

Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage

v. 10/7/04 P

Because marriage and family are fundamental in the Body of Christ, every Christian should know what biblical marriage is, why God instituted marriage and how he designed it to function. Any divorce is painful and deeply impacts the individuals involved as well as their children. In keeping with godly counsel and love, the most valuable information that can be provided is a clear summary of Bible doctrine and church practice. The following is the official statement of Denton Bible Church on this subject.

What is Marriage?

1. God designed marriage as a lifelong covenant relationship^a between a man and woman for the purposes of mutual companionship,^b bearing children,^c marital satisfaction,^d and to display the nature of the relationship between God and his people.^e In marriage, one is “leaving” primary bonds of mother and father and permanently “cleaving” to a husband or wife. Marriage is enacted by a vow to this effect and its consummation, sexual union; in this way God makes the couple “one flesh.”^f Every marriage is permanently binding under God’s authority.^g

Marriage to a Non-believer

2. God’s Word commands that a believer must not marry a non-believer.^h For this reason a believer also must not date a non-believer. However, God clearly regards an already existing marriage between a believer and a non-believer to be valid, and the believer must not leave or force the non-believer to leave.ⁱ Any current marriage is binding.

Widows: “...’til death do us part”

3. Death breaks the marriage bond; therefore, a widow or widower is permitted to remarry a believer.^j

To Those Who Would Betray Husband or Wife

4. To betray a husband or wife by desertion or adultery is abhorrent to God, because God himself is a witness to the marriage vow.^k
 - a. “Incompatibility,” “falling out of love,” or “things not working out,” are never grounds for a Christian to divorce.
 - b. Actions leading to divorce are equally treacherous to children. Due to the severe consequences of divorce to children, and God’s clear concern for their welfare, their consideration alone should encourage every possible prevention of divorce and every avoidance of actions which lead to divorce.^l
 - c. It must be stated that forgiveness and total restoration of fellowship with the Lord and the church are always available to the genuine believer.^m For those who abandon a spouse or commit adultery as a believer, this forgiveness does not bring permission to remarry as long as the offended spouse is living.ⁿ

When is Divorce and Remarriage Permitted?

5. Divorce and remarriage are permitted when one’s spouse deserts the relationship or commits adultery.
 - a. Remarriage is permitted without sin for anyone who is properly divorced, meaning for biblical causes.^o Under normal circumstances, the number of times an individual has been married does not alter this principle.
 - b. In ancient Israel, it was a common misunderstanding of Deuteronomy 24:1–4 that divorce was allowed simply because something was displeasing or “indecent” about one’s spouse.^p Jesus corrects this in addressing the first of the two causes by which divorce is permissible, adultery (extramarital sexual sin). (See 5-c below for the second cause.) Normally, to cause a divorce and remarry is adultery.^q The innocent spouse, although stigmatized,^r is not guilty of adultery if he or she remarries. The phrases “except for the cause of unchastity” (Matthew 5:32) and “except for immorality” (Matthew 19:9) clarify that the offended spouse is permitted to divorce and remarry without sin.^s
 - c. The apostle Paul addresses the second cause by which divorce is permissible, abandonment by a non-believer.^t If a non-believer deserts his or her marriage to a believer, the believer need not pursue reconciliation; the believer is “not under bondage,” which means “not under obligation” or “free to act” without respect for the former marriage (see point 2 and point 9-d). *Note:* If the spouse who is innocent as to adultery and desertion also contributed to the destruction of the marriage through sin, they must repent of this and make every effort to restore the marriage. However, no sin justifies adultery or desertion; therefore, if there is no response to appeals for reconciliation, one cannot be regarded guilty of a divorce caused by the acts of desertion or adultery by another.
 - d. Although discipleship may be necessary to address wounds and sinful behavior, nothing in the Body of Christ is withheld from one who is properly divorced. The only exception is that a man who is divorced might not be permitted to serve as an elder or deacon.^u

Even Then, Divorce is Not Required

6. While divorce is permissible for the biblical reasons of adultery and desertion, divorce is not required or automatic. God’s own relationship with his people, Israel, is described as a husband-wife relationship in which Israel is constantly unfaithful to her husband, the Lord God. There is a frequent reminder that it is within God’s right to “divorce” Israel, yet ultimately he will be reconciled to her.^v Also Hosea’s marriage to Gomer is an example of an unfaithful wife being restored. This is a startling highlight of God’s plan, because restoration in the case of adultery is beyond normal expectation.^w

Page 1 notes: ^a1 Corinthians 7:39; Malachi 2:14 ^bGenesis 2:18 ^cGenesis 1:28 ^dProverbs 5:18–19; 1 Corinthians 7:2–5 ^eEphesians 5:22–33 ^fGenesis 2:18–24 ^gMatthew 19:6 ^h1 Corinthians 7:39; 2 Corinthians 6:14–15 ⁱ1 Corinthians 7:12–13; 1 Peter 3:1–2 ^jRomans 7:2–3; 1 Corinthians 7:39; 1 Timothy 5:14 ^kExodus 20:14; Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 5:18; Proverbs 2:16–18; Malachi 2:14–16; 3:5; Hebrews 13:4 ^lDeuteronomy 6:1–9; Psalms 127:3; Proverbs 14:26; Matthew 18:1–10; Mark 9:42–48; Luke 17:1–2 ^m2 Corinthians 2:5–8; 1 John 1:9; 2:1 ⁿ1 Corinthians 7:10–11; Romans 7:2–3 ^oMatthew 19:9; 1 Corinthians 7:15,27–28 ^pDeuteronomy 24:1–4 ^qMatthew 19:6,9; Mark 10:8–12; Luke 16:18; Romans 7:3 ^rMatthew 5:32 *Note:* “makes her commit adultery” translates a passive Greek verb. ^sMatthew 5:32; 19:9 ^t1 Corinthians 7:15 ^u1 Timothy 3:1–10,12; Titus 1:6–9 ^vIsaiah 50:1; 54:6–7; Jeremiah 3:8 ^wHosea 1:2; 3:1–3

The Priority of Reconciliation

7. In every instance of separation and divorce, the priority is reconciliation. In every case, except those referred to in points 3, 5, 8, 9-c and d, and 10, the divorced man or woman must remain unmarried or be reconciled to their spouse.^a A believer must not abandon a marriage, and in every case in which one does leave, committing desertion or adultery, he or she is not permitted to remarry as long as the offended spouse is living (see point 4).

Reconciliation After a Second Marriage

8. If one is divorced and a later marriage ends in death or divorce, an individual is *not* permitted to remarry any previous spouse.^b

When Must the Church Be Involved? The Instruction of Matthew 18:15–18

9. In the case of a failing marriage between two professing Christians where a husband or wife is involved in adultery or has perhaps abandoned the marriage, the biblical process according to Matthew 18:15–18 is as follows:
- Private confrontation in which the offending spouse is confronted by his or her own husband or wife.^c
 - If the offending spouse will not listen, repent, and be reconciled in the marriage, the one seeking reconciliation should bring one or two others from the church to confront them.^d
 - If the resistant spouse still will not listen, the problem must be submitted to church pastors and elders who will confront the offending spouse and restore the marriage, or determine an adamant refusal to be reconciled.^e Such a refusal demonstrates a lack of repentance and faith. The church must regard the unrepentant man or woman “as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer,”^f meaning a non-believer, since he or she has disregarded the marriage vow and shown contempt for the church.^g
 - After reasonable attempts to reconcile an individual to the church and to the marriage, the believer who has been unjustly abandoned must then be regarded as “not under bondage” to the unrepentant spouse, since this offending spouse is now regarded as a non-believer who has deserted the marriage^h (See point 5-c and 5-c Note). *Note 1:* Where the church elders have determined biblical grounds for divorce (see point 9-c), there is no necessary waiting period imposed that would subject an innocent believer to the wickedness of an unrepentant spouse. This is the effect of the command, “let him leave.”ⁱ *Note 2:* Where proper grounds for divorce have been established, the matter of who “files for divorce” is irrelevant.
 - If during this process, in the case of desertion, the offending man or woman responds, thus showing evidence of repentance and faith, the church and the spouse are obligated to forgive and work to fully restore the marriage.^j Church discipleship and counseling are strongly recommended. However, in the case of adultery, the sin itself destroys the marital bond and constitutes desertion. God likens adultery to marrying another.^k Therefore, the weight of obligation to reconcile does not exist; divorce is permitted and sometimes advised in this case. Nevertheless, as noted in point 6, it is not required or automatic.

Are There Other Biblical Grounds For Divorce?

10. The process above may also be undertaken in some cases of other sins destructive to the marriage or endangering of spouse or children, such as physical abuse, violence to children, or gross sexual perversion. These are not additional grounds for divorce or “loopholes” for easy divorce. Each case must be established through formal church discipline as acts of an unrepentant person endangering his or her family, thus leading to excommunication and constituting desertion.

What About Divorce Before Becoming a Christian?

11. Remarriage is also possible where divorce has occurred before Christian conversion.^l However, if the new believer is guilty of pre-conversion adultery or desertion, and the abandoned spouse is still unmarried and desires reconciliation, it is necessary for conversion to lead to reconciliation of that marriage. Therefore, if possible, a reasonable attempt at reconciliation should be made. If unsuccessful, the new believer is permitted to remarry.

What About Divorce Before Attending Denton Bible Church?

12. If an individual was divorced prior to attending Denton Bible Church, a conversation with a Denton Bible Church elder or member of our pastoral staff is necessary for mutual understanding of those circumstances. Guidance will be given based on a former church’s determination if it was of similar orientation, or in the absence of an evangelical church, based on what a biblical church would have determined with the information currently available. If those circumstances are in doubt, remarriage may not be supported.

Premarital Sex

13. Premarital sex is a presumptuous sin and is incompatible with Christian marriage preparation and sexual purity. Before a marriage can be performed in this case repentance and abstinence will be expected for at least six months or until the couple’s wedding date if it is more than six months away. There is no biblical basis to regard premarital sex and/or pregnancy as grounds for marriage. In these cases, repentance, accountability, and discipleship are necessary before marriage.^m

Cohabitation

14. Cohabitation is also sin because it is an arrangement that is not above reproach. Unrelated men and women are not permitted to live in the same dwelling even in the case of “platonic” relationships or for financial convenience.ⁿ

Premarital Counseling is Always Required

15. Before the wedding date all couples are required to take the full course of premarital counseling at Denton Bible Church if they will be married by a Denton Bible Church pastor. This is as much a requirement for multiple marriages as for first marriages. Premarital counseling has proven to dramatically reduce the incidence of divorce and is not optional. Couples who remain associated with Denton Bible Church should also receive one year of mentoring after their wedding. Premarital counseling from other churches is acceptable if approved by Denton Bible Church elders.

Approved by Tom Nelson & Board of Elders 7/16/02

Page 2 Notes: ^a1 Corinthians 7:10–11 ^bDeuteronomy 24:1–4 ^cMatthew 18:15 ^dMatthew 18:16 ^eMatthew 18:17a ^fMatthew 18:17b ^gAlso refer to 1 Corinthians 5:1–5,9–13 ^h1 Corinthians 7:15 ⁱ1 Corinthians 7:15 ^j2 Corinthians 2:5–11; Matthew 6:14; 18:21–35; Mark 11:25; Luke 17:3; Ephesians 4:32 ^k1 Corinthians 6:16 ^l2 Corinthians 5:17 ^m1 Timothy 5:2; 1 Thessalonians 4:3–8; 1 Corinthians 6:12–20 ⁿPhilippians 2:15; 1 Thessalonians 5:22; Titus 2:2–8