

# Marriage, Divorce & Remarriage

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## Marriage in Scripture:

Marriage is a creation ordinance. That is to say it was instituted by God at the beginning of human history as his decreed context for male and female companionship, sexual union, the birth and rearing of children (Matt.19:4-6). It is to be respected, promoted and honoured in all cultures among all peoples, not just Christians. (Gen.2:18-24. Prov.2:16-17. Heb.13:4)

Marriage is intended as a lifetime covenant relationship. That is to say that marriage is a life-long contract between husband and wife set in the context of family and community. Christians understand that the promises and vows made before God form the terms of the contract. The marriage relationship may be compared to the covenant between God and the nation of Israel and Christ and the church. (Ezek. 16:8; Mal.2:14; Eph.5:21-23)

Various cultural approaches to marriage are recognised and accepted in scripture – from the arranged marriages in Genesis to the apparent marriages of choice in the context of first century Corinth. We recognise a marriage as valid whether it is conducted in a civil or religious setting and whether the context is Christian, some other faith or secular.

A biblical understanding of marriage affirms the following:

- It is between a man and a woman - not two people of the same sex (Gen.2:24)
- It is to be monogamous (1Cor.7:2)
- It is a lifetime commitment requiring faithfulness and fidelity (Matt.19:6; Rom.7:2)

- It is to be contracted between two Christians and not with an unbeliever (1Cor.7:39)
- It is approached and contracted in different ways in different cultures. (Jewish & Gentile practices are accepted without judgement in the New Testament)
- It is affirmed and contracted on commitment based on love and respect. (Love and respect are commanded - Eph.5:21-33)
- It has important social implications and is not merely a private matter.

### Pastoral & Practical Considerations:

1. Pastoral pre-marriage guidance will be offered to those who are planning to marry. Couples are encouraged to seek pastoral guidance before becoming engaged.
2. Those requesting marriage in Windsor or by the pastor of the church elsewhere will be expected to commit themselves to pre-marriage guidance sessions.
3. The conduct of a service of marriage in Windsor will be agreed with the pastor/elders.
4. The church will seek to provide ongoing support for married couples.
5. Those who find themselves with difficulties in their marriage are urged to seek pastoral help at the earliest opportunity.
6. The church will not facilitate a marriage between a believer and an unbeliever.

## Divorce

Scripture states that God hates divorce (Mal.2:16). Just as Israel proved unfaithful to the covenant with God so, unfortunately, the marriage covenant can be broken (Deut.24:1-4; Isa.24:5; Jer.3:8; Mal.2:14). In Exodus 21:11 & Deut 21:10-11 failure to fulfil the obligations of marriage permitted a slave or foreign wife to go free – from slavery and from the marriage. In Ezra 10 people were instructed to divorce.

When addressing the Jewish crowds (Matt.5:31-32 & Luke 16:18) Jesus speaks strongly against the contemporary practice of men divorcing their wives as and when they wished. In Matthew's account an exception clause is included which restricts the grounds for divorce to sexual indecency (NIV, marital unfaithfulness). Significantly, immediately before speaking about divorce in Matt.5 Jesus redefines the accepted concept of adultery to embrace attitude as well as action (Matt.5:27-30).

When responding to questions about the interpretation of Deut.24, put to him by Jewish leaders (Matt.19:3-9 & Mark 10:2-12), Jesus reaffirms God's intention regarding the permanence of marriage. In this context he states that divorce was permitted because of the hardness of our human hearts and there is a strong statement to the effect that a man or woman who divorces their partner and remarries commits adultery. In the Matthew account there is again an 'except' statement that reiterates that divorce is properly restricted to the context of sexual sin.

Paul, when writing to the Christians at Corinth from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds, provides instruction as to the importance of marriage and states that a wife should not separate from her husband but if she does she should remain unmarried or be reconciled with her husband (1Cor.7:10-11). Paul also states that a husband should not divorce his wife (1Cor.7:11(b)).

Paul acknowledges that unbelieving partners may abandon their Christian spouse. In such circumstances the Christian spouse is not bound, i.e. divorce is permitted (1Cor.7:15).

### **In summary:**

- It is clear that the highest standards of fidelity in marriage are expected among Christians
- While abhorrent to God divorce is permitted because of the consequences of our human fallenness
- Reconciliation and forgiveness are to be pursued in preference to divorce
- The New Testament permits divorce because of sexual immorality or desertion by an unbeliever.
- The Old Testament permits divorce on a number of other grounds as indicated in the passages above
- Divorce brings a marriage to an end whatever the grounds or circumstances
- Formal ongoing Separation is an acceptable alternative to divorce.

### **Pastoral & Practical Considerations:**

1. As a result of our human sinfulness there are times when a marriage relationship may be in difficulty. This can arise as a consequence of unfaithfulness or other serious offence or breakdown in trust. While there may be on occasions a guilty and an innocent party in a marriage breakdown it can be very difficult to make a clear judgement in some circumstances.
2. Pastoral counsel will seek to facilitate and encourage reconciliation and forgiveness in situations of marriage difficulty. It is accepted that facilitating reconciliation may entail temporary separation.

3. The church shall seek to provide appropriate pastoral support for any undergoing divorce proceedings.
4. A person applying for membership of the church who is divorced, whether when an unbeliever or a professing Christian, will not be refused membership solely on such grounds.
5. All applications for membership involving persons who have been divorced shall be dealt with by the elders.

## Remarriage

The Old Testament permitted remarriage for those who had been divorced on legitimate grounds (Deut.24:1-4)

Jesus' teaching indicates that to divorce without good cause and to remarry is an adulterous action. Jesus puts no restriction on remarriage when divorce has good cause.

Paul's teaching in Romans 7:2-3 is sometimes understood to be a total prohibition on remarriage. However, Paul is drawing from marriage to illustrate the relationship between the Christian and the law in the context of the death of Christ and is not attempting to address any other aspects of divorce and remarriage.

Divorce and remarriage do not constitute the unpardonable sin. (Matt.12:31)

### Pastoral & Practical Considerations:

1. As marriage is a creation ordinance the same biblical principles apply to the actions and behaviour of Christians and unbelievers in marriage relationships. A high and Godly standard is expected of those who are Christians and the church is expected to uphold those standards. However, both believer and non-believer require a similar attitude of repentance towards God following moral and marital failure.
2. Our policy in practice will be that remarriage following divorce or marriage to a divorcee shall be permitted where the grounds for divorce were sexual immorality or desertion by an unbelieving partner.
3. Remarriage of a divorcee whose circumstances do not fall clearly into either of the above categories may be permitted if after investigation of the circumstances the elders are satisfied that there is a proper attitude of

repentance and the issues arising from the previous marriage have been fully addressed.

4. Pastoral involvement in the marriage that involves a divorcee shall be determined by the pastor and elders on a case by case basis.
5. A person divorced and remarried shall not be refused membership solely on such grounds.
6. All applications for membership involving persons who have been divorced and remarried shall be dealt with by the elders.