

Calvary English Chapel

POSITION PAPER ON DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

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That divorce is a very painful experience is something few would dispute. The emotional trauma it inflicts on both spouses and their children often takes years to recover from. This fact notwithstanding, the statistics continue to confirm divorce as ever-increasing norm in Western society. Professing Christians are unfortunately not exempt from this sad reality and churches are often at a loss as to how to adequately respond. Further compounding the difficulty of divorce is the fact that it is often accompanied by remarriage. Complex questions surround these issues and pastors and church leaders ignore them at their own peril with God's honor, biblical fidelity, and the congregation's well-being all at stake. For these reasons, this paper will articulate Calvary English Chapel's position on divorce and remarriage in light of its leadership's understanding of biblical teaching. This position will then serve as a basis for answers to some frequently asked questions.

GOD'S INTENTION FOR MARRIAGE

It must be stated up front that any and every divorce is a tragedy because it is out of step with God's original design for marriage as an exclusive, lifelong commitment between one man and one woman. Jesus emphasizes this without ambiguity in one of the most significant passages dealing with divorce and remarriage: "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning" (Matthew 19:8).¹ This immediately follows his quotation of Genesis 1:27 and 2:24, in which he affirms marriage as a creation ordinance instituted before the fall of humanity into sin. We must therefore agree with D.A. Carson, who says "any view of

¹All biblical quotations in this paper are from the New International Version (NIV).

divorce and remarriage (taught in either Testament) that sees the problem only in terms of what may or may not be done has already overlooked a basic fact – divorce is never to be thought of as a God-ordained, morally neutral option but as evidence of sin, of hardness of heart.”² Lifelong, heterosexual monogamy remains the biblical ideal and standard. God’s hatred of divorce (Malachi 2:14-16) does not apply only in the Old Testament era.

VALID GROUNDS FOR DIVORCE

Having said this, however, we believe there are circumstances in which divorce and remarriage – though not ideal – is nevertheless permissible for Christians. *Specifically, we understand the Bible to allow divorce (and remarriage under specific guidelines, to be discussed below) for victims of either adultery or abandonment by an unbelieving spouse.* We will take each of these in order.

Adultery

As noted above, Matthew 19:3-12 is a key text for the subject of divorce and remarriage. It begins with the Pharisees’ attempt to trap Jesus with the question, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” (verse 3).³ Jesus’ response ends

²D.A. Carson. *Matthew*. Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 413.

³The question was a trap because it intended to force Jesus to choose between two popular views in mainstream Palestinian Judaism. One view, that of a rabbi named Shammai and his followers, believed that a man was allowed to divorce his wife only on the grounds of gross indecency, including adultery. The other view, espoused by rabbi Hillel and his followers, believed that a man could divorce his wife for practically anything she did that displeased him – whether real or imagined. Both schools based their view almost entirely on Deuteronomy 24:1: “If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds *something indecent* about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house...” The key phrase in this verse for both schools was “something indecent.” The Hillel school’s interpretation of the phrase was much broader

with this climactic pronouncement in verse 9: “I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.”⁴ The phrase, “marital unfaithfulness” translates the Greek word *porneia*. (It is rendered “immorality” in the NASB and “sexual immorality” in the ESV.) The word carries a “[wide] range of connotations throughout the area of sexual sin and impropriety, including the act of adultery.”⁵ Because of this broad semantic range, only context can determine whether a more specific meaning is intended in a given sentence.⁶ In the case of Matthew 19:9, its most probable meaning is “adultery” – that is, any sexual relationship that involves someone other than one’s spouse.⁷ We therefore conclude from this passage that while forgiveness

than Shammai’s, leading to their far more liberal view of divorce. (For further information, see Gittin 9:10 in the Mishnah, a Jewish religious text dating from A.D. 90-200.) In any case, this explains their question, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for *any and every reason*?” The Pharisees were attempting to make Jesus say something that would damage his reputation with the people or contradict a popular interpretation of the law of Moses.

⁴The parallel passages in the other Gospels – specifically Mark 10:12 and Luke 16:18 – do not contain the “marital unfaithfulness” exception clause of Matthew 19:9. This has led some to view Jesus as prohibiting all remarriage and Matthew’s exception clause as applicable only during a couple’s period of engagement. See, for example, John Piper, *What Jesus Demands From the World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 309-316. But the more plausible explanation behind these seemingly different accounts is that Jesus uttered the exception clause as contained in Matthew, and Mark and Luke omitted it since both Jewish and Greco-Roman society universally acknowledged adultery as legitimate grounds for divorce. They felt no need to restate the obvious.

⁵David Instone-Brewer. *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 156.

⁶1 Corinthians 5:1 is one example. The context clearly narrows *porneia*’s meaning to incest.

⁷John Piper notes that a different word, *moicheia*, is used for “adultery” later in Matthew 19:9. He concludes from this along with the fact that both words appear in Matthew 15:19 that *porneia* cannot mean “adultery” in the traditional sense – not in Matthew, at least. He views Matthew’s use of *porneia* as applying only during a couple’s engagement (hence Joseph’s decision to quietly divorce Mary in Matthew 1:19). For further

and reconciliation remains the preferred option, God permits divorce for a victim of adultery.⁸

Abandonment

The *locus classicus* for this category is 1 Corinthians 7:10-16, especially verses 15-16: “But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?” The situation here relates to a mixed marriage – one spouse is a Christian and the other is not. Both partners were very likely non-Christians at the time they married. Since then, however, one of the two spouses converted to Christianity and the non-believing partner no longer wishes to stay in the marriage, perhaps on account of the believing partner’s new faith.⁹ In such cases where the unbelieving partner intends to leave, the believer should not attempt to

explanation, see *What Jesus Demands From the World*, 313-315. While this view is not without merit, we find it unpersuasive for two reasons: (1) The context of 19:3-12 is a debate between two popular Jewish rabbinic interpretations of biblical teaching on marriage and its violation by one partner. It is *this* debate the Pharisees are asking Jesus to adjudicate on, not the issue of premarital sex; (2) Given this context, there is no reason to narrow the usual meaning of *porneia*, which certainly includes adultery. See Craig Blomberg, “Marriage, Divorce, and Celibacy: An Exegesis of Matthew 19:3-12,” *Trinity Journal* 11 (1990): 176; also Andreas J. Köstenberger, *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 232-233.

⁸In making this pronouncement, Jesus is taking a more radical position on the question of divorce than Hillel and even Shammai. For one thing, Shammai *required* divorce in the case of adultery; Jesus merely *permits* it. (See Blomberg, “Marriage, Divorce, and Celibacy,” 178; also Carson, *Matthew*, 416.) This explains in part the disciples’ amazement in verse 10, especially if – as W.D. Davies and Dale Allison propose – the Hillel view was in the majority during those days. See their *Matthew, Vol. I International Critical Commentary*. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 530. Secondly, divorce was permitted for victims of adultery whether the spouse was the husband *or the wife* (see Mark 10:11-12).

⁹Anthony C. Thiselton. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* New International Greek Testament Commentary. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 525-527.

prevent it, especially since there is no guarantee that the unbeliever will be saved.¹⁰ We conclude from these verses that God permits divorce for the Christian who is a victim of abandonment by his or her unbelieving spouse.¹¹

WHAT ABOUT REMARRIAGE?

We believe that God permits remarriage for the faithful partner of a divorce on biblical grounds – that is, either a victim of adultery or abandonment by an unbeliever. In the case of a victim of adultery, Jesus' exception clause in Matthew 19:9 applies to both divorce *and* remarriage, not divorce only.¹² In 1 Corinthians 7:15, the apostle Paul seems to grant the same permission for remarriage to the Christian who divorced because of desertion by his or her unbelieving spouse: "But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is *not bound* in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace."

While some debate surrounds the phrase, "not bound," it more than likely means the

¹⁰If, on the other hand, the unbelieving spouse wishes to remain in the marriage, verses 12-13 prohibits the Christian from seeking a divorce.

¹¹We do not believe this interpretation of verses 15-16 contradicts verses 10-11: "To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife." Unlike verses 15-16, the situation in this case is not a mixed marriage but rather a marriage between two believers in which one of the two spouses is seeking an *illegitimate* divorce (that is, in cases where adultery has not taken place). That Paul is addressing two different situations between verses 10-11 and 15-16 is shown by the phrase "*To the rest* I say this..." in verse 12, which almost certainly indicates a transition in thought. See Thiselton, *First Corinthians*, 526.

¹²Carson provides several good arguments in support of this view in *Matthew*, 416. But the issue is not ultimately decided by grammar and syntax alone. Blomberg, however, makes a very convincing point when he states, "When one further recognizes that remarriage was viewed as a fundamental right by virtually all Jews in antiquity (*m. Git.* 9:3), one should realize that if Jesus had wanted anyone in his audience to understand that he was forbidding all remarriage, he would have had to have said so much more clearly," "Marriage, Divorce, and Celibacy," 179-180.

Christian who was abandoned by his or her unbelieving spouse is no longer connected to that person in a formal sense so that remarriage would constitute adultery.¹³ We conclude, therefore, that a legitimately divorced person is free to remarry – provided that the new partner is a Christian.¹⁴ We also feel Andreas Köstenberger’s insightful comments merit further reflection:

While [a “no remarriage” view] does safeguard a high standard of marriage, it carries the danger of placing too stringent a requirement on the one whose partner is guilty of sexual unfaithfulness or abandonment. If Paul, for example, strongly urged young widows to remarry [1 Timothy 5:11, 14], why ought victims of spousal sexual unfaithfulness whose partner has remarried be prohibited from entering into another marriage?¹⁵

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What if I have undergone a divorce that does not meet either of the two criteria of adultery or abandonment by an unbelieving spouse?

In such cases where a divorce has taken place on unbiblical grounds, the first step should be confession of sin and repentance, evidenced by a genuine attempt to reconcile with the former spouse if he or she is a believer and has not remarried yet. If that person has

¹³John Piper notes that the word used for “bound” in verse 15 (*douloo*) is different than the one used in verse 39 and also Romans 7:2 (*deo*). This leads him to conclude that Paul is not granting permission to remarry in 1 Corinthians 7:15. See his “Divorce & Remarriage: A Position Paper,” available on the Desiring God website at: http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/TopicIndex/135_Divorce_and_Remarriage/1488_Divorce_and_Remarriage_A_Position_Paper/ But the two words in fact are quite related and share a similar semantic range. Moreover, as Köstenberger points out, the verb “not bound” in 7:15 is in the perfect tense, implying that “the unbeliever abandoned the marriage in the past and that, as a result, the remaining believing spouse is ‘no longer bound’ at the present time (with the effect of the abandonment continuing into the present),” *God, Marriage, and Family*, 253.

¹⁴Paul’s instruction for widows in 1 Corinthians 7:39 to remarry a person who “belongs to the Lord” would also seem to apply to legitimately divorced persons seeking remarriage.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 256.

not yet remarried, we would advise against remarriage to someone else in order to leave the door open for possible reconciliation with the first partner. God still views the couple as married in such cases and any act of remarriage by either partner would constitute adultery. If the estranged partner has already remarried, reconciliation is no longer possible and the Christian now has the option of either remaining single or pursuing another relationship under the guidance and counsel of church leadership.¹⁶

What if I committed adultery or abandoned my former spouse? Do I have any hope of ever being able to remarry, especially if I repent of my sin?

We believe Scripture prohibits any remarriage for a person guilty of adultery or abandonment if the aggrieved, former spouse has not yet remarried. Reconciliation, however unlikely, is still possible and the Christian should not compound his or her sin by remarrying without biblical warrant. If the former spouse does remarry, however, then the first marriage covenant is now de facto dissolved in God's eyes. In such cases remarriage may now be permissible provided the Christian demonstrates tangible evidence of repentance for his or her sin.¹⁷ Whether or not this repentance has been truly demonstrated will have to be determined on a case-by-case basis.

¹⁶We view this permission to remarry as being in accordance with Jesus' teaching in Matthew 19:9: the estranged partner's adultery (*porneia*) now gives the Christian biblical warrant for remarrying without committing a sin in the eyes of God.

¹⁷Such evidence would include but not be limited to sincere acknowledgement of sin and apology to the former spouse (and children, where applicable), intention to fulfill any outstanding legal obligations with regard to spousal and child support, and a mutually agreed upon period of observation and follow up by church leadership for determining the person's capability of handling a second marriage.

What if I have already remarried after undergoing an illegitimate divorce?

Those finding themselves in such circumstances should acknowledge that their decision to remarry was sin, confess it as such to God and seek his forgiveness. No attempt should be made to get another divorce and return to the first partner or live as a single person. We echo John Piper's counsel here:

The Bible ... does treat second marriages as having significant standing in God's eyes. That is, there were promises made and there has been a union formed. It should not have been formed, but it was. It is not to be taken lightly. Promises are to be kept, and the union is to be sanctified to God. While not the ideal state, staying in a second marriage is God's will for a couple and their ongoing relations should not be looked on as adulterous.¹⁸

Am I allowed to remarry if my spouse dies?

The Bible grants permission to remarry for Christian widows and widowers who would like to do so (Romans 7:2-3), provided that the new spouse is also a believer (1 Corinthians 7:39).

Does God allow divorce in other “difficult” cases such as ongoing abuse, neglect, or insanity?

The church would have to evaluate such situations on a case-by-case basis. In the most extreme circumstances a temporary separation may be necessary, especially in situations where a person's life is in danger. Even during a temporary separation, however, eventual reconciliation – if possible – would remain the goal. If the abusive or neglectful partner is a professing Christian, then he or she would be subject to church discipline or accountability, or both.

¹⁸Piper, “Divorce & Remarriage: A Position Paper.”