



## A Case Study in Biblical Counseling and Divorce

### I. Introduction.

### II. God designed marriage to be a lifelong covenant of companionship. Gen. 2:24 Mt. 19:3ff

- A. God joins a husband and wife in marriage. Mt. 19:3-6 Gen. 2:24
  - 1. A sinfully begun marriage is still a marriage.
  - 2. A marriage of unbelievers or a civil marriage is still a true marriage.
- B. What God has joined, let no man separate.
  - 1. Those who are married should guard their own marriages.
  - 2. Those who fail to respect the marriages of others are also under God=s judgment. Heb. 13:4
  - 3. Marriage is worth fighting for.
  - 4. Some are called by God to remain in hard marriages. I Pe. 3:1-2 I Co. 7:12-14 I Sam. 25:1ff
  - 5. Many people give up way too easily, forgetting their vows B Afor better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, until God by death shall separate us.@
  - 6. People make unbiblical excuses.
    - a. I wasn=t a Christian when I married him/her.
    - b. My spouse is an unbeliever. I Co. 7:12-13
    - c. We weren=t married in a church.
    - d. I=m doing it for my kids. I Co. 7:14
    - e. My spouse is a huge disappointment.
    - f. We were too young when we were married.
    - g. I have been living for others too long. I need my freedom to express myself.
    - h. I married the wrong person.
    - i. I would have never married this person if I knew what I was getting into.
    - j. We have irreconcilable differences. I Co. 10:13
    - k. We are no longer in love.
    - l. I owe it to myself to be happy. God wouldn=t want me to be unhappy.
    - m. All of my friends say that I ought to leave him/her.
    - n. God will forgive me. I Jo. 2:3-4
  - 7. Bad marriages can be transformed by God=s grace. II Co. 5:17ff
- C. Ordinarily a marriage ends with the death of one spouse. Rom. 7:2-3 I Co. 7:39 I Tim. 5:14



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- D. God's ideal is not merely that couples remain married, but that they find great joy as they fulfill their roles in marriage by serving one another. Eph. 5:22ff Pr. 5:18ff
- E. Marriage is a picture of God's relationship to His people. Eph. 5:22ff Ezek 16

### III. Divorce is permitted under certain circumstances.

- A. God hates divorce. Mal. 2:14-16
  - 1. Every divorce is due to human sin. Deut. 24:1-4 Mt. 19:8
  - 2. Not all parties are equally guilty.
- B. Divorce brings many consequences and much misery. The nature of divorce.
  - 1. The essence of divorce is the termination of marital obligations along with eligibility to remarry. Deut. 24:1-4 Mt. 19:9 5:32
  - 2. Divorce (and remarriage) without biblical grounds is sinful and adulterous. Mt. 19:9 5:32
  - 3. Someone who is divorced is truly divorced, even if the grounds were not biblical. They are not still married in God's eyes. Mt. 5:32 19:9
  - 4. Someone who has sinfully divorced his ex-spouse is not eligible/free to remarry. He/she should pursue reconciliation or remain unmarried. I Co. 7:10-11 Mt. 19:9
  - 5. Someone who has been sinfully remarried is really married. Mt. 19:9 Mark 10:11
  - 6. Divorce can provide protection for the innocent party.
- C. God permits divorce in cases of marital unfaithfulness. Mt. 19:9 5:32 Mark 10:11-12
  - 1. The act of adultery is a severe breach of the marriage covenant and is grounds for divorce.
  - 2. God Himself divorced Israel and Judah on the grounds of their unfaithfulness. Jer. 3:8ff Isa. 50:1 Hosea 1:9
  - 3. Sexual sin during engagement is treated as adulterous. Deut. 22:23-24 Mt. 1:19
  - 4. Other heinous sexual sins (*porneia*) can also be grounds for divorce.
  - 5. The innocent party does not have to divorce. He/she is free to forgive, which is often the best outcome. Eph. 4:32 Hosea 2-3
  - 6. The lawfully divorced person is free to remarry.
  - 7. These principles apply equally to both men and to women. Mark 10:11-12



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8. Under the Old Covenant adultery resulted in the death penalty, which would have ended the marriage and freed the innocent spouse to remarry. Dt. 22:22 Lev. 20:10
  9. If, after an unbiblical divorce, one's ex-spouse remarries, reconciliation becomes impossible and remarriage would then be allowed.
- D. God permits divorce when an unbelieving spouse abandons the marriage. I Co. 7:12-16
1. If the unbeliever is willing to stay, the believer should remain in the marriage and do everything within his/her power to make the marriage work.
    - a. This is a shift from the Old Covenant in which those who intermarried with those outside Israel were forced to divorce their spouses. Ezra 10:10-11, 18ff
    - b. It is assumed that the believing spouse was converted after the marriage, since it is forbidden for a believer to marry an unbeliever. I Co. 7:39
    - c. The believing spouse should not attempt to drive the unbeliever away.
  2. If the unbeliever abandons the marriage, the believer is free from obligation to that marriage and free to remarry.
  3. If a couple has been wrongly divorced and one spouse seeks reconciliation but is refused by the other spouse, the spouse who sought reconciliation may consider himself/herself abandoned.
- E. What does the Bible teach about separation?
1. The concept of a legal separation, short of divorce, is not taught in the Bible.
  2. Temporary physical separation may be necessary for safety or legal reasons.
  3. Legal separation may be used for financial protection.
  4. The innocent spouse may choose to file for legal separation while waiting to see if the guilty will repent.

### IV. Hard questions:

- A. Where should the line be drawn in terms of what sexual sins (*porneia*) constitute biblical grounds for divorce? Mt. 5:27-28
1. Sexual sins with other people?
  2. Pornography and masturbation?
  3. Affairs of the heart?
  4. Sexual sin before or during engagement? Deut. 22:23-24 Mt. 1:19
  5. Wisdom, discretion and grace must be exercised in such cases.
  6. Counsel should be sought from those who have spiritual oversight. Heb. 13:17
  7. Where sexual sin has taken place, the marriage covenant has been breached



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and the innocent party has a right to know and (hopefully) to forgive.

- B. What level of proof is required to establish that sexual sin has taken place? Dt. 19:15
1. Trust is a huge issue in cases of adultery B usually there are many lies. Eph. 4:25
  2. We must assume innocence unless guilt is established. Dt. 19:15 I Cor. 13:7
  3. Trust God to bring the truth to light. Num. 23:23
- C. When should sexual sin be forgiven? Mt. 18:21ff
1. The innocent spouse may have the opportunity to restore the marriage through showing Christlike forgiveness to the guilty spouse. Mt. 18:21ff Eph. 4:32
  2. How can you know if the guilty party is repentant? II Co. 7:10-11
  3. No-one can know with certainty that a person is inwardly repentant and that he or she never be unfaithful again, which means we must trust God. Jer. 17:5-8
  4. It may be wise to have a waiting period to test whether repentance is genuine.
  5. Sin which has been fully forgiven can no longer be used as a ground for adultery. Eph. 4:32 Jer. 31:34
  6. Must the innocent spouse forgive and take the guilty back? Mt. 18:21ff 19:9
  7. Is there any sense in which forgiveness can be granted while still going ahead with a divorce? Num. 14:19ff II Sam. 12:13-14
- D. Exactly what constitutes abandonment?
1. Can someone abandon the marriage without filing for divorce?
  2. Can someone abandon the marriage without physically moving out?
  3. Is the refusal to fulfil basic marital duties abandonment? Ex. 21:10 I Tim. 5:8 I Co. 7:3-5 Eph. 5:29
  4. If one is unable to fulfill marital duties, then he/she is not guilty of willfully abandoning the marriage.
  5. What if the wife is unsubmitive and/or the husband is a poor spiritual leader?
  6. Can abuse constitute abandonment? I Co. 7:15
  7. Asking a direct question to the unbelieving spouse may help to clarify the situation: AAre you committed to this marriage?@
  8. Beware. Stretching the meaning of abandonment can lead to a slippery slope which could justify many unbiblical divorces.



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- E. What if a professing believer abandons the marriage?
1. Through the process of church discipline he will either recommit to the marriage or he will be removed from the church, which means he can be treated as an unbeliever. I Cor. 5:1ff Mt. 18:15ff
- F. Churches which fail to shepherd their sheep and practice church discipline make bad situations worse. Heb. 13:17 When one has biblical grounds for divorce, how long should he/she wait to see if the other person repents?
- G. What if someone who has been unbiblically divorced remarries? Should she/he divorce his/her new spouse and go back to the first spouse? I Cor. 7:26-27 Dt. 24:1ff
1. He is really divorced and really remarried.
  2. Confess your past sin to God and those affected. Then seek to honor Him in your present marriage.
  3. God can still bless a marriage with a sinful beginning. II Sam. 12:24-25
- H. What situation is Paul envisioning in I Corinthians 7:10-11 when he seems to allow a woman to abandon her marriage on unbiblical grounds with limited consequences?
1. Why doesn't Paul just tell her to go back to her husband if their divorce is not for biblical grounds (or else there would be church discipline I Cor. 5:1ff)?
  2. Can this be a situation in which her grounds are questionable, but not certain?
  3. Church leaders may face rare situations in which they are not convinced that there are biblical grounds for divorce, but they aren't fully convinced that there aren't biblical grounds. In this case they would advise against divorce or separation, but would not have sufficient grounds to exercise church discipline.
- I. If a believer has been divorced from an unbelieving spouse, should or can he/she remarry her/him? I Co. 7:10-11,27,39 Mt. 19:6
- J. What role does the government have in regulating marriage and divorce?
1. Nothing in the Bible instructs or authorizes the government to regulate marriage.
  2. Should governments legally prevent divorce?
    - a. Under the Old Covenant divorce was forbidden under two exceptional circumstances. Dt. 22:19,29
    - b. Nothing in the Bible says that people should be legally prevented from getting a divorce, even a sinful divorce. Mt. 19:8 I Co. 7:15 Dt. 24:1ff
  3. Nor does Scripture require a waiting period before divorce.



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4. Tragically, the government may need to get involved in cases of divorce to settle issues of child support, custody, etc.
  5. Should Christians create their own marriage contracts?
  6. What should be done in countries in which divorce is illegal?
  7. Can a couple ever consider themselves married if they are not legally married?
- K. Does the prohibition of remarrying one's former spouse after his/her remarriage and divorce (or the death of the second spouse) apply under the New Covenant?  
Dt. 24:1ff

### V. Conclusion.

- A. Though we were unfaithful, God has been gracious to us. I Co. 6:9-11
- B. Recommended resources
1. Adams, Jay; Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible.
  2. MacArthur, John; The Divorce Dilemma.
  3. Wayne Mack, Rebuilding a Marriage after an Affair (audio and outline).
  4. Murray, John; Divorce.
  5. Priolo, Lou; Divorce Before You Say I Don't.