

# DIVORCE & REMARRIAGE

A CORAM DEO POSITION PAPER



## INTRODUCTION

From the beginning marriage has occupied center stage in our world: established by God, attacked by the serpent, and fractured by sin... and that only gets us three chapters into the story. Marriage is still the central human relationship and organizing principle of cultures, and still undeniably attacked by Satan and marred by sin.

In our culture, the current reality regarding marriage is tragic. Though widely practiced, marriage is not widely honored. Ignorance and neglect of covenant vows is not only common, but widely accepted. For evidence, one must look no further than the staggering divorce and remarriage rates both outside and inside the church.

To make matters more complicated, there is much debate and confusion among Christians on the topic of divorce and remarriage. The historic position of the church upholds the sanctity of marriage by generally opposing divorce and treating remarriage with great caution. Still, healthy debate is ongoing within the realm of orthodox Christianity.

Divorce is by no means a reality that merely exists “out there”. Our young church community has encountered a variety of issues related to divorce and remarriage: adultery, abuse, a history of multiple divorces, remarriage, neglect, reconciliation, not to mention those who now struggle to understand their current marriage as they realize past sin in this area.

Therefore, it is of utmost importance for our elders to articulate a biblical understanding of these issues. First of all, the sanctity of marriage is at stake, and must be defended against the attacks of the enemy and the corrosion of sin. Secondly, the mission of God is at stake, and must be advanced by the restoration of all things, not least of which is the central human relationship in creation. Finally, we seek understanding in this area for the good of those who have been entrusted to our pastoral care.

The topics of divorce and remarriage require extensive study and thoughtful prayer. We have devoted ourselves to both over the course of many months as we have sought to establish biblical convictions for our church in these areas. Our aim here is to articulate a clear position for our church that will prove 1) faithful to God’s word and 2) helpful to those who seek God’s will in marriage.

## CAVEATS & CAUTIONS

Before getting into the nitty-gritty of biblical exegesis and theological argumentation, it is important that we state a few caveats.

1. This paper is not intended to be applied in isolation. God intended for his church to be led by godly, qualified elders (1 Timothy 3, Titus 1) who lead under the authority of Scripture (Titus 1:9; 2 Timothy 4:1-5) and serve as faithful examples to the flock (1 Peter 5:3; Hebrews 13:7). Every position stated in this paper assumes the involvement of elders in its application. The risk we take by putting a position in writing is that immature people will presume freedom to apply it in ways that suit their own purposes. Doing so would be contrary to the paper's intent. Especially in matters related to marriage, the insight and counsel of a biblically faithful church community is crucial.
2. This paper is a compass, not a roadmap. A compass points in a direction; a roadmap shows the exact route from point A to point B. Most people would rather have a roadmap – especially in matters of divorce – so that they can apply it to their own situation without accountability or community or prayerful discernment. That is not the intent of this paper (see #1). The positions outlined here should serve to orient the reader in a biblical direction; but the particular path forward depends upon the variables in each situation.
3. The reader must take account of his or her own biases. Position papers like this one are often read by people who are looking to get divorced or who have already been divorced and are looking to get remarried. If this describes you, please proceed with caution. Your perspective may already be skewed in a particular direction. The emotional pain caused by divorce may cloud your biblical judgment. We urge you to prayerfully acknowledge your own biases on this matter as you move forward.
4. Just because someone says it doesn't mean it's correct. On this issue in particular, there are books and articles justifying every conceivable position. Part of our purpose in writing this paper is to assess the exegetical and theological cogency of all the arguments put forward, testing them by the light of Scripture and upholding sound doctrine as the Bible commands elders to do (Titus 1:9; 2 Timothy 4:1-5). Those interested in further study on this topic would do well to consult some of the resources listed at the end of this paper, keeping in mind that some arguments are good and others are bad. We find the positions outlined in this paper to be the most exegetically defensible, theologically sustainable, and pastorally sensible.

## A BRIEF OUTLINE

Two challenges confront us in outlining our position on divorce: 1) the diversity of the reading audience and 2) the voluminous literature related to divorce and remarriage. To ensure that our treatment is both pastorally helpful and theologically precise, we have organized it according to the following outline:

- A Gospel-Centered View of Marriage (establishing a biblical grid for marriage)
- Position Summary (a concise statement of Coram Deo's position on divorce and remarriage)
- Exegetical and Theological Summary: Divorce (a treatment of passages concerning divorce)
- Application to Specific Situations: Divorce
- Exegetical and Theological Summary: Remarriage (a treatment of passages concerning remarriage)
- Application to Specific Situations: Remarriage
- Conclusion
- Resources for Further Study
- Divorce and Remarriage Flow Chart

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## A GOSPEL-CENTERED VIEW OF MARRIAGE

Before we can deal adequately with divorce, we must establish a biblical understanding of marriage as a starting point. The gospel storyline of Creation-Fall-Redemption is reflected in the institution of marriage just as it is in every other element of life and society.

### **Creation: God is the Author of Marriage**

Marriage was God's idea. It was God who said to Adam: "It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for you." And it was God who created Eve as a perfect counterpart to Adam and brought her to him. As the author of marriage, God defines the nature and purpose of it. In Genesis 2:24, God sanctions marriage in this way: "For this reason a man is to leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two shall become one flesh." The implication for us is that marriage involves a change in ultimate allegiance from one's parents to his or her spouse and the union of two people into a shared identity.

Crucial to the biblical view of marriage is the understanding that marriage is a covenant, not a contract. It is a solemn, binding, legal "swearing to God," not a casual relationship to be entered (and exited) out of convenience. Covenants involve an oath or vow of allegiance, and God takes those vows seriously: "If a man makes a vow to the LORD, or takes an oath to bind himself with a binding obligation, he shall not violate his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth" (Numbers 30:2).

In contrast, our culture commonly regards marriage as a contract. As Darrin Patrick describes:

*The decision to marry for most people ... is founded on the premises of consumerism. What is consumerism? It is simply the idea that you deserve happiness, you are entitled to it, and you should have it at any cost. With a consumerist mentality, the majority of people get married for the sake of happiness ... So most people enter and exit marriage on the basis of a contract, which is an agreement that connects two parties only for the purpose of mutual benefit, but allows them to continue as individuals if the contract needs to be broken. The commitment and values of covenant are far too often betrayed by the pursuit of personal happiness and replaced with easily broken contracts.<sup>1</sup>*

The covenantal nature of marriage is theologically crucial because it mirrors God's relationship with his people. God's grace toward us is not contractual. He does not welcome us into his family as long as it's convenient for him. Rather, he binds himself to his people by covenant oath, promising to be faithful even when we are not (Genesis 15; Deuteronomy 7:7-8; 2 Timothy 2:13). Christian marriage is intended to be a picture of Christ's relationship with his bride, the Church (Ephesians 5:22-33).

In Creation, then, we learn that marriage is a solemn relationship, instituted by God, in which a man and a woman leave their families of origin and come together as "one flesh." It is a permanent, lifelong covenant: "What God has joined together, let no man separate" (Mark 10:9).

### **Fall: The Marriage Covenant Was Fractured By Sin**

After God established marriage, however, the man and woman broke covenant with their Creator. Fruit from a forbidden tree became more desirable than intimacy with God and each other. Their sin resulted in removal from God's presence and a fracturing of the marriage relationship. From that day on, all the sons of Adam and daughters of Eve, in and of themselves, cannot experience the Creator's presence or enjoy the marriage covenant as God intends.

The genius of Scripture is that it points us back to Creation, but also helps us live in a world marked by the Fall. On the one hand, Scripture shows us God's intent in creation: marriage is to be a solemn covenant between one man and one woman, for life (Genesis 2:18-25). On the other hand, Scripture gives laws and regulations about divorce to help God's people navigate a broken world (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). God does not approve of divorce. But He "understands" its existence because of sin and hard-heartedness. "There is no evidence to show that divorce was approved or morally legitimated. Permission, sufferance, toleration was granted. But underlying this very notion is the idea of wrong."<sup>2</sup> God regulated divorce for the purpose of preserving human dignity in a sinful culture, especially on behalf of women who were often helpless in such situations.

The prevalence of marital unfaithfulness among God's people illustrates a broader type of infidelity: the Old Testament portrays God's people as those who repeatedly break covenant with their God. The imagery employed is that of an adulterous wife (e.g. Hosea 3:1). But God remains faithful to His covenant.

In the Fall, then, we learn that marriage will be difficult. It will be attacked by the enemy, marred by human sin and hard-heartedness, and complicated by the effects of a broken world. Divorce will happen, even though God never intended it to be so.

### **Redemption: The Marriage Covenant is Redeemed In Christ**

To reverse the effects of the Fall, the Creator did the unthinkable. He became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus emptied Himself of His divine prerogatives, took on the form of a servant, and humbled Himself to the point of death on a cross. He became a sacrifice for sin in His death, and He rose from the dead so that He could be the Covenant Keeper for those of us who are covenant breakers.

The metaphor of marriage is thus carried over to the New Testament as a way of describing God's covenant relationship with His people. A vivid example is in Ephesians 5:23-32:

*Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church— for we are members of his body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.*

Jesus reconciles man to God, people with one another, and thus makes possible our obedience and faithfulness to God and each other. As a picture of God's covenant with His people, and our relationship with Jesus, the Bible's vision for marriage is one of faithfulness, love, worship, and witness. Commenting on Jesus' words in Matthew 19:1-4, one theologian states:

*It was of course precisely the order of creation that Christ came to restore; therefore, the restoration of the order of creation should manifestly be taking place in His body the*

*church, which is composed of new creatures, or renewed creations in Christ. The Christian church, accordingly, has a special responsibility to bear witness in its practice as well as its doctrine to the sanctity of the marriage bond. Of all spheres of human society it least of all should show that ungodly hard-heartedness which requires the divine standard to be accommodated to the debased levels of man's fallen state.<sup>3</sup>*

Through Redemption, we learn that Jesus is in the business of restoration. Those facing divorce often feel that things are beyond repair – that divorce is “inevitable.” But this pessimistic outlook is not in line with the hope of the gospel. Jesus fixes broken things. His grace can restore and renew even the most pain-filled marriages.

### **Applying A Gospel-Centered View Of Marriage**

How should this understanding of marriage as created by God, fractured by sin, and redeemed in Jesus affect the church's approach to divorce and remarriage? First, we must acknowledge and submit to God's wisdom and holiness regarding marriage. Second, we must repent of our sinful perspectives, desires, and actions regarding the marriage covenant and regarding our specific marriage relationships. Third, we must trust in God's forgiveness through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. And finally, we must trust in the power of God's Spirit to enable covenant faithfulness and fruitfulness as we seek to make Jesus' submissive sacrifice of His body on the cross the center and pattern of our marriages.

The gospel must transform our understanding of what is possible in marriage. The gospel enables forgiveness, even in situations of grievous sin. The gospel allows even the most hard-hearted people to repent and change. The gospel makes it possible for two sinners to love and serve one another despite their own brokenness. Too many Christians are quick to adopt the mindset of the culture, demanding their rights in a difficult or broken marriage. But the gospel reminds us that Jesus laid down his rights and took on the form of a servant, displacing himself for our good (Philippians 2:5-11). By his power, we can do the same toward even the most difficult spouse. The gospel assumes that rather than filing for divorce, Christian husbands and wives will pray and work and forgive in order to redeem a broken marriage.

Practically speaking, the Creation-Fall-Redemption motif of Scripture allows for a degree of tension in the church's understanding of divorce. We must uphold God's design for marriage. It would be impossible to overstate the biblical emphasis on covenant oneness in marriage. Divorce is not to be an option for Christians. Our responsibility as Christians, both individually and communally, is to fight against divorce and to uphold the sanctity of the marriage bond. Yet at the same time, we are called to help people righteously navigate the effects of a fallen world and of human hard-heartedness. Since human beings can be grievously sinful, hard-hearted, and rebellious, the Bible does make allowances for divorce in certain cases. Our task is to discern how we ought to apply a gospel-centered view of marriage to the sins that lead to divorce and to the subsequent complexities of remarriage. Toward that end,

we now summarize briefly Coram Deo's position and then turn our attention to the specific passages of Scripture that apply to these matters.

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## POSITION SUMMARY

Coram Deo's concise position regarding divorce and remarriage can be summarized as follows:

1. The **marriage** covenant was instituted by God, by which one man and one woman are joined together by God as one flesh. This covenant is binding as long as both people live.
2. **Divorce** is never commanded or condoned in Scripture. It is one of the effects of sin and is therefore outside of the perfect will of God. However, Scripture does acknowledge the existence of divorce as part of the fallen landscape of humanity and makes limited concessions regarding divorce when the marriage covenant is broken by sexual immorality or abandonment. Faithfulness to the marriage covenant is always the highest aim, and therefore reconciliation of a broken covenant should be exhaustively pursued before any action toward divorce is counseled or contemplated.
3. **Remarriage** after a divorce may be permissible in certain situations, but each case is complex and subject to inquiry and examination by local church eldership. Even after divorce is final, reconciliation and restoration remain the biblical mandate. Those who seek divorce should do so knowing that they may never have the "right" to remarry.

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## EXEGETICAL & THEOLOGICAL SUMMARY - DIVORCE

An exhaustive summary of the various positions on divorce among Christian scholars would take much more space than our current purpose allows. Because the differences revolve around the interpretation of pertinent biblical texts, due process requires both a study of the texts themselves and an understanding of the differences in interpretation. After immersing ourselves in the literature, we have chosen to summarize the key interpretive points and to explain our reasons for landing where we do. We will begin by considering what Scripture teaches about divorce; the question of remarriage will be addressed in the following section.

### **Overview: What Does Scripture Teach About Divorce?**

Against the backdrop of a gospel-centered view of marriage, *divorce is always a breaking of covenant*. Therefore, divorce grieves God and broadens the effect of sin in our world. Churches and individual Christians are bound by the commands of Scripture and the implications of the gospel to work against divorce and to uphold and defend the sanctity of marriage.

However, as mentioned previously, God in His mercy “understands” that human sin may lead to divorce, and thus makes concessions for divorce in certain situations. These concessions are always a last resort. The first goal is always repentance, forgiveness, and restoration of the marriage covenant. “It is impossible to envisage any dissolution of the [marriage] bond as anything other than abnormal and evil... [yet] it is quite conceivable that while the reason for divorce is sinful, the right of divorce for that reason may be divine.”<sup>4</sup>

In what situations, then, does the Bible make allowance for divorce? Theologians have suggested three biblical criteria or “grounds” for legitimate divorce: **sexual immorality, abandonment, and neglect.**<sup>5</sup> We will now consider the biblical support for each of these grounds.

### **Divorce on the Basis of Sexual Immorality**

The Bible considers sexual unfaithfulness in marriage to be a legitimate ground for divorce. This view finds biblical support in Matthew 5:31-32 along with its parallel texts in the other gospels.

*It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ 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 5:31-32, ESV).*

In context, Jesus is confronting the contemporary views of righteousness – “doing the right thing” by the law. In contrast, he is holding up a truly biblical view of righteousness -- inner transformation of character that produces genuinely righteous behavior. The phrase “It was also said” introduces the common cultural understanding of divorce based on Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Many Jewish scholars interpreted this passage to teach that a man could divorce his wife for any reason as long as he wrote her a legal “certificate of divorce.” Jesus’ aim here, and elsewhere, is to confront their misunderstanding of the Mosaic Law and affirm the sanctity of marriage.

The first thing we might ask is: Why did the Old Testament make concessions for divorce at all? Scholars answer by noting that the existence of a divorce law does not imply that divorce was permissible, but merely that it was reality. Much of the Old Testament Mosaic Law is “case law;” it is not intended to specify God’s ideal, but to regulate life “as it really is” in a fallen world.

*Moses’ aim was to regulate and thus to mitigate an evil which he could not extirpate. The evident purpose was, as far as possible, to favor the wife, and to protect her against an unceremonious expulsion from her home and children.<sup>6</sup>*

*While divorce goes against the plan and institution of God, it was permitted because of sin and the hardening of hearts. This act was to keep women from being abused and abandoned. Without divorce, an ungodly husband might abandon his wife, leaving her with no provision and unable to remarry.<sup>7</sup>*

Jesus condemns the common understanding of divorce and lays out sexual immorality as the only just cause for divorce. This does not mean that divorce must occur where there has been sexual immorality, or even that it should occur. Reconciliation is always the highest aim. The concession here is that adultery deeply defiles the marriage covenant, and can be so devastating to the innocent party that he or she may not be able to reconcile.

In a culture where sexual immorality is rampant, we sometimes do not give adequate weight to the connection between marriage and sexuality, and therefore we may not understand why the Bible sees adultery as so deeply destructive to the marriage covenant that it establishes grounds for legitimate divorce. After all, many people are guilty of sexual immorality before marriage. Why is sexual immorality after marriage such a weighty issue? The answer is that sexual immorality after marriage is not just sex; it is the violation of a covenant vow. The Bible's ideal is that two virgins would marry, consummate that marriage by becoming "one flesh" sexually, and then renew their covenant frequently by enjoying a lifetime of monogamous sex. In the biblical worldview, sex is always connected to the covenant vow.

Another question arises in light of this text: What qualifies as "sexual immorality"? The Greek word translated "sexual immorality" here is *porneia*. In contrast to the word *moicheia*, which is always translated "adultery", *porneia* is a broader term which refers to all kinds of sexual immorality. This semantic difference is important, and it raises the question: exactly what sort of sexual immorality constitutes grounds for divorce?

The simple answer is: this is a judgment call that should be entrusted to mature and godly elders. The historic Reformed position, enshrined in the Westminster Confession of Faith, is that a single act of adultery in a marriage constitutes legitimate grounds for divorce.<sup>8</sup> Most current evangelical denominations agree with this judgment, as do we. But a wise and Christ-honoring application of the biblical criteria of "sexual immorality" requires a prayerful and honest assessment of each particular situation. As an example of the possible complexities: should a wife whose husband commits one act of adultery, repents of it, submits to church discipline, and seeks restoration be counseled in the same way as a wife whose husband has a habitual and unrepentant addiction to pornography but has never "actually" committed the physical sin of adultery? These are the kinds of variables that elders must consider.

After prayerful study of the relevant biblical texts, we concur with the historic Reformed position that sexual immorality constitutes biblical grounds for divorce. Divorce is permissible in cases of sexual immorality because the sin of adultery deeply violates the marriage covenant. But the fact that divorce is biblically permissible in such cases does not mean divorce should be pursued. Every attempt should be made for forgiveness and reconciliation. If the offending spouse is unrepentant, or if the offended spouse is unable to forgive and reconcile even after extensive counsel and prayer, divorce may be a viable option.

In either case, time, counsel, and eldership examination will be critical factors in making such a determination.

### **Divorce on the Basis of Abandonment**

The Bible also considers abandonment of a believer by an unbeliever to be a legitimate ground for divorce. This view finds biblical support in 1 Corinthians 7:2-16.

*... each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband ... To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife. 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. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. 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. 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. For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? (1 Corinthians 7:2-16)*

When a believer is married to an unbeliever, divorce is to be avoided if possible because the Christian partner is a channel of God's grace in the marriage. But if the unbeliever insists on divorce, he is not to be denied. Dr. Andreas Köstenberger, Professor of New Testament and Director of Ph.D. studies at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, offers further insight:

*The entire chapter deals with various instances of legitimate and illegitimate divorce... To those who are married to an unbeliever, Paul says, continue in the marriage if the unbelieving spouse is willing to do so, but if not, you are "not bound" (vv. 12–16). In this context, it seems that Paul is not merely talking about living in peace but specifically about legitimate vs. illegitimate grounds for divorce and remarriage.<sup>9</sup>*

The strictest view of abandonment is a situation where an unbelieving spouse leaves a believing spouse. In such cases, the believing spouse is not "bound" to the marriage and is allowed to pursue legal divorce. But the question arises: Are there other forms of abandonment? Does one have to physically leave to functionally abandon his or her spouse? To answer this question, we will distinguish between abandonment and neglect. Abandonment, as already defined, is a clear biblical ground for divorce. Neglect is a different issue altogether.

### **Divorce on the Basis of Neglect?**

Some theologians<sup>10</sup> posit that neglect is a third biblical reason for divorce. They extract a definition of neglect from Exodus 21 that, in their view, breaks the marriage vows and thus constitutes divorce. Let's consider the text and associated commentary.

*When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do. If she does not please her master, who has designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed. He shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people, since he has broken faith with her. If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her as with a daughter. If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, or her marital rights. And if he does not do these three things for her, she shall go out for nothing, without payment of money (Exodus 21:7-11).*

If a father gave his daughter to be a concubine in another man's house, and she then became despised by her master (husband), then she was allowed to be redeemed by a near kinsman, but never to be sold to foreigners.

The obvious "elephant in the room" in this passage is polygamy. Again, remember that Moses' laws were given in light of cultural norms that had already been formed. It is not that God approved or overlooked polygamy; He merely provided a way to regulate it through the law so as to preserve the dignity and rights of those who stood to be used and abused.

Polygamy aside, there are several important observations to be made here. First, the husband was wrong to dismiss his wife. In his commentary on Exodus, Edward Dennett points this out:

*By his deceitful dealing, the husband had forfeited rights which otherwise he would have possessed. Whether betrothed to his son, or to himself, her rights were carefully maintained; and if these were neglected, in case he took another wife, then she should be absolutely free."<sup>11</sup>*

Second, the husband's marital responsibility to his wife, even if he took another wife, was to provide food, clothing, and shelter (another interpretation of the phrase "marital rights" would be "conjugal rights"). If the husband denied her these essentials, then he had broken the marriage covenant and she was free to leave him. Denial of these needs may serve as a baseline definition of marital neglect.

Even so, the relevance of this text to the issue of divorce is ambiguous. Again, Andreas Köstenberger offers clarity on the matter:

*The underlying problem is that Exodus 21 is not addressed in the NT by either Jesus or Paul, as far as I can see. So should we just assume it still applies because it is mentioned in the*

*OT? [Some do this], largely on the strength of first-century Jewish rabbinical teachings. For most of us, this is not good enough; we need an explicit NT reference here.<sup>12</sup>*

*"I understand 'abandonment' to be referring to the case mentioned in 1 Corinthians 7, where one person comes to faith, but the spouse doesn't and leaves them because of it. 'Neglect' would be more like a person not taking good enough care of the spouse (or not honoring, etc.). So abandonment would be—they took off, am I stuck in this marriage or free to remarry? Neglect would be, we're still married but I don't get good enough [or any] love/food/sex/emotional support/whatever, can I divorce her and marry someone better?"<sup>13</sup>*

Marital neglect, therefore, is a much broader topic than abandonment by an unbelieving spouse. In the event of marital neglect, the proper course of action is for the church to exercise discipline by confronting the offending spouse with his or her sin and calling for repentance. If the offender professes to be a Christian yet does not repent, he is to be considered an unbeliever. Even so, there seem to be no biblical grounds for divorce if the offending spouse is willing to stay married.

Certain severe cases of neglect may cross the line into abandonment. In these instances, which must be appraised on a case-by-case basis by mature and godly elders, there may be cause for separation, and perhaps even consideration of divorce. Such a determination would be a last resort, and would only occur after much prayer, discernment, and pleading for repentance.

To summarize, then, we hold that neglect is not a biblical reason for divorce, but rather a cause for investigation and church discipline. Sexual immorality (Matthew 5:31-32) and abandonment of a believer by an unbeliever (1 Corinthians. 7:15) are the only biblically justified grounds for divorce.

Dr. Köstenberger effectively represents Coram Deo's position on divorce in this comment:

*...Affirming a high view of marriage as Jesus did while allowing exceptions for divorce in cases of adultery and abandonment remains the option that is exegetically most defensible and pastorally most sensible.*

As we conclude this section, we wish to state again that just because divorce is **permissible** in situations of adultery and abandonment does not mean it is **desirable**. Our practice will be to exhaust every possible avenue for repentance, forgiveness, and restoration of a troubled marriage before we counsel in favor of divorce.

## APPLICATION TO SPECIFIC SITUATIONS - DIVORCE

For further clarification, let us now apply the biblical teaching on divorce to some specific situations. These scenarios are never as simple as they look “on paper,” which is why the discernment and accountability of a biblically faithful church community is essential. At this point in our examination, we will consider only hypothetical situations dealing with the subject of divorce. Remarriage will be considered later.

### BEFORE DIVORCE HAS OCCURRED

**Q:** Can two Christians divorce?

**A:** Maybe. The only justifiable cause for divorce between two Christians is sexual immorality (Matthew 5:33). The Jewish concept of divorce for “any cause” was based on a misinterpretation of Deuteronomy 24, and is far from biblical.

**Q:** Can an unbeliever divorce a Christian?

**A:** Yes. If the unbeliever initiates the divorce and leaves, the believing spouse is no longer bound by that marriage covenant (1 Corinthians 7:15).

**Q:** Can a Christian divorce an unbeliever?

**A:** No. Assuming the unbelieving spouse is willing to stay in the marriage, the believing spouse has no grounds for divorce. Further, the believing spouse should consider himself a vessel of God’s grace to his unbelieving spouse.

**Q:** Can two unbelievers divorce?

**A:** Maybe. All marriage is covenantal. The church encourages unbelievers to remain faithful to their marriage covenant. If they divorce, except for sexual immorality and abandonment, they have sinned, though perhaps in ignorance.

### AFTER DIVORCE HAS OCCURRED

**Q:** What should two Christians do if they have divorced on unbiblical grounds?

**A:** If two Christians have divorced without biblical cause and have since been convicted by the Holy Spirit of their sin, they should repent and make every effort to reconcile.

**Q:** What should a Christian do if he or she has been divorced by an unbelieving spouse who later comes to faith?

**A:** If the unbelieving spouse later comes to faith, repents, and seeks reconciliation, the believing spouse should make every effort to reconcile.

This is not a Scriptural mandate as far as we can tell, but is at the least an application of the gospel.

**Q:** What should a Christian do if he has divorced an unbeliever on unbiblical grounds?

**A:** He should be called to repent and seek reconciliation. If the Christian is unrepentant, the church should consider him an unbeliever.

**Q:** If two unbelievers have divorced, and one later comes to faith, what should he or she do?

**A:** Seek reconciliation. Again, we do not think this is a Scriptural mandate, but rather a gospel implication.

**Q:** What should a Christian do if he's already divorced and remarried?

**A:** He should fully repent of any sin surrounding the prior divorce, and should remain committed to his current marriage.

In all of the preceding scenarios, forgiveness and reconciliation are always the goal and the counsel and leadership of godly biblical elders is always implied.

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## EXEGETICAL & THEOLOGICAL SUMMARY - REMARRIAGE

Having established a gospel-centered view of marriage, we must now consider the question of remarriage after divorce. In addressing the topic of remarriage, we assume that the reader has given adequate attention to the discussion about divorce in the first half of this paper. Without this foundation, a proper understanding of the biblical teaching on remarriage will be impossible.

From the outset, it must be stated that “the biblical teaching on remarriage” is somewhat of a misnomer. The Bible has precious little to say about remarriage, primarily because the concept of re-marriage is out of line with God’s original intent. Marriage was designed by God to be between one man and one woman for life. The question of remarriage only arises because of hard-heartedness and sin. And because the Bible’s intent is to protect marriage and discourage divorce, remarriage is only a peripheral topic. There is no passage of Scripture that lays out “principles for remarriage.” This does not mean Scripture does not speak to the matter; it simply means that Scripture doesn’t speak as clearly as we would like. The framers of the Westminster Confession of Faith said that the counsel of God “is either expressly set down in Scripture or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture;”<sup>14</sup> the topic of remarriage definitely requires us to deduce a position from Scripture rather than basing our position on explicit biblical statements.

Furthermore, because of the paucity of Scriptural teaching on the issue of remarriage, good and godly scholars whom we greatly respect disagree with each other. This causes us to hold our position with a degree of humility. We wrestle with the dilemma: is it worse to forbid remarriage if in fact God permits it, or to permit remarriage if God forbids it? In facing this complex question, we place great weight on the role of the Holy Spirit. We want to pay attention to the verdict of church history on this matter (i.e. how has the Holy Spirit led our forefathers?), and we want to give weight to the current role of elders (i.e. how is the Holy Spirit leading the church today through the men he has called to spiritual leadership?). As with divorce, the application of Scripture's teaching on remarriage to specific situations will require the insight of mature, godly elders within a biblically faithful church community.

Having sorted through the divergent viewpoints on remarriage, we find only two that are biblically sound, broadly held, and historically supported:

1. Remarriage is never permitted
2. Remarriage is permitted for the innocent spouse in cases of unrepentant adultery (and perhaps in some other cases)

Our biblical study causes us to adopt position #2 based on the exegetical and theological arguments outlined below.

### **Overview: What Does Scripture Teach About Remarriage?**

To put it simply: the only clear biblical basis for remarriage is the death of a spouse (1 Corinthians 7:39). Whether or not remarriage is allowed in other circumstances depends on the interpretation of five important biblical texts.

*It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' 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 5:31-32, ESV).*

*I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery (Matthew 19:9).*

*Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery (Luke 16:18).*

*And he said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery" (Mark 10:11-12).*

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

*husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife. 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. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. 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. 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 (1 Corinthians 7:10-15).*

Since entire books have been devoted to the exegesis of these texts, a full treatment of them would take us beyond the scope of the current paper. We must be content to state some of the pertinent exegetical questions and show how the answers to those questions affect one's view of remarriage.

**Question:** Why do Mark and Luke not include the exception clause found in Matthew ("except on the ground of sexual immorality")? Did Mark and Luke remove this clause because they assumed their readers knew it? Or did Matthew add it for his own authorial reasons?

- **View #1:** The no-remarriage view claims that either a) Matthew added this exception specifically to exonerate Joseph and Mary,<sup>15</sup> or b) Matthew includes the exception clause to clarify instances of valid divorce, but this does not imply anything about subsequent remarriage.<sup>16</sup>
- **View #2:** The traditional Reformed view claims that Mark and Luke omitted the exception clause "because the exceptions were obvious and well-known to the original audience."<sup>17</sup>

**Question:** Does the exception clause in Matthew apply to remarriage, or only to divorce?

- **View #1:** The no-remarriage view sees the clause as only applying to divorce (see above).
- **View #2:** This view sees the clause as applying to both divorce and remarriage, primarily because this is how the original audience would have understood things. Even Gordon Wenham, a leading proponent of the no-remarriage view, admits: "No one would dispute that Jews, Greeks, and Romans in the first century assumed that a divorce entitled one to remarry. It is plain, too, that the Old Testament tolerates divorce with the right to remarry, though it also quite clearly does not like it."<sup>18</sup>

**Question:** What implicit assumptions about divorce and remarriage are shared by Jesus, the gospel writers, and the original audience, but might be missed by current readers due to cultural distance?

- **View #1:** The no-remarriage view points to an important cultural instance of "divorce" that was important to the original audience but not to us: the problem of sexual unfaithfulness during the engagement/betrothal period. This was precisely Joseph's dilemma in Matt 1:19, and may be a reason why

Matthew found the exception clause important to his authorial objective.

- **View #2:** This view points to the fact that the original audience would have assumed remarriage after divorce to be permissible (see above). “Valid or legitimate divorces included the right to remarry, and no one in the first century denied remarriage to innocent victims of divorce.”<sup>19</sup> This cultural assumption may explain why Mark and Luke did not include the exception clause as Matthew did.

**Question:** What is Jesus’ rhetorical aim in his response to the Pharisees’ questions?

- **All Views:** the interpretation of the Gospel passages (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) is complicated because Jesus is responding to a rhetorical ploy by the Pharisees: “Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” (Matthew 19:3). In situations like this, Jesus’ answers are sometimes cryptic, designed to turn the questions back around on the Pharisees rather than to give a plain answer. On the issue of divorce and remarriage, the Pharisees were divided into two camps. Those who followed the school of Hillel believed that a man could divorce his wife for any reason. Those who followed the school of Shammai believed that a man could not divorce his wife unless he could prove she was guilty of adultery. The difference between these two schools centered around the wording of Deuteronomy 24:1: “When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found a matter of indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce...”
- **View #1:** The no-remarriage view understands Jesus to be confronting the views of both Hillel and Shammai by taking a stricter view than either of them. “By only permitting divorce (i.e. separation) for porneia and by ruling out remarriage, Jesus shows that his views are quite different from both Pharisaic positions... if the divorce-with-remarriage view is correct, Jesus is just another Pharisee who supported the school of Shammai.”<sup>20</sup>
- **View #2:** This viewpoint understands Jesus to be confronting both Hillel and Shammai, but in different ways. He confronts the Hillelites by flatly rejecting their view of divorce “for any reason.” He confronts the Shammaites by expecting offended spouses to extend mercy instead of demanding justice. “Jewish law nearly mandated divorce for sexual unfaithfulness and prohibited a wife from ever returning to her husband after she had been unfaithful. Jesus challenges both these notions and encourages offended spouses to forgive and take back unfaithful mates who are repentant.”<sup>21</sup>

This is not an exhaustive list of the pertinent exegetical questions, but it should serve to show why good, conservative, Bible-believing scholars and pastors hold differing viewpoints on remarriage. It remains, then, for us to explain more fully why we hold view #2 instead of #1.

### **Why Do We Disagree with the No-Remarriage View?**

The no-remarriage view has strong exegetical and historical support. Though it may sound restrictive to those of us who swim in the cultural waters of “no-fault divorce” and “blended families,” we dare not reject it simply because our culture does. In fact, its counter-cultural nature is a strong argument in its favor! This view seems to take very seriously the God-ordained nature of the marriage covenant (“What God has joined together, let no man separate” – Mark 10:9). However, it is beset by three weaknesses.

First, it just doesn’t seem to square with pastoral common sense. In praying and reasoning through various scenarios, we find ourselves facing situations in which preventing remarriage would seem to work against the nature of redemption. For example: a young husband commits adultery, refuses to repent, and ends up leaving his wife and children. After a lengthy period of time, a godly man in the church wishes to marry the woman, fulfill the masculine role of husband and father, and heal the wounds left by adultery and abandonment. Could we really counsel against this option?

We are not the only ones facing this dilemma. John Piper, a well-known modern proponent of the no-remarriage view, finds himself at odds with his elders over this issue.<sup>22</sup> William Heth, a scholar who helped write the definitive book defending the no-remarriage view in 1984, later changed his position because he “could not come up with a satisfactory biblical answer for the practical dilemmas caused by a blanket no-remarriage conclusion.”<sup>23</sup> And the Puritans, who were by no means theological liberals or lightweights, allowed remarriage after adultery: “In the case of adultery after marriage, it is lawful for the innocent party to sue out a divorce, and after the divorce to marry another, as if the offending party were dead.”<sup>24</sup> Though all biblical Christians agree that the Bible has a very high view of marriage, and though scholarship has clearly shown that the early church held a no-remarriage view,<sup>25</sup> pastoral concern seems to have kept the no-remarriage view from winning the day.

Second, the no-remarriage view places Jesus at odds with the Old Testament. Though the Old Testament permitted divorce and remarriage, Jesus does not. This creates a very perplexing and troubling dilemma that we have not seen adequately solved. Jesus himself said, “I did not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it” (Matthew 5:17) and “whoever annuls one of the least of these commandments... shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:19). In the rest of the antitheses within the Sermon on the Mount, scholars agree that Jesus is not contradicting the Law, but correcting the Pharisees’ faulty interpretation of it. So, for instance, when Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY’; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:27-28), he is not revising the Ten Commandments, but rather drawing out their heart-level implications in contrast to the Pharisees’ behavior-focused moralism. However, if the no-remarriage proponents are right in their view, Jesus is annulling the Old Testament law with regard to divorce! He is essentially saying, “Though Deuteronomy permitted divorce in certain cases, I now forbid it.” This puts his

teaching on divorce at odds with the rest of his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount and causes him to contradict his own statement in Matthew 5:17.

Third, the no-remarriage view does not seem to account for the seriousness of the sin of adultery. Those who hold the no-remarriage view are forced to conclude that adultery violates the marriage covenant and justifies divorce, but that the divorced partners are still husband and wife in the eyes of God and therefore may not remarry. In other words, adultery breaks the covenant but does not really break it. But Scripture seems to take a much stronger view of adultery. Indeed, in the Old Testament, adultery was punishable by death (Leviticus 20:10); if a spouse committed adultery, the marriage was over due to the death of the offending spouse. The framers of the Westminster Confession seemed to have this connection in mind when they wrote, “In the case of adultery after marriage, it is lawful for the innocent party to sue out a divorce, and after the divorce to marry another, as if the offending party were dead.” Because adultery violates the covenant vow and desecrates the physical one-flesh relationship, it is the most grievous and damaging sin possible within a marriage. The no-remarriage view suggests that the “new” and radical aspect of Jesus’ teaching about divorce is his prohibition of remarriage. In fact, in light of Scripture’s consistent condemnation of adultery, the most radical aspect of Jesus’ teaching is that adultery could actually be forgiven! In the Old Covenant, adultery must lead to divorce (because the offender is condemned to death). In the New Covenant, adultery may lead to divorce, but the gospel empowers and invites repentance and restoration of a broken covenant.

So, because of pastoral concerns, because of the unity between the Old and New Testaments, and because of the weight given in the Bible to the sin of adultery, we find the no-remarriage view to be inadequate.

### **How Permissive Should We Be in Remarriage?**

Once we conclude that the Bible permits remarriage in some cases, we must then decide how far to extend this permission. Everyone who holds position #2 agrees that in the case of adultery, the innocent spouse is free to remarry. Some go further and allow remarriage in cases of abandonment. Some go even further than that, allowing remarriage in other cases “by extrapolation.”<sup>26</sup>

We find the whole intramural debate on this issue to be misguided for two reasons. First, everything written on remarriage tends to be oriented around the question of justice instead of the question of mercy. Instead of posing the question, “In what situations do I have the right to remarry?” the gospel compels divorced people to ask the question, “Have I done all I can to extend mercy, offer forgiveness, invite reconciliation, and devote earnest prayer to my former spouse in an attempt to repair my broken marriage?” Second, most of the literature on remarriage neglects the role of mature, godly elders in the process. To be frank, a Christian who has been stung by the pain and turmoil of divorce is not the most objective interpreter of the biblical passages on remarriage. Elders are charged in Scripture with the tasks of teaching sound doctrine (Titus 1:9), disciplining unrepentant Christians (Matthew 18:15-17), and exercising spiritual oversight for God’s people (1 Peter 5:2). So to teach or write about the biblical position on remarriage without discussing the role of godly

elders in the process is an alarming oversight. The Bible clearly teaches that God grants wisdom to Spirit-filled human leaders to resolve conflict, confront sin, and apply biblical truth to complex situations (see, for example, Exodus 18:13-26; Joshua 7; 1 Kings 3:16-28).

The language of our position, then, has been chosen very carefully: *Scripture teaches that remarriage is permitted for the innocent spouse in cases of unrepentant adultery (and perhaps in some other cases)*. Here is what we intend to communicate in that statement: In general, the Bible allows the innocent spouse in a case of adultery to remarry (Deuteronomy 24:1-4; Matthew 19:9).

1. In general, the Bible does not allow remarriage in other cases of separation/divorce (1 Corinthians 7:10-11).<sup>27</sup>
2. However, every situation presents a number of variables that must be considered. Some of these include:
  - a. Grounds: was the prior divorce biblical or unbiblical?
  - b. Guilt: are we dealing with the innocent or the guilty party?
  - c. Heart/Demeanor: is this person soft and repentant, or hard and unrepentant?
  - d. Effort: has this person made a faithful effort to reconcile the previous marriage?
  - e. Time: how much time has passed since the divorce?
  - f. Aftermath: is the previous spouse remarried, or single?
3. Scripture assumes the involvement of wise and godly elders in any remarriage scenario. Elders are responsible to prayerfully apply the biblical guidelines to the variables of each specific situation.

Undoubtedly this position will cause tension for some readers. Some will feel that it leaves too many variables open for debate. Others will feel that it is too restrictive. Our conviction is that this position does the most to honor both the original intent of God in marriage and the complexity of life in a fallen world. It places appropriate biblical weight on the abiding nature of marriage and on the seriousness of the sin of adultery. Yet it also acknowledges that the application of biblical truth to specific real-life situations will involve the wise consideration of multiple variables. For instance, consider this scenario: a Christian husband commits adultery and is unrepentant, which leads to eventual divorce. His ex-wife is bitter, unforgiving, and cynical, but wants to remarry. Though the “letter of the law” permits remarriage in this situation, pastoral wisdom would require that she not remarry until she has allowed the gospel to transform her unforgiveness and bitterness. Or to use another hypothetical example: two childless professing Christians got divorced a decade ago for unbiblical reasons (they just decided the marriage “wasn’t working”). Shortly thereafter, the wife sinfully remarried. Since then, both have been convicted of their sin of their first divorce and have repented toward God and toward each other. In addition, the wife has repented of the fact that her second marriage is adulterous (because the divorce did not take place on biblical grounds). The first husband would now like to remarry a godly

Christian woman. Though the letter of the law does not allow remarriage in cases of unbiblical divorce, the factors of repentance, time, and the impossibility of reconciling the original marriage covenant might lead elders to conclude that remarriage would not be adulterous in this case.

Articulating a position on remarriage is emotionally difficult for us because of what we stated at the outset of this section: the concept of re-marriage is out of line with God's original intent. Marriage was designed by God to be between one man and one woman for life. The Bible's intent, and ours as pastors, is to protect marriage and discourage divorce. For this reason, those who fall under our spiritual oversight need to understand that we do not see remarriage as a right. It is a concession to hard-heartedness and sin which may apply in some circumstances. Even in the most grievous cases of adultery, our goal and purpose will be to restore and preserve the original marriage covenant. Furthermore, our counsel will always take into account the implications of the gospel. The law is concerned with questions of right and wrong; the gospel is concerned to distinguish between good, better, and best.<sup>28</sup> Remarriage in certain circumstances may be good (permissible); remaining unmarried is better; and holding out for repentance and restoration of a broken marriage is certainly best. Though biblically divorced spouses may be entitled to what is good, the gospel promises the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit to hold out for what is best (1 Corinthians 7:36-40).

#### **A Summary of Coram Deo's Position On Remarriage**

- The only clear biblical grounds for remarriage is the death of a spouse (1 Corinthians 7:39)
- Exegetical, pastoral, and historical arguments cause us to conclude that the Bible also permits remarriage for the innocent spouse in cases of unrepentant adultery (and perhaps in some other cases)
- The fact that the Bible permits remarriage in some situations does not mean it is best; divorced Christians are commanded to remain unmarried or be reconciled to each other (1 Corinthians 7:10-11)
- In no case should remarriage be considered without the counsel and accountability of a biblically faithful church community

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## **APPLICATIONS TO SPECIFIC SITUATIONS - REMARRIAGE**

**Q:** After divorce on the grounds of sexual immorality, can either spouse remarry?

**A:** The offended spouse is free to remarry in good conscience (good), but the gospel implication would be to remain unmarried until reconciliation is rendered impossible (best).

The offending spouse is not free to remarry; this is part of God's judgment against the sin of adultery (Hebrews 13:4).

**Q:** After divorce on the grounds of abandonment, can either spouse remarry?

**A:** Abandonment is grounds for divorce but not remarriage (1 Cor. 7:10-15). Believing spouses who are deserted by unbelievers must remain unmarried and pray for conversion and reconciliation. If the unbelieving, deserting spouse remarries another person, that marriage is adulterous, and the deserted spouse is then free to remarry in good conscience.

If a believer abandons his spouse, he is not permitted to remarry. He should be confronted by the church and called to repentance and reconciliation. If he does not repent he is to be considered an unbeliever.

**Q:** After divorce for unbiblical reasons, can either spouse remarry?

**A:** Remarriage is not permitted for either spouse. The first one to remarry commits adultery (Matthew 19:9). Whether the remaining spouse is ever free to remarry is a judgment call that must be made by biblical elders based on the intervening variables.

**Q:** Can I remarry if I was divorced prior to my faith in Jesus?

**A:** Those who were divorced before conversion to Christ are forgiven and cleansed of all past sin. The first course of action is to repent of all past sin and make every effort to reconcile the previous marriage. If reconciliation is impossible, then remarriage may be permitted based on elders' assessment of the intervening variables.

**Q:** What if someone becomes convicted of his or her unbiblical divorce and/or remarriage after remarriage has already happened?

**A:** If someone is currently in a remarriage after an unbiblical divorce, he is to confess his sin and fulfill the marriage vows of the second marriage. He will not be seen as "living in sin", but rather as having sinned, confessed, been forgiven, and now empowered to follow God in his present marriage.

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## CONCLUSION

Marriage is a covenant relationship, instituted by God, in which one man and one woman are joined together by God as one flesh. This covenant is binding as long as both people live. God's intent for the world is that husbands and wives would live together in joy and harmony, reflecting the fullness of his design for community, sexuality, and family. This is the beauty of Eden and the vision that God's people are to fight for.

Because the Fall has marred God's good creation, the marriage relationship is often fractured by selfishness and sin. All have broken covenant with God, and

all are inclined to break the covenant of marriage. As an accommodation to the ravages of sin, God made concessions for divorce. But “from the beginning of creation... they are no longer two, but one flesh” (Mark 10:6-8). God allows divorce in certain situations, but he does not approve of it.

In the gospel, Jesus reconciles man to God and people with one another, making it possible for Christians to fulfill the marriage covenant as God intends. Where the law sees only categories of right and wrong, the gospel sees categories of good/better/best. The gospel invites us to lay aside our rights and pursue repentance and reconciliation, even in situations where we have a legal “right” not to.

In this position paper, we have sought to draw a distinction between what God permits and what He desires. Scripture permits divorce when the marriage covenant is broken by sexual immorality or abandonment. However, God desires relentless faithfulness to the marriage covenant, and therefore reconciliation of a broken covenant should be exhaustively pursued before any action toward divorce is counseled or contemplated. Scripture permits remarriage after divorce in certain situations. However, God desires reconciliation and restoration, and therefore the best option for divorced people is to remain unmarried and to prayerfully pursue their former spouse in the same way that God relentlessly pursues His people (Hosea 2:14-23).

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Darrin Patrick, *Divorce and Remarriage* [A position paper written for The Journey Church in St. Louis, MO, 2007], available from <http://www.journeyon.net/media/divorce--remarriage.pdf>; Internet; p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> John Murray, *Divorce* (Philadelphia, PA: Orthodox Presbyterian Church Press, 1953), 8.

<sup>3</sup> Evangelical Presbyterian Church, *Position Paper on Divorce & Remarriage* [A position paper on divorce and remarriage], available from <http://www.epc.org/mediafiles/epc-divorceremarriage-position-paper.pdf>; Internet, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Murray, *Divorce*, 1-2.

<sup>5</sup> Some would include incompatibility in this list, but we do not see any Scriptural warrant for regarding “incompatibility” as breaking the marriage covenant.

<sup>6</sup> W. W. Davies, *Divorce in the Old Testament*, [encyclopedia online], available from <http://net.bible.org/dictionary.php?word=DIVORCE%20IN%20THE%20OLD%20TESTAMENT>; Internet.

<sup>7</sup> Darrin Patrick, *Divorce and Remarriage*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> See *Westminster Confession of Faith* 24.5.

<sup>9</sup> Andreas Köstenberger, *Q & A on Divorce and Remarriage*, <http://www.biblicalfoundations.org/?m=20071022>; Internet.

<sup>10</sup> i.e. David Instone-Brewer, see article titled “What God Has Joined” in October 2007 issue of *Christianity Today* for further insight into this view.

<sup>11</sup> Edward Dennett, *Typical Teachings Of Exodus: Being A Simple Exposition* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, LLC), 183.

<sup>12</sup> Andreas Köstenberger, *Q & A on Divorce and Remarriage*.

<sup>13</sup> Andreas Köstenberger, *Q & A on Divorce and Remarriage*.

<sup>14</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith* 1.6.

<sup>15</sup> cf. John Piper: “Matthew includes the exception clause in particular to exonerate Joseph, but also in general to show that the kind of ‘divorce’ that one might pursue during a betrothal on account of fornication is not included in Jesus’ absolute prohibition.” Piper, *Divorce & Remarriage: A Position Paper*, at [www.desiringgod.org](http://www.desiringgod.org), accessed 1 May 2008.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Gordon J. Wenham, who says, “The early church understood [the exception clauses in Matthew] to allow separation, but not remarriage” (“No Remarriage after Divorce,” in Mark L. Strauss et al, *Remarriage After Divorce in Today’s Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 27).

<sup>17</sup> William Heth, “Remarriage for Adultery and Desertion,” in Mark L. Strauss et al, *Remarriage After Divorce in Today’s Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 73.

<sup>18</sup> Wenham, “No Remarriage after Divorce,” 33.

<sup>19</sup> Heth, “Remarriage for Adultery or Desertion,” 70.

<sup>20</sup> Wenham, “No Remarriage after Divorce,” 31 and 33.

<sup>21</sup> Heth, “Remarriage for Adultery or Desertion,” 73.

<sup>22</sup> See “A Statement on Divorce and Remarriage in the Life of Bethlehem Baptist Church” at [www.desiringgod.org](http://www.desiringgod.org).

<sup>23</sup> Heth, “No Remarriage after Divorce: Responses,” 44.<sup>24</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith* 24.5.

<sup>25</sup> “In the first five centuries all Greek writers and all Latin writers except one agree that remarriage following divorce for any reason is adulterous.” William Heth and Gordon Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce: The Problem with the Evangelical Consensus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985), 22.

<sup>26</sup> Craig Keener, for example, advocates “extrapolating Scripture’s principles to resolve questions not explicitly addressed in the biblical text” (Keener, “Remarriage for Adultery or Desertion: Responses,” in Mark L. Strauss et al, *Remarriage After Divorce in Today’s Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 93).

<sup>27</sup> We disagree with those who find permission for remarriage after abandonment based on 1 Cor. 7:15: “But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved...” Some interpreters claim that if the brother or sister is “not enslaved,” he or she must (by implication) be free to remarry. We contend that this interpretation does violence to the context of the passage, which emphasizes the abiding nature of marriage (1 Cor. 7:10-11) and the importance of the believing spouse as a vehicle of God’s grace within the marriage (1 Cor. 7:14). In a case of abandonment, we believe the Bible calls the deserted spouse to remain unmarried in hope of reconciliation (1 Cor. 7:11). If and when the deserting spouse marries another, that marriage will be considered adulterous (Matt 19:9), and that act of adultery would give the deserted spouse biblical permission to remarry.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. 1 Cor. 6:12a: “Everything is permissible for me; but not everything is beneficial.”

Though stacks of books have been written on divorce and remarriage, those interested in further study will find the resources listed below to be the most useful.

#### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR STUDY**

Heth, William A., and Wenham, Gordon J. *Jesus and Divorce: The Problem with the Evangelical Consensus*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1985.

A groundbreaking work defending the no-remarriage view, referenced in almost every subsequent study of divorce.

Köstenberger, Andreas. *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004.

An excellent, thorough biblical theology of marriage and family.

Murray, John. *Divorce*. Philadelphia, PA: Orthodox Presbyterian Church Press, 1953.

A magisterial work on divorce and remarriage by a first-rate biblical scholar, consulted by almost every subsequent writer on the subject.

Piper, John. *Divorce and Remarriage: A Position Paper*. Online at [www.desiringgod.org](http://www.desiringgod.org).

Compare with “A Statement on Divorce and Remarriage in the Life of Bethlehem Baptist Church,” the official statement of Piper’s church on the matter. Piper takes a no-remarriage view; his elders take a more permissive view. Comparing these two statements allows readers to see the clear differences between the two viewpoints.

Strauss, Mark L, editor. *Remarriage After Divorce In Today’s Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006.

A very good point-counterpoint book on remarriage in which Heth reverses his previous no-remarriage position. Forceful yet charitable biblical argumentation from all contributors.