

# UNITING WHAT GOD DIVIDES

## Divorce & Marriage – What does the Bible really say?

by Bruce Woolard

May each reader who has the blessing of a godly and supportive spouse give true thanksgiving to God. May we each work to make our marital relationship bring honour and glory to our wonderful Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. May the Lord enable us to demonstrate His grace to those who have not been so blessed. The key to a successful marriage is given to us in Ephesians 5:22-33. A man is to love his wife even as Christ love the Church (2 Timothy 2:13). The husband and wife ought to submit to God and to give honour and respect each to the other. The man in the relationship is considered to be the head or source of the family. This does not imply that the husband usurps greater authority than the wife. It simply means that as the head of the family “the buck ends with him”.

This booklet is not intended to promote divorce but to guide the reader away from the influence of an incorrect concept regarding marriage. Marriage is not a “sacrament”. A couple should do all within their power to stay together. Let them not depart. Divorce is never pleasant. Divorce is painful. The writer to the Corinthians says that divorcees shall have trouble in the flesh (1 Corinthians 7:28).

What God has joined together let no man put asunder (Matthew 19:6). It is with these words that a marriage officer concludes a wedding ceremony. The question that begs an answer is “Does God unite every couple who marries?” Marriage has been designed for the well being of all mankind. It is only with God’s help that we can make a success of our relationship. Surely it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to realise that God does not unite every couple who say “I do”. In some instances it would have been better for some people to have not met, never mind be married. If some marriages are made in heaven they still have to be worked out on earth. Some women get married because they do not like to spend their evenings alone and then get divorced for the same reason.

### UNPARDONABLE SIN

Divorce is not an unpardonable sin. There are only two situations mentioned in the Bible in which a man could not divorce his wife. Firstly, if a man slandered his wife concerning her virginity (Deut. 2:13-19). If he did so, the right of divorce was lost. Secondly, if a man seduced an unengaged virgin he was to marry her and never divorce her (Deut. 22:28-29). What is important when reading the Bible is to understand that divorce was the end of a marriage, otherwise it would be a separation and not a divorce. The dictionary defines divorce as “the ending of a marriage.” Many sincere Christians and pastors would say “the Bible condemns divorce from Genesis through to Revelation”. What does the Bible really say about divorce? We have to take the time to prove and examine all things (1 Thessalonians 5:21). Like any other failure and sin divorced people can find forgiveness and wholeness. They

do not have to live as second degree Christian citizens in the Christian church. God's grace includes unconditional forgiveness.

## **DIVORCE CONTROVERSY**

Jesus, in His earthly ministry, was confronted with the controversy of divorce. This great controversy was known as the "Hillel and Shammai Dispute". Hillel taught that a Jewish man could divorce his wife for any cause whatsoever. Shammai on the other hand held to the view that a man could not divorce his wife for every cause but for the one cause of fornication or adultery. The Jewish people considered the right to divorce as a right to remarriage and this was accepted without question by all in Israel. The question posed by the Jewish leaders to Jesus contained not the right to remarriage but only the right to divorce. The Pharisees wanted to know which side of the controversy Jesus was on. It was the prevailing custom to divorce and remarry without number. Hence the strategy was to make Jesus unpopular. When one considers these two extremes, Hillel claimed that you could divorce your wife for petty reasons, Shammai took the extreme view based on adultery only as a grounds for divorce (the Lord, in Mark 10 :1-12 deals with this controversy). He refers to the bill of divorcement issued by Moses as a means of resolving marital conflict. Jesus refers to Hillel's position and says that if a man divorces his wife for a petty reason he causes her to commit adultery with another man that she marries. Jesus, like Shammai, draws attention to the justification of divorce based on extreme cases. As an example of an extreme case, fornication and adultery is listed. If we put this dispute into context we are saying that multiple marriages and divorces based on fickle emotions and attitude changes is not acceptable by God. We perpetuate adultery when such a practice and attitude prevails. The basis of a death and an ultimate divorce should be for a justifiable reason. The word fornication is the Greek word "*porneia*". This word means immoral. Any immoral act in a marriage relationship brings death to the union. If a man should commit adultery with another woman he breaks his oneness and union with his wife. This is very descriptive but nevertheless it is necessary to mention that sex in a relationship makes two people one. This oneness in intercourse is broken when a man or a woman sleeps with another. The union of marriage is dissolved at that moment and therefore divorce becomes the result of a broken union. If a man beats his wife or is unfaithful to his wife or emotionally abuses his wife, he is also acting in an inhumane and immoral (*porneia*) manner. Based on a deduction of the dialogue of Matthew 5:31-32 and Mark 10:1-12, it is logical to conclude that Jesus accepted that divorce was necessary because of a broken union. In our modern context we need to understand that the death of a marriage does not occur when the law grants a divorce settlement. The marriage is already dead when a union is broken and if an act of immorality has occurred.

## **BILL OF DIVORCEMENT**

In the Old Testament Moses gave a bill of divorcement as a legal means of dissolving a marriage. He did this because of the hardness of people's hearts. As a matter of fact the following words were contained in an official divorce settlement given in ancient times: "*On the first day of the week of the month of April and in the year 3900 I, Emiel Isaacson, who am also called the son of Jacob, of the city of Gaza, do hereby consent with my own will being under no restraints and I do hereby release*

*and send away and put aside my wife, Rachel, who is also called the daughter of Rathkeal who are this day in the city of Salem by the river of Jordan who has been my wife in time passed and thus I do release her and send her away and put her aside that she may have permission and control over herself to go and be married to any man that she may desire and that no man shall hinder her from this day forward. She is permitted to any man and this shall be to her a bill of dismissal and a document of release and a letter of freedom according to the law of Moses and Israel. Michael, the son of Zinriël, is my witness.”*

This bill would be read by the rabbi in the synagogue. It would be signed and the woman was told to remove her rings and spread out her hands to receive the divorce bill which her husband would place in her hands saying *“This is your bill of divorce and you are permitted to any man.”* The woman then closed her hands and handed the document to the rabbi who read it a second time and pronounced excommunication upon anyone who would attempt to invalidate it.

So we can see from the above that divorce was not taken lightly. It was very serious and even before the birth of Christ it was practiced as an acceptable method of dissolving a marriage that had broken down.

### **THE ABRAHAM CRISIS**

Most pastors and Christian leaders overlook the story of Abraham in terms of his dilemma. Abraham was married to Sarah, his wife. She could not have any children. Yet God had promised Abraham that he would make him a father of many nations. One can only imagine the mockery that Abraham endured among the country folk whom he met. Abraham means “father of many”. So when Abraham met strangers and they asked him what his name was you can picture the frowns and the sniggers that would spew from the mouths of his contemporaries. They most likely would say “Your name means father of many and yet you have no children?” This embarrassment was extremely hurtful to Sarah his wife. She proposed that they consider taking her concubine or servant by the name of Hagar as a surrogate mother. At one time Abraham even requested that his servant Eliezer be appointed as his heir because he had no son. Abraham eventually became the father of Hagar’s child and they named him “Ishmael”. Not many years later Sarah conceived and gave birth to a son, Isaac. After some time Sarah noticed that Hagar and her son Ishmael made fun of her son, Isaac. She was so incensed by this behaviour that she implored Abraham to make a choice between her and Hagar. Abraham was a man in crisis. So he turned to God “What should I do?” he cried. Galatians 4:21-31 gives us some insight into Abrahams’ crisis. The first child namely Ishmael, was born out of bondage, Isaac the second son was born out of freedom. The choice was made. Abraham sent the woman of bondage away and cleaved to his wife, Sarah. The lesson is very clear. Abraham had to make a choice as to who he really loved. Hagar was a woman of convenience for Abraham’s selfish ambition and for his distrust in God’s promise, and Sarah was the woman he loved. How often we find couples in bondage to each other in the union of marriage. We can’t blame God for a failed marriage. Too often people make choices when they are young and immature. Does this mean that a poor choice in one’s youth should leave one a prisoner in bondage for the rest of one’s life? Of course such sentiment does not apply to those who treat marriage and love lightly. For there are some who are promiscuous and loose in their lifestyle who may want

freedom only to indulge in their own sensual desires. On the other hand there are others who find love for the very first time in their life and are faced with a crisis similar to that of Abraham. They are married and unhappy. Then they meet someone who they sincerely fall in love with. Do we insist that these people remain unhappy for the rest of their lives? Or like Abraham, do they have a choice to determine the difference between bondage and freedom? (Please read Galatians 4:21-31) It is not a sin to fall in love.

### **DID GOD GET DIVORCED?**

Do you know that God divorced Israel and gave her a bill of divorcement? For those who propagate the view that a marriage that is in turmoil and the parties who are incompatible can not be dissolved through divorce, need to consider the record found in Isaiah 50:1 and Jeremiah 3:8. God Himself divorced Israel and took a new bride (the Body of Christ). The Christian church is presented to God as a chaste virgin. (2 Corinthians 11:2) When God has completed and fulfilled His commitment to the church (when the rapture occurs, 1 Thessalonians 4:11-18) then God will recommence the restoration of the nation of Israel (Romans 11:25-26).

### **DO NOT REMARRY YOUR FORMER SPOUSE**

Out of ignorance and poor advice many divorced couples have been encouraged by the church to remarry each other. In ancient times Jewish couples were forbidden to remarry a spouse that they had divorced. (Deut. 24:1-24)

### **UNBELIEVERS IN MARRIAGE**

Paul the Apostle in 1 Corinthians 7:10-16 gives some sound advice in terms of Christians who are married to unbelievers. Many believers were concerned that they were married to unbelievers and they thought that their children would be considered illegitimate. The apostle consoles them and declares that the unbelieving husband is considered to be living in a just and lawful relationship even if he is an unbeliever. (1 Corinthians 7:14 says that he is sanctified by the wife). This means that the relationship is regarded as pure. However if an unbelieving spouse cannot accept the faith of the believer and desires a divorce, the believing spouse should let such a partner leave knowing that he or she is free to remarry. The apostle says that a brother and a sister are not under bondage in such cases. (1 Corinthians 7:15) The reference to bondage obviously means freedom to remarry.

## DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

There is much confusion concerning divorce and remarriage. Some teach that there is no such thing as divorce. According to some you can only be married once in a lifetime. Others say that you may remarry only if your mate dies. There are those who teach that if you were divorced before you were saved, that it is all right, while others say that “you are living in adultery.” Some say that you may divorce for “fornication” but that you cannot remarry. And there are those who teach that in a divorce there is “no innocent party.” The issue of divorce and remarriage is indeed a controversial one. This issue has split many churches.

Let us “look through the Bible” to see what it has to say concerning divorce.

**GENESIS:** God instituted the first marriage in the Garden of Eden with one man and one woman. This was the plan of God for marriage. God had joined them together and what else could they do? Could there have been divorce in the garden? Who else was there?

Next we see “faithful” Abraham (Galatians 3:9) divorcing his wife at the command of God (see Genesis 16:3; 21:10-14; Galatians 4:20).

The fact is that there is *nothing* in the book of Genesis against divorce.

**EXODUS:** In the book of Exodus a neglected wife may leave her husband (21:11). One should take special notice how that divorce is regulated by the law while the practice was taken for granted. Would some then suggest to us that God is *regulating evil*? Certainly not. And although this book is filled with “rules and regulations” there is *nothing at all* against divorce.

**LEVITICUS:** In the book of Leviticus the **PRIEST WAS NOT TO MARRY** a divorced woman. Much is often made of this passage but it should also be noted that they were also **FORBIDDEN TO MARRY WIDOWS** (Leviticus 21:7,14). These rules applied *only* to the priests and *not* to everyone. The very fact that the priests had *special* rules regarding this makes it clear that those *not* in the priesthood didn’t.

**NUMBERS:** Numbers 30:9 lists the divorced women right along with the widows and not with the outcasts and abominable of Israel.

**DEUTERONOMY:** In Deuteronomy a man who divorces his wife was to “Let her go... and be another man’s wife” (24:2). The reason for the divorce, according to the passage, is that there was “no favour” and “*some* uncleanness.” These could not have been sexual impurities because they were dealt with by death, *not* divorce (adultery 22:22; fornication 22:13-21). It should be noted that according to 24:1-4 God *recognised* divorce papers.

God so recognises the divorce and remarriage that *former* mates *cannot* remarry (although that is actually what some counsel people to do: divorce their present mate and remarry their former). The fact is that they are *not* as some would say “still married in God’s sight.”

There is nothing in Deuteronomy *against* divorce.

**JEREMIAH:** Although all divorce is a *result* of sin, not *all* divorce is *sinful*. In Jeremiah 3:8 God divorced His wife (the sin here was on Israel's part). That is indeed a strange thing for God to do if it was *forbidden* for one to put away his wife for *any cause*. Some folks would have a hard time recognizing the fact that God was a divorcee. Where does this leave the "no innocent party" doctrine? (It is also interesting to note along these lines, that Matthew 1:19 tells us that Joseph was minded to "put away" his wife Mary while at the same time being called a "just man.")

**MALACHI:** In Malachi 2:16 Israel *forsook* their wives to marry daughters of strange gods. To quote this verse for *all* divorce, as many do, is just as much private Bible interpretation as quoting Deuteronomy 7:3 and Ezra 10:11 to prove that God is against *all marriage*. In Deuteronomy 7 God is against marriage because of the *kind* of marriage it was. In Malachi, God was against divorce because of the *kind* of divorce it was.

**MATTHEW:** Matthew is a Jewish book concerning the kingdom of heaven. In Matthew 5:32,22 and 19:3-12 Christ is (don't forget the rest of the Sermon on the Mount) establishing the "constitution" for the Millennium. These passages (as do their parallels in Mark 10 and Luke 16) are in view of the fact that God has *joined* couples together. Not ALL couples are joined by God. Adam and Eve were. Men and women will be during the Millennium while Christ is here on earth. Today men and women are *joined* together by "preachers", "priests" and "justices of the peace" but not *by* God.

**ROMANS:** Of recent, Romans chapter 7 is usually a key passage used by those who promote the ROMAN doctrine of "ONCE MARRIED, ALWAYS MARRIED." This passage has *nothing* to do with divorce. No divorce is mentioned in the passage. There had been no divorce papers given! The woman *while married*, marries another. If as some teach, the woman was "divorced" and remarriage is adultery, why do you think that God would have given Moses authority to tell a woman it was all right to become an adulteress?

It should be remembered that this passage is written to THOSE WHO KNOW THE LAW! God giving a woman permission to commit adultery and recognizing her marriage as lawful is absurd. Some accuse us of "explaining away the Bible," but a text out of context is a pretext.

**1 CORINTHIANS 7:** This is a chapter written by Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles (Romans 11:13), of whose (Paul's) writings we will be judged (Romans 2:16). This chapter is dealing with marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Let us take a very BRIEF view of the verses which pertain to the subject of this article.

Vs 8, 9 – The widows and unmarried can marry (a divorced person is unmarried – see vs.11).

Vs. 10 – Saved couples should remain married

Vs. 11 – If they don't, then let them remain unmarried or remarry each other.

Vs.12 – Unsaved that will remain with the saved should be allowed to, they may be won to God.

Vs.15 – If the unsaved partner leaves there is nothing the saved can do but let them go. Therefore the saved partner is *not under bondage!* Bondage is a reference to the marriage (see Rom. 7:2; 1 Cor. 7:27). God has called us to *peace*. This is the *key* (Amos 3:3)

Vs.26 – Do not seek a divorce (Note that “loosed” in this verse means divorced). There are only two things which can *loose* the *bonds* of marriage: death and divorce. This verse could not mean “death”. (Of course you shouldn’t try to kill your mate).

Vs. 28 – It is *not* a sin for divorced person *or* a virgin to marry.

Vs. 39 – It is not a sin for a widow to marry.

**TIMOTHY:** According to 1 Timothy 4:1-3 ‘forbidding to marry’ is a doctrine, not of Paul, but of devils.

God said that it was not good that man should be ALONE (Genesis 2:18). Now suppose if you would, just for a moment, that Eve had left Adam for some other man. Could some “evil” that Eve did, change that which was “good” for Adam? Does God have a system whereby the divorced must live in “celibacy?” That is a Roman doctrine is it not? Isn’t it a form of *penance* for past sins? God forbid! Must one atone for the sins of their mate? Have some forgotten that it is God, and God alone that forgive sins? Even if sin had been committed – it *can* be forgiven.

**NOTES OF INTEREST:** Did you know that a woman could be a widow and her husband still be alive? (cf. II Samuel 14:5; 20:3; Isa.54:4-5). It doesn’t take a *literal* death to end a marriage (I Tim. 5:6)

Did you know that it was possible for a man to have a wife and *not be married?* (See Deut. 24:1; Matt. 1:20; I Cor. 7:36; Isa. 54:1).

**DAVID AND BATHSHEBA:** David had Bathsheba’s husband killed and married her. God forgave him. Then could God forgive a man for marrying a divorced woman (if it were a sin) if he does not kill her former husband? When God forgives, He forgives fully. There are NO second class believers. Not of works lest any man should boast! If God could do this for David “under the law” surely He could do no less “under grace”.

Some preachers will take a couple married the second time into their membership but would not marry them. Some will not let them serve within their local church. They are to some degree *unacceptable!* That is except for their *money!*

**I TIMOTHY 3:** What about the Bishop being the “husband of one wife?” Does this mean that a divorced and remarried man cannot be an elder? No. His qualification is a standard against the common Old Testament practice of polygamy. How can we be sure? There are two clear passages with which we can compare.

Deuteronomy 24:4 teaches us that when a man divorces his wife she become his *former* wife. (It is important to notice that they are not, as some would say “Still married in God’s sight.”) If he remarries he therefore has only *one living wife!*

In John 4:16-18 Jesus told the woman at the well that she was correct about having *no* husband. She had had *five* husbands. But they were *no longer* her husbands. She had *none*. Now if she were a man and had *no* wives and remarried, how many living wives would there be? ONE! She would have *fully* qualified for at least “the husband of one wife” clause of the qualities of a Bishop.

Is it not amazing that a man, before he is saved, can commit fornication with countless women (never getting a marriage license with any of them) and then finally get saved and “settle down” with one – he is acceptable to many as an elder. BUT, if a man has been faithful to one “legally wedded” wife and she leaves *him* – he can never become an elder if he legally remarries! The first man acted of his own will in his “sins”. The second was acted upon. I encourage those who so reason to return for a FRESH look at the Scriptures.

*Salvation is by God’s grace through faith alone (Ephesians 2:8)*

#### REFERENCES:

Clyde Pilkington – Divorce & Remarriage  
Billy Graham – Christian Counselors Handbook  
Holy Bible – King James Version  
Bruce Woolard – When Two Equals One  
Speakers Manual – Quips & Quotes  
St Marks – Wedding Ceremony

# ADVICE FOR THE NEWLY DIVORCED

1. *Don't deny or suppress your feelings.* You will need to do "grief work". Keep in mind that mourning the death of a relationship is a process that leads to healing. Give yourself time to heal.
2. *Keep busy.* Force yourself back into the mainstream of living. Start getting involved in church activities.
3. *Refrain from rushing into another intimate relationship on the rebound.* The break-up of another relationship before you have worked through your divorce can be doubly devastating.
4. *Pray for your former spouse and pray for strength each time you may encounter him or her.* Encounters may thus become less painful for you if tempered by God's love in you heart.
5. *Seek counselling.* If you or your children are experiencing pain so great you can't live with it, seek out a pastor or professional counselor to help you deal with it.
6. *Surrender to God the anger and resentment you feel.* These emotions are devastating if harboured continually. Ask for God's forgiveness.
7. *Ask for God's guidance as you redefine your personhood.* As you pick up the pieces of your shattered life, God alone can lead you from the valley of despair to a new sense of self and give purpose and meaning to your life as a single person. Growth is not only possible but also exciting.
8. *Plan new activities for the painful holidays.* Perhaps family gatherings will not be the same as they were before the divorce. Planning new experiences will create memories unrelated to former celebrations.
9. *Reach out and help other people.* By helping others, you learn to love yourself and live again.
10. *Stay close to your children.* Communicate; be attentive to their grief.
11. *Suggested devotional readings:* Jeremiah 29:11-13; 2 Corinthians 1:3-5; Ephesians 4:23-24; Ephesians 4:30-32; 1 Peter 5:7

## HOW TO HELP YOUR CHILD WITH DIVORCE

1. *Tell your child how you feel even if you can't fully explain the feeling.* It's okay to let your child see you cry. Say, "I'll talk about it when I'm able".
2. *Give gentle explanations, but tell the truth.* When children are not given facts about the divorce, their imaginations will fill in the missing pieces and they may blame themselves for the divorce.
3. *Don't weaken the child's relationship with the other parent.* Don't use your child as a go-between or a means of getting even with your former spouse. Parents shoot an arrow through a child's heart when they talk negatively about each other.
4. *Don't try to make the child open up.* Be available, accepting and non-judgmental. Most importantly, LISTEN. Love is the most important healing factor.
5. *Be open to your child's need for physical warmth.* Touching will comfort and reassure the child of your love.
6. *Encourage the child to talk about his or her feelings with a trusted adult.* Don't tell the child what these feelings should be. Their confusion and pain are real.
7. *Keep the lines of communication open with your children.* They are working through some of the same intense feelings you are.
8. *Encourage the family to accept God's love and yours.* Divorce in a family does not necessarily mean the parents do not love God.
9. *Don't assume that a child who has experienced divorce in the family is destined to have emotional problems later.* Be attentive, however, to your child's spiritual life and mental health.
10. *Expect the feeling in a divorce to be similar to those when there is a death in the family.* Realise though, that a family often receives more support after a loss by death.
11. *Seek professional help if the child is highly upset.* For most young children, healing after a divorce takes about one year. Time doesn't necessarily heal all wounds.

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