

TWO BASIC ETHICAL QUESTIONS ASKED BY CHRISTIANS

In discussing the subject of divorce, Christians find themselves asking two important questions:

1. Is a Christian ever justified in seeking divorce?
2. Once divorced, may a Christian re-marry?

In an attempt to answer these important questions, we submit the following:

The Three Main Schools of thought amongst Christians on the subject of Divorce and Re-Marriage are:

Position 1

If one of the partners in the marriage bond is guilty of adultery then on the authority of Matthew 5:31,32 and Matthew 19:1-9, the innocent party has Scriptural grounds for divorce and subsequent remarriage.

However, if the guilty party repents and seeks forgiveness, then forgiveness should be extended, and every endeavor should be made to re-build the marriage relationship.

Position 2

If one of the partners in the marriage bond is **repeatedly** guilty of adultery, and seems to be unrepentant and not willing to change, then forgiveness should be granted but reconciliation is not expected. The innocent party, in this instance, has Scriptural grounds for divorce and remarriage on the authority of Matthew 5:31,32 and Matthew 19:1-9.

We at High Calling Ministries NZ hold to the following position:

Position 3

If one or both of the partners in the marriage bond are guilty of adultery, this **does not** give the innocent or guilty parties Scriptural grounds for divorce. Marriage is to be regarded as a binding life-long **covenant**, which can only be terminated by the death of one of the partners.

Contrary to popular opinion, none of the following are Biblical grounds for divorce:

- * Adultery
- * Fornication
- * Unfaithfulness
- * Desertion
- * Cruelty
- * Sodomy
- * Homosexuality
- * Abuse
- * Alcoholism
- * Prostitution
- * Insanity
- Etc.....

The marriage vows made to each other before many witnesses, the minister and God, are binding and hold each other accountable **for better for worse, till death do us part**. Each partner in this marriage bond is to realize that, as opposed to being a **contract** which has escape clauses and penalty clauses; marriage is a sacred covenant which binds the couple together with an unbreakable vow made to God.

The Exception Clause

The references in Matthew 5:31,32 and Matthew 19:1-9, when read in the NIV Bible and many other versions, state that **marital unfaithfulness** is Biblical grounds for divorce. This is deduced from the clause in the King James and other older versions, where the wording read **“except it be for fornication”**. The NIV translators considered this to be equivalent to *“marital unfaithfulness”*, which is not an accurate translation of the original Greek text. The Greek word **Porneia** means fornication (i.e. **pre-marital** sexual relationships).

The Biblical Hebrew Custom

When culturally understood this phrase *“except it be for fornication”*, refers to the Hebrew custom of courtship/engagement before marriage and allows for breaking the “engagement” in the event of fornication (i.e. pre-marital sexual relationships). This is the position that Joseph and Mary found themselves in, as recorded in Matthew 1:18-20. Joseph was **espoused** (or engaged) to Mary and before they came together in marriage, she was found to be pregnant. Joseph thus contemplated exercising his legal rights to put his wife away by giving her a bill of divorcement. In the Hebrew customs, she was considered to be his wife during the time of the binding epousal period, even though they had not officially come together in the covenant of marriage.

The exception clause is only found in Matthew's gospel, as this was written primarily to Jewish believers, and is regarded as the **Kingdom Gospel**. Mark 10:10-12 and Luke 16:18 address the subject of divorce and re-marriage, but do not include the exception clause. The reason for this is that both Mark and Luke were written with more Gentile readership in mind than Matthew's gospel. In the ancient Greek/Gentile and Modern Western cultures we do not adhere to the 9 to 12 month's bind **espousal** period and thus, the gospels of Mark and Luke naturally omit the *exception clause*, as it is irrelevant.

Further Biblical Explanation about Betrothal/Espousal

Betrothal/Espousal -Divorce of a betrothed wife.

Betrothal among the Jews in Biblical times took place nine to twelve months before marriage. The bride being in all respects bound as a wife, she could be freed only by death or divorce, under the same divorce laws as the married woman.

During the espousal period of between nine to twelve months before the marriage **proper** took place, the woman who was betrothed or espoused was regarded as the man's wife, and he as her husband, even though they had not sexually come together or made their marriage vows.

Deuteronomy 22:23 (Sleeping with a betrothed/espoused damsel was regarded as sleeping with another man's wife).

Matthew 1: 18-21 (Mary was only betrothed/espoused to Joseph when she was found pregnant. They were not **properly** married and thus, according to Hebrew custom he could put away his espoused wife by giving her a writing of divorcement).

Death (not divorce) was the penalty for adultery in Old Testament times.

Leviticus 20: 10 (A man committing adultery with another man's wife must be put to death).

Leviticus 18: 20 (Adultery defiles a man and makes him ritually unclean)

Deuteronomy 22: 22 (A man and a woman committing adultery: both must die).

Two Rabbinical Schools of Thought

The post-Old Testament writings of the rabbis shed some light on the divorce issue. Two schools of thought emerged concerning the grounds for divorce.

Rabbi Shammai restricted divorce to causes of adultery – causative, but a liberalization of the Mosaic Law. Following Deuteronomy 23:1-4, this school believed that *finding some uncleanness in her or something that greatly displeased him* gave the right to give the wife a writing of divorcement and put her away.

Rabbi Hillel allowed divorce for almost any grievance no matter how trivial. For instance, if a wife was found speaking to another man in the street or if she burnt the food, forgot to salt it, or if he happened to find another woman more beautiful than her, he could give her writing of divorcement and put her away.

God Hates Divorce

Because marriage is a ***binding covenant***, entered into by two individuals (male and female), which can only be terminated by death, God says that He hates divorce. Hear also what he says in Malachi about the marriage covenant and the mystery of becoming one flesh:

*“... the Lord is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your **marriage covenant**. Has not the Lord **made them one**? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. **“I hate divorce,”** says the Lord God of Israel....” Malachi 2: 14-16 (NIV).*

Cutting a head off the Body!

Following the analogy of Eph 5: 21-33, where the husband is the head of the wife and the wife represents the body: then divorce depicts cutting a head off the body or severing a body from the head, and is seen as “**murder** in the sight of God.”

Trying to justify what God has condemned!

Often Christians will endeavor to vigorously defend their marital position by justifying their remarrying whilst their previous partner is still alive. To do this they will use Scriptural references that often center around God's mercy and forgiveness. They will say something like this "When I confessed my sin, God's mercy was extended to me and it is forgiven and all under the Blood". I am now a new creature in Christ Jesus. To this we would add: If we want to stay under the grace of God and thereby enjoy the *mercy of God* we need to be balancing mercy with truth, like two oars of a boat. Proverbs 3: 3 says "*Let not mercy and truth forsake thee: bind them about thy neck; write them upon the table of thine heart*". Using God's mercy to cover our willful disobedience to God's word is only presuming upon the Grace of God. Paul challenges the Christians at Rome with this searching question:

"What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?" God forbid....." Romans 6: 1,2

We must never substitute a prayer of justification for an act of obedience.
Always make your commitment because it is right, not because it is easy!

Scriptural verses to be considered

Scripture

The Truth Conveyed

Deuteronomy 23:21-23

God views all vows (including our marriage vows) in a very serious light. They must be kept at all times.

Numbers 30: 2-4

Ecclesiastes 5: 1-6

Romans 7: 1-4

A husband and wife are bound by a covenant commitment to marriage. If either divorces and re-marries whilst the previous partner is still alive, they will be living in adultery. **Death alone terminates the marriage covenant.**

1 Corinthians 7:10-13, 39 Husbands and wives must not put each other away in divorce. In the unfortunate event of divorce occurring then either party must remain **unmarried**, or be reconciled.

Luke 16: 18
Mark 10: 10-12 If a husband or a wife divorces and re-marries whilst the previous partner is still alive then they are **living in adultery**

Matthew 5: 31,32
Matthew 19: 1-9 The exception clauses are only in the book of Matthew. The New International Version (NIV) wrongly substitutes the words “*marital unfaithfulness*” for “*fornication*” as it appears in the King James Version.

Malachi 2:14 – 16 God sees marriage as a covenant and becoming **one flesh**. And he **hates divorce!**

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