

A Biblical Foundation For Marriage

by Terry DeLaney

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Marriage in the Bible

Marriage was God's first "covenant" institution. It was installed before the Mosaic Law before sin entered the world. As such it was designed for sinless men and women. Later, regulations were imposed to prevent certain abuses, especially those concerning divorce. To de-regulate divorce, many in the church have determined that only what is found in Acts through Revelation can be recognized. Anything before that, they teach, including the gospel accounts, can be safely discarded as "Mosaic."

Since marriage is a covenant set up before and apart from the Law, anything said by the Holy Spirit on the subject, regardless whether it is Old or New Testament is valid. Even in the stipulations handed to Moses, the principles are the same today. Even though we may not stone someone for adultery today, the principle is that adultery should be viewed as an evil to be avoided.

God said, "I hate divorce." (Mal 2:16) His attitude on divorce did not suddenly change at Christ's resurrection. Many want to think that God disposed of the OT law, and gave His followers license to do as they please. To which, Paul answered, "you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh." (Gal 5:13)

Marriage was instituted by God when He declared, "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him" (Gen 2:18). So God created Eve and brought her to Adam. Scripture also emphasizes the truth that "a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Gen 2:24). God's design was for a man to be the husband of one wife and for the marriage to be permanent.

God's people were also to marry within the body of believers. An Israelite was never to marry a foreigner. The reason for this was that the Israelite would embrace the spouse's god as well (Exod 34:10-17; Deut 7:3-4). Likewise, Paul commanded the church at Corinth, "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers" (2 Cor 6:14). Our culture has discarded both of these principles. People marry and divorce at will, and Christians enter into relationships with unbelievers, hoping to convert them.

In biblical times, a betrothal for marriage was a binding agreement that set the young woman apart for the young man. The agreement was voided only by death or divorce; one could not get out of the betrothal in any other way. Today, engagements, for the most part, are treated casually. As long as nothing is in writing, escape from the relationship is always an option.

Usually, a period elapsed between the betrothal and the marriage ceremony. During this time the young man prepared a place in his father's house for his bride, while the bride prepared herself for married life. Today, most young people are ill prepared for the financial burdens associated with marriage. Common sex, not common sense, drives the relationship.

On the day of the wedding, the groom and his friends dressed in their finest clothes and went to the home of the bride. Together the couple went back to the groom's house. Their friends sang and danced their way back to his house.

Once at the groom's house, the couple was ushered into a bridal chamber. The marriage was consummated through sexual union as the guests waited outside. Once that fact was announced, the wedding festivities continued, with guests dropping by for the marriage feast. The typical wedding party lasted about a week.

In our culture, all of this has been altered to make way for immediacy. Parents are not always consulted on the couple's decision. Sex is premarital, and maternity wedding gowns have become commonplace. Since the relationship is entered into helter-skelter, they soon find themselves fighting over money they don't have, in-laws they don't like, and babies they're not prepared for.

Added to this mixture is a lack of maturity, brought on by a culture that emphasizes recreation over responsibility. A young husband spends hours playing video games. The young wife may miss those times where she partied with friends. The video game controller is thrown down in anger because Junior won't stop screaming for his bottle. The smell of dirty diapers, empty beer bottles, and overflowing ashtrays testify to an attempt at trying to serve more than one master. Somewhere in the house or apartment, hidden in a hallway closet, buried in a box of junk, is a bible, evidence of more innocent times.

If the young couple had the good fortune to have had parents who taught strong values, the marriage might survive. More often than not, however, divorce is the easy fix. Just erase the whole mess and start over. Maybe next time we can get it right.

We can't fix society, but a return to God may rescue some. Until such a change is acknowledged, we are doomed as a nation. The family unit will crumble, and the church will fall right behind it.

Marriage Problems

Most marriage problems, regardless of the type, find a common origin in selfishness. John spends too much on a hobby at the detriment of the family budget. Mary begins to complain, demanding he changes his priorities. Ideally, John would shelve his hobby, and the family would start to function normally again. Unfortunately, John's selfishness causes resentment to creep in since the hobby gives him pleasure. Mary is seen as an enemy who seeks to destroy that happiness. Solution? Get rid of

Mary.

God made John a social creature, however. He's gotten rid of Mary and is happily investing time and money into his hobby. But what God has hardwired into the soul eventually rises to the top. The desire for companionship inevitably demands John's attention. Ideally, he should go back to Mary and promise to do better. Unfortunately, Mary has found Bob. So John tosses aside the X-Box controller and goes off in search of another wife. The cycle begins all over again.

This simplistic model in no way explains all of the intricacies of a relationship. In real life, the problems are manifold. Arguments become bitter and full of words that seek to destroy the other person. Physical attacks upon the person and their property further decimate the relationship. Drugs, alcohol, adultery, and other evil further complicate and destroy the marriage. Sin rules the house.

Summary

To accommodate the homosexual agenda society wants to define marriage as a "legal relationship between two people." Marriage is a life-long commitment between a man and a woman. It is not merely a contract between adults who intend to live together in a particular sexual and domestic framework of their choosing. Our modern culture has taken God's original design and perverted it to accommodate their desires.

Thousands stand before priests, judges, and ministers every year, promising life-long commitments, only to see those hopes shredded in divorce court. Our fast-food, drive-thru, microwave society has taught us to expect immediate satisfaction to every whim and desire. Betrothals or engagements are looked on as things of the past—we've got to have it *now*. John and Mary meet on Day One and are having sex on Day Two. One or both of them embrace the common tenet of "test-driving the car" before buying.

America once believed in God. Our founding fathers based the Constitution on Christian beliefs. Not so long ago, families went to church; dad read the bible to their kids; mom taught Sunday school while ironing clothes; adultery and divorce were dirty words, only gossiped about in hair salons.

Since God has effectively been erased from schools, work and home, the sanctity and importance of marriage is no longer treated with the same holiness. Church is something we go to on special occasions. Dad is too busy chasing the Almighty Dollar. Mom worries more about the kids' teeth being straight rather than their souls being saved. Television has replaced mom and her ironing board as the home school teacher. Divorce is splattered all over the media, viewed with as much casual interest as the weather report.

Since God instituted marriage in the Garden of Eden, He must be part of the equation. But like in every other facet of our culture, society has sought to remove Him. Until He is brought back into society, this nation will continue to slide into spiritual decay, ending up as many nations before us.

Adultery Defined

Any unfaithfulness or sin on the part of Israel was regarded as spiritual adultery, which broke the spiritual ties, effectively divorcing the nation from God. He was no longer obligated to fulfill His covenant with them when they sank into idol worship. In the same way, physical adultery breaks the covenant of marriage. When Jehovah no longer appealed to Israel, they began looking at the nations around them, finding “greener pastures” in false gods. (1 Sam 8:4 – 9) The same holds true for a man or woman no longer satisfied with their spouse—they start looking for someone else.

The word ‘adultery’ means, *contaminate, to make unclean or impure*. McClintock’s and Strong’s Greek dictionaries both define it as the sexual intercourse of a married woman with any other man than her husband, or of a married man with any other woman than his wife. The root of *moichos* describes the act as a man sitting at a table, eating his plate of food. He then reaches across and snatches another man’s plate. He has no right to it; he already has his own plate. It is not his to enjoy. This is the essence of adultery.

Jesus placed adultery on the same level as fornication: “I tell you that anyone (IE, not just a married man) who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” NIV (Matt 5:28) Fornication was and sometimes is still seen as a lesser sin than adultery. Whereas adultery played havoc with inheritance issues pertinent to God’s promise to Israel, Jesus was now saying that all sexual sin was to be avoided as ruinous to society. How true it is today, where freewheeling sex has caused much misery.

Jesus said, “whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.” NAS (Matt 19:9) This agrees with God’s admonition through Paul: “the wife should not leave her husband. But if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband. And that the husband should not divorce his wife.” NAS (1 Cor 7:10-11)

“Leaving” means “divorce,” since Paul said she must remain unmarried. He’s speaking of divorce, as legal separations were unknown at that time.

But what did Jesus mean? The text in Matthew 19 says, “do not divorce unless there’s an issue regarding immorality.” If the divorce is based on anything other than an immoral issue, marrying someone else constitutes adultery, since the couple is still married in God’s sight. The notion that God will go along with any state-sanctioned divorce doesn’t fly in the face of scripture.

From the time of Moses until today, people have divorced over mundane issues. The religious leaders asked Jesus that if divorce was so wrong, why did Moses allow it in the first place? His reply: “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.” (Matt 19:8) Rather than forbidding divorce altogether, regulation was imposed on it. Israel is termed “a hard-hearted and rebellious people” throughout scripture, and this attitude as a nation was reflected in how they viewed marriage.

The reasons for divorce in our culture are far removed from God’s design. His view on the subject is summed up in the words, “I hate divorce.” (Mal 2:16)¹ Therefore, those contemplating divorce need to

¹ The ESV (English Standard Version) bible omits this verse.

tread lightly; it is something that displeases our Lord.

Does the Bible Authorize Divorce Between Christians?

Although God detests the practice, He never condemns it in scripture. As far as the unsaved go, God is unconcerned with it altogether—salvation is His priority. Imposing regulations on marriage and divorce to the unsaved is like telling a terminally ill person to exercise to live longer. To the saved—persons who have had their sins removed and are walking in the will of God—the Christian will not violate the principles of “having the mind of Christ.” (1 Cor 2:16)

Jesus’ words in Matthew 19 seem to permit divorce, but only for reasons of immorality. This is where many dust off the Greek lexicons and search for a bible translation agreeable to their interpretations. What does ‘immorality’ mean? The NIV translates it as “marital unfaithfulness.” The NAS renders it ‘immorality.’ The KJV says ‘fornication.’

The Greek word used in Matthew 19:9 is *porneia*, where we get the word ‘pornography.’ *Porneia* comes from the verb *porneuo*, meaning to engage in unlawful lust. The term is used extensively in scripture to describe idolatry—spiritual unfaithfulness.

Porneia refers to any unlawful lust. Incest, child molestation, homosexuality, pornography, and adultery are all examples of illicit lust—sexual desire outside of God’s will.

There are those who want to color Matthew 19 in light of what the other gospels have to say on the issue. The following is taken from the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia:

True, we have other reports of what Jesus said (Mark 10:2-12; Luke 16:18). But in Matt 19 we have the fullest report, containing everything that is said elsewhere and one or two important observations that the other writers have not included. Luke has only one verse where Matthew has ten. Luke’s verse is in no necessary connection with context. It seems to be a mere memorandum among others of the spiritual or ethical teachings of Christ. Luke, however, caught the gist of the whole teaching about divorce in recording the prohibition to put away one wife and marry another. The records in Matt 19 and Mark 10 cover the same occasion. But there is nothing in Mark that is not in Matthew, and the latter contains nearly a third more of text than the former. There is nothing, however, essential in Matthew that is not in Mark, save the clause “except for fornication.”...We seem to be justified then in saying that the total doctrine of the Scripture about divorce is contained in Matt 19 (emphasis mine).

Jesus quoted Genesis, saying that a man and woman “will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.” NIV (Matt 19:5-6)

When a man and woman marry, they are not literally one flesh, but united into a complete unit made up of two human beings. When adultery occurs in a marriage, that fleshly communion is broken. They may still be married legally, but the spiritual connection between them has been violated. As in the case of idol worship, adultery makes the original relationship null and void. Sexual engagement with anyone outside of the marriage bond renders the marriage invalid. This is why Jesus said immorality was the

only legitimate reason for divorce. As idolatry (spiritual adultery) broke the covenant between God and Israel, physical immorality breaks the original covenant made between man and wife and is, therefore, the only grounds for divorce.

Many take the view that since Jesus lived while the Mosaic Law was still in effect, teachings found in the Four Gospels are not binding on the Christian. Although the arguments are lofty on this issue, the bottom line is that certain individuals in the church want to throw out Jesus' teachings and legitimize divorce for any reasonable cause.

What About Forgiveness?

Regardless of whether or not the gospels apply to Christians, and beyond any other legal prescriptions in scripture, there is an issue that the Christian must grapple with if his or her mate has committed adultery or some other act of immoral behavior: forgiveness.

Jesus said that forgiveness of others was a prerequisite for forgiveness from God. (Matt 18:21, 22) Nowhere does the bible teach that sins of immorality are excluded. If God forgave Israel many times over for worshipping other gods, how can a Christian be justified in not forgiving their mate?

That said, however, forgiveness is a two-way street. Jesus said, "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him." (Luke 17:3, 4)

For example, John and Martha are both Christians. John becomes entangled in an affair with another woman. Martha finds out about it. Does she forgive him out-of-hand? Not according to Luke 17. If John begs his wife's forgiveness, however, and repents of the adultery, she must forgive him. Divorcing John for his infidelity is not forgiveness since it implies that Martha must treat him as if it never happened. (Isa 43:25; Heb 8:12; 10:17)

This is easier said than done in most cases. Although a "forgive-and-forget" attitude may be achieved, the first time John comes home late, or a caller hangs up when Martha answers the phone, accusations fly, and emotions boil over.

Forgiveness does not relieve one of punishment. A robber may return stolen goods in the act of repentance, but he may still go to jail. God forgave David for murder and adultery, but He also punished him for it. (2 Sam 12:13, 14) Martha may forgive her husband, but life may hold a bitter pill for the offending party, and sometimes, the family as a whole.

The Christian is not to punish anyone; that is God's realm. God does not forgive our sins and then send us to hell as punishment. Otherwise, the forgiveness is nothing more than lip service. Neither should Martha forgive John and then exact punishment for his sin. This is not to say the road to recovery will be easy. A broken trust can be almost impossible to put back together.

One problem is that repentance may not come immediately at being discovered, and the marriage will suffer under an umbrella of misery. This is where 1 Cor 7:10 comes into play: the wife should not leave her husband. But if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband.

Martha catches John, but he makes excuses, lays blame elsewhere, and his pride won't let him repent. The situation may become so unbearable, that separation may be the only option to get John to repent.

Paul is saying, go ahead and divorce, although you shouldn't. However, once divorced, don't think you can marry someone else. Go back to your husband instead, if possible.

Many in the church—especially those who have blessed marriages—may be quick to judge others in this area. They contend that a couple must remain together, regardless. Divorce is out of the question, and the Bible must be obeyed at all costs. This kind of pious legalism contradicts plain scripture and God's grace. Where does scripture teach that the wife must suffer beatings at the hand of a drunken husband? Where does the bible say that the marriage must continue even if the children are being molested? In such situations, God's grace allows for remedy: the Christian should not leave, but if they do, they can't marry another. Thus, God provides an escape, but with restrictions.

Can My Past Divorce and Re-Marriage Affect My Salvation?

It's inevitable that our divorce-happy culture would give rise to doctrines that stretch the limits of credibility. One view is that a Christian whose spouse divorces them and marries another is obligated to remain single.

Another, more sinister teaching, is that those looking for salvation must first divorce any current spouse and remarry their original one. The reason is that any subsequent marriages are sinful, and cannot be remitted by the blood of Jesus. Such a teaching implies that the blood of Christ is insufficient to forgive such sins. It furthermore levies tremendous pain and grief upon all parties involved, while also demanding an extended period to carry out such an impossible task.

Imagine John telling his wife and kids that he wants to become a Christian, but before doing so, he must divorce them and go hunt down his former wife of 10 years ago? Would John's family be inclined to embrace Christianity? Would John's former wife—now married to another and with three kids—agree to such a proposal? Yet certain churches promote this vicious gospel.

Jesus said, "Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge; you yourselves did not enter, and you hindered those who were entering." (Luke 11:52)

Those who say that God never changes would do well to consider His views in the Old Testament. Part of the law concerning marriage that Jesus referred to spoke to people getting divorced, marrying someone else, and then reuniting with the first spouse who married another:

...her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife, since she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the Lord, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance. NAS (Deut 24:4)

To now make such a thing a mandatory prerequisite to salvation is contradictory and evil. Fortunately, most of these hardliners have passed on, and the doctrine is rarely mentioned except in an anecdotal way.

What If My Spouse Divorces Me and Marries Another?

Let's set the record straight: Divorce is not the Unpardonable Sin. Those who teach that it is are guilty of "twisting the scriptures to their own destruction." (2 Peter 3:16)

The Christian may suppose that if their mate files for divorce and marries someone else, they are free to re-marry. A principle addressed in the New Testament is the human need for sex. Paul wrote, "Since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband." (1 Cor 7:2)

When God said it was not good for man to be alone (Gen 2:18), He created Eve, not to keep Adam from certain immoral practices, but to give him a helper. Adam was without sin when God said those words. After the Fall, however, marriage continued to be God's foundation for how men and women should live together. Paul's words imply that in our sinful world, marriage serves a two-fold purpose. (1) Men and women still need each other; (2) since there is "so much immorality," get married!

Sex is a part of our humanity—it is an expression of joy and intimacy between husband and wife. The world engages in sexual "freedom," but far from God's will. The context in 1st Corinthians verifies that sexual needs exist, and are a fundamental part of humanity:

The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife. Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. (1 Cor 7:4-6)

The terms 'body,' 'deprive,' 'come together,' 'tempt,' and 'lack of self-control' are all self-evident parameters within the marriage.

Paul also says that single adults are better off remaining unattached. But "if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn with passion." NAS (1 Cor 7:8-9) Marriage brings its own problems, so Paul advises, "better off staying single." But if you can't—if you're inflamed with lustful passions that will eventually send you to hell—get married.

The second principle deals with the subject at hand: What do I do if my spouse leaves me and marries another? According to some—mainly those who are comfortably married—the Christian is doomed to spend the rest of their life single. If they burn with desire, too bad. Again, we turn to God's word:

If the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace. 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? NAS (1 Cor 7:15-16)

Not under bondage refers to no longer being obligated to fulfill the marriage vows. Note:

The married woman is bound by law to her husband while he is living; but if her husband dies,

she is released from the law concerning the husband. NAS (Rom 7:2-3)

Like other laws, marriage law is immutable. The law of gravity is never set aside to accommodate a particular event. It refers back to Jesus' words, "what God has brought together, let no man separate." The only way out is by death. That said, Romans 7 is not a proof-text for marriage issues—Paul was merely using marriage to explain how a person died to the law and was free to "marry" Christ.

What Paul is saying in 1 Cor 7:15, is that if an unbelieving partner divorces their Christian mate, the latter is no longer bound or enslaved to the former. Let them divorce you, in other words. The believer, thinking their unbelieving spouse will lose their chance at salvation, may vigorously contest the divorce. But God has called us to peace, Paul says. To which he adds, "You don't know if they'll come to Christ through your efforts anyway—let 'em go."

The verse says the wife should not leave her husband. But if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband.

Be warned, however: just because your unbelieving mate (or even Christian one) divorces you, it is not a license to seek another spouse. Reconciliation must always remain the first option. What about the divorced Christian whose former spouse has remarried, moved to another state, and is now having children in the new relationship? Is the injured party doomed to spend the rest of their life single, burning with passion? Does the Bible advocate that potential reconciliation must remain, regardless? Is the divorced Christian to stay hopeful for their spouse to return until death? If so, how do we treat Deuteronomy 24:4, which forbade such re-marriages? While Christians are not subject to the Mosaic law, it does serve to illustrate God's attitude toward such reunions.

Paul is speaking to married Christians here. They should not divorce. But if they do, they have to remain single or else go back to their spouses. Verse 12 says, "don't get a divorce just because you got saved and your wife didn't." Stay married, he tells them. Why? "Because the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy." (1 Cor 7:14) In other words, the influence of Christianity shines within the family, even though one party may not believe. The family is still set apart (sanctified) from the world because of God's light that emanates from within the family unit.

There were hard feelings among the pagans in Corinth, who hotly disagreed with the Christian faith. (The disagreement was with Christianity's denouncement of immorality that was openly practiced in Corinth.) As a result, they divorced their mates. Paul thus says in the next verse, "But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so."

What does the Christian do whose spouse has remarried? Are there grounds for the believer to re-marry? If not, how does one answer 1 Cor 7:2—Since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband? How does the divorced Christian deal with his or her natural impulses?

The only truly scriptural answer is found in verse 39: A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord.

The implication is that only death can truly dissolve a marriage. Human devices can't separate what God has joined. That does not, however, relegate "remarriage" to the status of Unpardonable Sin.

The NT doesn't provide a laundry list of do's and don'ts encompassing all possible scenarios. Obedience is not based on legal terms, but on relationships with each other and Christ. As Christ and the apostles affirmed, love is the embodiment of any law.

The divorce and subsequent "remarriage" by an unbelieving spouse to another is not given as justification for the Christian to seek a second marriage. Only death seems to give the Christian any latitude. Companionship and human need override any legalistic obedience to the letter of the law.

Jesus taught that human need came before blind obedience to any law (Matt 12:1-11). The NT is not rules and regulations, but a Book of Life—how to live as God intended us to live. The decision for a Christian to remarry because their spouse left them for another is a sensitive issue, and may best be left to that person and God, who will dissect all motives and intentions on the Day of Judgment.

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