

A TREATISE ON DIVORCE,
REMARriage
AND RECONCILIATION
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It is the desire of this writer to thoroughly and fairly look at what God has to teach us about the subject of divorce, remarriage, and reconciliation through an examination of the Holy Scriptures. I ask my readers to compare the following treatise with the Scriptures and to acknowledge only what is thereby proven to be truth. I have chosen to use a number of questions to organize this study.

What constitutes marriage in the eyes of God?

This question lies foundational to the consideration of any aspect of marriage. The Scriptures are almost completely silent in relation to how a man is to get married to a woman. God gave no directions in the Law or in the New Testament for marriage services or ceremonies. There are no Biblical directives that would even require the involvement of a priest or church leader. God's simple initial directive was "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh," Genesis 2:24. From this we can see that marriage is a time of separation from the parental homes and of establishing a separate home.

Furthermore, when God spoke of Himself as the husband of Israel, He referred to a covenant that added a binding aspect to the relationship (Ezekiel 16:8,59,60,62 and Malachi 2:14). In Malachi 2:14, God also refers to Himself as being a witness to this marital covenant. From these references, we can conclude that there was some type of legally binding covenant that was confirmed by witnesses when a marriage was entered into. This is also seen in the procedures followed by Boaz in Ruth 4:9-12. This passage gives us the only covenant wording found in Scripture. In the Jewish economy, a father's acceptance of the dowry indicated his acceptance of the proposed covenant (Genesis 24:53). After the dowry was accepted, the woman was referred to as being the wife of the groom even before the wedding was celebrated and they began to live together (Matthew 1:18-20).

The numerous references in Scripture to wedding feasts, wedding suppers, and wedding garments also indicate that weddings were occasions that were celebrated.

Christ's discussion with the woman at the well in John 4 also clearly reveals that God does not accept "common law" marriages as being legitimate. "Common law" marriages are unions recognized by the government as having legal rights equal to marriage after a couple has simply lived together for a specific period of time. Christ told the Samaritan woman that the man she was presently living with was not her husband. Scripture nowhere supports the idea that adulterous relationships become sanctified if they are engaged in long enough.

From these direct and indirect references to marriage practices, I believe that we can safely conclude that God recognizes a marriage that is founded on a covenant, that is formally witnessed, and that is publicly celebrated.

What is a "one flesh" relationship?

This is another question that is foundational to our understanding of numerous Scriptures. This phrase is used seven times in Scriptures to refer to the physical and emotional bond formed by physical intimacies. Not only is this "one flesh" relationship the result of legitimate marriage relations: but also, according to 1 Corinthians 6:16, it is the product of illicit physical relationships. Because of this, the "one flesh" relationship in no way implies that the relationship is permanent or approved of God. If this were not the case, fornication (illicit physical relations between unmarried individuals) would be impossible because the act of fornication would automatically marry the individuals in the sight of God.

The fact that any physical relationship forms a "one flesh" bond also makes it possible that an individual can form this bond with multiple individuals. This leads us then to the next question.

Is it possible to be married to more than one individual?

To answer no to this question produces a number of problems. If only the first marriage is valid, polygamy is impossible. If this is the case, then numerous men listed in Hebrews 11 were adulterers because they had children by more than one woman. According to 1 Corinthians 6:9 and Galatians 5:21, this sin will keep an individual out of the kingdom of God. Yet Jesus said in Luke 13:28 that Abraham and Jacob would be in the kingdom of God. A second problem that arises if we say that it is only possible to be married once is seen in the qualifications for a bishop. In both 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6, Paul lists "the husband of one wife" among the qualifications. If it is only possible to be married once, then this wording would require that a bishop must be married. This would have disqualified Paul since he was not married and would also disqualify a bishop whose wife dies. It is more likely that this restriction applies to those involved in polygamy who become members of the church.

Were the directives given for divorce in Deuteronomy 24 God's plan or Moses' idea?

When Christ was asked the question, "Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife?" (Matthew 19:3, Mark 10:2), He responded with another question, "What did Moses command you?" After His challengers referred to Deuteronomy 24, Jesus told them that Moses suffered divorce because of the hardness of their hearts. Christ then took His challengers back to Genesis 2 and told them that divorce was not part of God's original plan. There are some individuals who use Christ's reference to Moses to say that the directives for divorce were not from God but were simply Moses' attempt to control a bad situation. Is this a correct interpretation of Scripture? To be fair, we need to look at the other things that Christ referred to as being commands of Moses. In Matthew 8:4, Christ healed a leper and told him to "...shew thyself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, for a testimony to them." How could Christ use obedience to a command that was only Moses' idea as a testimony of His divinity? The Sadducees in Matthew 22:24 attributed the command that a brother marry the widow of another brother to Moses. Were the Jews ignorant of the fact that Jehovah slew Onan (Genesis 38:10) because of his refusal to marry Tamar, the widow of his brother? Mark 7:10 records Christ's own words as attributing the commands, "Honor thy father and thy mother," and "Whoso curseth father and mother, let him die the death," to Moses. Did Moses lie when he said, "Honor thy father and thy mother, as the LORD thy God hath commanded thee." (Deuteronomy 5:16) Was Christ confused when He attributed these same two commands to God in Matthew 15:4? Finally, in Mark 8:5, Moses is given credit for the command that adulterers should be stoned.

Is it not obvious that a better interpretation of the question "What did Moses command you?" simply is that Christ was directing His challengers back to the Law as given by God through Moses rather than to the Psalms or to the Prophets or to the various other Old Testament Scriptures? This then leads us to next question.

Did God ever command divorce, or He just make allowance for it?

In order to answer this question, we need to first consider the two types of marital relations seen in the Old Testament. The first is the formal husband/wife relationship. This relationship involved a covenant as noted previously and gave the wife authority in the household and the children produced by the relationship the right of heirs. The second level of marital relationship was that of husband/concubine. This relationship seems not to have involved a covenant, gave the wife no authority in the household, and did not give the children a right to the estate. It seems to have functioned to make cohabitation acceptable for the purpose of producing more offspring or to cement political ties. These differences are clearly seen in Genesis 25:1-6 in the life of Abram. It seems that the difference between

these two relationships is what produced the tension between Hagar and Sarai. God validated this relationship difference when He addressed Hagar as "Sarai's maid" in Genesis 16:8 and called her Abraham's "bondwoman" in Genesis 21:12. Likewise, Galatians 4:22-31 refer to Sarai as the "freewoman" and Hagar as the "bondwoman." God also indicated the inferiority of the concubine relationship when He instructed Abraham to "cast out" Hagar as Sarai had ordered. This directive was in the face of Abraham's resistance to the idea. The Hebrew word translated cast out here is the same word used for divorce (Strong's #1644) in Leviticus 21:7,14; 22:13; Numbers 30:9 and Ezekiel 44:22. The question may be raised whether Abram relationship with Hagar was inferior simply because he was already married to Sarai and could not be married to another. Again God's instructions in the Law help us to answer No to this question. When giving instructions for inheritances, God gave clear directions that the oldest son is to receive a double portion--the birth right. In Deuteronomy 21:15-17, God speaks to situations where a husband has two wives of equal status but where the husband loves the one more than the other. God implies that children from both relationships will share in the inheritance but He required that the first born, even if he was the son of the less-loved wife, get his double portion. So again we see that God does accept that a man can have more than one wife. Jacob is another Old Testament individual who had two wives in equal relationships and two concubines in inferior relationships (Genesis 29:25-30:9). In answer to the question, "Did God ever command divorce?", the answer is Yes but only in a husband/concubine relationship not a husband/wife relationship.

What did divorce do as God outlined it in Deuteronomy 24?

The divorce directives that God outlined in the Law in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 have their foundation in the covenant that, when witnessed, initiated the marriage. Both the Hebrew word (Strong's #1644) and the Greek word (Strong's #630) that are translated divorce mean "to drive out, to cast out, to expel, or to release." Thus the "writing of divorcement" of Deuteronomy 24:1,3 and Isaiah 50:1 was a legal document stating that the previous covenant was no longer in effect. At this point, the man was no longer responsible for the woman and the woman was no longer under the authority of the man (Deuteronomy 24:2). That one covenant could change a previous covenant is clearly seen in that the New Covenant has been given to replace the Old Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31 and Hebrews 8:8,13). The first affect of a writing of divorcement was that the man could expel the woman from his house. The woman could then return to her father's house (Leviticus 22:13) or be married to another man. The marriage however did have a permanent affect on the woman even though it ended in divorce. In Numbers 30, God gave directives concerning vows. For a man, every vow stood before God. For the vow of an unmarried daughter to be in effect, it needed to be approved by her father. A husband needed to approve the vow of his wife. (For an example of this see 1 Samuel 1:23.) For a widow or divorced woman however every vow stood (Numbers 30:9). The marriage covenant removed the woman from the authority of her father so he could no longer disallow a vow even if she returned to live in her father's house; likewise, the bill of divorcement removed her from the authority of her husband just as if he had died. Thus marriage produced a irreversible change. Another permanent effect of the divorce was that the woman was not allowed to become the wife of a priest (Leviticus 21:7). In this effect, a divorced woman was different than a widow in that Ezekiel 44:22 gave allowance for a priest to marry a widow of another priest. For a wife to return to her father's house without this legal release was considered whoredom because she was giving herself to the authority of one who was not her husband (Judges 19:1-2).

For what reasons was divorce allowed?

God clearly answered this question in Deuteronomy, and Christ restated this original reason in the New Testament. The Law allowed divorce if the husband "hath found some uncleanness in her." The word uncleanness (Strong's #6168) is a verb meaning to pour out or make bare. As such, it indicates the discovery of improper actions on the part of the wife, not merely displeasing qualities. Christ, when ask if it was lawful to divorce "for every cause" (Matthew 19:3), answered by referring them back to Genesis

2:24 and then told them that, "What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder." When questioned then as to why the Law allowed divorce, He clearly told them that it was as a result of the hardness of their hearts and that it was not God's original intent. The word hardness (Strong's #4641 from #4642), according to Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, "signifies 'trying, and exacting' and is a synonym for austere." This seems to indicate that divorce was for the protection of the woman due to the harshness of the man as a result of jealousy. This would not have been a problem before the Fall thus "from the beginning it was not so." Nor would hardness be an issue if everyone expressed the spirit of love and forgiveness that God manifests when an individual turns in sorrow and repentance to Him. God also made it very clear in 1 Corinthians 7:12-13 that having an unbelieving spouse is not grounds for divorce.

Christ followed His statement about divorce with two more very clear teachings. First, divorce for reasons other than fornication is setting ones self up to commit adultery. This "exception clause," as it is sometimes known, has been the basis for much needless confusion. Christ's choice of the word fornication indicate that this only applies to moral impurity before marriage. This harmonizes with the Law and clarifies that the New Testament only allows for divorce between the making of the marriage covenant and the formal celebration of the marriage. It was exactly this type of situation that prompted Joseph to consider divorcing Mary until God clarified to him the reason for Mary's condition (Matthew 1:18-21). From this teaching we can draw several interesting conclusions. The first is that God apparently does not join together a couple when they are promised to each other but when their wedding is publicly observed. If this were not the case, Christ would with this teaching giving room for what He just said should not be done, putting asunder what God has joined. Therefore, since God only joins a couple on their wedding day, the engagement period, as we know it today, does not bring any additional physical liberties. This teaching that "putting away" is only right in cases of fornication discovered during the betrothal also shows to us the seriousness with which God views the commitment to marry. Christ seems to have been teaching that to break an engagement for any reason other than fornication, physical or spiritual, is wrong and any marriage after this would be adultery. I believe this is because of the typology involved which we will look at later.

The second teaching Christ gave after clarifying that divorce was not God's original intent is that marriage to a divorcee is adultery. With this teaching, Christ made it clear that a divorce decree does not remove all vestiges of the marriage. Some would use this fact to teach that divorce does not alter the first marriage in any way. However, this does not harmonize with another New Testament teaching. In 1 Corinthians 7 God spoke through Paul to this very issue in verse 11. After instructing that the wife should not depart-this is the same Greek word as Christ used in Matthew 19:6 and Mark 10:9-God say: "But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried. If the divorce proceedings do not affect the marriage relationship in any way, why would God choose to use here a Greek word that is used three other times in this chapter (verses 8,32, and 34) to clearly refer to persons who are not married? God's choice of this word unmarried clearly shows that the divorce person is no longer under any marriage obligations because they are in the same condition as a person who was never married. Putting these two Scriptural teaching together gives us a clear understanding that divorce does free a person from marital obligations but permanently alters their life so that any further marital relationships constitute adultery. This raises another question-

Is it possible to marry another person after divorce?

Again, the Scriptures provide a clear answer to this question. Mark 6:17-18 tells us that Herod had married his brother's wife. Matthew 19:9 and Mark 10:11-12 record the exact words of Christ when He spoke of adultery being committed by either a husband or wife who marries another. Romans 7:3 also speaks of a woman being married to another man while her husband liveth. If, as we noted before, it was possible that a man could marry more than one wife in a way that God approved of in the Old Testament, is it not also consistent to believe that a person could be married more than once in ways not approved by

God? Some have argued that Christ did not really mean married when He used that word in His teaching on divorce. They say that Christ simply used this word because it was a term that His audience could relate to but what He really meant was that the two individuals were just living together because it is not possible to get married to another partner if the first partner is still living. Arguments like this totally destroy the validity of the entire Bible! The confessions of faith historically accepted by the Anabaptist churches declare that we believe in the verbal inspiration of the Word of God. This means that we believe that God inspired the very words of Scripture not just the ideas that He then allowed the writers to put into their own words. To teach that Christ's command of vocabulary was that limited that He could not find a word to express exactly what He intended to say in a way that His listeners could understand is to do great injustice to the wisdom of Christ. Furthermore, we have a very clear Scriptural example where a word is used because it is what people could relate to, but Scripture clarifies that this word is not doctrinally accurate. This example is found in Luke 3:23. When Luke was ready to give the genealogy of Christ, he was inspired to insert "as was supposed" before listing Christ as the son of Joseph. To say that God does not mean what He says by the words that He inspired is to destroy the authority of Scripture and to make man the final interpreter of what God really did mean. God forbid! If Paul could base a whole doctrinal argument on an Old Testament word being singular not plural (Galatians 3:16), should we not accept God's choice of a verb? Closely related to this question is the next question-

Do the vows of a second marriage mean anything?

Those who teach that it is not possible to be married the second time while the first marriage partner is still living must answer this question in the negative. Can this be supported from Scripture? As we noted before, the only vows that did not stand as spoken were the vows of a wife or an unmarried daughter and then only if they were disallowed at the first hearing by the husband or father. All other covenants, based on a promise to God, stood as they were uttered (Numbers 30:2, Deuteronomy 23:21-23). Oaths that turned out to be for the hurt of the one who uttered them stood (Psalm 15:4). The keeping of covenants was considered that important to God that He required that an animal dedicated to Him could not be switched for another animal even if the dedicated animal turned out to be flawed. He would rather have a sacrifice that was less than perfect than to have a man change a vow (Leviticus 27:9-10). Ecclesiastes 5:4-6 clearly teaches us that it is sin not to perform our vows, even ones that we later realize were in error. Jephthah discovered this, much to his dismay, in Judges 11:30-36. Joshua also realized this after he made a covenant that clearly violated the command of God (Exodus 23:32-33, Joshua 9:15-21). Yet, this covenant needed to stand; and even generations later, God punished Israel for violating it (2 Samuel 21:1). Thus, the Old Testament was very clear that every vow to God stood regardless of the content or circumstances of the vow. The New Testament does not weaken this stand at all, but rather Christ placed all of our speech on this level when He forbid the use of oaths and simply said "Let your communication be yea, yea; nay, nay..." (Matthew 5:36, James 5:12). This frees us from the lawyerly debates that the scribes and Pharisees got into as to whether a vow was to God or not (Matthew 23:16-22). The fact that the second marriage vows are binding in the sight of God produces the dilemma of reconciliation-how can a person perform the one vow without breaking the other vow? This brings us to the next question.

When is reconciliation possible?

Thankfully, again God provided this answer both in the Old Testament and in the New. Deuteronomy 24:4 simply states: "Her former husband, which sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife after that she is defiled; for that is an abomination before the LORD..." God in the Law clearly defined the punishment for both adultery and fornication to be death (Deuteronomy 22:20-24). The use of the term former husband and the lack of punishment proscribed for this defilement indicates that divorce did affect the first marriage relationship and that, under the Law, physical relationships with a second husband were not sin. This physical union however was the "point of no return" in relation to

being reconciled to the first husband. The New Testament also outlines this same restriction in 1 Corinthians 7:11 with the words: "...let her remain unmarried **or** be reconciled to her husband..." (emphasis mine). Strong's says that the word or (#2228) is "a primary particle of distinction between two connected terms." Strong's further identifies or as a disjunctive, that is, it indicates a contrast or an alternative. So, we see no difference between the Old and New Testaments in relation to the question, "When is reconciliation possible?" Both allow reconciliation before remarriage but not after. The final and possibly most serious consideration is-

What are the spiritual relationships that marriage is to illustrate?

The Scriptures use the marriage union to illustrate two different spiritual relationships. (1) The relationship of God to Israel in the Old Testament, and (2) The relationship of Christ to the Church. First, let's look at how God uses marriage terminology to describe His relationship to Israel. Isaiah 50:1, Jeremiah 3:1-4:1, and Hosea 2 succinctly portray God as a husband and Israel as His wife. Interestingly enough, God in Jeremiah 3:8 speaks of having two wives-Israel, whom He had divorced already; and Judah, the sister of Israel. Isaiah 50:1 also refers to the bill of divorcement that God gave to Israel, yet in Jeremiah 3:1, God pleads with her to return to Him even after He had repeated the prohibition of Deuteronomy 24:4. A careful reading and observation of the terminology used repeatedly in Jeremiah 3 and Hosea 2 reveals no incompatibility between the Law and God's desire. Over and over again, God speaks of their adulterous actions, their harlotry, and their lovers, but never another husband. God validated the "point of no return," but they had not crossed this line therefore He could and would take them back. Furthermore, the divorce itself also followed the criteria of Deuteronomy 24 because Isaiah 50:1 tells us that the divorce was not a result of a change in God's feelings toward her; but rather a result of her improper actions. The fact that God speaks of Himself as having two wives is also compatible with the fact that Christ clarified that God's original intent was for one man to have one wife. I believe God's original intent was to have a unified Israel as His wife. God however chose dividing the kingdom as the way of punishing the house of David for the sin of Solomon. Yet in order to remain faithful to His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, He chose to "marry" both Israel and Judah. I believe this is why God did not condemn polygamy in the Old Testament. God did forbid this practice in the New Testament; and again, this does not violate His nature. Nonresistance is another issue that God Himself does not practice yet He requires of His followers in the New Testament church age. This New Testament prohibition of polygamy is also true to type in that in the New Testament the marriage bond is to represent Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:31-32). Polygamy is forbidden because the true Church universal will be the one and only bride Christ will ever take. Divorce by either husband or wife is also forbidden in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 7:10-11) because Christ will never cease loving the Church (Romans 8:35,39) and the faithful Church will always be in love with Christ (Matthew 16:18). The true Church will never return to her "father's" house or place herself under the authority of someone other than Christ (John 6:66-68). However, on an individual level, we find that the Law is a "school master to bring us to Christ" even in its teaching on marriage. The Law allowed divorce in the event of unfaithfulness before marriage. Today as Christians, we are called the bride of Christ because we have entered into the marriage covenant with Christ (Ephesians 5:25) even though the marriage celebration did not yet occur (Revelation 19:7-9). If during this betrothal period, we are found to be unfaithful to Christ, He will divorce us personally. To believe anything else is to embrace Calvinism and unconditional eternal security. Christ even gave us an example of the issuing of a spiritual divorce decree in Matthew 10:33 ("But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven.") and 2 Timothy 2:12 ("If we suffer, we shall also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us."). The denial that these verses speak of seems to relate especially to those who had once enjoyed a covenant relationship with Christ but later prove to be unfaithful to this covenant. Just as a divorce decree needed to be witnessed in the Old Testament, In Matthew 10, God Himself is declared to be the witness to this divorce. Second Timothy 2:13 becomes beautifully clear when seen in the light of this Old

Testament type. The Old Testament allowed divorce only for unfaithfulness on the part of the wife, not just if a husband "changed his mind." Verse 13 brings this type home for a most beautiful promise—we need never fear that Christ will "deny" us because He changed His mind and no longer loves us. He does not divorce for His own reasons—"He abideth faithful." Hallelujah! Furthermore, just as a divorce left a woman forever changed, to enter a covenant relationship with Christ and to be "divorced" for our unfaithfulness will also have a permanent effect unless we are reconciled to Him (Matthew 12:45, Luke 11:26, and 2 Peter 2:20).

What affect does death have on a marriage relationship?

Scripture is clear that physical marriage is only a temporal relationship, and its binding aspects are dissolved at the time of death (Romans 7:1-2, and 1 Corinthians 7:39). Christ also made it very clear that this was the simple answer to the Sadducees supposedly tough question about the marital status of the woman who had seven husbands during her lifetime (Matthew 22:28). Spiritual death has the same affect on our spiritual marriage to Christ. All of the promises that go along with this covenant relationship are only for those who maintain their spiritual life (Revelation 3:2). To die spiritually is to lose the covenant relationship with Christ. Death is the one and only release from a marriage covenant.

"Now of the things which we have spoken, [what] is the sum?"

I believe that the Scriptures clearly teach that for the New Testament era, marriage is a covenant relationship between one man and one woman. This covenant can be sinned against through adultery or broken by divorce but once pronounced, forever stands. A subsequent marriage not only constitutes sin against the original covenant but also includes an equally binding covenant. This additional covenant only serves to entangle the person farther and brings him to the place where it is impossible to live with any marriage partner without being unfaithful to one of the covenants. Thus, the only recourse for a Christian involved with remarriage after divorce is to remain celibate until one or the other partner dies. This position is in full harmony with the Old Testament Law, with the New Testament teaching on marriage, with God's declared position of His relationship with Israel, and with the New Testament teaching of the relationship of Christ to the Church as a body as well as His relationship to the individual believer. I further believe that we need to continue to teach the seriousness of engagement and marriage as types of Christ's relationship to the Church. Could it be any less serious for us today to break these types than it was for Moses to strike the rock when he was told to speak to it? May the Church continue to hold forth as a beacon the unadulterated principles of God's Word to the glory of God and for the salvation of souls.