

# WHAT WE BELIEVE THE BIBLE TEACHES ABOUT DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

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*A position paper by the Elders of McLean Bible Church*

Jesus once summarized God's design for marriage to the religious leaders of Israel like this, "So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate" ([Matthew 19:9](#)). Divorce is not a deliberate part of God's plan from the beginning. In fact, God says He hates divorce ([Malachi 2:16](#)).

Divorce has crept into human marriage relationships, however, and today has become rampant. Approximately one out of every two marriages in America will be broken by divorce, and the rate is increasing. To those who believe in Jesus Christ, this is a disconcerting state of affairs. It is also a state of affairs that demands a clear understanding of what the Bible teaches about divorce and especially remarriage.

The purpose of this information is to explain in a concise way what God says in the Bible about divorce and remarriage. Certainly, every case involving a divorce and/or remarriage must be considered individually, but the principles explained herein should provide a biblical framework to evaluate each individual case.

This explanation operates on the following assumptions:

1. The Bible is the Word of God, inerrant, infallible, and authoritatively binding in every age and culture on earth.
2. The Bible is to be interpreted literally unless the context clearly indicates that it should be taken otherwise.
3. More specifically related to the issue of divorce and remarriage, it is assumed that whenever God grants permission for a legitimate divorce, He also grants permission for a legitimate remarriage. If God did not desire to grant permission to remarry, He could prescribe

permanent separation only ([1 Corinthians 7:11](#)). Therefore, since in some cases God does permit divorce, it is assumed that wherever He does, He also permits remarriage.

## I. MARRIAGE BETWEEN TWO BELIEVERS

The general principle for a marriage between two actively professing Christians is stated by Paul in his first letter to the church at Corinth: *“To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife”* ([1 Corinthians 7:10-11](#)).

The principles here are very clear:

1. No divorce is permitted to a Christian couple.
2. Separation is allowed in severe circumstances (e.g. physical cruelty or abuse, life threats, etc.) but never divorce or remarriage.

The only exception to this principle is found in Matthew 5:32. *“Everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman [meaning for any reason other than sexual immorality] commits adultery.”*

Since sexual relations form a bond of oneness between two people ([1 Corinthians 6:16](#)), sexual sin on the part of one marriage partner is grounds for divorce. The Greek word translated “sexual immorality” (*pornea*) is a general term and would include adultery, homosexuality or any type of sexual perversion. It should be noted that Jesus does not insist upon divorce in such cases nor command it -- nor even encourage it. Considering the Scriptures as a whole, it would seem that divorce should be a last resort, reserved only for cases of repeated and/or flagrant sexual violations. Short of this, forgiveness and reconciliation are to be sought after and the marriage preserved. If a divorce is obtained because of sexual immorality, remarriage is permitted.

## II. MARRIAGE BETWEEN A BELIEVER AND AN UNBELIEVER

The Bible speaks directly to this kind of situation in 1 Corinthians 7:12-16:

*“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. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. 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. 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. For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?”*

The principles here are also very clear:

1. If the unbelieving partner desires to preserve the marriage, the believing partner has no freedom to divorce him/her.
2. If the unbelieving partner chooses to leave and sue for divorce, the believing partner is to let him/her depart. In such cases the believing partner is free to remarry, but “only in the Lord”. ([1 Corinthians 7:39](#))

### **III. SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Every situation does not fit neatly into these categories. There are a number of varied situations that can and do arise. Many are of such a unique nature that general principles cannot be formulated for them. However, there are a few special cases that tend to reoccur regularly, and these are considered below:

**Involving a Non-Biblical Divorce** - When any divorce is obtained on non-biblical grounds and one of the parties remarries, that person has committed adultery since God never recognized the divorce as legitimate ([Matt. 5:32](#); [Mark 10:11](#)). Since the remarried partner has “committed adultery,” the marriage bond is now broken and the remaining partner is free to remarry.

**Involving a New Believer** - In the case of a person who has just accepted Christ as his/her Savior, that person becomes a “new creature” in Christ ([2 Corinthians 5:17](#)). This does not mean that God immediately erases all painful memories, bad habits or underlying causes of past marital problems, but that He begins the process of transforming the believer through the

Holy Spirit and the Word of God. Nor does this mean that the new believer is automatically freed from all responsibility related to his/her former or existing marriage.

1. If the new believer is presently separated from his/her spouse, he/she must seek genuine reconciliation with the estranged partner ([1 Corinthians 7:11](#)). If the partner refuses, and seeks and receives a divorce, the believer is free to remarry in the Lord according to [1 Corinthians 7:15](#).
2. If the new believer is presently divorced, he/she must seek genuine reconciliation with the divorced partner ([1 Corinthians 7:11](#)). If the partner refuses, the believer is free to remarry in the Lord according to [1 Corinthians 7:15](#).
3. If the new believer is presently divorced and his/her former spouse has since remarried, the marriage bond has been broken and the new believer is free to remarry in the Lord. To have the remarried partner obtain a second divorce to reconcile with the new believer would be a violation of the Scriptures ([Deuteronomy 24:1-4](#)).
4. If the new believer's former spouse has remarried and is now divorced again, the new believer is not allowed to take the former spouse back ([Deuteronomy 24:1-4](#)) but is allowed to remarry in the Lord.
5. If the new believer is presently remarried, but his/her original divorce was not biblical, he/she should not dissolve the present marriage to seek reconciliation with the former partner. To do so would be a violation of the Scriptures ([Deuteronomy 24:1-4](#)). The new believer should confess his/her sin, receive God's forgiveness, and make his/her present marriage honoring to God.

**Involving the Restoration of a Previous Marriage** - It is assumed that the grace of God becomes operative in any attempt to reconcile a marriage. Two people who repent and confess their sin, and seek God's power and strength, can once again experience the joy of a healthy marriage relationship. A true sign of repentance and salvation will be a sincere desire to restore a former marriage whenever possible.

**Involving Remarriage from a Biblical Divorce** - If the innocent party in a legitimate, biblical divorce is seeking remarriage, it is preferable that he/she waits until a spouse who is unwilling to reconcile has remarried. The purpose of such a wait is so as not to preclude any possibility of reconciliation. However, this is not to be a hard and fast rule, but will depend upon a number of factors that must be evaluated by each person in such a situation (e.g., purity of life and thought, time, children needing a father/ mother, etc.)

#### **IV. DIVORCE AND SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP**

The church has a responsibility to uphold the biblical ideal of marriage, especially as exemplified by its leadership. In cases where there has been a divorce in a person's past, the church has an obligation to restrict, for a period of time, the person's involvement in leadership until it is proven that the person's lifestyle and/or present marriage exemplifies godliness, pure devotion and sacrificial love.

On the other hand, divorce is no greater sin than any other, and must not be placed in a unique category that is not in keeping with the Scriptures. [1 Timothy 3:2, 12](#) does not prohibit previously married men from serving as elders and deacons. Such an interpretation would bar widowers from such service as well as divorced men, and this would be a clear contradiction of the Scriptures ([1 Corinthians 7:39](#), [Romans 7:1-3](#)). Where there has been repentance, confession and forgiveness from God, a believer's qualifications for leadership must be evaluated on the qualities which currently characterize his/her life. The Bible does not see divorce as a sin that is to follow a person all his/her life or permanently disqualify him/her for all spiritual service.

For questions regarding the MBC Marriage Policy or getting married at MBC, please contact a pastor or staff member at the MBC campus you attend.