It is not easy to understand the biblical position on divorce. No clear doctrine or systematic teaching about divorce is presented anywhere in the Bible. Old and New Testament teachings about divorce differ. Matthew’s and Mark’s accounts of what Jesus said about divorce differ significantly (Matthew 5:32, 19:9; Mark 10:11-12).

Matthew’s recording of Jesus’ teaching and Paul’s teaching (1 Corinthians 7:10) about divorce are difficult to make compatible. The problems of interpretation are so significant and the solutions proposed by different authorities so varied that any biblical discussion of divorce should be approached with great caution and humility. It is in this spirit that Joe E. Trull, after careful study of what the Bible actually says about divorce summarized his conclusion in a guest editorial in the Baptist Message:

1. God's plan in marriage is one man and one woman joined for life (Genesis 2:24).
2. The Old Testament “law of divorce” (Deuteronomy 24:1-4) was an accommodation to mankind's failures in marriage in Moses’ day.
3. Divorce seems to be allowed in cases of marital unfaithfulness (Matthew 19:9) and desertion (1 Corinthians 7:15), though not commanded.
4. Remarriage is not so clear, but it seems to be allowed for the faithful partner by implication (Matthew 19:7-9).
5. Marriage failure violates the seventh commandment, but like any sin, is forgivable (John 5:18, 8:3-11). The phrase “living in adultery” is not a biblical definition and is certainly foreign to the spirit of the New Testament.
6. Divorced Christians have every right to discover new beginnings through God’s forgiveness, including remarriage to a Christian.
7. Pauline qualifications for deacon and pastors seem to prohibit ordaining practicing polygamists, the emphasis being on present faithfulness rather than past history (1 Timothy 3:2, 12).
8. Inclusion of divorced Christians into the life of the church and other leadership roles reflects the example of Jesus and the New Testament church.

THE DIVORCE PROCESS

Although we tend to think of divorce as a single event in people’s lives, nothing could be further from the truth. Legally, it may be a single event, but emotionally, it is a process – sometime a never-ending process that changes forever the lives of everyone involved. It begins long before the initial separation occurs and lasts long past the legal decree.

THE DECISION-MAKING PHASE

The decision-making phase of the process begins when one or both partners first consider divorce as a solution to their relationship problems. In this phase, one may cycle through the decision to stay or to separate many times. How long this phase lasts depends on a number of factors – length of marriage, children, age, etc.

“What happened?” Divorcing persons may ask themselves over and over. Most people want a “reason” for the death of a marriage. All too often, however, the relationship
deteriorated over time, so slowly that neither partner knew when the dying actually began. People in this phase are generally aware of the emotional, social and financial costs associated with their decision. They struggle with the stigma and stereotypes our society associates with divorce as well as their own religious convictions. If children are involved, the sense of guilt, failure, and worry may be overwhelming. Certainly, for most, the decision to divorce is not made without considerable pain and long deliberation.

THE RESTRUCTURING PHASE

Physical separation marks the movement from the decision-making phase into the “restructuring phase.” In this phase most individuals are faced with loneliness, anxiety, disorganization, and the confusion of a mass of legal problems. Changes in simple tasks and habits may produce agony and frustration. Concerns about custody, single parenting, loss of parental role, visitation, and economic instability overcome some divorcing persons with feelings of loss, depression, pessimism, and lowered self-esteem. Other feelings often experienced during this stage are rejection, hostility, bitterness, confusion, guilt, failure, and sometimes relief. Multiple changes and worries concerning money, jobs, children, family, friends, sex, and household maintenance can overload the strongest and challenge the coping skills of the bravest.

Both divorce and physical death mark the end of a relationship. On the average it takes about two years to recover from either because usually both involve profound grief. In physical death and in divorce, it is the loss of the relationship that one grieves most. Both involve loss, stress and upheaval of life.

The process of grieving is similar in death and divorce, with two exceptions. First, in physical death we bury our dead; with divorce the “corpse” is still around. If there are children, there will always be some tie between the former spouses. It is possible to divorce your spouse, but you cannot divorce your child’s parent.

Second, our society has many established traditions for helping people cope with death — the funeral, cards, food, visits, etc. As yet, there are no formalized customs established for helping people deal with the death of a marriage. Friends and family often are as confused about what to do as are the divorcing couple. Because relatives and friends do not know what to do, they may withdraw into silence, leaving the bereaved to grieve alone.

The restructuring phase is over when the divorcing person has learned to cope with the emotional, spiritual, legal, parental, economic, and social problems that accompany divorce and has established a stable, autonomous life apart from the former marriage partner. As the process ends, one begins making realistic plans, identifies reasonable goals and gains greater self-awareness. The latter includes becoming aware of and accepting responsibility for one’s contributions both to the marriage and the divorce.

IF YOU ARE CONSIDERING DIVORCE
To divorce or to remain together and try to work it out – that is one of the most important decisions you will ever make. It is difficult to discuss the negative consequences of divorce without offending someone who has made the choice or sounding moralistic or just plain naive. Divorce is sometimes the best solution available. This is most often true in cases of physical abuse or drug and alcohol addiction. No one should stay in a situation where physical or emotional harm is risked. But even in those situations, it is crucial for those considering divorce to anticipate what lies ahead. Too often the negative consequences of divorce are far more devastating than people realize when contemplating the decision.

People generally consider divorce for two primary reasons:

1. **to escape a relationship that has been painful, loveless, or destructive;** or
2. **to seek a more satisfying life alone or with a new partner.** Michele Weiner-Davis, a marriage therapist, emphasized in her book, *Divorce Busting*, that people *seldom* achieve these goals through divorce. She identifies three reasons why:

1. **Divorce does not solve the problem it is meant to solve.** Many people believe that if it were not for their spouses, they would be happy and there would be no more arguments. Diagnosing the spouse as the problem means that the partner has failed to notice how the patterns of behavior of both partners have contributed to their unworkable marriage. Unfortunately, when a partner leaves, those habits go with him or her. Why else would 60 percent of second marriages fail? If divorce were really the answer, would people not learn from the mistakes they made in the first marriage?

2. **Divorce creates new problems.** Money matters often are the most devastating negative consequences of divorce. A woman’s standard of living in the first year of divorce typically decreases, while a man’s increases. While men’s standard of living initially rises, if they eventually remarry, they may find themselves supporting two families on the same income. Loneliness is another negative consequence of divorce. And many veterans of the single life have discover new challenges.

3. **Divorce hurts children of all ages.** Judith Wallerstein's long-term study of children of divorce confirms that children of all ages suffer when their parents divorce. Children of divorce achieve less in school, leave home earlier, earn less, and are more likely to experience divorce than are children from intact homes.

**Does this mean couples should stay together for the sake of the children?** Not necessarily. Couples should not remain in conflict-filled marriages for the sake of their children. Research shows that whether parents are married or divorced, children suffer when there is unresolved conflict. Couples should do everything in their power to make their marriages work so their children’s lives will not be adversely affected by divorce or unresolved conflict.
Perhaps you are thinking, “I’ve done everything possible to make this marriage work.” Maybe you have, but is it possible your focus has been in the wrong place? If your focus has been on changing your partner’s behavior, maybe you could try one more thing – changing your own behavior. Relationships are such that if one partner changes, the relationship must also change; but waiting for your partner to change before you change equals no change. If what you have been doing to “fix” the relationship is not working, try something else. If you have “talked until you are blue in the face,” stop talking and try ignoring the issue for a while. Rather than waiting for your partner to do something to make you happier, do something for yourself to increase your happiness. Ask yourself, “What is different about the times in my life when I feel happier?” Then do some of those things that make you more fulfilled – go to a movie with a friend, take a college course, go out to eat with friends, get a hobby, do something to make yourself a happier person. If your partner will not go to counseling with you, go alone. Counseling has not helped? Change counselors. Read a novel or a book on self-improvement. Of course, none of this is easy, particularly if you are depressed about your current situation. But neither is what you have been doing, and it is not working. Ask God to give you the strength to try just once more.

**IF YOU ARE ALREADY DIVORCED**

If you are already in the process of divorcing, it is important that you recognize that you are in a state of grieving. When the divorce experience is new to those involved, it is difficult to know what is “normal.” The divorced person often believes that certain feelings “shouldn’t be there” or “I should be over this by now.” Grief takes time to heal and cannot heal until there is an awareness of what is going on and a willingness to let go of the past.

Worrying about what one ought to do or ought not to do puts too much pressure on a person trying to heal after the death of a marriage. Sometimes it is helpful to know that others have had similar experiences. Most divorcing people go through the following states after a divorce.

1. **A period of denial.** This may begin before the divorce and is a time when one cannot or will not face the act that the relationship is dying or dead.

2. **A period of depression and withdrawal.** One may experience intense feelings of personal failure and a constant state of confusion along with the depression. It often involves withdrawing from family, friends, church, and social activities.

3. **A period of intense anger.** The anger is sparked by feelings of betrayal and is directed at the ex-spouse and perhaps all members of the other sex. In this period, emotions are so strong that the person may not be aware of how he or she is relating to others, including family and friends. It is a very vulnerable period in which new relationships can hold many dangers.

4. **A period of gradual adjustment and restructuring of life as a single person.** The divorcing person gains mastery over most of the areas of his or her life, including the legal, social, personal, financial, and parenting problems associated with divorcing. He or she
thinks in terms of being single rather than being part of a couple.

Do you see yourself in one of these stages? Most people need help getting through this process. It might come from a pastor, a counselor, a friend, a divorce recovery group, or a family member. Call on God for strength and ask God to help you find people to be an channel of support.

Be patient with yourself and take time to heal. It is only natural in your loneliness and state of low self-esteem to want someone to love and appreciate you, but until you feel whole again mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, it is too early to consider a serious relationship, much less remarriage. A good rule of thumb is to wait about two years after a divorce before letting yourself get into a serious relationship. Too many divorced persons remarry much too soon, particularly men or single parents who think marriage will make life easier. Remember: Remarriages end in divorce more often than first marriages.

IF A FRIEND OR FAMILY MEMBER IS DIVORCING

The divorcing process affects more than just the couple involved. Family and friends grieve too. Often in that grief they do not know how to help the individuals who are divorcing. In her book, Counseling with Single Adults, Nancy Potts suggests the following ways family members and friends can be helpful during the process of divorce.

Don’t do these things:

1. Don’t encourage pain by saying, “It's not all that bad.” There is no way that we can make that determination about another person’s life.

2. Don’t accent feelings of failure by saying, “If it were me……” Again, you cannot second-guess how you'd respond if you were faced with the same circumstances.

3. Don’t use the phrase, “Your kids will suffer.” That is one area in which great pain and struggling has already occurred and will continue to play a part in the process. The parents are well aware of the effects the divorce has on children.

4. Don’t ask how the person can still come to church, or verbally beat him or her over the head with Scripture quotations. If you are going to quote Scripture, tell of the new hope, new beginnings, and forgiveness available.

5. Don’t try to decide who is to blame. There are no guilty or innocent parties; no matter how much you know about the history of the relationship, the fact is you did not live in the marriage.

6. Don’t take it upon yourself to decide when the person is ready for an
active social life.

7. Don’t ask for explanations. You will be told what the person wants you to know.

8. Don’t pass on tidbits of gossip.

9. If you take sides — and the divorcing partner always knows if this has been done and whose side you’ve chose — then understand that one relationship may end. Perhaps it can be renegotiated later, but there is an excellent chance that it cannot.

The following are positive responses you can give to the divorcing couple:

1. Respond with genuineness. If you do not know the words, you can with integrity say, “I don't know what to say, but I care.”
2. Call at the spur of the moment to invite your friend out to dinner. That can be one of those serendipity experiences.
3. Offer to babysit so the custodial parent can go out for the day or in the evening.
4. Allow persons to withdraw, talk, or be silent when they need to.
5. Be sensitive to time and place. Crowds and work situations are not the best times to inquire about the divorce, feelings, arrangements, and so forth. You may be putting the person on the spot at a time when he or she is trying to keep emotions under control.
6. Be as natural as possible and allow the person to handle his or her own life.
7. Think of the divorce as a death experience. We tend to be more patient when we understand his or her emotions.
8. Realistically help the couple build self-esteem through care and support.
9. Ask your friend if there is anything you can do, but be prepared to accept that sometimes there will be nothing.
10. Understand that economics must play a part in the changing lifestyle. If you are inviting someone as a guest, let it be known at the time of the invitation.

CONCLUSION

Divorce is an agonizing reality in the lives of many Christian couples. It is an emotionally wrenching experience that threatens the determination of each person to be faithful to a growing relationship with God and others. There are no magical solutions to the pain of loss. It takes time and effort to heal the hurts. We are part of one another to support and encourage so life can go on toward the ideal of Jesus Christ (John 10:10).

May these words of hope be part of your struggle and redemption:
We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed but not despairing, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed.
2 Corinthians 4:8-9