

Neil Powell (Ed. Richard Collins)

When is divorce permitted?

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Historically, the church has offered a number of responses to this difficult question. Given that wise and godly people have arrived at different conclusions, I'm bound to say that humility is the only suitable spirit in which to address this subject. Divorce is an important, yet secondary issue. Therefore, it's essential to remember, when discussing an issue which evokes contrary opinions, that we are held together by fundamental truths which bind us together in the Body of Christ. We must not allow this issue to divide us.

So, the first thing to note is that for followers of Jesus,

1) We cannot divorce unless a spouse is at serious fault.

Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?' - Matt 19.3

Jesus' reply is a categorical 'no'. He states at the end of verse 6, 'Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.' Then in verse 8, he says, 'Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this

way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.'

Jesus insists here that God does not recognise the category of 'no fault' divorce. His words also rule out divorce for what we might call 'irreconcilable differences.' Indeed, if irreconcilable differences were even a possibility, we might think this reason would be offered in a case where one spouse came to faith while the other did not. However, Paul calls for marital faithfulness, even if we got married before coming to faith in Christ. Paul says to Christians – stay married to your unbelieving spouse. (1 Cor. 7.12b) Every marriage will go through difficult times, but if a marriage can honour God even after one spouse comes to faith, then the gospel calls on us to work through circumstantial changes and remain faithful.

Nevertheless, there are occasions when Jesus does permit divorce.

2) Christians can initiate a righteous divorce if a spouse is sexually immoral in marriage.

'Anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital

unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery. Matthew 19.9. The word 'marital unfaithfulness' is the Greek word *porneia*. It is the word often translated elsewhere in the Bible as sexual immorality.

Why does Jesus use the word *porneia*? It is a catch-all term for any kind of sex outside of marriage – heterosexual sex, homosexual or bestiality. So Jesus rules out any form of extra-marital sex.

Why does Jesus single out sexual immorality as the one ground for divorce? The most likely reason is that sex with someone who is not one's spouse is a unique violation of the 'one-flesh' union. Kevin DeYoung writes, 'Sexual sin breaks the marriage covenant because sex is the oath signing of the covenant. Having sexual experiences with someone other than your spouse is like trying to sign on someone else's dottedline. That breaks the covenant and is a ground for divorce.'

Two important conclusions flow from Jesus' teaching here.

First, it is vital to remember that whilst every divorce is the product of sin, not every divorce is therefore sinful, because Jesus permits divorce under this one exceptional circumstance. Second, Jesus' words also mean that marriage is not indissoluble. It is never God's design, but a marriage can in fact end. When Jesus says 'What God has joined together, let no man separate,' he implies that the couple can be separated.

Is this all that the Bible teaches on divorce? Most evangelicals believe that this is the only ground under which Christians might initiate a righteous divorce. Yet Paul in fact gives a second ground for divorce. It is not one in which the Christian has initiated divorce, but one where the Christian has, in effect, been divorced by an unbelieving spouse. Having called on Christians to stay in their marriages with unbelieving spouses, Paul goes on to say 'but if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances.' I Cor 7.15.

Under the Roman law of the first century, it was enough to simply abandon the marriage. Walking out with no intention of returning was to

divorce your spouse. In our culture, we differentiate between separation and divorce, but neither the Bible nor Roman law made such a distinction. Paul teaches that if a spouse is abandoned by their unbelieving partner, and if it is clear to all that the deserting spouse does not intend to return, the church should recognise that a marriage has come to an end – even if the innocent spouse is the one who has to legally begin the divorce proceedings.

Some have tried to find an irreconcilable contradiction between Jesus and Paul at this point. But a closer examination of the two passages reveals that far from contradicting each other, they complement each other because they address two distinct questions. Jesus answered the question 'when can I, as a Christian, under God, initiate a righteous divorce?' Paul is answering the question, 'what should I do as a Christian, if I have been wrongly divorced by my unbelieving spouse?' Evangelical Christians agree that these are the only New Testament texts that address the issue of divorce. However, in my next article, I will consider whether there might be other grounds for divorce.



Neil Powell

Neil Powell is the City of London Director of City to City U.K. and a chair of City to City Europe, a church planting organization.

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