

## **DIVORCE, REMARRIAGE, AND CHURCH LEADERSHIP**

### ***A study of the Biblical teaching on divorce, remarriage, and divorced people being in positions of church leadership***

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#### ***Synopsis***

- While divorce is never God's will, He does recognize it under certain circumstances.
- When a divorce is recognized by God, remarriage may be possible.
- A prior divorce is not necessarily a Biblical obstacle to serving as a leader in the church.

The subjects of divorce, remarriage, and divorcees becoming official church leaders are of grave importance, since they involve some fundamental moral and ethical issues. Unfortunately, these issues are also greatly disputed among Bible students and teachers. In a society in which believers are constantly confronted with divorce situations, this leads to confusion and uncertainty for many believers as to what is right and wrong. Yet, it is unthinkable that matters of such vital importance would be left unsettled or uncertain by Scripture. We can be sure that the Bible has given us clear and conclusive principles that will help solve these problem questions.

The first five points of this study are taken directly from Scripture. They are not primarily a matter of interpretation, but of observation. They are what the Bible says. There are additional situations to which the Scriptures do not speak directly. Yet, people in those situations need to have Biblically sound advice. The problem is this: What is God's will in situations that are not God's will? The last three points of this study are drawn from the teachings of the Bible, but less directly than the first five. Nevertheless, they are consistent with the teachings of Scripture. They are the best conclusions and advice the author has to offer.

#### **1. Divorce is never the will of God under any circumstance.**

The following Scriptures directly teach that divorce is never the will of God under any circumstance. That is, God does not want people to divorce.

***"I hate divorce," says the LORD.*** [Mal. 2:16]

***What God has joined together, let no man separate.*** [Mat. 19:6]

*Because of your hardness of heart, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way. [Mat. 19:8]*

*To the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband...and that the husband should not send his wife away. [1 Cor. 7:10-11]*

*If any brother has an unfaithful wife, and she consents to live with him, let him not send her away. And a woman who has an unfaithful husband, and he consents to live with her, let her not send her husband away. [1 Cor. 7:12-13]*

The Greek word which I have translated “unfaithful” in the last two verses is the word ἀπίστος (apistos—AH-pē-stōs). Almost every commentator and translator of this passage renders it “who is an unbeliever” or “an unbeliever.” However, that is actually an interpretation more than a translation. The root meaning of the word is faithless. The context in which the word appears determines the kind of faithlessness that is meant. In some passages a person is faithless with regard to the gospel; and so, the word is translated “unbeliever.” If the passage is talking about a witness being faithless, it means that he is not truthful. An unfaithful arrow is one that doesn’t fly straight. An unfaithful spouse is one that commits adultery. Isaiah 1:21 in the LXX (the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament) uses the root word this way (πιστός, [pē-STŌS], without the negative prefix α). It says, “How the faithful city is become a harlot.” The meaning “unfaithful” or “adulterous” fits the context of 1 Cor. 7 best, since in the entire passage Paul has been talking about sexual purity and obligations. It is also the only way to avoid the problem of having Paul say that unbelief is a recognized basis for divorce, while Christ flatly denied that idea by saying that fornication was the only recognized basis for divorce. For further evidence and a more detailed explanation of the view, see my commentary on [1 Corinthians 7:10-16](#).

## **2. Divorce is only valid and recognized by God when adultery has taken place and a divorce certificate has been issued.**



What is often lost sight of in the discussion of divorce is that, while divorce is always contrary to what God wants for people (it is against His will), God does, nevertheless, recognize it under certain circumstances. He recognizes it when both of these conditions have been met: when adultery has taken place and a divorce certificate has been issued.

*And it was said, “whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of dismissal”; but I say to you that every one who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. [Mat. 5:31-32]*

*They said to Him, “Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate and divorce her?” He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart, Moses*

*permitted you to divorce your wives. ...And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another commits adultery.” [Mat. 19:7-9]*

The following chart gives a harmony of the verses in the Gospels on this point.

| <b>Matthew 5:32</b>                                    | <b>Matthew 19:9</b>                   | <b>Mark 10:11-12</b>   | <b>Luke 16:18</b>   |
|--|---------------------------------------|--|---|
| Every one who divorces his wife,                       | Whoever divorces his wife             | Whoever divorces his wife  | Every one who divorces his wife   |
| except for the cause of unchastity                     | except for immorality                 |  |   |
|  | and marries another commits adultery, | and marries another woman commits adultery against her;          | and marries another commits adultery;                                   |
|  |                                       | and if she herself divorces her husband and marries another man, |   |
| makes her commit adultery                              |                                       | she is committing adultery.                                      |   |
| and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. |                                       |  | and he who marries one who is divorced from a husband commits adultery. |

The saying of Christ on this topic can be harmonized this way, along with explanatory comments in brackets:

***Whoever divorces his wife, except for the cause of immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery against her*** [because in reality they are still married], ***and he makes her commit adultery*** [assuming she gets remarried]; ***and if she herself divorces her husband*** [except for the cause of fornication] ***and marries another man, she is committing adultery*** [because in reality she is still married to her first husband]; ***and he who marries a woman who is divorced from a husband*** [except for the cause of fornication] ***commits adultery*** [because in reality the woman is still married to someone else].

It should be added that Biblically both marriage and divorce are between the individuals involved and God. Their marriage is established because they have made their vows to each other, and their divorce is established because one spouse has given a written statement of divorce to the adulterous spouse. God has established three institutions: the family, the government, and the church. These institutions have their own spheres of

authority which are not subject to the jurisdiction of the other institutions. The government and the church technically can only recognize the fact that a couple (because they have promised marital faithfulness to each other) are married. Technically, the marriage is not established by either the government or the church, but by the mutual covenant of the couple. Yet in our society we prefer to get the government and the church involved in the marriage for the sake of legal and social propriety. In the same way, divorce takes place when the conditions of divorce have been met. The certificate of divorce is issued by the spouse charging the other with adultery. A spouse could issue such a certificate on his own, even before the government has issued its version of the certificate, and the couple would at that moment be Biblically divorced. Yet, in our society we prefer to get the government involved in the divorce for the sake of legal and social propriety. It is ironic (and perhaps cowardly, too) that the church is so eager to get involved at the recital of the marriage vows, but is completely uninvolved when it comes to the certificate of divorce.

**3. If a divorce is not valid, the couple is really still married; and, if either one marries someone else, that second marriage is initially not recognized by God, so that it involves adultery.**

The previous verse clearly show this. The same kind of principle is followed by our civil with regard to bigamy. If a man marries a woman and then leaves her, but does not get a divorce that is recognized by the state, then the state still considers them to be married. If the man then goes and marries another woman, the second marriage is seen as invalid, since he is still married to the first woman. To put the verse in these terms, we could say, “Every one who leaves his wife without getting a legitimate divorce and supposedly marries another woman commits adultery (since the second marriage is not legitimate).”

**4. It is God’s will for the divorcer to remain single or to try to be reconciled to his ex-spouse, unless his ex-spouse has already remarried or is an unbeliever.**

The one who divorces the adulterous spouse is either to remain single or else is to be reconciled to the spouse.

*But if she does leave, let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband.* [1 Cor. 7:11]

The reason why the divorcer is to remain single appears to be to give the couple the chance to be reconciled. God wants marriages to succeed. If either spouse remarries, then reconciliation (having the marriage be restored) is no longer possible.

*When a man takes a wife and marries her ... and he writes her a certificate of divorce ... and she leaves his house and goes and becomes another man’s wife, and if the latter husband ... writes her a certificate of divorce ... or if the latter husband*

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*dies ... then her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife ... ; for that is an abomination before the Lord.* [Deut. 24:1-4]

Now while this teaching is from the Law, and we are not under the Law, nevertheless the reason why this law was given is that the actions it proscribes are an abomination before the Lord. It was in the Law because it is an abomination to the Lord; it was not an abomination because it was in the Law. The principle is still the same. What was once an abomination to the Lord has not become acceptable to Him.

The passage shows clearly that once one of the spouses has remarried, the couple cannot be restored to their former marriage relationship. There can be no reconciliation. Such remarriages are not permitted by God.

If both parties of the divorce are still single, they are permitted (and encouraged) to be reconciled. However, if one of them is an unbeliever, they may not remarry.

*She is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.* [1 Cor. 7:39]

*Do not be bound* [KJV: “unequally yoked”] *together with unbelievers.* [2 Cor. 6:14]

**5. If the unfaithful spouse is the divorcer, the divorcee is free to marry and is not required to remain single or to seek to be reconciled to the divorcer.**

Paul makes it clear that when the unfaithful spouse is the one who divorces, the other spouse does not have to remain single but may remarry at any time.

*Yet if the unfaithful one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage* [that is, the marriage bond and related obligations are no longer binding] *in such cases.* [1 Cor. 7:15]

*Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you should marry, you have not sinned.* [1 Cor. 7:27-28]

In this passage the term “to be bound” means to be married; “to be released” means to be divorced. Paul has already specified that the spouse who divorces the other spouse is to remain unmarried or else be reconciled to his spouse. Here he deals with the other spouse. If your spouse has divorced you, you are encouraged to remain single, but you are allowed to remarry, and the assurance is given that such remarriage is not sin.

**6. If either the divorcer or the divorcee of a divorce recognized by God has remarried, the other person is free to remarry since reconciliation is now impossible.**

We saw in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 (above in point #4) that reconciliation is impossible once either spouse has remarried. We just saw in 1 Corinthians 7:27-28 (under point #5) that

remarriage is possible for a divorced person. The Bible teaches that marriage is a proper and desirable state for adults:

*But because of immoralities, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband.* [1 Cor. 7:2]

This principle applies equally to divorcees as well as to singles who have never been married. The only question is, To whom are they to be married? If remarriage to their ex-spouse is no longer possible, then marriage to someone else is not only possible, but desirable.

### **7. An invalid divorce becomes valid when adultery has taken place. The second marriage then becomes valid, too.**

If a divorce is invalid (because no adultery has taken place) and either spouse remarries, the initial act in that marriage is adulterous (see #3 above). At that point the initial divorce becomes valid since adultery has now taken place. The second marriage also becomes valid; for, since the divorce has become recognized, the remarriage can also be recognized.

If this conclusion is rejected, then the alternative is to say that all such divorced people who have remarried are still married to their original spouses and are living in adulterous relationships. Thus, they would have to separate from their second spouses (even if there were children involved—in which case the children would be illegitimate) and seek to be reconciled to their original spouses (even if they had since remarried). Since such a catastrophic course of action is not taught in Scripture, and since a more constructive conclusion (the one proposed by the author) is possible and is consistent with what is taught in the Bible, the wiser course of action seems to be to adopt the view advocated here.

### **8. Can and should a divorced person ever serve in a place of church leadership?**

In coming to the conclusion as to whether a divorced person should ever serve in a place of church leadership (such as in the capacity of elder, deacon, or even pastor), the issue that must be addressed is whether the person meets the Biblical qualifications for those positions. One of the qualifications for service is that the individual be the husband of only one wife:

*An overseer, then, must be...the husband of one wife.* [1 Tim. 3:2]

*Let deacons be husbands of only one wife.* [1 Tim. 3:12]

*Appoint elders in every city as I directed you, namely, if any man be ... the husband of one wife.* [Titus 1:5-6]

It should be evident to all that, just because a man may qualify on one point, he does not necessarily qualify on the rest. And unless he does, he cannot be an official church leader.

So, while this study is focusing on only one qualification, we must not lose sight of the other qualifications.

The marriage requirement for church leadership will be examined under three points: the interpretation of the passages, the application of the requirement, and answers to false arguments.

***a. Interpreting the requirement***

***1). Only the leader's present status is in view***

Paul is only describing the current status of the leaders when he gives this list of qualifications. He is not referring to their whole life history. This is clear from two points. First, the verb Paul uses in each case is in the present tense and points to the way things are now. He does not say, "If a man *has been* the husband of only one wife." Instead, he says, "If any man *is* the husband of one wife." The observation that Paul is speaking of the present is equally important for properly understanding the other requirements. For example, a man might not have always been hospitable, but if he is now, he is not disqualified on that account. Second, there are some qualifications in the lists that everyone has at one time or another fallen short of. For example, the elder cannot be a new convert (1 Tim. 3:6). Yet, he would have to have been a new convert at some time in his life. Thus, if Paul is regulating anything other than the present status of the leaders, then no one could ever be an official leader of the church, since everyone at one time has been disqualified. The only issue addressed by this requirement of being the husband of one wife is this: Is the man currently married to no more than one woman? The issue of whether he has previously divorced is not germane.

***2). The issue is that he is currently above reproach***

None of Paul's lists of qualifications for church leaders is exactly the same. But, what is the same about each list is that they say that the leader must be above reproach, or blameless. A strong case may be made for the view that Paul really presents only one qualification, that of blamelessness, and that the other qualifications are really only an explanation or illustration of what that means.

The reason for saying that blamelessness is the issue is that in the Greek (the language in which the New Testament was originally written) the word "blameless" or "above reproach" is separated from the rest of the qualifications by the verb. The actual word order is like this: "An overseer above reproach must be: the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent," etc. (1 Tim. 3:2). This would explain why his lists can be different without it appearing that he was wavering on what should be included. It also means that the qualifications are to be understood in terms of blamelessness. That is, when it says that he must have believing children (Titus 1:6), it does not mean that he must have at least two children and that both of them must be believers (by the way, some people argue for that). There is nothing reproachful about having only one child, or about having a child that is too

young to be a believer. The point is that if he has children at home who are old enough to be believers, but who are not believers, then there is something wrong. Certainly, if he has not been able to win his own children by the time they are in school, he is not qualified to be an elder.

This principle that the long lists of qualifications are merely defining blamelessness is significant in the issue of what it means to be the husband of one wife. Taking the qualification all by itself, however, you would have to say that if a man's wife died, he would have to quit the ministry (at least until he could remarry), since he would no longer be the husband of one wife. But taking the qualification as a definition of blamelessness and of being above reproach, you can say that since being a widower is not reproachable, Paul is not meaning to exclude widowers from the ministry. However, being married to more than one woman at the same time is reproachable, and so Paul is excluding bigamists and polygamists from the leadership in the church. This would mean that a single person could be an elder, since there is nothing reproachable about being unmarried (in fact, this is how the early church understood it—they even preferred that their elders be single). If, however, you say that each qualification must be taken totally separately from the rest, then you must be consistent and say that for a man to be an elder he must have at least two children and all of them must be believers. Thus, if his wife becomes pregnant, he would be forced to resign his position, since that child is not a believer. And if his wife dies, he would be forced to resign his position, since he is no longer the husband of a wife.

It may help to notice that in the list of qualifications some requirements deal with activities where there are three possible situations, while other qualifications deal with issues where there are only two possible situations. For example, in 1 Timothy 3:2-7 Paul says that the elder must be able to teach. The only alternative is that he is not able to teach. Another requirement is that his children be well disciplined. In this case, however, there are two possible alternatives: having unruly children and having no children. The condition that is reproachable is that he have unruly children. There is no shame in having no children. Another example is that he not be addicted to wine. The alternatives are that he be a moderated drinker or an abstainer. Paul allows for either of these two and only prohibits alcoholism.

### ***b. Applying the requirement***

For the purposes of this study, we will look at how this requirement of being the husband of one wife relates 1) to those who have been divorced, but who have remained single, and 2) to those who have been divorced, and who have remarried.

#### ***1). The divorced person who has remained single***

How does the interpretation of the requirement to be blameless apply to the divorced person who has not remarried? If his divorce is recognized by God, then he is not married to anyone; he is a single person. First Corinthians 7:11 calls a divorced person single:



*But if she does leave* [divorce], *let her remain unmarried* (ἄγαμος AH-gah-mōs)...

As far as the requirement of being the husband of one wife goes, a divorced man would be in the same category as bachelors and widowers: single. So, if you say that his divorce is recognized by God and that single men (bachelors and widowers) meet the marriage requirement for church leaders, then you would have to say that a divorced person who has remained single also qualifies on that one point.

If, however, you say that his divorce is not recognized by God, then he is still married. As such, he would be the husband of one wife and would qualify on that point. But it is clear that he would not currently be managing his own household well (since he and his wife would be separated), and so he would be disqualified (1 Tim. 3:4-5).

## **2). *The divorced person who has remarried***

Now, as for the divorced person who has remarried, the following conclusion may be drawn. If his divorce is recognized by God, then he is currently the husband of one wife. Thus, as far as this requirement goes, he would qualify the same as any other married man.

If, however, his divorce is not recognized by God after he has remarried, then he would be in one of two possible situations, either of which would disqualify him from a leadership position in the church. (However, because of point #7, I believe that neither of these situations is possible since, if he has remarried, his divorce is recognized by God.) Even so, for the sake of argument, either he is married to two women at the same time (the one he thought he divorced and the one he is now with), or he is married to only one wife (the one he thought he divorced). If the latter is the case, then he is living in adultery with the second woman (even though he thought he was married to her). In that case, he must separate from her, regardless of whether there are children involved. However, if the former is the case, then he must seek to be reconciled with his first wife while maintaining his marriage to his second wife, thus establishing an openly bigamous household! Those options are unacceptable, but they are the conclusions that those who reject the position of this paper seem to have forced themselves into.

## **c. *Answers to false arguments***

In discussions on this issue of divorced people being church leaders, some false arguments come up which need to be addressed.

### **1). *That the divorce took place before salvation***

Some say that, if the divorce took place before the divorced man was saved, then he can become an elder (since any sins in connection with the divorce are under the blood of Christ), but that, if the divorce took place after he was saved, he cannot become a church leader. There are several reasons why this view must be strongly resisted.

First, it implies that the blood of Christ loses its cleansing power in the life of a person after he is saved. Or, it seems to assume that sins before one was saved are somehow less serious than after one is saved. There is no Biblical basis for this opinion. Any sins connected to a divorce after one is saved can equally be forgiven as the sins connected to a divorce before one is saved.

Second, it tends to assume that, if a man has been divorced, he necessarily has some guilt which must be forgiven. But there can be totally innocent people in divorce, as is illustrated by the fact that God says He divorced Israel (Jer. 3:8), and yet He is totally innocent and righteous:

*And I saw that for all the adulteries of faithless Israel, I had sent her away and given her a writ of divorce ... .*

While it is true that none of us is blameless before God, that does not mean that when a husband commits adultery his wife is somehow to blame. Her burning the toast does not cause the blame for a subsequent divorce to be placed on her. The blame for the divorce is limited to the person who was having the affair. No matter what kind of witch she may have been, it is not her fault that he committed adultery. He bears 100% of the blame for his own sin.

Third, it obscures the fact that one's present marital status, not his past history, is what is stated as the issue in the list of qualifications for elders. So, (ignoring the conclusion in point #7) if in being divorced and remarried the man is not the husband of one wife but of two, then no amount of confession and forgiveness can change the fact that he is disqualified as long as he is in that state of bigamy. If, however, his divorce is recognized by God and his remarriage makes him the husband of only one wife, then confession and forgiveness are not an issue in whether he qualifies as the husband of one wife.

## **2). *That he is neither the husband of one or of two wives***

There are many who say that a divorced man who is remarried does not meet the qualification of being the husband of one wife, yet they deny that he is the husband of two wives. It is almost as if they are saying that he is the husband of more than one wife, but less than two. The reason for this totally illogical position seems to be that the remarried divorcee places them on the horns of a dilemma, and they are looking for a convenient out. If they say that he is the husband of only one wife, then they must acknowledge that he meets the marriage qualification for being a church leader. But if they say that he is the husband of two wives, then he must fulfill his marriage obligations to both women. To fulfill those obligations would mean that he would have to cohabit with both of them. They are understandably repulsed by that conclusion. One way that they try to get around this is to say that he is a "serial bigamist." But that kind of word game does not solve their dilemma, and it is not a Biblical concept.

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Very often these same people will say that a divorced man who remains single fails the qualification of being the husband of one wife, yet they think that it is fine for a widower to become an elder. What is even more inconsistent is that they will assert that the divorced man who remains single is not the husband of one wife, but that the divorced man who remarries is the husband of two. They can't have it both ways.

***3). That his wife has been divorced***

Finally, most people who say that a divorced person cannot be a church leader also add that if the man's wife was ever divorced, he cannot be a church leader even if he were never divorced. But in what sense does that make him not the husband of only one wife? They have created a new requirement for church leaders. The issue of whether a man's wife was ever divorced is irrelevant to the list of qualifications for church leaders.

**Conclusion**

Divorce is never God's desire, but He does allow it and He does recognize it when adultery and a divorce certificate has been issued.

Someone who otherwise qualifies for a position as an official church leader is not disqualified from that position on the grounds of having been Biblically divorced.

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