

Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage

By Terry Moore and Art Braidic

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All Scriptures are from the New King James translation unless otherwise noted.

In order to understand God's view of marriage, divorce, and remarriage; we must first recognize that marriage is a divine institution. Marriage is a sacred covenant made between two people before Almighty God. It is to be held in the highest regard, and couples are to do their best to be honorable in all things (Heb. 13). Marriage is actually a God plane relationship. It was designed to reflect the future marriage of Christ to His bride—the Church (Eph. 5:22-33). When the bond of marriage joins a man and a woman, the couple is to entirely commit themselves to this relationship. The example is to learn how to live, love, and work together in preparation for a comparable relationship with Christ.

Because men and women were created to serve different roles in the family, it is our belief that God made each with diverse qualities and unique personalities for a purpose. They must learn to work together as a team each striving to fulfill the needs and desires of the other. If conflicts arise, they will work together to resolve these problems. Couples are to practice problem solving and making sacrifices for each other and the family. They are to learn to become one in mind and spirit, and to discover the importance of esteeming the other better than the self. In this way they become one flesh on a much deeper level than simply having sex.

Therefore, while marriage can produce supreme fulfillment in our physical lives, its primary purpose is spiritual. It is a means to provide training for individuals to develop the kind of relationship Christ desires to one day share with His bride. Notice the expressions of the kind of unity Christ desires to have with God's people:

I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, *are* in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me (John 17:20-23) .

People need to understand the magnificent purpose of marriage. In that context, consider the relationship the Church now has with our Savior. He promised never to forsake us (Heb. 13:5). He would never abandon us when we make mistakes or are not yet what He expects us to be. Something similar can be said about marriage. Under normal circumstances, it should be unimaginable to consider divorcing our mates.

However, God made a comparison between marriage and the covenant between God and ancient Israel (Jer. 3:6-14). His example shows us that, when a mate is found to be unfaithful, separation is acceptable. This means that there are biblical guidelines that provide grounds for divorce. Nonetheless, a severance between husband and wife should always be a last resort; and remarriage can only be justified if there has been adultery, betrayal, or blasphemy. A few examples of these qualifying factors will be discussed in this article.

Consider that learning to demonstrate love toward others is inextricably connected to our relationship with Christ (1 Jn. 4:20-21). In addition, the Almighty hates the betrayal, lack of love, sadness, and hostility that invariably follows divorce. For this reason, speaking within the confines of the community of Jews who once knew the true God, Christ told His disciples that God never intended divorce! He stated:

Furthermore it has been said, “Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.” But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery (Matthew 5:31-32).

In this statement, Christ was not adding something to the law that was previously undisclosed to ancient Israel. He was correcting a misapplication of the law among the Jews. What He spoke of is Deuteronomy 24:1. In that scripture, God gave legitimate terms for divorce. It was for “some uncleanness.” This refers to something shameful or disgraceful which may have been undisclosed before the marriage or a terrible sin afterward—such as adultery. The reason for making this point clear is because the Jews misused God’s instructions and would choose divorce for illegitimate reasons.

A legitimate reason for divorce is obviously adultery, and this sin includes any kind of sexual behavior with anyone outside of the marriage. Addiction to pornography may also qualify as a reason for divorce. Notice that Christ said previously:

But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Matthew 5:28).

Some common sense needs to be applied when considering this statement. It does not mean that we can divorce and remarry just because of lustful thoughts. Christ’s intent was that we have temperance. It is a warning that what we become is based on our thoughts. Just as hate is the first step towards murder, an adulterous thought is the first step toward adultery. Still, the thought must be acted out in order to be a good reason for divorce.

In this context, when an individual uses pornography, they are acting upon the thought. It becomes a betrayal of the marriage covenant and is a form of adultery. It is interesting to note that the term “pornography” came from the Greek word *porneia* frequently translated in the New Testament as “fornication.”

Other Legitimate Reasons for Divorce

Some have been led to believe that, after a man and woman are married, the only justifiable reason for divorce and remarriage is adultery. However, it must be remembered that when Christ spoke of adultery being the only lawful reason for divorce, He was speaking in the context of a community where most people were adherents to the letter of God’s law. Therefore, Jesus was speaking of a normal marital relationship within a God fearing society.

When the Church eventually spread to gentile communities, it became apparent that conflicts within marriage may occur when only one individual was converted. Therefore, the Apostle Paul made note of another acceptable reason for divorce:

But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her. And a woman who has a husband

who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy. But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace (1 Corinthians 7:12-15).

The Apostle Paul dealt with a scenario other than adultery. If a Christian is married to an unbeliever who wants out of the relationship because they refuse to accept the believer's faith, the believer is not bound to the marriage. Again, a little common sense must be applied to this type of situation.

If a husband or wife is "willing to live with" their spouse, this means that they are willing to accept the believers ethics. It does not mean that they also must adhere to God's doctrine, but it means that they will be agreeable and not contentious. If the unconverted mate will live in peace with the believer, there is no reason to forsake their commitment to each other. On the other hand, if the unbeliever is frequently argumentative displaying consistent hostility to their spouse, this means that they refuse to dwell with them in peace. The couple can divorce and remarry if this is the case.

This does not mean that the believer must remain in a relationship that could be considered toxic simply because the unbeliever is not contentious. For example, witchcraft is something abhorred by God and should not be tolerated. There are also other acts to consider that are not a part of a normal marriage. Fraud, abuse, lying, stealing, drug addiction, and criminal behavior are not part of a normal marriage. Therefore, such behaviors can be legitimate reasons for divorce.

A key element is the ability to live in harmony. This means there should not be criminal behavior, persecution, fraud, blasphemy, drug addiction, or adultery within the boundaries of the relationship.

Common sense should prevail. Consider if a person committed murder, but did not commit adultery. Would God expect their spouse to remain bound to them? Must an individual be forever bound to someone who repeatedly abuses family members or continuously subjects them to harm. If a man or a woman were to divorce in order to protect themselves or their family, does that mean the family must now live without a proper father or mother for the rest of their lives? Are they to remain incomplete and unfulfilled because of a spouse's sin? God's spirit of mercy and love tells us—No!

God is not cruel. He is a God of peace, love, and kindness. The answer should be obvious. Like adultery, other despicable acts that betray the relationship are lawful reasons for divorce. The enduring principle in God's Word is that the individual that sins should be punished—not the innocent. As Ezekiel declared:

The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself (Ezekiel 18:20).

An analogy demonstrates this point. It is clear that if we betray our covenant with Christ He has the right to sever His relationship with us. In an example taken from biblical history, God considered any dealing with other gods as spiritual adultery. During the time of Jeremiah God divorced Israel saying:

Then I saw that for all the causes for which backsliding Israel had committed adultery, I had put her away and given her a certificate of divorce (Jeremiah 3:8).

The covenant Israel entered with God has been broken and therefore God was justified in severing the relationship. The symbolism explains that God has the right to divorce and remarry if the covenant was broken. However, He also has the choice of mercy and forgiveness. If the people were repentant of their adulterous ways, they could return to Him and He would accept them. As the Prophet Jeremiah wrote:

Have you seen what backsliding Israel has done? She has gone up on every high mountain and under every green tree, and there played the harlot. And I said, after she had done all these *things*, “Return to Me.” But she did not return (Jeremiah 3:8).

Thus, there is a reason to divorce, but before a separation takes place, if there is real repentance, there can and should be reconciliation.

Biblical Guidance for Marital Problems

Within the Church of God, many have been taught that the only allowance for divorce is adultery. This has led some to believe they don't have to work at making their spouse happy once the ceremony has taken place. They erroneously believe that all they have to do is win their beloved's affection until that day when they make their vow to each other. Then, after both say “I do,” some conclude that they are forever joined together no matter what they might do as long as it is not adultery. They believe they can behave in any disrespectful and discomfiting way they might choose and their spouse must live with it for the rest of their lives. Some no longer work to make relationship enjoyable for both the husband and the wife.

This mistaken idea has caused many husbands to conclude that they do not have to be considerate and treat their wife with kindness and respect. Many wives also think they don't have to submit to their husband's authority. However, God believes that these are requirements for the husband and wife:

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her (Ephesians 5:22-25).

The idea that we don't have to actively fulfill basic principles of marriage just because our spouse previously said “I do” at a ceremony is contrary to the Scriptures. Promising to love, honor, and support our mates and then consciously and consistently offend them is fraud; and the Eternal Church of God believes that the Scriptures recognize fraud as grounds for divorce in which remarriage would then be an option. Notice what King David wrote regarding commitment and our behavior toward others—including our spouse:

LORD, who may abide in Your tabernacle? Who may dwell in Your holy hill? He who walks uprightly, and works righteousness, and speaks the truth in his heart; He who does not backbite with his tongue, nor does evil to his neighbor, nor does he take up a reproach against his friend; In whose eyes a vile person is despised, but he honors those who fear the LORD; He who swears to his own hurt and does not change (Psalm 15:1-4).

Husbands and wives should be able to work out their differences. If any of the previously mentioned conditions of sin and betrayal are NOT present, and reconciliation is not attempted resulting in a married couple wanting to divorce, they should NOT remarry. The Apostle Paul made this clear when he wrote:

Now to the married I command, *yet* not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from *her* husband. But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to *her* husband. And a husband is not to divorce *his* wife (1 Corinthians 7:10-11).

Some have made a terrible mistake while attempting to apply these terms written by the Apostle Paul. It has been taught that if a person was married, divorced, and remarried before they were converted, that they should divorce the second spouse and return to their first marriage. If they were unable to remarry their first spouse, they were instructed to remain unmarried for the rest of their lives. However, this belief actually contradicts the Scriptures which state:

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 uncleanness in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts *it* in her hand, and sends her out of his house, when she has departed from his house, and goes and becomes another man's *wife*, if the latter husband detests her and writes her a certificate of divorce, puts *it* in her hand, and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her as his wife, *then* her former husband who divorced her must not take her back to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that *is* an abomination before the LORD (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).

Based on these words, it is the position of the Eternal Church of God that couples make every attempt to give each other what they both desire and need within the confines of God's law in order to be fulfilled. We encourage those who have problems to pray, study, make personal sacrifices, seek counsel, and fast while communicating to one another in love so that solutions may be found.

Matthew 18:15-17 also applies equally to husbands and wives as well as between brethren. Couples must go to one another alone and make a sincere effort to reconcile. If that fails, they should take witnesses of wrong doing. If this second approach should also fail, they have the option of taking it to the Church. However, the Eternal Church of God has heard of cases where some ministers are unfair in their judgment by not rightly applying the instructions Christ gave regarding conflicts within the Church. We will discuss some of these precepts in this article, but for a complete understanding we recommend reading our booklet—The Truth about Matthew 18.

There are also tools available to help those having marital difficulties such as *The Love Dare*—a book offering tremendous advice based on biblical principles. Use every tool available. God wants our marriages to work!

Contrary to the biblical approach, what generally occurs is that couples make their own decisions without sincere attempts to make the marriage work. They then take their conflicts to courts of unbelievers when the Bible clearly warns against this. As Paul wrote:

Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world will be judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Do you not

know that we shall judge angels? How much more, things that pertain to this life? If then you have judgments concerning things pertaining to this life, do you appoint those who are least esteemed by the church to judge? I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you, not even one, who will be able to judge between his brethren? But brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers! Now therefore, it is already an utter failure for you that you go to law against one another. Why do you not rather accept wrong? Why do you not rather *let yourselves* be cheated? (1 Corinthians 6:1-7).

The Apostle Paul's admonition is that we not take our conflicts to secular courts of law. Instead, we should use the procedure outlined in Matthew 18. The Eternal Church of God understands that some ministers are biased and have little marriage counseling experience. In such cases, any minister that is connected with one of the parties in a particular way must excuse himself and help the couple find another minister. Even in the light of the current state of the Church it is our firm belief that conflicts, even those in marriage, should be handled in the biblical way according to Christ's instructions.

We should do everything in our power to reconcile our differences in harmony and to mature spiritually from this process. However, if members choose to have the Church make judgments in marriage, or any other case, there must be a hearing. The couple must testify. Witnesses must appear and testify. Then, two or more Church leaders are required to agree in the decision. As Christ clearly stated:

Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' And if he refuses to hear them, tell *it* to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them. (Matthew 18:15-20).

Sadly, this process is not understood by many and frankly ignored by most in the wider Church of God. Many go to a minister before going to their brother or spouse. Adding insult to injury, most ministers skip the process of having a hearing and a single elder usually makes a decision based upon his opinion alone. Even if two or more elders discuss the subject together, if they make a judgment without allowing both sides to present their case it violates Christ's command and that is not how we are to resolve problems in the Church!

If trespasses and offenses are handled the way Christ commands, God will influence the situation just as He promised, and both parties are then bound by the decision.

Note that these are general positions of the Eternal Church of God regarding marriage, divorce, and remarriage. If there are specific questions or circumstances that we can help you with, we will do our best to provide biblically sound advice.