



Divorce and Remarriage in The Church: A Summary of Biblical Instruction by Andrew H. Selle, D.Min.

Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.¹

On the subject of divorce, and remarriage after divorce, sincere Christians have voiced a range of opinions. All agree, however, that God created marriage as a sacred institution and that, at best, divorce is a last resort to resolve an intolerable situation. Even if divorce is not always sinful, it always is caused by sin. Therein lies our hope: Jesus Christ came into the world to save broken sinners, and therefore he can rescue broken marriages. I humbly present this paper to summarize my convictions on these matters² to give hope to strugglers and guidance to the church.

WHO ARE THE TWO GROUPS THE APOSTLE PAUL INSTRUCTS?

To help us reach a full and balanced view, we begin with Paul's instructions to the post-Pentecost church. He clearly addresses potential divorcees in two different categories: a believing couple (1 Cor. 7:10-11) and a believer married to an unbeliever (12-16).

For the first group, he instructs the believing couple not to divorce, and if they already have done so, they should remarry each other. And since marriage to someone else ends the original marriage, they should live as unmarried individuals until their union is restored. In such situations, the church—and especially church leadership—should intervene to assist in both biblical reconciliation and, if possible, the restoration of the marriage.³

The apostle then gives authoritative⁴ instructions for the second case, a believer married to an unbelieving spouse.⁵ This is the context for Paul's charge to the believer to remain in the mixed marriage, but not "stand in the doorway" if the unbelieving spouse wants to abandon it.⁶ In reality, the smog of sin permeates every broken marriage throughout, so patience is

¹ Genesis 2:24 in KJV. Other Scripture quotes (in italics) are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

² The views expressed in this paper are similar to those in the classic work by John Murray, *Divorce* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1976) and a more recent adaptation by Jim Newheiser, *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage: Critical Questions and Answers* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2017).

³ Biblical reconciliation through confession and forgiveness is related to, but distinct from restoration of the marriage. Paul does not present *remain unmarried* as a godly alternative to remarrying the Christian spouse, as though he would approve of a believer divorcing and then joining a monastery. He means, "If you've already sinned by wrongly divorcing, don't add the additional sin of remarrying someone else"—which would drive the nail in the coffin for the original marriage.

⁴ Jesus himself addressed the case of marriage within the covenant community (*not I, but the Lord*, vs. 10; cf. Matt. 5:32; Luke 16:8). We have no biblical record of our Lord addressing the second case of mixed marriages. Yet Paul instructs the church with apostolic authority. *I, not the Lord* is not an expression indicating humble take-it-or-leave-it advice. Rather, he actually places his own words next to Christ's and states "As an apostle, I speak on Christ's behalf with his authority." The claim is breathtaking.

⁵ The apostle probably had in mind the husband or wife who came to Christ after marriage, but their spouse remained in unbelief (cf. 1 Peter 3:1-6). Yet his instructions apply to any believer currently in a mixed marriage.

⁶ Many cases are not so clear-cut. For instance, what should happen if a couple marries as professing Christians, then one of them later apostatizes and leaves the faith? In such a case, the believing partner might be able to claim that his or her

always required, along with all the other fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). The believing partner must personally repent where necessary, acknowledge God's good providence in their trials, act with prudence and not haste, and seek godly counsel about weighty decisions that carry life-long consequences. Even if an unbelieving spouse departs, the believer might choose to wait for a significant period of time before taking steps to dissolve the marriage. God still does extraordinary things to honor the name of his Son.

WHAT ARE LEGITIMATE GROUNDS FOR DIVORCE?

An understanding of these two groups within the church is important context for grasping and applying biblical teaching on grounds for divorce. Scripture presents two biblical grounds for divorce: marital unfaithfulness (*pornea* Matt. 5:32; 19:9) and abandonment (*chorizo/aphiemi* 1 Cor. 7:10-16).

Ground One: Definitions are critical for defining “marital unfaithfulness.” *Pornea* is much narrower than the broad interpretation Jesus’ condemned, a practice which gave justification for a husband to divorce on a whim⁷ (Matt. 19:3-9). However, because of the expansive implications of the marriage bond (Gen. 2:18-25), *pornea* must be broader than adultery narrowly defined.⁸ Clearly the offense of *pornea* is a serious sin that radically compromises the exclusivity of the marital covenant. Today, it might include sins such as continuous use of pornography, sexual immorality short of intercourse, and secret extra-marital relationships (even if without physical sex) that break and replace the marriage bond.

Ground Two: Two words define the “abandonment” ground. *Chōrizō* and *aphiēmi* deal with the two sides of divorce—separating or forcing one’s spouse to separate. Both terms amount to the same event, the dissolution of a marriage. Paul’s counsel is clear: “If the unbeliever is in the process of leaving the marriage, let him leave.”⁹ In other words, if an unbelieving spouse is actively moving towards divorce, even if not legally finalized, *the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace.* The apostle appears to forbid the believer from contesting a divorce simply to save a mixed marriage.¹⁰ We might envision a married man who has abandoned his wife and is actively dating other women, but has not bothered to end the marriage. In such a situation, it could be determined that she has biblical grounds to file for divorce.¹¹ Extreme abuse could also be considered an abandonment of the marriage covenant such that divorce is permitted. This is especially the case if permanent separation is required to protect the most vulnerable parties, typically the women and children—both then and usually now. Sometimes obedience to the Sixth Commandment trumps the longevity of a marriage.

mate has shattered the solemn covenant “. . . to live after God’s commandments in the holy estate of marriage,” and therefore has biblical grounds to divorce the unbelieving partner. The wisdom of Christian leaders acting as a church court is crucial.

⁷ The backdrop to our Lord’s teaching was the rabbinic school of Hillel that claimed Deuteronomy 24:1 to justify a husband putting away his wife for nearly any reason.

⁸ i.e., sexual intercourse of a married person with another person other than his or her mate

⁹ 1 Cor. 7:15. The verb forms of *chorizo* are important: the first is present passive indicative (“is separating”) and the second is present passive imperative (“let him separate”). It is important to note that the modern concept of intentional long-term separation without divorce is foreign to Scripture.

¹⁰ In reality, there might be other legitimate reasons for legal action to resist a divorce, such as protection of children or protection from financial injustice. Legal options and their implications vary widely between cultures and settings.

¹¹ Understand that filing for divorce in civil courts is not the equivalent of divorce; likewise, with other actions related to physical or financial protections available under civil law. The implications of any such action depend on culture and context. In every case, it is crucial that all parties and counselors clarify the intentions behind any legal action taken.

WHAT SHOULD BE THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH AND ITS LEADERSHIP?

God created and loves marriage and he hates divorce (Gen. 2:24; Mal. 2:13-16). Sin brings dishonor to the name of Christ and the reputation of the church, and for that reason a couple should “not (be) left to their own discretion in their own case.”¹² Rather than independently deciding to divorce, a church member should seek the counsel of the church leadership, specifically the “elders” sitting as a judicial body (Matt. 18:17-20; Gal. 6:1; Heb. 13:17). At the least, they can offer wise counsel and earnest prayer. One of the most important practical reasons for this cautious and prudent approach is the high cost of divorce, especially when children are involved. Those who are suffering at the hands of a sinful spouse desperately need compassionate counsel, and often other forms of help, so they can handle these difficult decisions with godly wisdom and the support of the Christian community.

Paul’s great concern for the glory of God displayed in the church, rather than dishonored before a watching world, issues in his stern command: church members may not bring lawsuits against each other, but must settle their personal disputes in the church courts (1 Cor. 6:1-8). Therefore, contested divorces that expose sins to the world should be greatly discouraged. If an offending party refuses to repent of blatant sin, church discipline is in order, and eventually that person could be removed from the church roll—functionally re-classifying him or her as an unbeliever (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:12-13). At that point, the other party is free to divorce (1 Cor. 7:15) if the church leadership rules that there are biblical grounds.¹³

In every case, caring pastors and counselors should help the couple overcome the causes of the marriage breakdown, which nearly always come from both parties. Even if there are biblical grounds, a Christian ought to forgive the offender if he or she repents. And because this transactional forgiveness includes the promise by the offended ones that they will no longer bring up those past sins,¹⁴ biblical reconciliation strongly inclines against divorce. In any case, if the offender genuinely repents and confesses sin, and the offended party grants forgiveness, the couple can be reconciled as a Christian brother and sister—even if the marriage is over. Above all, we must keep the gospel of Christ front and center. The Lord commands patience and mercy, and he still does mighty acts of personal transformation. The One who raised Jesus from the dead can raise dead marriages. As we exercise *faith working by love* (Gal. 5:6) we will see the Lord accomplish extraordinary deeds of peace and healing (Eph. 3:20-21). For these reasons, if the sins that attacked their marriage have been forsaken and forgiven, we believe professing Christians should almost never divorce one another.

¹² the Westminster Confession of Faith 24.6 (c. 1646), a towering doctrinal statement still used today (with some revisions) by many churches.

¹³ This paper holds to a high view of the church and the importance of church leaders giving pastoral help and acting together in a judicial capacity when called to do so. In this regard, I am aligned with Newheiser (p. 274-275) and Jay E. Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1980). However, Adams takes the position that a married Christian may not divorce unless the spouse has been formally removed from the church roll by discipline—or the church itself is functionally declared a non-church because of its failure to do so (p. 90). This view is too extreme, given the confused state of today’s church. We think other factors must be considered—rather than forcing individual victims of sin to bear the consequences of the church’s corporate failures.

¹⁴ The four promises of forgiveness: “I will not dwell on it.” “I will not bring it up to use it against you.” “I will talk with others about it.” “I will not allow it to stand between us or hinder our relationship.” See www.ccmVT.org, Resources, Downloads, “Sincere Confession and Full Forgiveness” for my version of Ken Sande’s formulation. We also recommend his resources at www.RW360.org.

WHAT ABOUT REMARRIAGE AFTER DIVORCE?

Whether biblically permissible or not, divorce actually ends a marriage (see on *chōrizō* and *aphiēmi*, above), and those who are divorced are released from the former marriage—if all other obligations have been addressed (1 Cor. 7:15, 27,28a). Those obligations often are complex, so care and prudence are necessary. For example, we have seen that if two believers divorce without biblical grounds, and neither has remarried, they generally ought to remarry each other (7:10-11). On the other hand, if a believer and an unbeliever divorce, their remarriage could be forbidden since believers may only marry *in the Lord* (1 Cor. 7:39). If the original marriage is dissolved, the offending party should seek forgiveness from God and from the former spouse, and reconciliation take place as much as possible, even if the marriage cannot be restored.

In our day, biblical marriage comes under attack from many directions, some of which were inconceivable in the ancient world. As a result, many Christians are confused about areas that were once considered crystal clear. Many have no formal church connection, and if they do, their spiritual leaders often fail to give them adequate pastoral care, knowledgeable advice, or hold them accountable to their commitments. It is no wonder that struggling couples feel stranded and lost. They need compassion and practical wisdom, not condemnation. The centuries-old caution remains as important as ever, that parties should not be abandoned to “their own discretion” but allow others to speak into their lives. Marriages, divorces, and remarriages within the church reflect either negatively or positively on the honor of Christ and the witness of the church in the world. The church and its leadership must exercise a proactive role in helping troubled marriages and shepherding hurting sheep to green pastures—and sometimes through the dangerous valleys of divorce.

In the end, our deepest desire is that the gospel of Jesus Christ shine forth with all its transformative beauty. Let us heed Jesus’ command, *Go and learn what this means: “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.” For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners* (Matt. 9:13). As the Holy Spirit teaches us this lesson, may our lives and marriages—even ones that have been ruined by sin—conform to our Savior’s will: *Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God* (Eph. 4:32-5:2).