

# **A STUDY OF MARRIAGE, DIVORCE, MALICIOUS DESERTION, AND REMARRIAGE IN THE LIGHT OF GOD'S WORD**

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## **Foreword**

Marriage is the creation of God and a source of blessing to both individuals and society. Since God first established it by joining Adam and Eve as husband and wife, believers have looked to his Word to know what those blessings are, to guide them in carrying out a God-pleasing relationship with their spouses, and to strengthen them in resisting the sinful influences that would harm that relationship.

Today, the institution of marriage is under unprecedented assault. Powerful cultural and societal forces are seeking to change the definition of marriage itself (and are appearing to have some success). Other voices in our society have undermined the life-long nature of the commitment, leading many to view the marriage commitment binding not “until death do us part” but only “until I decide that it’s over.” In addition, developments in technology and communications have taken old temptations and made them more pervasive and available than ever before. Christians are not immune to these influences.

In 1989 Professor Armin Schuetze authored a white paper entitled, “A Study of Marriage, Divorce, Malicious Desertion, and Remarriage in the Light of God’s Word,” at the request of the Conference of Presidents. The paper offered pastoral guidance regarding the scriptural principles that serve as the foundation of marriage, as well as advice for how biblical principles can be faithfully applied in a variety of circumstances.

In the time since that paper was written, the biblical principles have not changed, but the world we live in has. Sadly, the changing societal and cultural views on marriage and divorce have had a growing impact on Christian marriages and families. In addition, sinful use of the internet and other technology has brought threats and challenges to marriage in a way that simply did not exist in the past.

These developments have raised new questions of how clear biblical principles should be applied in today’s world. Those questions come from lay people as they live in a sinful world, as well as from pastors and other spiritual leaders as they strive to provide pastoral care and guidance to their members.

With that in mind, the Conference of Presidents determined to undertake an update and expansion of the 1989 white paper dealing with marriage, divorce, and re-marriage. It is our prayer that this effort will help our pastors and people navigate the troubled waters of our day and to hold fast to the truths that God has entrusted to us.

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Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod  
+ The Ascension of our Lord 2015 +

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### **A note about translation**

*The Conference of Presidents decided to use the New International Version (1984) as the default translation for this document rather than picking and choosing various translations. Where the default translation is weak or misleading, a clearer translation is offered.*

## **A Study of Marriage, Divorce, Malicious Desertion, and Remarriage in the Light of God's Word**

"Marriage should be honored by all" (Hebrews 13:4). God honored marriage not only by establishing and blessing it, but also by using it as a picture of the beautiful relationship between Christ and his church. The love of Christ, the groom, was so great that he willingly sacrificed himself for the bride, his church. Looking to that relationship, husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her, and wives are to be submissive to their husbands as the church submits to Christ (Ephesians 5:22-33).

Scripture says, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" who "became obedient to death – even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:5,8). But how do we achieve such an attitude? "Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (2 Corinthians 5:14, 15). Living for Christ also applies to marriage.

Christ knows all about marriage, for he was there when God said, "Let us make man" (Genesis 1:26). He, the Word who was made flesh for us, was God and was with God, and by him all things were made. As the eternal Word he quotes the written word and says, "Haven't you read...that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate" (Matthew 19:4-6).

The living Word referred to the written word. We will do the same, looking at what Scripture says concerning marriage, divorce, malicious desertion, and remarriage, and letting the Word of God show us the principles God has established to guide us.

### **A STUDY OF THE PERTINENT PASSAGES**

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#### ***The institution of marriage***

Genesis 1:27,28: So God created man in his own image ...male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

Genesis 2:18-24: The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field. But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman', for she was taken out of man." For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

Matthew 19:4-6: "Haven't you read," he [Christ] replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and

the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

Mark 10:6-9: "But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

Genesis 1 contains the synopsis account of the creation of all things, including man and woman. Details of the creation of man and woman as well as the establishment of marriage are presented in the expanded account of Genesis 2. Marriage is clearly among the "good and perfect gifts" lovingly given by God for the joy and benefit of mankind.

After repeated announcements that God's creation was "good" (Genesis 1), this divine declaration catches our attention: "The LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him'" (Genesis 2:18). The loving Creator had not yet completed his chosen work on behalf of the man. "For Adam no suitable helper was found" (Genesis 2:20). No complementary companion, no helping partner was found. The account of the formation of the woman is then related, culminating in the man's joyful response: "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man" (Genesis 2:23). The man immediately recognized and rejoiced in God's good and perfect gift for him.

The opportunity for men and women in general to recognize those of the other gender as complementary partners in life remains evidence of God's love for us. The opportunity for a particular man and a particular woman to enjoy each other in a unique, one-flesh integration of lives is likewise a gift of love from the Creator. The establishment of marriage provided this opportunity.

Genesis 2:24 is the seat of doctrine for marriage in Holy Scripture. Christ in Matthew 19 and Mark 10 regards it as the instituting and regulating word of God on marriage. Marriage is a union that God brought about. Genesis 2:24 is not merely prophetic or descriptive of what will happen, but prescriptive, because it reveals the will of God concerning the relationship of man and woman. Whether these words were spoken by Adam is not clear. If they were, they were spoken in the perfection of the image of God and perfectly reflect God's will. If given through Moses, they serve as God-breathed truth.

From these accounts in Genesis we learn a number of basic truths. One is that marriage is for one man and one woman. All other unions, such as multiple partners of the opposite sex, or partners of the same sex, or humans and animals, or humans and machines, are perversions of God's creating and instituting will.

Another basic truth is that God instituted marriage. God brought man and woman together. Marriage is therefore unique among all human relationships; it is a lifelong union established by God. All other human relationships are established solely by human promises and may be dissolved by human decisions.

Third among the basic truths taught by this account in Genesis is that blessings for all society flow to and through the marital union. Procreation and dominion provide for both the preservation and orderliness of the human race. Marriage is the foundation on which God builds and blesses society. In Eden the marriage of Adam and Eve constituted the elements of society that since the Fall are divided into family, church, and government.

Two things are essential for marriage: to leave and to be united. "Leaving" is the intent and action of separation. The intimate bond of the new marriage requires a degree of separation from the allegiance to, and dependence

on, the previous parental bond. Being united to one person requires leaving all others. This is often more an emotional leaving than a physical one. Spouses will also continue to honor their parents even to the point of caring for them, if that becomes necessary (1 Timothy 5:8). Though those planning a marriage will respect parental counsel in regard to their impending marriage, marriage itself demands a “leaving” that makes it possible for a new family unit to be formed. The close physical, psychological, and spiritual unity God intends for marriage requires a separation from all other ties that would keep this intimacy from expressing itself.

This action of leaving is a willing decision and action on the part of both individuals. It is also a public decision and action insofar as the man and the woman leave their fathers and mothers and establish a new family. In paradise “father and mother” represented all of society. Entering marriage is therefore a public action taken before family members, brothers and sisters in the Christian congregation, society, and government.

The second step of marriage is “to be united.” This action of being united with one’s spouse is coordinate with the separation or leaving. The Hebrew verb (קָבַץ) suggests a “gluing,” a close, inseparable bonding. Man and woman commit themselves to one, inseparable union. (The mention of only the man suggests initiating action, not unilateral action.) While man and woman bring into their marriage their own identity, to be united indicates a fusion of those identities while yet remaining individual persons. The result of such uniting is to be unity of goals and purposes.

This is also indicated by the words: “And they will become one flesh.” The two become one. Marriage, the result of the willing and public separating and uniting, is to be a permanent union. This union includes sexual, psychological, and spiritual closeness (Genesis 2:18,20-24; Proverbs 31:10-12; 1 Peter 3:7). Christian spouses express this union by companionship, nurture, mutual service, and spiritual care and concern for one another (1 Corinthians 7:10-14; Ephesians 5:21,28,29). The enjoyment of sexual relations between man and woman, however, is to be reserved until after they are married. In fact, since the sexual union is a significant factor in becoming “one flesh,” engaging in sexual relations with anyone but one’s wife or husband is adultery or sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 6:15-20, Exodus 20:14; Hebrews 13:4).

The establishment of this intimate relationship between Adam and Eve was intended not only for them, but for all time. Marriage is an enduring institution meant for the joy and benefit of every generation since their day.

### ***The permanency of marriage***

Matthew 19:6: Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.

Romans 7:2,3: By law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage...If her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress, even though she marries another man.

1 Corinthians 7:39: A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry.

God established marriage to be a permanent, lifelong commitment, a union that only God is to end. The death of one or the other marriage partner is God’s own termination of this union. According to Scripture, remarriage after the death of either partner is permissible, since marriage is a bond for this life only.

Matthew 19 shows that passages such as Romans 7 and 1 Corinthians 7, when they speak of the woman, do not apply only to her, but also to the man in the marriage relationship.

## ***Divorce, a violation of God's will***

Deuteronomy 24:1-4: If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the LORD.

Matthew 19:3-9: 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?" "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate." "Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?" Jesus replied, "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." (Cf. also Mark 10:1-9; Luke 16:18)

In light of Jesus' explanation in Matthew 19, the words of Deuteronomy 24 cannot legitimately be considered a prescriptive allowance for divorce. Moses and Jesus require a formal writ of divorce as protection against the abuse of a man putting away his wife without formally stating a cause. This abuse offended the innocent wife and caused her to be branded an adulteress. Moses' allowance of civil divorce was a concession to the immorality that existed within the Israelite nation and a desire to limit the offense of a man putting away his wife without a formal divorce decree. In no way do the words of Moses change God's will that marriage is to be permanent, that is, lifelong. To separate what God has joined together is a serious matter, a violation of God's holy will. Thus divorce writs were no more than a concession in Israel's civil law to the hardness of Israel's heart toward God's moral law. Jesus pointed back to Genesis 2:24 as God's prescriptive will concerning marriage and stated that man should under no circumstances break a marriage.

Marital unfaithfulness is a human being's way of wrongfully ending what only God should end. Included in marital unfaithfulness (*πορνεία*) is not only the obvious sexual immorality of adultery, but also other kinds of sexual immorality, including homosexuality, lesbianism, incest, pederasty, pedophilia, and bestiality. While it is true that *πορνεία* does not necessarily include every form of sexual sin, it is not valid to arbitrarily exclude any form of sexual sin from a general use of *πορνεία* when nothing in the context gives a ground for such limitation. So also, the use of pornographic material for sexual gratification is contrary to God's will for his gift of sexuality (Psalm 101:3; Matthew 5:28; Philippians 4:8; 1 John 2:16). Persistent use of pornography may therefore destroy the marital bond. God's gifts of sex and sexuality are blessings he intends to be enjoyed only between a husband and wife. Any other use of these gifts is a sinful abuse and misuse of them. When marital unfaithfulness has occurred, a public decree of divorce is not demanded, but permitted, since the marriage bond has been broken.

## ***The man-woman role relationship in marriage***

Ephesians 5:22-33: Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish,

but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

1 Peter 3:1,7: Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives...Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.

1 Corinthians 11:11,12: In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.

1 Corinthians 7:1-9: Now for the matters you wrote about: It is good for a man not to marry. But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband. The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife’s body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband’s body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife. Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. I say this as a concession, not as a command. I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that. Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

These Scripture passages direct our attention to the proper and God-pleasing relationship between husbands and wives. “A husband is the head of his wife” because man was created first (Genesis 2:18; 1 Timothy 2:13); because the woman was created to be a helper for man (Genesis 2:18; 1 Corinthians 11:9); and because the woman was created from the man (Genesis 2:21,22; 1 Corinthians 11:8). The Christian wife submits to her husband, even as the church submits to Christ.

Christian husbands love their wives, whether they are Christian or not, as Christ loves the church. This is a meaningful and sacrificial love, a love that is concerned about the total well-being and the happiness of the wife. Christian husbands love their wives because they are one body, one flesh with them. Christian husbands, married to believing wives, cherish their partners not only because they are part of their body, but also because they are members with them of the body of Christ. The love and reverence Christian wives have for Christ leads them willingly to submit to their husbands as all believers submit to Christ as the head of the church.

The husbands to whom Peter wrote were Christian husbands. He reminded them to live with their wives according to the “knowledge” (γνῶσιν) they had received from the Scriptures regarding the proper relationship between husbands and wives. According to this knowledge a husband will treat his wife with the honor and respect that is due to a treasure that God has given him and that the Lord describes as the “weaker partner.” This weakness may refer to her more vulnerable physical nature or to her husband’s possible abuse of his authority in a sinful world (Genesis 3:16). In either case Christian husbands, led by God’s word, will want to show their wives consideration and thoughtfulness.

Christian husbands will also honor their wives as co-heirs of “the gracious gift of life.” When it comes to God’s gift of spiritual life and eternal life, there is no difference between man and woman, husbands and wives (Galatians

3:28). Only as Christian husbands continue to deal with their wives according to the knowledge of God's word can they expect their prayers to be heard and their worship to be acceptable. When husband and wife heed what Scripture teaches, their marriage will be one of a mutual meeting of needs and of unselfish caring and concern, honor and respect for one another.

Christian husbands and wives also recognize that God has given each of them a marital duty (sexual responsibilities) towards each other (1 Corinthians 7:2-5). They realize that their bodies do not belong just to themselves but also to each other. They will seek to bring their partner sexual fulfillment (Proverbs 5:15-20). They will not make demands on each other sexually, but will instead make mutual decisions out of love for one another and in a commitment to their marriage.

### ***God's hatred of divorce***

Malachi 2:16: "I hate divorce", says the LORD God of Israel.<sup>1</sup>

By "divorce" God in this passage means the actual breaking of a marriage, not just the written, formal public decree of the break.

Marriage is God's institution. It is sacred and inviolable. Therefore God hates divorce – any divorce and every divorce. God hates it, because divorce always involves sin. That God hates divorce must be clearly taught to all, especially to those who are contemplating breaking up a marriage and to those who have actually broken up a marriage.

However, since divorce and a writ or certificate of divorce are not the same thing (Jeremiah 3:8), the spouse who has been sinned against may secure a legal divorce and not be guilty of breaking the marriage covenant. The spouse who has been the victim of such a sin is only making public the breaking of the marriage bond, which may have been entirely private. That action is not hated by God. It is the guilty partner that faces the God who said, "I hate divorce," and recorded that fact.

### ***Malicious desertion***

1 Corinthians 7:10-15: To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife. To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.

In verses 10 and 11 the apostle is addressing husbands and wives who are Christians. They are bound by Jesus' word that forbids a public decree of divorce unless their spouse has broken the marriage bond. When a husband or wife separates or divorces for unscriptural reasons, that spouse must work toward reconciliation. If possible, the person should reconcile promptly. In some cases the couple may need to live apart as they work toward reconciliation. During this period the separating spouse should not marry another person, as this would make

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<sup>1</sup> Other translations render this passage, "The man who hates and divorces his wife." In either case, the point of the passage is the same: Sin is always involved in divorce.



reconciliation impossible, and should work actively toward reconciliation, since this is the God-pleasing fruit of repentance in this situation.

In verses 12-15 the apostle addresses the case of a Christian man or woman who is married to an unbelieving spouse. Unbelief in itself is never a reason for terminating the marriage. If the unbelieving spouse abandons the Christian spouse by leaving or by sending the believing spouse away, what is the Christian spouse to do? The apostle's answer is clear: "A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances." "In such circumstances" refers to any situation in which the unbelieving party has clearly broken the marriage bond.

The Greek word used in 1 Corinthians 7:15 (*χωρίζεται*) means to separate, to divide, or to part, in whatever way that might occur. If an unbeliever physically deserts the believing spouse or sends the believer away, the Christian is not required to remain in the marriage. The other has unilaterally and willfully broken the marriage bond. The Apostle expands the thought beyond physical separation, however, with the phrase, "in such circumstances." In situations like that, in which one spouse unilaterally and willfully breaks the marriage bond, the believer is not required to remain in the marriage.

The Scriptures speak of the "deserter" as an unbeliever. This also applies to one who professes to believe, but becomes guilty of desertion, knowingly and willfully continuing in the sin. Such a spouse's unbelief becomes evident by the lack of repentance. Concerning this Dr. Luther wrote: "What St. Paul here says of the heathen spouse is to be understood as applying also to the false Christian."<sup>2</sup> Spouses who thus break their marriage lose their connection with Christ and demonstrate that they are unbelievers because they are guilty of perpetrating a sin without repentance.

We use the term "malicious desertion" to describe what Paul here says is the willful leaving of one's marriage partner. It is impossible to give an exhaustive list of the shameful perversions of the sinful heart. Examples of malicious desertion include such sinful actions as persistent use of pornography, physical or psychological abuse, persistent refusal to have sexual relations with the spouse, financial abandonment, refusal to seek to improve the marriage, and unrepented addictive behavior. We must be careful, however, not to use this term in such a broad manner as to cover the many unscriptural reasons given for breaking a marriage. Malicious desertion is not a blanket excuse for divorce when there are problems in a marriage caused by a believing spouse who, in weakness, struggles with sin. A pastor will want to ask, "Has one person willfully, persistently, and unilaterally broken the marriage bond?"

### ***Jesus on divorce***

Matthew 5:31,32: It has been said, "Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce." But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus tells us what a man does to his wife who is not guilty of marital unfaithfulness when he divorces her, and what he does to the man whom she marries. While the Pharisees allowed divorce on the basis of the Mosaic concession, Jesus disallowed it but for one exception, "marital unfaithfulness." In the case Jesus talks about, the man sins by breaking his marriage on non-scriptural grounds. The wife was not guilty of marital unfaithfulness.

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<sup>2</sup> *Luther's Works*, Volume 28, p. 36.

Some versions give an improper understanding of the passage when they translate “causes her *to become* an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.” In the case of the woman we have an aorist passive (μοιχευθῆναι), which would be better translated “causes her *to appear as* an adulteress.” In the case of the man who marries her, the verb form used (μοιχᾶται) may be middle or passive. The context favors the latter. The man is also looked upon as an adulterer. A translation that better reflects the Greek verbs would be: “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce,’ but I tell you that whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, causes her to be stigmatized as an adulteress, and whoever marries a divorced woman is stigmatized as an adulterer.”

Matthew 19:9: I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.

Mark 10:10-12: When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. He answered, “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery.”

Mark 10 is a parallel to Matthew 19:3-10. One thing is added, however. In the words recorded by the Evangelist Mark, Jesus points also to the woman as an adulteress if she divorces her husband who has not been guilty of adultery. “And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery.” What Scripture says concerning marriage and divorce applies to women as well as to men.

Also note the words “against her” in verse 11. The man who divorces his wife who has not been unfaithful “commits adultery against her.” This again points to the fact that the abandoned wife, who is the victim of an unscriptural divorce, may be looked upon as an adulteress (Matthew 5:31,32).

### ***Christian discipline***

1 Corinthians 5:1-13: It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: a man has his father’s wife. And you are proud! Shouldn’t you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord. Your boasting is not good. Don’t you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth. I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. “Expel the wicked man from among you.”

The congregation at Corinth had a case of sexual immorality that required discipline. The Apostle Paul admonished the congregation to deal firmly with the guilty party. In their “grief” over this man’s sin and out of love for his soul they should have handed this man “over to Satan,” not to get rid of him or to clean house, but that his “sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.” Repentance, forgiveness, faith, and salvation

should have been the goals. That was their obligation and duty as a Christian congregation, but they had not carried it out.

The apostle warned what could happen if they continued to boast of their liberalism, their tolerance, their open-mindedness, and their indecisiveness toward the publicly-known sin. “Don’t you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough?” (1 Corinthians 5:6). If they did not discipline the man guilty of sexual immorality, they themselves would be guilty of sin. They would be giving offense by tolerating such an openly known and practiced sin, thereby giving their stamp of approval. This would be a disservice to the man, to themselves, and to outsiders. It could lead to permitting and condoning other sins as well.

The reason for taking action is stated in these words, “For Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed” (1 Corinthians 5:7). Since Christ had been slain for them, and his blood had blotted out their sins, how could they be unconcerned about any fellow member who continued to live in sin?

From what the apostle writes in this chapter it is obvious that we too are to discipline a professing brother or sister who is guilty of adultery or malicious desertion (cf. Matthew 18:15-17). We dare not condone their sins. If we do nothing, we give offense, causing others to stumble in their faith. We must take action in order to lead the impenitent sinner to realize the guilt of his sin before God so that he may repent and lead a godly life – or in the words of Paul: “that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.”

### **Remarriage**

Romans 7:2,3: For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage. So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress if she marries another man.

1 Corinthians 7:15,39: But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances. God has called us to live in peace... A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord.

There is no question that the Lord permits remarriage after the death of a spouse. Marriage is a bond for this life only, and death is God’s own termination of the covenant that he himself sealed. It should be noted, however, that some translations of 1 Corinthians 7:39 are restrictive beyond what the Greek text states. The Greek does not say that the man a Christian woman marries must “belong to the Lord,” that is, be a believer. It is not the *object* of her remarriage that must be “in the Lord,” but rather the *action* of her remarriage. That is to say, she will want to take the Lord’s will into consideration for her new marriage.

The moral propriety of remarriage after a divorce decree is not specifically treated in Scripture in a way that addresses every situation. It is clear that the conscience of the offended party should not be bound. St. Paul writes in regard to the desertion of the unbelieving spouse, “A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.” The offended party is free to remarry. By implication Jesus’ words allow the same conclusion in Matthew 5:32. With his clause of exception, “except for marital unfaithfulness,” Jesus allows that a divorce decree may properly be obtained by the offended party because the marriage vow was violated by marital unfaithfulness. There are circumstances in which a remarriage by the offending spouse who is guilty of adultery or desertion would be adulterous and should not occur. Many other biblical teachings and truths must be applied when sin so complicates human lives. A study of repentance, faith,

fruits of repentance, public offense, and church discipline is required to give proper evangelical counsel and to lead Christians to God-pleasing actions. Pastoral counsel should be sought in any situation in which remarriage is being considered.

## PRINCIPLES

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### *Institution*

1. *God instituted marriage at creation as the foundational social unit for his world (Genesis 1:28, 2:22-24).*

God not only instituted marriage, he also blesses and preserves it. Thus marriage is not only a relationship between husband and wife, but also a relationship between both husband and wife and God. A right relationship with God promotes a right relationship between husband and wife (Ephesians 5:22-33).

2. *God's institution of marriage is valid for all time (Matthew 19:6).*

God's institution of marriage is not a historically-isolated decree separate from the reality of the present day. Though God instituted marriage for society, marriage is not merely a social phenomenon subject to the moral whims of an evolving society. It is part of God's order of creation. Even today it is God who joins together a man and woman who are free to become husband and wife.

3. *God, who instituted marriage, reserves for himself alone the right to define, regulate, and terminate marriage (Genesis 2:24; Malachi 2:16; Matthew 19:4-6; Hebrews 13:4).*

God defines and regulates marriage in his word. Marriage is terminated without sin only when one spouse dies. For a proper understanding of marriage—what it is, what it is for, and when it ends—believers turn to the word of God. The laws of the government, the customs of society, the practices of religious groups, and the advice of secular counselors must all be viewed in the light of the God's word, because Christians are bound to that word even if the government, society, or visible churches change their definition of marriage.

### *Essence*

4. *God establishes a marriage a) when one man and one woman (Genesis 1:27,28; 2:22-24; Matthew 19:4-6) b) both of whom are truly free to marry in God's eyes (Matthew 19:4-6; Romans 7:2; 1 Corinthians 7:10,11,39), c) willingly and publicly make known their promises to live together as husband and wife, from that point forward, as long as they both shall live (Genesis 2:24; 24:58; Matthew 19:6; Romans 7:2; 1 Corinthians 7:39; Mark 10:9).*

a) The marriage bond and the sexual contact that expresses marital unity are only for one man and one woman. All other sexual relationships, including polygamous, incestuous, non-human, virtual, and homosexual, are contrary to God's will (Leviticus 18:22,23; 20:10-17,19,20; Romans 1:24-32; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 1 Timothy 1:10; Exodus 22:19).

b) God requires that both the man and the woman entering into marriage be free to marry, that is, be truly single (Mark 10:11,12; Romans 7:2). This means that they must not be married to, or involved in an illicit relationship with, someone else (1 Corinthians 6:16). Truly single are those who have never

been married, those who have been previously married but whose spouse is deceased, those who were the offended party in a divorce, and the offending party in a divorce who has repented, but for whom reconciliation is impossible.

- c) Marriage consists of one man and one woman who freely and publicly make known their promises to live together as husband and wife for life from that time forward. This is the essence of marriage. The sexual union itself does not create the marriage, nor do compatibility, expressions of mutual love and companionship, or the bearing and rearing of children. These are aspects of marriage God graciously gives to couples, as he chooses and as they live out their chosen vocation, but they are distinguishable from the stated commitment and vows that bring marriage into existence. Because marriage is a social arrangement, governed by the laws of the land, the public consent central to marriage includes submission to the state's requirements regarding marriage.
- d) Legislation and judicial decisions may make homosexual marriages legal, but according to God's word they are still immoral, in direct conflict with God's will as it is revealed in Scripture. On the basis of God's word such a "marriage" is no marriage at all. Since marriage is instituted by God, he alone is able to define it. He does, stating that marriage is a lifelong union of one man and one woman. God does not allow marriage to be redefined by the state or by the preferences of society.

God's establishment of marriage as a lifelong union requires commitment (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:6; Ephesians 5:22-33). The most important quality in a marriage partner is faithfulness. That faithfulness, which is a commitment to lifelong union, keeps a marriage intact. Those who intend to enter marriage do well to look for this quality above all else in their prospective partner. External appearance, compatibility, and romantic love are desirable, but commitment is the heart of a stable marriage. This quality of commitment is enhanced by faith in Christ (Genesis 2:23; Proverbs 31:30; Ephesians 5:25,33; 1 Peter 3:3-5). Thus the key element in maintaining mutual love between marriage partners is Christian faith and a love for his calling and gift that led to the marriage.

Because God made marriage a lifelong union, all conditional arrangements for a man and a woman to live together are contrary to God's will. Living as husband and wife without the commitment to lifelong union is sinful. As homosexuality attacks the one-man-one-woman aspect of the essence of marriage, so cohabitation without marriage denies God's requirement for making known publicly the willing promise of lifetime faithfulness. Any conditional arrangement for living together without lifetime commitment is sexual immorality. Those who cohabit as if they were husband and wife ignore and defy God's definition and institution of marriage and distrust God's ability to preserve and bless what he established. It is rightly described as "living in sin."

### **Purpose**

- 5. *One of God's purposes in instituting marriage is the mutual companionship and love of husband and wife (Genesis 2:18,23,24; Ecclesiastes 9:9; Proverbs 12:4; Colossians 3:19).*

The husband is to care for his wife as Christ does for the church (Ephesians 5:28,29). The wife is to be a suitable helper for her husband (Genesis 2:18). The one-flesh relationship that God establishes in marriage serves this purpose. This loving companionship is a purpose and product of marriage, not a part of its essence. Work will sometimes separate two people, as when a soldier has a tour of duty overseas. An

extended illness can cause hardship, not only for the one who is ill, but for the one who is not, because it affects the companionship one looks for in the relationship. Because of human sinfulness, companionship will be expressed in degrees short of perfection and may be entirely absent at times; yet its imperfection or even its occasional absence does not itself break a marriage.

In a Christian marriage companionship includes sexual fulfillment, mutual spiritual care, concern, support, encouragement, and example for one's spouse (Genesis 2:24; 1 Corinthians 7:12-16; Ephesians 5:21-23,28,29; Colossians 3:19; 1 Peter 3:1,2,7). This companionship will be carried out in accordance with the roles God established at creation: the husband is the head and the wife is the helper.

6. *Another of God's purposes in instituting marriage is to provide the blessing of children and the context of the family to care for those children (Genesis 1:28; 9:1; Psalm 127:3-5; Psalm 128; Mark 10:14; Ephesians 6:4).*

The same selfless love and sacrifice that nurture marriage also serve to bring children up "in the training and instruction of the Lord." Sexual relations between husband and wife is God's chosen way for them to receive the gift of children. While God governs the distribution of this gift, and marriage partners may remain involuntarily childless, we still recognize procreation as one of God's purposes in marriage. Refusal to acknowledge God's blessing of children as one of his purposes for marriage is a spiritual weakness. Such weakness is not in itself an impediment to marriage, nor does it necessarily break the marriage bond. However, Christians who enter marriage expressing an intention to have no children should be counseled on the basis of Scripture to recognize children as a gift of God.

The Christian approach to birth control and family planning will be guided by the knowledge of God's desire and promise to bless marriage with children. Children are God's blessing. The use of contraceptives will be guided and limited by the principles of moral law (Commandments 5, 6, 7, 8, 10 – and thus the refusal of all abortifacient agents). The individual Christian conscience will apply the law of God to the circumstances pertaining to the physical and mental health of the spouse. Christians will also weigh the stewardship of their resources for raising children over against the covetous and selfish desires natural to the flesh as they prayerfully ponder God's will for their family.

7. *After the fall into sin a subsequent purpose God has for marriage is the promotion of sexual purity (Matthew 5:27,28; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; 7:2-6; 1 Thessalonians 4:4,5; Hebrews 13:4).*

The enjoyment of sexual relations in marriage is a natural expression of the "one flesh" companionship and a special blessing the Lord gives to husbands and wives. The practice of sex in marriage is also a God-given "marital duty" (1 Corinthians 7:3) that helps quench the temptations to sexual sins in thought (Matthew 5:28), speech (Ephesians 4:29; 5:4) or actions (Ephesians 5:23; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20). Sexual fulfillment as an expression of marital companionship, even apart from the intent or desire to procreate, is God-pleasing. Failing to control one's own desires, finding or seeking sexual fulfillment outside of marriage, or using pornography as a replacement for marital intimacy or for a sexual release are violations of God's plan for his gift of sex and are neither holy nor honorable. God has called us to live pure and holy lives (Matthew 5:28; 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8).

## **Termination**

8. *Marriage ends in a God-pleasing way only when one of the partners dies (Romans 7:2; 1 Corinthians 7:39).*

Because marriage is a lifelong union established by God, only God has the right to terminate it. God does this through the death of one of the spouses. The death of a spouse is the only God-pleasing way in which marriage is terminated.

Jesus taught that marriage is for this life only (Luke 20:27-36). Thus the death of a spouse releases the surviving partner from the marriage, and he or she is free to remarry (Romans 7:2,3; 1 Corinthians 7:39).

9. *God hates divorce (Psalm 5:5; Malachi 2:13-16; Jeremiah 3:1; Matthew 19:8,9).*

This unpopular truth, enunciated in Scripture in many different ways, must be proclaimed to Christians, since they also are sinners and are surrounded by a contrary pagan mindset. Divorce always involves sin. At least one partner is guilty of the specific sin of breaking the marriage. Today complicity in divorce often involves both partners in sin.

Society is its own witness that divorce creates more problems than it solves. It divides families: spouses, children, grandparents, in-laws. It is usually an economic hardship for one or both spouses. It can damage children spiritually and psychologically, leave them without parental role models, create insecurity, and may make them feel guilty for the sins of their parents. It may bring loneliness to the separated spouses that often impels them to engage in sinful relationships or to enter into another equally unstable marriage. It may leave all involved with a lifelong sense of failure.

Though God hates divorce as he hates all sin, yet it is equally true that God is a God of love. We reflect his love in our compassion for the innocent victims of divorce. A careful translation of Matthew 5:32 reveals Christ's great compassion for victims of divorce. We reflect God's love by extending his forgiveness to those who repent of their sin of breaking a marriage and are willing to bring forth the fruits of repentance.

10. *Marriage is sinfully ended a) by a spouse who engages in sexual activity outside of marriage or b) by a spouse who maliciously deserts his or her partner.*

a) A spouse who engages in sexual activity outside of marriage violates the one-flesh commitment of faithfulness and thus breaks the marriage covenant, no matter what form that activity takes. Such activity not only includes physical adultery, coital contact, incest, homosexuality, pederasty, and bestiality, etc., but may also include sexting, online sexual interaction ("virtual sex"), and the persistent use of pornography.

b) Marriage is also sinfully ended by a spouse who maliciously deserts his or her partner. The word Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 7:15 to describe desertion means "to divide" or "to separate oneself from." A spouse who abandons the marriage physically, or forces a partner to leave, sinfully ends the marriage. In such circumstances, when a spouse willfully and unilaterally breaks the marriage bond, even if the spouse hasn't physically abandoned the marriage, the believing spouse is not bound by God to remain in the marriage. "Such circumstances" may include sins like persistent refusal of sexual intercourse, repeatedly seeking sexual satisfaction through pornography, refusing to carry out the duties and obligations of married life, or persistent physical or psychological abuse. It certainly also refers to the

unbelieving spouse seeking a divorce for non-scriptural reasons and being unwilling to reconcile. “In such circumstances” includes all cases where the essence of the one-flesh commitment is broken.

Christians must be careful not to follow the world in using malicious desertion as a catch-all excuse to seek a divorce for any and every dissatisfaction with their marriage. Scripture demands patience, love, sacrifice, cross-bearing, prayer, forgiveness, toleration, and long-suffering. The Apostle Paul allows for the possibility of a period of mutually-agreed-upon abstinence (1 Corinthians 7:5) or even a period of separation (1 Corinthians 7:11). Christians and their counselors must avoid premature judgment and before contemplating divorce must be convinced that malicious desertion has actually occurred. They must act with a clear conscience (Romans 14:23).

Malicious desertion occurs when an unbelieving spouse unilaterally and willfully breaks the one-flesh commitment. The unbelieving spouse may even be a professing Christian who knowingly and willfully continues in sin. Refusal of sexual intercourse, the persistent use of pornography, self-pleasure, abortion, unilateral prevention of pregnancy, physical or psychological abuse, non-support, and drug and/or alcohol addiction are a prevention of, or an interference with, God’s gracious purpose for marriage. Such actions may become supporting evidence that malicious desertion has taken place. The spouse who deserts demonstrates that he is an unbeliever (1 Corinthians 7:15). Such a person is to be called to repentance and ultimately excluded from the church should the individual remain impenitent (Matthew 18:15-20). Although the goal of Christians is reconciliation, no matter what the sin, reconciliation does not necessitate the re-establishment of a broken marriage. The deserted spouse will need to determine whether or not to make a new commitment to the deserting spouse who repents.

Paul is not adding a second exclusion to Jesus’ exception of marital unfaithfulness when he says that desertion ends a marriage. Sexual contact outside of marriage and desertion both violate the marriage bond because they destroy the essence of marriage. Sexual intimacy outside of marriage breaks the one-man-one-woman bond. Desertion likewise breaks the lifelong commitment.

Incompatibility is a general term used to include many reasons people give for breaking up their marriage when there has been no marital unfaithfulness or malicious desertion. Divorce on the basis of such incompatibility is sin. The same is true of “no-fault” divorce in which the spouses do not see marriage as an unbreakable, God-made bond and desert each other by common consent.

Victims of broken marriages are to forgive their repentant, sinful partners and, if circumstances warrant, may choose to reestablish their marriages. Spouses who do forgive their sinning partners and reestablish their marriages may not at a later time claim their partner’s original offense as grounds for divorce.

### **Remarriage**

- 11. Remarriage is governed by the same essential elements as marriage: one man and one woman, both free to marry, willingly and publicly making known their promise to live together as husband and wife for life.*

Remarriage is permitted by God when the one who was married previously is truly free to marry. This may occur when the marriage bond has been dissolved through death (Romans 7:2) or when a spouse has been the victim of a wrongful divorce (1 Corinthians 7:15).



There is no question at all that those whose spouses have died have the privilege of remarrying. The reality of divorce, however, inevitably leads to the question of remarriage on the part of those whose marriage was broken. It is not always possible to effect reconciliation when a marriage bond is severed because of sin. Though an abandoned partner may choose to take back the former spouse, God does not insist that the abandoned partner do so. An abandoned husband or wife is therefore free to remarry (1 Corinthians 7:15).

While the words of Matthew 5:32 have been understood by some as a prohibition of remarriage, more accurate translations of the passage show that such a remarriage is not to be termed adultery, but as an act that might be viewed as adulterous by others. This is unfortunately another price exacted by broken marriages. The subsequent marriage, however, is acceptable before God and God's people.

Christ's words in Luke 16:18 have led many to look upon God's will as being categorically opposed to remarriage. Note, however, that the specific circumstances are not mentioned by the Lord. Comparing the words of Luke 16 with what Jesus says elsewhere indicates that undoubtedly both partners sinned in dissolving their marriage, did so with remarriage in mind, and thus entered their new marriages with the guilt of adultery.

In the case of the spouse who sinfully ended a marriage by adultery or malicious desertion, we look for repentance. With repentance we also anticipate a genuine desire to restore the broken relationship, if possible. Should this be truly impossible, because the former spouse has remarried or is unwilling to reconcile, remarriage for the offending spouse may become a possibility. This assumes, however, that as far as one can observe, the repentance is genuine and the attempt at reconciliation is equally genuine. In other words, there can be no "planned" repentance, for that is no repentance at all. The repentant person must also have the intention of living a godly life in the new marriage bond. Great caution must be exercised so that we do not give the impression that what might be possible in exceptional circumstances becomes a license to disregard God's revealed will.

## **PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS**

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### ***1. Teaching God's people***

In a society that has a lax view of marriage and divorce it is vital to teach our congregations what the Bible says about such subjects as marriage and divorce, the Christian life, love, and forgiveness (2 Timothy 4:2,3). In fact, the need to educate our congregations on what Scripture says on these subjects cannot be emphasized too much. Since it is a sad fact that many in our congregations do not appear to be fully convinced of what the Bible says on these subjects, we need to repeat and repeat: "What God has joined together, let man not separate" (Matthew 19:6).

It is vital to lead all members of our congregations to understand the scriptural idea of marriage. And they will as they call to mind the loving relationship between Christ and his bride, the church. When each husband loves his wife as he loves himself and when each wife respects her husband, imperfect as he may be in his efforts to take care of her, there will be a happy marriage.

To achieve this we will use all possible means – our sermons, our educational agencies, our various organizations, and our personal contact with our members. We will encourage all our members to attend church regularly, to participate in Bible classes and to do personal Bible study. We will also teach parents to know and to express their roles, not only as spouses, but also as parents. We will train our children by giving them a clear picture of God’s will. In this present world they cannot learn too young. The Lord who has laid this responsibility upon us will also support us and guide us as we carry it out.

## **2. *Dealing with prospective members***

We will teach prospective members who may be divorced, remarried, or living together outside of marriage that a commitment to Christ is the most important thing. Only after we have nourished that commitment may we expect the appropriate fruits of faith (Matthew 12:33; 2 Corinthians 5:14-18; Ephesians 4:21-24).

## **3. *Premarital counseling***

Formal and intensive premarital counseling is vital. In premarital counseling we have an opportunity to discuss what marriage is all about—not only in the secular sense, but as Scripture reveals it. In doing so we will explain what the essence of marriage is, with particular emphasis on commitment. Many who profess to be Christians unfortunately do not understand what a lifelong commitment implies. The same is true about love and respect. A significant cause for the failure of marriages is a misunderstanding of the concept of love. Couples need to be reminded that love for another must be rooted in the love God has for them. Though love itself does not establish the marriage relationship, its presence is important if the marriage is to be a healthy one.

## **4. *Counseling approach***

To enrich marriages and to foster healing between partners in troubled marriages, we will maintain the centrality of the gospel. We will let those whom we counsel know that our primary concern is with their souls and their relationship to their Savior. Only as the Spirit grants them growth in faith through the gospel will they grow in marital commitment as well as in mutual love and respect. Forgiven and forgiving spouses will love each other as Christ loved them and gave himself for them.

Our purpose, then, goes beyond the restraining of sin and the furthering of external tranquility in the home and family. Sin is to be repented of and forgiven and in this way continuously removed as a destructive force that separates partners. Only the gospel can move spouses in a God-pleasing way to be kind, compassionate, and forgiving by pointing them to God’s prior forgiveness in Christ (Ephesians 4:32-5:2).

In counseling marriage partners we will also caution them to recognize the biblical call to personal appropriation and application of God’s word. Christian husbands and wives are to examine their own lives in the light of the word and acknowledge individual accountability before God as having a far higher priority than seeking to change the marriage partner. It is easier to focus on the faults of the spouse than to seek God’s grace and power to deal with personal shortcomings.

Pastors will offer those whom they counsel scriptural advice on loving communication, human sexuality, and all other areas on which Scripture touches. They will, however, also be ready and willing to refer couples to professional counselors for advice in areas not specifically touched on in Scripture.

### **5. *Dealing with troubled marriages***

When we counsel spouses with troubled marriages, we are especially concerned about promoting reconciliation by zeroing in on commitment in marriage and the concepts of love and respect (see No. 3). Those contemplating divorce are first of all to be encouraged to establish a closer relationship with God. We must seek to strengthen their commitment to the Scriptures.

Counselors may come to the conviction that it would be best to allow some troubled couples to separate temporarily so that they can be actively involved in counseling and work on the issues. But if they are not absolutely sure that such a separation is in keeping with the revealed will of God in Scripture, it is important to wait. This is particularly important because those dealing with troubled marriages often have difficulty in determining what is really going on between partners who declare their grievances against each other. Another reason for being cautious in recommending separation is that separation in and of itself will not solve the marital problems. However, a temporary separation can be helpful in giving the partners time and opportunity to grow spiritually, receive individual counseling, and focus on the issues that need to be addressed in the relationship.

We need to remain alert to the emotional, physical, and spiritual damage that persistent mental abuse can cause. The abusers need to learn from Christ to love and respect their spouses. It may be necessary to encourage abusers to get professional help. In extreme cases, an immediate separation may be necessary. Physical abuse must be dealt with as soon as it becomes known. The abusers must be held responsible for their actions, because the Fifth Commandment condemns their conduct. Outside help may also be necessary, and separation may be an immediate need.

With increasing frequency, the pastor is confronted with the question whether persistent mental, psychological, or physical abuse on the part of a marriage partner, drug and/or alcohol addiction, inadequate or sporadic financial support for the family, persistent viewing of pornography or addiction to pornography, or physical violence in the home should be considered desertion. Sinful behavior in a marriage is always harmful, but it may not immediately destroy the marriage covenant. Such behavior, however, may be evidence of desertion, should the offender unilaterally and willfully continue in it despite admonition. Great care needs to be exercised in determining if this is so, and the emphasis of the believing partner will remain on helping the sinning spouse overcome sinful behavior and showing patience with forgiveness. 1 Corinthians 7:15 may not be used as a license to dissolve the marital bond for insufficient cause.

### **6. *Dealing with those who have broken their marriages***

The church with its called pastors needs to deal with broken marriages. If we do nothing, we give offense – hardening the guilty in their sin and leading others to commit the same sin by giving the impression that the church allows marriages to be broken (1 Corinthians 5:1-13).

The church with its called pastors should seek to bring to repentance the spouse who broke the marriage bond in a sinful way. The sinner who repents will be assured of the Lord's forgiveness (2 Samuel 12:13). The sinner who repents will also produce fruits in keeping with repentance (Luke 3:8). These fruits are not a cause or condition of forgiveness, but a response of faith in God's forgiveness.

In seeking fruits of repentance we will keep in mind that the Scriptures do not always specify the exact form they must take. In general, the fruit of repentance is to amend one's sinful ways. Out of love to God for his goodness in forgiving their sins, penitent sinners will fight against the sin they repented of and will seek to restore, if possible, what their sin damaged or ruined. Since the fruits of repentance are in the realm of sanctification, they will never be perfect.

When it becomes evident that the person who has broken the marriage does not repent, Christian admonition is called for, even to the point of excluding someone from the church. Excommunication is the church's public announcement that the individual, by persisting in unrepented sin, has shown himself to be an unbeliever, who is not a member of the Holy Christian Church and therefore cannot be a member of a Christian congregation. Only in that way will such persons be faced with the magnitude of their sin and – pray God – be moved to repentance.

#### **7. *Watching ourselves***

As we deal with these cases we will be careful to watch ourselves (Galatians 6:1-5). We will let the principles of God's word, not our feelings, guide us. Let us never be hasty in our actions, if there is some uncertainty as to facts or conscience. Let us avoid judging a case or another pastor's or counselor's handling of a situation, when we may not have all the facts (Matthew 7:1,2). If we have questions about another pastor's or congregation's handling of disciplinary cases, let us lovingly approach them for information. To do otherwise would be to sin against them.

Love is our motive – love for God and his word; love for sinners, seeking to call them back to God and his word; and love for those who have been wronged, supporting them with the guidance and help of God's word.

“Who is equal to such a task?” (2 Corinthians 2:16)  
“Our competence comes from God” (2 Corinthians 3:5)