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BIBLICAL GROUNDS FOR DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

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Synopsis

Many people, especially Christians, have serious questions about divorce and remarriage. As the American family appears to be imploding with divorce, and as blended families become a major challenge to negotiate and develop by those who remarry, it is wise for us to examine again Paul's instructions about divorce and remarriage in First Corinthians 7.

When may a person biblically and ethically divorce a spouse and remarry another? Marriage is founded upon the biblical basis of a covenant. Violations of the marriage covenant may lead to the dissolution of the marriage covenant. Paul clearly sets forth this underlying assumption and then develops an inspired hermeneutic for dealing with troubled marriages and the questions surrounding divorce for Christians.

We live in a broken world, and everything in this world is broken as well. In the creation, God formed a perfect world and declared it all "very good" ([Gen. 1:31, ESV](#))¹. The basic parameters of life, set forth in the creation in Genesis, chapters 1 and 2, have been damaged by the human fall into sin. Man's dominion over creation; gender identity and roles; love, marriage, and child-rearing; domestic life in the home; community solidarity and safety; and the value and sanctity of human life have all been damaged by sin (as is evidenced in Genesis 3 ff., and the evening news on ABC, FOX, or CNN). Paul David Tripp metaphorically likens our world to an old, broken-down house:

The world you live in is a lot like that broken-down house. Every single room has been dirtied and damaged by sin. Not one part of it shines with anything like the pure glory that was so evident when it was first made. Sin has left this world in a sorry condition. You see it everywhere you look.

You see it in great cities and small communities. You see it in the environment, blighted by pollution and misuse. You see it in government, often focused more on caring for itself than on serving the people. You see it in entertainment that replaces what is truly beautiful with what is essentially pornography. You see it in the family, as the place designed for growth and protection often becomes a source of life's greatest hurts. You see it in a staggering, diseased economy that has finally exhausted itself after decades of financial debauchery. You see it in art and culture that often debases the very concept of beauty. You see it in history, with instance after instance of man's inhumanity to man. You see it in each life as we all struggle with physical, emotional, spiritual, and relational brokenness every day.²

Of all God's ordinances and institutions marred by sin and teetering from spiritual and moral decay, perhaps none bears the marks of damage as much as marriage. Studies, both public and private, religious and secular, surrounding the condition of marriages in America are legion. Those of a conservative,

biblical, and historic Protestant theology are greatly alarmed by the social indicators that do not bode well for the institution of marriage.³ Donald Wildmon of the American Family Association wrote back in 2004:

In my lifetime I have seen changes I would never have dreamed would occur in our nation. We have abortion on demand, including partial birth abortion. Pornography is everywhere, from comic books to the Internet, reaching nearly every home in our country. Gambling is a state-run business promoted to our youth and our poor. The work ethic has been devalued. Divorce has played havoc with the social structure. The list goes on and on.

*Now comes the biggest and—if we don't win—the last battle: homosexual marriage. The fact is, radical homosexuals don't really want marriage. What they want is approval for a perverted lifestyle. And if marriage is destroyed in the process, so be it. And yet politicians, businesses, even some church leaders have jumped on the bandwagon.*⁴

Lest Wildmon be accused of narrow-minded censoriousness toward those of “alternative views,” I would remind the reader that the protection of heterosexual marriage benefits society at large—not just the evangelical church. James Dobson of Focus on the Family Ministries gives us a well-balanced, historically valid, and professional opinion when he summarizes the benefits of solid marriages:

*In short, marriage, when it functions as intended, is good for everyone—for men, for women, for children, for the community, for the nation, and for the world. Marriage is the means by which the human race is propagated, and the means by which spiritual teaching is passed down through the generations. Research consistently shows that heterosexual married adults do better in virtually every measure of emotional and physical health than people who are divorced or never married. They live longer and have happier lives. They recover from illness more quickly, earn and save more money, are more reliable employees, suffer less stress, and are less likely to become victims of any kind of violence. They find the job of parenting more enjoyable, and they have more satisfying and fulfilling sex lives.*⁵

What may surprise many is this statement: the greatest threat to marriages in America is not homosexuality, same-sex marriages, feminism, or premarital sex, but rather *divorce*. Unbiblical divorce constitutes the major sinful pattern in our broken world, threatening the preservation of life's first and most basic institution. So prevalent is divorce today that church members divorce at the same rate and percentage as nonchurched individuals. My own denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), approved a study on the subject of divorce and remarriage and adopted the *Position Paper on Divorce and Remarriage*⁶. This position paper began with these words:

The PCA reaffirms that sex is a gift from God which should be expressed only in marriage between a man and a woman. Therefore all sexual intercourse outside marriage, including homosexuality and lesbianism, is contrary to God's Word (the Bible), and is sin. We acknowledge that the Bible declares that those who continuously and unrepentantly sin shall not inherit the Kingdom of God, and we sorrow for their plight. Yet we also joyfully acknowledge that God in the Gospel of Jesus Christ forgives repentant sinners and welcomes such forgiven, cleansed and changed sinners into the Church of Jesus Christ ([1 Corinthians 6:9–11](#))⁷.

The PCA acknowledges that marriage and the church exist within a broken world. The church also recognizes that both God's law and God's grace must shape and guide our understanding of marriage, divorce, and remarriage. As such, the Westminster Confession of Faith (the PCA doctrinal standards) reflects the biblical teaching that permits divorce for two reasons- adultery and irreconcilable desertion:

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 willful desertion as can no way be remedied by the Church, or civil magistrate, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage: 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. (Westminster Confession of Faith 24–26)⁸

These two reasons for legitimate divorce are clearly set forth by Jesus Christ (Matt. 5, 19) and His apostles (1 Cor.7) in the New Testament. Adultery and desertion remain the only two explicit reasons whereby a person may divorce a spouse. The traditional and historic understanding of this “biblical divorce” doctrine was set forth clearly by the Princeton theologian and professor, Alexander A. Hodge, in 1869: “The divine law as to divorce is, that marriage is a contract for life between one man and one woman, and that it is, ipso facto, dissolved only by death (Rom. vii, 2, 3); and that the only causes upon which any civil authority can dissolve the union of those whom God has joined together are (a.) adultery, (b.) willful, causeless, and incurable desertion.”⁹

I will briefly examine these two reasons for divorce, and their implications for marriage and remarriage, by looking at the biblical texts and their teachings, which are relevant to today.

Divorce Due to Adultery

Jesus Christ Himself is the first in the New Testament to refine the Jewish practice, instituted by Moses, which allowed for divorce. Twice Christ qualified and greatly restricted the practices of rabbinical Judaism in His day. The rabbis had developed a convoluted way in which a man could divorce his wife. They succumbed to cultural and pagan pressures to relax even further Moses’ instructions in the law (*Torah*). In [Deuteronomy 24:1-4](#), the lawgiver set forth this perpetual statute:

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, and if she goes and becomes another man’s wife, 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, 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.

Fourteen centuries later, Moses’ words, “if she then finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her,” had been interpreted in the broadest sense of the phrase to mean anything that might displease a husband (e.g., being a poor cook, hard to get along with, barren and unable to bear children, overweight, old, etc.). One can only imagine both the frivolous reasons concocted by unloving husbands and the unjust treatment meted out to faithful wives due to this rabbinic interpretation. The rabbis focused only on the “letter of the law”—in this case, making sure the divorce certificate was filled out, filed, and prosecuted properly. The heart and spirit of the law was lost in its legalistic mechanics. Keep in mind that the rabbinical rules benefited only the husband and not the wife.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus Christ brings such chauvinistic abuses to marriage to a screeching halt. In His reiteration and reinterpretation of God’s law, Jesus says the following: “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ 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” ([Matt. 5:31-32](#)).

What Christ meant by this was simple. The Holy Spirit used two distinct Greek words in relating to the Apostles the essence of Christ’s teachings and the Scripture we now possess. Each Greek word related to a family of Greek words used to express ideas about illicit sex, referring to sex outside the bounds of a monogamous marriage. Here is what Christ literally said: “Everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of *porneia* (sexual immorality), makes her *moichao* (commit adultery). And anyone who marries a divorced woman (i.e., one who has been divorced for other cause than adultery, or who divorces her husband for other cause than adultery) *moichao* (commits adultery himself).” Understanding these two Greek words is very important in our interpretation of Christ’s teaching on divorce and remarriage.

The first word (*porneia*) comes from a family of words used to describe illicit sex outside the bounds of a legal and monogamous marriage. Both Greco-Roman law and Jewish law highly valued the institution of marriage. The Greek language reflects these values. This family of *porn*-words describes all types of illicit sex. The Greek verb *porneuo* (to fornicate) is related to the Greek words *porneo*(harlot), *pornos* (fornicator), and *porneia* (fornication).

The second word is more specific. *Moichao* is a verb used for adultery in marriage. It meant to “have sex with someone other than your spouse to whom you are married.” The cognate of the verb, *moicheia*, always referred to adultery, and nothing else.

So here is what Jesus says: “If a man divorces his wife for other reason than that she engaged in sexual immorality, and was sexually unfaithful to him, and if he marries another, he commits adultery because he is still married to his first and faithful wife in God’s eyes, and in society’s as well. And if he puts a sexually faithful wife away, and she then marries another man, he has forced her into an illicit marriage, and this too is therefore a form of adultery.”

Later in His ministry, Jesus expounded on this viewpoint in [Matthew 19:1–12](#). Again, the issue of divorce is raised by the crowd. The Pharisees ask Jesus, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” Jesus is frank and clear. He explains four things to the Pharisees and those listening to their discourse.

1. From the beginning of creation, God had always intended a marriage to be between one man and one woman, in a lifetime commitment. Christ references [Genesis 2:18–25](#).
2. Moses did not prescribe [Deuteronomy 24:1–4](#), at the inspiration of God, in order to loosen the demands of marriage but rather to restrict divorces. It was the “hardness of the heart” that was in view in [Deuteronomy 24:1–4](#). In other words, the “certificate of divorce” was intended to make divorce more difficult to obtain, not to facilitate dissolutions of marriage.
3. Only *porneia* or *moicheia* (sex outside of marriage) are the acceptable grounds for divorce.
4. Those who divorce other than for sexual infidelity will commit *moicheia* (adultery).

My wife and I have recently returned from Nairobi, Kenya, a society much troubled by polygamy. We traveled there at the invitation of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Kibera, in order to speak at a marriage conference. I must admit that I was surprised by the questions asked me during this week of biblical preaching and teaching:

-“My husband has taken a second and now a third wife. Am I free to leave him and seek a divorce?”

-“My husband is legally married to me, but back in his home village, he has a second wife—a tribal marriage, though not official. Can I divorce him?”

-“My wife and I are not legally married. As in most Kenyan marriages, we have just lived together. I no longer want my wife. Am I free to leave her?”

-“My husband has repeatedly had forced sex with our thirteen-year-old daughter. Can I leave him over this?”

-“My husband has had sex with animals. These encounters have been verified by another woman in our village. I have separated from him for the past two months. He says the Devil makes him do it. May I divorce him over this?”

-“My husband has AIDS. I do not...yet. May I divorce him to protect myself and my daughters?”

-“My husband likes to have sex with men. Do I have to remain with him or am I free to divorce and remarry?”

“Incredible!” you say? So it is. But real, nevertheless. All of these situations reflect three realities:

1. The distortion of marriage due to cultural norms and practices directly at odds with God’s Word.
2. Gross violations of the central issue in a covenant of marriage: sexual fidelity.
3. The presence of sexual immorality (porneia) that constitutes permissible grounds for divorce.

We in America may not practice such base, tribalistic forms of unbridled sexual lusts, but in substance we violate the sanctity of marriage to the same degree as these Kenyans.

Multiple marriages and divorces are nothing short of “serial polygamy.” Incest, rape, and molestation are not infrequent in American families. Homosexuality is on the rise and fornication is as common as dating and often assumed to go hand-in-hand. Pornography, graphic movies, lewd dress, and a pitiful preoccupation with sex characterize our culture. AIDS is a growing concern. The Internet includes Web sites advocating legal polygamy. How are we so different from “primitive” Kenya?

John Calvin, in Book Two of his famous Institutes of the Christian Religion, explains to us the importance of the seventh commandment: “You shall not commit adultery” ([Exod. 20:14](#) and [Deut. 5:18](#)). He comments:

The purpose of this commandment is: because God loves modesty and purity, all uncleanness must be far from us. To sum up, then: we should not become defiled with any filth or lustful intemperance of the flesh. To this corresponds the affirmative commandment that we chastely and continently regulate all parts of our life. But he expressly forbids fornication, to which all lust tends, in order through the foulness of fornication, which is grosser and more palpable, in so far as it brands the body also with its mark, to lead us to abominate all lust.

Therefore, the Lord sufficiently provided for us in this matter when he established marriage, the fellowship of which, begun on his authority, he also sanctified by his blessing. From this it is clear that any other union apart from marriage is accursed in his sight; and that the companionship of marriage has been ordained as a necessary remedy to keep us from plunging into unbridled lust.¹⁰

Divorce Due to Desertion

The church recognizes one other biblical ground for a legitimate divorce: willful desertion that cannot be remedied. Jesus did not speak of this ground for divorces, but His apostle, Paul of Tarsus, did, in 1 Corinthians 7. Some view this ground as inferior to that of adultery, and a few even reject willful desertion as a biblical ground for divorce. One’s view of Scripture will affect one’s view on this issue. If a person accepts the inspiration and infallibility of the Scriptures, then it cannot stand that what Jesus said in Matthew carries more authority than what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians. Both men spoke from God ([2 Pet. 1:21](#)) and both men complement each other’s teaching in reflecting the Holy Spirit’s inspiration ([2 Tim. 3:16-17](#)).

In fact, Paul makes it quite clear that the Lord Jesus Christ led him to certain ideas about marriage, desertion, and divorce, while in other places he spoke from his own understanding of the will of God. In both cases, we have the reliable Word of God: the words of Christ while He was on earth, and the words of the Holy Spirit speaking through the apostle Paul (cf. v. 40). Our understanding of Scripture, therefore,

places Christ's and Paul's statements on equal ground. Both are the inspired Word of God. If one accepts the inspiration of the New Testament, then one must accept that willful and impenitent desertion is a ground for divorce equal to that of adultery. Here is what Paul wrote concerning desertion and divorce in [1 Corinthians 7:10-16](#):

To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.

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. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. 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. 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. For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?

Paul's instructions are straightforward, if not obvious at first glance. He sets forth four principles concerning marriage, desertion, and divorce.

1. Generally, husbands and wives should not leave (desert) or seek to divorce their spouses ([1 Cor. 7:10-11](#)).
2. If a person leaves a spouse for a reason other than adultery, that person should:
 - a. be reconciled to his/her spouse;
 - b. if not, he/she should remain separated without seeking divorce and
 - c. without remarrying another person ([1 Cor. 7:11](#)).
3. If a Christian is married to an unbeliever (non-Christian person), the believer should not leave nor put away the unbelieving spouse, if that spouse is content to remain married ([1 Cor. 7:12-14, 16](#)).
4. If an unbelieving spouse leaves and seeks a divorce, then the Christian in that marriage is "not enslaved" (i.e., not bound to remain married), and may divorce the absentee spouse after indication is given that the absent spouse does not intend to return to the marriage ([1 Cor. 7:15](#)).

In summary, Paul teaches that Christians, even those "unequally yoked with unbelievers" ([2 Cor. 6:14](#)), should always do all they can to preserve their marriages, both for the honor of Christ and for the spiritual good of spouse and children ([1 Cor. 7:14](#)). But if the non-Christian spouse decides either to desert the marriage or to seek divorce, the Christian does not need to work to preserve the marriage. The believer is free to grant a divorce or seek a divorce on the basis of "willful desertion"; and, having been granted that divorce, is free to remarry—but only to a fellow Christian. The deserted and divorced spouse falls into the same category as a widowed person: free to remarry, but "only in the Lord," that is, to another Christian ([1 Cor. 7:39-40](#)).

Some may say, "Well, isn't this rather utilitarian! A Christian operates by a set of rules that always benefits him, but never the non-Christian spouse! Is this not horrible revisionism of God's law and that which Jesus taught?" I will admit that at first glance Paul's teaching looks that way, but further reflection and study reveal quite the opposite.

Paul reviews in 1 Corinthians 7 the entire scope of the Christian view of marriage, divorce, and remarriage. He sets forth a very demanding and difficult charge to his fellow Christians: they were to

remain married as much as possible and as long as possible, because the gospel of Christ has called us to peace ([1 Cor. 7:15](#)). In doing so, Paul sets forth several general guidelines.¹¹

Paul, in the spirit of Jesus Christ, seeks not to make divorce easier for people, but rather to regulate divorce in this broken world, hold Christians to a higher standard, while allowing for the fact that human depravity and sin may often make marriage impossible to sustain. Paul's teaching, like Christ's, reflects the beautiful combination of a high view of God's law, a measure of sympathetic grace, and wisdom in the face of the realistic facts of life.

THE COVENANT BASIS OF MARRIAGE

Both Christ's teaching on adultery and divorce and Paul's instructions on desertion and divorce reflect God's covenantal design for marriage. The Lord ordained marriage as a lifelong covenant between one man and one woman. In Scripture we can observe four purposes to this covenant:

1. The spiritual partnership and mutual edification of husband and wife in pursuing the will of the Lord ([Gen. 2:18–25](#); [Eph. 5:22–33](#); [1 Pet. 3:1–7](#)).
2. The procreation of children and the nurture of the human family ([Gen. 1:26–28](#)).
3. The development of spiritual intimacy and the fulfillment of sexual pleasures through conjugal love ([Gen. 1:18–25](#)).
4. Protection against lusts, immorality, and sexual temptations ([Prov. 5:15–23](#); [1 Cor. 7:1–9](#); [1 Thess. 4:1–12](#)).

When we understand marriage as a covenant it follows that violations of any one of its four covenant purposes could constitute grounds for divorce. Adultery and willful desertion are obvious and potentially irreparable violations of covenant love. It would seem that there are other sins against marriage that could rise to the same level of covenant unfaithfulness as adultery and desertion, including physical abuse, refusal to work and support the family, illicit and illegal activities that threaten the safety of the family, refusal to engage in marital sex, refusal to bear or care for children, unrepentant addiction to pornography, alcoholism or drug abuse, forsaking the home for long periods of time unnecessarily, and engagement in occult activities or other spiritual actions harmful to the family. It could be argued that these violations of the marriage covenant may constitute biblical grounds for divorce, even though they are not specifically named as such in the New Testament.

In such cases, the church, through its ordained officers, must be engaged for advice, assistance, and biblical guidance. In the end, the dissolution of a marriage is never the decision of one aggrieved spouse. Just as it took four parties to contract the marriage—husband, wife, church, and state—so it will necessitate the interaction of the same four parties to dissolve the marriage. The goal, in every instance and situation, is not to make divorce easier, but rather to regulate divorce so as to honor God's law, seek for the peace of the gospel, work for the grace of reconciliation and forgiveness, protect the innocent party from undue harm, and, when necessary, to dissolve the marriage in an orderly manner.

Such are the realities of marriage, divorce, and remarriage in a broken world. To accomplish God's will in all of this, Christians will need to revamp the way they think about the covenant of marriage. Christians must reconcile themselves to a radical idea: God's call to holiness in marriage trumps their own pursuit of happiness. Gary Thomas, in his book, *Sacred Marriage*, puts forth this challenge: "What if God didn't design marriage to be 'easier'? What if God had an end in mind that went beyond our happiness, our

comfort, and our desire to be infatuated and happy as if the world were a perfect place? What if God designed marriage to make us holy more than to make us happy?"¹²

In a broken world, holiness may be more difficult to find than happiness. But such is our calling as Christians in marriage. We may not like that message, but it is biblical. As Paul wrote, "And I think I too have the Spirit of God" ([1 Cor. 7:40](#)).

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notes

1 All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.

2 Paul David Tripp, *Broken-Down House: Living Productively in a World Gone Bad* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 2009), 17.

3 Mark Regnerus, "The Case for Early Marriage," *Christianity Today* (August 2009), 23.

4 As quoted in James Dobson, *Marriage under Fire* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Press, 2004),

5. 5 Ibid., 17.

6 "Position Papers" are the result of formal and in-depth studies of theological and moral issues by pastors, elders, and theologians in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). These study committees are commissioned by our General Assembly as these needs arise. The resulting Position Papers are received and reviewed by a subsequent General Assembly, and then voted on by the body of assembly representatives from the local churches. Once approved, they hold no binding authority over the PCA, but rather reflect the mind of the denomination on a specific issue. They are published to help guide local churches concerning difficult issues.

7 Presbyterian Church of America, Paul Gilchrist, ed., "Divorce and Remarriage," *Digest of Position Papers: 1973–1993*, part five (Atlanta: Christian Education and Publications, 1993), 182.

8 Presbyterian Church in America, Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 24, "Of Marriage and Divorce" (Atlanta: Christian Education and Publications, 1990), 81–82.

9 Alexander A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith: A Handbook of Christian Doctrine Expounding the Westminster Confession* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1978), 307–8.

10 John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*: 2.8.41, vol. 1, ed. John T. McNeill and trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 405–6.

11 See Charles Hodge's summary of 1 Corinthians 7 in his *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1956), 107–8.

12 Gary Thomas, *Sacred Marriage* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Books, 2000), 13.