

Divorce, Remarriage, and Church Membership

(What Every Member and Prospective Member of Christ Fellowship Needs to Understand about Our Position with Respect to Divorce and Remarriage)

This article is in two parts. Part 1 is a brief summary of our doctrinal conclusions concerning divorce and remarriage. Part 2 concerns the way our position affects church membership. Both parts are excerpted from *Divorce and Remarriage: A Permanence View*, by Daryl Wingerd, Jim Elliff, Jim Chrisman, and Steve Burchett (Kansas City/Parkville, MO: Christian Communicators Worldwide, 2009). Those who wish to study our position in more detail may obtain a copy of this book from one of our elders.

Introduction

Divorce and remarriage are painful subjects to address biblically in our culture, for at least three reasons. First, the practice of divorce has reached epidemic proportions even among those who profess to be Christians. Nearly every Christian knows someone in his or her local church who has been divorced. Second, most Christians who divorce also remarry, usually with the strong encouragement of other Christians but often without a thorough, personal understanding of what the Bible has to say about second marriages. Third, not everyone agrees as to what *is* the biblical position regarding divorce and remarriage. As a result, Christians in potential divorce and/or remarriage situations often receive conflicting counsel from different, though equally qualified and respected, pastors and teachers.

Part 1: A Summary of Our Doctrinal Conclusions

After conducting an intensive study of this topic, the elders of Christ Fellowship have come to believe that the Bible's teaching on marriage, divorce, and remarriage may be summarized in three points:

1. The one-flesh union created in marriage is permanent until death.

Summary: *In the Bible, the remarriage of a divorced person is consistently said to be an act of adultery. This indicates that the one-flesh union created by God when a marriage begins is not dissolved by divorce.*

Jesus referred to the nature and permanence of this union when He said, "So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate" (Matt. 19:6; Mark 10:8-9). Jesus' language shows the couple as passive, with God Himself joining them together. Additionally, the New Testament makes it clear that no one other than God can dissolve the one-flesh union. Divorce does not end that which God has established as permanent. Despite civil laws and personal opinions to the contrary, only death, which God alone ordains, can dissolve the one-flesh union. We can be certain that this is true because remarriage after divorce is described as an act of adultery. As Jesus said,

... whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. (Matt. 5:32b)

Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her; and if she herself divorces her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery. (Mark 10:11-12)

Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries one who is divorced from a husband commits adultery. (Luke 16:18)

The Apostle Paul stated it this way:

For 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. So then, if while her husband is living she is joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from the law, so that she is not an adulteress though she is joined to another man. (Rom. 7:2-3)

An act of sex between a man and a woman is called “adultery” only when it violates an existing marital union. Because remarriage after divorce (while the original spouse is living) is called “adultery,” it is evident that the one-flesh union with the former spouse still exists in some form. The union created by God in marriage is not *un*-created by the act of divorce.

2. Initiating a divorce is never lawful.

Summary: The defining principle of the Bible’s teaching on divorce is that it is always unlawful, and there are no compelling reasons to see this prohibition as less than absolute.

Jesus prohibited divorce categorically, using absolute or universal terms, when He said, “What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate” (Matt. 19:6; Mark 10:9). The point of the command is to say that man (whether male or female) should *never* attempt to destroy what God has created. In both Matthew 19 and Mark 10, this statement was Jesus’ answer to the Pharisee’s question about whether or not it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife. Jesus’ answer to this question was an unqualified “No.”

Paul’s prohibition of divorce in 1 Corinthians 7 is in perfect agreement with the teaching of Christ. When the question of divorce is addressed, Paul responds as follows:

. . . the wife should not leave her husband. (v. 10)

. . . the husband should not divorce his wife. (v. 11)

. . . if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her. (v. 12)

. . . a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away. (v. 13)

No less than four times in this chapter Paul says, in effect, “Do not divorce your spouse.” The closest he ever comes to an exception to this rule is in verse 15 where the believing spouse is permitted to *cooperate* in a divorce if the unbelieving spouse insists on leaving. Paul gives no support for the idea that in certain cases it is lawful to *initiate* a divorce.

3. Remarrying after divorce is an act of adultery if a former spouse is living.

Summary: *Only death dissolves the one-flesh union created by God in marriage. This morally binding union is not dissolved by divorce. Therefore, any remarriage of (or to) a divorced person, prior to the death of the former spouse, is an act of adultery.*

As we said in our first point, the one-flesh union created by God in marriage is permanent. Though marriages can be, and frequently are, severed externally in civil, legal ways, the one-flesh union can only be separated by God Himself through the death of one or both spouses. This is why marriage to any other person after divorce, as long as the original spouse is living, is consistently called “adultery.” As Jesus said,

... whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. (Matt. 5:32)

Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her; and if she herself divorces her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery. (Mark 10:11-12)

Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries one who is divorced from a husband commits adultery. (Luke 16:18)

These verses clearly provide no exceptions to the rule that remarriage after divorce is an act of adultery. The second part of Luke 16:18 even seems to disallow a wife’s remarriage in the event that her husband has divorced her and has already married someone else. Furthermore, contrary to some interpretations of Paul in 1 Corinthians 7, the apostle does not soften Jesus’ stance against remarriage. Even in the event that a divorce does occur, Paul says,

But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that 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. (1 Cor. 7:10-11, emphasis added)

The only case in which Paul permits remarriage is when the former spouse has died. This permission is stated clearly in two places:

For 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 her husband. So then, if while her husband is living she is joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from the law so that she is not an adulteress though she is joined to another man. (Rom. 7:2-3)

A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. (1 Cor. 7:39)

The three points explained above constitute our position on divorce and remarriage. We call our position the “permanence” view because it recognizes that the one-flesh union created in marriage is permanent, separated only by death. We do not believe the integrity of the Scriptures concerning this difficult and sensitive topic can be preserved without arriving at these three conclusions. What follows is an explanation of the most significant objection to our view from conservative, Bible-believing Christians, along with our analysis of one particular verse that is critical to understanding this matter.

A Brief Explanation of the Opposition to Our View

Most evangelical Christians believe there is at least one exception to the no-divorce/no-remarriage statements made by Jesus and Paul. The disagreement centers around Jesus' words in Matthew 19:9:

And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, *except for immorality*, and marries another woman commits adultery. (Matt. 19:9, emphasis added)

Many have come to understand this statement, with the italicized "exception clause," as permission to divorce and remarry when a marriage covenant has been violated by one spouse's sexual unfaithfulness (in other words, by adultery). In our view, this permissive understanding of Matthew 19:9 is at odds with Jesus' categorical prohibition of divorce in Matthew 19:6 (and Mark 10:8), as well as His consistent prohibition of remarriage after divorce (Matt. 5:32; Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18).

Did Jesus actually permit in verse 9 what He had just said "no man" may ever do in verse 6? Did He permit remarriage after divorce for adultery despite His unqualified prohibitions of *all* remarriage of (or to) a divorced person whose former spouse is still living, as recorded in other places in the Bible? Most importantly, should interpreters of the Bible allow Matthew 19:9, with its somewhat ambiguous wording, to be *the* determining passage when so many other factors, not only in Jesus' teaching but also Paul's, point in the opposite direction? Is it proper, in other words, to allow a single, less-explicit text to override what is plainly stated in other places? We believe the answer to each of these questions is "no." We understand how Matthew 19:9 can be understood this way, but we believe there is a much better interpretation, one that harmonizes all the biblical divorce and remarriage texts and fits the historical context of Matthew's gospel.

The "Betrothal" Understanding of Matthew 19:9

In Matthew 19:9 (and similarly in Matt. 5:32), when Jesus prohibited divorce and remarriage "except for immorality [Greek: *porneia*]," we believe He was excluding from His prohibition the annulment of a Jewish betrothal contract on the grounds of *pre-marital* sexual immorality. In Jewish culture these legal annulments were referred to as "divorces," and were considered necessary when one of the parties to the premarital agreement was found to have been unchaste before the wedding occurred. Jesus did not want to be misunderstood as prohibiting this legitimate act of "divorce" (actually annulment) along with His categorical prohibition of divorce in the context of a consummated marriage. This understanding of Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage has been called the "betrothal" view.

In support of the betrothal view we present the following four arguments:

1. Matthew's usage of the word *porneia* (fornication) seems to be very specific and limited. Each time he uses *porneia* he distinguishes it from the word *moicheia* (adultery). Matthew uses *porneia* three times in his gospel:

... but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of *unchastity* [*porneia*], makes her *commit adultery* [the verb form of *moicheia*]. (5:32)

For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, *adulteries* [from the root *moicheia*], *fornications* [from the root *porneia*], thefts, false witnesses, slanders. (15:19)

And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for *immorality* [*porneia*], and marries another woman *commits adultery* [the verb form of *moicheia*]. (19:9)

Notice that each time Matthew uses *porneia* (fornication), he also uses either *moicheia* (adultery) or its verb form in the same sentence, presumably to clarify that two different classes of sin are being described. In Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, if the exception clauses were meant to describe sexual unfaithfulness in the context of a consummated marriage (which is always adultery, not fornication) it would be hard to explain why Matthew would not have used *moicheia* instead of *porneia*. Where he describes the sin of adultery elsewhere, he always uses *moicheia*, not *porneia* (cf. 5:27, 28, 31; 15:19; 19:18). The fact is, if the sin of adultery were what Jesus intended to describe in the exception clauses, *moicheia* would have much more clearly explained His meaning and would have been much more consistent with Matthew's writing pattern.

2. In John's gospel the word *porneia* (fornication) is only used once, in John 8:41. To understand the context in which the word was used, note that Jesus had just challenged the Pharisees' claim that they were children of Abraham (vv. 39-40). In verse 44 He calls them children of the devil. In the midst of this heated conversation, the Pharisees replied, "We were not born of fornication [*porneia*]; we have one Father, God" (v. 41).

The unbelieving Pharisees clearly could not allow themselves to believe that Jesus was actually born of a virgin. If they were to admit that He was born in this way, it would be very difficult to then deny that He was the fulfillment of the virgin birth prophecy in Isaiah 7:14—"Immanuel," "God with us"—which would also make Him the fulfillment of Isaiah 9:6-7, Daniel 7:13-14, and Micah 5:2. In other words, the virgin birth served as proof that Jesus was the King of the Jews who was to sit forever on the throne of David. So they *had* to deny the virgin birth. But the only way to deny Jesus' virgin birth was to claim that Mary had gotten pregnant through intercourse with Joseph or some other man prior to the marriage being legitimately consummated. This would have made Jesus one who was "born of fornication [*porneia*]." The point is, John's use of the word *porneia* to describe what was perceived by the Pharisees as Mary's premarital sexual activity indicates that this single word was commonly understood by first-century Jews to describe the particular sin of premarital sex, not the sin of adultery.

3. Matthew is the only gospel writer who includes the exception clauses (5:32; 19:9). He is also the only one who describes Joseph's intent to divorce Mary, which, as Matthew indicates, was the righteous thing for Joseph to do (Matt. 1:18-19). Since Matthew is the only one who describes Joseph and the situation in this way, it logically follows that Matthew would be the one to include the fact that divorce (annulment) in these specific situations was not unlawful. Otherwise, without the exception clause, Jesus would be seen as prohibiting what Matthew had earlier called a righteous action.
4. According to nearly universal scholarly opinion, Matthew's gospel was intended for a primarily Jewish audience. His purpose was to convince Jews that Jesus was the Messiah, their King. Since Jews in particular would understand Jewish betrothal laws and would therefore wonder if Jesus were prohibiting even *this* type of divorce, it would naturally follow that Matthew would be the one to include the exception clause for the sake of his Jewish readers.

Mark and Luke, on the other hand, writing primarily to Greek and Roman readers, saw no need to include the exception clause when they recorded Jesus' teaching about divorce and

remarriage (cf. Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18). Greeks and Romans also had betrothal arrangements (as is evident in 1 Corinthians 7:25-38), but betrothal was not as legally binding for non-Jews as for Jews. It could be ended without legal “divorce” proceedings. Because of this, Greeks and Romans would not have easily associated the term “divorce” with anything other than the termination of a consummated marriage. Mark and Luke may have recognized that including the phrase, “except for immorality,” would mislead Greek and Roman readers into thinking that Jesus was allowing an actual exception to His no-divorce/no-remarriage teaching in the context of a consummated marriage. In other words, they may have omitted the exception clause in order to *preserve* Jesus’ true intent, which was to disallow *all* divorce.

When all of these factors are considered, it seems certain to us that when Jesus said, “Whoever divorces his wife, except for *porneia*,” He was not permitting divorce in the context of a fully consummated marriage when adultery occurs. Instead, He was clarifying that His categorical prohibition of divorce did not apply to the termination of a betrothal agreement when one party was found to be unchaste prior to the consummation of the marriage. Jesus was saying that in these situations, a legal annulment (for which the Jews used the same terminology as legal divorce) was permissible.

Again, the betrothal interpretation of Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 is merely one part of the investigation that led us to adopt the permanence view. The permanence view itself is fully stated by the three points explained at the beginning. It is also important to note that our permanence position is not completely dependent upon the betrothal view. There are actually seven (if not more) ways in which the exception clause has been understood. Of these seven views, five lead to a no-divorce conclusion and six lead to a no-remarriage conclusion. We offer the “betrothal” understanding of the exception clause as what we believe to be the most consistent way to harmonize all of the divorce/remarriage texts in the Bible. But even if one were to remain perpetually unsure of precisely how to explain the exception clause, the preponderance of evidence found in the other passages should lead to a no-divorce/no-remarriage conclusion.

Part 2: The Permanence View and Church Membership

Church Membership and the Permanence View

Q: Can a person be a member of your church if he or she disagrees with the permanence view?

A: Yes, in most cases. Not every member of our church will immediately or easily embrace the permanence view. Some may never come to full agreement. This difference of opinion does not, in itself, prevent anyone from becoming or remaining a member of our church. Regardless of personal convictions about divorce and remarriage, however, all members and prospective members need to be aware of the following expectations associated with membership:

- Members are encouraged to study matters related to divorce and remarriage and discuss their personal views with other members, even if they disagree with the permanence view. There are limitations to this freedom, however. No member may encourage another member to act contrary to the church’s position, speak disparagingly of those who hold this view, or behave divisively in other ways.

- All members must acknowledge that the permanence view will be the guiding conviction in disciplinary matters related to divorce and remarriage.
- Members who have not embraced the permanence view must agree not to complicate and/or delay disciplinary actions related to wrongful divorce and/or remarriage by seeking to debate the permanence view during a disciplinary process.
- Any member may abstain from affirming a disciplinary action related to divorce and/or remarriage on the basis of his or her personal convictions, but all members must respect and abide by disciplinary decisions and actions deemed appropriate and necessary by the majority.

Q: You said a person who disagrees can be a member “in most cases.” What is the exception to this general rule?

A: The exception concerns those who disagree with the permanence view, but have divorced a spouse and/or remarried after divorce while a former spouse was still living. Divorce and wrongful remarriage are serious sins. To divorce a spouse is to disobey Christ’s command not to separate what God has joined together (Matt. 19:6; Mark 10:8). To remarry after divorce while the former spouse is living is to commit an act of adultery (Matt. 5:32; 19:9; Mark 10:9-10; Luke 16:18; Rom. 7:3). As with any other significant act or pattern of sin formerly committed by a person who seeks membership with our church, sins related to divorce and remarriage must be repented of before church membership can be granted. The person needs to sincerely acknowledge that his or her former actions were sinful. Until such an acknowledgement is forthcoming, our church has no option but to view the person as unrepentant with respect to the sin(s) that were committed. It cannot be right to overlook in an unrepentant *prospective* member what would cause the disciplinary removal of an unrepentant *member*.

Q: Are you saying that you cannot receive these people because they are not Christians?

A: No, that is not what we are saying. We are sensitive to the widespread influence of conservative, Bible-believing Christians who, for centuries, have taught that divorce and remarriage are permitted in cases of adultery or desertion by a disobedient spouse. Some who seek membership with our church, and who have divorced a spouse and/or remarried after divorce, may have been fully convinced that their actions were permissible on the basis of this prevailing view. Even a sincere believer could misconstrue a few Bible verses as permitting divorce and/or remarriage in cases of adultery or desertion (specifically Matt. 5:32; 19:9; 1 Cor. 7:15, 27-28). While we are firmly convinced of the view we now hold, the confusion among well-meaning, Bible-believing Christians is understandable.

Q: Are you adding to the basic requirements for church membership (i.e., conversion and baptism) by insisting upon repentance in this specific area?

A: No, we do not believe we are. The practice of dealing with former sinful actions in the membership process is common to churches who work hard to maintain a regenerate membership. Discussions about former sins are not focused only on the issue of divorce and remarriage. *Any* notable sins for which a church would enact discipline are part of the intimate discussions with prospective members. We welcome all who are repentant of known sins, because repentance is one necessary mark of a true Christian.

In the end, what we are asking of people in this category is that they enter into membership with the same attitude toward their former divorce(s) and/or remarriage(s) as toward any other former sins—that is, with a heartfelt acknowledgment of *whatever* sin was involved. Depending on the circumstances of the individual divorce and/or remarriage, this acknowledgment of past sin may focus more on the act(s) of disobedience than on an attitude of rebellion, because their sin may have been committed without knowledge of error or premeditation.

Q: Why would you require repentance prior to membership in the case of a person who did not know or understand biblical instructions regarding divorce and remarriage, or one who knows the Bible and is fully convinced that he or she did what God permits?

A: In the civil realm, ignorance of the law does not exempt a person from facing the consequences of the law. The same is true when a person misinterprets the law and, as a result, does what is unlawful. Such a person may be less culpable because his crime was not committed intentionally, but he or she was nonetheless disobedient to his government. We believe this is a biblical pattern as well. For Old Testament Jews there was a category of sin called “unintentional.” There was even a special sacrifice prescribed for such sins. Before the sacrifice was offered, however, the sin(s) involved, committed in ignorance, had to be brought to the guilty person’s attention by others. Then, by offering a sacrifice, the guilty person acknowledged his or her actions as sinful. This acknowledgement through sacrifice for unintentional sin was required for leaders as well as common people (cf. Lev. 4:22-31).

This Old Covenant law is instructive in principle for us as New Covenant believers. We too may be guilty before we realize we have sinned, but when our sin is made known to us, repentance is required. This principle is evident in Jesus’ instructions in Matthew 18:15-17, in that additional witnesses, sometimes even the whole church, must seek to convince the offending person that he or she has sinned.

We want you to know that we have also repented of our former views on divorce and remarriage, though, similarly, we did not believe we were acting outside of God’s will at the time. Our wrong views resulted in errant counsel and likely convinced some people to disobey God—a serious and dangerous sin for those who teach the Bible and pastor churches (cf. James 3:1). Part of our sin was in the failure to go deep enough into the divorce/remarriage issue to find out the truth. It was not easy to come to this conclusion about our own culpability, but having been convinced by Scripture, we have willingly repented. Now we are asking prospective members who have acted sinfully with respect to divorce and/or remarriage to do the same.

Q: What about already-existing members who divorced and/or remarried wrongfully according to the permanence view, were received into membership before you arrived at your new position, yet still disagree with your view? Would you enact church discipline on the basis of your new position?

A: Along with the obligation to welcome new members in a manner that is consistent with our convictions, we have the competing obligation to honor the covenant into which we enter when a person becomes a member. In this case, the person has done nothing since becoming a member to break the membership covenant, and the bond of love with the church has grown strong. Breaking such a bond at this point, when no additional sins have been committed, would undoubtedly do more harm than good. Because of these factors, we intend to maintain unbroken fellowship with members who are in this situation, while holding strictly to our permanence stance in every other situation.

We hope that members in the above situation will study the permanence position carefully and prayerfully as they maintain a teachable spirit and pursue doctrinal unity (as all members agree to do in submitting to our membership agreement¹). Only if an already-existing member were to commit additional sin related to divorce and/or remarriage, or become divisive about doctrinal differences, would church discipline be considered.

Final Thoughts

We want to deal with each member and prospective member lovingly on this issue, and with grace. We realize that a new understanding of the sinfulness of past actions may be hard to receive and almost startling, especially if sincere efforts were made to obey God. We have struggled with a proper response to this dilemma, discussing various approaches of accommodation. We trust that all incoming members will realize that though we are conscience-bound, we will also empathize when discussing these matters. We will carefully work through the circumstances of the former divorce and/or remarriage in order to help the prospective member understand what the proper response(s) would be.

Fundamentally, we believe that with regard to membership, taking actions that are consistent with our convictions will be more helpful for the church, the kingdom of God as a whole, the culture around us, and even the individual seeking membership. The problem of discernment in this area, in our view, was not so common in the earliest churches. We believe first-century Christians would have understood the words of Jesus and Paul just as we are explaining them. We are regretful that the history of the church has brought us to the point where such issues produce misunderstanding and confusion. We participated in that more recent history ourselves. But having sought out, to the best of our ability, God's will about the matter from Scripture, we must now act in a manner that is consistent with our convictions. We fully believe that our actions will prevent divorces. Most importantly, by promoting marriage permanence in this way we will be valuing and honoring marriage the way Paul did in Ephesians 5:25-33 when he likened the relationship of a husband and wife to the relationship of Christ and His church.

Lastly, wrongful divorce and wrongful remarriage are forgivable sins. We hope every true believer will find comfort here, at the heart of our faith in Christ. When Jesus died for our sins, He did not neglect to atone for our misdeeds in this critical area. A person who has acted as wrongly as it is possible to act in this matter may be fully forgiven and may certainly have a fulfilled life of service to God. Furthermore, though a high percentage of second marriages fail, it is also astoundingly true that God mercifully blesses many that were started the wrong way. This is a mystery for which we can all be extremely grateful.

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¹ Our membership agreement may be viewed on our church's website at (http://www.christfellowshipkc.org/join_member_agreement.asp).