

Divorce and Remarriage: A Call to the Church

In the presence of witnesses, many of us take a solemn vow: “I promise to love and to cherish until death do us part.” However, our marriages are being parted in epidemic proportions not by death but by divorce.

In a culture reeling from high rates of divorce, the Church finds itself caught in the same maelstrom of destruction. Traumatized by the devastation left in the wake of divorce, the Church struggles not only to provide Biblical encouragement to those who are hurting, but also to give godly counsel to those who are seeking direction concerning divorce or remarriage after divorce.

Certainly, divorce is not the unpardonable sin. The eagerness of God to forgive is not in doubt. God evaluates our hearts, not our legal documents. Neither the measure of our lives nor the standing of our spirits is determined by our marital status. The question, rather, is this: “How can the people of God walk in strong obedience, surrendered to holiness?”

The Premise of Marriage

Through marriage, God created a living object lesson to demonstrate His love for His people. In the Old Testament, God illustrated the unshakeable commitment of His love through the prophet Hosea, who remained committed to his wife despite her repeated infidelities. In the New Testament, we learn that marriage reveals to the world nothing less than the unfailing, steady love of Christ for His Bride.

It is the privilege and calling of every married believer to demonstrate the *chesed*¹ love of God through a steady commitment to his or her marriage partner. This faithful commitment stands firm, regardless of the state of the marriage and regardless of the spouse’s behavior.

¹ This ancient Hebrew word conveys a rich, deep, and generous love—a merciful and unfailing loving-kindness.

This depiction of the covenantal love of God is the undergirding premise of marriage. The reason that we do not abandon our covenant partners is that God does not abandon us. The reason that we do not reject our covenant partners when they fail us is that God does not reject us when we fail Him. The reason that we do not dissolve our covenants is that God does not dissolve His covenant with us.

The perspective that there are acceptable reasons for divorce and remarriage is predicated upon three fallacies:

1. It is better to divorce than to suffer.
2. The behavior of our spouses determines our commitment.
3. Singleness is a punishment.

We have forgotten these powerful truths:

1. Suffering for the sake of Christ is both commendable and spiritually profitable.
2. Marriage is a calling from God to serve another. It is an opportunity to display the unfailing love of God. Loving a spouse who is difficult or unfaithful serves to magnify the selflessness, the forgiving generosity, and the strength of committed love.
3. Singleness is commended and even encouraged in Scripture. Far from being a punishment, singleness is a divine calling just as marriage is. Both singleness and marriage require the equipping and grace of God.

God brings healing and forgiveness to every aspect of our lives which is yielded to Him. Breaking vows and violating covenants are acts of resistance to God, not acts of surrender to God. Faithfulness, obedience, and trust are the vessels which God floods with merciful, glorious, and powerful redemption.

A divorcing and remarrying church has little to offer in the area of marriage. The philosophy of such a church and the philosophy of the American culture are essentially the same: "A lasting marriage is ideal, but it is often not possible. While divorce is regrettable, we can move past it."

Divorce rates are no better in many churches than in the general population, for many churches have nothing better to offer. The Church must rise up with a higher standard and a greater strength. This means a fervent call to marriage until death; and this vision must be embraced, not as a dreary sentencing, but as a divine and noble calling.

Compassion

Many feel that divorce and remarriage are mandated by compassion. Certainly, God's people are called to compassion; and certainly, there is none more compassionate than God Himself. There is, however, no true compassion in justifying the ripping apart of families or in condoning the breaking of holy vows.

“For I hate divorce,’ says the LORD, the God of Israel. ‘It is as cruel as putting on a victim’s bloodstained coat,’ says the LORD Almighty.” (Malachi 2:16, NLT)

Divorce is not merciful; it is an act of violence.
 It does not alleviate pain; it prolongs and expands pain.
 It does not cure; it compounds.
 The *one flesh* is not dissolved; it is mutilated.
 Children are not spared; they are shredded.

When someone wants “out” of his or her marriage, we are tempted to say, “Yes, this is too painful. You must get out. In fact, when you get away from this situation, you can be more productive for God.” But when believers divorce their spouses, they miss a powerful opportunity to glorify God by reflecting His faithfulness and by trusting Him in the midst of suffering.

Believing firmly in the compassion of God as well as in His wisdom and power is what motivates us to stay faithful to our marriage covenants. God meets us there and works His redemption through our grace-enabled obedience and trust.

Wisdom-directed intervention may sometimes be the best way to love an offending spouse. But rejection never is. We compound the injuries of wounded spouses when we feed them the weak broth of mere sympathy instead of the nourishing stew of compassionate truth—truth which will put the iron of courage in their backbones, hope in their spirits, and strong obedience in their feet.

We are called to something higher than the mercy killings of marriages. We can offer the sustaining strength, the gentle grace, and the powerful healing of God Almighty. Do we doubt His sufficiency?

King Solomon once proposed dividing a baby in two in order to settle a conflict. This non-solution was acceptable only to the specious

mother. Divorce is cutting the baby in two, for it is the severing of "one flesh." True love must protest.

We may be motivated by compassion and good intentions when we excuse divorce and remarriage. But in reality, this tolerance is not compassion. Sometimes, when we see marriages stumbling, we reach out in a sincere desire to help, as Uzzah did with the ark of the covenant. But if our instinctive acts of mercy violate the sacred covenant of marriage, then it can actually be an "irreverent act" (2 Samuel 6:7).

God has told us how to carry the covenant of marriage: we are to accept the weight of commitment on our own shoulders, maintaining the covenant as sacred. Our culture prefers to put the ark of the marriage covenant on a cart, borne by convenience and comfort. This puts marriage in a precarious position, vulnerable to inevitable stumbling.

Like King David, we may be angry at God's insistence upon respect for covenants. Later, King David wondered if he would be able to enjoy the blessing of the ark if doing so required strict adherence to God's instructions: "How can the ark of the LORD ever come to me?" (2 Samuel 6:9). Similarly, after Jesus equated divorce with adultery, the disciples wondered if it would be better not to marry than to be required to adhere to God's standards (Matthew 19:10).

If God's people, however, will faithfully shelter marriage covenants within their own homes, as Obed-Edom did, then they will be able to showcase God's blessing. In this way, God's people will encourage others to shoulder a commitment to covenants and to carry the blessing of God to their households, too.

The Church is called to strengthen, encourage, and support these who are hurting in their marriages. Although it is much easier to tear down than to build up, the demolition of a home leaves people destitute while the strengthening of a home meets the true needs of people.

We can provide God's people with understanding, motivation, and training. Compassion means

- teaching new ways of relating,
- working for healing, for growth, and for individual thriving,
- accessing resources for training, mentoring, and reconciliation, and
- committing to the spiritual warfare of prayer on behalf of others.

We are most merciful when we help others to trust God and to pursue His best.

The Biblical Foundation

Jesus made the following statements:

"But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate." Mark 10:6-10²

"Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery." Mark 10:12

"Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery." Luke 16:18

The apostle Paul wrote:

"To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife." 1 Corinthians 7:10-11

"Are you married? Do not seek a divorce." 1 Corinthians 7:27

"A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives." 1 Corinthians 7:39

These verses create clear guidelines for believers: do not divorce; pursue reconciliation. However, many Christian churches today teach that there are several exceptions to the Scriptural prohibitions on divorce and remarriage. It is believed that these exceptions occur in cases of infidelity, abandonment, and salvation after divorce:

² All Scriptures are from the New International Version unless otherwise noted.

1. Infidelity. Those who accept infidelity as a Biblical cause for divorce (and then remarriage) base their position on Matthew 19:9, in which Jesus said, "I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."

2. Abandonment. Those who argue for abandonment as reasonable cause for divorce base their position on 1 Corinthians 7:15: "But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace."

3. Salvation after divorce. Some have suggested that remarriage is acceptable if an earlier divorce occurred before salvation. This position is based on 2 Corinthians 5:17: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"

While these latter three passages provide additional instruction, they do not alter the teaching of the earlier passages; they do not qualify or modify the absolute guidelines given elsewhere. Even in cases of infidelity, abandonment, and salvation after divorce, the Scriptural commitment to marital covenants remains unwavering:

1. Infidelity. It is interesting to note that the "exception clause" of Matthew 19:9 is found in the one gospel account which is written primarily to a Jewish audience. This group would have been familiar with the ancient Jewish custom of betrothal, in which an engagement was considered so binding that the couple was referred to as husband and wife. Even though the engaged couple did not yet live together, canceling the betrothal agreement was referred to as a divorce.

The word that Jesus used in Matthew 19:9 is *porneia*, the Greek word used for sexual immorality in general. It is also the word used specifically for fornication, that is, sexual immorality between unmarried people. (*Porneia* is, in fact, translated as "fornication" in the King James Version.) In this passage, Jesus did not use the specific Greek word for adultery, *moicheia*, which is sexual immorality involving a married person. Many Bible scholars find this distinction significant, arguing that *porneia* is the appropriate word to use in reference to a betrothed person, while *moicheia* would properly refer to a married person.

Thus, the exception clause of Matthew 19:9 may be understood as permission to break a betrothal, not a marriage.

Porneia is used in John 8:41, in which Jesus is scorned as a child of *porneia*, for his accusers believed that his unmarried parents had committed fornication as a betrothed couple.

Not only is Matthew's gospel the one which is written to a Jewish audience, but it is also the only account which refers to the Jewish betrothal of Mary and Joseph, and also to Joseph's original intention to "divorce" Mary. For this Jewish audience, it would have been important to clarify Jesus' teaching against divorce by explaining that sexual impurity was justifiable cause for breaking a betrothal. This particular distinction would have been important to Matthew's Jewish readers not only as it applied to their own lives but also as it exonerated the actions of Joseph. For Gentile audiences, however, this reference to Jewish culture would not have been as relevant or even as readily understood. Accordingly, the exception clause does not appear in the other gospels.

The larger context of Matthew 19:9 is Jesus' strong endorsement of the permanency of the marriage covenant. His repudiation of divorce was so startling to the disciples that they declared, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry" (verse 10).

2. Abandonment. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul addresses marriage within the Church. Moving in an organized fashion, he addresses several different groups:

- First, Paul addresses all married couples. In verses 10 and 11, Paul states that married couples are not to divorce.
- Secondly, Paul speaks to Christians married to unbelievers. Paul explains that believers are to remain married to their unbelieving spouses. Paul then answers the question that arises: *What if the unbelieving spouse does not want to live with the Christian spouse?* In such cases, Paul explains, the believer is "not bound."

The Greek word for "bound" in verse 15 is *douloo*, which refers primarily to being in a place of service. This is not the same word used in verse 39, in which Paul says,

"A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives." The Greek word in verse 39 is *deo*, which is a tying or knitting together.³ Thus, the believer in verse 15 is released from usual acts of marital service but not from the bond of marriage itself.

Having stated in verses 10 and 11 that marriages are not to be broken by divorce, Paul now explains that a believer who is deserted by an unbelieving spouse is not responsible before God to serve in the same way as had been possible prior to desertion. The believer need not be in distress, for the inability to serve is not the same as the refusal to serve, which Paul discourages earlier in the chapter. The believer is not *douloo* bound where he or she is not welcome to serve. However, the Christian is still *deo* bound to the marriage covenant.

The surrounding verses (14 and 16) show that the desired goal is to create an influence of holiness and an environment of peace through which God can minister redemption.

- Thirdly, Paul addresses those who have never married. To this group, Paul says, "I think it is good for you to remain as you are" (verse 26).

Finally, Paul speaks to widows. As he concludes this section on Christian marriage, Paul returns to his starting premise that married couples are *deo* bound to their spouses until separated by death (verse 39). Paul states that if a woman's "husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord." Paul adds, however, that he believes that "she is happier if she stays as she is" (verse 40).

No "just cause" is given for divorce; no mention is made of marriage after divorce (except remarriage to an earlier spouse, in verse 11). Even first-time marriage is not heartily encouraged: "But those who marry will face many

³ Although *douloo* is derived from the root word *deo*, there are distinctions in meaning between the two words. *Douloo* is consistently translated to convey servitude; it is defined metaphorically as giving one's self wholly to another's needs and service. *Deo* is consistently translated to convey binding and tying, either legally or with chains. (<http://www.biblestudytools.com/Lexicons/Greek/>)

troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this" (verse 28—see also verses 32-35).

3. Salvation after divorce. Conversion does not change a person's legal status, nor does it alter historical facts or physical realities. There is, however, an incredible difference created by salvation and by submission to the Spirit: the consequences of forgiven sin operate in the believer's life now as redemptive blessing and not as punishment or curse. Being forgiven does not mean the dissolution of responsibility. To the contrary, repentance turns God's people toward reconciliation.

Relationship

God is a God of relationships. His very essence, being triune, is one of relationship.

God desires relationships, not regulations. His heart for marriage is not about who-did-what and who-gets-to-do-what. His deep heart is for restored relationship.

Is any "law" needed other than the one command to love? When we begin to admit exceptions, we soon find ourselves developing ever-increasing regulations for these allowances. When we accept infidelity, abandonment, and salvation after divorce as grounds for divorce, then we must generate many policies in response to the many questions:

Infidelity: What if a wife pushes her husband toward infidelity? While her behavior would never excuse his unfaithfulness, if her actions contributed heavily, even primarily, to the deterioration of the relationship, does she still earn a "pass"? And is the unfaithful one then free to marry someone else, too? If an innocent wife remarries, and the unfaithful husband repents, can he marry someone else?

What constitutes sufficient infidelity to justify divorce? Some teach that only repeated infidelities are grounds for divorce. How many?

Jesus said that lust is adultery. Can wives Biblically divorce their lecherous husbands? Does addiction to pornography count as infidelity? What about emotional infidelity?

Abandonment: How long does someone have to be abandoned before he or she earns the right to divorce? Does it matter if the couple tried counseling or not? Again, what if the wife pushes or provokes her husband into leaving? Can she still qualify for a Biblical divorce? What if he abandons her emotionally or financially? Does that count, too? What if the one who leaves is a believer? Does that qualify, too, even though Paul mentions only unbelievers who leave?

Salvation: What if a woman married her current husband when she was an unbeliever, but now she is a believer? As a new creature, can she choose a new husband? What if someone divorced while "backslidden"? Can that person ask God for forgiveness and then marry someone else? What if someone thought he was a believer when he divorced, but sees now that he wasn't entirely sincere in his faith? Is it only initial conversion that brings newness to our lives, or does subsequent repentance also bring newness into our lives?

When we start looking for loopholes, even though we may be motivated by commendable compassion, we violate the essence of covenant. When we create exceptions, the depiction of Divine Commitment is destroyed. Both the understanding and the practice of covenant are lost.

The erroneous teaching of divorce and remarriage is a gaping hole in the grand ship of the Church. We will be forced to continue expending our resources in bailing water until this is rectified. Until true covenant is honored, our progress will continue to be impeded. When true compassion returns in our churches, greater power will also return.

While marital separation may sometimes be therapeutic, divorce itself is a surrender of hope. The Church is called to offer hope and to commit itself to the hard work of relationship building and mending.

God is not only *able* to work redemption and glory in any situation, but He *will* work redemption and glory in every situation which is given to Him. We are not serving others when we facilitate their compromise rather than strengthen their advancement into the highest and greatest.

We have sunk to people-pleasing rather than people-loving. Merely pleasing people is as weak as cotton candy; truly loving people is as strong as the right arm of God Himself. We fail people when we shrink back from speaking truth to them.

Why are we looking for what God will tolerate rather than wholeheartedly seeking for God's best? God's best is not to be feared; it is to be pursued and embraced.

We cheat God's people when we settle for less.

A Final Plea

Not only is the Church called to maintain faithfulness within marriage covenants, but the Church is called also to maintain unity within the fellowship of believers. It is ironically tragic that the effort to curtail divorce in the home sometimes creates division in the Church.

The call to the Church to demonstrate the *chesed* love of God through marriage is part of a larger call to all-encompassing holiness, which includes sharing the passionate desire of Christ for the unity of the Body. May the respectful and loving harmony of brothers and sisters in Christ be the platform from which we teach, model, and support our sacred covenants.

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July 2010