

# **A Position Paper on Divorce and Remarriage**

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## **Introduction**

### **The Purpose of This Paper**

I am a local church pastor who believes the Bible with all my heart. My passion for God's Word means that I should have strong convictions about truth and morality, and it also means that I should have a spirit of patience and grace. To lack either is to be a deficient minister of the gospel.

Christ himself modeled both conviction and grace in a perfect way. According to the apostle John, he was "full of grace and truth." I do not understand the character of Christ to be sometimes truthful and sometimes gracious but, rather, always truthful and always gracious. I want to be like him.

Any pastor will tell you that one of the hardest areas to communicate biblical conviction and godly patience is with regard to issues of divorce and remarriage in the church. There are so many situations that involve high emotions, conflicted opinions, placement of blame, and deep wounds that the pastoral navigation of divorce and remarriage is fraught with misunderstandings and relational fallout.

To be frank, many Christians tend to jump to conclusions and reason in irresponsible extremes. Many tend to base their decisions on emotions and what seems right to them in their own eyes. Many tend to invest little in the way of diligent consideration to the Word of God, and even those who do consider the Bible struggle to be truly objective about what it has to say. Further, many will acknowledge what God's Word teaches and still decide to act according to their own desire.

If this assessment of the attitudes and thought patterns of confessing Christians seems too harsh, let me just say that I believe many Bible-believing pastors would agree with it. Unless you have spent much time in biblical counseling, you may not realize how frustrating the calling to give biblical counsel can be. Too often a pastor is trying to help someone who has no real desire to hear from the Bible nor willingness to act on God's principles. Too often the destructive symptoms of the heart are plain before a pastor's eyes and the person in counsel will not receive spiritual wisdom or biblical truth.

And to make matters worse, sometimes pastors aren't much better. Too many pastors tend to view truth and grace at odds. One error is to "stand for truth" in unloving ways or over matters of legitimate difficulty. Another error is to "celebrate grace" through obvious biblical compromise.

And then of course, many pastors genuinely seek out biblical conviction and biblical grace. But even these men are subject to being misunderstood and labeled inappropriately by others. To help to avoid misunderstanding, I am writing this paper to attempt to clarify several things concerning my position on divorce and remarriage. I am writing to communicate where my convictions lie and how I would seek to operate in a spirit of grace in light of my convictions.

### **Four Categories for Clarifying**

There are four basic categories that I wish to set forth in this paper.

**Category 1.** I wish to set forth my basic conviction about the type of marriage that I can personally affirm and in which my conscience would allow me to participate. Along with this, I need to set forth my position on the issue of divorce and remarriage. I hope to concisely yet adequately show how my conviction is based on diligent meditation on the Bible.

**Category 2.** I wish to set forth the basic situations in which I cannot personally affirm or participate but can allow the church I pastor to cooperate in an official way. This category stems from my desire to be truthful about what I believe the Bible teaches and my conscience's demand to take a personal stand. But I also want to be patient with my church family about areas of legitimate difficulty in understanding the issue. I do not believe that I can expect every member to be in the same place as me in wrestling with some of the difficult questions that concern divorce and remarriage. So in terms of the involvement of other ministers on my staff or the use of our building for ceremonies, this category clarifies marriage situations in which I would express my personal reservation but not necessarily stand formally in the way.

**Category 3.** I wish to set forth the basic situations in which I cannot affirm or participate or allow the church I pastor to officially cooperate but in which I would not necessarily pursue as a matter of church discipline. In such situations, a church member may choose to get married in the face of strong counsel to the contrary and apart from the official involvement of the church, but still not be in such a clear-cut discipline scenario that is likely to be dealt with in effective unity without causing more harm than good. In my opinion, this category is the messiest and most difficult to clarify, but it is necessary due to the messy realities of our fallen world.

**Category 4.** I wish to set forth the basic situations in which I cannot affirm or participate or allow the church I pastor to officially cooperate, and additionally, I would pursue as a matter of church discipline. In such situations, even if the church body had difficulty recognizing the need for discipline, I would press for it due to the clear sinfulness of the marriage. I believe there should be a limit to a pastor's tolerance of choices among his church family. A man of God needs to be able to count the cost and be willing to stand up and call his church to corporate action when sinful behavior is being blatantly accepted. In such instances, he should be able to demonstrate the sinfulness of the action from the Bible and instruct in the appropriate process of loving discipline.

## Why Four Categories

It is legitimate to ask what the rationale is behind the four categories that I have just given. My answer is that they stem from the significance of three important parties involved in every Christian marriage: Party one is the individual pastor of the church involved. Party two is the local church congregation involved. Party three is the couple being married.

Speaking in general without reference to marriage for a moment, this three party dynamic is always present in any life-decision that a church member makes. There is always pastor, church family, and individual believer.

**Party 1.** Pastors should be men who are reliable guides, men who view life and spirituality through a mature lens. But of course, this means that many in the church won't be where he is yet with regard to understanding how the Bible and life intersect. So a pastor is called to patience and grace. He should not expect all of his mature personal convictions to be embraced by all in his church family. The local church must have room for the strong and the weak. So a pastor must have discernment about issues where the church must collectively agree and issues of individual growth. Further, pastors are not perfect and may err. So they must hold certain personal convictions with a degree of caution, especially regarding difficult life issues.

**Party 2.** Church congregations should be places that embrace the authority, inerrancy, and clarity of God's Word. So there should be many matters of conviction that are held as matters of collective church doctrine. Sound doctrine encompasses both theology and ethics, so every church must have agreement over basic convictions with regard to both. In general, these areas of basic agreement depend upon the importance of the doctrine at hand and the clarity with which the Bible speaks. Submission to the local church's doctrine should be the basis for receiving new members and for disciplining current members.

**Party 3.** Individual believers have both a corporate and an individual dimension to their walk with Christ. Corporately speaking, they should care deeply about the blessing and affirmation of their local church and its pastors. This means that they should take seriously the collective doctrine of the church and the personal counsel of the pastors. But individually speaking, there are still going to be countless decisions that are between them and Jesus. There are many personal choices of every believer in which a local church cannot or should not be involved. Though a church is called to get involved in individual's members lives when clearly sinful and destructive choices are happening, there are many times when choices are not so clear cut. The pastors or members of the church may express concern about something in a member's life and even be reserved about blessing and affirming, but not necessarily have sufficient clarity that would justify a direction of formal church discipline.

So considering these three parties, there arise four categories with regard to individual member decisions. In the first category, all three parties can affirm the decision. In the second category, the pastor cannot affirm, but the church family and the individual in question do. In the third, neither the pastor nor the church can affirm, but the individual is given the freedom to

make the decision before the Lord. And in the fourth category, neither the pastor nor the church can affirm, and the individual clearly should not affirm either.

I believe when one takes into account the amount of messy, convoluted situations surrounding divorce and remarriage and the amount of disagreement among earnest believers with regard to what is right and wrong, these four categories are relevant and needed.

### **What This Paper Is Not**

I should clarify what I am not attempting to do in this paper:

1. I am not attempting to address the extremely important matter of helping people with the pain associated with divorce and remarriage. Every divorce and remarriage is loaded with emotional pain and past wounds. The feelings of people involved are extremely important and should be handled with pastoral care and biblical truth.

However, feelings are not a reliable guide with regard to divorce and remarriage just as feelings are not a reliable guide for any other important decision in life. The principles of the Bible must govern Christian choices. This paper is about working through the biblical principles and how to deal with disagreement over them.

2. I am not attempting to go into a detailed biblical argument of all the various positions. But I do speak to some of these perspectives and particularly aim to present the key biblical rationale for my own position.

3. I am not attempting to counter all possible objections to my position. I will simply say that I am well aware of the various objections but have ultimately not been compelled by alternative stances because I do not believe other positions adequately interpret God's Word.

4. I am not attempting to make the case for church discipline. The responsibility for the church to hold one another accountable in cases of sin is an abundantly clear principle in the New Testament (Matt 18:15-20; Luke 17:3; Gal 6:1; 1 Cor 5:1-5; 1 Tim 1:18-20; 2 Tim 3:16).

### **A Plea to Hear My Position With a Gracious Spirit**

Before diving into these categories, I would simply commend myself as a pastor and theologian who is passionate about the grace of God purchased for us in the cross of our Savior and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to live according to his will. I am a man who is committed to the Word of God as inerrant, authoritative, and basically clear concerning God's will toward his people, who has spent countless hours over the course of many years interacting with the various positions on this subject, who has pastorally been involved in many challenging marriage/divorce situations, and who loves the people of God and their Lord with all my heart.

I do not profess to be perfect or beyond movement on this issue. However, my current position is conscience bound by the Word and has been so for years.

As far as those who may read this paper and have a range of responses to my position, I would simply ask that unless you have spent a good deal of serious biblical study on this issue and are vigilantly committed to following God's Word, please be slow to judge about my own interpretation and my own reservations concerning divorce and remarriage. Whatever your current understanding of this issue may be, I pray that this position paper will help you grow as you consider these things afresh.

### **Category 1 Situations That I Can Affirm**

I can only affirm a marriage situation in which neither person has been formerly married or in which any former spouses have died and in which both individuals are professing Christians who show that they are truly serious about following Jesus. Therefore, I can only participate in marriages that fit these criteria.

Further, I believe that the act of any remarriage while a former spouse is still living is adultery. Therefore, I cannot in good conscience affirm or officiate any marriage in which one of the individuals is divorced and whose former spouse is still living. This conviction holds no matter the reason for the divorce or the current state of affairs between the divorcees.

Further, I believe divorce and remarriage to be two separate issues. Though divorce may sometimes be an unavoidable course for a believer, I do not believe remarriage while a former spouse is still living is ever justified, no matter the reason for the divorce.

Further, I believe that an adulterous remarriage is, nevertheless, a real marriage in God's sight. Though it should not take place, when it does, vows are still exchanged and a new union is established so that remarried people are truly married people. Therefore, they are not necessarily living in perpetual adultery, nor are they to be called to divorce the new spouse. I believe that this choice would simply be adding sin upon sin. Rather they should be called to repent of their past sins and to commit their new marriage unto the Lord. The church must extend grace in the aftermath of sinful choices and help remarried couples learn to honor Christ with their new union.

I know that my absolute prohibition of remarriage is not in the majority among Christians and am aware of the kind of reaction that it can receive. Often times, there is an accusation that this stance does not celebrate God's grace.

So before going any farther, it may be wise to clarify that my view has nothing to do with a lack of celebrating grace. In fact, my view has nothing to do whatsoever with access to forgiveness concerning past sins but entirely to do with the rightness of future choices. In other words, I love God's grace. I love that the cross covers all sin. I love that Jesus gets glory by

forgiving even the vilest of sinners. I consider myself a vile sinner who has experienced the glorious forgiveness of God. Christians should rejoice in the cross of Jesus that any past sins of any kind can be covered by the blood of Christ. No matter our past situations, the church is called to be ambassadors of grace, healing, and acceptance to those who are willing to repent.

And at the same time, Christians must recognize that past decisions and vows have implications for how to obey and honor the Lord with future choices. The condition for receiving the grace of God in the gospel is faith and repentance. So forgiven people are supposed to be repentantly driven to honor God with future choices. That drive to honor God should certainly take into account past vows and lifelong responsibilities. As I said in the introduction about Jesus himself, there is nothing inconsistent about having strong moral convictions and loving God's grace.

### **A Brief Explanation of Why I Have this Conviction**

To briefly explain my personal view, it is based on the conviction that God never loses sight of the "one flesh" union created through marriage even though human circumstances may lead to a legal divorce.

**Jesus' Teaching.** In Luke 16:18, Jesus demonstrates that two people can be divorced in the world's eyes but are still bound in covenant in the Lord's eyes: "Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery." In short, the only way that Jesus can call a remarriage "adultery" once a legal divorce has happened is if God still views the original marriage through the lens of a life-long one-flesh union.

For me, it is impossible to escape Jesus' label of "adultery." If he wanted believers to affirm certain situations of remarriage, it is very hard for me to understand why he would make such a categorical claim about the sinfulness of remarriage. Whenever I am lured toward a more permissive view of remarriage, the strong nature of Jesus' words brings me back. I sometimes imagine myself standing before Jesus one day and saying, "Lord, on my own, I would have been more permissive, but you said it was 'adultery,' and I took you for your word." I have a hard time believing I will be rebuked for this basic disposition.

In Mark 10:2-12, Jesus claims that legal divorce creates a tension between the human perspective and God's perspective:

And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away." And Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female' 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man

separate.” And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. And he said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

It is important to note that in these passages, both the divorcer and the divorcee are guilty of adultery if they remarry. It is difficult (I would even say impossible) to make sense of these passages unless God views a legally divorced couple as still bound by their one-flesh union. If they are, then even if a circumstance seems to necessitate divorce, remarriage to someone else should not take place.

**The “Exception Clause.”** Given the categorical nature of Jesus’ words in Luke and Mark, the natural next question pertains to Jesus’ words in Matthew, particularly regarding the “exception clause” found there. In two places, Jesus says essentially the same thing as in Luke and Mark but with an additional explanation.

Matthew 5:31-32: “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, *except on the ground of sexual immorality*, makes her commit adultery. And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

Matthew 19:3-9: “And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, ‘Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?’ He answered, ‘Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.’ They said to him, ‘Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?’ 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. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, *except for sexual immorality*, and marries another, commits adultery.’

In both of these passages, Jesus makes an exception for cases of “sexual immorality.” The question is: What is he actually talking about?

Since the Protestant Reformation, this clause has been traditionally interpreted by protestant churches as an exception for cases of adultery. It should be noted that this was not the common view of the early church fathers for the first several hundred years of church history. Additionally, it has been assumed since the Reformation that such cases permit remarriage. This view is so widespread that most evangelicals today assume it to be acceptable and assume that their pastor agrees with it (when in fact, many pastors and biblical scholars do not). I also believe that this problem is compounded by an interpretive translation in the popular New International Version of the Bible, “except for marital unfaithfulness.” This wording appears to support the adultery view, but I believe it was an extremely irresponsible choice of the NIV committee that has misled many.

There are serious interpretive problems with this understanding of the exception clause. Someone may ask, “Why then is it so widespread?” I believe it is the most popular among evangelicals, not because of the weight of interpretive evidence, but mainly because it is socially easier to hold a permissive view than one that is more restrictive. To be clear, I’m not saying that all who hold this view willfully base their conviction on its permissiveness but that the pull of permissiveness is so strong that many do not realize that their judgment is being affected by it.

The major problem with the adultery view is that the Greek word used in the exception clause is not the Greek word for “adultery.” The Greek word for adultery is *moichao*. If Jesus wanted to make an exception for cases of adultery, he could have done so very plainly by using this word. But instead he used the word *porneia* which generally refers to other types of sexual immorality without reference to a marriage covenant. So now the question is: Why did he use *porneia*?

Some interpreters would argue that he used this word to cover broader matters of sexual infidelity within marriage that could not formally be called adultery. (An addiction to pornography perhaps would be a modern day example.) One major problem with this view is that in the Sermon on the Mount and in Matthew 19, Jesus is hardly creating more room for divorce and remarriage than what was commonly held. The theme of his teaching is that of presenting a higher standard that shocks his listeners by its loftiness.

Other interpreters would argue that he used this word to refer to unchastity during the one year betrothal period of Jewish marriages. Jewish betrothal was a period of legally binding but not fully consummated marriage. Under this view, Jesus is not allowing for divorce and remarriage after the full consummation but only during that one year period before consummation occurs. (For example, John Piper espouses and explains this view in his personal position paper on divorce and remarriage: <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/divorce-remarriage-a-position-paper>)

This view of *porneia* is a much more legitimate possibility than the adultery view because Jews were allowed to “divorce” for unchastity during the betrothal period. It may be argued that in God’s eyes before consummation, the one-flesh union has not occurred. This view is also supported by the fact that only in the gospel of Matthew do we learn of Joseph’s plan to put Mary away quietly after she was found to be with child during their betrothal. The argument goes that Matthew included the exception clause in both places where Jesus teaches about divorce and remarriage in order to cover Joseph’s instance of “divorce” without indicting him for an unrighteous plan. The problem with this view is that there isn’t any solid evidence that *porneia* was ever used in this technical way in the first century and that there is a better interpretive option. Though I see the betrothal view as a more legitimate possibility than the previously mentioned views, there is another view that I deem the strongest.

I believe that Jesus uses *porneia* to refer to certain types of legal marriages in his day that are not truly viewed as marriage in God’s eyes. These are situations in which sexual immorality



is occurring that God does not accept as a one-flesh union. For example, incestuous unions were legal in Greco-Roman culture but were not considered true marriage in God's sight. Under this view, Jesus is saying that in such a situation, "divorce" should happen because the "marriage" isn't really marriage anyway. It is simply *porneia* happening under the false label of marriage. There is no one-flesh union before God.

To understand this view it is important to note that it interprets the exception clause as an immoral state of a being not just to an immoral act. I say this because so many people are conditioned to hear the exception clause as referring to an immoral act that they sometimes have a hard time wrapping their head around this interpretation. My paraphrase of Jesus' words would be like this: "Anyone who divorces his wife, except in false marriage situations that are inherently immoral, and marries another commits adultery."

Upon close inspection, the support for this view is very strong.

First, Matthew is the most sensitive to the Old Testament of all the Gospels. He is addressing a Jewish context that is very aware of the Levitical marriage code. In Leviticus 18, God covers an array of sexual abominations that he would never deem as marriage, particularly of note are incestuous unions and homosexual unions. In such cases, even if the two people are "legally married" in society, they are not married in God's eyes and are in a relational state of perpetual sexual immorality. In light of Jesus' shocking call for faithfulness in marriage, it is understandable that Matthew would not want Jews to think that Jesus would have such unlawful unions stay in that immoral situation. Such a view would pit Jesus against God's levitical law rather than show Jesus as the champion of God's moral law. So Matthew would have included the exception to protect against this notion.

Second, incestuous "marriage" was in fact an issue in Jesus' day and was an issue in the Gospel of Matthew! John the Baptist was beheaded by Herod because of his insistence that Herod's incestuous union was not truly marriage in God's eyes. Matthew 14:3-4: "For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because John had been saying to him, 'It is not lawful for you to have her.'" John died because he insisted that Herod should legally divorce Herodias because of the incestuous immoral nature of the relationship itself. In light of this story, I believe it is highly likely that Matthew included the exception clause to cover John the Baptist's rebuke of Herod and demonstrate John and Jesus' agreement.

Third, we see in two other places in the New Testament that the word *porneia* is used in the same particular vein with reference to a concern for Leviticus 18 and unlawful unions. In 1 Corinthians 5:1, Paul rebukes the church in Corinth for allowing an incestuous union to exist among them without taking decisive action to call the person to repentance: "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality (*porneia*) among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife." What is especially noteworthy is that Paul calls this supposed union *porneia*, and he is clearly condemning it as unlawful and in need of being addressed.

Also, in Acts 15:28-29 after the Jerusalem counsel, which was concerned with how to reconcile the Jewish codes with hellenistic Christians, the church agreed on the following course of action: “For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality (*porneia*). If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well.” Again the word *porneia* is used in this passage, and it is likely referring specifically to the Levitical code since the whole counsel concerned this code. Further, their concern would have been particularly to reinforce God’s view of unlawful unions over against the permissive view of Greek culture.

So to conclude about Jesus’ teaching on divorce and remarriage, I do not believe that he ever gives explicit permission to divorce, and even in cases where he acknowledges that divorce has taken place, he categorically prohibits remarriage by calling it “adultery.”

**Paul’s Teaching.** The other significant text in the New Testament that addresses issues of divorce and remarriage is 1 Corinthians 7. This is a long chapter with many elements to it. I do not attempt here to interact with every element. I simply note a couple of key things:

1. Paul strongly commends a single life as a life of joy and fulfillment in serving the Lord. He does not have a view that being single is a graceless punishment. This is huge to recognize because it corrects the common misconception that a prohibition against remarriage is a punishment of the divorced person. The Bible does not view singleness in this way. And I would suggest that people who do view singleness as a punishment have a deficient view of the joy that only Christ can give them. Divorced or not, such individuals are not necessarily ready for marriage anyway because they will be inclined to fix their joy on their spouse and not on Christ alone.

If anything, Paul is saying that marriage is the harder path. In 1 Corinthians 7:28 he says, “Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that.” Further, just circumstantial honesty should cause us to look around and see that many, many marriages turn into a type of prison for one or both of the spouses. Of course, if God’s will is embraced by both spouses, it need not turn into this. But in so many cases, one or both of the spouses does not embrace their God given role and, thus, the marriage is very painful.

This observation corrects the “grass is greener” syndrome about marriage. Often times people who are unmarried view marriage with rose-tinted glasses. They think the key to their fulfillment is in marriage. On the other hand, often times people who are married desire their singleness again. This statement is especially relevant to those who have been divorced because they should know as well as anyone the bondage of a bad marriage and the freedom of newfound singleness. A divorced person is the last person who should view a call to singleness as an inherent punishment because a divorced person knows the horrors of a bad marriage.

Christians must never say that one situation, marriage or singleness, is inherently more joyful than the other because this fixes joy on a circumstance and not on Christ. Further, such a claim would be a horrible attitude to convey to those who are single. It tells them that their situation is inherently less fulfilling than marriage. Paul disagrees.

2. Paul says that a Christian is not enslaved to fight against an unbelieving spouse to stay together if the unbelieving spouse insists on separation or divorce, but he does not give permission to remarry as long as the former spouse is still alive.

In the middle of his call to Christians to stay faithful to an unbelieving spouse, Paul writes, “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” (1 Cor 7:15).

Many take this verse to provide an additional exception for divorce and remarriage in the Bible. They would argue that Paul’s permission to a Christian to allow an unbelieving spouse to leave them is also permission for remarriage. The word “enslaved” is an important key. Those who take this view would interpret Paul’s meaning to refer to the entire situation of being abandoned and alone. They would say that Paul does not want a Christian to feel enslaved to singleness due to an unbelieving spouse.

I believe this view is wrong because it has several serious problems:

First, it views singleness as a type of slavery and bondage that the Bible, and especially Paul, would not propose. I just covered this issue directly above.

Second, it cannot be reconciled with Jesus’ categorical label of all remarriage as adultery. I covered this issue above.

Third, a huge problem with this view is similar to the problem with the adultery view of the exception clause from Matthew, namely, that the Greek word used does not point to this interpretation. Just like Jesus could have used the obvious word for adultery in Matthew if he had wanted to make that point, Paul could have used the obvious word for the marriage bond if he had wanted to free abandoned Christians to remarry. But he did not.

The word that is consistently used in the New Testament to refer to the marriage bond is the word *deo*. It literally means “bound” and is consistently used to refer to the one-flesh union of marriage. For example, in Romans 7:2 Paul uses *deo* to describe the obligation of the marriage covenant: “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.” In 1 Corinthians 7:15, if Paul wanted to permit remarriage, he could have easily clarified this permission by saying that the divorced spouse is “not bound.” But instead he says “not enslaved” which is a different word: *douloo*.

I believe that Paul uses the word “enslaved” because a situation of fighting to stay married when an unbeliever is insisting on divorce would be so contentious that it would be like

a form of slavery. Paul doesn't want Christians to feel the oppression of going through such an endless battle. This is why he says, "God has called you to peace." I believe that Paul is saying nothing about a right to remarry, but simply a permission to allow divorce to happen. If he wanted to allow for remarriage, he would have said, "In such cases the brother or sister is not bound." But he didn't. (Again, the New International Version is poorly translated and uses the word "bound." This is an inexcusable interpretive call and not a responsible translation.)

3. At the end of this chapter after Paul has addressed all kinds of marital issues, he concludes with the following statement: "A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. Yet in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God" (1 Cor 7:39-40).

This is a remarkable conclusion for several reasons:

First, it brings final clarity to the question of remarriage. I believe that Paul does not want anything he has said about any situation to be construed as unbinding a spouse from the one-flesh union of their marriage covenant. It is notable that here he does use the word *deo* because he is making a clear claim that the marriage bond is a reality until the death of one of the spouses occurs.

Second, it punctuates the chapter with the potential happiness of a single life before the Lord. Paul says of a single woman after her former spouse dies "in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is."

Third, this statement particularly applies to an abandoned spouse. It makes no sense for Paul to say it concerning someone still married because they are obviously bound. It is only needful as a clarification for those who are divorced. I believe Paul's only possible motive for finishing the chapter this way is to bring final clarity concerning the situation of an abandoned or divorced believer.

**Conclusion of my personal conviction.** My conscience only allows me to affirm and participate in a marriage in which two committed Christians are coming together and do not have any former spouses still alive. (I also may have other reservations toward a couple's marriage plans which might regard their personal maturity, financial situation, other besetting sins, etc.)

Also, I would not counsel remarried couples to divorce simply because of their adulterous union. But would encourage them to examine their past to see how they need to ask forgiveness and to devote their current marriage fully unto the Lord.

Given the status of western culture's acceptance of homosexual "marriage," one final note on my position is helpful to draw out. Based on what I believe to be the correct interpretation of the exception clause in Matthew, I would most certainly counsel any inherently immoral "marriage" union to divorce, even if it is legal in our society.

So one of the strong practical advantages that my view has is that it directly addresses the issue of homosexual “marriages” in our culture. I believe that in the exception clauses Jesus explicitly affirms that incestuous and homosexual “marriages” should be dissolved. I also believe that Paul affirms this course of action in 1 Corinthians 5. So if an incestuous or gay “married” couple came to Christ, their correct course of repentance is not to stay faithful to their vows but to legally “divorce” and live according to God’s sexual standard.

I want to be clear that I do not hold this interpretation because of this helpful practical clarity in our culture, but it is a helpful practical clarity nonetheless. Nor do I mean to suggest that a Christian with a different view of the exception clause would necessarily differ in his view of homosexual unions. I am simply saying that the “unlawful marriage view” sees explicit instruction in the words of Christ and Paul concerning such a situation.

## **Category 2**

### **Situations That I Personally Cannot Affirm But Can Allow My Church to Affirm**

I can work within a church setting where not everyone agrees with all of my particular convictions concerning divorce and remarriage. However, my conscience has limits of cooperation due to what I deem to be within the realm of legitimate interpretive difficulty in the Bible.

For example, though I disagree that Jesus is giving an exception for adultery in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, I understand why other Christians would take his words in that way (especially in light of misleading translations such as the NIV and dogmatic alternative teachers). Certainly the common protestant tradition carries much weight. So I am willing to work along side other staff or in a church setting where divorce and remarriage are permitted for this reason. I still would try to win such people to my own conviction, but not as a point of fellowship.

Here are the situations that would fit under this wider umbrella:

1. Exceptions for divorce and remarriage in cases of adultery on the part of the other spouse. The common protestant view is that a spouse who was the victim of the other spouse’s adultery is free to divorce and remarry. It is important to add that this does not apply to the spouse who committed the adultery.

2. Exceptions for divorce and remarriage in cases of desertion. As in the case above, this exception does not apply to the offending spouse, but only to the spouse who was “deserted.”

3. Exceptions for divorce and remarriage in cases of extreme abuse. Extreme abuse may be deemed as another type of desertion of the marriage covenant. Again, this exception does not apply to the offending spouse.

In all of these cases, I personally would counsel a person not to remarry, and I would explain my conviction that remarriage would be adultery. However, I would not pursue such an instance as a matter of church discipline because of the legitimate difficulty I concede in understanding the Bible in these cases.

It should also be noted, that even believers who hold to these exceptions, have a relatively restricted view of divorce and remarriage. Their consciences should not allow them to simply turn a blind eye to sinful situations. “Offending spouses” are not permitted to remarry under this view, and it would be irresponsible to overlook this distinction.

I should also note that under my conviction, the difficult and elusive job of assigning blame is irrelevant because of the cut-and-dry nature of the prohibition against remarriage. I am essentially free from the need to point fingers with regard to my core conviction. However, those who hold the exceptions listed above must also make judgments about fault and blame or else the exceptions are useless. This can easily lead to overlooking both spouses’ joint contribution to the marital problems (even if one has committed a more egregious act). The one is deemed “innocent” while the other is deemed “guilty” which can frequently present a false perspective of the problem and pit the spouses further against each other. I have also witnessed that once this door of blame is cracked open, the rationales of people in these difficult emotional situations can often run wild. Our hearts tend to make our minds their slaves. Logic is easily shaped by desire. So I believe if a believer gives an inch on divorce and remarriage, situations will frequently take a mile.

Unfortunately, there is still some burden for these considerations upon me because I am seeking here to work with grace among alternative perspectives. However, it is worth pointing out that if everyone embraced the interpretation of divorce and remarriage that I have set forth, then the “blame-game” would be irrelevant.

### **Category 3**

#### **Situations That I Cannot Personally Affirm Nor Allow My Church to Corporately Affirm But Would Not Pursue as a Matter of Church Discipline**

Understanding when church discipline is necessary is one of the most excruciating aspects of being a pastor. On the one hand, I do not want to be a coward and shy away from a truly needed instance of church discipline. In fact, I am resolved not to be a coward. Just because people often backlash against loving pastoral confrontation, it doesn’t mean that I am unwilling to attempt it where it is needed. (And I have on numerous occasions.) On the other hand, I do not want to cause unnecessary conflicts that create tensions where there cannot be full clarity. There is no cowardice in being wise about choosing one’s battles.

To speak directly to the issue at hand, some situations of divorce and remarriage are so slippery that it is difficult to imagine the church affirming and participating in the remarriage on the one hand, but on the other hand, it is equally difficult to imagine the church having a clear agreement over a discipline process. In short, some situations are practically impossible to

resolve on a corporate level. In such cases, an attempt in either direction on the part of the church could be so damaging that it may be best for the church as a corporate body to release the decision between the Christian couple and Christ even in the face of strong reservations.

I cannot express how difficult it is for me to even type the above paragraph. I do not view the Bible as an ambiguous book that leaves us without direction, and as I have already explained, I personally believe it understandable on questions of divorce and remarriage.

I also do not believe that God's grace can be invoked as a justification for future sin. More than once, I have heard a couple say something to this effect: "God is gracious, so we are prepared to ask God's forgiveness after we are married." I believe that such a mindset is one and the same with the mindset of "let us sin so that grace may abound" that Paul rejects in Romans 6:1.

But the reality is that every believer, even within a solid Bible-believing church, does not agree on the same principles or agree on the relationship between principle and grace. So it seems to me that there are some situations where it may be best for the pastor and the church body to avoid formal affirmation on the one hand and total prohibition on the other.

Such situations are difficult to pin down so an attempt at explaining them will have shortcomings, but perhaps a brief list can at least point in the direction of the type of situations that would fall under this category. All I can say is that I believe some situations are more clear cut than others among the church.

Situations falling under this category may be:

1. Instances where the divorce occurred due to a mutual failure, but then the former spouse is remarried, thus, making any hope of restoration impossible. Further, the church member has demonstrated repentance over the previous marriage and has shown significant progress in overcoming the former destructive mentality and actions.

Some people would classify this situation under the above scenario of abandonment and readily permit it. But I do not think it fits under that classification. If the "fault" for the original divorce was on both spouses' inability to make the marriage work or on the spouse under current question, then I don't believe that the claim of "abandonment" according to 1 Corinthians 7:15 can be legitimately applied.

However, with a wrecked marriage hopelessly beyond restoration due to the remarriage of the former spouse, many Christians, on the grounds of grace and viewing singleness as a type of bondage, have difficulty permanently prohibiting a future marriage. Because of this, it is very difficult to see how a church could have unity in discipline over such a situation. But it is equally difficult to see how a church could affirm or cooperate with such a remarriage given that the original divorce had no justification that may fall under any biblical rationale.

2. Instances where the divorce occurred due to a mutual failure, and though the former spouse is not remarried, the former marriage is deemed “irreparable.” Further, the church member has demonstrated repentance over the previous marriage, an earnest desire to be reconciled with the former spouse if possible, and has shown significant progress in overcoming the former destructive mentality and actions.

This situation is even harder for me to include here because of the subjectivity behind the judgment “irreparable” and because there is no definitive act of remarriage on the part of the former spouse that destroys the possibility of restoration. However, if a divorced Christian has earnestly and repeatedly sought restoration with the former spouse and been completely rejected, or if the former spouse is so mired in a destructive lifestyle that there is no legitimate hope for a renewed marriage, such situations might be deemed “irreparable” by the divorced Christian and the church family. In such situations, it could be very difficult to insist on church discipline because it may seem unreasonable to many Christians in the church family to expect a person to remain single when there is no hope of ever fully restoring the previous relationship.

#### **Category 4 Matters of Church Discipline**

There are a number of situations that clearly call for loving church discipline.

Church discipline should always have rescue from sin and restoration to fellowship as its goal. God has given us guidelines in the Bible for appropriate confrontation that, if followed, frequently lead to positive outcomes for those involved. Sadly, it does not always end in this way because ultimately the person or persons who are operating in sin have to come to a point of repentance. But just as concerned confrontation and moral boundaries are aspects of any truly loving relationship, so must a corporate church body be willing to confront those going down a path of sin and have boundaries for being part of its fellowship.

Unfortunately, many believers have not learned to embrace discipline as a needed aspect of church fellowship, nor have they learned to trust and follow God’s guidelines for confrontation. So frequently, the concept of discipline is viewed as inherently destructive. The result is that too often loving confrontation is avoided when obedience to Christ would demand otherwise.

Here is an attempt to list some of the marriage situations that would call for church discipline. Some of the situations listed are not specifically with reference to divorce and remarriage, but I list them because I believe it is helpful to give a fuller picture of the types of marriage situations that should be prohibited by a church family:

1. Instances where a church member is planning to marry a non-Christian.
2. Instances where a church member is planning to “marry” into a homosexual or incestuous relationship. These situations are explicitly addressed in Leviticus 18.



3. Instances of planned polygamy. Unfortunately, this issue is of growing relevance in our permissive culture.

4. Instances where a divorced person is unrepentant about past marriage failure, has not demonstrated legitimate progress in personal issues that would affect marriage, or gives strong reason to doubt a genuine desire to follow Jesus. This point could encompass a number of considerations, but at root is the lack of concern to be right with God concerning one's personal marriage choices.

5. Instances where a divorced person's former spouse is open to reconciliation, or at least might be open to reconciliation, and there is no obvious reason why reconciliation is not reasonable to attempt, but the person desiring to remarry is unwilling to attempt such reconciliation and prefers a new relationship. (I concede that there may be times when the former spouse desires reconciliation on a certain level, but it is not wise based on his or her extremely destructive patterns. Some examples might be as follows: A pattern of abusive behavior. A pattern of infidelity or immoral sexual addiction. A pattern of addiction with regard to money, gambling, extreme irresponsibility.)

6. Instances where a relationship that started as an adulterous affair leads to the divorce of the former marriage and then leads to a desire for marriage between the adulterous couple. If the adultery of two people contributes to the destruction of one or both of their marriages, true repentance should lead them to end their newfound sinful romantic relationship, not eventually get married. I believe this moral demand is obvious. There is simply no way that true repentance would lead to anything other than ending the adulterous relationship. Further, it is plain that the person shows no readiness for marriage given that he or she has not had any time "alone" to work through matters of repentance and relationship with the Lord. Such an unhealthy marriage situation is clearly rebellious and simply setting up for another failed marriage.

7. Instances where two former spouses attempt to remarry each other after one or both of them were married to someone else for a time. This situation is explicitly addressed in Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

8. Instances where two professing Christians are planning to get married, but choose to live together before their wedding. Sadly, this situation is more and more common in our culture. Amazingly, sometimes the couple in question will claim that they do not have a sexual relationship yet but that they are only living together for some practical necessity such as to save money. Whether their claim is true or not (which it projects a certain level of insult to expect mature Christians to accept), the fact is that their action of living together speaks much louder than their words. It is a blatantly foolish situation for professing believers to choose and, therefore, calls for loving discipline.

9. Instances where one or both of the individuals desiring to marry clearly demonstrate that they are not responsible in any number of ways that may prevent them from being able to

live in a mature marriage relationship. Such areas of irresponsibility may range from moral ensnarements, to relational patterns, to basic life skills, to financial habits, etc.

### **Conclusion**

I pray that this statement of my personal position on divorce and remarriage is edifying to the reader. I have earnestly sought to express my conviction about the permanent one-flesh union created by the marriage bond with a spirit of grace. It is my prayer that my thoughts on this issue help prevent the sin of adultery, but also the sin of unnecessary division. It is also my prayer that this paper help those directly influenced by my pastoral leadership to understand where I am coming from with regard to divorce and remarriage. Though I have strong convictions, I love my brothers and sisters in Christ and view all his true followers with open arms. I pray that those who may disagree with me on some points would view me in the same way. May Christ be glorified in his church, and may he return and establish his kingdom where broken relationships no longer exist!