



*A Ministry of the
Church of God (Seventh Day)*

Divorce and Remarriage



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The Bible's teachings on divorce can be summarized in two sentences: 1) Divorce is a failure that misses the mark of heaven's original design for marriage, thus falling short of the glory of God, and 2) The sin of divorce is never unforgivable. The serious student and teacher of the Word should understand these points and be able to clearly convey them to others.

It requires no great length or depth to support the first truth, that all divorce owes to human failure and never represents God's perfect will. This is implicit in the Bible's passage of primary reference regarding marriage (Genesis 2:18-25). It is made explicit by the prophet Malachi (2:14-16), by the writings of Paul (Romans 7:2, 3; 1 Corinthians 7:10, 27), and most importantly by the teachings of Jesus Christ (Matthew 5:31, 32; 19:3-12; Mark 10:1-12; Luke 16:18).

Both Paul and Peter write remarkable paragraphs describing the duty of Christian husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church, and the corresponding responsibility of believing wives to respect their husbands and submit to their loving leadership (Ephesians 5:22-33; 1 Peter 3:1-7) so that what God has joined together in marriage will not suffer the separation of divorce.

Broken marriages always stem from the faulty attitudes and unrighteous actions of at least one of the partners, and often both. Thus, divorce is categorically sinful. Each person involved in a divorce proceeding should do the painful work of asking and discerning how they may have contributed to the failure of that marriage. The no-fault divorce is mostly a figment of human imagi-

nation, and not a reality found in Scripture or human experience.

All divorces created equal?

Though all marital failure is a product of human sin, some divorces more nearly approach the revealed will of God than do others. This is the clear implication of Jesus' teaching, often called the "exception clause" and found in the first Gospel. In two places Matthew reports Jesus couching His words about the failure and sinfulness of divorce by adding the clause "except for sexual immorality." Hear Christ say it again: "But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery" (5:32; see also 19:9).

The term *sexual immorality* in these verses is translated from the Greek *porneia*, a word that can cover a wide range of sexual offenses. It is often translated as "fornication." Jesus says twice in Matthew that a marriage damaged by the sexual unfaithfulness of one spouse may result in a divorce that He recognizes as legitimate for the other spouse. Sexual immorality, then, is a true marriage-breaker, according to Christ, and it is the one exception He offers to the rule of lifelong matrimony. Divorce for any other reason is seen by the Lord as an act of adultery because it violates one's marriage vows in order to be sexually involved with another.

In addressing the issue of divorce (Matthew 19:3-9), Jesus would have been fully

aware of the hot debate in the Jewish culture of His day. Leading rabbis from an earlier era, Hillel and Shammai, had taken opposite positions on the subject. Following how Moses' teaching (see Deuteronomy 24:1-4) had often been misunderstood (Matthew 19:3, 7, 8), Hillel taught that divorce was permitted for almost any cause. Shammai, on the other hand, taught a more restrictive view, that Moses intended divorce only for sexual uncleanness, as the Deuteronomy text implies. Jesus' expressed position in Matthew 19 is close to that taught by Shammai — that divorce must be restricted to one offense (i.e., *porneia*) and not be broadened to cover almost any excuse that might be offered for marital discontent.

This exception clause has generated much debate among pastors and scholars. Some have concluded that, since it is found in only one Gospel, it is essentially meaningless and that Jesus had no tolerance for divorce in any case. Others go to the opposite extreme by forcing almost every divorce through the one "loophole" that Jesus gave: sexual immorality. It is rare to find a Christian in divorce proceedings today who will admit that their case does *not* fit the exception Jesus gives, thus stretching the divorce "loophole" beyond recognition. Still, it undermines Scripture and discounts Jesus' own credibility to insist, contrary to Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, that divorce is never permissible for Christians, regardless.

All divorces forgivable

Though all marital separation and divorce reflect the fact of human failure and sin, no divorce separates its victims from God's loving desire to redeem. This statement takes its cue from the infinite capacity of Christ to forgive sin, expressed in Matthew 12:31. Such sin is atoned for by His death and resurrection on behalf of all humanity. Every divorce involves sin at some point, some more than others; but no divorce is unforgivable.

The teachings of Jesus and the New Testament on the topic of unpardonable sin never link it to marriage, divorce, or remarriage. The apostasy for which we can never be forgiven may be linked to hardened attitudes over time that produce divorce and remarriage with no regard for God's revealed will and the Holy Spirit's urging in the matter. But apostasy is never identified with the mere fact of divorce and remarriage itself.

If you are a Christian with a past experience of divorce — or divorce and remarriage — you may trustingly seek the forgiving heart of Jesus in this matter, for He says that “all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they may utter” (Mark 3:28). Our Lord goes on to say that the only exception to this axiom is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, not divorce and remarriage. In your prayers of confession and repentance over marriage failure, be sure to confront your own wrong words, actions, and attitudes that may have contributed to this failure, no matter how great

the faults and failures were of your former marriage partner.

Sample categories explored

Not all divorces are equal, nor should all who suffer them be viewed and treated the same by the church and those in spiritual authority. Here are a few of the many cases that may be encountered:

Divorce chosen or experienced prior to faith in Jesus Christ, the new birth, and Christian conversion.

By the terms of the gospel and the new life it brings, coming to Jesus in faith and repentance is the definitive new start for all believers. The new birth marks a new beginning — indeed, a new identity in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17); the guilt and shame of the old are gone. Divorce and remarriage prior to conversion are among the sins that are forgiven by God and remembered against us no more. Hence, they are not detrimental to one's membership and good standing in the church of God. Newborn babes in Christ often face personal challenges imposed on them by indelible memories and fading life patterns of the past, but they should not be saddled with additional penalties placed on them by the church or her members who find it easy to consider divorcees as second-class Christians.

Divorce experienced by a Christian who is faithful to their marriage vows, while their spouse persists in sexual unfaithfulness, i.e., porneia.

By the terms that Jesus lays down in Mat-

thew 5:32 and 19:9, a Christian who remains faithful in a marriage that's broken by a spouse's infidelity may accept a divorce or even seek it. In this case, the marriage is dissolved and the non-offending spouse is free to remarry.

When infidelity occurs in a marriage, no scripture *requires* the spouse of an adulterer to put away the other after a single sexual offense, or after many offenses. Scripture teaches that Christians are to seek for reconciliation whenever possible, even following a divorce (1 Corinthians 7:10, 11; Romans 12:18; Ephesians 4:32). The prophet Hosea is the classic example of one who remained faithful to an oft-straying spouse, thereby showcasing God's grace in His long marriage to unfaithful Israel.

If a Christian who has been faithful to their marriage vows is divorced by a spouse who was not faithful, the non-offending believer may be considered the "innocent party" and continue their service in the church, including any leadership roles.

Divorce chosen by a Christian who was not faithful to their spouse.

The good standing of a brother or sister in the church who has violated their marriage vows by sexual immorality may be uncertain for a time. The offending person should expect to be gently called to account by spiritual leadership (1 Corinthians 5:1ff; Galatians 6:1) and to forgo leadership positions during any period needed for investigation and restoration. If the problem cannot be corrected in a satisfactory and biblical manner, a straying spouse is in danger of forfeiting good standing in the church

by their persistence in willful sin.

Divorce chosen by a Christian who has been abandoned by their spouse.

Based on Paul's teachings in 1 Corinthians 7, desertion may be seen as a special case of Jesus' exception clause. In verses 10-17 of this chapter, Paul addresses the Christian whose husband or wife is not a believer in Jesus. Should they remain together, or should they separate? His general counsel is that the believing spouse in a mixed marriage must do their best to maintain the marriage (vv. 12, 13), in part because spiritual benefits accrue to the unsaved spouse and to the children (vv. 14, 16).

However, Paul concedes in verse 15 that if the unbelieving spouse determines to leave the marriage, the Christ-follower may recognize that reality and not be under bondage to a marriage in which they have been essentially abandoned.

Legal separation or divorce chosen by a Christian married to one who inflicts abuse upon the spouse and/or children.

Though not addressed by Jesus' exception clause, many Bible students agree that a married person who experiences physical or extreme mental abuse from their spouse to themselves or their children may remove themselves (with the children) from the offending spouse and bring that person before the church (Matthew 18:15-17) and/or legal authorities. Such abuse by a spouse relates closely to abandonment. It is the abuser who has created the separation and who has, in effect, deserted the victim(s).

What about remarriage?

We have seen that, while marriage was designed to last until broken by death, it is often cut short by divorce because of human frailty and sin. The Scriptures offer only one valid reason that a Christ follower might seek a divorce: fornication.

Sadly, the low moral standards of modern culture mean that many believers find Jesus' exception clause applicable in their case, and others stretch His exception to seek the divorce they hope He will bless. This "loop-hole" in the law, likely intended by Jesus to be small and limiting, has become a large, ragged wound to the institution of marriage!

What about the case of Christians married to a sexually immoral spouse, who have sought and/or received the legitimate divorce approved by Jesus' exception clause? Are they free to remarry without fear of displeasing their Lord? The Bible teaches they are. Consider the following:

- The Old Testament word for *divorcement* means a cutting of the matrimonial bond (*Strong's Concordance*, Hebrew word #3748).
- The New Testament word for *divorce* means to release, to set free (*Strong's*, Greek word #630).
- The divorce permitted under Moses' law (Deuteronomy 24:1-4) carried with it the right of remarriage.
- It makes little sense to say that Jesus would give a faithful spouse the right to divorce an immoral partner, and then penalize them by disallowing remarriage.

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- The phrase *husband of one wife* (1 Timothy 3:2) forbids polygamy, but not the proper succession of spouses following death or legitimate divorce. This view predominates among conservative scholars.
 - Paul's words *not under bondage* seem to clearly suggest dissolution of the marriage when an unbeliever departs (1 Corinthians 7:15; see also the word *loosed* in v. 27).

These points are offered to substantiate the common understanding of what happens when a divorce is granted: Both in ancient times and today, the marriage is dissolved. A divorced person is not still married, and one who has been divorced for a legitimate Bible reason has a legitimate right to remarry. While a marriage ending in divorce is dissolved for both parties, only the offending (i.e., immoral) partner faces the prospect of guilt before God for the failure of the marriage.

Hope for all strugglers

As Christians committed to God's Word from the beginning, and especially as that Word was magnified to its fullest through God's Son, Jesus Christ, we embrace the good gift of marriage God offers to everyone for the good of all. In particular, we embrace that pattern of marriage first outlined by the Father in the second chapter of Genesis, and further developed in the words of Jesus and His apostles throughout the New Testament. A faithful, mutually enriching, enduring marriage and family relationship may

be the best foretaste we have of the coming kingdom of heaven.

As fellow strugglers in a world under the bondage of sinful corruption and in a church not yet fully free from it, we admit our own imperfect success in finding God's best in our homes and families. Many of our marriages fail to thrive, even though they avoid the sexual immorality that is divorce's only valid excuse, according to Christ. We lament our sinful disregard for former and present marriage partners, and for God's holy standard in all our relations. We seek His mercy and grace upon a church and culture that too easily excuse their failures at home and abroad. We confess that our marriage sins, inside and outside the church, have contributed much toward the moral decline and social indecency we see in our present world.

We reach toward our Christian brothers and sisters whose marital sins and sexual failures have been most obvious in this regard, embracing them with the same love, acceptance, and forgiveness we ourselves have received from Jesus in matters equally sinful, even if less notable. We reject the double standard that places greater blame and shame on those who've failed in human sexuality and marriage, while excusing those whose sins remain hidden or are considered more "respectable."

As the Church of God, let us turn again to the enduring teachings of the Bible for all human relationships in general and marriage in particular. Let us embrace them through the power of God's Spirit, even as we look continually to Jesus, who has died

for our sins, risen again, and entered heaven, ever to intercede for our eternal salvation in Him.



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