

How to Think Biblically about Divorce and Remarriage

NOTE: The Elders of University Baptist Church understand divorce and remarriage are sensitive topics, so we intend to address them with both truth and grace. This paper culminates in two recommendations to equip our church to love those who have experienced or are experiencing divorce or remarriage.

God's Purpose and Design for Marriage

One of God's purposes for marriage is for mankind to be fruitful and multiply and to fill the earth (Gen. 1:28). Adam, by himself, was unable to fulfill this purpose. Therefore, God made Eve as a helper fit to complement Adam via the union of marriage (Gen. 2:18). Marriage reflects the Trinity in that it is a complementary relationship leading to profound unity (Gen. 2:23–24). Man and woman are not the same, nor are they interchangeable, but they come together in marriage to form a unique, covenantal union.

A biblical covenant is a sacred agreement between God and mankind (or between people) in which God sets the terms of the agreement and serious consequences result if those terms are broken. Accordingly, a covenant-view of marriage is distinct from a consumer-view of marriage. The latter prioritizes the needs of the individual. The former prioritizes the needs of the relationship. As a covenant, the marriage union is to honor God with its exclusivity and permanence (Matt. 19:5-6): hence the common wedding-day promises, "Till death do us part" and "As long as we both shall live." As the Baptist Faith and Message (2000) states, "Marriage is the uniting of one man and one woman in covenant commitment for a lifetime."¹

Hard Questions

Given God's stated design for marriage, is divorce ever permissible? If so, are there specific conditions in Scripture that specify when it is? And what about remarriage? Is remarriage to someone other than the previous spouse ever permissible? If so, does Scripture provide guidelines for remarriage?

¹ "Baptist Faith and Message," Southern Baptist Convention, adopted on June 14, 2000, <https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/>.

None of these questions are easy to answer, and centuries of debate within the Church have not lessened the confusion. In fact, evangelical churches still do not agree about when divorce and remarriage are biblically permissible. Nonetheless, living in a broken world necessitates our engagement with sensitive (and even contentious) issues, and practical ministry concerns create an urgency to understand the biblical guidelines for divorce and remarriage.

Three Main Views on Divorce and Remarriage

As one might expect, the questions of divorce and remarriage are interconnected, so they are difficult to deal with independently. Andrew Naselli, in his helpful article “What the New Testament Teaches about Divorce and Remarriage,” simplifies the various positions taken by Bible teachers, pastors, and biblical scholars over the years.²

VIEW	DIVORCE	REMARRIAGE AFTER DIVORCE
1. Never Initiate Divorce, Never Remarry	Never legitimate (to initiate divorce)	Never legitimate (as long as one's former spouse is still alive)
2. Sometimes Divorce, Never Remarry	Sometimes legitimate A. Only for sexual immorality or physical desertion	
3. Sometimes Divorce, Sometimes Remarry	B. Also for other actions that break the marriage covenant, like physical abuse	Legitimate when the divorce is legitimate

When, if Ever, Is Divorce Permissible?

The simplest position for church leadership to take is View 1 in the Naselli chart: Never Initiate Divorce, Never Remarry. Yet key biblical passages argue that God does allow divorce and remarriage in certain contexts (see below). Simply stated - while God never promotes divorce, He does sometimes *permit* it. A plain reading of Jesus’s words in both Matthew 5 and 19 suggests one situation in which divorce is permitted: “on the ground of sexual immorality” (Matt. 5:32; cf. 19:9). The phrase *sexual immorality* in these verses comes from the Greek word *porneia*, which is “a general term that encompasses sexual sin such as adultery, homosexuality, bestiality, and incest.”³ We believe the intentional use of pornography also qualifies as sexual immorality. One of the purposes of sex in marriage is for spouses to deepen their covenant commitment to each other. It’s the way a husband and a wife say “I belong to you and you alone.” Sexual immorality, or *porneia*, is a violation of the intimacy of marriage; it is the forsaking of a covenant obligation.

Even though Jesus’s instructions to the Pharisees in Matthew 19 permit divorce in certain situations, we must remember that His primary point is to correct the notion that a man could divorce his wife for

² Andrew David Naselli, “What the New Testament Teaches about Divorce and Remarriage,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 24 (2019): 3.

³ Grace Community Church, “Divorce and Remarriage,” Grace to You, accessed September 11, 2023, <https://www.gty.org/library/articles/DD04/divorce-and-remarriage>.

just any cause (Matt. 19:3). Divorce is an accommodation to mankind's hardness of heart (Deut. 24:1–4) and should be the rare exception rather than the rule.

The second situation in which the New Testament permits divorce is physical desertion. When a believer is married to a non-believer, and the non-believer wishes to leave the marriage, the believer is free from the marriage covenant (1 Cor. 7:12–15).

Challenges arise when the departing spouse claims to be a believer but wishes to leave the marriage for reasons not permitted in Scripture. In such cases, the departing spouse needs to be confronted about his/her sin and called to repentance. If the departing spouse does not repent, then he/she should be treated as a non-believer (Matt. 18:15-18). The result is that the believing spouse may then be considered free from the marriage covenant, since the departing spouse is to be treated as a non-believer, notwithstanding his or her claim to know Christ.

“Sexual immorality and abandonment of one’s spouse are decisive breaks of the marital covenant”⁴ because the offending spouse has broken the call to “leave and cleave” (Gen. 2:24). Thus, in at least these two cases, the faithful party is free to pursue divorce after all attempts at reconciliation have failed. This is why we believe View 3.b), “Sometimes Divorce, Sometimes Remarry,” best reflects the biblical teaching on divorce and remarriage.

What about Physical Abuse?

A more contentious exception discussed among biblical scholars and ministry practitioners introduces a possible third alternative beyond sexual immorality and physical desertion: the act of physical abuse.

Actions like sexual unfaithfulness and physical desertion are grounds for divorce because they break the marriage covenant. Physical abuse is at least as much of a covenant breach as physical desertion: the abuser has not only failed to protect and care for his spouse, but instead has done her harm and violence⁵. Doing so is the opposite of Scripture’s call for a husband to honor his spouse and live with her as the weaker vessel (1 Pet. 3:7). Furthermore, it is an affront to his responsibility to sacrificially love his wife as Christ loved the church and give himself up for her (Eph. 5:32). Therefore, if the lesser act of desertion qualifies for a legitimate divorce, how could the greater act of abuse not?

While abuse-related circumstances may indeed result in a biblically permitted divorce, we urge the congregation to refrain from rushing to that conclusion. We would generally encourage the abused to take other steps for his or her protection, including legal separation, prior to filing for divorce. Divorce does not have to be the default decision when abuse occurs.

That being the case, the circumstances surrounding abuse and divorce are messy. The complexities will not allow a one-size-fits-all response. The Elders of UBC will carefully and prayerfully address each situation on a case-by-case basis.

⁴Trey Suey, curator, “Marriage, Divorce & Remarriage,” TGC Course, The Gospel Coalition, accessed September 11, 2023, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/course/marriage-divorce-remarriage/>.

⁵ We recognize that physical abuse is not exclusively committed by men against women. There may be times when the husband is the more vulnerable spouse due to circumstances such as physical ailment, mental disability, etc. If the wife physically abuses the husband, we believe the same principles would apply.”

When, if Ever, Is Remarriage Permissible after Divorce?

Some would suggest that one of the purposes of a biblical divorce is to make plain that the faithful partner is free to remarry.⁶ Jesus indicated that neither divorce nor remarriage is sinfully adulterous when sexual unfaithfulness has occurred (Matt. 19:9). Additionally, Paul says that the believer is not “enslaved” to the marriage covenant when a believing spouse is abandoned by an unbeliever (1 Cor 7:15). In other words, the believer is free from that marriage. As Martin Luther stated, “If someone is not bound, he is free and released. If he is free and released, he may change his status, just as though his spouse were dead.”⁷ (Paul addresses the freedom of one spouse surviving another in Rom. 7:1-3; 1 Cor. 7:39.) It is our position that if a person divorces on biblical grounds, then remarriage is permitted.

However, if spouses divorce on non-biblical grounds, either of them marrying another person would be considered an act of adultery (Mark 10:11–12). That is why Paul explicitly states that a believing woman who divorces her husband on unbiblical grounds should “remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband” (1 Cor. 7:10–11). Accordingly, a believer in this situation would be free to remarry only if the former spouse remarries, proves to be an unbeliever, or dies, “in which case[s] reconciliation would no longer be possible.”⁸

This raises two important questions: if a person who is divorced for unbiblical reasons chooses to remarry, thereby committing adultery, is he/she then living in perpetual adultery? And, if so, should the new marriage be ended? It is clear that those who divorce without biblical grounds, then remarry, commit an act of adultery (Luke 16:18). It is our position, based on Paul’s “stay as you are” principle (emphasized in various examples throughout 1 Corinthians 7), that a person who is married should stay married, even if they married under sinful circumstances. While getting married was an act of adultery, staying married does not produce a state of adultery.

Where Do We Go from Here as a Church?

First, we must value marriage as God values marriage. The ideal is that no one would experience divorce, either as spouses or as children. As a church, we must teach, challenge, and equip our people to pursue God-honoring marriages. From the pulpit to adult classes and from the student ministry to the senior adult ministry, we should teach and model God’s special call upon husbands and wives. We should also be intentional to help newlyweds and those preparing for marriage to honor God through their unyielding love for one another.

When difficulties arise within a marriage, we suggest practical steps be taken:

- A. Commit the matter to prayer. We can cast our cares on God knowing that He cares for us (1 Pet 5:7)
- B. Ask a trusted couple for counsel and prayer. In a multitude of counsel, there is safety (Prov 11:14).
- C. Share your struggles with your church deacon. If needed, your deacon can help you work through the process of receiving formal marriage counseling from trusted sources.

⁶ Suey, “Marriage, Divorce & Remarriage.”

⁷ Quoted in Naselli, “What the New Testament Teaches about Divorce and Remarriage,” 3.

⁸ Suey, “Marriage, Divorce & Remarriage.”

In situations where the steps outlined above have been taken and divorce is being considered, the decision must be made carefully. If a member of our church is inclined to pursue a divorce that he or she believes to be biblically warranted, we ask that they contact the Elders to discuss their rationale. The Elder/s will take time to listen well, ideally to both spouses. Much prayer will be devoted to the process before a decision is reached. We ask our members to refrain from formally filing for a divorce until our Elders affirm that biblical grounds for doing so are present.

Second, we must not neglect those within the scope of our ministry who have faced the reality of divorce—whether it was biblically permissible or not. There is no sin outside of God’s grace. His love and forgiveness reach to the deepest of struggles and the greatest of heartaches. Healing may sometimes be slow and will never be full until Jesus comes again, but fellow siblings in Christ can support the hurting with tangible reminders of God’s forgiveness and love.

Summary

We believe that God perfectly designed marriage to be between one man and one woman for one lifetime. We also recognize that we live in a broken world where sin affects God’s perfect design. From the teaching of Moses (Deut. 21:1–4) to statements from Jesus (Matt. 5:31–32; 19:3–9) and the apostle Paul (Rom. 7:1–3; 1 Cor. 7:12–15, 39), we are challenged to balance the ideal of God’s design for an exclusive and permanent marriage between husband and wife with the post-Fall consequences of two imperfect people entering into a marriage covenant. Therefore, we conclude that while God never promotes divorce, He sometimes permits it. In the cases that divorce is biblically permissible, we believe that remarriage is likewise permissible. In all cases, believers are called to value and honor God’s institution of marriage while also loving those walking through divorce or remarriage.