

AN OVERVIEW OF MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE FROM THE OLD & NEW TESTAMENTS

GOD'S ORIGINAL DESIGN FOR MARRIAGE:

GEN. 1:27, 2:20-24 - God created man and then created woman as the appropriate helper of man. He created one man and one woman which has continued to be the Biblically approved model, even when polygamy and divorce became common.

THE ORIGIN OF DIVORCE:

Matt. 19:3-8 - When Christ was asked about divorce, Christ said that from the very beginning it had been God's will that marriage involved one man and one woman leaving their own families to form a new family as the TWO became one flesh. He further said God had tolerated divorce because of the hardness of the human heart (and one should assume polygamy as well as is shown by the original design of God in creating Adam and Eve, not Adam and Eve and Mary and Jane...or Eve and Adam and George and Bill...even as he did not create Adam and George as the original couple). Note: this means the great men of the Old Testament (Abraham, David, etc.), were tolerated in marriages outside of God's will.

INCEST CONDEMNED:

Lev. 18:6-16 - Incest was against the Law of Moses. To have sexual relations with any blood relative was an abomination punishable by being "cut off from the people" (v. 29). Note: However, at the start marriage was of necessity allowed to a blood relative, and continued until at least the time of Abraham who was married to a half-sister (Gen. 20:1-13).

EARLY LAWS CONCERNING MARRIAGE:

Deut. 22:13-29 - Great emphasis was placed on a woman being found to be a virgin at the time of the consummation of her marriage. Evidently, the bed clothes stained with blood were saved to provide proof of her virginity in the case her husband should falsely claim she was not a virgin. If such proof could not be given, she was to be stoned. If while engaged a woman had sex with a man, both she and the man were to be killed. If a man raped an engaged woman, the man

was to be killed. If a man raped a woman who was not engaged to be married, the man had to pay 50 shekels of silver to her father (evidently the usual bride's price), and then marry the girl without the right of ever divorcing her. Note: It is a matter of question as to how often these penalties were imposed...when David had sex with Bathsheba, neither of them was killed. Also, when Joseph learned that his wife to be was pregnant, and thought she had been unfaithful to him, he did not seek to have her stoned, but rather thought to put her away privately because he was a compassionate man (Matt. 1:18-25).

MOSES PERMITS DIVORCE

Deut. 4:1 - A condition is given under the Old Law by which a man could divorce his wife. The grounds were that she "found no favor in his eyes," or because he "found some indecency in her." In later times there was much discussion as to what these conditions included. By the time of Christ, two schools of thought developed. The most conservative was headed by Shammai who taught it meant unchaste, shameless conduct. The more liberal view was led by Hillel who believed it included any thing about the wife that was displeasing to the husband.

REMARRIAGE TO A FORMER WIFE PROHIBITED

Deut. 24:1-4 - In the case a divorce occurred, and the divorced wife entered into a second marriage which also ended in divorce, her first husband was prohibited from marrying her again.

IT SEEMS STRANGE TO US

DEUT. 25:5-10 - Levirate marriage demanded that if a married man died without leaving heirs, his brother was to produce a child by his brother's wife so that his brother would have an heir. This would also keep her from marrying out of her tribe and thus run the risk of her tribal land passing to another tribe. It probably also had to do with having offspring to care for her in later life.

AS THEY ENTERED CANAAN HEBREWS WERE TOLD NOT TO MARRY FOREIGNERS

Deut. 7:3-4 - God knew that intermarriage would pull Israel into the lifestyle of the local people who were being expelled because of their sinfulness. However, there were exceptions as in the case of Judah who married Shua, a Canaanite (Gen. 38:2). Later, Judah had two children by another Canaanite named Tamar...the genealogy of Christ passes

through one of these named Perez (Matt. 1:3). Rahab, the harlot, who helped the Hebrew spies at Jericho and was spared when the city was destroyed, later marries a Hebrew and had a child also listed in the genealogical line of Christ (Jos. 6:22-25, Matt. 1:5). Later, Ezra told the Jewish men who had married Canaanites to send away those wives and their children (Ezra 10:1-44).

GOD HATES DIVORCE

Mal. 2:13-16 - As already mentioned, God allowed divorce because of the hardness of human hearts. However, that did not change His attitude toward divorce, as indicated in the above passage. The reason was that divorce involved the breaking of a covenant that had been made, one of which God was a witness.

HOW A BROKEN BIBLICAL MARRIAGE LAW WAS APPLIED BY JOHN THE BAPTIST

MARK 6:1-20 - Although Herod Antipas was the ruler over Galilee and had a life or death power over John the Baptist, John, none the less, told Herod to his face that he had broken God's law by divorcing his own wife and marrying the wife of his brother Herod Philip. Of course, this occasioned the wrath of Herodias (the woman in question) who eventually found a way to have John killed.

A SECOND EXAMPLE OF DEALING WITH ADULTERY UNDER THE OLD LAW

Matt. 1:18-25 - When Joseph learned that his promised wife was pregnant, he evidently thought she had been unfaithful to him. However, because he was a righteous man and because he did not want to humiliate her publicly, he decided to divorce her privately. While he was thinking along these lines, the Angel came to Joseph in a dream and told him the child was of the Holy Spirit. Whereupon, Joseph immediately took her to himself as his wife, and took the blame for the child being carried by Mary (Luke 3:23). However, he had no sexual relations with her until after the birth of the Christ child. This is well expressed by Hagner, "Joseph did not want to expose Mary as an adulteress, yet neither would he marry one so obviously guilty of sin. He therefore chose the one other option open to him, formal divorce proceedings in relative privacy. Thus Joseph's plan expresses simultaneously his righteousness and his charitable kindness" (Word Biblical Commentary, Word Books Pub., Dallas, 1993, p. 18).

CHRIST ON DIVORCE

MATT. 5:32, 19:3-9, MK. 10:1-12, LUKE 16:18 - In the Matthew passages, in His statement about divorce in the Sermon on the Mount, and later in His response to the question about grounds for divorce given Him by the Pharisees, Christ is very consistent. He goes back to the beginning and says God created male and female and in marriage they become one flesh. It is God who really makes them one in marriage, and therefore Christ's judgment is that "what God has joined together, let no man separate." However, He does give one reason for which a divorce may be (not must be!) sought and that is fornication (PORNEIA - illicit sexual inter-course). In Mark, essentially the same words are recorded except He stresses that if either a man or a woman initiates a divorce and remarries, they thereby commit adultery (MOICHAOMAI -unlawful sexual intercourse with the spouse of another). The above mentioned Pharisees were asking their question due to the long standing debate mentioned above about what was meant by "not finding favor," and finding some "indecentcy." The Luke passage does not give the exclusion clause, but rather fixes attention on the fact that those who remarry after divorcing their mate, by so doing, commit adultery.

SEPARATION (FOR ANY REASON) IS NOT A SIN, BUT DIVORCE IS NOT PERMITTED

1 Cor. 7:10-11 - In this passage, the case is made that if a decision is made to separate, so be it, but the alternatives are to (1) remain single, or (2) reunite. Paul makes it clear that this is not a human judgment, but instruction which comes directly from the Lord.

A SECOND CAUSE FOR A SCRIPTURAL DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE?

1 Cor. 7:12-15 - Paul begins a conversation about the condition in which a Christian with an unbelieving spouse finds himself/herself, by saying this "is what I say, not the Lord." In the course of the teaching, he holds out the possibility one has to bring an unbelieving spouse to the Lord. However, if not successful, and finally the unbeliever elects to leave, Paul says the Christian "is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace." Some have taken the position that Paul is authorizing divorce and remarriage by these words. This has not been the usual understanding of many scholars and certainly not of those of the churches of Christ (to my knowledge). As Gordon Fee has pointed out in his work on 1 Corinthians, remarriage is not mentioned in this passage. Perhaps Paul's general advice is to be applied here..."Let each man remain in that condition in which he was called" (1 Cor. 7:20).

IS THERE SUCH A THING AS "LIVING IN ADULTERY" IN THE NEW TESTAMENT?

Rom. 7:1-3 - In making his case for mankind having been freed from eternal judgment on the basis of Law, Paul wanted to show that we have been brought out from under Law and saved by Grace because Christ kept the law perfectly for us. To illustrate, he gives an example from marriage. A woman is married to her husband until he dies, and then she is free to marry whom she will. However, if she should divorce her husband to be married to another man, she would be called an adulteress. I believe this is the passage ordinarily used to introduce the "living in adultery" idea. This passage does not take any exceptions into consideration that might allow a justifiable divorce, nor would such be the purpose of the illustration.

WERE MARRIAGE PROBLEMS EVER A PROBLEM IN NEW TESTAMENT SCRIPTURES?

1 Tim. 3:2, Tit. 1:6 - Evidently there were persons within the context of the church who had, or had had more than one wife. In both of the above passages, a man had to be "the husband of one wife" in order to qualify for the position of elder.

ADULTERY WAS A FORGIVEABLE OFFENSE

Luke 7:36-50 - The woman who bursts into a dinner uninvited and begins to wash Jesus' feet with her tears and dry them with her hair was recognized by the other persons there as a "sinner" (literally 'an immoral woman'). Evidently, her moral sins were well known in the area. At any rate, after giving a little lesson to the invited guests, Jesus tells her, "your sins have been forgiven" (v. 48).

John 8:1-11 - On this occasion, the scribes and Pharisees brought a woman who was "caught in the very act of adultery" to Jesus to put him on the spot. They tell Him the Law said she should be stoned, and asked His judgment. Jesus said the one without sins among them should throw the first stone, and from the oldest to the youngest, they all left. He then told the woman, "Neither do I condemn you, go your way; from now on sin no more" (v. 11).

1 Cor. 6:9-11 - In this passage, Paul identifies the kind of people that will not be saved. In this list we find included fornicators and adulterers. After giving the list he adds that some of the Corinthians had been guilty of these sins, but said had been "washed, sanctified, and justified" in the name of the Lord Jesus (v. 11).

Rev. 2:18-23 - The Lord (Rev. 1:13-19) tells John to write to the church at Thyatira accusing them of having a "Jezebel" in their congregation

who claimed to be a prophetess and was leading church members to commit adultery as an act of worship. The Lord's judgment was that they must either repent or face great tribulation, and her children would be killed with pestilence.

1 Cor. 5:1-13 - This is a case of a church member who was living sexually with his father's wife. In no uncertain terms, Paul said that he personally had already delivered such a one to Satan (v. 5), and ordered the Corinthians to "remove the wicked man from among your selves" (v.13). Paul had great concern that such an example would be followed by others if not corrected (vv. 6-7). His order was obeyed and was successful in achieving the desired purpose (2 Cor. 2:4-11).

WHAT ABOUT THOSE WHO GET INTO MARRIAGE TROUBLE BEFORE BEING SAVED?

To my knowledge this is not discussed in the New Testament, other than the suggestion already made about an elder being the husband of "one wife." Some believe this suggests there were persons in the church who had marriage problems. It has been suggested, given the high percentage of Jews known to be divorced at the time of Christ (I have heard 20% to 30% but at this moment I have no source), and given the large numbers of Jews who entered the church at Pentecost and soon afterwards, it is hard to believe that those with marriage problems had been culled out. Notice the progression: 3000 at Pentecost (Acts 2:41), shortly thereafter 5000 men without saying how many women (Acts 4:4), multitudes added (Acts 5:14), and a little later, the number increased greatly (Acts 6:7). In my experience, most of the churches of Christ have not tried to get persons coming into the church out of the world to clean up their marriage act. We seem to have taken literally the statement of Paul, "Brethren, let each man remain with God in that condition in which he was called" (1 Cor. 7:24).

A SUMMARY STATEMENT

Heb. 13:4 - "Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge."

Carl Mitchell