

CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

MARRIAGE WAS INSTITUTED BY GOD

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 fashioned woman and brought her to man. On seeing the woman, Adam exclaimed, **“This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man”** [Gen. 2:23]. This passage also emphasises 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].

NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING ABOUT MARRIAGE.

The New Testament does not contradict the teachings about marriage in the Old Testament. When Jesus was asked about marriage and divorce, He quoted two passages from Genesis. **“Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate”** [Gen. 1:27; 2:24; 5:2; Matt. 19:4-6]. Jesus reinforced the Old Testament concept that marriage was the joining together of two people by God, so they become **“one flesh.”**

In the marriage ceremony, in the presence of God, the man and woman take vows which are in fact a covenant commitment to each other for the rest of their lives. When this covenant vow is made in all honesty, God honours their commitment by making them **“one flesh.”** They are brought to one mind and one heart so that there is no friction between them.

DIVORCE – REACTIONS ON THE BASIS OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 19

The Pharisees came to Christ to test Him. They asked the question, **“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?”** This was the stand taken by the Hillelite Pharisees, who granted divorces for **“any matter”** - for any fault in the wife that displeased the husband.

Jesus replied, **“And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.”** [See also Matt 5:27-32, Mk 10:2-12, Lk 16:18]

Without making a careful study of Jesus’ reply, many churches and individual Christians have adopted a hard stand, saying that once a person has been divorced, guilty or not, they have been made an adulterer or adulteress, and that they may never marry again. In relationship to the truth presented by the whole bible, this narrow viewpoint has many inconsistencies.

* First and foremost it violates the character of God as a loving merciful Father, who readily forgives and restores those who turn to Him in humility and repentance. It is unthinkable for instance, that a woman who has suffered shocking physical abuse and then found relief through divorce, is forever deprived of the love and support of a Christian husband.

* To forever brand a divorced person as an adulterer or adulteress is to deny the forgiveness of God. This would make adultery and divorce unpardonable sins, and the bible clearly states that there is only one unpardonable sin. **“Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men.”** [Matt 12:31].

* The essence of forgiveness is to forget the existence of the sin. When we repent and turn to God, He puts our sins behind His back. [Isa 38:17]. This is vastly different to having a perpetual brand of being an adulterer, never to marry again. God’s forgiveness is shown in the case of King David. Not only did David commit adultery with Bathsheba, he also engineered her husband’s death

in the battle field so that he might marry her. When David repented with his whole heart he was forgiven. An evidence of his forgiveness was that God chose Solomon, the offspring of David and Bathsheba, to be the new king of Israel.

The irony of the situation is that by holding fast to the letter of the law, a woman could kill her husband, be forgiven, and be eligible to marry again. On the other hand, on the basis of the way some people interpret Jesus' reply, if she divorced her husband she would be an adulteress, and could never marry again.

* Jesus did not heap condemnation on the woman caught in adultery. He asked her, **“Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said to her, “Neither do I condemn you [to the judgment of stoning]; go and sin no more.”** [John 8:10-11].

* The relationship between God and Israel was likened to a marriage. When Israel broke the marriage covenant over and over again, God finally divorced her. **“Then I saw that for all the causes for which backsliding Israel had committed adultery, I had put her away and given her a certificate of divorce; yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but went and played the harlot also.”** [Jer 3:8].

One of the very basic problems of our handling of the issue of divorce is that we have failed to study the word of God carefully in its context and completeness.

Secondly, we have trusted English translations of the bible without referring back to the original Hebrew and Greek meanings to discover God's mind concerning divorce. We will attempt to make such a study of divorce in both the Old and New Testaments with the expectation that the inconsistencies above will no longer exist.

DIVORCE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Before commencing our Old Testament study, it is important to examine and compare the meanings of three Hebrew words. They are,

1. **‘Shalach’** Shalach occurs 901 times in the Old Testament. In almost all occasions in modern versions of the bible it is translated as **‘to send’ ‘to dispatch’ ‘to cast off’ or ‘to put away.’** On only four occasions is it translated as **‘to divorce.’** From this we may conclude that the normal translation of ‘shalach’ is **‘to send or put away’** rather than ‘divorce.’
2. **‘Kerituth’** Kerituth is **translated ‘divorce.’** It appears on only four occasions in three passages. It should be noted that **‘kerituth’** is always used with the Hebrew word **‘sepher,’** meaning ‘certificate.’ By comparison ‘sepher’ is never used with ‘shalach’ in any of the divorce passages. Here is an example of the use of the two words:

“When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favour in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her a bill (or certificate) of divorcement [SEPPER-KERITUTH], and give it in her hand, and send her out [SHALACH] of his house. And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's wife. And if the latter husband hate her, and write her a bill of divorcement [SEPPER-KERITUTH], and giveth it in her hand, and sendeth her out [SHALACH] of his house; or if the latter husband die, which took her to be his wife; Her former husband, which sent her away [SHALACH], may not take her again to be his wife, after that she is defiled; for that is abomination before the LORD: and thou shalt not cause the land to sin, which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance.” [Deut 24:1-4 (KJV)].

This reading shows us that the proper translation of ‘shalach is ‘to put away,’ and that the proper translation of ‘kerituth’ is ‘divorce.’ Much of the misconception concerning divorce comes from the fact that translators have translated ‘shalach’ as ‘divorce.’

When we read the above passage carefully, we discover that it was not divorce that was condemned, but the first husband remarrying the wife whom he had divorced. A certificate of divorcement was required to legally end the marriage covenant, so that the ‘sent out’ person could marry again.

Another Example of the Use of ‘Kerituth’

“And I saw that because faithless Israel had committed adultery, I had sent her away [SHALACH] and given her a certificate of divorce [SEPHER-KERITUTH]; yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear God and went and played the harlot also.” [Jer 3:8]. In this case God divorced Israel because she had broken the marriage covenant because of her harlotries. He did this as an example and warning to Judah.

3. ‘Garash’ Garash occurs 46 times in the Old Testament. Forty one times it is translated ‘to drive out’ or ‘evict,’ and only on four occasions is it translated ‘divorce.’ Again it should be apparent that the proper translation of ‘garash’ is ‘to drive out, or evict.’

OTHER MISTRANSLATIONS OF ‘DIVORCE’ IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Did God actually say, “I hate divorce”

“Yet you say, "For what reason?" Because the LORD has been witness between you and the wife of your youth, with whom you have dealt treacherously; yet she is your companion and your wife by covenant. But did He not make them one, having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly offspring. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth. For the LORD God of Israel says that He hates divorce [SHALACH - ‘to put away’], for it covers one's garment with violence," says the LORD of hosts. "Therefore take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously.” [Mal 2:14-16]

The word ‘shalach’ has been mistranslated. The real meaning is that God hates a husband to treat the wife of his youth [with whom he is in covenant] treacherously by putting her away, or casting her off, or deserting her.

Another Example

A man falsely accuses his wife of misconduct, and is found to be lying by the elders. This is what follows: **“Then the elders of that city shall take that man and punish him; and they shall fine him one hundred shekels of silver and give them to the father of the young woman, because he has brought a bad name on a virgin of Israel. And she shall be his wife; he cannot divorce [SHALACH-‘to put away’] her all his days.”** [Deut 22:18-19] Again it is the treacherous ‘putting away or casting off’ an innocent party that is condemned.

DIVORCE IN THE GOSPELS

The New Testament is basically consistent with the Old Testament in its attitude to putting away and divorce. Again there are two basic words used, and as in the Old Testament, they have been mistranslated.

The Hebrew word ‘shallach’ for ‘**putting away**’ has its Greek equivalent ‘**APPOLUO.**’

The Hebrew word ‘kerituth’ for ‘**divorce**’ has its Greek equivalent in ‘**APOSTASION.**’

Now let us see how Christ used these two words. He starts by quoting from Deut 24:1-4.

“Furthermore it has been said, ‘Whoever divorces [APPOLUO - to put away] his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce [APOSTASION - divorce].’ But I say to you that whoever divorces [APPOLUO - to put away] his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her

to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced [APPOLUO - put away] commits adultery.” [Matt 5:31-32]

Correctly translated, it can be seen that Christ is speaking about casting off or putting away a marriage partner - not a legal divorce. We will now see if the second account in Matthew 19 is consistent.

“The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce [APOLUO - put away] his wife for just any reason?" And He answered and said to them, "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate." They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce [APOSTASION - divorce], and to put her away [APOLUO]?" He said to them, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce [APOLUO -put away] your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces [APOLUO - puts away] his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced [APPOLUO -put away] commits adultery.” [Matt 19:3-9].

Firstly, let us examine the context of this passage. The Pharisees were divided in their interpretation of the laws of divorce.

The Hillelite Pharisees granted divorces for ‘any matter,’ - for any fault in the wife that displeased the husband.

The Shammaite Pharisees allowed divorce only on the grounds of sexual immorality.

The vast majority of divorces granted at that time were from the Hillelite Pharisees, because they were easier to obtain. But because of the dissension between the two groups, they now wanted Jesus to arbitrate. In the face of so many divorces granted for **“just any reason,”** Jesus’ answer would come as a shock. His reply was a bold reinforcement of the idea that marriage was supposed to be a lifelong covenant commitment of two people to each other. Now let us look at the passage in detail.

The Pharisees asked this question: Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for just any reason?

Jesus’ Answer: No! What God intended is that marriage should be a lifelong union.

The Pharisees asked a further question: Why then did Moses command them to give a certificate of divorce and then put the wife away? [Deut 24:1].

Jesus’ answer: First of all He corrected them by changing **“Moses command”** to **“Moses permitted.”** Putting away was permitted because of their hard hearts [they had a hardness of heart towards making a lifelong covenant commitment to their wives].

In the Old Testament, Moses [and therefore God], permitted them to put away their wives. But this had to be accompanied by a certificate of divorce for the protection of the wife. Otherwise she could never marry again. But Christ was responding to ‘putting away’ rather than the certificate of divorce.

‘Putting away’ the wife was the real sin, as it was a breaking of the marriage covenant. The certificate of divorce was a legal acknowledgment that the marriage covenant was broken, and that the parties were no longer bound to it. The certificate of divorce also allowed the wife to marry again without committing adultery. Both divorce and remarrying were permitted in the Old Testament.

Repetition for emphasis: Jesus emphasised His stand by saying, **“And I say to you, whoever divorces [APOLUO - puts away] his wife, except for sexual immorality [Gk: “*porneia*” - harlotry, adultery, fig: idolatry], and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced [APPOLUO -put away] commits adultery.” [Matt 19:3-9].**

Remember that the Hillelite Pharisees allowed a man to divorce his wife **“for just any reason.”** Jesus responded by saying that it was unlawful for anyone to put away his wife [or break his marriage covenant] except on the grounds of adultery. It follows that any certificate of divorce granted ‘for just any reason’ was invalid, and consequently, marrying a put away person who was not legally divorced was adultery, because she was still married.

Again we stress that it is the ‘putting off,’ or breaking the marriage covenant, which causes the illegality. Jesus did not condemn divorce in itself, nor people who remarried after a legitimate divorce. That was the main purpose of the Jewish divorce certificate, which contained the words “You may go and be married to any man you wish.”

OTHER GROUNDS FOR DIVORCE

Christ’s answer was framed in a manner that would answer the query of the Hillelite and Shammaite Pharisees – ‘could a man divorce his wife for just any reason.’ No other grounds were mentioned, and so they were not included in His answer.

There are other legitimate grounds for divorce. Paul, for instance, said that if an unbelieving partner wanted to separate, the believing partner could let him or her depart, and no longer be bound to the marriage vows. [1Cor 7:15].

Other grounds for divorce are listed in Jewish divorce laws in Exodus 21. **“If he takes another wife, he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, and her marriage rights. And if he does not do these three for her, then she shall go out free, without paying money.”** [Exod 21:10-11].

We may gain a better understanding of the grounds for divorce if we fully understand the nature of covenant, which is a lifelong commitment to each other with the seal of God on it. When the marriage covenant is violated and is irrevocably broken, God’s seal of approval is removed.

PAUL’S TEACHING ABOUT MARRIAGE, SEPARATION, & DIVORCE

Paul’s First Instruction

“Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband. But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce [APHIEMI - another Greek word meaning to put away] his wife.” [1 Cor 7:10-12].

This instruction expresses the Lord’s desire that a marriage be a permanent relationship. Rather than the modern practice of trying it out, or entering into marriage with doubtful expectations, the couple should make a complete commitment to a lifetime relationship. In the above reading, the man and woman are instructed not to separate from each other; but if they do, it should not be for the purpose of remarrying, but a ‘cooling off’ time leading to reconciliation.

Paul’s Second Instruction

This concerns the case of a believer married to an unbeliever. **“But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce [APHIEMI - put away] her. And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce [APHIEMI] him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy.”** [1 Cor 7:12-14]. The believing partner is obliged to maintain the marriage relationship as long as the unbelieving partner is willing to do so.

Paul recognised that an unbelieving partner may not have the same commitment to the marriage relationship and want to depart. His instruction was, **“But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to**

peace.” [1 Cor 7:15]. Paul declares that, having done all to maintain a proper marriage relationship, the believer is released from bondage to the relationship when the unbeliever departs.

The crucial question is, what is the nature of the bondage the believer is released from? Two further verses in this chapter shed light on the issue.

- **“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].
- **“Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released from her. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek another wife. But if you should marry, YOU HAVE NOT SINNED.”** [1 Cor 7:27-28].

SUMMARISING PAUL’S INSTRUCTIONS

A believer has the responsibility of making a total commitment to a marriage relationship. If an unbeliever desires to sever the relationship, the believing partner may comply for the sake of peace. The believing partner is no longer bound to the marriage covenant, and is free to be legally divorced. Paul recommends that he or she does not marry again, but if they do it is not a sin. **“...if you should marry, YOU HAVE NOT SINNED.”** Paul declared that it is not a sin to divorce and remarry.

In summing up the whole question of marriage and divorce as it is disclosed in the Old and New Testaments, we may conclude the following.

The Old Testament laws of marriage and divorce, and the teaching of Christ and Paul, permit divorce and remarrying.

A properly constituted divorce is not a sin, as it legally ends a marriage covenant that has already been broken. This paves the way for the injured party to marry again without committing adultery. The real sin is in the ‘putting away,’ or breaking the marriage covenant in the first place.

Even though divorce and remarrying on the right grounds are permissible, our overall dedication should be to the marriage - on entering into a lifelong covenant commitment to the marriage relationship in the sight of God.

THE HOLY SPIRIT IS OUR GUIDE

The principles of God’s moral laws are unchangeable, but the circumstances confronting each individual case are different. God has clearly expressed His will that marriage should be undertaken as a lifelong covenant commitment. But unfortunately in some cases the marriage covenant is irretrievably broken by one of the partners. The bottom line is this; the moral precepts of God’s law are our guide, but are not meant to enslave us. Paul tells us that we have been set free from the power of the law to rigidly bind us to its every letter.

“But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held [captive] by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter.” [Rom 7:6].

“[O]ur sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” [2 Cor 3:5-6].

Being set free from the letter of the law does not mean that we are free to make up our own minds. It means that we now have the Holy Spirit to guide us in ascertaining the will of the Lord in our individual circumstances.