



DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

THE APPROACH OF MARINERS CHURCH

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At Mariners Church, we believe the Bible must shape our understanding of marriage—a relationship that requires a “sacrificial commitment to the good of the other.”¹ According to God’s purposes as part of the created order, marriage is foundational to the relational, social, and spiritual flourishing of human life. Since God designed and ordained this institution, He alone holds the authority to define its purpose, intention, and boundaries.

God instituted marriage to be a lifelong monogamous relationship between a man and a woman (Gen. 1:27-28; 2:22-25). The marriage union initiates the exclusive covenant of companionship between a husband and wife (Gen. 2:24, Matt. 19:3-6, Mark 10:9, Mal. 2:14), a relationship understood within the Christian tradition to be oriented toward fruitfulness in bringing new life into the world, and as a sign of the covenant love between Christ and the church.

Jesus affirmed the sanctity of marriage. He highlighted the teaching of the Old Testament that marriage is a commitment with and before God, between husband and wife. It is a commitment that extends to the society in which they live. Moreover, He opposed leaders who minimized the seriousness of divorce by permitting the breakup of marriage for trivial reasons. The Apostle Paul described marriage as an expression of the gospel and God’s covenant love (1 Cor 7:11, Eph. 5).

As a picture of salvation, the Bible compares marriage to the covenant relationship God has with His people (Ex. 19:5-6, Lev. 26:12, Heb. 9:15) and the covenant bond between Jesus and His church (Eph. 5:31-32). Tim and Kathy Keller write, “a covenant relationship is a stunning blend of law and love.”² The relationship grows in intimacy and love under the protection of its legal form. When a man and woman make vows of commitment to one another, they do so not only because of their present love, but also as a promise for love to come.

DIVORCE

It is a sad reality that so many marriages end in divorce. No one gets married looking forward to the day they’ll end up divorced. When a couple chooses to divorce, it results most often in a traumatic experience for one or both spouses, as well as for their families, friends, and especially their children. Society is jeopardized by the disruption caused by the weakening of the family nucleus. A variety of factors conspire to lead a couple to consider divorce, such as lack of commitment, financial struggles, conflicts and arguing. An alarming number of marriages end because of some form of betrayal, infidelity, abandonment, domestic violence, abuse, or substance abuse. (Nearly 60% of divorcing couples cite one of these as the “final straw” leading to dissolution.³) Divorce is a source of grief and loss no matter the reason, and it leaves behind a permanent trail of scars in the hearts of people created in God’s image. God takes divorce seriously. So should we.

Divorce is painful. But is divorce a sin? Does God make allowances for divorce? Is it okay for divorced persons to remarry or does remarriage after divorce constitute adultery? These are questions thoughtful Christians must consider when they contemplate, initiate, or experience a divorce. Our hope is to shed light on how Mariners Church interprets Scripture as we seek guiding principles that help us minister to people.

THE PRIORITY OF RECONCILIATION

At Mariners Church, we believe in the power of the gospel to restore struggling marriages and bring about reconciliation after a long period of separation or even after a divorce has been finalized. Our position on divorce and remarriage should not dissuade couples who want to reunite and reconcile. And though we believe in some cases divorce is permitted, we walk alongside couples and provide resources and programs that can help them explore, to the fullest extent, the possibility of reconciliation. We acknowledge that the process of reconciliation can be complex, requiring time, wisdom, and caution. Yet Jesus emphasized the Old Testament principles and compassion, “saying that the injured partner should forgive the partner who breaks their marriage vows and then repents.”⁴ As long as there is no threat of violence toward adults or children, we urge any couple considering divorce to pursue reconciliation through prayer, wise counsel, and study of all the relevant Scriptures with the goal of receiving God’s wisdom and direction as we seek to bring Him glory.

GRACE AND WISDOM

We believe that God sets a high standard for marriage and takes divorce very seriously, but also that God is merciful and forgiving to those who repent of any wrongdoing. He is always loving, kind, and quick to forgive any sinner who is sincerely sorry for what they have done and is trying to change. Jesus paid the penalty for our sin in full when he died on the cross, was buried, and resurrected (1 John 2:1-2). Yet, Paul made it clear that considering God’s amazing and costly grace, we should not offer any part of ourselves to sin, but to remember that we have “become enslaved to righteousness” which results in sanctification (Rom. 6:22).

Upon the precondition of repentant hearts, the views on divorce and remarriage in this paper are presented as a guide to our pastors as they counsel couples entering marriage, seeking reconciliation, or contemplating divorce now or in the future, as well as married couples seeking to walk faithfully with Jesus but are tormented with guilt and shame for their past divorce actions or experience.

VIEWS OF DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

The Bible speaks about divorce and remarriage in a handful of passages, all of which have been studied and debated for centuries. Christian commentators have arrived at four general views on the topic of divorce and remarriage.

1. No Divorce and No Remarriage.

This view upholds marriage as a bond that cannot be broken. Marriage is a covenant (or a sacrament), and not merely a contract. Proponents ground this position in the Lord's statement in Mal. 2:16 most often translated "For I hate divorce," and in the impossibility of severing the marriage bond between husband and wife because humans must not separate what God has bound together (Mark 10:9). This position holds the marital covenant as binding for life regardless of situation. Death is the only act that dissolves the marriage bond (Mal 2:10,14). J. Carl Laney writes: "The biblical concept of 'cleaving' suggests the idea of being 'superglued' together—bound inseparably by a commitment to a life-long relationship."⁵ Therefore, divorce and remarriage are not permissible on any grounds. Proponents of this view include the Roman Catholic Church which makes divorce "indissoluble" for valid sacramental marriages.⁶

2. Divorce, But No Remarriage.

This view asserts that "dissolubility" is possible because divorce at times is unavoidable. But remarriage is not permissible as long as the previous spouse remains alive. The emphasis here is on the gravity of divorce. Since marriage is an unbreakable covenant, remarriage to another person constitutes adultery because divorce does not remove the moral obligation of the initial covenant. Therefore, a valid divorce does not permit valid remarriage. William A. Heth believes there are only two general approaches to divorce affirmed by Scripture: remain unmarried or else be reconciled. Only these options "can authoritatively be set before the divorced or divorcing" Christian.⁷

3. Divorce and Remarriage after Adultery or Abandonment.

This view claims that remarriage is biblically permitted since, in the first century, divorce included the right and certificate to remarry on the grounds of sexual immorality (Matt. 5:31-32) as well as willful and irremediable desertion (1 Cor. 7:15). While the Bible "specifically states that God intended for marriage to be maintained," the previous two positions that present marriage as a "sacrament" and "indissoluble" (or make remarriage in all cases immoral) cannot be held dogmatically because "no verse in Scripture explicitly teaches that marriage is such."⁸ The act of adultery violates the covenant of marriage and therefore releases the victimized spouse from adhering to the covenant commitment (1 Cor. 7:15b). Therefore, divorce and remarriage are permitted in the cases of adultery and abandonment, since these are the two cases mentioned explicitly in Scripture.

4. Divorce and Remarriage under Several Circumstances.

This view holds to the same principles as the third but adds additional circumstances that may be situational. If, for example, the unbeliever divorces and abandons the believer, the believer is free to remarry (1 Cor. 7:15; Matt. 18:15-17; 1 Tim. 5:8). In addition to abandonment by an unbeliever, this view expands the permissible reasons for divorce and remarriage through its interpretation of the words of Paul in 1 Cor. 7:15: "in such cases." Advocates of this view take Paul's words to infer additional situations where divorce may be warranted, but only after every effort has been pursued to restore the marriage to health through pastoral support and wisdom. An example would be the case of physical and verbal abuse. Divorce and remarriage become a "legitimate possibility not only in cases of desertion by an unbeliever, but also in situations that similarly brought extensive and severe damage to the marriage."⁹ However, by no means should this view be misconstrued as condoning divorce and remarriage for any and all reasons.

MARINERS CHURCH POSITION

At Mariners Church, we concur with the fourth view. Our study of the Old and New Testaments lead us to adopt a high view of marriage, yet also to recognize several circumstances in which God releases a couple from the lifelong covenant of marriage and allows for remarriage.

BIBLICAL ALLOWANCES FOR DIVORCE

While divorce was never God's intention for His children, God is not surprised by divorce. He knows the "hardness" of the human heart (Matt. 19:8), our frailty, and our struggles. He loves us enough to guide us through these circumstances. One reason God permitted divorce through the law in Deuteronomy 24:2 was to keep men from "acquiring" and abandoning wives, instead of taking care of them. Women were especially vulnerable in the ancient near east as they were unable to provide income for themselves. A woman was dependent upon her family or her husband. God's heart for the vulnerable is highlighted here, as is the case elsewhere in Scripture (James 1:27, Ps. 68:5). He judged nations for lacking care for the poor and needy (Ez. 16:49). Both the Old and New Testaments speak against emotional and material neglect (Ex. 21:10-11, 1 Cor. 7:3-5, 32-34).¹⁰ A certificate of divorce allowed a woman freedom to remarry (Deut. 24:2).

When we combine the teaching of Jesus with the writings of Paul, we find three legitimate grounds for divorce, and by extension, remarriage:

1. Adultery, Sexual Immorality.

In Matthew 19:3-11, Matthew 5:31-32, and Luke 16:18, Jesus reaffirms God's original plan for marriage as presented in Genesis 1-2. Jesus reiterated that one man and one woman are unified by marriage, yet God allows for divorce and remarriage on account of "sexual immorality" (Matt. 19:3-9).

The Pharisees asked Jesus which side He took regarding an old and well-documented dispute between the rabbinic traditions of Hillel and Shammai regarding the interpretation of Deut. 24:1-4. Both Hillelites and Shammaites condemned adultery as something that causes the breakdown of a marriage. But the Shammaites were stricter than the Hillelites. The Hillelites allowed for divorce for "any matter," such as abuse, neglect, and even unpleasant habits.¹¹ Jesus argued for reconciliation not separation by refusing to validate such a divorce and taught that a person committed adultery if he or she remarried after a divorce for just "any grounds" (Matt 19:3-6). His answer surprised those listening, for He rejected the framework of both sides.¹² He pointed out that Moses allowed the concession for divorce because of people's "hardness of heart," thus implying that His kingdom held the answer to the problem of hard-heartedness. Jesus did not relax but intensified the standard by appealing to God's original intent. This stricter interpretation of the law led the disciples to exclaim, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry" (Matt 19:10).

Consistent with His typical response to questioning from the religious leaders, Jesus illuminates the high bar of God's law to highlight the need for grace for this and all other sins. In so doing, Jesus elevates the covenant of marriage, and yet mentions "sexual immorality" (Matt 5:32;19:9) as a condition that would make divorce permissible. The Greek term *porneia* includes a

variety of physical sexual sins and offences that “violate the ‘one flesh’ principle which is foundational to marriage”.¹³ Divorce for sexual immorality is permissible, though not encouraged or required. Because of the power of the gospel, even a couple in which one or both spouses have been unfaithful can reunite, provided there is confession, repentance and both parties working together through counseling toward healing. That said, those who divorce on the grounds of adultery or sexual immorality are allowed to remarry: they are not committing a sin either in divorcing or remarrying.¹⁴

2. Abandonment

The Apostle Paul adds “abandonment by a non-believer” as grounds for divorce in 1 Corinthians 7.¹⁵ Paul encourages believers not to abandon their unbelieving spouse and to seek reconciliation and peace whenever possible. A Christian spouse is not free to dissolve the marriage simply because the other spouse rejects the gospel. This example specifies the situation when one spouse abandons the other. Desertion has the same harmful effect on a spouse whether the abandoning person is a believer or not. In the time of Paul’s writing, “desertion was the recognized Greco-Roman method of divorce.”¹⁶ Paul’s intentional use of the plural expression “in such cases” “when he could have used the singular”¹⁷ in 1 Corinthians 7:15 refers “not only to desertion by a non-believer, but any desertion that cannot be reversed.”¹⁸ It implies the remaining spouse is no longer “bound” (in other words is “not enslaved”) to the marriage partner who has deserted the marriage, and is therefore free to remarry.¹⁹

3. Abuse, Cruelty, Addiction

Any credible threat of injury from one spouse to another or to children must be taken seriously and dealt with in accordance with the law and reported to civil authorities. A spouse or child must not remain in a dangerous situation that poses imminent risk, serious injury or death, physical or emotional or sexual harm, or exploitation by another person. We encourage separation to re-establish safety for all parties involved.

Although the Bible does not directly mention abuse as an acceptable or required reason for divorce, the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:15 suggest there are “cases” or situations where Paul “considered divorce a legitimate possibility not only in cases of desertion by an unbeliever but also in situations that similarly brought extensive and severe damage to the marriage.”²⁰ It is hard to make such a claim definitively from such a vague reference, yet we know that physical and sexual abuse are contrary to the law of God and inexcusable in the life of a believer. The damage to the marriage is harmful and “sufficiently similar to the damage from adultery or desertion.” if not worse.²¹

All three of these points come together in Malachi 2:14 where God says, “...You have been unfaithful to her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.” God uses the metaphor of a broken marriage, where a man abandons his wife and fails to sustain her with provision and love, to confront Judah for her unfaithfulness and failure to keep her covenant with God. We must interpret this passage through the eyes of the God of justice (Prov 6:16-19, 1 Cor. 7:15). God’s criticism toward Judah is akin to the failure to be faithful to the marriage covenant. Abuse, cruelty, addiction, abandonment and adultery are poisonous to marriage. This is consistent with the law in Exodus 21:10-11 “...he must not deprive the first one of her food, clothing and marital rights...” which groups together material and emotional neglect as an act of cruelty.²² Divorce is painful and leads to lasting consequences, and God does not want such pain for us. But he also does not condone abusive and cruel behavior in marriage.

THEOLOGICAL AND BIBLICAL FRAMEWORK FOR MARRIAGE AFTER DIVORCE

Jesus and Paul affirmed grounds for divorce though their posture remained focused on reconciliation and that divorce should be avoided whenever possible. Nothing in the Scriptures allows for an easy way out of a marriage that has become difficult. To break up the marriage covenant without pursuing reconciliation is unbiblical. We believe in the grace offered by Jesus through His life, death and resurrection, that He died on the cross for the forgiveness of sins. But the gift of grace by no means is a permission to go on sinning (Rom 6:1-2). We stand with Paul that “there is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1), and we pray that couples will feel safe to seek help before resorting to divorce. God does not turn his back on the repentant heart, and neither do we.

When Jesus does mention remarriage, it is a secondary point in his response to testing by the Pharisees about the grounds for invalid divorces. A person with an invalid divorce is still married, and thus commits adultery if he or she marries another. But when adultery is the basis for divorce, remarriage becomes a possibility. Clearly, Jesus is more interested in preserving marriages than forbidding remarriages. Under both Greco-Roman law and Jewish law (Ex. 21:10-11), anyone with a valid divorce certificate was allowed to remarry. According to historians, all Jewish and most Greco-Roman divorce certificates contained the words, “you are free to marry any man you wish” or something similar.²³ Death of a spouse permits a widower or widow to remarry (1 Cor 7:39). Abandonment by a spouse who refuses to reconcile, as stated above, also permits the remaining person to remarry.

We believe divorce due to one of these permissible exceptions allows for remarriage. Paul’s language in 1 Corinthians 7:15—“is not bound”—would have been familiar to both Greek and Jewish readers and this phrase implied the freedom to remarry. If a person is abandoned by their spouse, the Christian is free of his or her responsibility to the relationship and may remarry. A person is “not bound to stay with” an unbeliever who leaves.²⁴ The term was also used for emancipation from slavery, where a person was free to separate from a master. Jesus and Paul’s words show us that God’s ideal is for marriages to remain intact, that exceptions for divorce are few, and when divorce does occur, remarriage is permissible.

God offers us wisdom in his Word, warning us not act in unrighteous ways, and by the power of the Holy Spirit in us, calling us to turn from our foolish ways, but still offering us forgiveness when we repent. Jesus said that remarriage after an ungrounded divorce is like adultery (Matt. 5:32), but he did not want remarried couples to get divorced. There are times when we cannot put right the wrong we have done, and attempting to do so may actually cause another wrong. For example, after taking in consideration God’s posture against divorce without biblical cause, a remarried person should not divorce his or her new spouse because a prior groundless divorce, or because the person they married was previously divorced with or without biblical grounds. That would cause more suffering, possibly lifelong, and go against God’s justice. However, if a person has not remarried, and the prior divorce was without biblical grounds, he or she should attempt reconciliation with their former partner, as stated above.

WHAT THIS MEANS (AND DOESN'T MEAN) FOR MARINERS CHURCH

The journey of faith permeates every aspect of a person's life, including their relationships. Mariners Church is devoted to preparing those who desire to enter the covenant of marriage, supporting husbands and wives, and providing counsel when couples face struggles or crises. When necessary, we minister to those who are considering divorce. Specific situations, questions, and particulars are discussed in confidential settings with trusted believers and pastors.

At Mariners Church, we do not act as arbitrators or make decisions for couples on what is the best course of action for their marriage. We do, however, stand vehemently against destructive conditions within a marriage that place persons or children at risk of harm, violence or abuse. Through our divorce recovery programs, we seek to counsel those who are going through or have already been through a divorce so that they might experience deep healing, and if possible, reconciliation. When divorce has already taken place, we counsel couples as they consider remarriage either to the previously divorced spouse or in a new relationship.

A WORD TO THOSE WHO DISAGREE

As noted above, biblical teaching on divorce and remarriage can be interpreted in a variety of ways. The purpose of this paper is to outline the framework for our ministry and to introduce the general views we hold. It is impossible to discuss here the particulars of every relationship. Nor are we able to expand upon all our theological conclusions within the scope of this document. Due to the complexity of interpreting the few passages that mention divorce in the Bible, we know some will disagree with our position. We are confident these differences will not prevent us from working together to advance the gospel and support our brothers and sisters as they make some of the most difficult decisions of their lives.

A WORD TO PERSONS DIVORCED, REMARRIED OR NOT

Because marriage is intended to be a lifelong covenant relationship, the consequences and pain of divorce are substantial. Nevertheless, we want people to know that hope is possible. Divorce is not the unpardonable sin. We at Mariners seek to welcome people and show the love of Christ. We encourage everyone to lean on the power and gift of Jesus to forgive and heal. God understands the condition of our hearts. At times, all people are selfish and unwilling to sacrifice for another entirely. None of us love perfectly the way God loves. In the woes of our relational struggles, divorce is a last resort—a path that produces its own heartaches and emotional scars. Our ministry to those struggling in their marriage as well as to divorced couples is to offer biblical truth and compassion in support of people as they navigate these difficult seasons and experiences.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Timothy Keller with Kathy Keller, "The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God" (New York, Penguin Books, 2016), 83.
- 2 Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 88.
- 3 Scott, Shelby B et al. "Reasons for Divorce and Recollections of Premarital Intervention: Implications for Improving Relationship Education." *Couple & family psychology* vol. 2,2 (2013): 131-145. doi:10.1037/a0032025 (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4012696/>)
- 4 David Instone-Brewer, "Divorce and ReMarriage in the Bible; The Social and Literary Context" (Michigan, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), 69.
- 5 J. Carl Laney, in "Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views" Contributions by J. Carl Laney, William A. Heth, Thomas R. Edgar and Larry Richards, Edited by H. Wayne House (Illinois, IVP Academic, 1990), 18.
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- 9 Wayne Grudem, "What the Bible Says About Divorce And Remarriage" (Illinois, Crossway, 2021), 53.
- 10 Instone, "Divorce and ReMarriage..." 275.
- 11 Instone, "Divorce And Remarriage", 110-111.
- 12 Feinberg, "Ethics for a Brave New World", 605.
- 13 Stott, "Issues Facing Christians Today", 372
- 14 Feinberg, "Ethics for a Brave New World", 625.
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- 19 Grudem, "What the Bible Says...", 36,42, 44.
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- 21 Grudem, "What the Bible Says...", 45.
- 22 Instone, "Divorce And Remarriage", 110.
- 23 Instone, "Divorce and Remarriage...", 202.
- 24 J. Carl Laney, William A. Heth, Thomas R. Edgar and Larry Richards, *Divorce and Remarriage; Four Christian Views* (Illinois, IVP Academic, 1990), 190-191, 241.