

DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

Summary

Marriage between one man and one woman for a lifetime is the historic Christian standard based on the full witness of Scripture. The Assemblies of God holds marriage in such high regard that it only recognizes the right to divorce under a narrow set of biblically warranted exceptions. Where we recognize the right to divorce, we recognize the freedom to remarry. Even when those exceptions do not exist, divorced and remarried Christians belong to the people of God and should be treated as members of the body of Christ.

Introduction

In the United States, lifelong marriages are no longer the norm for families. One twenty-first-century study shows that about one-third of Americans who are or have been married have also been divorced at least once. Among self-professed evangelical Christian believers, 25 percent reportedly have experienced divorce.¹ Vast segments of the general population live in families headed by single parents, either divorced or never married. Many others live in transient relationships marked by convenience or fear of legal entanglements. In short, many people today live contrary to God's design for the family, sexual relationships, and child rearing.

The Church must speak to the issues of divorce and remarriage, which occur all too often. Christians can struggle with how their commitment to Christ should shape their views of marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

Witness of Scripture

On Marriage

1. Marriage joins two sexes, male and female, who share in the divine image. Both males and females are biologically needed to be "fruitful and multiply" so that humanity can reflect God's authority over the earth (Genesis 1:27–28).

Marriage between two sexes should be a mutual relationship. After God placed man in the Garden to work it, He noted that man should not be alone. God created man's equal to work alongside him as an *ezer kenegdo*, or "ally in front of" (Genesis 2:18). *Ezer* is a Hebrew term that can mean "helper," "ally," or "rescuer." The Old Testament uses the term most often to describe God. *Kenegdo* is a Hebrew word that can mean "in front of" or "in sight of." It describes standing face-to-face or eye-to-eye. In this context, *ezer kenegdo* does not mean "junior partner" but "corresponding ally." Man immediately recognized his equal in woman compared to other living beings (Genesis 2:19–23).

¹ Barna Group, "The Trends Redefining Romance Today," [February 9, 2017] <https://www.barna.com/research/trends-redefining-romance-today/> (accessed May 8, 2024).

Marriage is a lifetime union between two sexes. The story of woman's creation explains marriage as the moment man leaves his family of origin to become "one flesh" with his wife (Genesis 2:24). Jesus said of this union, "What God has joined together, let no one separate"² (Matthew 19:6).

2. Marriage is a covenant. It is a solemn, binding agreement made before God and among people in society. The marriage order of Genesis 2:24 strongly implies the nature of marriage. But Malachi 2:14 describes it as a covenant. Ezekiel 16:8 then extends the idea of marriage to the covenant relationship between God and Israel.

Marriage is a covenant between one man and one woman. While different roles exist for males and females in different cultures, the most significant difference between men and women is biological and is related to procreation. Only women can say, "With the help of the LORD I have brought forth" another human being (Genesis 4:1). The physical differences that exist between men and women do not negate the equal responsibility they share for their marriage.

3. The sexual consummation of marriage is for procreation, bonding, and mutual pleasure in a safe and loving relationship. Paul taught spouses to faithfully respect each other sexually (1 Corinthians 7:3–5).

Biblical marriage begins and ends with monogamy. The first story of the family focuses on one man and one woman. Some practiced polygamy later, but the resulting family experience was never ideal (e.g., Genesis 21:9–10; 37:2–36; 1 Samuel 1:1–8). Comparing Israel's "one-God people" relationship with the institution of marriage (e.g., Isaiah 54:5, Hosea 3:1) led to an insistence on "one-spouse marriage" by the New Testament era.

Within the Church, Paul proscribed monogamy for leaders by his references to a "one-woman man" (1 Timothy 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6). Paul saw marriage as analogous to the relationship between Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:21–33). Spouses' faithfulness to each other's well-being reflects the reconciled community Christ died for and for whom Christ will return.

On Divorce

1. God judged divorce as harmful (Malachi 2:14–16). Divorce was not a part of God's original intention for humanity. Deliberately breaking the marital covenant hinders God's purposes in marriage.

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God's Law regulated divorce. The Law acknowledged that divorce was already taking place in Israel. In those times, women were under the authority of men. A husband could abandon his wife, without legal recourse, to starvation or prostitution on a mere whim. The Old Testament divorce law was a necessary hedge against mistreatment. The Law offered the possibility of divorce only under carefully prescribed circumstances (Deuteronomy 24:1–4; cf. 22:13–19, 28–29).

2. Jesus spoke against divorce (Matthew 19:5–6; Mark 10:6–9). In the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees over divorce, the question concerned what qualified as “indecency” in Deuteronomy 24:1. Can a man divorce his wife for any cause or only for adultery? Jesus pointed out that Moses only permitted (*epitrepo*) them to divorce their wives—but even then, not for “every cause” (Matthew 19:3, 7–8). Jesus interpreted Deuteronomy 24:1–4 as a description of divorce happening in certain instances, not a command to divorce.

In the case of “marital unfaithfulness,” Jesus permitted divorce (Matthew 5:32; see also Matthew 19:9). The Greek word translated “marital unfaithfulness” in these passages is *porneia*, which would undoubtedly include adultery but is also a broader term for sexual immorality of various kinds, often habitual, both before and after marriage (Mark 7:21; Acts 15:20; 1 Corinthians 5:1; 6:18; Galatians 5:19; Ephesians 5:3; 1 Thessalonians 4:3).

When Jesus spoke against divorce, the concern was people finding any excuse to divorce one spouse to marry another. Divorce for the sake of remarriage constituted adultery in God's eyes unless *porneia* had already broken the marriage covenant.

3. Paul forbade Christian couples to divorce (1 Corinthians 7:10–11). Christian couples are to remain unmarried if they divorce unless they are reconciled to their believing spouse. Paul also forbade Christians from initiating divorce simply because their partner was an unbeliever. Suppose an unbelieving spouse wants to stay in the marriage to a believer. For Paul, the believer sanctifies (sets apart) their marriage and family by their presence as a follower of Jesus (1 Corinthians 7:12–14). In fact, the believing spouse's witness could lead to the salvation of the unbelieving spouse (1 Corinthians 7:16).

Paul allowed for divorce when an unbelieving spouse was unwilling to continue in marriage to a believer. In that case, the believer must let them go “to live in peace” (1 Corinthians 7:15). Just as marriage to an unbeliever can lead a family to Christ if the unbeliever wants to stay, forcing marriage on an unbeliever who wants to leave can disrupt the peace that the gospel promises to bring. In these cases, abandonment, by implication, provides grounds for divorce and remarriage.

In summary, marriage is a covenant between two partners, male and female, that God intends to last a lifetime. Marriages also create the potential for the birth and rearing of children. Two parents can better partner for the good of the children and the good of each

other. There is no closer human relationship than marriage, so there is no better analogy for the relationship between God and His people or Christ and His Church. Marriage should reflect the loving community God intends for His people.

God hates divorce among His people. It violates the covenant between wives and husbands as bearers of the divine image in their union. At the same time, God protected wives from mistreatment in cultures where husbands had more power to initiate divorce by prescribing narrow conditions in which divorce is allowable.

Jesus also offered protection from spouses looking to divorce for any reason. Jesus did allow for (though He did not command) divorce for marital unfaithfulness because one spouse has already broken the marriage covenant.

Paul also forbade divorce for Christians but provided for unbelievers who were bound in marriage with believers. If an unbeliever wants out, the believer must let the spouse go. As an implied abandonment, the marriage covenant is already broken again, so divorce must be permitted.

Jesus interpreted the Law by looking to the heart of the Law and not just the wording. Paul interpreted Jesus by looking to the heart of the gospel and not just the one exception Jesus discussed. Both Jesus and Paul allowed divorce when the marriage covenant was already broken. They also considered what protected members from mistreatment in their discussions of divorce. While it takes two to marry, it may only take one to force a divorce. Christians are not responsible for divorces outside of their control.

The Assemblies of God recognizes exceptions for divorce and remarriage based on the above: adultery, abandonment of a believer by an unbeliever, domestic violence, and ecclesiastical annulment. The Assemblies of God also does not count preconversion divorce against the possibility of remarriage.³ Whatever has happened before conversion belongs to the old way of life. Preconversion divorce does not count as the failure of a Christian marriage.

Domestic abuse, whether of the spouse, children, or both, can also constitute a breaking of the marriage covenant.⁴ Spouses are to love and mutually submit to one another. Parents are to care for their children by the very act of becoming parents. No spouse should stay in an unsafe environment any more than a parent can disregard the suffering of their children. God's calling on us as stewards of our children and bodies is no less meaningful than God's calling on us as spouses. Based on Scripture, the Assemblies of God holds the abuser responsible for breaking the marriage covenant and not the one who may divorce to protect themselves or their children.

³ The bylaws of the Assemblies of God (Article IX. B, Section 5, paragraph b) allow for credentialed ministers to conduct a marriage for divorced believers if one of those five conditions applied in their divorce.

⁴ See the Assemblies of God position paper on "Domestic Violence" approved by the General Presbytery of the Assemblies of God in August 2022 at ag.org/Position-Papers/Domestic-Violence.

An ecclesiastical annulment is also a biblical exception, allowing for remarriage when the first marriage was not entered freely or honestly. If by force, fraud, or lack of consummation, a marriage may be annulled in recognition that there was no covenant between two willing parties with which to begin. At the same time, the person so defrauded is an innocent party to the failure of the marriage.

Divorced Christians and Remarriage

Concerning All Believers

The Law makes clear that divorce permitted remarriage. Deuteronomy 24:1–4 assumed the divorced woman (and former husband) would remarry. However, this passage shows that the Law put certain limits on remarriage. A husband could not reclaim his rejected wife after her marriage to another man.

Jesus taught that divorce and remarriage, without biblical cause, was adultery. It constituted a sin against the covenant of the first marriage (Matthew 5:32; 19:9; Mark 10:11–12; Luke 16:18). In these passages, Jesus appeared to speak to those who willfully initiated divorce without having biblical grounds to do so. However, Jesus recognized that the fundamental problem is divorce itself and not remarriage.

Because Jesus included an exception on behalf of the innocent spouse, a married person who divorces a sexually immoral spouse does not commit adultery since the offender is already guilty of adultery. Nor does the innocent spouse commit adultery upon remarriage. Note that “marital unfaithfulness” or *porneia* often implies ongoing immorality. So, this exception is not a command to end a salvageable marriage.

Paul also included an exception on behalf of the innocent spouse when unbelieving spouses were unwilling to live with partners who had become believers (1 Corinthians 7:15). Paul does not encourage remarriage after divorce, but he also does not condemn it for innocent parties (1 Corinthians 7:27–28).

Remarriage establishes a new marriage covenant. Scripture makes it clear that spouses who sinfully break their marriage covenant to marry another commit adultery. Yet, Scripture never places such guilt on the innocent partner. Believers are only to remarry one who “belong[s] to the Lord” (1 Corinthians 7:39), and the new marriage covenant is to be permanent.

Due to a prior divorce, some churches may assess an individual’s suitability for various church leadership positions, such as teacher, elder, deacon, and board member. A proven successful remarriage, or a sufficient time past the divorce for those who remained single, could demonstrate that spiritual concerns stemming from the failed marriage no longer exist. A church may determine that, rather than a disqualifier, a healthy long-term remarriage qualifies as evidence of the level of maturity needed for someone to hold a leadership position even outside of the previously mentioned exceptions for divorce.

Concerning Credentialed Ministers

Near the top of the list of requirements for the offices of elder or overseer (corresponding to a pastor) is that they shall be “the husband of one wife” (1 Timothy 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6, KJV⁵). In Greek, this reads literally “one-woman man.” Its exact meaning is elusive and has been subject to several interpretations. Some have argued that it literally means that leaders must be male and must be married to a woman (i.e., not single). The Assemblies of God rejects those interpretations and credentials women and singles, whether male or female.⁶

The more common question is whether this passage refers to one spouse at a time or one spouse for an entire lifetime. Does it mean that elders and deacons could not remarry after being widowed, could not remarry after being divorced, or, if married, must be married to one person only (i.e., no polygamy)? The General Council of the Assemblies of God has adopted the interpretation that the “one-woman man” restriction applies to individuals in a heterosexual, monogamous marriage for which divorce is not an option except under specific conditions. If those conditions do exist, remarriage becomes allowable for divorced ministers.

Those conditions must be exceptions that follow biblical teachings about marriage, conversion, and the value of human beings. This includes the allowance of remarriage when the divorce occurred prior to conversion (because we are now a “new creation”), as a result of the previous spouse’s sexual infidelity, because of abandonment of the believer, due to domestic violence aimed at a spouse or child, or in recognition of an ecclesiastical annulment due to fraud, willful lack of consummation, or lack of freedom or consent in entering the marriage.⁷

Guidelines

This paper aims to inform pastoral care and guidance for the people of God. The complexities of modern life prevent Scripture from including specific directions for every issue. Realizing we do not know how the apostles might have handled every problem raised by divorce and remarriage, we offer this paper in a sincere effort to affirm the truth of Scripture while endeavoring “to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3).

The following principles and recommendations are offered for consideration:

1. All Christians need to hear regular and consistent instruction on the nature, permanence, and nurture of marriage. An uncompromising declaration of the sanctity of marriage must be articulated in ways that affirm and comfort the

⁵ KJV refers to the King James Version of the Bible.

⁶ See the Assemblies of God position paper on “The Role of Women in Ministry” approved by the General Presbytery of the Assemblies of God in August 2010 at ag.org/Position-Papers/The-Role-of-Women-in-Ministry.

⁷ The bylaws of the Assemblies of God (Article VII, Section 2, paragraph j and Article IX. B, Section 5, paragraph e) allow for credentialed ministers to divorce and remarry under those exceptions.

divorced and equip them to be successful in any new marriage that may have already been undertaken.

2. The victims of divorce, including children, need and deserve special care within Christian congregations and from trained caregivers.
3. The Church must also deal purposefully and uncompromisingly with professing believers who willfully violate their marital vows and engage in behaviors that destroy their marriage covenants.
4. Particular sensitivity is necessary for those caught in difficult marital circumstances not specifically addressed in Scripture. Believers enmeshed in these circumstances need careful guidance. Lead them through applying scriptural principles and prayer, so they make decisions consistent with Scripture and their consciences.