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Divorce...is it for Christians?

Many Christians reject divorce outright. Marriage, they say, is for life, and can't be sundered. Divorce is sin. What does the Bible say?

by James McBride

Divorce, in our western world, affects at least one in three marriages. It is costly both to those concerned and to the state. But divorce also implies great distress, and even many Christian marriages end in divorce. Other Christians, however, reject divorce in any circumstance. But however we interpret his words, Jesus Christ himself agreed that divorce is a possibility - given a certain scenario. Let's examine the Bible's guidance on this vital matter.

But first let's make plain that divorce denotes failure. It's the mark of a failed marriage. God detests it. And every stop ought to be pulled out to bring harmony into a discordant marriage to prevent its breakdown.

The human reasons for the preservation of a marriage reflect what God thinks - for He hedged marriage around to ensure a stable society. Divorce means instability. It results in the break-up of a family, seriously affecting the extended family - and ultimately the decay of national stability. The historian Edward Gibbon, for example, cites it as a factor in the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. Without regulation there's a restless bed-hopping which results in an unhappy populace and confused, miserable children. And the cost to the national purse is multiple billions annually.

The Bible, of course, recognizes that marriages can fail. At some unrecorded point in history the concept of divorce was introduced, and by the time of Moses divorce was a recognized institution. It recognized that, given human nature devoid of the Spirit of God, married people could come to the place where they simply could not live together. Jesus summed it up thus: *"Moses permitted divorce - because of the hardness of your heart"* (Matt 19:8).

Clearly, divorce is to be discouraged - but in a far from perfect world where imperfect men and women physically, mentally and emotionally abuse and are abused in marriage

it's a necessary evil!

Spirit-led Marriage

But what of Christians? We are urged to *"live by every Word of God"*. So, what do the Scriptures teach? The bottom line is that God expects a much higher level of behaviour from His own people - those who have repented and been given His Spirit - than from "the world". That does not mean it's easy! Given the vagaries of human nature - even converted human nature - a successful marriage requires tough discipline and hard work.

Each of us comes to a marriage with pre-set patterns of behaviour accumulated through some decades of our development. Inevitably there will be clashes! However, given the mind-changing action of God's Word in the Christian, partners in a Christian marriage will converge in Christ-like behaviour. Problems can be solved in a godly and Biblical way. Life's inevitable crises can be faced with God's help.

God's Spirit in us advantages us above all others. The Spirit can mobilize in the Christian all those virtues which enable a marriage to thrive. It can release true loving service, a spirit of forgiveness and mercy, toleration, humility. The work of grace engendered by the Holy Spirit in the Christian - as he or she co-operates with the Spirit - enables a marriage to blossom into a beautiful and fruitful relationship that can survive all that human nature and life throws at it.

However, both partners don't always live Christ-like. The Spirit in us ebbs if we neglect the "means of grace" or fail to actively apply godly principles. And some Christian households will inevitably reach the edge of divorce.

Biblical Divorce

Is there, then, any circumstance in which a Christian couple may divorce?

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[Elsewhere we have dealt with the matter of divorce and remarriage before conversion. Divorce in such circumstances is not sin, even though it highlights glaring personal defects which ought to be carefully examined - and righted - before any further marriage.]

One clear Bible teaching is that in a “mixed” marriage - one in which only one partner is a believer - the Christian is obliged to do all in his or her power to maintain that marriage intact. It has been known in some churches for the Christian to be urged to summarily divorce the unconverted partner. This is usually gross sin, and those who offer this advice which is contrary to Scripture will face divine enquiry!

The apostle Paul, however, makes it clear (I Corinthians 7:12-16) that when a non-Christian partner insists on ending a marriage the Christian, having made every effort to save the marriage - for he or she will answer to God! - ought not to block a divorce. As Paul wrote: “*For God has called us to peace*” (v.15).

The unbelieving partner, though, must take note that by leaving the Christian home he or she is removing him or herself from divine care. Even the children will in Bible terms become “*unclean*” (v.14), if removed from the Christian influence! It should here be noted that such a “mixed” marriage is likely to result only when one partner is converted after the marriage. For God’s instruction is that a Christian must marry only a believer (v.39). Paul here draws on clear principles laid down in the Old Testament. A man or woman should be careful, therefore, to marry one in whom the fruits of the Spirit are clearly evident.

Divorce Between Christians

For Christians, marriage is *for life*.

That’s the stark reality of a marriage between two believers. Certain passages of Scripture have been used to counter this teaching, but as we will explain these are readily understood when placed in perspective.

Marriage is an agreement, a covenant. It is a solemn undertaking to unite two different people and in time to make them one - physically (through children), emotionally, intellectually and in their dreams and aspirations. Within this, in Christian marriage, each party contracts to give himself or herself unreservedly to the other - 100% in both directions!

To fulfil the divine purpose for marriage this means a life-time commitment, unreservedly. It means that if we are to be “*spotless*” at the return of Christ and our resurrection into the Family of God a Christian marriage cannot be dissolved. For whatever the challenges we face there is always a way to meet them. Wrote Paul “*God will not*

allow you to be tested above what you are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape that you may be able to bear it” (I Corinthians 10:13). Not avoid, but bear, it.

Not that troubles won’t come. They will. But God guarantees that we can cope! Not in our own strength but through the “means of grace” He has made available to His children. We have the intercession of Jesus Christ (Romans 8:26-27). We have the Word of God to be a light to our path (Psalms 119:105). We can pray (Philippians 4:6) and fast and fellowship and counsel. And if we diligently and prayerfully apply God’s Word in our marriage it will become successful. Such a marriage doesn’t “just happen”!

The End Of The Road

But what if the marriage reaches impasse? What if one or both Christian partners neglect God and His Word and the means of grace and come to detest one another? Feel they can no longer face one another across the breakfast table?

For Christians to even contemplate divorce means they have almost reached the end of the road. Sin is involved somewhere. There has been sexual impropriety, or a drug (eg alcohol) problem, or uncontrolled emotions as anger and hatred and self-pity and an unforgiving spirit *etc.* True “*agape*” love has not been given expression. Certainly the Father and Jesus Christ and their way of life has been side-lined.

When a Christian couple reaches such a low - is divorce an option?

We must look to the Word of God for our answer! We can have all the sympathy and compassion in the world for their plight. A Church fellowship should be supportive and available. But whether the marriage can be terminated is not merely a humanitarian decision. There must be submission to God’s revealed Word.

The basic teaching of Jesus on divorce is in Luke 16:18: “*Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery*”. This same stark teaching - without “exceptions” - is repeated in Mark chapter ten.

The foundation for marriage, Jesus pointed out (Matthew 19), was God’s instruction to our first parents in Eden: “*Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined let not man put asunder*” (vv 3-8).

God’s clear intention for the newly created and sinless pair

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- both of whom had access to the Tree of Life - was that they were to remain faithful throughout their lifetime. For Adam this was over nine centuries!

But Adam and Eve sinned. They were denied access to the Tree of Life - symbolic of God's power through His Holy Spirit. And the cumulative effect over generations was that sometimes a marriage went on the rocks and the most peaceful outcome for both partners was divorce. It remains so today.

But not for Christians.

For Jesus referred His disciples to how it was "*in the beginning*". That, as Christians, is our standard. We have access to the same divine power as did our first parents, and are expected with God's help to stay married for life.

The "Exception Clause"

What then of Matthew's addition that divorce was a no-go for Christians "*except for unchastity*" (ch 19:9)? Clearly Jesus could see that on rare occasions - '*unchastity*' - even a Christian could lawfully be divorced.

Let's look at this in two examples.

Suppose a Christian has, God forbid, been unchaste - an affair, a perversion like homosexuality or lesbianism or transvestitism or child abuse or incest for example. Clearly such behaviour is sin. The Bible makes this very clear. Unless repented of and forsaken such a person cannot enter God's Kingdom (I Corinthians 6: 9-10): "*Neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor sexual perverts...will inherit the kingdom of God*". They have placed themselves outside the community of God, the Church.

In other words, the unrepentant offending party becomes in effect an unbeliever (Matthew 18:17). By his or her actions, failure to turn from their sin and having refused to react positively to wise Christian counsel they can no longer be considered to be a Christian.

We have already seen Paul's inspired remedy: if an unbeliever wants to stay in the marriage the Christian is to accept him or her. If the unbeliever insists on leaving the protection of a God-blessed family, the Christian may permit divorce and he or she may remarry if he or she wishes. But let's again emphasize that it is the obligation of the believer to do all that can be done to keep the marriage intact. It would be rare for there not to have been problems with both partners!

Learn To Forgive

But this begs the question: what if the believing partner feels unable to live with the believing partner who sinned - and who may indeed be still sinning? It's not unlikely

that there could be deep revulsion. Certainly this is a major reason for divorce among non-Christians today.

This is where it becomes tough!

In such circumstances the natural reaction is to say "Divorce him (or her)!" But Jesus had some "hard sayings" including one which is relevant, and applies to all Christians. After giving the outline prayer - the "Lord's Prayer" - Jesus chose to comment on only one of its elements. He had just said "*Forgive us our trespasses as we also have forgiven those who trespass against us*" (Matthew 6:12). He continues, "*For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses*" (vv.14-15).

That's a frightening thought!

Apply this to a breaking marriage, and Jesus is saying that we must *forgive* the offending partner! For the unconverted that can be an impossibility, hence the spawning of thousands of divorce lawyers. And undoubtedly why God permitted divorce to His nation of Israel.

But for Christians it is gloriously possible! Indeed it is of the essence of Christianity.

God, for the sake of Jesus Christ, has forgiven us the heinous crime of causing the death of the Son of God. (If I were the only one ever to break the laws of God, Jesus would have died for me alone! You too.) Forgiveness is the heart of the Gospel. If another Christian sins against us we must - certainly in most situations - unreservedly forgive. For the sake of harmony in Christ's Body, the Church, Christians ought to forgive without "demanding repentance". In a tiny measure we take upon our body and spirit the penalty for another's sin against us.

In the marriage context Paul's words are apt: "*Put on then - as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved - compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you so you also must forgive*" (Colossians 3:12-13).

Can you imagine the kind of marriage, or the kind of Church, there would be if we without exception insisted that the other person always "repents" before we forgive! As Paul wrote (I Corinthians 6:7) "*Why not suffer wrong?*"

Dealing With Disputes

Of course repentance is generally a condition of forgiveness "by rights". And where a Christian feels the situation warrants it, Jesus gave a pattern for resolving disputes between Christians. It certainly applies within marriage.

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In essence, we go direct to the one who offends us - including our partner - to sort out the problem. We do this prayerfully, patiently, unreservedly seeking God's solution. If this fails, we take along independent witnesses who have the confidence of both parties to both note the situation and to give godly counsel. Note that this need not be a 'one-off' but part of a series of such loving contacts. Always the end goal is reconciliation.

If the person still refuses to heed the complaint then the local Church becomes involved. If still unresolved the final step, said Jesus, is for the offending and unrepentant one to be considered as an "unbeliever" (Matthew 18:15-17) Clearly, we're here talking heavy stuff!

But its relevance to marriage - and to divorce - should be clear. Primarily, we must throughout our married life develop *the habit of forgiveness*. Who knows when this weapon in the Christian armory may be urgently needed! If we have learned to forgive in small matters, it will come easier when faced with a gargantuan challenge to faith. It is of note that in giving the pattern for resolving disputes, Jesus went on (vv.21-35) to discuss forgiveness in detail. He summed up: "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you [ie, make you pay all], if you do not forgive your brother [or sister] from the heart".

Guilty Of Adultery

Consider this, then. Suppose your wife entered an adulterous relationship. You confront her, and guilt-ridden and filled with godly sorrow she clearly repents. She does all she should: she breaks off the liaison permanently, she implores your forgiveness, she gets counsel and prays and fasts. *But - you cannot find it in you to forgive.*

What then? Can you seek a divorce?

Not if you follow the instruction of Jesus Christ. *He commands you to forgive.* However difficult it may be, it is your choice. He has given you His Spirit which is a forgiving Spirit, and it is always possible for one who lives in the Spirit to choose to forgive. This may be why the apostle Paul in his "marriage chapter" (I Corinthians 7) says: "Defraud you not one another [sexually] except it be with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again that Satan tempt you not again for your incontinency" (v.5). When serious problems arise in marriage fasting and prayer will aid our return to "a state of grace".

But if you persist in being unforgiving and hard-hearted *you* could be the one considered, finally, as an unbeliever. For God forgives "*all manner of sin*" - including adultery (I Corinthians 6:9-11, Matthew 12:31), but can't forgive an unforgiving heart. In a sense this denies the power and influence and nature of the Holy Spirit - that is, of God Himself. Jesus said that such "blasphemy" cannot be forgiven "*either in this age or the age to come*" (Matthew 12:32). For the Holy Spirit in us is the indwelling Christ (II Corinthians 3:17). He always forgave, even on the cross.

It's vital that we store up the "good fruit" of an attitude of forgiveness throughout our Christian life.

In the book of Hebrews we are warned: "*See to it that no one fail to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" spring up and cause trouble, and many be defiled"* (ch 12:15). Certainly an unforgiving spirit is a branch of such a root!

Adultery, then, can indeed be a legitimate Biblical reason for a marriage between Christians being dissolved. But divorce is only possible where there is no repentance by one partner - *or no forgiveness from the other*. The consequences of either negative attitude is horrendous to contemplate!

Prevention, it is said, is better than cure. As Solomon put it: "A prudent man sees danger and hides himself; but the simple go on and suffer for it" (Proverbs 22:3). If both partners follow Bible principles we won't come to the place where divorce is even contemplated.

Divorce, for Christians is unnecessary. And marriage, by the divine will, is for life.

Request a copy of:

The Edge Of Divorce - which looks at ways of avoiding divorce

Also request:

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