

# **Divorce and Remarriage in The New Testament Church**

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## **Introduction**

God's ideal is for marriage to be a joyful, lifelong commitment of two individuals, who become one. He also intends that this love relationship will help us understand the love relationship between Christ and His bride, the church. The Bible is always realistic, and its authors are aware that some marriages fall far short of these ideals.

This paper provides a summary of the key New Testament teachings concerning divorce and remarriage. This paper addresses some seeming disagreements between these teachings. For example, on the one hand, the Bible is clear that God hates divorce [1]; and yet, on the other hand, God understands the hardness of some people's hearts and some passages mention the possibility of "righteous" divorce. This topic of potential "righteous divorce" is another area where there is a seeming disagreement within Scripture. Jesus mentions sexual immorality as a potential basis for a "righteous" divorce and Paul mentions rejection by an unbelieving spouse as a basis for divorce. Yet other passages seem to imply that divorce is always sinful.

During the New Testament period all churches were house churches. The dynamics associated with being a small intimate community provided several opportunities for them to be the body of Christ in a manner that is very different from most modern-day churches. This paper explores some of the practices of New Testament house churches as they relate to divorce and remarriage. In particular, this paper provides a summary of New Testament teachings concerning reconciliation and church discipline and discusses the implication of these practices to troubled marriages. These practices of New Testament house churches, when considered in the cultural setting of the Roman Empire, explain much of the difference between Jesus' and Paul's teachings concerning potentially acceptable reasons for divorce.

As noted above, the New Testament discusses the impact of sexual immorality and abandonment on marriage. The New Testament does not explicitly address many other types of sin which are toxic to marriage and which are regrettably common even in marriages of believers. This paper also discusses how these painful issues are addressed through the practices of New Testament house churches concerning reconciliation and church discipline.

There are some circumstances where remarriage is acceptable after a divorce. Even in these cases there may be issues the believer needs to address to ensure that he/she is in a good place to remarry. This topic is the focus of the penultimate section of this paper.

The topic of divorce and remarriage has been carefully considered by believers over many centuries. Even within the portion of the church which accepts the authority of Scripture, no consensus has been reached. As I have reviewed some of the published material on this topic, it seems to me that the relevance of the New Testament church's practices for reconciliation and church discipline has been under explored. It seems to me that considering this aspect helps resolve some of the tough theological and practical questions.

## **Why does God hate divorce?**

The harm done by divorce is commonly greater than for most other sins. Many divorced people are deeply scarred by it as are many of their children. Children of divorced parents are more likely to divorce, which extends the harm to another generation. God can heal these deep wounds, but such healing is typically an extended journey.

Divorces are not the result of a brief lapse into sin during a moment of weakness. Divorce is the result of at least one party consistently following through with the decision to seek a divorce. Divorce is also the result of at least one party consistently rejecting God's desire for repentance and reconciliation leading to character transformation.

Marriage is an institution created by God in which two individuals become one (Mark 10:6-9). Divorce breaks this God given oneness and, for those who married before God, divorce is a breaking of vows made before God.

In some respects, human marriage exists to help us understand the love relationship between Christ and His bride, the church (Eph 5:21-33). The essence of the new heaven and the new earth is the marriage of the Lamb (Rev 19:7-9, 21:1-3). We are called to be the light of the world with our light illuminating our good works so that others will give glory to God (Matt 5:14-16). Each time the bond of a Christian marriage is broken, the foreshadowing God intends the world to see of the coming marriage of the Lamb is defiled; and an opportunity for the others to glorify God is lost.

## **New Testament Passages Addressing Divorce and Remarriage**

In Matt 5:32 Jesus says "everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery" [2]. Similarly, in Matt 19:9 Jesus says "whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." These verses are very similar. Matt 5:32 focuses on the divorce causing the divorced woman to commit adultery when she remarries. (Given the limited employment opportunities for women in the first century, remarriage was often the only way for a single woman to avoid destitution.) Matt 19:9 focuses on the individual who initiates the divorce committing adultery when he remarries. Taking both verses together it is clear that remarriage will result in adultery both for the individual initiating the divorce and for the individual being divorced. Jesus explicitly combines both of these cases in Luke 16:18 where he says "Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery." God only recognizes divorce in certain circumstances. In other cases, he considers couples to still be married regardless of any divorce certificate issued by a civil authority. Therefore, he considers the new relationship to be adultery. But in cases where a divorce is acceptable to God, it is a true ending of the marriage (just like death) and the individual is free to remarry.

When Jesus mentions sexual immorality as a potential basis for righteous divorce, he is not encouraging individuals to divorce if they discover that their partner has been unfaithful. The desire to forgive and be reconciled is a key element of God's character and he wants His people to be like him. God always wants to see marriages restored based on repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation. Divorce is always a last resort and it is only an option in the case of unrepentance.

The Greek word translated "sexual immorality" in Matt 5:32 and 19:9 is *porneia*. In classical Greek this word means prostitution or being a prostitute. It became a strong insult and its meaning broadened over the centuries leading up to the New Testament period to include adultery, incest and fornication. It was also used figuratively for idolatry. Marshall Beretta writes [3] concerning this word:

In Papyri and other sources the word has the meaning of “disease,” “active excess of evil.” The Patristic period after the New Testament uses the word in various manuscripts with meanings of “fornication,” “unchastity,” “sexual impurity,” “illicit intercourse,” “prostitution,” “adultery (as grounds for divorce)” and “idolatry.”

Some older Bible translations (e.g., KJV, ASV) translate *porneia* in Matt 5:32 and 19:9 as fornication and some translations from the middle of the last century (e.g., RSV) translate *porneia* as unchastity. More recent translations (e.g., NKJV, NIV, ESV, CSB) translate *porneia* as sexual immorality. This broader translation seems appropriate given Matt 5:28 where Jesus says that “everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” This broader translation also seems appropriate given the broader meaning of the word in papyri [4] and in the early church fathers.

In arguing for this broad interpretation of the meaning of the word *porneia* I am not suggesting that thinking a single lustful thought is a basis for divorce. However, a long term, unrepentant addiction to pornography is a profound violation of a marriage not dissimilar to adultery.

In Matt 19:9 the Greek word *me* is translated “except”. This same Greek word is also used in Matt 12:3-4

(3) He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him: (4) how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests?

In verse 4 of this passage *me* is translated “but only”. This passage is referring to the law given in Lev 22:11 which says of the holy food “but if a priest buys a slave as his property for money, the slave may eat of it, and anyone born in his house may eat of his food.” This verse makes clear that the priest, his slaves and his children may all eat the holy food. Matt 12:4 uses *me* to introduce just one of the three exceptions provided in Lev 22:11. This example makes clear that when Jesus (and Matthew) list an exception to a command they are not necessarily stating all of the possible exceptions. This is consistent with the pattern of Jesus’ teaching: in general, he states God’s ideal for a situation. In contrast to Moses, he does not attempt to provide appropriate “small print” for every messy circumstance which will arise. Based on this principle it is possible that there may be exceptions other than the one given by Jesus in Matt 5:32 and 19:9. In particular, this principle may explain the apparent contradiction between these verses and I Cor 7:15 where Paul states that a believer abandoned by an unbelieving spouse is free.

I have already discussed Matt 19:9 in the context of Matt 5:32 and Luke 16:18. However it is valuable to consider this verse in its context, Matt 19:3-12.

(3) And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” (4) He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, (5) and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? (6) So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” (7) They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” (8) He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. (9) And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.” (10) The disciples said to him, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” (11) But he said to them, “Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. (12) For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it.”

In this passage Jesus responds to a question about the lawfulness of divorce by emphasizing God’s ideal for marriage: lifelong unity. Divorce breaks a union created by God. The pharisees respond by asking why Moses allowed divorce. Jesus’ reply in verse 8 is personal “Because of *your* hardness of heart ...”. This verse is directed to unbelievers who do not have the benefit of the Holy Spirit transforming their

hearts. Jesus is accepting that divorce may be the least evil outcome for hard hearted unbelievers [5]. Even so he immediately continues in verse 9 to state that remarriage after divorce results in adultery (unless the divorce was due to sexual immorality). It is clear from the context that the teaching in verse 9 applies to unbelievers as well as believers. In verse 10 the focus of the dialog moves to the disciples. Jesus notes that within the believing community some have the gift of remaining sexually pure while single.

An incident similar to Matt 19:3-9 is recorded in Mark 10:2-12.

(2) And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" (3) He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" (4) They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away." (5) And Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. (6) But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' (7) 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, (8) and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. (9) What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." (10) And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. (11) And he said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, (12) and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

There are some differences between Matt 19 and Mark 10, so it is possible that these passages are recording separate incidents [6]. A particular difference is that in Mark's account (verses 10-12) the statement that remarriage after divorce results in adultery is given privately to his disciples instead of being addressed to the Pharisees and disciples jointly. More importantly, Mark does not include the phrase "except for sexual immorality". I will discuss this difference in the next section.

In Rom 7:1-3 Paul uses marriage as an example to illustrate a point about the law.

(1) Or do you not know, brothers—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives? (2) For a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage. (3) Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.

In this passage Paul is focused on making a point about the law. Paul is clear that remarriage after the death of one's spouse is not adultery. Paul also notes the cultural assumption that living with another man while your husband is alive is always adultery. In this passage he provides no teaching concerning the possibility of a righteous divorce, which would open the door to a righteous second marriage.

1 Cor 7:1-16 is the longest passage discussing marriage in the New Testament. The first 9 verses of this passage are replying to a question the Corinthian church sent to Paul. They wanted to know if it was better for believers to be celibate. In verse 7 Paul states that each individual has their own gift. For some it is to be married and for others it is to be single (cf Matt 19:10-12). He emphasizes the importance of remaining sexually pure.

In 1 Cor 7:10-11 Paul says

(10) To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (11) (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife

In these verses Paul addresses the topic of separation and divorce for Christian couples. He explicitly states that his teaching on this topic is based on Jesus' teaching [7]. He says that Christian couples should not separate or divorce. If they do separate, which Paul considers to be sin, they should not remarry, they should continue to be open to reconciliation.

In 1 Cor 7:12-16 Paul says

(12) To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. (13) If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. (14) For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. (15) But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. (16) For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?

In this passage Paul is addressing marriages between believers and unbelievers [8]. He says that believers should remain married to their unbelieving spouses if the unbelieving spouse consents to continue to live with the believing spouse. In this circumstance the believing spouse should not initiate a divorce. Paul goes on to say that the unbelieving spouse has been (is) made holy (or sanctified) [9] by the believing spouse and that their children are holy. The exact meaning of this statement is unclear, but it does seem to indicate a spiritual blessing to the unbelieving spouse due to the marriage [10].

In verse 15 Paul goes on to say that believers are not “enslaved” or “bound” if their unbelieving spouse chooses to separate. The believer is to be at peace. He/she should not rush to assume the separation is permanent. But when it becomes clear that it is permanent, the believer is no longer “enslaved” or “bound”. Believers differ concerning the appropriate interpretation of these words. To me the most obvious meaning is that a believing spouse is free to remarry if he/she is abandoned by an unbelieving spouse. He/she is not “enslaved” or “bound” to his or her marriage vows [11]. By leaving, the unbeliever has hardened his/her heart against the believer. Jesus acknowledged that hardness of heart may result in a basis for divorce (Matt 19:8, Mark 10:5). Hardness of heart is a sin. Jesus is clear that divorce is the result of sin by at least one spouse. It should never be the believer who is the one being hard hearted.

In the Roman world separation was legally equivalent to divorce, so the abandoned spouse would be viewed as divorced by the civil authorities. Furthermore, under Roman law, in most cases, Roman citizens were required to be married, and there was a requirement to remarry after divorce or the death of their spouse [12]. It also seems that during this time period there was more economic pressure to be married than there is today, especially for women. It is likely that many unbelievers who choose to separate would enter into a new relationship fairly soon. So, in many cases, during the first century, Paul’s teaching (you are not bound if your unbelieving spouses abandons you) became equivalent to Jesus’ teaching (you are not bound if your spouse commits sexual immorality). This is because many unbelievers who abandoned a believing spouse, would also enter into a new relationship. God would consider this new relationship adulterous. It seems that long term singleness after a failed relationship is more common now than it was in the first century.

In our legal system an unbeliever can separate permanently without bothering to divorce. As noted above this was not the case under Roman law. Given this context, it is fair to interpret 1 Cor 7:15 as permitting a believer to initiate divorce proceedings when he/she has been permanently abandoned. The believer is also free to remarry. This is part of not being “enslaved” or “bound” to marriage vows. The believer should allow time to reveal that the unbeliever’s decision to separate is permanent. The final phrase in this verse says “God has called you to peace”. Similarly, Romans 12:18 commands us “if possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” Rushing to divorce is not consistent with these commands. One indicator that the unbeliever has definitely moved on is if he or she enters into a new relationship. In this case Matt 5:32 and 19:9 become relevant.

A key word in 1 Cor 7:12-13 is *suneudokeo* which is translated consents (ESV, NASB, RSV, DBY), willing (NKJV, NLT, NIV, CSB), pleased (KJV, YLT, WEB), content (ASV, HNV) and happy (NET). This range of translations is consistent with the translations offered in Thayer’s Lexicon: “to be pleased together with, to approve together (with others)” and “to be pleased at the same time with, consent, agree”. This is a

compound word combining *sun* which means with or together with and *eudokeo* which means to think well, approve, acquiesce, take delight or pleasure. This is a strong positive word with an emphasis on mutuality. In some cases where an unbelieving spouse continues to live with a believing spouse, the unbelieving spouse may have an ongoing pattern of being physically or emotionally abusive to the believing spouse. Severe abuse is evidence that the unbelieving spouse is not “pleased together with” the believing spouse. In this circumstance, the Lord may lead the believing spouse to separate [13].

The term “physically or emotionally abusive” describes a very wide range of behaviors. Furthermore, what one individual might call severe abuse, another might call mild abuse and yet another might feel that the term abuse is not appropriate. I realize that there is a high degree of subjectivity in my statement that “severe abuse” may be a basis for separation. My intent is this phrase should be interpreted in the context of a Biblical worldview such as 1 Peter 2:13 – 3:7. I encourage anyone considering separating from his/her spouse based on abusive behavior to discuss the situation with wise believers [14].

The believer should not rush into separating. I know of several women who have developed particularly deep faith while trusting Jesus in a painful marriage. The pattern of spiritual development described in James 1:2-4 [15] has born its fruit in their lives. In some cases, the marriages significantly improved. If God does lead a believer to separate from an abusive unbelieving spouse, the goal is for this separation to lead to a change in heart by the unbelieving spouse.

### **Why does Matthew mention sexual immorality as a basis for divorce and the other Gospel authors do not mention this option?**

The textual evidence that the phrase “except on the ground of sexual immorality” was in Matthew’s original text of Matt 5:32 is strong. A few ancient manuscripts omit this phrase from Matt 19:9 but several others include it.

It is important to interpret scripture in the context of scripture. So, if one passage is more detailed than another, it is reasonable to assume that the additional detail is important and that the less detailed passage does not negate anything in the more complete passage. As John notes in John 21:25, the Gospel authors had far too much source material. They all made choices to keep their gospels to a reasonable length.

It is possible that Mark and Luke did not feel it necessary to list the exception “except on the ground of sexual immorality” because the exception was so well established in that society [16]. An example of this is found in Matt 1:19 which records Joseph planning to divorce Mary because she was pregnant. He was assuming that this pregnancy was the result of sexual sin. (In that culture betrothal was such a strong commitment it required a divorce to end the betrothal). A related example is Jer 3:8 where God says he divorced Israel for her spiritual adultery. At the time of Jesus, rabbis were actively debating the acceptable grounds for divorce. Even so it appears that there was broad agreement between rabbis that adultery was an acceptable basis for divorce. (Under a strict application of Mosaic law the question was moot because the adulterers were put to death (Lev 20:10). However, the Romans had taken away from the Jews the authority to execute people (John 18:31).)

God does not want believers to treat the possibility of divorce in the case of sexual immorality as a “get out of jail free card”. Sadly, some believers seem to be pleased when they discover their spouse has committed adultery. Instead of working to heal the marriage, they rush to a “righteous” divorce. God may have guided Matthew to mention the exception whilst also guiding Mark and Luke to not mention the exception, to help believers realize that divorce, even in the case of sexual immorality, is to be a last resort.

Paul's teaching about believers divorcing (1 Cor 7:10-11) does not mention the possibility of a divorce based on sexual immorality. I will discuss this in the section below entitled "Implications of Church Discipline Process to Troubled Marriages".

### **Why does Jesus single out sexual immorality as the only basis for divorce?**

In 1 Cor 6:15-20 Paul says

(15) Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! (16) Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, "The two will become one flesh." (17) But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. (18) Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. (19) Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, (20) for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

In this passage Paul is discussing the profound unity that is created between two individuals who have sex together. When a married person commits adultery, he/she forms a bond with that person which Paul says is a sin against his/her own body. It is also a sin against the spouse's body because they are "one flesh". The word translated "sexual immorality" in 1 Cor 6:18 is the same Greek word *porneia* as is used in Matt 5:32 and 19:9. The word translated "sexually immoral person" is the related Greek verb *porneuo*. As I discussed above, the appropriate translation of *porneia* is "sexual immorality" not the narrower terms "unchastity" or "fornication".

Sexual immorality violates the core unity of marriage. Even so God wants us to seek the path of forgiveness and reconciliation. A divorce based on sexual immorality is only "righteous" if the "sinner" has consistently refused to repent. True repentance involves a profound change to our way of thinking and acting. In the case of adultery, it involves dealing with the roots that made the adulterer vulnerable to the temptation. Repentance is a decision which starts a journey of transformation. In the case of adultery there also needs to be a journey of the restoration of trust.

In 1 Cor 7:12-16 Paul discusses the case of believers abandoned by their unbelieving spouse. If the unbelieving spouse enters into a new relationship, this is strong evidence that the abandonment is permanent. Jesus never commented on the possibility of abandonment being a basis for righteous divorce. However, in his culture singleness was rare (and illegal). So, it would be common for the individual who separated to form a new relationship fairly soon. This would result in sexual immorality, which Jesus states is a potential righteous basis for divorce.

### **NT Church Approach to Reconciliation and Church Discipline**

The key New Testament passage concerning reconciliation between believers is Matthew 18:15-18.

(15) If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. (16) But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. (17) If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. (18) Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

The goal of this process is repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation. However, this does not always happen. The final step in this process (verse 17) is a summary of the church discipline process practiced by the New Testament church. In the New Testament church, the decision-making authority for discipline decisions was the full congregation, not just a group of leaders. The only punishment used by the New Testament church was exclusion from the community of faith. The decision to expel a believer

is a heavy decision. It should only be made in a humble and careful manner with much prayer. The intent of expelling a “sinner” is to communicate to the “sinner” that his sin is so severe that he is no longer part of the believing community and his salvation is in question. The hope is that this will trigger the individual to reconsider.

Usually when individuals consider the New Testament process for reconciliation and church discipline, they only consider verses 15 – 17. I believe it is also important to include verse 18 which addresses “binding” and “loosing”. The terms “binding” and “loosing” had a technical meaning in Jewish culture describing things forbidden or permitted by decisions of the rabbis. Even though Mosaic law contains both general principles and many detailed laws addressing specific circumstances, not all specific circumstances are addressed. So Jewish leaders developed regulations and traditions to address these other circumstances. This process was called “binding and loosing”. In many cases this process became extremely unhealthy. Jesus sharply criticized many of the “binding and loosing” conclusions reached by the rabbis.

As we have already noted, Jesus’ moral teaching typically focuses on key principles. In general, he (and other New Testament authors) do not provide a detailed outworking of these principles to the wide range of circumstances we encounter. In this passage dealing with conflict resolution and church discipline, Jesus explicitly gives the complete church (not just a group of leaders) authority to bind and loose. He is not asking the church to develop a set of detailed regulations addressing every conceivable circumstance. He is giving the church authority to carefully consider all the circumstances associated with a specific conflict and decide how the general principles he taught apply to the specific situation. In some cases, several general principles may be relevant. So, the church will need to receive God’s wisdom to find the appropriate balance between the relevant principles in the specific situation.

All human processes are fallible. Unhealthy congregations can misuse the church discipline process, deeply wounding the individual they judge. As will be seen in the following paragraphs the New Testament pattern of house church community life and the specific practices associated with the church discipline process combine to provide many safeguards.

In 1 Cor 5:1-5 and 9-13 Paul discusses church discipline saying

(1) It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father’s wife. (2) And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. (3) For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. (4) When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, (5) you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

(9) I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— (10) not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. (11) But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. (12) For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? (13) God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.”

This passage clearly teaches the importance of the church discipline process when an individual within the church is continuing in sin. It also teaches that the church should not judge those outside the church. The church discipline process should be conducted with a heart attitude of humility and mourning. The decision to punish (or not punish) an individual is to be made at a public meeting of the full congregation. In this passage Paul is seeking to influence the Corinthian church concerning this specific case, but he is clear that the final decision is to be made by the full congregation. It is not to be made by a group of leaders without the full involvement of the other members of the congregation.

Matt 18:16 mentions that “every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.” This statement applies to the step prior to the issue being considered by the full congregation. However, it is reasonable to assume that the phrase “tell it to the church” in the next verse includes the witnesses providing their evidence (cf 1 Tim 5:19). Presumably both sides were free to call witnesses and were free to speak in their own defense. It is likely that in some ways, the congregation acted like the jury at a trial. As noted above, the only “punishment” available in the church discipline process is to exclude the person from the church community [17].

It should be remembered that New Testament churches were small intimate groups of believers who met in homes. In order to maintain the dynamics of church life described in the New Testament it is likely that each house church had fewer than about 20 adult members. In a healthy church, these individuals know one another well and are connected to each other by deep bonds of love, respect and mutual submission. Furthermore, congregations would have typically included individuals with the gift of discernment of spirits. This gift can help to see through individuals who are expert at putting on a good public face. It is in this intimate setting that church discipline decisions were made. The process is characterized by checks and balances and involving the whole congregation in the decision process provides substantial protection to all parties involved.

Section 1.1.4 of my book, “Rediscovering The New Testament Church”, provides additional discussion of the church discipline process [18]. This book describes the dynamics and practices of the New Testament church as documented in the New Testament. Understanding these broader dynamics and practices, which are different to those of most churches today, provides context to help us understand the church discipline process as it was used in the New Testament period.

### **Implications of Church Discipline Process to Troubled Marriages**

As noted above the church discipline process was only applied to believers. This section only considers marriages where both partners say they are Christians. Paul does not mention any acceptable basis for two Christians divorcing each other (1 Cor 7:10-11). However, it is clear from 1 Cor 5, that sexual immorality is a basis for church discipline. In the case of sexual immorality, the couple should follow the path described in Matt 18:15-17. Only in the case of a hard-hearted individual who refuses to repent and seek reconciliation will the final step of the church discipline process occur, which is expulsion from the believing community. In this case, expulsion from the believing community will almost certainly also result in the spouses separating. The goal of this step is to help the sinner realize his need for repentance. In some cases, as time passes, it becomes clear that he/she is not going to repent. In this case, the relevant scripture is no longer 1 Cor 7:10-11, which applies to a believing couple, but 1 Cor 7:12-16, which applies to a believer married to an unbeliever. As previously discussed, in this circumstance divorce and remarriage are possible because the unbeliever chose separation (by choosing not to repent). Divorce and remarriage are not required or even encouraged.

One clear evidence that an individual, who has been disciplined by the church, does not intend to repent is if he or she is part of a long-term adulterous relationship. Roman law viewed separation as equivalent to divorce and required divorced people to remarry within 18 months. This, in combination with economic pressures, resulted in many individuals who became separated from their spouse entering into a new relationship fairly soon (or they might have continued the adulterous relationship which caused the church discipline). Either way Jesus’ teaching in Matt 5:32 and 19:9 would then apply: righteous divorce is possible due to sexual immorality. So, in many cases during this time period, the teaching Paul gave ended up with the same result as the teaching Jesus provided. Paul’s thread has more steps: sexual immorality; attempts at reconciliation; church discipline process results in the sexually immoral person being expelled from the community and separating from his/her spouse;

expelled individual enters a new relationship (or continues the prior adultery) confirming his/her commitment to unrepentance and committing ongoing sexual immorality; righteous divorce is possible. I suspect this is the reason why Paul did not mention sexual immorality as an acceptable basis for divorce in 1 Cor 7.

If there is physical or emotional abuse in a marriage of two believers, it is appropriate to initiate the Matt 18:15-17 process. A temporary separation is likely to be appropriate while this process runs its course. As always, the goal of this process is repentance and reconciliation. However, as with sexual immorality, this process may end up with the abuser being expelled from the believing community and the couple separating. If it becomes clear, over time, that the abuser is not going to repent and rejoin the believing community, then 1 Cor 7:12-16 becomes the relevant scripture and it is possible for the believer to divorce and remarry.

The church discipline process focuses on the sin (and unrepentance) of a particular individual. In some cases, the primary issue is deciding if a sin was committed. In other cases, the primary issue is deciding if the sin is severe enough to justify expelling the individual from the believing community. For example, the level of physical or emotional abuse in a marriage may be small, moderate or severe. Great wisdom and humility are required to decide if the level of sin is sufficient to justify expelling the individual. Making this decision is part of the authority the local church has to “bind and loose”. If the sin relates to a marriage (e.g., physical or emotional abuse), the church discipline decision implicitly also decides the righteousness of the couple separating. This in turn decides the righteousness of divorce and remarriage, assuming the sinner remains unrepentant.

In 1 Cor 5:11 Paul says “I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one.” Clearly, Paul is not discussing occasional lapses in behavior followed by repentance and forgiveness. He is discussing patterns of unrepentant behavior. He was expecting the Corinthian church to investigate these individuals using the church discipline process prior to deciding to separate from them. Some of the sins in this list (in addition to sexual immorality which we have already discussed) can directly impact marriages. Examples of this include drunkenness and reviling which can be a form of emotional abuse. Many sins not mentioned in 1 Cor 5:11 may also be an appropriate basis for initiating the church discipline process. Some of these other sins (e.g., fits of rage, dishonesty) have a toxic impact on marriage (assuming they are committed against the marriage partner). As discussed in [19], expulsion from the believing community may not require the spouse of the expelled individual to separate. However, if the unrepentant sin which caused the expulsion is toxic to the marriage, it is likely that the expelled individual is not “pleased together with” the believing spouse (1 Cor 7:12-13). In this case separation may be appropriate.

### **Moving Forward Righteously After The Failure Of A Marriage**

As a believer considers the possibility of separating, divorcing or remarrying, it is critical to consider if this is a righteous option in his/her situation. As one makes these assessments, it is easy to become totally focused on the sin of the partner. As one walks this journey one should not ignore the possibility that one’s own behavior is contributing to the marital disharmony or contributed to the failure of the marriage. For the sake of clarity, in this section I will assume the marriage has already ended in divorce. However, many of the points I make below are also relevant to troubled marriages which may yet be saved.

In Matt 7:1-5 Jesus says

“Judge not, that you be not judged. (2) For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. (3) Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? (4) Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me

take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? (5) You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

Even if the "log" was in the offending spouse's eye, there may have been a "speck" or "blind spot" in one's own eye. Perhaps there may have been a "speck" of contributing to a gradual downward spiral of mutual alienation and/or emotional withdrawal prior to the partner embracing the "log" of more obvious sin such as adultery. It is easy to rationalize one's own "speck" of sin as a reasonable response to the more serious sin of the marriage partner. Regardless of the severity of the marriage partner's sin it is important to repent and be forgiven of one's own sin (if any). It is also important to forgive the spouse even if he/she does not repent. Forgiving the offending spouse is different from being reconciled.

Some individuals enter marriage believing various lies about themselves. Examples include: I am no good; I am not worthy of love; I have to earn love by my performance; I am always to blame; it is dangerous to admit I was wrong about anything; I need to be in control to be safe; to feel good about myself I need to show that I am better than others; I need alcohol to be able to cope. Such thoughts deny our status as forgiven sinners who have been adopted into God's family. They are a rejection of God's truth. Allowing one's thinking to be dominated by such lies makes one vulnerable to marrying an individual who will reinforce the lies. This reinforcement may play out in various ways including emotionally abusive behavior or codependency. Whatever form it takes, this reinforcement causes much unhappiness and defiles the marriage. Living out of lies may have contributed to the failure of the marriage.

We all need to follow the example set by the Psalmist in Ps 139:23-24 "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! (24) And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!" God may answer this prayer by revealing specific character issues that contributed to alienating a spouse and/or surfacing lies that defiled the marriage. As God reveals things we should repent and receive his forgiveness. God delights to forgive us and as we receive his forgiveness, we should forgive ourselves. Some individuals may also need to repent and be forgiven for initiating or welcoming an unrighteous divorce. It may be necessary to ask for forgiveness from the former spouse. In some cases, it may be appropriate to provide some form of restitution.

Our God not only delights in forgiving sin when we repent and request his forgiveness, our God also delights in the process of transforming his children. Paul says "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor 5:17). Earlier in the same epistle Paul says "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:18). Some of the transformation God wants for his children happens instantly at salvation and the transformation process continues as we allow the Holy Spirit to develop his fruit in our life (Gal 5:22-23). Allowing God to change our character and/or to transforming our thinking may be necessary prior to entering into a new marriage. The sin of a former spouse is not a free pass to remarry quickly. We need to learn as much as possible from the failed marriage and act on what we have learned prior to remarriage.

I have already quoted 1 Cor 6:15-20 which discusses the one flesh union formed by the sexual act. In some Christian circles this is called a "soul tie". There is value in praying to break this union for all sinful sexual relationships. The first priority is to repent of the sexual sin and receive forgiveness. It is then good to pray for God to cleanse one's heart of any soulish defilement received from the sexual partner. When we form a one flesh union with another individual, we are also opening ourselves up to any demonic associated with that individual. So, it is also good to pray for God to deal with any demonic which might have gained the right to harass us as a result of the sexual relationship. This includes all demonic that had legal grounds to harass the sexual partner, including demonic that the sexual partner

has welcomed into his/her life by previous promiscuous behavior. In the case of divorce, there is value in breaking one's soul tie with one's former spouse. This may include dealing with any demonic associated with other sexual partners of the former spouse.

This class of prayer can also be appropriate after sexually immoral behavior, which does not include a sexual act with another person. For example, some individuals with an addiction to pornography, find it helpful to pray this type of prayer as part of their journey to freedom. Similarly, it is possible to be defiled by lusting after an individual, especially if that individual has had any occult involvement.

The purpose of the two preceding paragraphs is to provide a high-level introduction to a topic with numerous complexities. It is best to do these prayers with an individual who has the gift of discernment of spirits and who is experienced in this class of prayer.

Similar prayers can be helpful in the case of remarriage after the death of a spouse. Obviously in this case the prayers celebrate the good of the earlier marriage and do not include receiving forgiveness for sinful sex. I suspect that in many cases of remarriage after death God sovereignly deals with the soul tie to the former spouse. If He has done this, no additional prayers are needed.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

God's ideal is for marriage to be a joyful, lifelong commitment of two individuals, who become one [20]. God hates divorce and expects believers to seek repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation whenever sin mars a marriage. Jesus acknowledges the hardness of human hearts and accepts that this means that in some cases divorce may be the least evil option. Even so, at least one of the marriage partners is guilty of sin when there is a divorce.

Two possible causes of a "righteous divorce" are mentioned in the New Testament: sexual immorality and abandonment by an unbelieving spouse. Both are the result of hard heartedness. Even in these circumstances, divorce should always be regarded as a last resort. Divorce should only be considered after invitations to repentance have been rejected.

In Matthew, Jesus mentions sexual immorality as a possible basis for a righteous divorce. Paul states that divorce is never a righteous option for believers. He also teaches that in the case of a marriage between a believer and an unbeliever, the believer should work to maintain the marriage. However, if the unbeliever divorces the believer then the believer is free to remarry. (In that culture separation was legally equivalent to divorce). Paul also mentions situations where the unbeliever is not "pleased together with" the believing spouse. This seems to include situations where the unbeliever continues to live with the believer but treats the believer terribly. Separation may be acceptable in this case depending on the severity of the abuse. The goal of separation is repentance and reconciliation. If this does not happen, divorce and remarriage may be acceptable.

The New Testament church discipline process took place within the context of intimate house church communities where the full community, not just the leaders, had the decision-making authority. The goal of the church discipline process is repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation. The only punishment is expulsion from the community of faith, which is only applied if the individual remains unrepentant.

In the case of an issue between two individuals, they are first expected to seek to resolve the situation one on one. If this fails, they are expected to include a handful of witnesses. Only if this also fails should the case be considered by the full congregation. Jesus gave the local church the authority to "bind and loose". This means they have the authority to sort through all of the details of a particular case in the light of appropriate Biblical teaching prior to reaching a decision. Implicit in this is deciding if a sin is severe enough to justify the individual being excluded from the community of faith. If the sin relates to a marriage, this decision implicitly also decides the righteousness of the couple separating. This in turn decides the righteousness of divorce and remarriage, assuming the sinner remains unrepentant.

Paul expects churches to apply the church discipline process when a believer is in severe sin including sexual sin. If a married believer has committed sexual immorality (or other sin that is toxic to a marriage) and remains unrepentant, the church is to expel him/her from the community of faith and no longer associate with him/her. This will result in the married couple separating. The goal of this punishment is to convince the individual of the seriousness of his/her sin with the hope of repentance and restoration. If over time it becomes clear that the individual is not going to repent, then the marriage is functionally a marriage between a believer and an unbeliever where the unbeliever has chosen to separate. In this circumstance Paul permits divorce and remarriage. If the individual who was expelled from the church continues an adulterous relationship or enters into a new relationship, this is strong evidence that he/she is not going to repent.

Long-term singleness was rarer during the 1<sup>st</sup> Century than it is today. So, in many cases, especially during that time period, the net result of Paul's teaching is the same as Jesus' teaching (sexual immorality is a potential basis for righteous divorce). Paul's teaching had a longer thread but often ended in the same place: severe sin impacting marriage; followed by church discipline seeking repentance; followed by expulsion and marital separation; followed by the expelled individual committing sexual immorality (either by continuing an adulterous relationship or by entering a new relationship). The difference between Jesus' teaching and Paul's teaching concerning "righteous divorce" is perhaps not as large as it may seem at first. Paul provides more detail mainly emphasizing the importance of seeking repentance. Jesus, of course, always wants to see repentance.

In emphasizing this congruence between the teachings provided by Jesus and Paul, I am not saying that sexual immorality is the only evidence of unrepentance and/or permanent abandonment. After an individual has been expelled from a church for sin impacting a marriage and the couple has separated, it is necessary to allow time for repentance. When it becomes clear that the individual has no intent of repenting, the other partner is free to divorce and remarry.

Divorce even for righteous reasons is never an invitation to rapid remarriage. It is important for divorced individuals to prayerfully consider the possibility that they may have some lessons to learn from the failed marriage. It is possible that they may have some areas where they need to receive forgiveness and/or character transformation. It is also good to pray to break the "one flesh union".

There is a tendency in some believers to be harsher in responding to sins that they are not tempted to commit and more lenient in their response to sins that are a real temptation for them. Those of us who have been blessed with happy marriages or who are happily single need to remember to be gracious to those who endure unhappy marriages which may end in divorce.

## Notes and References

1. There is scholarly debate concerning the appropriate translation of Mal 2:16. NLT, NASB, RSV translate this verse “I hate divorce, says the Lord God of Israel.” KJV, NKJV and ASV offer similar translations. NIV, ESV and CSB offer a similar translation in their footnotes. Regardless of the specific textual issues associated with this verse, I believe it is clear from scripture that God hates divorce.
2. Unless otherwise stated all Bible quotations in this paper are taken from the ESV translation.
3. <https://www.epm.org/resources/2010/Feb/3/has-christianity-made-its-own-meaning-fornication/>
4. In recent years many papyri from the New Testament period have been found. They provide examples of the non-Biblical use of key Greek words and thus shed important new light on their meaning in the New Testament.
5. I will discuss hard hearted believers in the section on “Implications of Church Discipline Process to Troubled Marriages”
6. The topic of divorce and remarriage was actively debated by Jewish religious leaders, so it is possible that separate groups of pharisees might have independently decided to test Jesus with this topic. A possible counter to this speculation is that both incidents are recorded as occurring in “Judea beyond the Jordan” (Matt 19:1, Mark 10:1).
7. The Gospels had not yet been written when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians. Paul states in 1 Cor 7:10 that his teaching was directly based on the teaching of Jesus. It is not clear if the teaching Paul is referring to was later recorded in one of the Gospels. Jesus’ teachings in Matt 5, 19 and Luke 16 were given in public settings and were thus addressed to a mixture of believers and unbelievers. The two passages in Matthew allow for divorce in the case of sexual immorality, which Paul does not mention. It is possible that Paul was thinking of Mark 10:10-12 which records a private discussion with the disciples.
8. Paul does not appear to be aware of any teaching provided by Jesus which relates to marriages between believers and unbelievers. This is curious, because it is possible to interpret Matt 19:8 and Mark 10:5 as being relevant to marriages between a believer and hard-hearted unbeliever. Maybe Paul had additional information about these incidents (and Matt 5, Luke 16) which was not recorded in the gospels.
9. The Greek verb is in the perfect tense indicating a completed past action with current effect. The NIV translates this verb “has been sanctified”. Most other English translations use the present tense “is made holy” or “is sanctified” to emphasize the continuing relevance of the past action.
10. In verse 16 Paul mentions that the unbelieving spouse may be saved due to the witness of the believing spouse. So, he clearly does not mean the unbelieving spouse is saved when he says that he or she is made holy by the believing spouse. Paul in Ephesians 5:31 quotes Genesis 2:24 and Matt 19:5 stating that a husband and wife become one flesh. Maybe the unbelieving spouse is positively impacted by the Holy Spirit through his/her one flesh union with the believing spouse who is indwelt by the Holy Spirit.
11. A great deal has been written on this question. In my opinion, the arguments presented in favor of freedom to remarry are substantially stronger than the counter arguments. The strongest counter argument I have found concerns the verb *douloō*, which is translated “enslaved” or “bound” in 1 Cor 7:15. Some argue that it is never used in the context of marriage, so it cannot refer to individuals being free from their marriage vows. However, Paul uses the related noun (*doulos*, slave) when speaking of our relationship with Christ (Romans 1:1; Gal. 1:10; Col. 1:7, etc.) and the church is said to be the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:22-33). Paul uses the word *eleutheros* in Rom 7:3 to say that a widow is free from her first marriage and may remarry without becoming an adulteress. This Greek word is commonly used to indicate an individual who is not a slave. In a private communication David Instone-Brewer provided the following insights based on Mishnah Gittin 9.3

(<http://www.rabbinictraditions.com/?m.Git.9.3>) *The wording in a legal certificate of emancipation for a slave includes: "you are hereby a free woman, behold you belong to yourself." And the wording in a legal certificate of divorce is virtually identical: "you are free to marry any man that you please". The point is that the woman is free. She was formerly tied in many legal ways to her husband, and this restricted the things she was allowed to do. The certificate of divorce (like a slave's emancipation certificate) grants her freedom to do many things, including marrying whomever she wishes. The Greek that is often translated "not bound" in 1Cor.7.15 uses the language of slavery - as in ESV: "not enslaved" - which is very strange. I think that Paul had in mind this comparison between the wording of the divorce certificate and a certificate of emancipation from slavery. By referring to this, he was emphasizing the freedom to remarry after a divorce.*

12. In "What God Has Joined Together" David Instone-Brewer says. *"In the Roman world, any separation with the view to breaking up a marriage was automatically considered to be a legal divorce."* The Wikipedia article on Marriage in Ancient Rome states that Roman Citizens were (with some exceptions) required to be married. Instone-Brewer provides the additional detail that remarriage was required within 18 months of a divorce.  
<https://www.baylor.edu/ifl/christianreflection/MarriageArticleInstoneBrewer.pdf>  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marriage\\_in\\_ancient\\_Rome](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marriage_in_ancient_Rome)
13. A) Many abusive spouses want their victim to remain. For many abusers the act of abusing is like taking an aspirin for their underlying emotional pain. It gives a brief alleviation of the pain. So, they like having a victim easily available. Even so, the abuse is commonly focused on a perceived failing of the victim. Often the message is, if only you were better, I would not need to be angry and/or beat you. Based on this, I believe that severe abuse is evidence of the abuser not being "pleased together with" the victim. B) Appendix 5 of my book, "Rediscovering The New Testament Church", discusses New Testament teaching on submission. One conclusion is that it can be appropriate in a Biblically commanded relationship of submission to withdraw from a persecutor. In other cases, it is appropriate to remain and be persecuted. We need to receive God's guidance for each specific situation.
14. In the section entitled "Implications of Church Discipline Process to Troubled Marriages" (page 9), I discuss an approach to decide if the abuse within a marriage of two believers is sufficient to justify separation. This process may end with the full congregation making a church discipline decision. In the case of a marriage between a believer and unbeliever, where the believer is a member of a New Testament style house church, it may also be appropriate to engage the full congregation to help decide if the severity of the marital abuse justifies separation.
15. Jam 1:2-4 Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, (3) for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. (4) And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.
16. A clear example of Matthew feeling free to leave out an obvious exception clause is provided in Matt 5:23-24 "So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift." We all take it for granted that this passage only applies if the brother has a legitimate complaint. This is consistent with Jesus' actions. He did not spend his life seeking to be reconciled to individuals who were inappropriately offended by him.
17. 1 Cor 5:4-5 says "with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord". It is likely that Paul was thinking of Job 2:6 which says, "And the LORD said to Satan, 'Behold, he is in your hand; only spare his life.'" Everything that Satan was allowed to do to Job was under the control of God, and God used Satan's attacks on Job to bring Job closer to himself: "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job

42:5-6). This context reinforces the message that the goal of the church discipline process is repentance. However, it also makes clear that the individual, who has been “purged” from the community, is beyond the help of the community. They are to separate themselves from the sinner which includes ending attempts to persuade the sinner to repent. It is not a light thing to deliver someone over to Satan. It should only be undertaken “with the power of our Lord Jesus.”

18. Rediscovering The New Testament Church, A. Jacomb-Hood, pages 36, 37. The topic of “binding and loosing” is discussed on pages 234, 235.
19. <https://www.9marks.org/article/how-should-christians-relate-to-excommunicated-family-members/>
20. For over 30 years of happy marriage I gave intellectual assent to this truth but did not really understand what it meant. Then my wife died, and I realized that I had been torn in two.