

# BIBLICAL DIVORCE

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## Introduction

Marriage is a holy institution designed and implemented by God Himself. It is not merely a commitment between two people, but rather a covenant relationship between God, the husband, and the wife. As if to underscore its importance, the Bible even portrays the special relationship between Christ and the Church as a marriage (*Ephesians 5:22-33*).

Marriage is the highest expression of unity between a man and a woman. The Bible goes so far as to define marriage as a man and a woman becoming one flesh (*Genesis 2:24, Matthew 19:4-6*). When a married couple divorces, it is as if one person were torn into two. Divorce causes shattered hearts, broken families, and a splintered, traumatized society. Therefore, it is of primal importance that Christians seek the Bible as their sole authority as they approach this issue; we must understand the simple and clear commands of God, which can never be replaced by human wisdom. As a part of our understanding of God's Word, we must also strive to support healthy marriages, protect God's people from the trauma of divorce, and be sensitive, loving, and healing to people already hurt by divorce.

## Definition of Biblical Divorce

The Bible describes two specific circumstances in which divorce is permissible:

1. When a divorce occurs as a result of adultery, and
2. When a divorce occurs after a Non-Christian spouse abandons a Christian spouse.

## Scriptural Support For Permissible Divorce

In *Deuteronomy 24: 1-4*, Moses established some guidelines for divorce:

1 "When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts {it} in her hand and sends her out from his house, 2 and she leaves his house and goes and becomes another man's {wife} 3 and if the latter husband turns against her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts {it} in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her to be his wife, 4 {then} her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife, since she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the LORD, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance.

The phrase in verse one, "happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her" was a controversial one and had been interpreted in two different ways by Jewish scholars.<sup>1</sup> What did it really mean?

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<sup>1</sup> One group (called the school of Shammai) interpreted the phrase "some indecency" narrowly as meaning only "adultery." The other group (called the school of Hillel) interpreted the phrase "some indecency" broadly as meaning anything the wife might do that would be even the least bit displeasing to the husband, including burning his dinner, or wearing her hair in an unattractive way. One Jewish scholar named Rabbi Akiba even argued that the phrase "and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes" means that the man can divorce his wife simply on the basis that he had found a woman who was more attractive to him (see Barclay's [Commentary on Matthew](#)).

Jesus answers this question in *Matthew 5:31-32* and *Matthew 19:7-9*, when the Pharisees ask Jesus's opinion of the controversy. They ask under what conditions it is permissible for a person to get divorced, given what Moses had written? Here is Jesus's definitive response:

*Matthew 5:31-32* -- 31 "It was said, 'WHOEVER SENDS HIS WIFE AWAY, LET HIM GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE'; 32 but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for {the} reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

*Matthew 19:7-9* – 7 They \*said to Him, “Why then did Moses command to GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE AND SEND *her* AWAY?” 8 He \*said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way. 9 “And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.”

From this passage we can see that divorce was never part of God's plan; as Jesus states, “from the beginning it has not been this way.” We can also see that Moses established legal guidelines for divorce only because he could not stop hard-hearted people from cruelly abandoning their spouses; Moses did not “command” divorce as the Pharisees suggest, but only allowed divorce because of the “hardness” of people's “hearts.”

From both passages in Matthew, it is clear that the first biblically permissible reason for a person to divorce his or her spouse is if the spouse has committed “unchastity” (*Matthew 5: 32*) or sexual “immorality” (*Matthew 19:9*). But even when a sexual sin damages a marriage, God can heal the relationship through repentance and reconciliation and make it stronger and sweeter than ever before. Even when there are biblical grounds for divorce, Christians must prayerfully seek God's will in the matter and then only take legal action when they are assured they have a clear conscience before the Lord. Even when a potential divorce is permissible to God, His highest and best plan may be for the couple to remain married and discover unprecedented victory and joy in their relationship.

The other biblically permissible type of divorce occurs in *1 Corinthians 7: 12-16* when the apostle Paul states:

12 But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her. 13 And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away. 14 For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy. 15 Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such {cases} but God has called us to peace. 16 For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?

The most relevant verse here is verse 15: “Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such {cases} but God has called us to peace.” Clearly, the Christian spouse is free from the “bonds” of marriage if he or she is abandoned by a Non-Christian spouse.

### **What About Other Reasons For Divorce?**

Some people see these clear biblical reasons for divorce as too restrictive and argue that divorce is acceptable and even preferable for many other reasons. But such arguments are usually not based upon God's Word, but rather upon human reasoning and traditions of men which Paul warns us about in *Colossians 2:8*: “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.”

The Bible, for example, does not recognize spouses disliking each other or spouses growing apart as reasons for a permissible divorce. By moving in repentant hearts, God can transform two distant, lonely, hurting, and angry individuals into a beautifully reconciled, compatible, loving couple. This is God's answer for troubled marriages.

However, what are we to do in extreme cases, such as when one person is abusing his or her spouse and/or children?

The issue of abuse is difficult to reconcile with Scripture. The specificity within *Matthew 19* and *1 Corinthians 7* seems to preclude abuse as a valid reason for divorce.

However, there are those who contend that divorce is justifiable in cases of abuse, because it aligns with God's loving and justice-dispensing character. In other words, His character would not demand that those affected by abuse remain married to the one abusing. We see this character on bright display in the Psalms: "The LORD is a stronghold to the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. And those who know your name put their trust in you, for you, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek you" (*Psalms 9:9-10*). Additionally, David declares: "O LORD, you hear the desire of the afflicted; you will strengthen their heart; you will incline your ear to do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed, so that man who is of the earth may strike terror no more" (*Psalms 10:17-18*).

Others take this character argument and carry it to biblically stronger ground. Abuse qualifies as abandonment by an unbelieving spouse as we read in *1 Corinthians 7:15*. The abusing spouse is acting as an unbeliever would, and the marriage covenant has been so decisively broken that he or she has, in effect, abandoned the believing spouse. Divorce is permissible on these grounds, the argument concludes.

Still others find that Paul has given us further support through the overlooked phrase "in such cases." *1 Corinthians 7:15* says, "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." The common Greek phrase translated as "in such cases"—ἐν τοῖς τοιούτοις—usually means to include a broader range of situations than the one being described. In the context of *1 Corinthians 7:15*, "in such cases" then describes a *type* of situation—the type in view here is *abandonment by an unbeliever*—that is destructive enough to tear apart the one-flesh union Jesus describes. Similarly destructive cases, such as abuse, would also destroy the marriage relationship. Therefore, divorce is permitted in cases of abuse because abuse is the same type of marriage-destroying act as those specifically explained in *Matthew 19* and *1 Corinthians 7*.

While these arguments do not compel our church to formally add spousal abuse as a third reason for divorce, we respect those who find these arguments convincing. Since Christians may reasonably disagree on this issue, we accept those who hold that divorce is permissible for reasons of spousal abuse, and we commit to walking alongside every situation to help discern God's direction and to help bring God's healing.

Practically, the abused spouse should notify civil authorities at once, and may need to separate himself or herself from the abusing spouse and seek safe shelter. Of course, in such cases, the church ought to be notified, so both spouses and the children, if any, can receive counsel and assistance as soon as possible.

### **Avoiding Divorce through Marriage Counseling and Training**

A person who has divorced based upon the two circumstances of Sexual Sin and/or Abandonment (discussed above) is free to marry or remain unmarried in exactly the same way as a single person who had never married would be free. The church should not consider such a person as having committed a sin since God does not consider it a sin. But whether a person has never been married before, or has experienced a divorce in the past, each should approach the wedding day with prayer, and with a clear understanding of what the Bible teaches about marriage.

In order to foster good marriages and prevent divorce, Henderson Hills Baptist Church will teach biblical principles of marriage, and we will require every couple who wishes to be married by one of our Elders or Pastors to participate in at least four pre-marital counseling sessions with an Elder or Pastor before the wedding day. Couples can also seek to improve their marriages through the many programs and resources the church provides (see Appendix).

### **What about Church Leaders Who Have Divorced?**

Included in the many qualifications of an Elder in the first chapter of Titus are two of particular interest concerning Divorce: 6 "namely, if any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife." The phrase translated "the husband of one wife" in the Greek literally means that the Elder should be a "one-woman man." We do not interpret this

passage to mean that a man who has been divorced is automatically and forever banned from a position of leadership. Nor do we believe that this verse in any way excludes a single man from leadership because he has never been “the husband of one wife.” But if a man is or has been married, he must demonstrate in his life that he is a “one-woman man,” before he should be considered for Eldership or other important leadership positions.

Since an Elder (and to a lesser extent other church leaders) should be “above reproach,” the Elders and the Church should carefully consider if the divorce reveals a character flaw in the person, especially if the person was a cause of a biblically impermissible divorce. On the other hand, the divorce might reveal very little about the person, especially if he or she were a victim in a biblically permissible divorce, were divorced before becoming a Christian, or has experienced significant growth and maturity since the divorce. In these matters, there is no easy or formulaic answers that apply to everyone. Prayer, meditation, prudent counsel, observation guided by Godly wisdom, and direction from the Holy Spirit are crucial in determining who God has chosen to lead his Church.

## **Conclusion**

God absolutely hates divorce (*Malachi 2: 14-16*). The Church must hate it too and do everything in her power to stop it. At the same time, we must love and care for the people who are damaged by divorce, even those guilty of real sin which caused divorce. We are not called to jump to conclusions or to condemn our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, nor to treat them as second-class citizens. Instead, we are to avoid a smug superiority which might cause us to fall into sin, and we are to seek restoration, healing, and blessing for those touched by divorce, so we may all continue to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ, the Lord of marriage and of our lives.