

# MARRIAGE, DIVORCE, & REMARRIAGE



## A POSITION PAPER FROM STONEGATE CHURCH

Few things are more difficult to talk about than divorce. For those who have experienced the dark and difficult days of a divorce, the emotional pain is hard to convey. One pastor articulated the deep scars left behind by divorce like this:

*For many of you who have walked through a divorce and are now single or remarried, or whose parents were divorced, or some other loved one, the mere mention of the word carries a huge weight of sorrow and loss and tragedy and disappointment and anger and regret and guilt. Few things are more painful than divorce. It cuts to the depths of personhood unlike any other relational gash. It is emotionally more heart-wrenching than the death of a spouse. Death is usually clean pain. Divorce is usually unclean pain. In other words, the enormous loss of a spouse in death is compounded in divorce...The upheaval of life is immeasurable. The sense of failure and guilt and fear can torture the soul...The loneliness is not like the loneliness of being a widow or a widower or a person who has never been married. It is in a class by itself. A sense that the future has been devastated can be all-consuming...And then there is the agonizing place of children. Parents hope against hope that the scars will not cripple the children or ruin their marriages someday. Tensions over custody and financial support deepen the wounds...And add to all of this that it happens in America to over four out of every ten married couples.<sup>1</sup>*

So why discuss an issue that unearths so many deep wounds? Here are just a few of the reasons:

### 1. DIVORCE IS RAMPANT IN OUR CULTURE.

Divorce is not only lawful for something as common as irreconcilable differences, it's also cheap and easy. A quick Google search for divorce finds "Divorce Online – fast and easy", "Easy Online Divorce", "Texas Divorce Online, \$148 - divorce in 3 easy steps", "Hire Me Before Your Spouse". In addition, the ease of divorce shows itself in the number of divorces. Although nailing down specific divorce rates is difficult, everyone agrees that far too many marriages break. When marriages break, the brokenness spreads. For the first time in the United States, children living with both their mom and dad are now the minority.<sup>2</sup>

### 2. CHRISTIANS ARE BIBLICALLY ILLITERATE ABOUT DIVORCE.

There's a lack of awareness of what the Bible teaches about marriage, divorce, and remarriage, even among pastors. In his book on marriage and divorce, Jay Adams says, "I work with pastors and have done so for 14 years. I know most of the problems they face. And I know that large on their agenda of areas for study is the whole territory of divorce and remarriage. Pastors, as a whole, simply do not know how to handle the knotty questions they are being called upon weekly to face. I am not referring to liberal ministers but to conservatives - Bible-believing, Bible-

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<sup>1</sup> Piper, John. "This Momentary Marriage," 157-158.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/12/22/less-than-half-of-u-s-kids-today-live-in-a-traditional-family/>

preaching men!”<sup>3</sup> He’s correct. It’s part of the reason that so few sermons are preached on marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Pastors don’t want to preach on it because pastors are very uneasy about what to preach on it.

### **3. WE DESIRE TO BE A CHURCH THAT BOTH COMFORTS AND CONFRONTS.**

If we’re going to be a church who helps one another through the difficult and dark days that result from two sinful people marrying one another, we have to be able to both comfort with the grace of God and confront with the truth of God. And because marriage, divorce, and remarriage touch all of our lives, we need to think this issue through.

## **MARRIAGE, DIVORCE, REMARRIAGE, AND THE BIBLE**

Mark 10:1-12 is a helpful place to begin.

*And he left there and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan, and crowds gathered to him again. And again, as was his custom, he taught them. 2 And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” 3 He answered them, “What did Moses command you?” 4 They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away.” 5 And Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. 6 But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ 7 ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, 8 and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two but one flesh. 9 What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” 10 And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. 11 And he said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, 12 and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”*

This passages shows four things we need to consider:

### **1: GOD’S VIEW OF MARRIAGE.**

The primary point of this passage is to hold up God’s design for marriage. They came to Jesus wanting him to clarify all the ways out of marriage, but instead Jesus clarifies why they should stay in their marriage. In verses 6-8, Jesus points back to Genesis 2:24 and the purpose of marriage. **First, marriage is God’s doing.**<sup>4</sup> It is God, not a pastor or a judge who makes male and female one flesh. In this passage God is both creating and defining marriage, which means no human has the right or ability to define it. **Second, marriage is for God’s glory.** More than marriage is for any human being, marriage is for God. There’s a lot we can say about the purposes of marriage, but the ultimate thing we can say is that marriage is for God’s glory. Paul cements this in Ephesians 5:32, “This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.” Unlike any other relationship, marriage is meant to be a visible representation of the invisible relationship between Jesus and the church. The husband is the portrait of Jesus

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<sup>3</sup> Adams, Jay. “*Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible*,” iiv.

<sup>4</sup> This language comes from John Piper and his book, “*This Momentary Marriage*.”

pursuing, wooing, and winning over the church through his life, death, and resurrection. The woman is the portrait of the church living under the authority of Jesus. And the wife, in the way she responds to her husband, shows the world how great Jesus is! So what keeps Christians married is not our personal wants being met; what keeps us married is the desire to tell the world the truth about the never-stopping-always-pursuing love of Jesus.

## **2: GOD'S VIEW OF DIVORCE.**

Although the primary point of the passage is to display the beauty of marriage, the reality of divorce is also addressed. We learn the following about divorce from this passage and the wider context of the Bible:

**a) DIVORCE IS A RESULT OF SIN.** Not every divorce is sinful, but every divorce is the result of sin. In Mark 10:3-5, the religious leaders ask Jesus about divorce. In response, Jesus points them back to Moses and explains why Moses gave the provision for divorce, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment." Jesus clarifies that divorce is not the way it's supposed to be. Divorce exists because of hardness of heart, or because of sin. In other words, if sin didn't exist, divorce wouldn't either.

**B) DIVORCE IS HATED BY GOD.** God is careful with words. He's not prone to overstatement. Big words are used for big things and small words are reserved for small things. And Malachi 2:16 says, "'I hate divorce,' says the LORD God of Israel..." Why does God use such a big word to describe divorce? Simply put, because marriage is a big deal to God. Marriage is meant to tell the truth about the good news of Jesus, about Jesus' unending love for the church, and about the church's submission to Jesus' authority. Sadly, divorce tears at the very design and purpose of marriage. Divorce takes the gospel-illustrating picture of marriage and deforms it. There is another reason God uses a big word to describe divorce. God knows the effects of divorce. God knows the deep gash divorce inflicts upon the soul of men and women, children and grandchildren. For anyone considering divorce, please hear these words from God. God loves you. God knows what is best for you. Don't divorce your spouse. Don't buy the lie that divorce will solve your problems. For every problem it solves, divorce creates many more that will ripple through generations you will not live long enough to meet.

**C) DIVORCE IS REGULATED BY GOD.** Although marriage is meant to be a picture of God's never-dying love for his people, because of sin there seem to be two grounds that make divorce permissible.

### **GROUND 1: ADULTERY**

Virtually everyone in the first century believed there were biblical grounds for divorce, but they debated what those grounds were. The debate centered around Deuteronomy 24:1,

*"When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house,"*

The questions revolved around the definition of the word "indecency." There were two schools of thought that aligned behind two rabbis. The first school of thought followed Rabbi Shammai. He believed indecency meant some sort of sexual sin. The second school of thought followed Rabbi

Hillel. This was the majority view. He believed it meant anything undesirable in a wife could be grounds for a Biblical divorce. This was the raging debate. Matthew 19 is a parallel passage to Mark 10, which helps us sort through Jesus' position among the two prevailing views. In Matthew 19:3, Jesus is asked the question, "Is it lawful to divorce for any cause?" Jesus eventually answers their question in Matthew 19:9 by saying,

*"And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, **except for sexual immorality**, and marries another, commits adultery."*

So Jesus, talking about two Christians who are married, says that sexual sin severs the covenant of marriage so severely that it could be grounds for a divorce. Notice, he does not require it but permits it. This view has good company, and could be called the majority view. But it is not the only view. There are many who take the Bible seriously that do not believe Jesus is giving grounds for divorce in Matthew 19. They state several reasons for their position. **First**, that exception clause is not in Mark or Luke's Gospel,<sup>5</sup> nor does Paul restate it. **Secondly**, there was a word for adultery (sexual sin in marriage), but Jesus didn't use it. Rather he used a general word for all sexual sin that could be before marriage or in marriage. **Thirdly**, this group believes the exception applies to engagement, not an actual marriage. Matthew is the only Gospel writer who talks about Joseph and Mary, and the difficult situation Mary's pregnancy put Joseph in. If you remember the story, Joseph and Mary were engaged when Mary became pregnant with Jesus, and Joseph knew he wasn't the Father. Matthew 1:19 records Joseph's response, "And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly." Matthew uses the word divorce to describe Joseph's actions, even though they were engaged rather than married. In the first century, engagements were more binding than our culture considers them. Engagements were so serious that they used the word "divorce" to describe the breaking of it. So many good theologians believe Matthew alone includes this exception clause because Matthew was justifying Joseph's action of breaking an engagement with Mary, not of a person breaking the covenant of marriage.

We are sympathetic toward this view. We would anticipate some of our pastors will hold it. But we are not sympathetic enough to this view that we would put our church family under it. We believe an equally plausible explanation for why Mark and Luke do not add the exception clause is because everyone in their culture assumed it. It would be like someone asking a person, "Is it lawful for a 5 year old to drink?"<sup>6</sup> I don't have to put alcohol in the sentence for you to know what I'm talking about. It doesn't need to be clarified because it's so widely assumed.

So we are cautious but comfortable in saying adultery qualifies as a Biblical ground for divorce.

But we want to make it overwhelmingly clear, although it seems that divorce between two Christians is permissible in this case, it is never desirable. For two Christians, divorce is never inevitable. I love how Jay Adams says it, "*Since all believers have the Word and the Spirit, they have all that they need to bring about not only reconciliation but – in the future – a marriage that sings!*"<sup>7</sup> Regardless of how bad your marriage is, what your spouse did or didn't do, the sort of unfaithfulness that's ripped through your marriage, it's redeemable. If God can part the Red Sea

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<sup>5</sup> There are three parallel passages in the Gospels to consider (Mark 10:1-12; Matthew 19:1-12; Luke 16:18)

<sup>6</sup> <sup>6</sup> Thanks to Kevin Deyoung for that illustration.

<sup>7</sup> Adams, Jay. "Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible," 42.

and rescue rebellious Israel, he can rescue and redeem your marriage. This is the primary point Jesus is making in Mark 10. Jesus isn't trying to show us all the ways out of a marriage, He's giving us every reason to stay in and fight for a new and better marriage.

## **GROUND 2: ABANDONMENT**

1 Corinthians 7:10-16 is another relevant passage to consider.

*To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord ): the wife should not separate from her husband 11 (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife. 12 To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. 13 If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. 14 For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. 15 But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. 16 For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?*

Corinth was a new church plant in a pagan area. And the new church was producing great fruit. They were seeing men and women saved by Jesus. And some of these new Christians were in the difficult situation of receiving Jesus, while their spouse rejected Him. In verses 10-16, Paul addresses this difficult situation. Paul encourages couples to remain as you are. This is the theme of the passage. Paul's word to the believing spouse is to make it work, to serve your unbelieving spouse, to pray for them, to pursue them, to show them the love of Jesus. However, if he abandons the marriage even with your humble service and pursuit, you're free. This describes the other Biblical grounds for divorce. Paul's scenario is a believing spouse married to an unbelieving spouse, and despite the believing spouse's service, love, and pursuit, the unbelieving spouse abandons the marriage. In this scenario, the believing spouse is free.

**In the history of the church, these two grounds for divorce have the best company of men and women. And our pastors agree that this is where our church stands in regards to biblical grounds for divorce.** Now, what's striking about these two grounds for divorce are all the things not included: We have irreconcilable differences. They didn't make me happy. I felt unappreciated. They are lazy. They are crazy. I've fallen out of love. We have nothing in common. We don't get along. The list goes on.

At this point, the question is often asked: What about abuse? First, we would never want a spouse to be in a situation that could harm them. If a man or woman ever feels threatened, they should call the police. And depending on the situation, we would counsel separation until a sense of safety is restored. Secondly, the Bible doesn't describe in detail all the things that could be abandonment of an unbelieving spouse. Could a spouse sin in a high-handed and hard-hearted way (the sort of sin that does extreme damage to everyone around them) over a prolonged period of time, without repentance, experience church discipline, and still continue in their sin in such a way that although they are not demanding a divorce verbally, they are demanding a divorce with their actions? We are extremely cautious here and would always lean toward reconciliation and perseverance, but we would be willing to wrestle through this scenario. If the offending spouse claims to be a believer, this would require church discipline among other

things, but there could be a time when we would consider them an unbeliever who has abandoned their marriage.

### 3: GOD'S VIEW OF REMARRIAGE.

In Mark 10:10-12, Jesus also addresses remarriage, *“And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. 11 And he said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, 12 and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”*

Throughout the history of the church, there have been multiple views of the possibility for remarriage.

**ONE VIEW: No remarriage after divorce.** It's a well-honored position. Its main argument is that virtually every early church father agreed with it. But the same early church fathers also believed that when a spouse died, the surviving spouse was not free to remarry (contrary to the teaching of Romans 7). These early church fathers were likely influenced by a negative view of all things physical (sex, marriage, etc).

**OUR VIEW: Biblical grounds for a divorce gives Biblical grounds for a remarriage.** When divorce is permissible for a person, remarriage is also permissible. One way a divorce could be permissible is found in Matthew 19:9. When two Christians are married and one commits adultery, the non-offending spouse could remarry. In Matthew 19:9, when Jesus clarifies the exception for divorce (sexual immorality), that exception also applies to remarriage. In other words, Jesus is saying if you marry a divorced person you are committing adultery, unless they had biblical grounds for divorce. The other way a divorce could be permissible is found in 1 Corinthians 7. There is one believing spouse and one unbelieving spouse, the unbelieving spouse abandons the believing spouse despite their pursuit and sacrificial service. When Paul uses the phrase ‘is not enslaved’ in 1 Corinthians 7:15, we take that to mean that they are free to remarry after being abandoned by an unbelieving spouse.

## APPLYING THIS TO VARIOUS SITUATIONS

For the sake of clarity, let's apply this to various situations.

**For singles:** In light of God's view of marriage, divorce, and remarriage, it is crucial that your view aligns with God's view. You need to get clarity on these issues. Marriage is a gift from God to us, but it's not primarily for us. Marriage is primarily for God's glory and the display of the good news of Jesus to the world. Secondly, it's imperative that before you marry someone that you're confident they love Jesus and align with Jesus' view of marriage, divorce, and remarriage. If a person has less than God's view of marriage, they'll run when marriage gets difficult.

**For those married:** If your marriage is good, work to protect your marriage. Guard your marriage against sin and hard-heartedness. Men love your wives like Jesus loves the church. Ladies, show the world a picture of what it means for a Christian to respond to and follow Jesus in the way that you respond to and follow your husbands. The best way you can guard your marriage is by getting it into good community, where you can be known, pushed, and prayed for.

**For those in hard marriages:** First, if you're married and thinking about divorce, let us plead with you. Remember what your marriage represents. Your marriage, especially when it's difficult, is saying something about God's always-pursuing, never-breaking love for us in Jesus. God's grace can see you through. Lean into him. Trust him. Stay in your marriage. Second, you need to get your marriage under the authority of pastors and elders immediately. Their role is to help you, shepherd you, and walk with you through a really difficult season of your life.

**For those who have been divorced:** We're praying for a culture that consistently reminds you of how big grace is. You are not a second class Christian, so we want to point you to Jesus where grace and forgiveness is found.

**If you're divorced, single, and not the offending party.** First, we want to remind you that Jesus is enough, with or without remarriage. Secondly, as you think about remarriage, it's imperative that you wrestle with the Bible to gain clarity on how the Bible addresses these issues. This will help you discern who you could entertain a remarriage with. Marrying a person when they shouldn't remarry anyone other than their former spouse is serious. And because divorce is so common in our culture for "any reason," you'll likely need to counsel another single person you meet toward reconciliation with their former spouse.

**If you're divorced, single, and the offending party.** In other words, you divorced your spouse, but for unbiblical reasons. You're single, but you shouldn't be. The first thing needed is authentic repentance before God and your former spouse. If that hasn't happened, it's imperative that it happens immediately. If your spouse is still unmarried, reconciliation is the goal. We have a God who's in the business of miracles, who can make dead things live. Regardless of how bad your marriage was, it can be made new again in Jesus.

**If you divorced without Biblical grounds and remarried without Biblical grounds.** In short, you remarried and you should not have, either because you did not have grounds to remarry or your spouse did not have grounds to remarry. Both are sin, and both are serious. The question is, what do you do now? The answer is not to break your current marriage in an effort to go back to the one you should not have left. Rather, the principle in 1 Corinthians 7 applies... *"remain as you are."* With remaining as you are, there is also a deep need for repentance to occur. It's the posture of the heart that says, *"Father, I'm sorry. I was ignorant of the Scriptures. I was blind to my own sin. I've broken your heart, soiled the named of Jesus. Please forgive me. Have mercy on me!"* That would also mean seeking the forgiveness of all those in the direct line of your sin, which could include everyone from your former spouse, your kids, your pastors, etc.

#### **4: GOD REDEEMS DIVORCE.**

Divorce is not the unpardonable sin. Like all sin, divorce is redeemable. Many Christians who have been divorced or divorced and remarried struggle with a nagging sense of guilt and shame. There is only one way through that guilt and shame - repentance - turning from any and all parts of your sin that contributed to your divorce, and receiving the amazing grace of God that covers, cleanses, and redeems our sin, even the sin of divorce. An entire book of the Bible illustrates how grace redeems divorces. Consider the book of Hosea.

God calls Hosea to marry Gomer, the catch is Hosea's wife-to-be is a prostitute. But Hosea obeys God. He purchases Gomer out of prostitution and pledges his life to her in marriage. But Gomer breaks that covenant and rebelliously runs back into prostitution, selling herself to the highest bidder. And yet God again says to Hosea, go and get her! And yet again, Hosea purchases Gomer out of her prostitution, brings her back, and re-pledges himself to her again. Hosea is faithful to Gomer even when Gomer is unfaithful to him. The book of Hosea is not in the Bible to

highlight Hosea, but to highlight God's faithfulness to his unfaithful people! It's in the Bible to illustrate that God is the one who comes after us with a never-stopping, never-breaking, always-pursuing sort of love. One pastor put it this way, *"Even if your marriage covenant was broken in the past, if you're in Christ rest assured that the eternal marriage covenant is still intact."*<sup>8</sup>

The answer to all of our sin is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, it's the cross of Christ. So go to Jesus. Run to Jesus! With Jesus there will be plenty of grace to cover all your failures and plenty of grace to energize right living from a right heart for the rest of your life.

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<sup>8</sup> Brookhills Church position paper on divorce and remarriage.



## APPENDIX: 10 COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS & ANSWERS<sup>9</sup>

We answer the questions below with great hesitation. We have seen in Scripture what the New Testament teaches about divorce. The teaching of the New Testament is completely sufficient for life and marriage in godliness. At the same time, Scripture does not answer every question we have, particularly when it comes to this issue. Therefore, we are left with the responsibility of taking what we do know in Scripture and bringing it to bear on the questions for which we do not know the answers. You will find us constantly coming back to the truths already delineated above from Scripture in an attempt to keep the focus on what God has revealed instead of speculating too widely on what He has not revealed.

Furthermore, the views expressed below are presented to you by the consensus of the Elders. However, because of the speculation involved, some of the Elders have slightly different convictions on different issues. The responses below represent our consensus view but also leave room for personal convictions (grounded in Scripture) that differ at points.

Finally, we do not want to fall into the trap that inhibited Jesus' audience in Matthew 19. They were looking for reasons to divorce, searching for ways out of marriage, and working to justify their desires for divorce. Unfortunately, this attitude also pervades the church today, and we want to reiterate the redemptive approach, which Jesus brought to marriage. In answering the questions below, we want to avoid all attempts to justify divorce or make it possible for divorce to happen. Instead, we want to avoid divorce altogether. In the spirit of Hosea, we do not want to give up on the Gospel as the power of God for restoration and reconciliation in the darkest of situations (see especially Hosea 1-3).

There are two ways to read these questions and our answers, and the way a reader chooses will greatly influence how our answers are understood. The first way to read these answers is in an honest search for God's best in your life, in your spouse's life, and in your marriage. It is to read these answers (and this document altogether) with a passion to obey God's commands no matter what they are. This is the path of blind abandonment, a complete surrender of one's life and relationships to God that submits to His Word in every way. Such a path seeks the attitude of Christ in all things. This is a path that involves the love of Christ for one's spouse and the desire for restoration and reconciliation at every turn, always resisting divorce if at all possible. This is not the easy path, but we believe it to be the Gospel path, and we urge you to read these questions and answers in this way.

The other option is to read these questions and answers looking for a way out or a way in. What do we mean? First, there is unfortunately a way to read this document looking for a way out of marriage. Many spouses have been so hurt and so damaged in marriage that they are longing to get out more than they are longing to see the glory of Christ restored in their spouse's life and in their marriage. As much as possible, we feel the weight of the pain and wounds of readers like this.

However, we believe that marriage is a permanent covenant, and God desires by the power of the Gospel to rebuild broken marriages, no matter how shattered they are. As we have seen,

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<sup>9</sup> These questions and answers are taken from the end of the Brookhills Church position paper.

extremely narrow circumstances exist in which Scripture acknowledges divorce is possible, but this is neither desirable nor inevitable. The danger of reading these documents looking for a way out of marriage is the danger of the Pharisees who listened to Jesus speak in Matthew 19 and missed the Gospel altogether.

Likewise, many readers will be tempted to read these questions and answers looking for a way in. Maybe divorce for unbiblical reasons has been a reality for such readers in the past, and they are looking for justification to remarry. We know that situations vary and, as we mentioned, there are not always clear cut answers to questions about remarriage. However, we want to encourage readers who have been divorced and are considering the possibility of remarriage to read this document not with a view toward remarriage but with a view toward Christ. Marriage is not the answer for satisfaction in any of our lives, and neither is remarriage. Christ is. Christ is sufficient. Christ is supreme. Christ is Savior. Christ is enough. This is one of the primary points in 1 Corinthians 7 as Paul exhorts singles to stay single – for the sake of Christ and His mission. The world would have us think that marriage is the goal for a single; the Word tells us that Christ is the goal for a single. So we invite you to read these questions and answers with a view toward Christ above anyone or anything else in this world and with great contentment in the hope of an eternal marriage to Christ that will never spoil or fade.

Before reading on, we invite you to pray, search your heart, and ask God to reveal how you may be reading these questions and answers. Ask Him to give you the heart of Christ, the heart of the Gospel - that God might platform the glory of Christ in the difficult situations we face in marriage for which we do not have all the answers.

## **1. AT WHAT POINT DOES ADULTERY BECOME BIBLICAL GROUNDS FOR DIVORCE?**

Various people have asked this question in different ways. Some look at Jesus' words in Matthew 5 where He says if a man looks lustfully at a woman, he has committed adultery with her in his heart. Would this mean that lust is biblical grounds for divorce? Further, since the word Jesus uses as an exception for divorce in Matthew 19, *porneia*, refers to various types of sexual sin in Scripture, does this mean that various types of sexual sin provide biblical grounds for divorce according to Jesus?

Starting with the Matthew 5 reference, this passage (Matthew 5:27--30) occurs in the context of the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus is challenging the religious leaders regarding their view of righteousness. Throughout Matthew 5, Jesus is raising the bar, so to speak, to show them that God's standard of righteousness is far higher than any of them imagined. This climaxes in Matthew 5:48 when Jesus tells them they need to be perfect. All of this to say, when Jesus says that looking at a woman lustfully is committing adultery with her in his heart, he is not saying that physical sexual involvement with a woman is exactly the same as having a lustful thought. He is saying that if they really believed they could gain their righteousness by their works, they would gouge their eyes out and throw them away (5:29). Praise God – Christ came to make us perfect when there is no way we could ever be righteous on our own!

At what point does adultery become grounds for biblical divorce? The word Jesus uses in Matthew 19, *porneia*, does refer to various types of sexual sin and sexual immorality in Scripture. We believe the key to understanding *porneia* as grounds for divorce is to tie it with Jesus'

quotation of Genesis 2:24. Sexual sin within the context of marriage that provides grounds for divorce involves a violation of the “one flesh” meaning of marriage.

## **2. IF MY CHRISTIAN SPOUSE REPENTS OF ADULTERY, DOES THIS MEAN I NO LONGER HAVE BIBLICAL GROUNDS FOR DIVORCE?**

Jesus said plainly, *“Anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman, commits adultery.”* From this plain statement, Jesus offers this one exception for divorce that we have discussed – porneia, or adultery. So, in a plain sense, yes, divorce is permissible in this situation.

But is divorce desirable in this situation? In light of the totality of Jesus’ and Paul’s teaching on divorce in the redemptive context of the New Testament and in view of the picture of the Gospel in marriage, we do not believe divorce is always desirable or inevitable, even in the context of adultery. We do not pretend to know all the pain involved in having your husband or wife commit adultery in your marriage. At the same time, if your spouse is repentant, has sought and received the forgiveness of Christ, and is seeking forgiveness from you, we would encourage you, by the power of the Gospel, to forgive and embrace your spouse. This is the picture of Hosea in the Old Testament displayed even more clearly by Christ in the New Testament (see especially Hosea 1-3). He loves us unreservedly, and He welcomes our unfaithful souls with His ever-faithful arms. He does this repeatedly, and in the process He enables us to do it repeatedly with others, including our spouse. As a result, by the Spirit of Christ and for the glory of Christ, we would encourage you to consider not divorcing your spouse for adultery until you have exhausted every means possible for him or her to repent and seek forgiveness. We believe a divorce in adulterous circumstances would involve the offended spouse offering to forgive and praying fervently for restoration at every point in the divorce process, ready to forgive even at the last hour if the offending spouse should turn in repentance.

## **3. WHAT IF MY CHRISTIAN SPOUSE IS ABUSING ME?**

We start an answer to this question by pointing to Malachi 2:16. In the same breath that God says He hates divorce, He also says He hates a man’s covering himself (or his wife) with violence. God hates divorce and He hates abuse. Abuse is sinful and is not tolerable in a marriage relationship. We would not encourage any spouse or child to be in a home with a man or woman who jeopardizes their safety. Without question, we would implore any spouse in such a situation to remove themselves from all danger. Physical separation from a spouse may obviously be necessary in such cases.

While the seriousness of abuse cannot be overestimated, it is still not included in Scripture as biblical grounds for divorce. Our fear in recognizing this is that an abusive spouse might feel vindicated in their abuse since it apparently is not serious enough for divorce. But we want to resolutely affirm that though abuse is not a part of the exception clause in Matthew 19, it is extremely serious and it must be dealt with seriously according to Scripture.

Scripture outlines processes and procedures for addressing sin in the church. This process, outlined in Matthew 18, involves confronting a believer in his or her sin. If he or she does not respond in repentance (and prove their repentance with their actions according to Acts 26:20), other believers become involved in loving confrontation, and if necessary the church as a whole becomes involved. The goal of church discipline in these sorts of cases is always restoration and

reconciliation. This is true even in situations of physical abuse. As heinous as violence in the home is, we follow a Savior who loved, pursued, and prayed for His abusers. This is the power of the Gospel at work in one of the darkest situations a marriage can face.

In rare cases where a spouse continues to be abusive even when confronted by the church, then Matthew 18:17 says a point may come where the church treats this person as a pagan or a tax collector (basically, as an unbeliever). Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 5, Paul exhorts the church to expel the immoral brother. Such a step would be taken with great caution and with many tears after repeated attempts at restoration and reconciliation by the church as a whole.

However, if this becomes a reality, that person is then treated as an unbeliever by the church. Consequently, this changes the context of marriage, for now the marriage is between a believer and someone who has shown so little evidence of grace in their life that the church is now treating them as an unbeliever. As a result, church leaders would then help the offended spouse in evaluating whether or not grounds exist for divorce in light of the second ground for divorce: abandonment by an unbelieving spouse. Again, though, we reiterate that throughout this whole process divorce is neither desirable nor inevitable, and restoration and reconciliation of the offending spouse and damaged marriage is always the goal.

#### **4. WHAT IF MY CHRISTIAN SPOUSE ABANDONS ME?**

This question is similar to the above question in that it involves unbiblical grounds for divorce. We do, however, realize that situations exist where a Christian spouse will pursue divorce without biblical grounds. In such a situation, we would encourage church discipline in the vein of Matthew 18 to be implemented. A believer pursuing divorce without biblical grounds is sinning. Therefore, they would be confronted in their sin first by the offended spouse, then by others, and ultimately, in rare cases, by the church if the believer continues in unrepentant sin. At this point, this question becomes similar to the question above regarding the process by which sin is dealt with in the offending spouse and consequently in church leaders' guidance for the offended spouse. Also similar to the above situation, restoration and reconciliation to Christ, the marriage, and the church are always the goal.

#### **5. WHAT CONSTITUTES ABANDONMENT AS GROUNDS FOR BIBLICAL DIVORCE BETWEEN A CHRISTIAN AND NON-CHRISTIAN?**

Because Scripture is not specific in describing certain actions as indicators of abandonment, we hesitate to be specific without knowing the circumstances faced in these sorts of situations. On a whole, the thrust of Scripture's exhortation to the Christian spouse is to try to make the marriage work. The initiative for divorce in this situation would come from the non-Christian spouse. We would encourage the Christian spouse to counsel with church leaders to determine at what time and under what specific circumstances it would be best to "let him/her leave."

#### **6. WHAT IF I WAS DIVORCED WITHOUT BIBLICAL GROUNDS BEFORE I CAME TO CHRIST – IS REMARRIAGE A POSSIBILITY FOR ME?**

We as Elders have concluded that Scripture does not explicitly and decisively answer this question. On one hand, we know that when someone comes to faith in Christ, their heart is regenerated and they become a new creation; the old has gone and the new has come. Before

coming to Christ, that person is ignorant of God's Word and expectations for marriage. They now have the Spirit of Christ and for the first time understand covenant marriage as God designed it. As a result of the grace and forgiveness of Christ, some of us see remarriage as a possibility. We would also add that remarriage to the person's former spouse, if that spouse is a believer, would be the primary goal, if possible. If this is not possible because the former spouse is remarried or is unsaved and shows no evidence over time of coming to faith in Christ, then this person would be free to remarry another.

On the other hand, we understand marriage as a covenant that includes all people, including non-Christians. As a result, any person who has divorced for unbiblical reasons has broken covenant in disobedience to God. At salvation, this sin is obviously forgiven and cleansed, but many earthly consequences of sin prior to salvation still persist in a believer's life. If reconciliation and restoration with the former spouse is not possible, then remarriage is not possible.

In the absence of a clear and explicit answer to this question in Scripture, we encourage you to seek out church leaders to examine your situation and seek Christ and His Word regarding how to best glorify His Name.

## **7. SO WHEN AM I FREE TO REMARRY IF I'VE BEEN DIVORCED?**

Based on our understanding of Jesus' and Paul's teaching on remarriage and adultery, remarriage is permissible for men and women whose divorce was biblically permissible. In other words, the offended spouse in an adulterous situation and the offended spouse in the abandonment situation are free to remarry and not commit adultery.

However, even in these cases, we want to encourage the offended spouse to seriously and persistently pray, hope, and work for reconciliation with their former spouse before considering remarriage. Remarriage eliminates all possibilities for reconciliation that God may still yet bring about. As a result, remarriage should not be entered into lightly or without much prayer and biblical counsel.

If you are the offending spouse who divorced your spouse for unbiblical reasons, we encourage you to repent and turn to Christ and seek reconciliation with your former spouse.

## **8. I AM SINGLE. IS IT UNBIBLICAL FOR ME TO MARRY SOMEONE WHO DIVORCED FOR UNBIBLICAL REASONS?**

Yes, Jesus made it clear that marrying an adulterer or adulteress constitutes adultery (Mark 10:10--12; Luke 16:18).

## **9. WHAT ABOUT SEPARATION?**

We do not see evidence of separation in Scripture, and we believe that conflict in marriage should be confronted quickly, swiftly, and biblically. As a result, we are wary of prolonged separation that often isolates spouses from one another and gives them unhealthy "divorce practice" or "divorce experimentation." We recommend separation in the worst of circumstances (such as abuse) and for as short a time as possible (provided, of course, that a spouse or children are not in danger because of a potentially abusive situation).

## **10. IS GOD'S GRACE A LICENSE TO DIVORCE AND/OR REMARRY WITHOUT BIBLICAL GROUNDS?**

No, just as God's grace is not license to sin, His grace is not license to divorce and remarry apart from His design. His grace is motivation to treat divorce, marriage, and remarriage with greater honor, not less honor. The glory of Christ in the world is on display in the picture of marriage, and we guard it with everything we have.

### **FINAL NOTE**

This document is our attempt to apply the truths of the Bible to the issues of marriage, divorce, and remarriage. However, it is impossible to address in a single document the vast amount of complex situations that occur within marriage. We encourage everyone in our church family to seek counsel from our church leaders and pastors to discern how the Scriptures apply to your situation. We pray that Jesus would be honored and esteemed by how our church family approaches marital conflicts and fights for marital harmony.