

When Marriages Fail: Divorce and Remarriage

Marriage & Family Series



The good news of the gospel is that Christ came to deliver fallen humanity from sin and guilt, brokenness, and failure. Nowhere do Christ or his apostles suggest that divorce and remarriage are unforgivable sins—grievous as they may be. By his offer of forgiveness for sin, Christ made it possible for people who have failed to make a fresh start. For that reason, we believe the church can remain firm in its conviction that divorce and remarriage are contrary to God’s design, and at the same time seek to restore the fallen, as did our Lord. This hermeneutical perspective suggests the following pastoral approaches.

Pastoral Approaches

Save if possible. When a marriage fails, it is all too easy to condemn and to reject those caught up in this tragedy. But if the church shows no compassion, it is not true to its nature and calling. That might express itself, first of all, in trying to save a broken marriage. Every effort should be made at reconciliation and forgiveness.

Counsel and discipline. If, however, divorce has taken place, pastoral counselling would still be called for. Also, some form of discipline would be necessary, both for the benefit of the divorced person as well as the congregation. This may take a variety of forms, but minimally one would expect members whose marriage has failed to withdraw from all public service in the church until restoration to fellowship has taken place.

Find forgiveness. Divorced members will need a lot of support and counselling as they work their way through their guilt. They need help in finding forgiveness. This will call for confession before God and the Christian community, as well as the offer of forgiveness to one’s former spouse. Without such a process there can be no healing.

Practical needs. Moreover, when a divorce has taken place, the church will want to pay attention to the practical needs that will arise. The church can assist in caring for children, for example. A divorced mother, in particular, may need help in finding a livelihood or in dealing with matters formerly handled by her husband (e.g., finances, transportation, or housing). Support, compassion, courtesy, and kindness should not be withdrawn from people who know they have failed and who are seeking a way to make a fresh start.

Remarriage. After a divorce, the question of remarriage will come up sooner or later. Healing after a marriage breakdown normally takes longer than when a person loses a spouse through death. Divorced members of the church should, therefore, be strongly counselled, not to rush into another marriage. Where there has been genuine repentance and the past, forgiven by the blood of Jesus, a divorced person is on the way to make new beginnings.

When remarriage is contemplated, the church must find ways of giving “institutional expression” to the permanence of marriage and the gospel of grace that offers forgiveness of sins to those who repent. The Christian couple (remarriage to an unbeliever is not an option for a believer) who intend to enter upon the covenant of marriage (after divorce), should seek the approval and blessing of the church upon their new venture.

There are those who argue a church wedding in such cases is out of the question and simply advise a civil ceremony. Others would prefer a “service of blessing” in the church after a civil ceremony, rather than a regular church wedding. But when it is recognized that a marriage covenant not only is made between a man and a woman, but also calls for a public commitment to faithfulness to one another, then a church wedding would certainly be preferable.

So then, the marriage vows ought to reflect God’s will for marriage, as well as witness to God’s forgiveness for past failures. Then the church will be prophetic in its convictions and yet pastoral in its practice. ■

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Faith and Life

When Marriages Fail

In the long history of the church, there has been no uniform pattern in dealing with broken marriages. In the more distant past, our own denomination, as a rule, excommunicated those who violated their marriage covenant. Little or no effort was made to restore such members to fellowship. But the question is: Can we be firm in our conviction that divorce is a serious wrong and still show compassion toward those who have failed in this respect?

Perhaps our Lord points us in the right direction by his response to the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11). “Woman,” he says, “has no one condemned you?” Hearing a negative answer, Jesus speaks that marvellous word of forgiveness: “Neither do I condemn you.” However, in case anyone should think that he viewed adultery lightly, he adds: “From now on do not sin again.” In this encounter with a woman caught in adultery, Jesus displayed both conviction and compassion.

That’s our challenge—to maintain the tension between the prophetic (holding to the permanence of the marriage covenant) and the pastoral (seeking to restore those with failed marriages).

What follows is an attempt to find a way that encourages us to hold to the “ideal” view of marriage, as taught in Scripture, while at the same time dealing with the “real” world in which we live.

Biblical Teachings

In the Old Testament, the only law in the first five books of the Bible directly related to the question of divorce and remarriage is found in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. If a married man found something objectionable about his wife, he could give her a certificate of divorce. This would make it possible for her to remarry. The first

husband, however, was not permitted to remarry her, should her second husband die or divorce her.

This arrangement did not “mandate” divorce if the husband found some “indecent” in his wife, but permitted it. It did not encourage divorce either, but recognized that in this sinful world, divorce does take place. The fact that divorce in those days was financially costly, and required a certificate of divorce, was a deterrent to hasty decisions on the part of the husband. That the wife did not have the same right to initiate divorce reflects the patriarchal society of those days.

Just what was meant by “indecent” is not clear, but some serious (sexual?) misconduct seems to have been implied. (In later Judaism, the schools of Hillel and Shammai were divided in their interpretation of what “indecent” meant.)

That this arrangement did not reflect the Creator’s ideal goes without saying. In fact, Jesus later explained that divorce was a concession to the hardness of the human heart.

New Testament teaching. The Gospels tell us that in Jesus’ day, there was a dispute among Jewish teachers about what constituted proper grounds for divorce. This dispute lies behind the trick question addressed to Jesus by the Pharisees: “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” (Matt. 19:3). Divorce seems to have happened rather often in Jesus’ day and for trivial reasons, even though it was not encouraged and was always seen as a tragedy.

The question put to Jesus in Matthew 19:3 was designed to trap him about the grounds for divorce; in Mark 10:2, the question is, “Is divorce at all legitimate?” In both Gospels, however, the questioners wanted to see where Jesus stood with respect to Deuteronomy 24. If he opposed Moses, they would have a serious charge against him. But Jesus answered that Moses allowed divorce on account of the hardness of people’s hearts; divorce was not God’s ideal. In both passages, Jesus took his opponents back to Genesis (1:27; 2:24), where the creation ideal for marriage is spelled out. God’s design was that a man and a woman should live together in love until parted by death.

There are several other differences between the two Gospel passages. In Mark, the wife is put on the same level as the husband in taking the initiative in a divorce

(10:11,12). That difference may be due to the fact that Matthew has a Jewish audience, for whom a woman taking the initiative would be unthinkable, whereas Mark is addressing a Gentile Christian audience.

Also, Matthew has the so-called “exceptive clause” (19:9; cf. 5:32), which is not found in Mark. Just how we are to understand Jesus when he says, “Whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery” (Matt. 19:9; 5:32), is hard to say. Jesus certainly did not mean that porneia (fornication, adultery, incest, etc.) made divorce mandatory. However, he recognized that the human heart, being what it is, can find in porneia a cause for divorce. But even if porneia is understood as providing a legitimate cause for divorce, the primary emphasis of Jesus’ answer to the question posed by the Pharisees is that divorce is contrary to the will of God. Not only does it run counter to the creation ideal, but it also infringes upon the seventh commandment, “You shall not commit adultery.”

No wonder the disciples of Jesus reacted with surprise at such a high view of marriage: “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry” (Matt. 19:10). Jesus, however, goes on to stress that marriage is the norm, even though some may remain celibate for the sake of the kingdom (Matt. 19:11,12).

All the synoptic Gospel passages (including Luke. 16:18) agree: Divorce is a great evil and contrary to the will of God. That it happens is another matter. And when it happens, it is assumed that remarriage follows (as in Deut. 24, which underlies Mt. 19 and Mk. 10). Divorce and remarriage are of one piece, and when Jesus condemns divorce, remarriage also falls under the cloud of adultery (Mark. 10:11; Luke. 16:18). The question now is: does the gospel offer hope to people whose marriage has failed?

The Pauline texts. In keeping with Old Testament thought and Jesus’ teachings, Paul holds to the permanence of marriage. To the Romans, he writes that a woman “will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her

husband dies, she is free from the law, and if she marries another man, she is not an adulteress” (7:3). He writes to the Corinthians in a similar fashion (cf. I Cor. 7).

Earlier in I Corinthians 7, he affirms that marriage is for life, although he realizes that marriages do break down. “The wife should not separate from the husband (but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife” (7:10,11). Paul assumes a situation in which reconciliation is still possible; he does not say explicitly what a person should do when this is no longer possible.

In I Corinthians 7:12-16, Paul addresses a problem that arose out of the missionary activity of the church. As the gospel invaded a pagan society, a husband might be converted, but not the wife, or vice versa. The question

then was: Can a believing spouse remain in the existing marriage relationship? Paul’s answer is “yes.” However, if the unbelieving partner insists on leaving the believing spouse, the believer is not bound to stay with the unbeliever. Although the expression “not bound” means, in the first instance, that the Christian partner is not forced to stay together with an unbelieving spouse who wants to leave her (or him), it is not stated explicitly that such a deserted partner is then free to remarry. Commentators, therefore, are divided on the meaning of “not bound.” It would appear, however, that when a pagan partner divorces a believing spouse

and marries someone else, the Christian spouse would be free to marry again (similar to the widow; cf. 7:39).

In general, it should be said that when we seek guidance from Scripture on such questions as divorce and remarriage, we look in vain for detailed instructions for every possible eventuality. The fundamental biblical view of marriage is clear, as is the recognition that divorce and remarriage are not the Creator’s ideal. However, when it comes to the question of how the church should deal with marriages that have failed, we have to listen to the gospel as a whole.

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