

Position on Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage

The purpose of this document is to briefly outline the Scriptural understanding of the issues surrounding marriage, specifically...

- A. The Biblical View of Marriage
- B. The Biblical Allowance for Divorce
- C. The Biblical Response to Divorce
- D. The Biblical Allowance for Remarriage
- E. The Church's Position on Temporary Separation
- F. The Implication of Divorce on Ministry Roles

A. The Biblical View Of Marriage

Institution

The *institution* of marriage was established by God as a direct implication of His creation design of humanity. Genesis 1:27-28 expresses God's creation of mankind in His own image: "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them." In Genesis 2:18-25, God declares that creation is yet incomplete with man alone, and therefore He creates the woman and brings her to the man as His final act of creation. *"It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him... The Lord God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man."*

The implication from God's institution of marriage is that the core parameters and practices of marriage are not up for cultural emendation or personal preference. Each party in marriage is thus bound to fulfill their God-given roles, uphold the permanency of marriage, etc.

Design

The *design* of marriage was also given by God. Genesis 2:24: *"For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh."* This one flesh relationship in marriage is designed by God to be a lifelong spiritual union uniquely between them pictured by the physical intimacy enjoyed as two are joined in marriage. Just like it was God who formed the woman from the man and brought her to him (Genesis 2:21-22), it is God who ordains and performs each marriage today, uniting them into a *one flesh* relationship that man is commanded not to destroy. Jesus, speaking of all marriages in Mark 10:8-9, said, *"The two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but **one** flesh.* What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate."

The implication from God's design is that marriage is only to be entered into by a male and a female. No allowance is to be made for the modern notion of a self-conceived "gender" that fails to align with one's biological sex at birth.

Purpose

God's primary *purpose* for marriage is two-fold: to provide intimate companionship between man and woman, and to display the glory of God's commitment to His people.

1. God said it was not good for man to experience loneliness throughout life, and therefore provided not only the woman, but also her companionship in the commitment of a marriage covenant. The words “cleave to his wife” and “they shall become one flesh” point to a sacred covenant rooted in commitment to one another. God admonished Israel with these words in Malachi 2:14 “...*the LORD has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant.*” The marriage relationship between a man and a woman is a covenant before God (Prov 2:17), which involves the duty of providing relational, social, spiritual, and physical companionship to one another (1 Cor 7:1-5).
2. God also created marriage for the purpose of displaying His glory in a way that no other event or institution could. The mystery of marriage is more fully revealed in Ephesians 5:22-33. Paul quotes Genesis 2:24 in verse 31, “*Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.*” And then he gives an interpretation in verse 32: “*This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.*” That is, marriage is patterned after and to be a visible display of Christ’s covenant commitment to His Church. Therefore, the highest meaning and ultimate purpose of marriage is fulfilled when the covenant relationship of Christ and His Church is depicted by a husband loving his wife in a self-sacrificing way and a wife responding to him with glad submission.

The implication of a Christian fulfilling both of God’s purposes in marriage is that Scripture permits that a believer should only marry “in the Lord” (1 Cor 7:39). In other words, a believer should not “bind themselves together” in marriage with an unbeliever (2 Cor 6:14). And yet, if one finds themselves married to an unbeliever, they should remain faithfully in that marriage (1 Cor 7:12-14).

B. The Biblical Allowance For Divorce

The only biblical grounds for divorce are sexual sin or abandonment by an unbeliever. It is important to understand that these are grounds that **allow** divorce but do not **require** divorce. Assuming Biblical repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation can be attained, it is much better to remain married, as a lifelong commitment was God’s design in the first place.

Sexual Sin

The first situation that could allow divorce is sexual sin (Matthew 5:32; 19:9). The Greek word used for sexual here is “porneia” and encompasses all types of sexual sin such as adultery, homosexuality, bestiality, and incest. When one partner violates the unity and intimacy of a marriage by sexual sin with someone outside of the marriage, and forsakes his or her covenant obligation, the faithful partner is *allowed* to seek a divorce should they choose.

It is important that Jesus had the physical act of sexual sin in view. In Matthew 5:28 Jesus notes that anyone that “looks at a woman to lust” has committed adultery in his heart. It is important to note that Jesus says looking with lust results in “adultery in the heart.” Like many other sins which begin in the heart (such as hate being the heart attitude that leads to murder, etc.), this statement of “adultery in the heart” should not be construed as allowance for divorce any more than “anger with your brother” becomes grounds for the death penalty in civil courts (5:22). Such inward sins do make one liable to God, who sees all that is in the heart, and yet in the human sphere, it is outward sexual sin which provides the allowance for divorce.

Abandonment

The second situation that could allow divorce is when a believing spouse is “abandoned” by an unbeliever (1 Corinthians 7:12-15). The meaning of “abandonment” is the *actual physical nonpresence* of the unbeliever who chooses to leave. When an unbeliever leaves, trying to keep him or her in the marriage may only create greater tension and conflict. Because “God has called us to peace,” divorce is allowed in such situations. Also, if the unbeliever leaves the marriage relationship permanently but is not willing to file for divorce, perhaps because of lifestyle, irresponsibility, or to avoid monetary obligations, then the believer is often in an impossible situation of having legal and moral obligations that he or she cannot fulfill. Because “the brother or sister is not under bondage in such cases” (1 Corinthians 7:15) and is therefore no longer obligated to remain married, the believer may file for divorce without fearing the displeasure of God.

At times a spouse may feel themselves to be emotionally, relationally, or sexually “abandoned” by their spouse who still “consents to live together.” Though heart-breaking and though it represents a sinful neglect of God’s design for marriage, such does not constitute a biblical allowance for divorce as it does not fit the language of “leaving” in this passage. Such situations should be a cause of much prayer, open communication within the marriage, and the pursuit of biblical counsel. In all cases of suspected abandonment, the believer should continuously seek the counsel and prayers of the elders of the church from the very beginning.

C. The Church’s Response To Divorce

Despite divorce’s devastating consequences for individuals, families, and society as a whole, like any other result of sin, God’s grace can be shown to be sufficient in any situation. Both those who divorce biblically and those who divorce sinfully (provided repentance and restoration have taken place) have equal standing in the church as recipients of God’s grace (1 Corinthians 6:11). In God’s wisdom, the Scriptures do give certain prescriptions and directives on how the church should counsel and handle those involved in a divorce.

When Divorce is Allowable

Though, in His mercy, God permits divorce due to sexual immorality or abandonment by an unbeliever, He does not command it. Because of that, The Bible Church of Owasso would initially always encourage efforts to maintain the marriage. Scripture teaches us that God’s grace is able to abound to restore any marriage to one far superior to anything they could ever imagine. While allowing the faithful partner the option to pursue divorce on biblical grounds, we would seek to help the marriage partners be restored to each other through biblical instruction and counseling. In this way, the glory of God’s grace in overcoming sin is displayed to the world.

When Divorce Is Not Allowable

Were any believer *to seek a divorce* for reasons not allowed in Scripture, The Bible Church of Owasso would actively seek the repentance of the partner(s) who are pursuing divorce, and further seek the reconciliation to God and spouse following the biblical directives of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation, including the pursuit of restorative church discipline, if necessary (Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5:1-12). Were the sinning spouse unrepentant throughout the process of church discipline and were put out of the church, the faithful spouse would then be considered to be “abandoned by an unbeliever.”

If a believer comes into our fellowship *having sinfully divorced his/her spouse* for reasons not allowed in Scripture, The Bible Church of Owasso would seek true repentance of the individual. The fruit of this repentance would necessarily involve the pursuit of the biblical reconciliation and remarriage of the former

spouse, if possible, and therefore this one would need to remain single while reconciliation is possible (1 Corinthians 7:10-11). However, if it is not possible to remarry one's former spouse (i.e., they are already remarried, shown to be an unbeliever, or have died) this one is free to remarry after the fruit of repentance is shown by settling all other outstanding obligations associated with the former marriage (Matthew 5:23-24).

D. Biblical Allowance for Remarriage

The Bible only allows one previously married to remarry in five situations:

1. After the death of a spouse (Romans 7:1-3)
2. By a spouse who divorced their mate for sexual sin (Matthew 19:9)
3. By a spouse who was abandoned by an unbeliever (1 Corinthians 7:12-16)
4. The remarriage of two believers who unbiblically divorced each other (1 Corinthians 7:10-11)
5. The remarriage of one who has repented of their sinful divorce, and yet has no ability to remarry due to death or remarriage of their former spouse (1 Cor 7:11, 39)

One purpose for the Scripture's teaching on biblical divorce is to make clear that the faithful partner is free to remarry, but only in the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:15, 39). Even though the passages that allow divorce for sexual sin and abandonment **do not specifically state** that remarriage is allowed, the entire context implies that remarriage is an option for the faithful partner. Remarriage for any other reason is considered "adultery" since reconciliation is still possible (Mark 10:11-12). This is why Paul says that the believer who sinfully divorces should "remain unmarried, or else be reconciled..." (1 Corinthians 7:10-11). If no reconciliation is possible, the repentant sinner is no longer bound to the former marriage and free to remarry.

E. The Church's Position Temporary "Separation"

When Separation is Advisable

Temporary separation may be advisable in extreme cases where it is best for married spouses to temporarily live apart. Such cases would include physical / sexual abuse, criminal, adulterous, or dangerous activity by a spouse. Upon instances of criminal activity in which physical well-being is at risk, the believer should involve the civil authorities right away to restore safety. Usually such situations will appropriately be followed by a season of temporary separation. The purpose of such temporary separation is to provide continued physical safety and an opportunity for civil authorities and church leaders to work with the couple towards a long-term resolution of the crisis. Wherever possible, the goal of biblical reconciliation and restitution of the marriage should be pursued by the believer (along with church leaders) through confrontation, repentance, and forgiveness toward the goal of a restoration of mutual love and care.

In such cases, the entire church body should also gather around the afflicted fellow believer and provide ongoing strong support in both tangible and spiritual care, which would include participating in biblical confrontation of the abusive spouse.

In no such case should abuse be covered or ignored, but rather immediately brought to the elders in order to be properly and biblically exposed and confronted (Eph 5:11).

Notwithstanding such action in extreme cases, temporary separation in lesser cases is rarely advisable.

When Separation is Not Advisable

Outside of the types of crises stated above, marriages may at times enter a difficult season, in which one spouse may desire to physically “separate” by temporarily living apart from the other spouse for various reasons...

- Thinking, “we can work on our marriage better apart than together...”
- Because one spouse is “fed-up” with the other and just needs some space
- To have the freedom to pursue a sinful relationship outside of the marriage
- As a first step to pursuing a divorce

Though these may seem like rational and plausible arguments, separation as described above would violate the clear command of God. The biblical injunction in 1 Cor 7:1-5 must be considered, which forbids spouses from depriving one another from the companionship and intimacy the marriage relationship provides. Few marriages which are already weakened by serious strife can actually survive the trauma of a lengthy “separation.”

For Christians experiencing marital strife, the fact that separation is not part of God’s design is not because He wants imprison people in a hopeless marriage. Instead, He is providing the opportunity to trust in Him by seeking His path to restoration of the marriage to Spirit-given wholeness (Prov 3:5-6, Phil 4:13). His resources include His Word, His Spirit, His Church, and His promise of help in time of need. Seeking true pastoral counseling from church leaders is often a necessary step to bring lasting change into the marriage, as the couple obeys God in submitting to church leadership (Heb 13:17) and church leadership obeys God in “bearing one another’s burdens” (Gal 6:2) by providing practical and biblical steps that can lead toward reconciliation.

F. Implication of Divorce on Ministry Roles

Whenever the subject of divorce and remarriage is discussed, the inevitable question of whether a divorced and/or remarried man can ever serve as an elder/deacon follows closely behind. This discussion has led to much confusion as well as a great deal of heartache for many individuals and churches. Therefore, a clear biblical understanding of the issue is necessary.

Generally, two positions are held:

1. Regardless of any past circumstances, no one who has had a previous divorce is biblically qualified to serve as an elder/deacon. The support for this position comes from an interpretation of the leadership qualification listed in 1 Tim 3:2, 12, commonly translated into the English phrase, “husband of one wife.”
2. The man should be measured on his present faithfulness in marriage, and not based on any past event. The support for this position generally comes from the nature of the leadership qualifications as being present characteristics, and from the more literal translation of this particular qualification in 1 Tim 3:2, 12 as “one-woman man”, referring more directly to his marital faithfulness, not his marital status.

Husband of One Wife

One’s position usually hinges on the understanding of the qualification in 1 Tim 3, and therefore the following is an attempt to soberly evaluate the best understanding of the intent of God’s Word at this point. There are

generally four different ways this phrase has been understood, and it is helpful to biblically evaluate these options:

- A. Elders must be married
- B. Elders must not be polygamists
- C. Elders must have married only once in their life
- D. Elders must be sexually pure and whole-hearted in their commitment to their wife

Option A)

Paul states clearly in 1 Cor 7:32-35 that one who is unmarried is able to be “free from concern” about the things of the world and have “undistracted devotion to the Lord.” He also expressed his desire that all men would be single “as I myself am,” and that this would be “good” (1 Cor 7:7-8). This would be a direct contradiction for Paul to require church leaders to be married, when he himself exercised this role while unmarried. It is obvious this view is not a serious consideration of what the phrase “one-woman man” really means.

Option B)

The position that Paul was intending to convey that elders and deacons must not be polygamists is rendered improbable by his use of the same exact grammatical construction for a parallel context in 1 Tim 5:9. There he states that for a widow to receive support from the church, among other things, she is to be a “one-man woman.” Interpreted consistently, Paul would there be saying that a widow must not have been guilty of the socially abhorrent and virtually unknown practice of having multiple husbands. Those who hold that polygamy was the intent in 1 Tim 3:2 & 12, and yet not to have that same meaning later in that same letter, have no way to explain why Paul was so blatantly confusing in his writing to Timothy over this critically important issue.

Option C)

The view that Paul intended elders and deacons to only have been married once in their lifetime actually has two sides – 1) that elders could not have remarried after the death of a spouse, or 2) that divorced men could not have remarried after a divorce.

The former side of this view defies logic. Given the reasoning in Option b) above, the restriction on remarriage would apply to a widow also to receive support from the church, and yet Paul clearly encourages younger widows to remarry (1 Tim 5:14). It is untenable that he would command them to marry, and then restrict the ones who did from receiving support from the church if later their second husband were to die? Nowhere in Scripture does any “reproach” fall upon a person who remarries after the death of a spouse, for death “frees” one from the bond of marriage (1 Cor 7:39, Rom 7:2). Those who promote this view must concede that Paul was instituting some brand-new doctrine that counteracted God’s previous practice.

The other side of this view is that Paul was stating that a divorced man who remarries is unable to serve in spiritual leadership. This option would cause Paul to be advocating a difficult double standard, for those not in spiritual leadership who are divorced are able joyfully remarry without sin (1 Cor 7:27-28, cf 7:15). How then could Paul be forbidding those in spiritual leadership from taking a believing wife, especially when Paul admits that it is “better to marry than to burn *with passion*,” and since he admits that not all

have the “gift” of celibacy (1 Cor 7:7-9)? In addition, if divorce had been the Holy Spirit’s intended prohibition, Paul could have chosen one of four words used in the NT to refer specifically to divorce, as he did extensively in his letter to the Corinthians. In attempting to arrive at the best understanding of what Paul was intending as a qualification for leadership, the position that a man could only be married once in a lifetime presents some major difficulties.

Option D)

The view that Paul is saying that elders and deacons are required to exhibit marital faithfulness to their spouse seems to be the best way to interpret this phrase without any associated biblical contradictions or improbabilities. Marital faithfulness would obviously include sexual purity within marriage, but also fidelity to all other aspects involved in the marriage covenant (1 Cor 7:3,5,33, Eph 5:25-28, 1 Tim 5:8, etc.) This interpretation squares with the general tenor of the qualifications which evaluate the man’s present and ongoing ability to be “above reproach.” Certainly, the arena of personal purity and fidelity within his closest human relationship would make him an example to the flock of how one ought to live. Without accepting this view, we are left with the improbable situation that sexual purity would not be specifically called for in the man of God, despite other improprieties being clearly marked out (drunkenness, greediness, anger, fighting, etc.).

Summary of the Biblical Data

From this study, one can confidently conclude that the biblical qualification for leadership listed in 1 Tim 3 as “husband of one wife” is best understood as the measurement of a man’s present and characteristic marital faithfulness to one’s spouse, which would allow him to be “above reproach.” It is not requiring that a man be married, but simply stating that if a man is married, he must be characterized as a “one-woman man,” and if unmarried that he is maintaining biblical integrity in his relationship with women. This would clearly eliminate a polygamist, or one who is not fulfilling his marital responsibilities in faithfulness to his wife. The issue of divorce is not specifically in view, but obviously could have bearing on his ability to be “above reproach.”

Implication of Divorce upon Leadership Positions

The question that remains to be answered is whether a man who has been divorced could fit the general qualification of being “above reproach?” Three conditions must be considered...

1. Has Been Involved In A Biblically Allowable Divorce As A Believer

Though careful consideration must be given to the exact nature of his divorce by the elders, the qualification is upon the *man’s* character itself. Therefore, a biblically allowable divorce would not necessarily violate the qualification of “one-woman man.”

2. Has Unbiblically Divorced As A Believer

If a man has sinfully divorced after the radical transformation the Scripture describes in one coming to Christ, this violation of his call to be a “one-woman man” would cause him to be unable to serve as an elder or a deacon. God’s grace and forgiveness are extended to him equally as everyone else, and he would be able to minister in many other ways within the church, but not in the position of an elder or deacon.

3. Has Unbiblically Divorced Prior To Coming To Christ

Prior to coming to Christ, God’s elect may have committed all sorts of heinous sins (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). Though God’s grace covers all sin equally, because divorce is such a devastating event for the persons involved, children, extended family, and society as a whole, it is a fair question as to whether one who has been divorced in the past would be free from the possible reproach that may cling to the man due to a

divorce. This reproach (or ability for his character to be maligned) might come from the former spouse, children from previous marriage, extended family, other close relationships who even years later may scorn this man's character because of circumstances surrounding the divorce. In this case the elders would need to determine if this man's testimony in the church or in the community would render him as currently "above reproach."

It is important to note that it is not just the fact of a *past* divorce itself which might eliminate a man from serving as an elder or deacon, but rather any *present* reproach that still remains against this man's character. Due to these considerations, it would be a *truly exceptional case* that a man who has a divorce in his background could qualify as "above reproach." Marital faithfulness is a matter which the elders must carefully consider for all elder and deacon candidates, but especially for men with a divorce in their background. It is the testimony of Christ and His Church which the qualifications given by Paul are intended to safeguard.