

WHOSE WIFE WILL SHE BE IN THE RESURRECTION?
How Should We Respond Pastorally To Divorce and Remarriage?
Gary Matsdorf (Revised and Updated 2018)

There's no way we can avoid dealing with the issues of divorce and remarriage in the Church of the 21st century. It's at our altars and in our pews. Yet, my experience is that few of us in leadership have wrestled through a theology of the issue, sound or otherwise. Jay Adams' remark that "Christians are confused. They aren't sure what to believe about divorce and re-marriage. How much is tradition and how much is biblical?"¹ seems to apply as much to those of us in leadership as to Sunday Sam and Sally. Simply glad that Sister Jones won't be our wife in the resurrection, we often hope we can bluff our way through the issues!

"If they're going to divorce, they're going to divorce regardless of what the Church says. Furthermore, if I don't marry them, they'll go to Reno and be back in church the next week. Then what? Do we kick them out or turn our heads and plead grace?"

It's my perception that part of the reason our theology is sometimes weak is because biblically the issues of divorce and remarriage are somewhat complex. It takes a lot of effort and thought to harmonize the main biblical premise ("**Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate**" [Mark 10:9])² with the exceptions (i.e., ...**if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband** [1 Corinthians 7:11 {NRSV}]). This brief excursus will in no way deal with all the details and complexities of divorce and remarriage. Its intent rather is to give an overview and to compel us to begin thinking.

If divorce is the dissolution of marriage and remarriage is starting again, we need to first understand marriage if we are to understand divorce or remarriage. What does it mean to cling to a spouse and become one flesh? Where did marriage come from and what is its basis?

Marriage is neither society's nor the Church's invention. It is a "creation ordinance," established by God Himself when there was only Adam and Eve (Genesis 2:24); it is to be the foundational building element of any human society (Joshua 7:14). Jesus says it is

¹ Adams, Jay, *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage In the Bible*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1980, pg. xiii.

² All scriptures are from the TNIV unless otherwise noted.

to characterize society until the end of this Age (Mark 12:25). Since God instituted marriage, He alone has the right to regulate it, including its dissolution. “To determine the rules for marriage and for divorce is God’s prerogative alone.”³ This is why Jesus’ fundamental remark that we are not free to regulate nor dissolve marriage outside God’s rulings (Mark 10:9).

God institutes marriage because of His observation that “**it is not good for the man to be alone**” (Genesis 2:18). Marriage then is primarily an institution of companionship, solving the fundamental human problem of loneliness (*cf.* Proverbs 2:16-17; Malachi 2:14).⁴ This is why Eve was called “**a helper suitable for him**” (Genesis 2:18), a helper being a co-laborer, a worker needed to complete the assigned task.⁵

The biblical basis of this companionship is not love or sex, but a covenant. Covenant is not a familiar concept in our society. The closest concept we tend to know is that of a contractual agreement. “Covenant is a compact or agreement between two parties binding them mutually to undertakings on each other’s behalf.”⁶

Covenant in the Old Testament translates a Hebrew word (*berit*) which literally means “obligation” or “fetter.” It’s a binding pledge, which establishes a permanent relationship, sort of a never-ending contract “between two parties wherein each bound himself to perform a certain service or duty for the other”⁷ (*cf.* Jeremiah 31:33). A covenant—

- Creates rights and duties (2 Samuel 9).
- Assumes obedience on the part of both parties (Jeremiah 7:23).
- Is always officially sealed (Ezekiel 17:18; 1 Samuel 10:1, et al).
- Is unalterable and permanently binding.

However, realizing human frailty, a covenant presupposes forgiveness when broken (Jeremiah 31:34B) and commitment from the offended party to initiate restoration (Jeremiah 3:1, 14) and to renew the covenant (2 Kings 23:3). In covenant, the life the two

³ Adams, *op. cit.*, pg. 4.

⁴ This is why life-long fulfilled singlehood is an exception to the rule (1 Corinthians 7:38, 40), requiring special grace from God (Matthew 19:11).

⁵ A **helper suitable for him** deems Eve a “helper matching him...expressing the notion of complementarity rather than identity...the help looked for is not just assistance...but the mutual support companionship provides” (Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1-15--Word Biblical Commentary*, Word Books, Publisher, Waco, TX, 1987, pg. 68).

⁶ Archer, G.L., *Covenant in Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Walter Elwell (General Editor), Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI., 1984, pg. 276.

⁷ *Ibid.*

share together is of greater importance than their individual lives (1 Samuel 18:1-4). This is why Paul says married persons are never to willfully or intentionally withhold any conjugal rights or rights spelled out in the covenant agreement (1 Corinthians 7:3).⁸ A person enters a covenant with a vow, “a solemn promise or pledge that binds a person to perform a specified act or to behave in a certain manner.”⁹

This is why marriage begins “at the altar,” as covenant vows are exchanged before witnesses. A marriage, therefore, is always public and formal (*cf.* Genesis 34:12), requiring death (1 Corinthians 7:39) or a legal certificate of divorce to dissolve (Deuteronomy 24:1). Marriage is naturally not to be viewed as a cold, calculated contract; but, if we are to understand biblical divorce and remarriage, we must remember that the basis of marriage is vowed commitment, not felt love which often wanes. Hence, Old Testament marriages could be arranged, with love beginning after marriage (**Isaac took Rebekah, and she became his wife; then he loved her** [Genesis 24:67 {NRSV, emphasis mine}]). “They did not marry the person they loved; they loved the mate they married.”¹⁰

⁸ “Sexual relations are a ‘due’ within marriage (v. 3) because (v. 2) the body is not one’s free possession but belongs to one’s spouse (v. 4)...this understanding makes sense of the [pericope’s] emphasis on mutuality: the way to correct an abuse of mutual relations is not to make demands on the offending party only, but to emphasize the mutual responsibility of each. The language of obligation, literally ‘the payment of what is due,’ implies that married couples are indebted to one another sexually. Such language has often been found offensive...this usage of ‘the payment of what is due,’ however, is to be explained in light of v. 5, where some are in fact depriving their spouses of sexual relations. Although not primarily a duty, there are times when the duty aspect needs to be heard for the sake of the marriage. And Paul’s emphasis, it must be noted, is not on ‘You owe me,’ but on ‘I owe you’” (Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle To The Corinthians--The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI., 1987, pp. 279-280).

⁹ *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Ronald Youngblood, (General Editor), Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN., 1995, pg. 1297.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 804. This has very significant pastoral implications when counseling believers who feel they should not have married in the first place or realize they never did really love each other.

DIVORCE¹¹

“Divorce is a tragedy, and often the Church’s confused response to it has only compounded the tragedy.”¹² As we begin theologically to deal with the issue, let’s not forget to wed it to our biblical responsibility to be both directive and compassionate; we must remember that emotions run high during divorce and lives are always messy.

The biblical starting point for examining a theology of divorce is a clear ownership of the core of God’s heart on the matter—“**I hate divorce,**” says the Lord God of Israel (Malachi 2:16).¹³ This does not mean God hates the people involved in divorce or even the due process of legal divorce (Matthew 19:9; 1 Corinthians 7:15). Ezra even records an occasion when divorce was His will (Ezra 10:11). What God hates primarily are the attitudes and failures that occasion divorce—the breaking of covenant vows, the oft unwillingness to reconcile, a non-aggressive approach to character change to stabilize the relationship, the hurt it brings, etc. (see Matthew 19:8; Habakkuk 1:13).

- *Since divorce is not the unpardonable sin, it can be forgiven (even as idolatry, adultery, homosexuality, greed drunkenness, etc. [1 Corinthians 6]). The forgiveness does not heal all the heartbreaks of children and in-laws, however, not to speak of the parties involved in the divorce...divorce, even when proper, always is occasioned by someone’s sin. At best, then, divorce always brings misery and hurt. That is one reason why God hates it.*¹⁴

¹¹ “Although there are few references to divorce in the early centuries of the Christian era, the evidence points toward a rejection of divorce with right of remarriage by the early fathers. By the sixth century the Eastern church had developed a tradition of allowing divorce with right of remarriage for a variety of causes, and the Eastern Orthodox tradition today has introduced the concept of the ‘moral death’ of a marriage. The Western church, however, held firmly to the view that marriage was indissoluble. Augustine, to whom we owe the development of the view of marriage as a sacrament, believed that marriage was indissoluble, but in the sense of a moral obligation of permanence: marriage *should not* be dissolved. The medieval schoolmen in the West developed a sacramental view of marriage as indissoluble in an absolute sense: valid marriage *could not* be dissolved. This view prevailed in the Roman Church and is held by Christians of Catholic traditions. In the Middle Ages, alongside the rejection of divorce, a complex set of procedures for dispensation and annulment grew up by which burdensome marriages were dissolved, thus evading or overcoming the law of indissolubility. The Reformers sought to return to a more biblical understanding of the nature of marriage. They rejected the elevation of marriage to the status of sacrament, and they disagreed with the absolute indissolubility of marriage. They objected to the annulment procedures that were bringing the divine ideal of permanence into disrepute. They believed that some parts of the NT allowed divorce with right of remarriage in certain circumstances” (D. J. Atkinson, *Divorce* in Elwell, *op. cit.*, pg. 323).

¹² Keener, Craig, *And Marries Another*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA., 1991, pg. vii.

¹³ Note proposition nineteen of Foursquare’s *Creedal Statements*, “We believe in divorce on New Testament scriptural grounds.”

¹⁴ Adams, *op. cit.*, pg. 25.

God also hates a divorce that is for other than biblical reasons, though again, He does not hate the parties involved.

The words translated **divorce** in both Hebrew (Deuteronomy 24:1) and Greek (Matthew 5:32) come from verbal roots meaning to cut off, to release, to set free or to send away. Divorce is a legal severing of legally sealed covenant vows (Proverbs 2:17), occasioned by one party sending the other away (1 Corinthians 7:15). Whereas God initiated marriage, humankind initiated divorce. We do not know when. Although humankind initiated divorce, by the time of Moses God allowed it among His people, with regulations (Matthew 19:8). What He carefully regulates are—**1)** our attitude toward divorce; **2)** the grounds for attaining a divorce; and **3)** a recognition of the consequences of divorce (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). To ignore His regulations is to bring untold consequences and hurt upon ourselves (Deuteronomy 24:4).¹⁵

- *To see divorce as covenant-breaking is to see it as a serious and sinful act. It is arguable [however] that in circumstances in which sin traps us such that none of the ways open to us is good, divorce may in some circumstances be seen as a “lesser evil” choice. Taking the divine covenant as our guide, divorce is never obligatory; even the sin of sexual unfaithfulness (Hosea’s wife) can be an occasion for forgiveness and reconciliation.*¹⁶

In the New Testament, our understanding of divorce comes from Jesus and Paul. Jesus paints a broad theological picture (Matthew 5, 19), which Paul fills in with more specifics, including additional exceptions (1 Corinthians 7). Jesus’ reference to divorce in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5) indicates that kingdom people need to have a driving passion for preserving marriage and a sober awareness of divorce’s consequences (Matthew 5:31-32). We must never willingly nor frivolously “...**set aside one of the least of these commands**” (Matthew 5:19), including His take on divorce.

Jesus’ more detailed teaching on divorce is in response to a test question from the Pharisees (Matthew 19:3-12). Their purpose was to try to trap Him into taking sides with a controversial theological issue of their day—“easy, any cause divorce” advocated by Rabbi Hillel vs. for “sexual immorality” only divorce advocated by Rabbi Shammai.

¹⁵ Though aware that the primary purpose of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 is not to address a possible basis for a biblically permitted divorce, the author believes it does address an important basis. As to the nature of that basis (**something indecent [in one’s spouse]**), see footnote #24 below. Note also that Foursquare’s *Creedal Statements* refers only to “New Testament scriptural grounds.”

¹⁶ Atkinson, *op. cit.*, pg. 325.

Because Rabbi Hillel’s interpretation had become ludicrous in Jesus’ day (*i.e.*, a man could divorce his wife if she burned dinner, wore her hair in a way he didn’t like, used too much salt while cooking, etc.), Jesus sided with Rabbi Shammai; yet, He didn’t stop with a blank endorsement of this school. He would not handle divorce simply on the basis of exacting legal codes. Rather, He went on to draw their attention to the real issues at hand behind divorce—submission to God and His covenant and an understanding that even God’s people cannot always live out His highest standards.¹⁷

The totality of biblical evidence then shows that Jesus’ statement, “**...what God has joined together, let no one separate**” (Matthew 19:6), does not mean there can never be biblically sanctioned divorce; it simply means we must proceed toward divorce with humility and a desire to do it His way. There is a world of difference between trying to reconcile a marriage and failing and refusing to try to reconcile or to deal with personal failures undermining the marriage. This latter approach (often referred to as “the spirit of divorce”) should never be entertained by Christians; to do so is to live adulterously (Matthew 19:9; see also 1 Corinthians 7:10-11).¹⁸ “Clearly, the sum of the synoptic tradition argues that Jesus’ teaching intended to create among his disciples an intolerance for divorce even though Jewish law tolerated it.”¹⁹

Returning to Jesus’ argument in Matthew 19, His answer to the Pharisees’ test question immediately put them on the defensive (vs. 7). They next tried to argue one Old Testament section (Deuteronomy 24:1-4) against another (Genesis 2:24). In doing so, they misrepresented Moses’ teaching on permitted divorce. As Jesus notes, Moses never *commanded* divorce (vs. 7); rather, “**Moses permitted you to divorce**” (vs. 8). Again, God’s intent is not to totally disallow for divorce, but to regulate it, recognizing humankind is “**so hard-hearted**” (vs. 8 [NRSV]).²⁰ Does this make God fickle or a perpetrator of evil? No. It simply makes Him merciful and demonstrates the divine tension between justice and mercy. “**Moses permitted...but it was not this way from the beginning**” (vs. 8). “Genesis 2:24 is a statement of the ideal will of

¹⁷ See note #11 above.

¹⁸ Because of the sanctity of the body of Christ, a Christian who entertains a “spirit of divorce” in effect “divorces” the local congregation as well; they should therefore not be allowed unrestricted fellowship.

¹⁹ Christensen, Duane, *Deuteronomy 21:10-34:12--Word Biblical Commentary*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN., 2002, pg. 567.

²⁰ See note #13 above.

God...Deuteronomy 24:1-4 is a regrettable but necessary provision of those occasions when human sinfulness has failed to maintain the ideal.”²¹

“EXCEPT FOR SEXUAL IMMORALITY”—

Jesus’ famous “**except for sexual immorality**” clause (Matthew 19:9) indicates His permission for the sexually offended spouse to consider divorce. He does not demand the offended spouse seek divorce; however, they are biblically free to consider it.²² **Sexual immorality** translates the Greek word *porneia*. It is a generic term describing sexual deviancy of any sort—adultery, homosexuality, bestiality, pedophilia, incest, etc. (*cf.* **unchastity** [NRSV]; **marital unfaithfulness** [NIV]). **Fornication** [KJV], though included in the meaning of *porneia*, is too specific for the context.²³ Jesus does not indicate how many acts of **sexual immorality** it takes to break the marriage covenant; His heart is that such matters never be handled from a purely legal basis, but on a case-by-case “grace” basis.²⁴

I CORINTHIANS 7—

Paul devotes this entire chapter to principles of marriage, divorce, remarriage and celibacy. Regarding divorce and remarriage, he both reinforces Jesus’ teaching (vs. 10)

²¹ France, R.T., *The Gospel According To Matthew--The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI., 1985, pg. 281.

²² It can oftentimes be difficult for the offended spouse to seek a divorce because they think that the “legal filing” is what constitutes the divorce and they do not want to be deemed as “responsible.” Keener’s insight here is valuable—“The meaning in this case would be that this exception really is barely an exception after all—divorcing a perpetually unfaithful spouse does not dissolve a marriage, but simply makes official that the unfaithful spouse has already dissolved it by repeatedly denying it in practice” (Craig Keener, *op. cit.*, pg. 32).

²³ “In its more restricted sense fornication denotes voluntary sexual communion between an unmarried person and one of the opposite sex” (J. T. Mueller, *Fornication in Elwell, op. cit.*, pg. 422).

²⁴ Though scholars differ in their opinion, it is not likely that **sexual immorality** is the idea behind divorce because of **something indecent about [one’s spouse]** (Deuteronomy 24:1). The precise meaning of the Hebrew words in Deuteronomy 24 is lost to us (**some uncleanness** [NKJV]; **something objectionable** [NRSV]), but **sexual immorality** would have called for the death penalty, not divorce (*cf.* Leviticus 20:10). (The LXX translates it using a Greek word meaning shameful, indecent or inelegant—in ways other than sexual activity.) “The two Hebrew words...seem to mean something indecent, disgusting or repulsive...some indecency or impropriety of behavior” (Jay Adams, *op. cit.*, pg. 63). The reference is likely to what today we’d deem the ugliness of drug or alcohol abuse; abandonment; physical abuse; clinical mental illness, etc.—major life issues which are life-threatening to the spouse or children and/or do not allow for covenant marriage dynamics to continue. See M. G. McLuhan, *Marriage and Divorce*, Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton, IL., 1991, Chapter 8 for additional insight. See Christensen, *op. cit.*, pg. 566 and Keener, *op. cit.*, pg. 28 for the alternate view that **something indecent** is equivalent to Jesus’ **sexual immorality**.

and gives additional specifics Jesus never addressed—namely, divorce in which one partner is a believer and the other an unbeliever.²⁵ Paul assumes that either the believer became so after marrying an unbeliever (*cf.* 2 Corinthians 6:14), or else one believing partner has become an “unbeliever” after marrying (see below).

God’s first regulation is that the believer does as much as they can (without violating God’s rulership and laws in their life) to make the marriage work (vv. 12-13). The believing spouse should do nothing to provoke a divorce, realizing that their presence has great potential influence on the unbelieving spouse (vv. 14, 16)²⁶ and on the children (vs. 14). But, because an unbeliever **cannot please God** (Romans 8:8), there may come a point in which they desire divorce (vs. 15). This desire for divorce can be motivated by any number of reasons (other, so Paul assumes, then provocation by the believing spouse); it does not matter. In this case, **the believing spouse is to let it be so. The brother or sister is not bound in such circumstances;**²⁷ **God has called us to live in peace** (vs. 15).

This is the only biblical command relative to divorce;²⁸ the understanding here is that though the marriage covenant is sacred, a believer cannot demand any mis-mated relationship be held together; even with something as solemn as marriage, there cannot ultimately be **partnership...between righteousness and wickedness** (2 Corinthians 6:14). God calls the believing spouse, who has more insight into God’s realities, to

²⁵ Paul’s parenthetical, **I, not the Lord** (vs. 12), does not mean he is giving a mere opinion which one is free to accept or ignore. “Unfortunately for Paul the issues at Corinth were not addressed by the teaching of Jesus. In some aspects Paul’s Gentile mission was more complicated than the ministry of Jesus, which was primarily to Jews. The apostle must draw on other resources...what Paul has to ‘say’ here, however, is not his ‘take-it-or-leave-it’ opinion. Ultimately, his apostolic judgments derive their authority from Jesus even when a saying of the Lord is not directly involved...Paul’s teaching reflects his own unpacking and extended application of the Lord’s command” (Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians--The Pillar New Testament Commentary*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, pg. 295).

²⁶ “As long as the marriage is maintained the potential for [the unbelieving] spouse realizing salvation remains. To that degree they are ‘sanctified’ in the believing spouse...in speaking of ‘saving one’s spouse,’ Paul is referring to their ‘evangelizing’ or ‘winning’ them, whether by word or deed” (Gordon Fee, *op. cit.*, pp. 300, 306).

²⁷ Ciampa and Rosner see **in such circumstances** as “(that of being abandoned, not merely that of being married to an unbeliever) noting that a Christian spouse is not bound. That is, spouses are not stuck in the slavery of a no-man’s-land where they have no spouse (because they have been abandoned) and yet are not able to remarry (because they remain married). They are free” (Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *op. cit.*, pg. 303).

²⁸ Again, Jesus’ “**except for sexual immorality**” (Matthew 19:9) does not command divorce (see above).

therefore submit to the requested divorce; unfortunately, darkness has won and peace (wholeness) is more important than the marriage covenant.

- *Too often Christians, on bad advice, have settled for the in-between. Let me describe it. Believing (wrongly) that she must remain married to her unbelieving husband, no matter what, a Christian woman holds on even when her husband wants to end their marriage. He then may begin running around with other women and at length may even desert her. Yet, urged on by bad counsel, she will not agree to a divorce. He may stay away from home for six-month periods at a time, occasionally showing up for a week or so. This upsets the kids and the life of the home (hopes are aroused and shattered). His wife may get pregnant (if married, she must agree to sex if he seeks it), and so it goes on and on. She is always hoping against hope, yet there is no evidence at all of a desire on his part to consent to a marriage. She may hang on for years; for life!²⁹*

The most complex and controversial part of this passage is understanding Paul's use of **not a believer** (vs. 13). His most obvious understanding is that it refers to a spouse who has not made an initial, personal commitment to Jesus Christ for salvation (*cf.* 1 Corinthians 6:6; 19:27). But, it seemingly has a broader meaning in the New Testament as a whole, referring to those who have had a genuine legal salvation (justification) experience, but are perpetually unreliable, disobedient or lack commitment to the faith as a life-style.³⁰ This understanding is based on the fact that the Greek word translated **not a believer** (*apistia* [vs. 14]) literally means, "lacks faith"; because biblical faith is not just acknowledging Jesus as the Son of God for legal positioning, but a resultant life-style as well (*cf.* James 1:3; 2:14, 22), a spouse who is **not a believer** can be one who (as far as we can tell) has had a legitimate "born again" experience, but whose life-style regularly fails to follow God's commandments and whose heart does not desire change. **Anyone who does not [in practice] provide for their relatives...has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever** (1 Timothy 5:8).³¹ Their *ongoing*, defaulting Christian life-

²⁹ Adams, *op. cit.*, pg. 49.

³⁰ See *Faith in Dictionary of New Testament Theology, Volume 1*, Colin Brown (General Editor), Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI., 1979 printing, pp. 593-605.

³¹ "To deny (*arneisthai*) has a wide range of meanings, extending from 'to refuse to do something'...to a technical meaning of 'to apostatize,' as in the denial of Christ...between these two spectrums lies the meaning of 1 Tim 5:8. It cannot refer to apostasy; although ignoring one's familial responsibilities is reprehensible, it is not a damnable offense. Rather, for a person to claim to be a believer and yet not live up to even pagan standards of decency is virtually to deny the meaning of the Christian faith and live as an unbeliever...the believers who are not accepting their responsibility are doing more damage to the cause of the gospel than even an unbeliever could do" (William Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles--Word Biblical*

style then, in effect, brings about the divorce.³² Therefore, the believing spouse **is not bound**.³³

Such a judgment call by the believing spouse with reference to their “believing...living as an unbelieving spouse” is very difficult. It should not be made in independence or haste (Proverbs 19:18; 1 Corinthians 7:20); 1 Corinthians 7 is clear, they must—**1**) remain responsible to God and His Church (vs. 24); **2**) let providence/time have as much reign as possible (vs. 17); and **3**) remember that **keeping God’s commandments is what counts** (vs. 19).³⁴

REMARRIAGE

Remarriage as an institution is not frowned upon by God. The widowed are clearly free to remarry (1 Corinthians 7:39), with younger widows even being encouraged to do so (1 Timothy 5:14). However, Paul would never have remarriage entered into too quickly, especially following divorce. There are great benefits to staying single (1 Corinthians 7:7, 40) and healing must transpire before one undertakes another covenant.

- *Full recovery from divorce usually takes from two to three years. Learning, processing, and healing do not come overnight. Nor do they come by embracing a quick remarriage to someone who appears as an antidote to a broken spirit...a second marriage is far more complex than a first marriage; it takes planning and preparation to make it work.*³⁵

Remarriage after divorce then is biblically permissible, provided that the divorce is “biblically legal” (Deuteronomy 24:2; Matthew 19:1-9). “...divorce and remarriage are permissible on appropriate grounds...Jesus calls remarriage after an invalid divorce adulterous only because the divorce was invalid, due to insufficient grounds.”³⁶

Commentary, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN., 2000, pg. 285). They do equal damage to a marriage.

³² Jesus refers to this as divorce because “**your hearts were hard**” (Matthew 19:8).

³³ “They are not bound to the ruling given [in vv. 12-13] about maintaining the marriage. They have wanted to dissolve such marriages. Paul has said No. But now he allows that if the pagan wants out, then one is not enslaved” (Gordon Fee, *op. cit.*, pg. 302).

³⁴ For additional practical advice, see *Remarriage* in Elwell, *op. cit.*, pp. 931-932.

³⁵ Smoke, Jim, *Growing In Remarriage*, Fleming H. Revell Company, Old Tappan, NJ, 1990, pp. 11-12.

³⁶ Keener, *op. cit.*, pp. 59, 44.

REMARRIAGE FOLLOWING SEXUAL IMMORALITY—

Although the Greek construction behind Matthew 19:9 is difficult and somewhat obscure, most Greek scholars agree that Jesus' “**except for sexual immorality**” clause frees the victimized spouse to remarry.³⁷ “The wording of the saying suggests that in the case of a divorce on the grounds of sexual immorality the husband is allowed to remarry.”³⁸ As to the biblical right of the spouse committing *porneia* to remarry, the issue of their remarriage becomes more complex. Forgiveness and a new beginning for any sin are the essence of kingdom life (*cf.* Romans 5:17). However, there needs to be true confession and ongoing life-style change, including the process of submission to church discipline and restoration to personal wholeness (*cf.* 1 Corinthians 5:1-5; 2 Corinthians 2:5-11), before remarriage should even be considered. Their future is also largely determined by the subsequent action of the offended spouse. Have they remarried? Do they want reconciliation now that time has passed? The offended is to be considered when the offending considers remarriage.

REMARRIAGE FOLLOWING DIVORCE FROM AN UNBELIEVER—

What about the person divorced by an unbelieving spouse (1 Corinthians 7)? Paul notes that such a **brother or sister is not bound** (vs. 15). **Bound** (Greek, *douloo*) is a strong verb indicating they are no longer a slave—either to the unbelieving spouse or to the requirements of the marriage covenant. *Douloo* is interchangeable with *deo*, which is used in 1 Corinthians 7:39 to describe the breaking of a marriage covenant through death. Hence, the believer divorced by an unbeliever has the same privilege to remarry in the Lord as the widowed.³⁹

- *In my earlier prejudiced days I was reluctant to acknowledge that the words, “no longer bound” meant “no longer bound by the former marriage contract.” But I was wrong! There is no doubt whatever that the apostle is emphatically telling the abandoned Christian partner, “You are free!” This meant not only*

³⁷ The same principles apply to remarriage following divorce for **something indecent** (see excursus of Deuteronomy 24:1 above). “Remarriage is presupposed in the Deuteronomic legislation (Deut. 24:1-4)” (D. J. Atkinson, *Remarriage* in Elwell, *op. cit.*, pg. 933).

³⁸ France, *op. cit.*, pp. 281-282.

³⁹ Because the Bible's ethics apply to Christ-followers and not unbelievers, it is my understanding that divorce prior to one coming to Christ, regardless of the reason, allows for remarriage.

*that he or she was free of the broken marriage bond, but free to marry again—
but in the Lord!*⁴⁰

COMMITTED CHRISTIANS AND DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE—

What about two committed Christians who seek divorce for reasons other than **sexual immorality**? Paul is clear—they **should not divorce** (1 Corinthians 7:10 [NRSV]; cf. Mark 10:10-12). However, if they do divorce, they are to either **remain unmarried or else be reconciled** (1 Corinthians 7:11).⁴¹ Such divorces are along the lines of Rabbi Hillel’s “easy, any cause divorce” (cf. Matthew 19:3; see also above), stretch the limits of divine concession and are hence illegitimate in terms of freeing one to remarry. “After an illegitimate divorce, the first marriage is not considered annulled [for remarriage to another].”⁴²

Paul’s instruction in 1 Corinthians 7:11 is in keeping with Jesus’ assumption that Christians can experience the highest possible in terms of fulfilling God’s standings, for His Spirit is within (Matthew 5-7). “Jesus demands that we make our marriages work,”⁴³ which is why when He taught on divorce and remarriage, His disciples said, “**If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry**” (Matthew 19:10).

⁴⁰ McLuhan, *op. cit.*, pg. 122. “**Is not bound**: ‘is not in bondage’; the implication is that the believer **in such a case** was in a state of what amounted to widowhood...presumably remarriage would not be completely excluded for the believer” (F. F. Bruce, *The New Century Bible Commentary: I & II Corinthians*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI., 1980 publication, pg. 70). Fee disagrees. “This statement is the source of the notorious ‘Pauline privilege,’ in which the text is understood to mean that the believer is free to remarry. But despite a long tradition that has so interpreted it, several converging data indicate that Paul is essentially repeating his first sentence: that the believer is not bound to maintain the marriage if the pagan partner opts out. Remarriage is not an issue at all; indeed, it seems to be quite the opposite” (Gordon Fee, *op. cit.*, pp. 302-303).

⁴¹ Paul discusses this from the standpoint of the wife. “If she does separate, she must continue to follow the dictum ‘Stay as you are,’ meaning now ‘Remain unmarried’...the wife who may happen to divorce her husband may not use her present unmarried condition as an excuse for remarriage to someone else” (Gordon Fee, *op. cit.*, pg. 295).

⁴² Grosheide, F. W., *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians--The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI., 1972 printing, pg. 163. “David Instone-Brewer shows that Paul is clearly dealing with Greco-Roman ‘divorce by separation,’ which was a ‘no fault’ type of divorce, and that Paul does not approve of it any more than Jesus approved of the Hillelite version which permitted a man to divorce his wife for any reason that might occur to him. In the context, Paul is clearly dealing with people who are asking about whether they should divorce their spouses on grounds that Paul considers unacceptable, and thus he tells them that they should not do so. Paul stands with Jesus in holding that divorce may be justified only where one partner clearly manifests a radical refusal to respect one’s marital commitments and maintain the fundamental integrity of the marriage” (Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *op. cit.*, pg. 293).

⁴³ Keener, *op. cit.*, pg. 108.

The Bible's purpose is not to put unnecessary restraint upon us, but to promote good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:35). A knowledge of the truth and the presence of His Holy Spirit call for greater obedience and integrity of action among God's people (*cf.* Genesis 10:1-7).

ADDENDUM

LEADERS AND DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

Paul's teaching on the qualifications of bishops and deacons includes the statement they are to be **the husband of but one wife** (1 Timothy 3:2, 12 [NIV]).⁴⁴ This is often interpreted as a divorce and remarriage issue,⁴⁵ teaching that no one in the position of a Church leader can be remarried (save [among most scholars] if they are widowed). Others argue Paul is teaching the need for leaders to be martially faithful (see the TNIV's—**faithful to his wife**), possibly addressing the matter of monogamy. Because of the ambiguity of the phrasing, the argument will most likely never be settled.

The best approach is probably that of Donald Guthrie, "...regarding the words in a more general way as meaning that an overseer must embrace a strict morality"⁴⁶ (*cf.* the TNIV's rendering). Hence, if the potential leader is divorced and remarried or divorced and seeking re-marriage, the circumstances of the divorce/remarriage should be examined on a case-by-case basis in light of the above mentioned biblical criteria. If the divorce is found to be "biblical," then the remarriage is "biblical" and the remarried leader may serve in their respective leadership role.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ The Ephesian situation addresses only the qualifications of male leaders. The same principles are obviously true for female leaders, however.

⁴⁵ The NRSV has taken a bold interpretive stance, translating the statement as **married only once**; a footnote indicates the Greek literally reads, **be husbands of one wife**.

⁴⁶ Guthrie, Donald, *The Pastoral Epistles--Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI., 1990, pg. 92. For a complete discussion of the issues and the various historical positions, see Mounce, *op. cit.*, pp. 170-173.

⁴⁷ "Biblical" is used in this context in conjunction with the criteria for divorce and remarriage as outlined in this paper.