

## Seeking to Apply God's Word to Our Lives

# Divorce and Remarriage

Divorce and remarriage are frequently occurring in American churches today. What does God think about divorce? Are there biblical grounds for divorce? What happens if I got a divorce on non-biblical grounds? How should the church respond to a non-biblical divorce? These and other questions will be answered in this paper.

### What does God think about divorce?

The Bible clearly teaches that God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16). Christ teaches that divorce is an accommodation to man's hardness of heart, and is in violation of God's purposes for the intimate unity of the marriage bond (Matthew 19:5). Believers today should have the same attitude toward divorce as God does. We should see divorce as a violation of God's expressed purpose for marriage.

Even though God hates divorce, He has revealed two situations in which divorce is permitted in the believer's life:

1. **Fornication by a believing spouse** – Fornication is defined as any sexual activity outside of marriage (Matthew 19:9).<sup>1</sup>
2. **A non-believing spouse leaves the marriage** – When the unbelieving spouse chooses to divorce the believing spouse (1 Corinthians 7:12-15).

In the first scenario, in which there has been unfaithfulness within a Christian marriage, there are several biblical principles that are to guide the innocent party's decision whether or not to divorce their unfaithful spouse:

- **The innocent party is to continually love as Christ has loved them** – John 13:34 reads, "*A new commandment I give to you, that you [continually] love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.*" In this verse, the word "love" is the Greek word "agape." It can be defined in the believer's life as, "seeking the best for others at your own expense." Since every action in a believer's life is to be motivated by agape love (1 John 4:7), the innocent party's decision whether or not to divorce their unfaithful spouse is to be directed by this love.
- **The innocent party is to forgive as God has forgiven them** – In Ephesians 4:32, all believers are instructed to "*Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.*" So how has God forgiven the believer? Psalm 103:12 says, "*As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.*" Isaiah 43:25 says, "*I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake, And I will not remember your sins.*" The decision to divorce an unfaithful spouse must not be motivated by resentment, anger, or vengeance. Decisions based upon these types of emotions reveal that the offended believer has not forgiven their spouse as God has forgiven them.
- **The innocent party is to trust God** – Hebrews 11:1 says, "*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*" By faith, the innocent party is to believe that God causes all things to work together for good (Romans 8:28) and he/she is to respond to this trial with joy (James 1:2-4) and thanksgiving (1 Thessalonians 5:18).
- **The innocent party is to show the patience and long suffering of God** – Colossians 3:12-13 reads, "*So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.*"

The innocent party's decision whether or not to divorce must be motivated by love, forgiveness, faith, and patient longsuffering. Decisions that are not based upon these principles are motivated by sin and are not considered biblical reasons for divorce.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 19:9 reads, "*And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.*" In this passage, Jesus explains that a man who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery. The only exception to this law is if the spouse is guilty of immorality (i.e. sexual activity outside of marriage). In this circumstance, God permits divorce after the innocent party has applied biblical principles to the current situation and he/she believes it is God's will for him/her to divorce their spouse. Several examples of key biblical principles are discussed in the subsequent portion of this paper.

### **What happens if a believer gets a divorce on non-biblical grounds?**

If a believer divorces for any reason other than the two listed above, it is non-biblical and sin has occurred. In order to restore his relationship with God, the believer needs to confess his sin, repent, and seek to restore the marriage. If restoring the marriage is not possible (i.e. the spouse has remarried), the repentant spouse is free to remarry. If the spouse has not remarried but refuses to pursue restoration, the repentant spouse should remain unmarried and prayerfully seek future restoration to his ex-spouse (1 Corinthians 7:11).

If a believer was divorced before accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, he is free to marry another believer (2 Corinthians 6:14). If the believer is married to an unbeliever at the time of conversion and the unbelieving spouse consents to remain married, he should stay married (1 Corinthians 7:12-13).

### **Can a divorced believer remarry?**

There are two circumstances in which a divorced believer can remarry:

1. Remarriage is permitted for the innocent party when the divorce was on biblical grounds. Even though remarriage is permissible for the innocent party, it is preferable that the innocent party seeking remarriage, wait until any possibility of reconciliation is precluded by the remarriage of the ex-spouse, since divorce for infidelity is not commanded but only permitted.<sup>2</sup>
2. If a spouse remarries after a non-biblical divorce, he has committed adultery because God did not recognize the validity of the divorce (Matthew 5:32, 19:9). Since the remarried partner has committed adultery, the marriage bond is now broken, and the remaining partner is free to marry a believer.

### **Can a believer marry a divorced believer?**

If the person he wishes to marry was divorced on biblical grounds, the marriage is permissible. The Bible gives a warning to anyone who is planning to marry a believer who divorced his spouse for non-biblical reasons. If the individual's ex-spouse has not remarried, God still recognizes the original marriage, and the person who marries this person will be committing the sin of adultery (Mark 10:12).

### **How should the church respond to a non-biblical divorce?**

The believer who divorces his spouse on non-biblical grounds and refuses to confess his sin and repent, is living in sin. This person is subject to church discipline (2 Thessalonians 3:14; Matthew 18:15-17). Those who have acknowledged their sin and repented find forgiveness in Christ and fellowship at Treasure Valley Bible Church.

“Seeking to Apply God’s Word to Our Lives” papers represent an overview of various Bible doctrines. Each paper contains biblical truths that often set TVBC apart from other churches and religious organizations. We invite the congregation’s biblically based feedback as we seek to accurately handle the Word of God.

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<sup>2</sup> God modeled this principle for us. In Jeremiah 3:8, God wrote Israel a writ of divorce for their reoccurring unfaithfulness to Him for hundreds of years. Although God divorced Israel, He is patiently waiting for the day which Israel returns to God and He restores His relationship with them (Jeremiah 33:7-8).