

Q. What does the Bible say about divorce for Christians? When is it allowed?

A. Statistics show that divorce is about as common among Bible-believing Christians as it is among the general populace. For example, a Barna Report for the United States shows that 32 percent of all born again Christians who have been married have experienced at least one divorce while 33 percent of all adults—Christian and non-Christian—who have been married have been divorced.* This is alarming. While the remedy to this is complex and includes understanding what the Bible teaches about marriage, knowing what the Bible teaches about divorce can also help. So, in answering this question, my hope is that it will not only give us biblical knowledge (always a good thing) but that it will also cause couples considering divorce to think again and reconsider taking such a drastic action. Because, as we will see, most divorces granted today do not meet God's criteria and are, in fact, not real divorces at all.

First, let's set some foundational principles: 1) Old Covenant rules for divorce and remarriage are not valid for New Covenant Christians unless the New Testament specifically cites them as being valid under the New Covenant. 2) The Bible does not contradict itself, so that if Jesus clearly said divorce and remarriage is allowed only under certain conditions, then it is a mistake to interpret less clear Scriptures in a way that allows divorce under other conditions.

In Matthew 5:31-32, Jesus said, "It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement: But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery." In saying, "it has been said...but I say unto you," Jesus is replacing an Old Covenant law with a New Covenant one (see "The Sermon on the Mount" <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/sermononthemount.htm>). "Writing of divorcement" is from the Greek word *apostasion*. It is a reference to a

* "New Marriage and Divorce Statistics Released," <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/15-familykids/42-new-marriage-and-divorce-statistics-released>

certificate of divorce. "Shall put away" is from *apolusē*, meaning "loosen off" or "fully release." It commonly meant to divorce. *Moicheuō* is the word translated "adultery." It refers to a married person having sexual intimacy with someone who is not his or her spouse. "Fornication" is from the Greek word *porneia*, which includes both adultery and sexual intimacy before marriage. In other words, adultery during the marriage is not the only grounds for divorce. A sexual relationship the marriage partner had with someone before marriage, and did not reveal to his or her potential mate, is also grounds for divorce. But neither *moicheuō* nor *porneia* must inevitably result in divorce. It is not automatic. God would no doubt prefer forgiveness and reconciliation. But if this cannot happen, divorce is allowed.

In Matthew 19:3-9, we read,

The Pharisees also came unto him, tempting him, and saying unto him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause? And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder. They say unto him, Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away? He saith unto them, Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the beginning it was not so. And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.

In this passage, Jesus adds to what we learned in Matthew 5. He says that divorce was allowed under the Old Covenant because of the hardness of the Israelites' hearts. In other words, because they were unconverted. Then Jesus says that, according to His laws that supersede the Old Covenant laws that Moses gave, divorce for any reason other than *porneia* is not recognized. Thus, if, after such an unrecognized divorce, either partner from the marriage remarries, he or she is committing adultery.

Another important set of Scriptures is found in 1 Corinthians 7. In this chapter, Paul is answering questions about marriage that had apparently been addressed to him from the Corinthian church. In verses 1-9, Paul is speaking of potential marriages and marital principles among Christians. He continues speaking of marriage between two Christians in verses 10-11: "And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband: But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife." Paul is saying that a Christian wife should not leave her Christian husband. But if she leaves anyway, she must remain unmarried. The husband is not to divorce her. In other words, this is to be merely a separation with divorce and remarriage not allowed. It would be best, of course, if she were reconciled to her husband.

Beginning in verse 12, Paul speaks "to the rest." We will see that by this, he means Christians who are married to unbelievers. In verses 12-14, he says, "But to the rest speak I, not the Lord: If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away. And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy."

"Pleased" here is from the Greek word *suneudokei*. It is better translated "agrees." In other words, this is a decision reached jointly between the partners. What Paul is saying here is that in marriages where one of the partners is an unbeliever, if the unbelieving partner agrees with the believer that they should stay together, the believer is not to leave. "Put her away" is not the normal word for divorce. It is more general and probably refers to the husband no longer living with her but still supporting her (after all, she did nothing wrong but is simply an unbeliever). So, if one partner is an unbeliever, they should stay together under mutual agreement if possible. These verses should not be used as grounds for couples to stay together—or be forced to stay together by a church—in an abusive situation. Obviously, under such circumstances, there is no real agreement to stay together to make the marriage work. They should separate.

In verse 15, Paul continues, "But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace." The word "depart" that appears twice here is from *chōrizō*. It is the same word used for "put asunder" in

Matthew 19:6 and Mark 10:9. "Under bondage" is from *dedoulōtai*, which is a form of the word *douloō*, which means "to enslave." It is a much stronger word than the word usually used for the bonds of marriage, such as in 1 Corinthians 7:27 and Romans 7:2. Whether Paul is saying that the believer is so released that he or she is free to remarry or that the believer should merely remain married but separated is a debated point.

I believe that Paul has purposely left this open-ended. The practical situation is that Paul can only say what the believer is to do. If the unbeliever wants to go, no one can stop him or her. And if the unbeliever remarries, no one can stop that. I believe that Paul deliberately leaves unstated whether the believer is free to marry or not because it depends on what happens. If the unbeliever remarries or has a sexual relationship with another, this would, as we have already seen, be *porneia* and the believer would be free to remarry. If this does not happen, it would seem that the believer must consider him- or herself merely separated and not able to remarry.

So, the bottom line is that, just as Jesus said, divorce is only allowable in cases of sexual sin. In such cases, remarriage is allowable. If believing partners cannot stay together, and there is no sexual sin involved, then they are merely separated. There is no divorce in God's eyes, and they are not to remarry. But if an unbelieving partner remarries or has some other sexual relationship, then the believer is truly divorced and free to remarry, just as Jesus said.

These are the Scriptures on divorce, but there is something more. It is forgiveness. Under its founder, Herbert W. Armstrong, the Worldwide Church of God used to have a policy of separating husbands and wives of second marriages when the church did not recognize the divorce of the first marriage. Thus, they said that the second marriage was adulterous. This policy was carried out even when the second marriage had produced children. It was a policy that caused unnecessary trauma. I say that it was unnecessary because it completely left forgiveness out of the picture. The Worldwide Church of God no longer has this policy, but many of the splinter groups that follow Herbert Armstrong's teaching still enforce it. And one thing that surprised me after I left the Worldwide Church of God in 1991 was to find that other churches, even some Reformed churches that supposedly understand grace, follow this same policy. But the Bible does not tell us that we Christians must do something to make up for our sins. It says that we are saved from our sins (Matthew 1:21), that our sins are remitted (Acts 2:38; 10:43; Romans 3:25), that they are blotted out (Acts

3:19), that they are forgiven (Acts 13:38; 26:18; Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14; James 5:15), that they are washed away (Acts 22:16), that they are covered (Romans 4:7), that they are taken away (Romans 11:27), that our sins are purged (Hebrews 1:3), that they are reconciled for (Hebrews 2:17), and that God does not remember them (Hebrews 8:12; 10:17).

There are many more Scriptures I could cite, but I think this sampling is enough for us to see that, under the New Covenant, the sins of believers are not imputed to them (Romans 4:8). But a policy that tells divorced and remarried couples to separate from their second spouses *is imputing sin*, and it is, therefore, wicked. That is not too strong a word for it, because it is the devil who is the accuser of the brethren (Revelation 12:9-10), and any policy that tries to impute sin to born again Christians is a policy that is in league with that accuser. Sure, we sin (1 John 1:8-10). But as Christians, we are forgiven. It is in this way, that John can say, "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God" (1 John 3:9). In looking at our own lives, we should also, of course, remember Paul's admonition, "For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another" (Galatians 5:13).

The Scriptures I have covered are given so that Christians can know how to behave in their own lives and counsel others seeking help. But they are not to be used as clubs to accuse others, or as self-flagellation scourges to torment ourselves over our past. If we are under the blood of Jesus, we are forgiven.

Peter Ditzel