

Article of the Month
May, 2017

Re-Marriage

This is a large topic for a small article. Nevertheless, the principles of the subject can be summarized in a relatively short space.

First of all, it is important to stress that this article is for those who consider themselves a part of the “Body of Christ,” or, possibly, for those who wish to conform to the same high standards even if they have not consecrated themselves totally in the service of the Most High.

— Old Testament —

In Deuteronomy 24:1-4 we have the general rule for divorce and re-marriage among Jews under the Law Covenant. According to Jesus, this generous provision was made for Jews because God realized the “hardness of their hearts” and the resulting need for the provision of divorce even though God “hates divorce.” (Matthew 19:8; Malachi 2:16. — We are using the NAS translation.)

Some have supposed that the Deuteronomy text implies that the woman has been unfaithful. But that this is not what was meant seems obvious in that the penalty for adultery was death, not divorce. (Leviticus 20:10) Thus, the Deuteronomy 24 text permitted divorce and re-marriage for virtually any reason. It did not, however, permit a re-marriage to the original spouse after a subsequent marriage had occurred. This would simply have encouraged “wife swapping.” Death, of course, cancelled the marriage contract. (Romans 7:1-3)

It might be noted, however, that forgiveness of adultery was an option. This was evident at Jesus’ first advent when Joseph was told NOT to put Mary away (for what appeared to have been an adulterous relationship when she was carrying Jesus.)

Thus, in short, under the Jewish Law divorce and re-marriage was permissible for nearly any reason.

— New Testament —

When Jesus began his ministry, he was beginning to select from among men those who would constitute his “bride.” He doesn’t change rules for other Jews. Jesus was not there to dispute, destroy, or alter the Law Covenant. But he was there to begin a new age under a new law — a covenant by sacrifice (Psalm 50:5). And Jesus immediately

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begins to let it be known that in order to be one of his disciples, some things would be very different from what they were under the Law. Among these things was that “hardness of heart” would not be a permissible quality among his disciples. Thus, the Jewish Law standard (or even its reason) for divorce would no longer be applicable.

In Matthew 5:31, 32 and in Matthew 19:9 Jesus explains that there is one factor besides death that annuls the marriage covenant. It now became possible to divorce and re-marry ONLY if the partner had committed adultery. Thus, for a Christian disciple of Jesus, re-marriage to another spouse was permitted if the original spouse had died or had committed adultery. (Once again we must mention that divorce is not required when the spouse commits adultery. Forgiveness is always acceptable — but not required by a spouse for this particular sin.)

It has been noted by some that Jesus, in Mark 10:11 and in Luke 16:18, states that re-marriage after divorce (even permissible divorce) is not permitted and is considered adultery. We reply that Jesus had clearly stated the exception in Matthew. That exception still applies even when it is not mentioned. (Compare the idea of “manifest exception” in I Corinthians 15:27.) Therefore, the Mark and Luke statements are not blanket prohibitions against re-marriage following a divorce.

Jesus knew that the Law Age was coming to an end. He changed a number of things for those who would become spirit-begotten members of his “body” once they were no longer obligated by the Law. Among these was that disciples would no longer put adulterers to death. They could simply divorce them. Thus adulterers could, indeed, repent and subsequently be faithful followers of Jesus. Nevertheless, Jesus did allow adultery as a legitimate termination of ALL responsibility to the marriage contract just as if the spouse had died.

Jesus goes so far as to suggest that “to him that can receive it,” it is best to remain single. This was not a rule; it was a highly spiritual standard which few could attain. But Jesus made it plain that it would be for the spiritual best of those who could receive it. (Matthew 19:10-12) Paul echoes this ideal in I Corinthians 7.

— The Apostle Paul on the Subject —

The Holy Scriptures do not waste words or space. If Jesus had spoken everything we needed to know on the subject, the Apostle Paul would not have delivered a lengthy and detailed treatise on it as he does in I Corinthians 7. We must ask ourselves why Paul gave this extended message on the subject.

One thing had changed dramatically. Paul was the Apostle charged most with the responsibility of bringing Gentiles into the body of Christ. Gentiles had never been subject to the Jewish Law, and Gentiles might very well have been married to people who believed in a different God! Jews, at least, were all believers in the same God. Jesus apparently felt it necessary for Paul to interpret marriage laws for these new

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Gentile converts. His interpretation gives us vital additional information on the subject of re-marriage for disciples. It might even seem, on the surface, that Paul contradicts what Jesus had said. But we know that Scripture does not contradict itself. Therefore, a careful examination of I Corinthians 7 is in order.

We wish to note from this chapter to the Corinthians three items:

- (1) Marriage of two believing spouses (verses 10 and 11)
- (2) Marriage between a believer and an unbeliever (verses 12-16)
- (3) Marriage AND re-marriage ONLY to a believer (verse 39)

Divorce When Both Partners Are Believers

These verses (7:10, 11) are quite straight-forward. They very much say what Jesus had told his disciples. After all, his disciples were ALL Jewish and were under the Law Covenant. They all were believers in the same God. Paul, of course, is not limiting his discussion to Jewish disciples. But Paul's comments in these verses are to two people who are married and both committed to the same God. How do we know this? We know it because the next group (verses 12-16) are NOT both believers. Thus, by contrast in the context, verses 10 and 11 are defined for us as being about believing people.

It seems a real pity that two believers cannot remain in the married state. But this is a very real commentary on the fact that marriage is a fleshly state, not a spiritual one. It is sometimes just tragically true that two people, both devoted to God, cannot make a marriage arrangement work. But, in this context, Paul tells us something that Jesus did not as clearly elucidate to his disciples. Divorce is permitted in such a marriage. But there is an iron-clad restriction. The two parties must remain single or else re-marry each other. There is no other option. (Clearly, Jesus' exception still applies. If adultery is involved, the no-other-option is null and void.)

If this marriage between two believers is a serious detriment to the spiritual success of either one or both of these partners, Paul is letting us know that divorce is preferable to spiritual failure.

Divorce When One Partner Is Not a Believer

The next section of verses (7:12-16) is considerably more complicated. Jesus does not cover this situation — probably because the situation did not exist in his day and because he knew he would commission an Apostle to explain these details.

Paul is in some sense more restrictive on the part of the believer than he is in the former verses. He points out that the believing spouse must not divorce the unbeliever as long as the unbeliever is content in the marriage. This seems much harsher than the former situation as it simply does not allow divorce at all unless the unbeliever wants the

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divorce. This is probably the case because it is a wonderful witness for the unbelieving world that the believer is faithful even under conditions which might warrant a divorce. It also provides for the contingency that the believer might convert the unbeliever. It also keeps the Lord's overruling protection over the children of the marriage.

But, if the unbeliever wants the divorce, Paul allows that the believer has an advantage over the persons in verses 10 and 11. He states that the believer "is not under bondage in such cases." This seems to mean that the Lord considers the marriage officially terminated without adultery — meaning that the believer is free to re-marry someone else. Thus, in this particular situation, there is both a disadvantage and an advantage for the believing spouse. Such a balance seems typical of the Lord's grace.

BUT: "Only in the Lord"

Verse 39 is so important! For disciples there is a steadfast rule about marriage. Whether it be a first marriage or a re-marriage, Paul wants it firmly understood that believers are forbidden to marry unbelievers. This is not unlike rules for the Hebrews in Old Testament times. They also were forbidden to marry outside of the nation of Israel. This rule is sometimes ignored by the Lord's people. It is at our own peril if we do so. Surely the Lord can and has arranged that such a mistake can be overruled by Him. ALL of our mistakes can be! But we are not to tempt the Lord our God. And anyone purposefully ignoring the Apostle's rule is sinning and subject to whatever punishments the Lord may see fit to apply.

A Caveat

The above summary of re-marriage law for saints conforms, as well as we know how, to the available Scriptures on the subject. Some may and do discern some of the details differently — particularly in regard to the marriages of believers to unbelievers. We are all responsible to our consciences before the Lord. Whatever our actions, we, if we are trying to be faithful servants of our God and our Lord Jesus, must conform those actions to Scripture as best as we can discern what Scripture is saying. If we err honestly, the Lord is merciful toward us. If we err because of self-will, His mercies may not be so abundant. In the end, there is NOTHING BUT SCRIPTURE that we can use as our guide, our Law, our obsession, and our hearts' love.