DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

A working paper by
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A member of an interview committee asked my position on the issues of divorce and remarriage. (I consider them two separate issues.) As the topic was discussed by me and the committee, I remember one of the committee members exhorting our view with, "As long as we do what the Bible says." I wish it were that easy. Never-the-less, the Bible is obviously the place we must turn to deal with any issue. Unfortunately, there seems to be some difference in interpretation about what the Bible says. I think what becomes important, then, is that whatever position we hold, we be able to support it with the Bible and not merely with opinion or human reason.

Before dealing specifically with the issues of divorce and remarriage, it is essential to understand the underlying principle we find in Philippians 3:13. "Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." Each of us is where we are right now. We have only the future to look forward to. The past is over; and though we will continue to know the effects of the past on the present, it cannot be changed. If we find we have sinned, and we all do (sin is sin and no particular sin is more sinful than any other), we must ask God through Jesus Christ to forgive our sin. This certainly involves humble confession and repentance and where applicable, restitution. In the past we acted on what knowledge and convictions we had. When we come to new knowledge and new convictions, we should repent but not necessarily try to undo the past. We have the freedom to follow Paul's example and "forget what is behind." We are each given the opportunity to start new and fresh every day.

What then does the Bible say about divorce and remarriage? I can only tell you what I believe it says and suggest to you how I plan to live my life based on that conviction.

God established the institution of marriage when He said, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24 NASB). Jesus reaffirmed this when He added, "So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate" (Matthew 19:6 NASB). We are further reminded of the Biblical marriage principle in I Corinthians 7:10 and 11: "But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband (but if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife" (NASB). The marriage union of a man and a woman is complete and binding for life; it involves the creation of one out of two; it is physical, emotional, and spiritual union. This is also the only relationship in which God allows and even encourages sexual intercourse. Hebrews 13:4 affirms that marriage is honorable and "coitus" is pure - the Greek word *koite* is usually translated "marriage bed." In Romans 7, Paul illustrated a Law / Gospel point using the laws of marriage. He reminded his readers that the law of marriage is valid only in life and that only death releases the partners from their vows.

Never-the-less, there is no doubt that divorce existed among Bible people. But its existence does not mean God approved of it. When the Pharisees confronted Jesus with the fact that Moses allowed divorce, He responded with, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way" (Matthew 19:8 NASB). Divorce was allowed only because men are sinners and are unwilling to live by the standards God established at creation. As D. H. Field puts it in the *New Bible Dictionary*, "The provision was God's concession to severely sin-torn marriage relationships, not an annulment of his creation marriage ordinance. Here, as elsewhere, we must be careful not to confuse God's tolerance with his approval..." (2nd edition, S. v. "Ethics, Biblical"). And there were occasions in Old Testament law that specifically forbade divorce. If a man did not like his wife after their first sexual intercourse and tried to divorce her by accusing her of not being a virgin, but her virginity was proven by her parents, the man was never allowed to divorce her. Also, if a man had sexual intercourse with an un-engaged virgin, he was to marry her and could never divorce her. (Deuteronomy 22:19, 29) God's "creation marriage ordinance" is further upheld by the prophet Malachi. When speaking for God, he said, "'For I hate divorce,' says the LORD, the God of Israel..." (Malachi 2:16 NASB).

Because divorce is the result of sin and contrary to the purpose and will of God, divorce itself must also be considered sin. My pastoral position then is to advise people who are divorced to confess that sin to God and by His grace receive the forgiveness He so freely offers. I would further counsel that it is God's will that reconciliation be sought. If reconciliation is not possible each person should demonstrate humble repentance by a life of Godly singleness (see I Corinthians 7:11). To those who may be struggling from within a marriage, I would never advise divorce. The problems a couple might have in their marriage relationship cannot be solved by divorce. Instead of solving problems, divorce can only complicate and add problems. This does not mean that a woman (or man) must continue to live in an unacceptable situation. I think separation may be a fully acceptable necessity, always understanding separation as a temporary situation during which a couple can get Biblically based spiritual counsel toward the restoration of their relationship. I think it is so important at this point that we recall the fact that we made a "'til death do us part" promise that must not be undermined. We must also remember that in marriage God created one out of two. From a spiritual perspective even divorce cannot break the one (see I Corinthians 6:16). I also recognize that in some situations, reconciliation is impossible. Regardless of this impossibility I personally would not file for divorce nor would I willingly grant one. But I would also not allow an unrepentant unfaithful or abusive spouse to continue living at home.

The ideal is that we eliminate divorce. This would also do away with the remarriage issue. But we all know we do not live in an ideal world. There are people who are divorced, or who will become so, who will wish to remarry.

The Old Testament law, as in the case of divorce, is indirect with the issue of remarriage. The Mosaic law recognizes the existence of remarriage much as it recognizes the existence of divorce. There are, however, some specific situations that prohibit remarriage. Priests, for example, were forbidden from marrying any woman who was not a virgin. Included in this list are widows, prostitutes, and women driven out of a marriage [divorced] (see Leviticus 22). The law also forbids what we might call "re-remarriage." If a man divorced his wife and she remarried, the man was not allowed to have her back even if her second husband died. According to the law she was "defiled" or morally contaminated by remarriage so was prohibited from returning to her first husband (see Deuteronomy 24:1-4).

Apart from these specific cases, it seems that "among the Jews there was no such custom as separation without permission to remarry." (*New Bible Dictionary*, 2nd ed., 1991. S. v. "Marriage," by J. S. Wright and J. A. Thompson.) So at question were the grounds for divorce. Just before and during the time of Jesus there were two Jewish schools of thought on the issue. Those of the school of Shammai said divorce was acceptable only in the case of unfaithfulness while the school of Hillel held that "anything unpleasing to the husband" was acceptable grounds for divorce (Wright, Thompson). Jesus' words recorded by Matthew, Mark, and Luke were certainly spoken with full understanding of these two positions--and I believe in direct challenge to both positions. In both Mark and Luke Jesus specifically says that remarriage after divorce is adultery. (See Mark 10:11, 12 and Luke 16:18) If these two passages were the only ones to deal with the issue, I contend there would not be an issue. The difficulty is in dealing with the two passages in Matthew (5:32 and 19:9) and with a possibly related reference made by Paul in I Corinthians 7:15.

Both of the Matthew passages contain what has come to be known as the "exception clause." It is the interpretation of this clause that causes the difficulty in how to deal practically with the issue. Both passages are very similar so I will quote only the first. Jesus said, "...but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of *porneias*, makes her *moikethenai*; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery *moikatai*" (NASB with Greek terms transliterated). The words here transliterated *moikethenai*and *moikatai* are most certainly translated *commit adultery*and *adultery*. As can be seen, the key word in the exception clause (*porneias*) is an entirely different word. And it is the translation of this word that has caused most of the trouble.

The simplest translation of *porneias* is *fornication*. Specifically defined, fornication is pre-marital sexual intercourse. The narrowest interpretation, then, would allow remarriage if the divorce was during the Jewish betrothal period because one or the other partners found their betrothed had lost his or her virginity prior to marriage (by assumption with someone other than the betrothed.) This interpretation would have made it very legitimate for Joseph to divorce Mary, since the child she was carrying was not his, and still be able to find another wife. Some also suggest that the exception clause would allow the dissolution of marriages that were not legitimate in the first place (for example, incestuous or homosexual unions).

But the word porneias has not been uniformly translated or understood as fornication. It has not even been translated with consistency within a same translation of the Bible. Some other ways it has been translated are marital unfaithfulness, unchastity, immorality, sexual immorality, illegitimate (children), and even adultery. In I Corinthians 5:1 the specific instance of a man having his father's wife is labeled *porneias*. Because both the words *porneias* and *moikatai* appear together in a number of passages (Matthew 5:32, 15:19, 19:9; Mark 7:21,22) I would argue against adultery as a legitimate translation. Yet many have broadened the definition of fornication to include adultery. Another interesting point in the history of the word is that its closest relative, *porne*, is the word prostitute. We get both our words prostitute and pornography from the Greek words *porne* and*porneias*. (For a more complete discussion of the meaning of*porneias* please see [What Does ‘porneia’ Mean?](http://christiansanddivorce.com/cd7.html) by Peter Miles.)

I Corinthians 7:15 has also been interpreted as giving a good justification for divorce which would allow remarriage. Paul wrote, "But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances." A very conservative interpretation of this verse is that divorce frees the "abandoned Christian" from the authority of his or her former spouse but does not then also allow remarriage. A less conservative interpretation is that the freeing is to remarriage. The question I believe needs attention here is the relationship of this verse to verse 11 where Paul says, and he makes a point of indicating that this instruction is from the Lord, that a woman who leaves her husband is to remain unmarried.

So, on what grounds can remarriage after divorce be allowed? One approach is to take the "official" Lutheran position as stipulated by the reformers. Philip Melanchthon, writing for the theologians assembled in Smalcald in the year 1537 wrote "Treatise on the Power and Primary of the Pope." This document was accepted as a confession of faith intended to supplement the "Augsburg Confession." In a list of, and argument against unjust relationship regulations set up under papal authority, appears this statement: "and equally unjust is the tradition which forbids an innocent person to marry after divorce." (*The Book of Concord*, ed. Tappert. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959, p. 333) Innocence, then, becomes a key word. Some people suggest there is no such thing as an innocent party in a marriage that ends in divorce. H. Norman Wright in *Questions Women Ask in Private* suggests there are ten reasons people have affairs.(Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1993, p.186.) Of these, five are the complete and sole responsibility of the unfaithful partner (i.e. personality disorder, sexual addiction, developmental crisis, temptation-filled situations, unrealistic expectations) implying that if a divorce were to result following an affair caused by one of these five situations there would clearly be an innocent party. Technically, innocence has often been assigned to the marriage partner who did not and has not had sexual relations outside of that marriage regardless of how much that person contributed to the breakdown of the relationship. Some then ask the question, "Is this really innocence?" One problem with this approach is that the issue of innocence is very subjective. A greater problem is that Melanchthon stated no Biblical principle in making his assertion.

My personal advice grows out of what I would do if I had to make the decision for and about myself. I would not remarry if my "singleness" was the result of divorce. Until my "ex" remarried, I would work for the restoration of the relationship. I would understand such an event as an opportunity to do some hard thinking about myself and my relationship to God. (It becomes obvious that I should be doing this all the time, anyway.) Were my "ex" to remarry, I would give my life completely over to the pursuit of the knowledge and understanding of God that despite my past failings I might be a godly person. (I am not speaking about justification but of obedience in faith.) I would not remarry following a divorce nor would I marry a divorced woman. (This by no means implies that I consider myself better than someone who remarries after divorce. This is a standard I have set for myself and which I intend to keep. It is much like the standard I hope my children will set establishing the fact that they will not engage in sexual activity until after marriage and then only with their own spouse.)

My answer to the question "Would I conduct a wedding in a remarriage after divorce situation?" is not one that has come quickly or easily. It is certainly not my intent to drive people from the church or to impose my personal standards on others. On the other hand, I believe that if the Church will not stand firm upon a clear understanding of God's Word, then no one will. God has called us to a life of holiness. While we all fail and all continue in need of forgiveness on a daily basis, I cannot deliberately engage in an event which I consider contrary to God's ordinances. This does not mean that I would forbid a remarriage, that I would not associate with one who is remarried, or that I would not welcome the remarried to the fellowship of a congregation and even to ministry within a congregation. (It should be stated here that in accordance with 1 Timothy 3:2 and 12 and Titus 1:6 ministry within a congregation would not include serving as a pastor, elder, or deacon.) It must be simply understood that I cannot be the one to perform the wedding ceremony.

To those who desire to remarry following a divorce I would suggest a thorough study of the Biblical understanding of marriage. I recommend ["Christians and Divorce"](http://christiansanddivorce.com/) by Peter Miles as a great place to start specifically because he is divorced and has remained single as a result of his study. I would recommend they be able to present a case showing that in their understanding and situation remarriage should be allowed. I believe people seeking to remarry after divorce must understand the circumstances of their divorce and the Biblical teachings on marriage thoroughly. I would also advise them to be in such a state of spiritual health that they are seeking to have the heart and mind of Jesus. This should naturally include a desire to live a life pleasing to God. (It really should go without saying that both parties involved be living lives within the standards established by God for human relationships; or to put it bluntly, sexual relationships outside of marriage are never right. If sex is a part of a couple's pre-marital relationship-this holds true in all cases, whether first time marriage or remarriage-the couple must confess their sin to each other and to God before and vow to live a chaste life from that time on.)

There is one other related issue I believe needs to be addressed. There are some who argue that we should freely allow remarriage because by forbidding it or by limiting it to very particular circumstances we are driving people from the church. Of these people I ask the following questions. If an abortionist wanted to join our congregation, would we place any restrictions on his behavior? I think so. I hope we would not accept into membership someone who would continue in the slaughter of innocent children and in the degradation of women. Or if two people came asking for a blessing on their homosexual union, would we agree because we don't want to drive them from the church? I belong to a body of congregations that has made a united statement about its submission to the authority of God as dictated through the Scriptures which are His Word. We must recognize that while we do everything we can to show our love to all people, we cannot condone behavior that is contrary to the Word of God. Does this mean we kick sinners out the door? If it did, I'm afraid I would have to be the first to go. As Jesus gathered himself to sinners, we too must welcome the sinner with open arms. But we must call him to repentance and the obedience that comes by faith or we are not the Church and have failed in the primary task to which our Lord Jesus has called us.

For further study see also [Divorce & Remarriage: A Position Paper](http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/divorce-remarriage-a-position-paper) by John Piper.