



Marriage- Biblical Views and Interpretations

Some statements in the bible seem categorically to indicate that God has but one model for marriage and that is a monogamous, life long relationship between a male and a female, with both parties serving God and each other.

However, there is much debate about the interpretation of what scripture does say and often what it omits to say. This document has drawn together some strands of commentary. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the author or the church he attends.

Divorce and Remarriage

God's Original Plan

God's original plan for the human race, as indicated in his creation of Adam and Eve as husband and wife, is lifelong, monogamous marriage. Jesus affirmed this in responding to a question about divorce in Matthew 19:3-6:

<<Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?>> He answered, <<Haven't you read, he replied, that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female'>> [from Genesis 1:27] and said, <<'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'>> [from Genesis 2:24] <<So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate>>.

In this reply Jesus rebukes and corrects a first-century practice of easy divorce for trivial reasons. For example, the Mishnah said, 'The school of Shammai say: A man may not divorce his wife unless he has found unchastity in her. And the school of Hillel say [he may divorce her] even if she spoiled a dish for him. Rabbi Akiba says, [he may divorce her] even if he found another fairer than she' (Mishnah, Gittin 9.10). Rather than entering into this debate among rabbis, Jesus first affirms God's original plan for marriage and shows that it remains God's ideal for all marriages.

Malachi views marriage as a 'covenant' between a husband and wife, a covenant to which God was a witness and to which therefore God will hold people accountable:

You ask, ‘Why does he not?’ Because the Lord was a witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. Did not one God make her? Both flesh and spirit are his. And what does the one God desire? Godly offspring. So look to yourselves, and do not let anyone be faithless to the wife of his youth. For I hate divorce, says the Lord, the God of Israel, and covering one’s garment with violence, says the Lord of hosts. So take heed to yourselves and do not be faithless>> (Malachi 2:14-16 NRSVA).

Therefore marriage is an especially serious commitment:

1. between husband and wife,
2. to the society in which they live and
3. before God himself

Whether or not he is explicitly acknowledged in the marriage ceremony.

But What If One Spouse Is Unfaithful?

In marriage, a man and a woman commit to live with each other as husband and wife for life. In order for them to keep this commitment both parties have to remain in the marriage. But when one party decides to leave the marriage for another partner, it becomes impossible for the remaining spouse to faithfully fulfil his or her commitment (a husband, e.g. cannot live with and act as a husband to a wife who is living with another man). Because of such cases, it seems that in both the OT and the NT God allowed divorce, in order to give some relief to the one spouse when the other has deserted the marriage or desecrated it by adultery.

Although divorces took place in OT times (assumed by Leviticus 21:7 and 21:14, Numbers 30:9 and Deuteronomy 24:1-4), the only OT law concerning divorce is found in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. It envisions a situation in which a man divorces and sends away his wife, she subsequently remarries and then becomes divorced or widowed. In such a case the law forbids the first husband to marry her again.

Jesus’ Teachings on Divorce

Many of the first-century rabbis expanded on Deuteronomy 24:1-4, using it to justify divorce for many reasons, even trivial ones (see above). This fact lies behind the remainder of the exchange between the Pharisees and Jesus in Matthew 19.

<<Why then, they asked, did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?>>. He said to them, <<Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery>>. (vv.7-9).

Jesus’ statement, ***<<because your hearts were hard>>***, should not be understood to imply that only hard-hearted individuals initiate divorce but rather, ‘because your hard-hearted rebellion against God led to serious defilement of marriages’. The presence of sin in the community meant that some marriages would be deeply harmed and God therefore provided divorce as a solution in those cases.

When Jesus says that anyone who divorces his wife **<<except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery>>** (Matthew 19:9), he implies the converse: divorce and remarriage on the ground of one's spouse's sexual immorality are not prohibited and do not constitute adultery. It is the one exception Jesus makes to the requirement that marriage be lifelong, for sexual immorality seriously defiles, indeed disrupts, the **<<one flesh>>** union (Matthew 19:5). When Jesus says, **<<and marries another>>**, he implies that both divorce and remarriage are allowed in the case of **<<marital unfaithfulness>>** and that someone who divorces because his spouse has committed adultery may marry someone else without committing sin. Therefore, if marital unfaithfulness or sexual immorality occurs, (Gk. *porneia*, which included any sexual intercourse contrary to the moral commands of Scripture), then divorce is allowed but not required. In fact, forgiveness and reconciliation, restoring the marriage, should always be the first option.

Where divorce was allowed, as in Greek, Roman and Jewish culture, the right to remarry another person was always assumed in the first century. For example, the Mishnah says, 'The essential formula in the bill of divorce is, 'lo, thou art free to marry any man'' (Mishnah, Gittin 9.3).

But in Matthew 19:1-9 where Jesus allows divorce on the grounds of *porneia*, Jesus was simultaneously prohibiting divorce on the numerous other grounds that were being invoked in the first century. If divorce is secured for other reasons but see a further exception below, then God does not count the divorce as valid. For such divorcers would be committing adultery should they marry someone else, see Matthew 19:9.

In Matthew 5:32, Jesus affirms essentially the same teaching:

<<But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery>>.

Jesus says that the husband who wrongfully divorces his wife **<<causes her to become an adulteress>>** because in that society, it was assumed that a divorced woman would usually need to marry someone else for financial support and protection and yet Jesus still says this new relationship is, at least initially, adultery because there was not a proper reason for the divorce. But Jesus places most of the blame on the husband who wrongly divorced her, saying that he thereby **<<causes her to become an adulteress>>**. In the last sentence of the passage, **<<anyone who marries the divorced woman>>** should be taken in context with the preceding sentences and so it means, 'and whoever marries such a wrongly divorced woman as I have just spoken about'.

In the parallel statements about divorce in Mark 10:11-12 and Luke 16:18, Jesus does not include the exception clause, **<<except for marital unfaithfulness>>**. The most likely reason is that there was no dispute or disagreement among Jews, or in Greek or Roman culture, that adultery was a legitimate ground for divorce and Jesus is not addressing that issue. This does not invalidate the more extensive teaching given in Matthew, because Jesus' acceptance of the exception for

adultery, though not stated explicitly by Mark and Luke, was assumed as being beyond question. Other interpreters think that Mark 10:11-12 and Luke 16:18 prohibit all divorces and they then understand Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 to refer to special circumstances of some kind, not divorce in general.

Does Paul Add a Second Reason for Divorce?

Many interpreters hold that Paul adds a second legitimate reason for divorce in 1 Corinthians 7:12-15. Paul is facing a new situation that was not addressed by Jesus, the situation of a Christian and non-Christian married to one another. In the context to which Jesus was speaking, Jewish people only married other Jews and both husband and wife therefore were part of the Jewish religious community. When a believer has an unbelieving spouse, Paul says that they should remain married if the unbeliever is willing to do so (1 Corinthians 7:12-14). <<***But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so***>>. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. <<***God has called us to live in peace***>> (1 Corinthians 7:15). Most interpreters think this implies the freedom to obtain a legal divorce and the freedom to marry someone else. When an unbelieving spouse has deserted the marriage, God releases the believing spouse from the twin unending stresses of:

1. a lifelong vain hope of reconciling with an unbeliever who has left and
2. a lifelong prohibition against enjoying the good blessings of marriage again.

But some interpreters hold that remarriage is never allowed after divorce. On that view, Paul is saying only that the believing spouse is not bound to continue to seek reconciliation.

Would this passage apply to desertion by someone who professes to be a Christian? In such cases, a question arises as to whether the person is genuinely a believer or is making a false profession of faith. Each situation will be different and a Christian involved in such a difficult circumstance should seek wise counsel from the leaders of his or her church. Where possible, the steps of church discipline outlined in Matthew 18:15-17 should be followed in an attempt to bring reconciliation to the marriage. If that process results in the final step of excommunication from the church, then it would seem appropriate to treat the deserting spouse as an unbeliever ('let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector', Matthew 18:17). But it must be emphasized that, if reconciliation of the marriage can at all be brought about, that should always be the first goal.

Are There Other Grounds for Divorce?

In addition to the two grounds of sexual immorality or desertion by an unbelieving spouse, are there any other legitimate, biblical grounds for divorce? Some interpreters have argued that repeated instances of physical abuse should be seen as an additional legitimate ground for divorce. Others would respond that many other means should be used to bring the abuse to an immediate halt, including separation (for the eventual purpose of bringing restoration along with the complete cessation of the abuse), church discipline, confrontation and counselling, police action, a court order and other kinds of intervention by church members, family and friends. But these would stop short of adding a reason for divorce that neither Jesus nor Paul specified.

Personally, I fail to comprehend why battered wives or husbands stay with or become reconciled to someone who treats them so badly, especially if it is a case of persistent abuse.

Some have argued that a prominent school of rabbinic interpretation in the time of Jesus allowed divorce in cases where a husband did not provide enough material or emotional support to his wife. This was based on their interpretation of a law concerning a slave woman <<***If he marries another woman, he must not deprive the first one of her food, clothing and marital rights. If he does not provide her with these three things, she is to go free, without any payment of money***>> in Exodus 21:10-11. Since Jesus did not explicitly correct this view, they argue that he must have allowed the legitimacy of some other kinds of divorces, such as divorce for prolonged, unrepented physical or emotional abuse. But an argument from what Jesus did not say is of dubious validity, especially since Jesus' words <<***anyone who divorces his wife***>> (Matthew 19:9) are so extensive in scope and seem to rule out additional exceptions not specified in the Bible itself.

What should be done if someone has been divorced for other reasons than those given in the Bible and then has married someone else? Jesus says that in such a case the person has committed adultery, so the marriage began with adultery. But when Jesus says, <<***and marries another***>> in that same verse, he implies that the second marriage is in fact a true marriage. Jesus does not say, 'and lives outside of marriage with another' (which was possible, as with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4:18), but <<***and marries another***>>. Therefore, once a second marriage has occurred, it would be further sin to break it up, for it would be destroying another marriage. The second marriage should not be thought of as continually living in adultery, for the man and woman are married to each other, not to anyone else. The responsibility of the husband and wife in such a case is to ask God for his forgiveness for previous sin and then for his blessing on the current marriage and to strive to make the current marriage a good and lasting one.

With respect to the phrase <<***the husband of but one wife***>> in 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6, some argue that this means that a person has never been married more than once and therefore that it excludes from the office of elder all men who have been divorced for whatever reason and also all whose wives have died and who have subsequently married someone else. But a better understanding of this passage is that it refers to the present status of a man, either to his character of being faithful to his wife or else to the fact that he does not have more than one wife. In either of these better interpretations, the verse does not prohibit all divorced men from being elders but each case should be evaluated on an individual basis.

Since marriage is not an institution only for Jews and Christians but is an institution established by God at creation, it is for all people, believers and unbelievers alike and is in fact universal in the human community. The standards expressed here for divorce and remarriage are therefore applicable to all people. The church, where it has opportunity, should encourage non-Christians as well as Christians to abide by God's high moral standards regarding divorce and remarriage. However, in cultures where rampant divorce for all sorts of reasons is common and has been occurring for decades, individual Christians as well as

churches should seek to support and minister to the many men, women and children who have been hurt by divorces in the past, as well as the casualties of divorces in the present.

The principles expressed in this article represent the most commonly held view among Protestants since the time of the Reformation (e.g. see the 17th Century Westminster Confession of Faith 24.5, 6). Other views are also held by some evangelicals, however. Some hold that the exception clauses in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 apply only to sexual immorality committed during the betrothal period, when a couple was legally pledged to be married, and do not apply to marriage proper and therefore there are no legitimate grounds for divorce. Others argue that, where a divorce has occurred, for whatever reason, remarriage is never allowed. And others have argued that there should be some additional, but limited, grounds for divorce. But these views have not gained majority support among evangelical interpreters of the Bible.