

Biblical Guidelines on Marriage, Divorce & Remarriage (and Church Discipline)

The following guidelines are to be *applied on a case by case basis*.

Marriage:

Marriage is ordained by God as a life-long covenant/contract of caring companionship (Mt 19:4-6 / Gen 2:24, Eph 5:25, Tit 2:4 & Mal 2:14 NKJV/ESV). The marriage vows are a good explanation of what this means in practice. *In today's society there should be strong marriage preparation of couples*. Marriage is not to be to a near relative (up to and including cousins), by blood or previous marriage (Lev 18:6-18 & 1 Cor 5:1). A Christian is to marry another Christian (1 Cor 7:39 – “belong to/in the Lord”) – this is important Biblically and practically in sharing the same outlook. If a person becomes a Christian and they are married to an unbeliever then they are to remain married (1Cor 7:11,12 and 17 - “retain their place in life”).

As marriage is a public life-long commitment to one another, then just living together is not a marriage and is wrong (it's “living in sin”) because sexual relations only belong within marriage (Mt 19:4-6, quoting Gen 2:24), as such sex expresses, affirms and cements life-long commitment. However, if the couple in practice are committed to one another, (for instance this could be reflected in having or expecting a child/children), then they should get married (even if one is a believer and another an unbeliever, though the believer(s) would need to have repented of their sexual immorality prior to marriage in church). Such wedding services may be low key, especially if they have been living together for some time.

Divorce:

A. God clearly does not like divorce (Mal. 2:14-16 NKJV/ESV) because of the sin involved and the hurt (violence) it causes to those involved. But there are 3 permitted grounds for divorce, as a *last resort*:

- 1) *Adultery* (that is “marital unfaithfulness” which mean sexual immorality/fornication including same sex relations – Mt 19:9 compare Jer 3:8);
- 2) *Abandonment* (that is “leaves” by wilful desertion or neglect – 1 Cor 7:15 compare Ex 21:10,11 – not providing “food, clothing and marital rights [physical affection]” is a basis for divorce for a slave in Ex 21:10,11);
- 3) *Abuse* physically (this forces separation - hence is a form of abandonment and threatening to or giving serious harm to a partner is worse than not providing “food and clothing and marital rights [physical affection]” which is a basis for divorce in Ex 21:10,11).

These 3 reasons break the marriage covenant of Gen. 2:24/Mt. 19:5:

- “a man will leave his mother and father” (leaving former social unit) is broken by abandonment;
- “be united/cleave/cling” is broken by abuse;
- and “the two will be one flesh” is broken by adultery.

B. All other divorces, and remarriages to such divorcees (who did not divorce on the basis of a permitted ground above, are wrong (Mt 19:9 – a remarriage is considered to be “adultery” because they should not have divorced) though these are actual divorces and marriages (Mt 19:9 & 1 Cor 7:10,11 which is divorce merely by separation).

C. Any who break up a marriage by A and all those under B would come under appropriate church discipline (Mt 18:15-17, 1 Cor 5 & 2 Thess 3:14,15 – admonition; segregation or excommunication from membership/involvement).

Remarriage:

- I) Widows can remarry (Rom 7:2-4) and this is encouraged for younger widows (1 Tim. 4:14). A reasonable bereavement period is wise.
- II) People who divorced on the basis of permitted grounds (A, above) can remarry (Mt 19:9 compare Dt 24:1-2; 1 Cor 7:15 & 39 compare Rom 7:2 and Ex 21:11 – for adultery by the other partner read Mt 19:9 in reverse: anyone who divorces for marital unfaithfulness (sexual immorality) and marries another does not commit adultery; Whilst for abandonment and abuse by the other partner 1 Cor 7:15 says they are “no longer bound” that is free to remarry like a widow as per 1 Cor 7:39 & Rom 7:2-4. This is how the Jews and Romans of the time understood such a divorce.
- III) People in B above who wrongfully divorced one another should repent, be reconciled and remarry one another, if they are both still unmarried (1 Cor. 7:10,11). If such reconciliation and remarriage is not possible, after a reasonable period, then it would seem that this could be considered as abandonment (A2, above).
- IV) People in A who caused the divorce by adultery, abandonment or abuse, and those in B who wrongfully divorced for other reasons but who have sought to be reconciled to and remarry their former spouse (per III above), can be forgiven by God upon their repentance (1 Cor. 6:9-11 & Jn 8v1-11) and then may be remarried (including, if possible, to their former spouse). Repentance includes saying sorry to those who have been hurt and fulfilling any obligations of support, etc. (Relevant here is that Jews and Romans understood that a divorce certificate gave the right of remarriage to both partners - see Dt 24:1-4 where an “indecent thing” that is sexual immorality (Mt 19:7-9) gave that permission.) However, it is wise for the church not to marry an adulterous relationship that broke up a marriage, so as to discourage adultery. A brief service of repentance for broken vows is appropriate before the wedding (this could be immediately before or after the rehearsal for the wedding).
- V) In all instances for remarriage of divorcees, to another believer, practical wisdom says: remarriage is only possible after a divorce settlement and fulfilling any obligations (such as financial settlements, custody of children, financial support of children, clarity on ongoing relationships with children and divorced partners); remarriage must not be entered into quickly or lightly; and lessons need to have been learnt from the previous marriage and strong marriage preparation is still essential. If there has been two or more previous divorces then proposed remarriage should be examined very carefully before proceeding.

Differences amongst Christians and further reading:

After a great deal of study, reflection, discussion and facing various situations the above is my understanding of the Bible’s teaching. However Christians differ on:

- For A) Divorce, some would understand 2) Abandonment only applies to between unbelievers deserting believers and for 3) Abuse some would only reluctantly allow separation not divorce;
- For B) Remarriage, in addition to differences that will arise from the previous point, some think that a divorced couple are still married in God’s eyes (based on Mt 19:5 & 9) so remarriage is not permissible for them.

In conclusion it needs to be stressed that the *emphasis of God’s Word is not on divorce and remarriage but on life-long loving marriage.*

For further reading that confirms most of the conclusions I have given see:

D. Instone-Brewer, *Divorce & Remarriage in the Church* (Paternoster) – good for Bible basis & his conclusions are given pages 156-8

F. Retief, *Divorce: Hope for the hurting* (Christian Focus) – this is written for those facing the problems and is more practical