Introduction

Marriage is a holy institution designed and implemented by God Himself. It is not merely a commitment between two people, but rather a covenant relationship between God, the husband, and the wife. As if to underscore its importance, the Bible even portrays the special relationship between Christ and the Church as a marriage (Ephesians 5:22-33).

Marriage is the highest expression of unity between two people. The Bible goes so far as to define marriage as two persons becoming one flesh (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:4-6). When a married couple divorces, it is as if one person were torn into two. Divorce causes shattered hearts, broken families, and a splintered, traumatized society. Therefore, it is of primal importance that Christians seek the Bible as their sole authority as they approach this issue; we must understand the simple and clear commands of God, which can never be replaced by human wisdom. As a part of our understanding of God’s Word, we must also strive to support healthy marriages, to protect God’s people from this trauma, and to be sensitive, loving, and healing to people already hurt by divorce.

Definitions Of Lawful And Unlawful Divorce

The Bible recognizes two kinds of divorce: lawful and unlawful. Lawful divorce can occur in two instances:

1) When a divorce occurs as a result of adultery, and

2) When a divorce occurs after a Non-Christian spouse abandons a Christian spouse.
An unlawful divorce is one which does not meet either one of the two conditions for lawful divorce, that is, adultery did not precede the divorce, and the divorced person was not abandoned by a Non-Christian spouse.

Scriptural Support For Lawful Divorce

In Deuteronomy 24:1-4, Moses established some legal guidelines for divorce:

“1 "When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that 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 from his house, 2 and she leaves his house and goes and becomes another man's {wife} 3 and if the latter husband turns against 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 husband dies who took her to be his wife, 4 {then} her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife, since she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the LORD, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance.”

The phrase in verse one, “happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her” was a controversial one and had been interpreted in two different ways by Jewish scholars.² What did it really mean?

Jesus answers this question in Matthew 5:31-32 and Matthew 19:7-9, when the Pharisees ask Jesus’s opinion of the controversy. They ask under what conditions it is appropriate for a person to get divorced, given what Moses had written? Here is Jesus’s definitive response:

“Matthew 5:31-32 -- 31 "It was said, 'WHOEVER SENDS HIS WIFE AWAY, LET HIM GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE'; 32 but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for {the} reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

¹ “Lawful” in this document means “permitted by God” and should not be confused with the word or concept of “Legal,” which means “permitted by human governmental authority.”
² One group (called the school of Shammai) interpreted the phrase “some indecency” narrowly as meaning only “adultery.” The other group (called the school of Hillel) interpreted the phrase “some indecency” broadly as meaning anything the wife might do that would be even the least bit displeasing to the husband, including burning his dinner, or wearing her hair in an unattractive way. One Jewish scholar named Rabbi Akiba even argued that the phrase “and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes” means that the man can divorce his wife simply on the basis that he had found a woman who was more attractive to him (see Barclay’s Commentary on Matthew).
“Matthew 19:7-9 --- 7 They *said to Him, “Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?” 8 He *said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way. 9 “And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.””

From this passage we can see that divorce was never part of God’s plan; as Jesus states, “from the beginning it has not been this way.” We can also see that Moses established legal guidelines for divorce only because he could not stop hard-hearted people from cruelly abandoning their spouses; Moses did not “command” divorce as the Pharisees suggest, but only “permitted” divorce because of the “hardness” of people’s “hearts.”

From both passages in Matthew, it is clear that the only reason for a person to divorce his or her spouse lawfully is if the spouse has committed “unchastity” (Matthew 5: 32) or sexual “immorality” (Matthew 19:9). But even when a sexual sin damages a marriage, God can heal the relationship through repentance and reconciliation and make it stronger and sweeter than ever before. Even when there are biblical grounds for divorce, Christians must prayerfully seek God’s will in the matter and then only take legal action when they are assured they have a clear conscience before the Lord.

The other lawful act of divorce occurs in 1 Corinthians 7: 12-16 when the apostle Paul states:

“12 But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her. 13 And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away. 14 For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy. 15 Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such {cases} but God has called us to peace. 16 For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?”
The most relevant verse here is verse 15: “Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such {cases} but God has called us to peace.” Clearly, the Christian spouse is free from the “bonds” of marriage if he or she is abandoned by a Non-Christi

What About Other Reasons For Divorce?

Some people see these clear biblical reasons for divorce as too restrictive and argue that divorce is acceptable and even preferable for many other reasons. But such arguments are not based upon God’s Word, but rather upon human reasoning and traditions of men which Paul warns us about in Colossians 2:8: “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.”

The Bible, for example, does not recognize spouses disliking each other or spouses growing apart as reasons for a lawful divorce. By moving in repentant hearts, God can transform two distant, lonely, hurting, and angry individuals into a beautifully reconciled, compatible, loving couple. This is God’s answer for troubled marriages. However, in extreme cases, such as when one person is abusing his or her spouse and/or children, we counsel that the abused spouse should notify civil authorities at once, separate himself or herself from the abusing spouse, and seek safe shelter. Of course, in such cases, the church must also be notified, so both spouses and the children, if any, can receive counsel and assistance as soon as possible.
Avoiding Divorce Through Marriage Counseling and Training

A person who has divorced lawfully based upon the two biblical circumstances of Sexual Sin and Abandonment (discussed above) is free to marry or remain unmarried in exactly the same way as a single person who had never married would be free. The church should not consider a person who is lawfully divorced as having committed a sin since God does not consider it a sin. Still, any divorce causes trauma, and the church must not ignore such trauma, especially as divorced people re-marry.

In order to foster good marriages and prevent divorce, Henderson Hills Baptist Church will teach biblical principles of marriage, and we will require every couple who wishes to be married by one of our Elders or Pastors to successfully complete the church’s pre-marital counseling program before the wedding day. We recommend couples seek to improve their marriages through the many programs and resources the church provides (see Appendix).

What About Church Leaders Who Have Divorced?

Included in the many qualifications of an Elder in first chapter of Titus are two of particular interest concerning Divorce: 6 “namely, if any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife.” The phrase translated “the husband of one wife” in the Greek literally means that the Elder should be a “one-woman man.” We do not interpret this passage to mean that a man who has been divorced is automatically and forever banned from a position of leadership. Nor do we believe that this verse in any way excludes a single man from leadership because he has never been “the husband of one wife.” But if a man is or has been married, he must demonstrate in his life that he is a “one-woman man,” before he should be considered for Eldership or other important leadership positions.
Since an Elder (and to a lesser extent other church leaders) should be “above reproach,” the Elders and the Church should carefully consider if the divorce reveals a character flaw in the person, especially if the person was a cause of unlawful divorce. On the other hand, the divorce might reveal very little about the person, especially if he or she were a victim in a lawful divorce, were divorced before becoming a Christian, or has experienced significant growth and maturity since the divorce. In these matters, there are no easy or formulaic answers that apply to everyone. Prayer, meditation, observation guided by wisdom, and direction from the Holy Spirit are crucial in determining who God has chosen to lead His Church.

Conclusion

God absolutely hates divorce (Malachi 2: 14-16). The Church must hate it too and do everything in her power to stop it. At the same time, we must love and care for the people who are impacted by divorce, even those guilty of real sin which caused divorce. We are not called to jump to conclusions or to condemn our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, nor to treat them as second-class citizens. Instead, we are to avoid a smug superiority which might cause us to fall into sin, and we are to seek restoration, healing, and blessing for those touched by divorce, so we may all continue to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ, the Lord of marriage and of our lives.
Appendix: Other Programs and Resources to Enhance Marriage

The Marriage Retreat

Marriage Counseling

Accountability Groups

The Sermon Series available from the Media Ministry