

Divorce and remarriage are subjects of controversy among Christians. It is admittedly a difficult and complex issue. In this brief paper, we would like to look at the issues of marriage, divorce and remarriage in the light of the specific teachings of Jesus. The purpose is to deal with these issues sensitively, realizing that they are emotional issues for many people, but nevertheless attempting to come to a Biblical view of marriage, divorce and remarriage.

Jesus spoke of marriage and divorce on many occasions, as are recorded for us in the gospels. Often, He is asked to interpret an Old Testament law, and He quotes both from the Old Testament and from the oral law of the Pharisees. Thus, to get an accurate picture of Jesus' teachings on these issues, we must reference the whole of Scripture. It is important to start with the concept of marriage, as intended by God. This is an institution designed by God as part of His original creation. Jesus Himself points this out in quoting Genesis 2:24 as the basis for discussing marriage (cf. Matt. 19:5, Mark 10:7).



The Purpose of Marriage

The first step in discussing marriage is to ask why God instituted it. Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 tell us what some of the purposes are for marriage: (i) the procreation of children; (ii) suitable companionship, and (iii) sexual union. In addition to those discussed above, two further purposes of marriage may be discerned in the Bible. Throughout Scripture, family units, or "houses" are seen as part of the basic building blocks of society. Marriage is an institution that provides stability for a community and a nation. It is a place of nurture for children and a place of love and peace for members of a community (this is the intention, if not the reality). Another (spiritual) purpose of marriage is found in Eph. 5:31-32. Marriage is to be an earthly symbol of the unity between Christ and the church. The love that is to be found in marriage, and the companionship and the closeness that leads to the "two becoming one", are all symbolic of the link between Christ and His church. Although these are some of the purposes of marriage, it is important not to attempt to make them the essence of marriage. None of these purposes can be used to describe what defines a marriage.

The Characteristics of Marriage

What are the definitive characteristics of a marriage? Marriage cannot be equated with sexual union, as some have tried to do. The sexual act itself does not define a marriage. Neither is the procreation of children a definitive characteristic. People do not experience a state of "semi-marriage" until the birth of their first child, and childless marriages are still marriages. Marriage exists when a person "leaves" and "cleaves", emphasizing the permanence of the relationship between husband and wife. The leaving of parents is not unique to marriage, but the cleaving to another seems to be something reserved for marriage. Marriage is a close union, which incorporates the concepts of helping, becoming one flesh, and openness.

A definitive concept of marriage would be: **a covenant between a man and woman to an exclusive relationship that affects every part of their beings.** Since our relationship with God in eternity eclipses all such human relationships, the institution of marriage will not exist in heaven (cf. Matt. 22:30, Mark 12:25, Luke 20:35).

Divorce

Now that we have an understanding of marriage, we are in a better position to understand Jesus' teaching on divorce. When the Pharisees came to Jesus with their questions about divorce, it is clear that Jesus never considered divorce to be an acceptable option. On the contrary, Jesus' words in Matthew 19:8-9 show that divorce was never part of God's plan. It should be noted that divorce is never commanded or demanded in Scripture. Deuteronomy 24:1-4 does not contain an imperative, but rather a recognition of people's sinfulness and a regulation to guard against further abuses once divorce had been decided upon.

In Mark 10:11-12, Jesus gives the case for divorce, talking about both husband and wife. The sense of the passage is that divorce causes the one initiating the divorce to be judged as one who has committed adultery. Although there may be an effect on the spouse (this is made explicit in Matt. 5:32), this is only hinted at in Mark. The reference to both divorce and remarriage can be

confusing. The best interpretation seems to be that it is the divorce itself that is the cause of adultery. However, all of the passages are united in including the concept of remarriage as part of the statement of adultery. Thus, there seems to be a total ban on divorce and subsequent remarriage, except for the “exception clauses” in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9.

In these exception clauses, Jesus seems to allow one possible reason that divorce may be considered legitimate. This is in the case of adultery, or sexual unfaithfulness **already having occurred**. We have defined marriage as an exclusive relationship. Where one party breaks that relationship by becoming sexually involved with another person, the basis of marriage is damaged. The essence of marriage is an exclusive, covenant relationship. Sexual union with someone other than your marriage partner violates this covenant. Nevertheless, even in the case of infidelity, there is still hope for forgiveness and restoration.

It can be therefore stated that all divorce is as a result of sin. It was never part of God’s plan. In fact, God says that He hates divorce. (Malachi 2:16) Having said this, not every divorce is sinful. The Bible acknowledges divorce and regulates it. In fact, God Himself is said to be divorced from Israel (Jeremiah 3:8). There are occasions when divorce is legitimate and accepted by God. The easiest to explain is the case of a convert whose unbelieving partner wishes to divorce (1 Corinthians 7:12-16). Note that the believer may not initiate the divorce, neither is the believer *compelled* to seek a divorce in these cases. Rather, the believing partner should do all possible to maintain and strengthen the marriage.

Remarriage

Scripture is clear in its statement that God’s intention was for marriage to be permanent, but that sin has marred His plan. Scripture acknowledges and regulates how marriages are ended, and what may occur thereafter. Based on the discussion above, and on other New Testament passages, it is clear that legitimate grounds for the dissolution of a marriage is the death of one of the spouses. Since death breaks the marriage bond, the surviving partner is free to re-marry a believing partner. The question is whether a (living) divorced person may be remarried. The key issue to address is whether the

second marriage, after a divorce, constitutes adultery or not.

We have seen that every reference to divorce and adultery in the Gospels also refers to remarriage. It would seem that the tenor of these passages could be stated: “if a man divorces his wife **and then** marries another, he commits adultery”, or “if a man divorces his wife **in order to** marry another, he commits adultery”. This makes sense in a culture where divorce was fairly easy for a husband to do. In order not to break the law of Moses and commit adultery, the husband would first divorce his wife, and then marry the woman he desired. God judges the motives as well as the actions, and this is viewed as adultery by God. Thus, it is clear that the one who breaks the marriage covenant is the one who sins.

The Lord’s comments, although referring to remarriage, are focused on the divorce as the sin. We have also seen that *the sins that lead to divorce are the real issue*. It would seem, then, that Jesus’ teaching places no restriction regarding remarriage on the divorcee, since they are not the one initiating the divorce.

It is our view that none of these things are an issue if they have occurred before conversion. While it is true that there are lasting consequences to sin, we must never forget the power of God’s forgiveness.



To summarize:

- Marriage is instituted by God
- Divorce is not part of God’s design, and should not be entered into lightly
- All divorces are caused by sin
- Those whose divorce occurred before conversion would be free to remarry
- A Christian whose spouse divorces them for unbiblical grounds would be free to remarry

Marriage, divorce and remarriage are all extremely significant events in the lives of individuals. They are thus times of extreme emotions. It is therefore necessary to be fully Biblical, in order not to be swayed by our emotions on these issues. We can never be led by the pragmatic options or the easy routes, but rather by the light of God’s commands in Scripture.