

A Biblical Perspective on Divorce and Remarriage

One of the more hotly debated issues down throughout church history has been divorce and remarriage. Unfortunately, this controversy has generated more heat than light. Therefore, the goal of this paper is to present a concise biblical perspective on divorce and remarriage and its impact on the qualifications of a pastor/elder. To meet this objective four questions will have to be addressed: (1) What does the Bible say about divorce? (2) What does the Bible say about remarriage? (3) What does the Bible say about a divorced elder? (4) What does the Bible say about grace and forgiveness?

1. What does the Bible say about divorce? God hates divorce (Mal 2:16).¹ God ordained marriage to last a lifetime (Gen 2:24; Matt 19:4-6) but since the fall of mankind, God has permitted divorce because of the hardness of men's hearts (Matt 19:8). The key Old Testament text on divorce is Deuteronomy 24:1-4.² In this passage, permission for divorce was granted on the ground of a mysterious Hebrew term³ that is translated "indecency" or "uncleanness." The "indecency" must have referred originally to conduct on the part of the wife that the husband deemed shameful or offensive. It is clear that the "indecency" did not refer to adultery since God prescribed the death penalty by stoning for adultery (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22). The indecency must have been a sin or pattern of fornication that would cause the husband to treat his wife in a way that was even more displeasing to God than the act of divorce itself (e.g. marrying a second wife, physically abusing her to the point of death, etc.).⁴ **Summary:** Under the Old Testament law, Moses permitted a husband to divorce his wife for shameful and lewd behavior. Note: The Old Testament law is not binding on Gentile Christians.

In the New Testament, there are two passages that give us God's guidelines for divorce and remarriage: Matthew 19:1-10⁵ and 1 Corinthians 7:10-16. In Matthew 19, Jesus was addressing Jews under the law and had in mind marriages between Jews in the covenant community. Jesus states, "And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery" (19:9). The word that is translated "immorality" is the Greek word *porneia*. This word refers to "prostitution, unchastity, fornication, and every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse."⁶ The premier Greek lexicons demonstrate that the terms *porneia* (immorality) and *moicheia* (adultery) can be used interchangeably (see 1 Thess 4:3-4). In several other New Testament passages *porneia* is used in an all-inclusive sense, which includes adultery (e.g., 1 Cor 6:18; Col 3:5; and Gal 5:19).⁷ **Summary:** Due to the hardness of men's hearts, Jesus granted permission for divorce on the ground of adultery (Matt 19:9; cf. 5:32).

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul is addressing both Jews and Gentiles and is confronting a specific problem: Marriages between believers and unbelievers. The discussion is not about an innocent spouse (the Christian) initiating a divorce. Instead, the unbelieving spouse initiates the divorce.⁸ The general principle in 1 Corinthians 7:12-16 is that those who are married are to stay married (i.e., the believer should remain married to the unbeliever). But although the believer should not initiate the divorce (except in the case of the exception in Matthew), if the unbeliever should do so, the believer is no longer bound to the marriage (1 Cor 7:15). **Summary:** Paul granted permission for divorce in the case of a believer being deserted by an unbeliever (1 Cor 7:15).⁹

An interesting argument from Scripture that opposes those who claim a no-divorce interpretation is Jeremiah 3:8: "And I saw that for all the adulteries of faithless Israel, I had sent her away and given her a writ of divorce..." (Cf. Hosea 2:2) In this passage, the Lord is said to divorce Israel for her spiritual adultery. If God Himself can properly divorce His bride for adultery, then given Christ's unqualified adherence to the authority of the Old Testament, it seems difficult to conclude that Jesus would have allowed for no exceptions whatsoever. Yet, divorce should always be an absolute last resort, to be accepted only when all reasonable attempts at reconciliation have been exhausted.

2. What does the Bible say about remarriage? In Deuteronomy 24:1-4 divorce completely dissolved the marriage. The only prohibition was that divorced couples not remarry each other after marrying and divorcing new mates. In Matthew, it is critical to observe that Jesus talks about divorce and remarriage together, not divorce alone or remarriage alone. For example, if the exception clause (“except for immorality”) were removed from Matthew 19:9, the sentence would read, “And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery.” The statement, “except for immorality” coordinates the twin actions: “Divorces” and “marries another.” The natural understanding is that the exception clause should apply to both. Please note, this verse does NOT discuss an individual who merely divorces his wife and does not remarry. It only concerns an individual who both divorces and remarries. The interpretation that this verse allows divorce only is not merely improbable; it is grammatically impossible.

It is interesting that in both Matthew 5:31 and 19:7¹⁰ reference is made to “a certificate of divorce,” the same as stipulated in Deuteronomy 24:3. The very words used for divorce in the Old and New Testaments signify the thought of dissolution. In Deuteronomy 24:3, the Hebrew word for divorce, *karat*, means “a cutting off,”¹¹ so that the bill of divorce was a bill of cutting off. In the New Testament the Greek word for divorce is *apoluo* the primary meaning of which is “to set free, to release.” It would appear that the bill of divorce separated so as to grant remarriage, otherwise God’s permission for remarriage granted the right to take up an adulterous relationship. **Summary:** If a spouse has been divorced on biblical grounds, he or she is free to remarry “in Christ” (2 Cor 6:14).

3. What does the Bible say about a divorced elder? Paul writes that an elder must be “the husband of one wife” (1 Tim 3:2b). However, this phrase can (and should) be translated “a man of one woman” or “a one-woman man.” The English words translated “husband” and “wife” are Greek words that can be translated either “man/husband” or “woman/wife” depending upon the context.¹² In this context, the translation “a man of one woman” or “a one-woman man” fits best because Paul is unveiling eleven characteristics (3:2b-3) that define what it means to be “above reproach” (3:2a). The whole passage is dealing with subjective qualities of Christian character (e.g. temperate, prudent, respectable) in which no man is 100% perfect and in which there will always be room for growth and maturity.¹³ If the clause means married only once, then it would be the only absolute quality in this list of qualifications.¹⁴

Another consideration that lends support to this view is that the nouns (“husband” and “wife”) are used without the definite article (“the”). This construction emphasizes character or nature, hence the translation “a one-woman sort of man.”¹⁵ Though the absence of the article does not “prove” the translation, it certainly supports it.

A further support for this position is found in the similar qualification placed on widows to be enrolled in the list of widows who could receive financial support in 1 Timothy 5:9. Paul states that if a widow is to be considered for this privilege she must be “the wife of one man.” Interestingly, the Scriptures nowhere forbid or even suggest as morally questionable remarriage after the death of a spouse. In fact, Paul explicitly advises the younger widows to remarry (1 Tim 5:14). Therefore, if the qualification in 1 Timothy 3:2 prohibits elders from second marriages, then the requirement for a widow to be “a one-man woman” in order to be enrolled for aid also precludes a second marriage and thus excludes from aid in their later years the younger women who followed Paul’s counsel for remarriage.¹⁶

Summary: A man who has been divorced on biblical grounds can still meet the “husband of one wife” qualification, but he must be a one-woman man. This means there must not be even a hint of immorality or impurity in his relationships with other women (Eph 5:3). The affections of an elder must be set exclusively on his wife.

4. What does the Bible say about grace and forgiveness? God loves to demonstrate grace and forgiveness to His children who have been victimized and traumatized by divorce. After all, He is the God of the second chance. The Bible records saint after saint who failed God or fell into grave sin (e.g., Abraham, Lot, Moses, Samson, Saul, David, Solomon, Jonah, Peter, Demas, etc.). Yet, God used these men in spite of themselves.

Today, God can do the very same thing: he can use a man in spite of himself and any apparent blemish. Divorce is not the unpardonable sin. In fact, a man who has suffered the loss of his marriage will often be better equipped (and certainly more motivated) to minister to approximately half of the Christian community who has also been divorced. As Paul wrote, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (2 Cor 1:3-4).

But more importantly, God’s manifold grace can be highlighted in the life of a broken and humbled man. The Lord says, “But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word” (Isa 66:2b). Paul also exclaims, “But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God” (1 Cor 1:27-29).

If God has made a man clean can we fail to consider him worthy to serve God even on the highest levels? May we not be guilty of Peter’s prejudice (Acts 10:9-16) so that God must also rebuke us and say as He did to Peter, “What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy?” We must be careful to avoid the Pharisaical error of binding men with unnecessary and oppressive burdens (cf. Matt 23:1-4; Acts 15:10) and should seek to be gracious at every opportunity.

Conclusion: A man who has been divorced on the biblical grounds of adultery and/or desertion but meets the qualifications of an elder (1 Tim 3:2-7; Titus 1:6-9; 1 Pet 5:1-3) is free to be considered for the office.

Addendum: What about the man who was divorced on unbiblical grounds before his conversion? The Bible unequivocally states, when one is saved, all his sins are forgiven (Col 2:13); he becomes a member of the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13); his body becomes a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19); he receives a new nature created after God’s own holiness (Eph 4:24); he becomes a new creature (2 Cor 5:17); and he becomes a part of God’s “spiritual house” (1 Pet 2:5) and “royal priesthood” (1 Pet 2:9). Before a man is saved, he is dead toward God and His holy standards. He has no power over sin, no knowledge of God’s Word or will; thus to judge one’s life before his new birth is totally unjust. Paul states that even adulterers (as in divorce and remarriage) were “washed...sanctified...justified” (1 Cor 6:9-11). **Summary:** Divorce and remarriage are sins; but like any other sins, they can be forgiven and the believer cleansed.

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Notes

¹ Malachi 2:16 is the only verse in the Bible where God says He hates divorce, and in the context of Malachi it is unquestionably a special hatred for a special kind of divorce. Malachi is addressing a situation where the men of Israel were forsaking their wives for heathen women. They were choosing women outside of the covenant of Israel—a forbidden thing, and were unfaithful to their spouses for unjustifiable reasons. To use this verse as a generalization of all instances of divorce, however, is unwarranted and is a misrepresentation of Scripture.

² In the OT, a divorce that resulted in adultery dissolved the marriage. Deuteronomy 24:2 instructs, “and she [the wife] leaves his house [the husband’s] and goes and becomes another man’s wife.” In 24:3-4, when the woman remarried, she is not considered to have two husbands because specific reference is made of “her former husband.” The case of the woman in John 4 agrees with this teaching. This woman is said to “have had” five husbands (4:16–18). She was not presently married to five husbands; her adultery and subsequent divorce negated her previous marriages.

³ Heb. *ervath dabar* (lit. “a matter of nakedness”). Cf. Deut 23:14 for the nearest usage of this phrase. In this context, for excrement to be left outside the camp and uncovered would be *ervath dabar*.

⁴ It is also worth noting that the husband could have his wife stoned if on his wedding night he discovered that his wife was not a virgin (Deut 22:13-21).

⁵ Cf. Mark 10:2-12; Luke 16:18; and Rom 7:1-3. These three passages encompass all of the NT teaching on divorce and remarriage. But keep in mind that Mark 10:2-12 does not deny the exception clause (Matt 5:32; 19:9); it simply provides the general rule. Moreover, Luke 16:18 concerns a single example of the Mosaic law on divorce, not the comprehensive teaching. Paul’s teaching in Rom 7:1-6 does not concern divorce and remarriage; he merely uses them to illustrate the believer’s release from the Mosaic law. Too much on the teaching of divorce and remarriage has been read into this passage.

⁶ See Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979), 693b.

⁷ Some scholars have even suggested that the word *porneia* is used for the wife’s conduct and *moicheia* for the husband’s.

⁸ There is a lot of controversy as to what Paul meant when he used the verb “separate” in 7:10-11. Does the word “separate” mean, “separate” or “divorce” in our modern sense? The NT does not help us much because all of its 13 usages simply mean depart or separate. In the Greek OT, a form of this same word is used of separation of place. In the ancient Greek writings the term is clearly used as a technical word for divorce. The term is also linked in the immediate context (1 Cor 7:11) with the Greek word *aphiemi*, which clearly means, “divorce.” In Matthew 19:6, “let no man separate” is in contrast to “what God has joined together,” and clearly divorce and remarriage are in view.

⁹ Is there a principle to be deduced from this passage (and others) when the deserter is a believer? Yes, in Matthew 18:15-17 “treat him as you would a pagan...” (NIV)—that is treat him as an unbeliever. See also 1 Timothy 5:8 where Paul states that a believer who doesn’t provide for the members of his household “has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” It is certainly possible for a believer to desert an unbeliever and the principle can apply. Note: In most of these cases, the deserter has committed adultery or will do so at a later time.

¹⁰ The absence of the exception clauses in the gospels of Mark and Luke can be harmonized with this interpretation when it is seen that the main thrust of Christ’s teaching is the abolishment of the provision of Deuteronomy 24:1–4 which allowed for divorce on grounds other than adultery. Mark and Luke present the fundamental teaching of Christ while Matthew in a much longer treatment includes more detail.

¹¹ Francis Brown, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew-English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1979), 504b.

¹² Koine Greek, the language of the NT does not have another word to distinguish between the two. Glasscock observes that the King James Version translates the word *gune*, “woman” 129 times and “wife” 92 times and the word *aner*, “man” 156 times and “husband” only 50 times. See Ed Glasscock “The Husband of One Wife Requirement,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* V140 #559 (July 83), 245ff.

¹³ 1 Timothy 3:3 does not mean that an elder can never have been drunk. Rather, it means that an elder must not be “given to drunkenness” (NIV).

¹⁴ 1 Timothy 3:2 does not say “an elder must be married only once” nor does it say “an elder cannot remarry.” Since the phrase is admittedly somewhat ambiguous, to place this type of stern restriction on a godly man because of such an unclear phrase seems quite unjust.

¹⁵ The New Living Translation renders the phrase in question “he must be faithful to his wife.”

¹⁶ See Robert L. Saucy, “The Husband of One Wife,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* V131 #523 (July 1974), 230ff.