The law makes divorce permissible: Deuteronomy 24:1-4; also see: Mark 10:5 and Matthew 19:8 below.
- v. The biblical text also speaks to God's disdain for our relational unfaithfulness and our inability to maintain marriage covenants (Malachi 2:10-16).

*There are significant disagreements over the permissibility of divorce in the church. Disagreements center on different readings of New Testament passages, passages that seem to promote opposite views.*<sup>vi</sup>

## **Discussion:**

1. Read **Matthew 5:31-32/Matthew 19:3-9** and **Mark 10:1-12/Luke 16:18** (attached).
  - a. What reasons are given for the existence of divorce under the law? (esp. Matthew 19:8/Mark 10:5)
  - b. What reasons are given for the possibility of divorce and remarriage?

- c. From Matthew 19:3-9 and Mark 10:1-12: to what attitude about divorce is Jesus responding in these particular passages? In Matthew and Mark, what is Jesus protecting against? How might this impact our understanding of his response in each case?
  - d. *How does one reconcile the differences between Matthew 5:31-32/Matthew 19:3-9 and Mark 10:11-12/Luke 16:18?*
2. Now read **1 Corinthians 7: 10-16, 39-40** (attached)
- a. In what situations does Paul say that divorce (and remarriage) is permissible?
  - b. Does this make the argument for keeping marriage covenants stronger or weaker? Why?
  - c. What is the social context in which Paul is writing? Who is receiving this letter and how does that affect our reading of it?

***The Westminster Confession’s opinion on “Marriage and Divorce” borrows considerably from Matthew 19 and 1 Corinthians 7. Yet, the Confession states:***

- “Although the corruption of man be such as is apt to study arguments unduly to put asunder those whom God has 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 of dissolving the bond of marriage” (VI).
- Does the Confession’s opinion on “willful desertion” have biblical support?

**Further questions for applying biblical ethics:**

1. *How do these passages (altogether) relate to other situations associated with divorce and/or separation today, such as abuse?*<sup>vii</sup>
2. Despite being one single church, St. Paul’s does not exist in a vacuum. We are part of the universal church, one piece of God’s Kingdom here on earth.
  - a. How should we approach believers or non-believers who begin attending St. Paul’s, but have not been reconciled to their spouses?
  - b. What responsibility do we have to other churches that have exercised discipline on unfaithful spouses or (potentially) sinful divorcing?
3. How are we to counsel those whose spouses have recently committed adultery?

**3. Existential—How should it affect our hearts?**

1. How should the fact of relational brokenness impact us and impact our interactions with others?
2. How can you, with the Lord’s help, work toward repairing relational brokenness?
3. Knowing that we are prone to breaking covenants, what assurances do we have in the Lord’s faithfulness? Have you experienced the Lord’s faithfulness in your life?
4. How should our knowledge of the Lord’s faithfulness influence our relationships with others who have been affected by relational brokenness?

### **Passages for Consideration:**

#### Matthew 5: 31-32:

31 “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’  
32 But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

#### Matthew 19: 1-9:

1 Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. 2 And large crowds followed him, and he healed them there.  
3 And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?” 4 He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 5 and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? 6 So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” 7 They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” 8 He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. 9 And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”

#### Mark 10:11-12:

11 And he said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, 12 and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

#### Luke 16:18:

18 “Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.”

#### 1 Corinthians 7:10-16:

10 To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband 11 (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.

12 To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. 13 If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. 14 For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. 15 But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. 16 For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?”

## Endnotes:

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<sup>i</sup> This was a handout resource created for a course on biblical ethics. This particular session included considerable group discussion and elaboration from the facilitator. The notes have been adapted to act as a print/web resource; *they are not comprehensive for what was addressed verbally*. Any questions about the biblical ethics course and how it was facilitated can be directed to the author: [m.h.brittingham@emory.edu](mailto:m.h.brittingham@emory.edu)

<sup>ii</sup> Our culture has a complicated relationship with divorce. Generally, divorce has been declining. Partly, this decline has corresponded to a rise in alternative forms of partnership and cohabitation, most or many of which conservative Christians would not or should not advocate. On divorce statistics, and a good interpretation of them, see: Claire Cain Miller, “The Divorce Surge Is Over, but the Myth Lives On,” *New York Times*, Blog: Upshot, December 2, 2014: [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/02/upshot/the-divorce-surge-is-over-but-the-myth-lives-on.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur&bicmp=AD&biclukp=WT.mc\\_id&bicmst=1409232722000&bicmet=1419773522000&r=3&abt=0002&abg=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/02/upshot/the-divorce-surge-is-over-but-the-myth-lives-on.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur&bicmp=AD&biclukp=WT.mc_id&bicmst=1409232722000&bicmet=1419773522000&r=3&abt=0002&abg=0) Also, see: Dan Hurley, “Divorce Rate: It's Not as High as You Think” *New York Times*, April 19, 2005: <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/19/health/divorce-rate-its-not-as-high-as-you-think.html>

<sup>iii</sup> Another resource on the topic: “Directions: You're Divorced—Can You Remarry?,” *Christianity Today*, Vol. 43, No. 11, October 4<sup>th</sup> 1999: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1999/october4/9tb082.html>

<sup>iv</sup> To help facilitate discussion on the church and historical positions on divorce and remarriage, see John Jefferson Davis’ chapter on the topic in *Evangelical Ethics: Issues Facing the Church Today*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015).

<sup>v</sup> For the full view of the Westminster Confession, see: [http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf\\_with\\_proofs/](http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_with_proofs/)

<sup>vi</sup> Further resource: PCA position paper “Divorce and Remarriage,” 20th General Assembly, 1992, Appendix 0, p. 513: <http://www.pcahistory.org/pca/divorce-remarriage.pdf>

<sup>vii</sup> Also, see: Ad Hoc Committee of Philadelphia Presbytery, “THE WESTMINSTER DIVINES ON DIVORCE FOR PHYSICAL ABUSE”: <http://pcahistory.org/pca/2-267.pdf>