

17. Marriage and divorce

WCF chapter 24 *Modern Language version – 1993 – OPC*

1. Marriage is to be between one man and one woman. It is not lawful for any man to have more than one wife, or for any woman to have more than one husband, at the same time.

2. Marriage was ordained for the mutual help of husband and wife, for the increase of mankind with legitimate offspring and of the church with godly children, and for the prevention of sexual immorality.

3. It is lawful for all sorts of people to marry who are able to give their intelligent consent. Yet it is the duty of Christians to marry only in the Lord. Therefore, those who profess the true reformed religion should not marry unbelievers, Roman Catholics, or other idolaters; nor should Christians be unequally yoked by marrying those who are notoriously wicked in their way of living or hold to damnable heresies.

4. Marriage ought not to take place between persons who are within the degrees of close relationship by blood or by marriage forbidden by the Word. Such incestuous marriages can never be made lawful—so that such persons may live together as man and wife—by any law of man or by the consent of the parties involved.

God's ways: good... sometimes painful... always gracious

Defining marriage – see Genesis 2:24

One man and one woman
Permanent, public, physical union

vs. polygamy/polyandry
vs. unbiblical divorce

The purpose of marriage

Help/support – Genesis 2:18
Reproduction (if possible) – Genesis 1:28
Godly offspring/"seed" – Malachi 2:15
Sexual relations – 1 Cor. 7:2,9

Whom should Christians marry?

Any single adult can be married – don't need to be a Christian to be in a God-given marriage covenant – Malachi 2:14, 1 Timothy 4:3

Marrying in the Lord, not unequally yoked – 1 Cor. 7:39, 2 Cor. 6:14

vs. Solomon – 1 Kings 11:4 (also Neh. 13:25-27, Mal. 2:11-12)

Pray for and seek a spouse who is a committed Christian in a church that loves the gospel.

Relationships illegitimate because of bloodline...

E.g. Amos 2:7, 1 Cor. 5:1 (in the church!), Mark 6:18 (Herod etc)

5. Adultery or fornication committed after engagement, if detected before marriage, gives valid reason to the innocent party to break the engagement. In the case of adultery after marriage it is lawful for the innocent party to seek a divorce and after the divorce to remarry just as if the offending party were dead.

6. Although the corruption of mankind is such that people are apt to seek arguments to justify unwarranted separation of those whom God has joined together in marriage, nothing but adultery or such willful desertion as cannot be remedied by the church or the civil authorities is sufficient cause to dissolve the bond of marriage. In such cases a public and orderly procedure is to be observed, and the persons concerned are not to be left to their own wills and discretion in their own case.

Adultery, desertion, divorce and remarriage

Painful... but real

Sexual sin → legitimate reason to break engagement

Adultery and desertion → legitimate reason for innocent party to divorce and remarry

(NB. "desertion" includes different forms of spousal abuse – i.e. it is possible to abandon a spouse without physically leaving them)

As if "dead"

Danger: arguments to justify unwarranted separation

Public and orderly procedure

(See separate paper on divorce and remarriage, Appendix below)

Whole Bible...

Creation: God's plan for marriage – Gen 2:24

Moses: dealing with the reality of sin – Deut. 24:1-4

Exiles: illegitimate divorce – Mal. 2:14-16

Jesus: see disciples' response... & exception – Matt 19:3f

Paul: don't separate... & exception – 1 Cor. 7:10f

Applying the Bible...

Humility... respect... caution

* Our experiences shape us more than we realise *

We have an ever-faithful divine husband...

Personal response: for what should we give thanks... confess... pray?

Next week: The church and the communion of saints

APPENDIX: THINKING BIBLICALLY ABOUT DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

INTRODUCTION

Why must we think about divorce and remarriage? Simply, because both the Bible and real life require us to.

This is a deeply difficult area and almost everyone is touched by it in some way. Many people are hurting, both within and outside of the church. Plus, an encounter with God's Word can painfully expose sin (ours and others'). Additionally, some relevant Bible texts are hard to understand and are interpreted differently among Bible-believing Christians. And of course God's standards clash sharply with our culture in which fidelity and marriage are often cheapened.

But it matters greatly to God that Christian people think and live Biblically in our relationships. Our attitude to marriage speaks volumes. It says something about...

- *God* (he is holy and faithful – but will we copy him in our relationships?),
- *the Gospel* (marriage pictures the relationship between Christ and the church – but will we live this out?),
- *true discipleship* (Jesus is worth following whatever the cost – but will we value him above all else?).

In this paper we aim to listen carefully to God's words in both Old Testament and New Testament, before asking a key theological question and setting out some conclusions.

What follows is lengthy, sometimes a little complicated and for some may make for painful reading. May I encourage you persist in reading (especially the Bible passages, which are reproduced below in full), thinking and praying. If you have questions or concerns, please raise them.

Life can be extremely complicated (and our heavenly Father knows this full well). Nevertheless, as pastor of Immanuel Church Brentwood it is my deep desire that we each know and feel the all-sufficiency, ruling authority and deep goodness of God's Word for every corner of life.

1. KEY OLD TESTAMENT PASSAGES ON DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

What does each stage in the Old Testament's story have to say about divorce and remarriage? Here we listen to God's Word given in creation, in the law of Moses, in the prophets, and to the returned exiles.

(a) Creation: God's plan for marriage

In the beginning ***God made humanity male and female***. Our gender differences are God-given, deep, pre-date the fall, and are to be understood and celebrated however much western culture seeks to undermine them. We read:

^{ESV} Genesis 1:27, So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

God gives the gift of marriage. It is a ***public, permanent and physical union of one man and one woman***. No other sort of relationship can be a "marriage" (e.g. same-sex "marriage" is an impossibility). This creation pattern is the foundation for the whole Bible's teaching on marriage and is affirmed explicitly in the New Testament by both Jesus and the apostle Paul. We read:

^{ESV} Genesis 2:24, Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

(b) The Law of Moses: dealing with the reality of sin

Sin destroys relationships – both our relationship with God and with each other. Ever since the fall our marriages have been ravaged by sin. The law of Moses – given by God at Mount Sinai to the people he has graciously rescued from slavery in Egypt – understands this full well.

Adultery is treated with the utmost seriousness. For the Old Testament people of God it was a capital crime, of equivalent seriousness to idolatry. The death penalty was the result in both cases. Whilst the new covenant does not

prescribe death for adultery we do nevertheless learn that God hates a spouse's infidelity as much as he hates false worship. It has the most serious consequences, and the whole nation needs to be protected from its effects. We read:

^{ESV} Leviticus 20:10, "If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.

^{ESV} Deuteronomy 22:22, "If a man is found lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman, and the woman. So you shall purge the evil from Israel.

The **law of Moses does make provision for divorce**. From Deuteronomy 24 (see below) we learn that divorce will happen even among the redeemed people of God. Jesus tells us in the New Testament that this is on account of our hard and sinful hearts.

But **divorce is not commanded here or anywhere in the Bible**. This statement is so important that it bears repeating. Divorce is *never* commanded anywhere in the Bible. In the law of Moses it is simply described ("When... if... then") and its consequences are regulated in order to provide order and protection (mainly for the sake of women). Thus we read:

^{ESV} Deuteronomy 24:1-4, "When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, ² and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, ³ and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife, ⁴ then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the LORD. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance.

What was **the ground for divorce in Moses' law**? It is what Deuteronomy 24:1 calls "some indecency." This is a difficult Hebrew phrase which literally means "the nakedness of a thing."

But what does it mean? It cannot mean adultery, for in the event of adultery what followed was death (or, in the case of someone like King David, gracious forgiveness), not a certificate of divorce. So, "some indecency" must mean an extremely serious matter that falls short of adultery. (By Jesus' day this phrase had become used as a get-out clause among some of the Jews.)

We learn too that a divorced and re-married woman was not permitted to re-marry her first husband. Such sin defiled both the woman and the land as a whole.

(c) The prophets: spiritual adultery and spiritual divorce

The ongoing story of the Old Testament is in many ways a depressing one. God's people evidence declining trust and obedience. And in the prophets God uses the same words to describe spiritual unfaithfulness as he does to describe unfaithfulness in marriage. He doesn't mince his words. **Worshipping other gods is adultery, treachery and whoring**. We read:

^{ESV} Jeremiah 3:8-10, She saw that for all the adulteries of that faithless one, Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce. Yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but she too went and played the whore. ⁹ Because she took her whoredom lightly, she polluted the land, committing adultery with stone and tree. ¹⁰ Yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah did not return to me with her whole heart, but in pretense, declares the LORD."

^{ESV} Hosea 2:2-5, "Plead with your mother, plead- for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband- that she put away her whoring from her face, and her adultery from between her breasts; ³ lest I strip her naked and make her as in the day she was born, and make her like a wilderness, and make her like a parched land, and kill her with thirst. ⁴ Upon her children also I will have no mercy, because they are children of whoredom. ⁵ For their mother has played the whore; she who conceived them has acted shamefully. For she said, 'I will go after my lovers, who give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink.'

Behind the deep grief and anger of the Lord at his people's persistent sin we see **the heart of a betrayed husband**. For, in binding his people to himself in covenant the Lord is a supremely faithful spouse who calls his bride to respond

in total fidelity. Human marriage and divine marriage are mirror images of one another (a point which the apostle Paul will make crystal clear in Ephesians 5:21-33, where human marriages are said to be copies of the relationship between Christ and his church. And in the words of the prophets Jeremiah and Hosea we see that **the Lord divorces his people on account of their infidelity**. These are terrifying words.

(d) The returning exiles: hard hearts and the seriousness of divorce

Despite their sin, the Lord rescues a remnant of his people from Babylon where he had exiled them on account of their sin. And he kindly restores them to the promised land. But the returned exiles are no more faithful than their forefathers. They failed to love God and they failed to love their neighbour.

Marital sin was part of this bleak picture, which showed just how much they needed the new covenant promise of total cleansing and inward transformation. On the one hand men abandoned the wives of their youth, and on the other they married unbelieving women from among the nations.

What is the human response to this situation? **Those convicted of their sin resolved to divorce and remove their pagan wives and the offspring of those unions**. We read:

^{ESV} Ezra 10:3, Therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God, and let it be done according to the Law.

This passage has been understood in two different ways. Some have thought this was a commendable practice. Others have thought the motivation was commendable, but that its practical outworking was faulty (in that a marriage cannot simply be undone and such treatment of women and children is unloving). The Biblical text simply describes the incident and offers no comment. In the light of 1 Corinthians 7:13 we know that **divorcing an unbeliever on account of their failure to believe contradicts the will of God**.¹

But God's response to marital sin among the returned exiles is very clear. Thus we read:

^{ESV} Malachi 2:14-16, But you say, "Why does he not?" Because the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. ¹⁵ Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth. ¹⁶ "For the man who hates and divorces, says the LORD, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless."

We learn here that **marriage is a covenant**. Later on we discuss the nature of that covenant. For now it is enough to note that it is: "... a sacred bond between a man and a woman, instituted by and publicly entered into before God (whether or not this is acknowledged by the married couple), normally consummated by sexual intercourse" (Andreas Kostenberger, *God, marriage and family*, p91).

Further, we learn that **God is witness to the marriage covenant**. Indeed, **God creates the marriage union** ("did he not make them one?"). His command is clear: **don't be faithless**. Divorce is horrific. It is like murder or violence.²

2. KEY NEW TESTAMENT PASSAGES ON DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

(a) Jesus' teaching

Jesus' words about this issue are recorded in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. It is worth recording and reading all these words in full:

^{ESV} Matthew 5:31-32, "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'³² But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery. And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

¹ For a brief note on how best to understand Ezra 10 see D.A. Carson's comments in *For the love of God*, online at: <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/loveofgod/2014/01/10/genesis-11-matthew-10-ezra-10-acts-10-3/>

² The Hebrew of Malachi 3:16 is hard to translate. The NIV translation renders God the subject: i.e. "I hate divorce...".

^{ESV} Matthew 19:3-12, And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?"⁴ He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female,⁵ and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh?'⁶ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."⁷ They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?"⁸ He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so."⁹ And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery."¹⁰ The disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry."¹¹ But he said to them, "Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given."¹² For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it."

^{ESV} Mark 10:1-12, And he left there and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan, and crowds gathered to him again. And again, as was his custom, he taught them.² And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"³ He answered them, "What did Moses command you?"⁴ They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away."⁵ And Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment.⁶ But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.'⁷ 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife,⁸ and they shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh.⁹ What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."¹⁰ And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter.¹¹ And he said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her,¹² and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

^{ESV} Luke 16:18, "Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery."

Firstly, ***Jesus affirms the pattern of marriage that is given by God in creation.*** This is highly significant, for it tells us that God's plan for human relationships is constant across Old and New Testaments. There is not a new "ethic" for human relationships given under the new covenant.

Secondly, ***Jesus affirms the law of Moses, but shows its true meaning and implications.*** Always, in his treatment of the law, he deepens and intensifies the law's demands ("but I say to you...").³ Jesus basic point here is call to pursue faithfulness and renounce divorce. His basic warning is that *remarriage following divorce leads to adultery.*

In a moment we will consider any exceptions to this rule. But for now we need to hear and feel Jesus' deep and repeated words. He loves faithfulness and he hates divorce. *Remarriage following divorce leads to adultery.* The actions of a human court cannot undo what God has established.

In fact, divorce creates a growing web of adultery. The divorcing party makes his wife commit adultery (Matthew 5:32 – note the assumption that a divorced woman would almost certainly have to marry in order to survive in first century Jewish culture). Whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery (Matthew 5:32). Whoever divorces and remarries is themselves guilty of adultery, be they male or female (Matthew 19:9, Mark 10:11-21, Luke 16:18).

Thirdly, ***Jesus' discussions with the Pharisees show that the human heart always wants to diminish the demands of God's law and to increase our own sense of self-righteousness.***

The background to Jesus' conversations with the Pharisees seems to have been a widely known dispute between two groups of rabbis (followers of Shammai and Hillel, respectively) who disagreed about the meaning of Deuteronomy 24:1 and the basis for a legitimate divorce. Some thought that "indecent" had a very narrow meaning, whilst others a very broad meaning (e.g. "for any cause", Matthew 19:3, even burning a husband's dinner!).

Jesus' corrects the hearts and the practices of them all (just as he seeks to correct our hearts and practices too). He points out that they have twisted God's Word in the Old Testament. They believed that God "commanded" divorce, when he only "allowed" it on account of the sinfulness of their hearts (Matthew 19:7-8). Jesus' basic and repeated point is simply that this goes against God's creation pattern. Don't separate what God has joined. *Remarriage following divorce leads to adultery.*

³ At the same time Jesus seems to lessen the penalty for law-breaking: the correct response to adultery is no longer death.

Fourthly, **Jesus does allow for an exception.** The exception given in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 is “sexual immorality.” The logic seems to be that in this case the wronged party may divorce and remarry legitimately.⁴

But what is “sexual immorality”? The Greek word is *porneia*, (from which we derive the word “pornography”). There are two options as to its meaning and significance:

- In the New Testament it is used as a broad term for sexual sin, including adultery. On this basis divorce and remarriage is permitted following adultery.
- It can have a much narrower meaning and is different to the usual word for adultery (which is *moicheia*). On this basis it speaks only of fornication during betrothal (which is the situation in view with Joseph and Mary in Matthew 1:19) or of incest (which is the situation in 1 Corinthians 5:1).

Reformed and evangelical Christians take different views on the meaning and significance of this word. The majority of interpreters over the last several hundred years favours the former opinion. However, we should not rush to that conclusion and must note the strengths and weaknesses of both arguments.

Fifthly, **Jesus’ standards for marriage are exceedingly high and some may conclude that it is better never to marry.** This is what Jesus’ disciples in thought (Matthew 19:10-12). They listened as the Pharisees’ shoddy standards were exposed and they had their own hearts searched by Jesus’ teaching. And they concluded that “it is better not to marry.” Their response shows that Jesus taught the sanctity of marriage in the most profound way. Jesus partly agrees with their conclusion – different people are indeed called to a single life for a variety of reasons. But he adds – encouragingly! – that those who do marry will be enabled (by God) to receive and abide by His teaching.

(b) The apostle Paul’s teaching

Like Jesus, Paul affirms the creation pattern of marriage (e.g. in Ephesians 5:31). For him the marriage union is doubly sacred because it is **a picture of the relationship between Christ and his church** (Ephesians 5:22-33). We read:

^{ESV} Ephesians 5:22-33, Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. ²⁸ In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, ³⁰ because we are members of his body. ³¹ "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." ³² This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. ³³ However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

Thus, in the ordinary run of things **only death releases a person from the law of marriage.** We read:

^{ESV} Romans 7:1-3, Or do you not know, brothers - for I am speaking to those who know the law - that the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives? ² Thus a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage. ³ Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.

The bulk of Paul’s teaching on marriage, divorce and remarriage occurs in 1 Corinthians 7. His starting point is clear: **don’t separate – if you do separate stay unmarried or be reconciled. Don’t divorce.** We read:

^{ESV} 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband ¹¹ (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.

⁴ In Mark 10:1-12 and Luke 16:18 there is no exception. We do not know why. The context and purpose of the passage in Mark 10 is probably significant. It indicates that in this particular interaction with the Pharisees Jesus wanted to emphasise their low standards and God’s almost infinitely high standards of holiness, in order to reinforce the truth that salvation is given to those who come to Jesus with empty and grateful hands (and not to those who twist God’s word, look to test Jesus, and approach him with an almost palpable sense of entitlement).

Paul then considers the situation of believers who are married to unbelievers. Thus far he's considered "believing" marriages; now he turns to consider "the rest" – i.e. the "mixed" marriage was well known in the Corinthian church, just as it is in the church of today.

Paul's message is to **live with your non-believing spouse if they will live with you**. Their lack of faith in Jesus is not a reason for divorce. After all, the believing spouse makes the unbeliever (and any children) "holy." This doesn't mean that they are saved (yet), but it does mean they are set apart and in a different place to the spouse and children of an unbeliever; at very least they are in a brilliant situation in which to hear the gospel and see it lived out. Thus:

^{ESV} 1 Corinthians 7:12-16, To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. ¹³ If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. ¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. ¹⁵ But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. ¹⁶ Wife, how do you know whether you will save your husband? Husband, how do you know whether you will save your wife?

But what if a believer is deserted by their unbelieving spouse? This is what is in view in verse 15. **If deserted by an unbelieving spouse Paul's instruction is to "let it be so."** In this situation the believer "is not enslaved." At very least this seems to mean that the deserted believer is not obliged to keep on fighting to preserve the marriage.

But does verse 15 imply anything more? Specifically, **does "not enslaved" mean free to re-marry?** There are two options as to the meaning and significance of this term:

- It could mean "not enslaved to singleness, and therefore free to marry." This interpretation assumes that the word "enslaved" in v15 (*douloō*) means the same as "bound" (*deo*) in v27 and v39, the latter term clearly implying legal freedom to marry.
- It could mean "not enslaved to stay in the failing marriage" – but with no possibility of remarriage implied. This interpretation assumes that the words for "enslaved" and "bound" have significantly different meanings, and that if Paul had meant to give a legal freedom to the deserted party he would have used a more appropriate word in v15.

Reformed and evangelical Christians take different views on the meaning and significance of this word. The majority of interpreters over the last several hundred years favours the former opinion. We should try not to rush to conclusions and note the strengths and weaknesses of both arguments.

One important additional note must be made. Tragically, some people find themselves the victims of spousal abuse (in various and terrible forms). The Lord hates such sin. The victims of such abuse need the love and help of the church. Biblically, they should be regarded as having been deserted (i.e. it is possible to desert a spouse without physically leaving the home or marriage).

The apostle Paul goes on to talk about the situation of the "betrothed." Engagement or "betrothal" was a much more significant feature of 1st century life (and Old Testament life) than it is today. **His words to the engaged aren't directly relevant to our discussion of divorce and remarriage.** However, we will briefly note them here because some mis-translations of these verses make them appear otherwise. We read:

^{ESV} 1 Corinthians 7:25-28, Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. ²⁶ I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is. ²⁷ Are you bound to a wife [literally, "a woman"]? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife ["woman"]? Do not seek a ["woman"]. ²⁸ But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned. Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that.

Here the word "betrothed" is the Greek word *parthenoi*, which simply means "virgins." Paul is talking to those unmarried who are engaged. He is addressing those who are bound to a "woman" (the word for "woman" and "wife" is the same; almost certainly it is "woman" that Paul has in mind in v27). He advises them to remain in their current state, but pursuing marriage is not sinful – although it does bring what Paul calls "worldly troubles."

Lastly, Paul teaches that **death brings freedom to remarry (although the new spouse must be a believer)**. Yet, Paul would counsel a widow or widower to **be cautious in looking to remarry**. We read:

^{ESV} 1 Corinthians 7:39-40, A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. ⁴⁰ Yet in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God.

3. THE KEY THEOLOGICAL QUESTION: WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE MARRIAGE COVENANT?

Having surveyed the teaching of many individual Old and New Testament texts we have built up a picture of what God thinks about marriage, divorce and remarriage. In forming our mind on this subject – as with any – we want the text of the Bible to drive us.

It is important, also, to connect together big Bible truths and draw out theological statements and implications. This is the job of systematic theology (and ethics). This may sound a little highbrow or irrelevant. But we all have a theological framework in our minds whether we like it or not; the only question is whether it is a Biblical one or not.

The chief theological or systematic question is: what is the nature of the marriage covenant? There are three options.

Firstly, ***is it merely a voluntary contract formed by human will alone?*** Is making and terminating a marriage covenant no different to changing where you do your grocery shopping or switching your phone provider? No real Christian would think of marriage in this way. But it is increasingly the prevailing view of the culture in which we live.

Secondly, ***is marriage a covenant that can never be dissolved by human hands?*** Is it akin to the process of baking a cake, wherein ingredients (eggs, flour, etc.) are combined in such a way that they can never again be separated? Some godly Christians hold to this indissolubilist view, believing God gives a married couple a oneness that no human being can ever destroy. John Piper and Andrew Cornes would be modern exponents of this view.

Thirdly, ***is marriage a covenant that can be dissolved in certain circumstances?*** Is it akin to building a house, wherein materials (bricks, timber, etc.) are joined together in such a way that they can be separated, albeit with extreme difficulty? Some godly Christians hold to this view. They include most in the historic Reformed tradition, including Martin Luther, John Calvin and the Puritan author's of the Westminster Confession of Faith (See Appendix A).

Deciding between the 2nd and 3rd of these options is actually extremely hard. This difficulty indicates the extent to which we ought to proceed with caution.

One key theological concept that has been debated is the idea of *covenantal death*. Since all agree that death ends marriage, are there other "deaths" than physical? Luther, for example, believed that the state should still put adulterers to death and that, if they were permitted to live, they should be "considered as one dead" and the innocent party "remarry just as though his spouse had died, if it is his intention to insist on his rights and not show mercy to the guilty party" (Martin Luther, "The estate of marriage"). The Westminster Confession, similarly, regarded the innocent party as free "to marry another, as if the offending the party were dead" (WCF, XXIV.VI). How do we evaluate this idea? It is hard to judge whether this is a legitimate inference. After all, the fact remains that God alone makes and breaks marriages, and he chooses to use *physical* death to terminate a marriage union.

Others appeal to the Old Testament example of God "divorcing" his unfaithful people as an example of a covenant that can actually and legitimately be terminated. How do we evaluate this idea? It is hard to judge whether this it is relevant. After all, not all God's dealings with his people are to be copied by us (some are, some aren't). Plus, the New Testament would seem to speak of an unbreakable covenant relationship between Christ and his church.

4. SUMMARY AND APPLICATION

(a) How do we move forward?

All real Christians would unite around almost all that we have said thus far. But, there are a few very significant points where **Reformed evangelicals disagree**, not least over the meaning of those two Greek words *porneia* ("sexual immorality") and *douloō* ("enslaved"), and over whether a marriage covenant can ever actually be broken by man.

The very fact of this disagreement should encourage **humility** (some of the wisest and most godly disagree), **respect** (for those with whom we disagree), and **caution** (moving slowly toward practical conclusions). How then should we proceed as we do move toward conclusion and application? Here are two encouragements:

Firstly, we will want to acknowledge that **our experiences shape us far more than we realise**. If we were reading our Bibles in a culture that had little or no experience of divorce it is highly likely that we would “feel” differently about the sections of God’s Word which we have surveyed above.

Secondly, we will want to resolve to **follow God’s Word wherever it leads us**. We don’t want to be as liberal as possible. Nor do we want to be as conservative as possible. We want to be as Biblical as possible. So we pray for the Spirit’s help in understanding, obeying, and in helping one another believe and live out the standards of God’s Word.

The truth of God’s Word and the love of God’s people have a vital role here. We believe that God is holy and gracious, the Bible is good, we are infinitely loved by Jesus, and an eternity with the Lord means that our earthly lives (whether single, married, or divorced) are extremely short. Yet, human loneliness is a terrible thing and the world around us shouts that unless we’re in a sexual relationship then we are somehow sub-human. So, will we *all* join in the work of speaking gospel truth and of showing loving care to one another? Will we *all* be honest in admitting our own sin and brokenness, and in seeking to live a life of holiness that prizes Christ more than anything else?

(b) Implications for me as pastor of Immanuel Church Brentwood

I am called to pastor God’s people at Immanuel as truthfully and lovingly as possible. As I again have studied the Bible’s teaching on divorce and remarriage I find myself, on balance, coming to agree with the mainstream Reformed position articulated best by the Westminster Confession of Faith (see Appendix A, below). This permits a Christian to legitimately divorce and remarry in the event of adultery or desertion (and only in these circumstances). At the same time, I must be honest and say that the Biblical evidence which we have surveyed above makes me cautious in coming to this conclusion; I greatly respect those who adopt an “indissolubilist” position. In practice I can foresee a situation in which I would be willing to conduct a Christian marriage service for a person divorced in these circumstances, though would not be willing to do so either in haste or without a lengthy period of honest reflection and preparation on the part of the couple. (See Appendix B for the kind of reflection which is called for in these circumstances).

(c) Implications for all those called to pastoral care and leadership at Immanuel

All those in positions of leadership at Immanuel are called to watch their own lives and doctrine closely, and to pastor God’s people in accord with His Word. This means that we’re to pray for church members; to search the Scriptures and grow in our understanding of the Bible as it teaches us on this and many other difficult issues; and to speak the truth in love, seeking God’s glory and others’ good before our own comfort.

(d) Implications for church members

Those who have **never married** (including children) will want to resolve now, with God’s help, to close the door on divorce in the event that they should ever marry. In this event they’ll want to marry wisely – seeking a mature believer with whom they can live out God’s pattern of headship and submission. The whole church family will want to love and encourage single people, particularly those who are unable to marry.

Married couples are called to fidelity, to daily forgiveness, and to give themselves afresh to Christ and to one another. In particular, we are to do all we can to prevent divorce ever happening.

Those **who are divorced and single** need the love and care of the whole church family. Trusted friends must be available to come alongside while they grieve, (where necessary) repent, to respond Christianly to past hurts, to help them through painful transitions, to listen, and to speak God’s truth in love. Hard as it may be to hear, some divorced people are called by God to a life of singleness. For some, remarriage is biblically permissible, though should only be pursued with caution.

Those **who have divorced and remarried illegitimately** are called to acknowledge that the marriage was a mistake, even as they thank God for the good they have received in their second union. Should that second marriage be dissolved? Certainly not. Firstly, this would be to compound evils. Secondly, this is *not* an unforgiveable sin, although the consequences of some sins simply cannot be undone by us in our lifetimes. Thirdly, even a covenant that should not have been made involves significant promises which are to be honoured and the union is to be sanctified to God. While not the ideal, committing faithfully to that second marriage is God’s will for a couple and ongoing sexual relations should not be considered adulterous.

(e) Lastly...

Marriage is precious. God’s standards for married people are extremely high. Divorce and remarriage within the church family should be extremely rare. Bringing true pastoral care to people in difficult circumstances will become increasingly common, as men and women are converted out of an increasingly post-Christian culture.

Marriage is ultimately *not* about sex, friendship, help, childbearing. It is about displaying to the world the covenant-keeping love of Christ for his church. This is what we are all called to speak of and display, whatever our situation, for in Christ we have a divine husband who loves to give the grace, mercy and life that we *all* so desperately need.

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APPENDIX 1: WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH (1646) - CHAPTER XXIV - OF MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

I. Marriage is to be between one man and one woman: neither is it lawful for any man to have more than one wife, nor for any woman to have more than one husband; at the same time.(a)

(a) Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:5, 6; Prov. 2:17.

II. Marriage was ordained for the mutual help of husband and wife,(b) for the increase of mankind with a legitimate issue, and of the Church with an holy seed;(c) and for preventing of uncleanness.(d)

(b) Gen. 2:18.

(c) Mal. 2:15.

(d) I Cor. 7:2, 9.

III. It is lawful for all sorts of people to marry, who are able with judgment to give their consent.(e) Yet is it the duty of Christians to marry only in the Lord:(f) and therefore such as profess the true reformed religion should not marry with infidels, papists, or other idolaters: neither should such as are godly be unequally yoked, by marrying with such as are notoriously wicked in their life, or maintain damnable heresies.(g)

(e) Heb. 13:4; I Tim. 4:3; I Cor. 7:36, 37, 38; Gen. 24:57, 58.

(f) I Cor. 7:39.

(g) Gen. 34:14; Exod. 34:16; Deut. 7:3, 4; I Kings 11:4; Neh. 13:25, 26, 27; Mal. 2:11, 12; II Cor. 6:14.

IV. Marriage ought not to be within the degrees of consanguinity or affinity forbidden by the Word;(h) nor can such incestuous marriages ever be made lawful by any law of man or consent of parties, so as those persons may live together as man and wife.(i) The man may not marry any of his wife's kindred nearer in blood than he may of his own; nor the woman of her husband's kindred nearer in blood than of her own.(k)

(h) Lev. 18 ch.; I Cor. 5:1; Amos 2:7.

(i) Mark 6:18; Lev. 18:24, 25, 26, 27, 28.

(k) Lev. 20:19, 20, 21.

V. Adultery or fornication committed after a contract, being detected before marriage, giveth just occasion to the innocent party to dissolve that contract.(l) In the case of adultery after marriage, it is lawful for the innocent party to sue out a divorce:(m) and, after the divorce, to marry another, as if the offending party were dead.(n)

(l) Matt. 1:18, 19, 20.

(m) Matt. 5:31, 32.

(n) Matt. 19:9; Rom. 7:2, 3.

VI. Although the corruption of man be such as is apt to study arguments unduly to put asunder those whom God hath joined together in marriage: yet nothing but adultery, or such wilful desertion as can no way be remedied by the Church or civil magistrate, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage:(o) wherein, a public and orderly course of proceeding is to be observed; and the persons concerned in it not left to their own wills and discretion, in their own case.(p)

(o) Matt. 19:8, 9; I Cor. 7:15; Matt. 19:6.

(p) Deut. 24:1, 2, 3, 4.

APPENDIX 2: AN EXTRACT FROM THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND'S
"MARRIAGE IN CHURCH FOLLOWING DIVORCE – ADVICE FOR CLERGY"

(a) Do the applicants have a clear understanding of the meaning and purpose of marriage?

- Do the couple understand that divorce is a breach of God's will for marriage?
- Have they a determination for the new marriage to be a life-long faithful partnership?

(b) Do the applicants have a mature view of the circumstances of the breakdown of the previous marriage and are they ready to enter wholeheartedly and responsibly into a new relationship?

- Does the divorced person appear to be relatively free of self-deception and self-justification about the past?
- Did the divorced person take the first marriage seriously and has he/she learnt from mistakes?
- Is the other party aware of the possible cause(s) of the breakdown of their future partner's previous marriage?
- Is there an attitude of repentance, forgiveness and generosity of spirit so that the applicants are free to build a new relationship?

(c) Has there been sufficient healing of the personal and social wounds of marriage breakdown?

- Has there been enough time and distance for the parties concerned to recover emotional stability and good judgement?
- Are there any extant court proceedings relating to the former marriage?
- Are responsibilities to the children of any previous marriage being recognised and honoured?

(d) Would the effects of the proposed marriage on individuals, the wider community and the Church be such as to undermine the credibility of the Church's witness to marriage?

- Would the new marriage be likely to be a cause of hostile public comment or scandal?

(e) Would permitting the new marriage be tantamount to consecrating an old infidelity?

- While it would be unreasonable to expect that the couple should not even have known each other during the former marriage(s), was the relationship between the applicants – so far as you can tell from the information made available to you - a direct cause of the breakdown of the former marriage?

(f) Has either of the parties been divorced more than once?

- In the case of multiple divorces, the sheer complexity of relationships that may have developed will inevitably make any assessment by you more difficult. However, the Church witnesses to lifelong marriage, and should not find itself being a party to "serial monogamy", hence neither of the parties should normally have been married and divorced more than once.

(g) Do the applicants display a readiness to explore the significance of the Christian faith for their lives so that their further marriage is not an isolated contact with the Church?

- Given that the provision of careful marriage preparation should be the norm for all couples seeking marriage in church, do the applicants possess an understanding of the need of God's grace in relationships and show a willingness to be open to Christian teaching?