

DIVORCE – For Believers

This is but a very brief resume and not intended to be a final and complete answer to the problem. It is a most complicated topic, and I still have some unresolved problems in my mind. I am sure divorce is not a part of God's plan for His people. As a matter of fact the NASB translation of Mal. 2:15, 16 reads, "Take heed then, to your spirit, and let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth. For I hate divorce, says the Lord, the God of Israel."

However, Moses made arrangements for divorce, and told the divorced woman she was free to remarry. "When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favor in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house. And, when she is departed out of his house, **she may go and be another man's wife**". (Deut. 24:1, 2).

While it is true it was for the hardness of their hearts Moses gave this instruction (Matt. 19:8), it would seem strange if God was more gracious under law in this situation than He is in the age of grace! Sadly, there is all too often hardness of heart among us also. In some situations, caused by hardness of heart on the part of one (or both) of the people involved, divorce would be the lesser of two evils. In Jer. 3:8 we are told that God gave Israel a bill of divorce. This seems to have been better (bad as it was) than to continue to put up with Israel's conduct while remaining the "wife of Jehovah."

That divorce (in the Old Testament) included the right to remarriage is stated in Deut. 24:2, and seems to be implied in several other passages. For instance, in Lev. 21:14, priests were not allowed to marry widows or divorced women. This seems to imply that those who were not priests could do this. A bill of divorcement would have little value if it did not carry with it the right to remarry.

Rom. 7:2, 3 can hardly be construed as the rule for today unless we ignore Rom. 6:14. Paul is using a ruling under law (to those who knew the law – not to those under the law, for we are not under it) as an illustration of a great spiritual truth. While this passage does not condone divorce, it should not be used to totally rule out divorce for Christians in this age of grace.

By far the most important passage is First Corinthians seven. Verses 8 – 16 give instructions as to what we should do, and I would say a hearty "amen" to them. How we are to react when these instructions are not followed is another matter.

If divorce and remarriage is the all important sin of believers, why does Paul not mention it in the passages where he is listing such sins? Why wait until he is asked for his answer to problems believers are facing before he even writes what he does in First Corinthians seven? If a person (man or woman) finds himself unmarried by reason of divorce, is it not "better [for him also] to marry than to burn with passion" (1 Cor. 7:9 – NIV)? IN this context it seems verse 20 would indicate that those who were divorced and remarried before they came to Christ should not try to undo what has been done. They should continue on in the situation in which they find themselves – seeking to live for the Lord in the days before them. One couple asked Billy

Graham, “We were divorced and remarried before we were saved. Should we part and go back to our former spouses?” His reply was, “You can’t unscramble eggs!” The sin involves the divorce and remarriage itself, not the continuing family relationship with the one who has become the lawful mate through that remarriage. Such a person is not “living in sin” but living in the consequences of a sin in the past.

In 1 Tim. 3:2 Paul says, “A bishop then must be the husband of one wife.” This has been interpreted in various ways. Does it mean simply that a bishop must be married? Does it mean he must marry only once – period? Does it mean he is not to be practicing polygamy? Or does it rule out divorce, with the idea that his first wife is still his wife in spite of the divorce, and thus when he remarries he has two wives?

In light of the fact that polygamy was prevalent and legal at the time, it seems this is a warning against this practice. Divorce was known, and called by that name, so if divorce was in view, why did not Paul not refer to it, specifically, as “divorce”?

Some final thoughts – as I see it now:

Should divorce be thought of lightly or be encouraged? By all means NO!

Should we seek, in every way we can, to keep homes together, to help the couples solve their problems without breaking up the home? Of course!

Should we offer fellowship to those facing this problem? I believe we should. We surely can have at least limited fellowship with them without condoning divorce.

Should we allow divorced people to have a place of leadership in the church? Reluctantly, but being willing to weigh the circumstances in the case. Some involved in this are more sinned against than sinning. Also, it will depend on whether the divorce and remarriage was before or after conversion. Before conversion Paul was a murderer, but it was not held against him as a believer. See 1 Cor. 6:6 – 9, “know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.”

Should we perform marriages for those who have been divorced? Reluctantly, but weighing the individual circumstances.

Admitting that sin is involved, should we look upon this as a special kind of sin? Does it require action on our part while those guilty of gossip, hatred, spiritual pride, etc. go unrebuked? I do not think so.

Admittedly, and tragically, divorce has become very common among believers, yes, even believers in our grace churches. It is a heart-breaking situation. It seems the present

tendency to depend on special marriage seminars and psychology to stem the tide is largely doomed to but limited value. What could be more effective would be a true revival among God's people (why are we so afraid to use the word "revival" anymore?). Also we need a rebirth of Bible study – not merely to prove our doctrinal position (important as that may be), but to bring us to the Lord with tears, asking Him to grant us a closer walk with Him. Divorce, like drug addiction, materialism, immorality and so on, is not really the disease – it is one of the symptoms. The disease is that we are walking in the flesh, not in the Spirit. All of the above things, and much more, involve the lusts of the flesh – and we have His promise that if we walk in the Spirit we will NOT fulfill the lust of the flesh" (Gal. 5:17). If we were being led by the Spirit we would not need a lot of rules and regulations about divorce (Gal. 5:18).

I still have some unresolved questions on this topic. I am sure I do not have all the answers, and don't know anyone else who has all of them either. May the Lord grant us all His wisdom and graciousness as we deal with this problem in our churches.

--- William P Heath Bible Study # 74

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