

Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage

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Marriage

Marriage is a divine institution established by God Himself before the Fall, when everything, including marriage, was “very good” (Gen. 1:31). “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). “God celebrated the first marriage. Thus the institution has for its originator the Creator of the universe. ‘Marriage is honourable’; it was one of the first gifts of God to man, and it is one of the two institutions that, after the fall, Adam brought with him beyond the gates of Paradise.”—AH 25, 26.

God intended the marriage of Adam and Eve to be the pattern for all future marriages, and Christ endorsed this original concept: “Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ 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’? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate” (Matt. 19:4-6). Marriage, thus instituted by God, is a monogamous, heterosexual relationship between one male and one female.

As such, marriage is a public, lawfully binding lifelong commitment of a man and a woman to each other and between the couple and God (Mark 10:2-9; Rom. 7:2). Paul indicates that the commitment that Christ has for the church is a model of the relationship between husband and wife (Eph. 5:31, 32). God intended marriage to be as permanent as Christ’s relationship with the church.

Sexual intimacy within marriage is a sacred gift from God to the human family. It is an integral part of marriage, reserved for marriage only (Gen. 2:24; Prov. 5:5-20). Such intimacy, designed to be shared exclusively between husband and wife, promotes ever-increasing closeness, happiness, and security, and provides for the perpetuation of the human race.

Unity in marriage is achieved by mutual respect and love. No one is superior (Eph. 5:21-28). “Marriage, a union for life, is a symbol of the union between Christ and His church. The spirit that Christ manifests toward the church is the spirit that husband and wife are to manifest toward each other.”—7T 46. God’s Word condemns violence in personal relationships (Gen. 6:11, 13; Ps. 11:5; Isa. 58:4, 5; Rom. 13:10; Gal. 5:19-21). It is the spirit of Christ to love and accept, to seek to affirm and build others up, rather than to abuse or demean them (Rom. 12:10; 14:19; Eph. 4:26; 5:28, 29; Col. 3:8-14; 1 Thess. 5:11). There is no room among Christ’s followers for tyrannical control and the abuse of power (Matt. 20:25-28; Eph. 6:4). Violence in the setting of marriage and family is abhorrent (see AH 343).

“Neither husband nor wife is to make a plea for rulership. The Lord has laid down the principle that is to guide in this matter. The husband is to cherish his wife as

Christ cherishes the church. And the wife is to respect and love her husband. Both are to cultivate the spirit of kindness, being determined never to grieve or injure the other.”—7T 47.

The entrance of sin adversely affected marriage. When Adam and Eve sinned, they lost the oneness that they had known with God and with each other (Gen. 3:6-24). Their relationship became marked with guilt, shame, blame, and pain. Wherever sin reigns, its sad effects on marriage include alienation, unfaithfulness, neglect, abuse, sexual perversion, domination of one partner by the other, violence, separation, desertion, and divorce. Marriages involving more than one husband and one wife are also an expression of the effects of sin on the institution of marriage. Such marriages, though practiced in Old Testament times, are not in harmony with the divine design. God’s plan for marriage requires His people to transcend the mores of popular culture that conflict with the biblical view.

The Christian concept of marriage includes the following:

1. *Divine Ideal to Be Restored in Christ*—In redeeming the world from sin and its consequences, God seeks to restore marriage to its original ideal. This is envisioned for the lives of those who have been born again into Christ’s kingdom, those whose hearts are being sanctified by the Holy Spirit and who have as their primary purpose the exaltation of the Lord Jesus Christ. (See also 1 Peter 3:7; TMB 64.)

2. *Oneness and Equality to Be Restored in Christ*—The gospel emphasizes the love and submission of husband and wife to one another (1 Cor. 7:3, 4; Eph. 5:21). The model for the husband’s leadership is the self-sacrificial love and service that Christ gives to the Church (Eph. 5:24, 25). Both Peter and Paul speak about the need for respect in the marriage relationship (1 Peter 3:7; Eph. 5:22, 23).

3. *Grace Available for All*—God seeks to restore to wholeness and reconcile to Himself all who have failed to attain the divine standard (2 Cor. 5:19). This includes those who have experienced broken marriage relationships.

4. *Role of the Church*—Moses in the Old Testament and Paul in the New Testament dealt with the problems caused by broken marriages (Deut. 24:1-5; 1 Cor. 7:11). Both, while upholding and affirming the ideal, worked constructively and redemptively with those who had fallen short of the divine standard. Similarly, the Church today is called to uphold and affirm God’s ideal for marriage and, at the same time, to be a forgiving, reconciling, healing community, showing understanding and compassion when brokenness occurs.

Divorce

Divorce is contrary to God’s original purpose in creating marriage (Matt. 19:3-8; Mark 10:2-9), but the Bible is not silent about it. Because divorce occurred as part of the fallen human experience, biblical legislation was given to limit the damage it caused (Deut. 24:1-4). The consistently seeks to elevate marriage and to discourage divorce by describing the joys of married love and faithfulness (Prov.

5:18-20; Song of Sol. 2:16; 4:9-5:1), by referring to the marriage-like relationship of God with His people (Isa. 54:5; Jer. 3:1), by focusing on the possibilities of forgiveness and marital renewal (Hosea 3:1-3), and by indicating God's abhorrence of divorce and the misery it causes (Mal. 2:15, 16). Jesus restored the creation view of marriage as a lifelong commitment between a man and a woman and between the couple and God (Matt. 19:4-6; Mark 10:6-9). Much biblical instruction affirms marriage and seeks to correct problems that tend to weaken or destroy the foundation of marriage (Eph. 5:21-33; Heb. 13:4; 1 Peter 3:7).

Marriage rests on principles of love, loyalty, exclusiveness, trust, and support upheld by both partners in obedience to God (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:6; 1 Cor. 13; Eph. 5:21-29; 1 Thess. 4:1-7). When these principles are violated, Scripture acknowledges that tragic circumstances can destroy marriage.

Divine grace is the only remedy for the brokenness of divorce. When marriage fails, former partners should be encouraged to examine their experience and to seek God's will for their lives. God provides comfort to those who have been wounded. God also accepts the repentance of individuals who commit the most destructive sins, even those that carry with them irreparable consequences (2 Sam. 11; 12; Ps. 34:18; 86:5; Joel 2:12, 13; John 8:2-11; 1 John 1:9).

Scripture recognizes adultery and fornication (Matt. 5:32) and abandonment by an unbelieving partner (1 Cor. 7:10-15) as grounds for divorce.

There is no direct teaching in Scripture regarding remarriage after divorce. However, there is a strong implication in Jesus' words in Matthew 19:9 that would allow the remarriage of one who has remained faithful but whose spouse has been unfaithful to the marriage vow.

Church's Position on Divorce and Remarriage

Acknowledging the biblical teachings on marriage, the Church is aware that marriage relationships are less than ideal in many cases. The problem of divorce and remarriage can be seen in its true light only as it is viewed from Heaven's viewpoint and against the background of the Garden of Eden.

Central to God's holy plan for our world was the creation of beings made in His image who would multiply and replenish the earth and live together in purity, harmony, and happiness. He brought forth Eve from the side of Adam and gave her to Adam as his wife. Thus was marriage instituted—God the author of the institution and the officiator at the first marriage. After the Lord had revealed to Adam that Eve was verily bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh, there could never arise a doubt in his mind that the two of them were one flesh. Nor could ever a doubt arise in the mind of either of the holy pair that God intended that their home should endure forever.

The Church adheres to this view of marriage and the home without reservation, believing that any lowering of this high view is to that extent a lowering of the heavenly ideal. The belief that marriage is a divine institution rests upon the Holy

Scriptures. Accordingly, all thinking and reasoning in the perplexing field of divorce and remarriage must constantly be harmonized with that holy ideal revealed in Eden.

The Church believes in the law of God and also in the forgiving mercy of God. It believes that victory and salvation can as surely be found by those who have transgressed in the matter of divorce and remarriage as by those who have failed in any other of God's holy standards.

Nothing presented here is intended to minimize the mercy of God or the forgiveness of God. In the fear of the Lord, the Church here sets forth the principles and practices that should apply in this matter of marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

Though marriage was first performed by God alone, it is recognized that people now live under civil governments; therefore, marriage has both divine and civil aspects. The divine aspect is governed by the laws of God, the civil by the laws of the state.

In harmony with these teachings, the following statements set forth the position of the Church:

1. When Jesus said, "Let not man put asunder," He established a rule of conduct for the Church, under the dispensation of grace, that must transcend all civil enactments that would go beyond His interpretation of the divine law governing the marriage relation. Here He gives a rule to which His followers should adhere even if the state or prevailing custom allows larger liberty. "In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus declared plainly that there could be no dissolution of the marriage tie, except for unfaithfulness to the marriage vow."—TMB 63. (Also see Matt. 5:32; 19:9.)

2. Unfaithfulness to the marriage vow has generally been seen to mean adultery or fornication. However, the New Testament word for fornication includes certain other sexual irregularities (1 Cor. 6:9; 1 Tim. 1:9, 10; Rom. 1:24-27). Therefore, sexual perversions, including incest, child sexual abuse, and homosexual practices, are also recognized as a misuse of sexual powers and a violation of the divine intention in marriage. As such they are just cause for separation or divorce.

Even though the Scriptures allow divorce for the reasons mentioned above, as well as for abandonment by an unbelieving spouse (1 Cor. 7:10-15), the church and those concerned should make earnest endeavours to effect a reconciliation, urging the spouses to manifest toward each other a Christlike spirit of forgiveness and restoration. The church is urged to relate lovingly and redemptively toward the couple in order to assist in the reconciliation process.

3. In the event that reconciliation is not effected, the spouse who has remained faithful to the spouse who violated the marriage vow has the biblical right to secure a divorce and also to remarry.

4. A spouse who has violated the marriage vow (see sections 1 and 2 above) shall be subject to discipline by the local church. (See pp. 62-68.) If genuinely repentant, the spouse may be placed under censure for a stated period of time rather than removed from church membership. A spouse who gives no evidence of full and sincere repentance shall be removed from membership.

In case the violation has brought public reproach on the cause of God, the church, in order to maintain its high standards and good name, may remove the individual from membership. Any of these forms of discipline shall be applied by the church in a manner that would seek to attain the two objectives of discipline—to correct and redeem. In the gospel of Christ, the redemptive side of discipline is always tied to an authentic transformation of the sinner into a new creature in Jesus Christ.

5. A spouse who has violated the marriage vow and who is divorced does not have the moral right to marry another while the spouse who has been faithful to the marriage vow still lives and remains unmarried and chaste. The person who does so shall be removed from membership. The person whom he/she marries, if a member, also shall be removed from membership.

6. It is recognized that sometimes marriage relations deteriorate to the point where it is better for a husband and wife to separate. “Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband. 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” (1 Cor. 7:10, 11). In many such cases, the custody of children, the adjustment of property rights, or even personal protection may necessitate a change in marital status. In such cases it may be permissible in some countries to secure what is known as a legal separation. However, in some jurisdictions such a separation can be secured only by divorce.

A separation or divorce that results from factors such as physical violence or in which “unfaithfulness to the marriage vow” (see sections 1 and 2 above) is not involved does not give either one the scriptural right to remarry, unless in the meantime the other party has remarried, committed adultery or fornication, or died. Should a member who has been thus divorced remarry without these biblical grounds, he/she shall be removed from membership, and the one whom he/she marries, if a member, also shall be removed from membership. (See pp. 62-68.)

7. A spouse who has violated the marriage vow and has been divorced and removed from membership and who has remarried, or a person who has been divorced on other than the grounds set forth in sections 1 and 2 above and has remarried, and who has been removed from membership, shall be considered ineligible for membership except as provided below.

8. The marriage contract is not only sacred but also possibly more complex when, for example, it involves children. Hence, in a request for readmittance to membership, the options available to the repentant may be severely limited. Before final action is taken by the church, the request for readmittance shall be brought by the church through the pastor or district leader to the conference

committee for counsel and recommendation of steps the repentant one, or ones, may take to secure readmittance.

9. Readmittance to membership of those who have been removed for reasons given in the foregoing sections shall normally be on the basis of rebaptism. (See pp. 49, 67, 68.)

10. When a person who has been removed from membership is readmitted to membership, as provided in section 8, every care should be exercised to safeguard the unity and harmony of the church by not giving that person responsibility as a leader, especially in an office that requires the rite of ordination, unless by very careful counsel with conference administration.

11. No pastor has the right to officiate at the remarriage of any person who, under the stipulation of the preceding paragraphs, has no scriptural right to remarry.

Local Church Ministry for Families

The Church as a redemptive agency of Christ is to minister to its members in all of their needs and to nurture everyone so that all may grow into a mature Christian experience. This is particularly true when members face lifelong decisions such as marriage and distressful experiences such as divorce. When a couple's marriage is in danger of breaking down, every effort should be made by the partners and those in the church or family who minister to them to bring about their reconciliation in harmony with divine principles for restoring wounded relationships (Hosea 3:1-3; 1 Cor. 7:10, 11; 13:4-7; Gal. 6:1).

Resources that can be of assistance to members in the development of a strong Christian home are available through the church or other church organizations. These resources include: (1) programs of orientation for couples engaged to be married, (2) programs of instruction for married couples with their families, and (3) programs of support for broken families and divorced individuals.

Pastoral support is vital in the area of instruction and orientation in the case of marriage, and healing and restoration in the case of divorce. The pastoral function in the latter case is both disciplinary and supportive. That function includes the sharing of relevant information, some of which may be sensitive and must be handled with great discretion. However, this ethical concern alone should not be the grounds for avoiding disciplinary actions established in sections 1-11 above.

Just as God forgives, members are called to forgive and to accept those who have failed (Isa. 54:5-8; Matt. 6:14, 15; Eph. 4:32). The Bible urges patience, compassion, and forgiveness in the Christian care of those who have erred (Matt. 18:10-20; Gal. 6:1, 2). While individuals are under discipline, either by censure or by being removed from membership, the church, as an instrument of God's mission, shall make every effort to maintain caring and spiritually nurturing contact with them.