

Divorce and Remarriage (Rev. 0.1)

Note: At the conclusion of this article, many pertinent passages on this subject appear and they are referenced in the article as noted by **. So whenever you see the double asterisk, go to the end of the article to read the verses referenced.

The position of many, if not most, protestant Christians living in the 21st century U.S.A.

Many, if not most, Christians living in the 21st century believe that it is okay to divorce (and remarry another) if the spouse commits adultery or if the spouse is an unbeliever who decides to leave. In the first instance, they use **Matthew 5:32**** and **Matthew 19:9**** to support their position. In the second instance, they use **I Corinthians 7:15**** to support their position.

My position on divorce and remarriage:

I disagree with the position of many (if not most) Christians living in 21st century U.S.A. I believe that **Matthew 5:32**** and **Matthew 19:9**** do not talk about marital infidelity (sexual immorality during the marriage). Rather, Jesus was referring to fornication that occurs prior to the marriage as specified by Deuteronomy 22:13-21. This passage teaches that if a husband finds out on the wedding night that his new wife is not a virgin, she would be considered guilty of "fornication." The sex happened prior to her marriage to her husband so it was fornication, not adultery, since she was not yet married. After a marriage is consummated on the wedding night, any subsequent sex with another person outside of marriage is called "adultery," not "fornication." Jesus did not say, "except for the cause of "adultery." The exception Jesus mentioned is fornication, not adultery. And in the Matthew 5 and 19 passages, Jesus is clarifying the issue of divorce by referencing the law of Moses. The Deuteronomy 22:13-21 passage is a very relevant Mosaic teaching that anyone knowledgeable of the Jewish Law would know. They would easily understand Jesus' reasoning based upon the teaching of Deuteronomy 22:13-21.

In the case of the unbeliever leaving the marriage, Paul merely specified that the believer is "not under obligation" in such a situation. He did not specify that if he marries another, he would not be committing adultery as **Luke 16:18**** suggests. So, because Paul did not say that the believer may remarry another believer after the unbeliever leaves, I don't think it is safe to teach that **he did say it.**¹

Based upon these things, my position on divorce and remarriage (to another) is probably best summarized by quoting Luke. *"Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced from her husband commits adultery" (Luke 16:18).*

Many, if not most, Christians living in the 21st century would probably find my position extreme. But I believe God's view of marriage is extreme by today's standards. Paul taught that the marriage of a husband and wife is a picture of Jesus' relationship to His Bride, the Church. (See **Ephesians 5:30-32****.) It is considered by God as a holy union that is not to be taken lightly. I believe my position represents Jesus' teaching on the subject. Once the disciples understood Jesus, they too found this teaching extreme. They said to Him, *"If such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better not to marry."* Then, He said to them, *"All cannot accept this saying, but only those to whom it has been given: 'For there are eunuchs who were born thus from their mother's womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He who is able to accept it, let him accept it.'"* (See Matthew 19:10-12.)

How should the Church respond?

Pastors and individual Christians should never advocate for divorce. Rather, they should teach as Jesus taught, *"Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced from*

¹ Similarly, since I cannot know beyond a shadow of a doubt that he did not mean that believers may remarry after the unbeliever leaves, I do not teach my position dogmatically or attempt to bind the conscience of anyone about it.

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her husband commits adultery” (Luke 16:18). This teaching would better equip couples considering marriage to understand the seriousness of it before they get married. In addition, when marriage counseling takes place, the gospel would be better communicated. Husbands would learn that to love their wives as Christ loves the Church, they must be willing to forgive and cherish their wives even if they were to commit adultery. This is how Jesus loves us. (All of us have acted unfaithfully toward our husband Jesus at times, committing spiritual adultery against Him by loving other things or people more than Him. But He continues to love us.) In addition to teaching these things, the Church should utilize the procedure specified in Matthew 18:15-20 when appropriate to help any member considering divorce change his mind (repent) and be reconciled to his spouse.

What should the church say or command its members who have previously divorced and then remarried another (while their prior spouse is still alive)?

Since according to Jesus, all such people commit adultery by marrying another, we should not pretend that this is not true. But in light of the fact that it is true, can the church do anything to help rectify the situation?

A few might suggest that in light of passages like **Galatians 5:19¹** and **I Corinthians 6:9²**, since such people are committing adultery in the eyes of God, they should repent by terminating their new marriage and remaining unmarried. At this point in my thinking, I am not among them. But since their logic seems reasonable, I must provide my reasons for not advocating such action.

Christians who were previously divorced and then remarried to another did indeed enter into a covenant with their new spouse. Though the foundation for entering into that covenant was flawed because of the covenant made to their first spouse, the covenant of the second marriage is nevertheless still a covenant (or contract) that God and humans witnessed. God is very concerned about any vow we make, whether small or large. Jesus said, *“I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned”* (Matthew 12:36-37). A careful study, especially of the Old Testament, concerning the commitments we make with our words would probably surprise you. Bottom line, a Christian does not need to sign a contract to remain faithful in an agreement. All he has to do is speak his commitment and it is more solid than any written contract because God heard it and considers it done and not to be revoked.

In summary, even though I believe the covenant between the second spouse had flaws due to the first marriage vows, it nevertheless is still a commitment (vow) that was made that God takes very seriously. But I must explain my current position (not to advise breaking off the second marriage) in light of **Galatians 5:19²** and **I Corinthians 6:9³**. After reading Luke 16:18, someone recently asked me whether those who have been divorced and then married to another are currently on a trajectory for hell based upon **I Corinthians 6:9²** and **Galatians 5:19¹**. These passages indicate that those who practice adultery will not inherit the kingdom of heaven. I believe that this is a logical and valid question that demands further consideration and clarification.

While I pray that God continues to give me wisdom and clarity concerning this question, I can at this time mention one line of thought that has entered my mind. I wonder who Paul was thinking about when he said that no adulterer will inherit the kingdom of heaven. Did his statement apply to those who had been divorced and subsequently remarried to another? Or, was he addressing thoughts and behavior flowing out of an adulterous heart? I do believe that from God’s perspective, those who have remarried another subsequent to their prior

² **Galatians 5:19-21** Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, ²⁰ Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, ²¹ Envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.

³ **1 Corinthians 6:9-10** 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, ¹⁰ Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.

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marriage are committing adultery from a legal/righteous standpoint. But what is the involvement of their heart in it? I think this should be factored into the discussion somehow.

Jesus said that if any man looks upon another woman with lust in his heart, he has committed adultery with her in his heart. (See Matthew 5:27-30.) Paul said that if you are walking according to the flesh, you are about to perish, but if you are putting to death the misdeeds of the body by the Spirit, you will live. (See Romans 8:13.) The person who lives merely according to the dictates of his flesh is one who is living autonomously. He is walking “according to the flesh.” He should have no assurance that if he continues living that way that he will be in heaven.

I believe that in I Corinthians 6:9 and Galatians 5:19, Paul is focusing on the involvement of the heart in lusting after fleshly things. Galatians 5:19 starts out, “*Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery....*” So, in the case of a Christian husband that is not divorced, we know that if he is viewing pornography with lust in his heart, he is pursuing pleasures of the flesh. In so doing, since he is married, he is committing adultery in his heart. Currently being an adulterer at heart, we know from Galatians 5:19-20, that if he continues living according to the dictates of his flesh in that way, he will not inherit the kingdom of heaven. This involvement of the heart in this work of the flesh seems like the main thrust of Paul’s teaching in this passage. But did Paul also have in mind anyone who had been previously divorced and subsequently remarried to another, even if their heart is not engaged in adulterous fleshly pursuit?

Perhaps the involvement of the heart and flesh is a key consideration when trying to apply I Corinthians 6:9 and Galatians 5:19. I have observed people that had been divorced and then remarried to another, who subsequently, seemed to be walking according to the Spirit, not the flesh. In other words, they were not living autonomously according to the dictates of the flesh but seemed to be walking according to the Spirit. Their hearts were not filled with adulterous lust. Rather, they were in the habit of putting to death the misdeeds of the body by the Spirit. Perhaps such people are not those who Paul had in mind when he wrote Galatians 5:19 and I Corinthians 6:9. Perhaps Paul was focusing on the heart in hot pursuit of fleshly pleasure.

Though the N.T. does not mention it, I think it is safe to conclude that there were people in the churches in Paul’s day who had been divorced prior to their conversion and subsequently remarried to another prior to their conversion. That might explain why Paul specified concerning the office of elder, that only those married to one wife qualify for the office of elder. Why would he say this unless there were others in the congregation who had more than one wife or had been remarried to another after a divorce (prior to their conversion)? If Paul believed all such people would perish unless they terminated their second marriage (and remained unmarried), wouldn’t he have been instructing people accordingly? Why would there be anyone in the churches who had been previously divorced and then remarried? Wouldn’t Paul have instructed to “put them out of the church” in hope that they would eventually repent and be restored?

Surely divorce is destructive and causes distortion in the church. We know that God hates divorce. But in this world, there will be distortions. We can pray, teach and work to prevent divorce. But divorce will always manifest itself in some degree. But in determining what the church should do in every case, I think we must take into account the involvement of the heart. But I remain open to learn whatever more God may teach me on this messy matter.

Note: I have many Christian friends who have been divorced and subsequently remarried to another. In no way can I, or do I, look down in judgment on any of them because of their situation! If it were not for God’s gracious work in our lives, Linda and I would most likely have ended up in the same situation. We are in no way above our friends who have been divorced and then remarried to another!!!

Pertinent New Testament passages relating to divorce and remarriage:

Matthew 5:31-32 " Furthermore it has been said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' ³² "But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.

Matthew 19:3-12 The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?" ⁴ And He answered and said to them, "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' ⁵ "and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? ⁶ "So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate." ⁷ They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?" ⁸ He said to them, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. ⁹ "And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery." ¹⁰ His disciples said to Him, "If such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better not to marry." ¹¹ But He said to them, "All cannot accept this saying, but only those to whom it has been given: ¹² "For there are eunuchs who were born thus from their mother's womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He who is able to accept it, let him accept it."

¹ **Matthew 19:9** I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.

Mark 10:2-12 The Pharisees came and asked Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" testing Him. ³ And He answered and said to them, "What did Moses command you?" ⁴ They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce, and to dismiss her." ⁵ And Jesus answered and said to them, "Because of the hardness of your heart he wrote you this precept. ⁶ "But from the beginning of the creation, God 'made them male and female.' ⁷ 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, ⁸ 'and the two shall become one flesh'; so then they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹ "Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate." ¹⁰ In the house His disciples also asked Him again about the same matter. ¹¹ So He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. ¹² "And if a woman divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

Luke 16:18 "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced from her husband commits adultery.

1 Corinthians 7:10-17 ⁰ Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband. ¹¹ But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife. ¹² But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her. ¹³ And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him. ¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy. ¹⁵ But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace. ¹⁶ For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife? ¹⁷ But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk. And so I ordain in all the churches.

Romans 7:2-3 For the woman who has a husband is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives. But if the husband dies, she is released from the law of her husband. ³ So then if, while her husband lives, she marries another man, she will be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from that law, so that she is no adulteress, though she has married another man.

Ephesians 5:22-32 ²² Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. ²⁴ Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, ²⁶ that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, ²⁷ that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. ²⁸ So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. ³⁰ For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. ³¹ "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." ³² This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church.