

HOT TOPICS

DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

In the United States, lifelong marriages are no longer the norm for families. One twenty-first-century study shows that about one-third of Americans who are or have been married have also been divorced at least once. Among self-professed evangelical Christian believers, 25 percent reportedly have experienced divorce. Vast segments of the general population live in families headed by single parents, either divorced or never married. Many others live in transient relationships marked by convenience or fear of legal entanglements. In short, many people today live contrary to God's design for the family, sexual relationships, and child rearing.

What does the Scripture Say?

About Marriage

- 1) Marriage joins two sexes, male and female, who share in the divine image of God. Both males and females are biologically needed to be "fruitful and multiply" so that humanity can reflect God's authority over the earth (Genesis 1:27–28).
 - a) Marriage between two sexes should be a mutual relationship. After God placed man in the Garden to work it, He noted that man should not be alone. God created man's equal to work alongside him as an (Hebrew: **ezer kenegdo**) or "**ally in front of**" (Genesis 2:18). *Ezer* is a Hebrew term that can mean "helper," "ally," or "rescuer." The Old Testament uses the term most often to describe God. *Kenegdo* is a Hebrew word that can mean "in front of" or "in sight of." It describes standing face-to-face or eye-to-eye. In this context, **ezer kenegdo does not mean "junior partner" but "corresponding ally."** Man immediately recognized his equal in woman compared to other living beings (Genesis 2:19–23).
 - b) Marriage is a lifetime union between two sexes. The story of woman's creation explains marriage as the moment man leaves his family of origin to become "one flesh" with his wife (Genesis 2:24). Jesus said of this union, "What God has joined together, let no one separate" (Matthew 19:6).
- 2) Marriage is a covenant. It is a solemn, binding agreement made before God and among people in society. The marriage order of Genesis 2:24 strongly implies the

nature of marriage. But Malachi 2:14 describes it as a covenant. Ezekiel 16:8 then extends the idea of marriage to the covenant relationship between God and Israel.

a) The sexual consummation of marriage is for procreation, bonding, and mutual pleasure in a safe and loving relationship. Paul taught spouses to faithfully respect each other sexually (1 Corinthians 7:3–5).

b) **Biblical marriage begins and ends with monogamy.** The first story of the family focuses on one man and one woman. Some practiced polygamy later, but the resulting family experience was never ideal (e.g., Genesis 21:9–10; 37:2–36; 1 Samuel 1:1–8). Comparing Israel’s “one-God people” relationship with the institution of marriage (e.g., Isaiah 54:5, Hosea 3:1) led to an insistence on “one-spouse marriage” by the New Testament era.

3) Within the Church, Paul commanded monogamy for leaders by his references to a “one-woman man” (1 Timothy 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6). Paul saw marriage as parallel to the relationship between Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:21–33). Spouses’ faithfulness to each other’s well-being reflects the reconciled community Christ died for and for whom Christ will return.

About Divorce

1) God judged divorce as harmful (Malachi 2:14–16). **Divorce was not a part of God’s original intention for humanity.** Deliberately breaking the marital covenant hinders God’s purposes in marriage.

2) God’s Law regulated divorce. The Law (Gen – Deut) acknowledged that divorce was already taking place in Israel. In those times, women were under the authority of men. A husband could abandon his wife, without legal recourse, to starvation or prostitution on a mere whim. The Old Testament divorce law was a necessary hedge against mistreatment. The Law offered the possibility of divorce only under carefully advised circumstances (Deuteronomy 24:1–4; cf. 22:13–19, 28–29)

3) Jesus spoke against divorce (Matthew 19:5–6; Mark 10:6–9). In the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees over divorce, the question concerned what qualified as “indecent” in Deuteronomy 24:1. Can a man divorce his wife for any cause or only

for adultery? Jesus pointed out that Moses only permitted them to divorce their wives—but even then, not for “every cause” (Matthew 19:3, 7–8).

- a) In the case of “marital unfaithfulness,” Jesus permitted divorce (Matthew 5:32; see also Matthew 19:9). The Greek word translated “marital unfaithfulness” in these passages is **porneia**, which would undoubtedly include adultery but is also a broader term for sexual immorality of various kinds, often habitual, both before and after marriage (Mark 7:21; Acts 15:20; 1 Corinthians 5:1; 6:18; Galatians 5:19; Ephesians 5:3; 1 Thessalonians 4:3).
- b) When Jesus spoke against divorce, the concern was people finding any excuse to divorce one spouse to marry another. Divorce for the sake of remarriage constituted adultery in God's eyes unless **porneia** had already broken the marriage covenant

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- 4) Paul discouraged Christian couples from divorce (1 Corinthians 7:10–11).
 - a) Christian couples are to remain unmarried if they divorce unless they are reconciled to their believing spouse.
 - b) Paul also forbade Christians from initiating divorce simply because their partner was an unbeliever. Suppose an unbelieving spouse wants to stay in the marriage to a believer. For Paul, the believer sanctifies (sets apart) their marriage and family by their presence as a follower of Jesus (1 Corinthians 7:12–14). In fact, the believing spouse's witness could lead to the salvation of the unbelieving spouse (1 Corinthians 7:16).
 - c) Paul allowed for divorce when an unbelieving spouse was unwilling to continue in marriage to a believer. In that case, the believer must let them go “to live in peace” (1 Corinthians 7:15). Just as marriage to an unbeliever can lead a family to Christ if the unbeliever wants to stay, forcing marriage on an unbeliever who

wants to leave can disrupt the peace that the gospel promises to bring. In these cases, abandonment, by implication, provides grounds for divorce and remarriage.

- 5) In summary, marriage is a covenant between two partners, male and female, that God intends to last a lifetime. There is no closer human relationship than marriage, so there is no better analogy for the relationship between God and His people or Christ and His Church. Marriage should reflect the loving community God intends for His people.
- a) **God hates divorce among His people.** It violates the covenant between wives and husbands as bearers of the image of God in their union. At the same time, God protected wives from mistreatment in cultures where husbands had more power to initiate divorce by prescribing narrow conditions in which divorce is allowable.
 - b) Jesus also offered protection from spouses looking to divorce for any reason. Jesus did allow for (though He did not command) divorce for marital unfaithfulness because one spouse has already broken the marriage covenant.
 - c) Paul also forbade divorce for Christians but provided for unbelievers who were bound in marriage with believers. If an unbeliever wants out, the believer must let the spouse go. As an implied abandonment, the marriage covenant is already broken again, so divorce must be permitted.
 - d) Jesus interpreted the Law by looking to the heart of the Law and not just the wording. Paul interpreted Jesus by looking to the heart of the gospel and not just the one exception Jesus discussed. **Both Jesus and Paul allowed divorce when the marriage covenant was already broken.** They also considered what protected members from mistreatment in their discussions of divorce. While it takes two to marry, it may only take one to force a divorce. Christians are not responsible for divorces outside of their control.
 - e) **Domestic abuse, whether of the spouse, children, or both, can also constitute a breaking of the marriage covenant.** Spouses are to love and mutually submit to one another. Parents are to care for their children by the very act of becoming parents. No spouse should stay in an unsafe environment any more than a

parent can disregard the suffering of their children. Based on Scripture, the Word holds the abuser responsible for breaking the marriage covenant and not the one who may divorce to protect themselves or their children.

Divorced Christians and Remarriage

- 1) The Law makes clear that divorce permitted remarriage. Deuteronomy 24:1–4 assumed the divorced woman (and former husband) would remarry. However, this passage shows that the Law put certain limits on remarriage.
- 2) Jesus taught that divorce and remarriage, without biblical cause, was adultery. It constituted a sin against the covenant of the first marriage (Matthew 5:32; 19:9; Mark 10:11–12; Luke 16:18). In these passages, Jesus appeared to speak to those who willfully initiated divorce without having biblical grounds to do so. However, Jesus recognized that the fundamental problem is divorce itself and not remarriage.
 - a) Because Jesus included an exception on behalf of the innocent spouse, a married person who divorces a sexually immoral spouse does not commit adultery since the offender is already guilty of adultery. Nor does the innocent spouse commit adultery upon remarriage. Note that “marital unfaithfulness” or porneia often implies ongoing immorality. So, this exception is not a command to end a salvageable marriage.
- 3) Paul also included an exception on behalf of the innocent spouse when unbelieving spouses were unwilling to live with partners who had become believers (1 Corinthians 7:15). Paul does not encourage remarriage after divorce, but he also does not condemn it for innocent parties (1 Corinthians 7:27–28).
- 4) Remarriage establishes a new marriage covenant. Scripture makes it clear that spouses who sinfully break their marriage covenant to marry another commit adultery. Yet, Scripture never places such guilt on the innocent partner. Believers are only to remarry one who “belong[s] to the Lord” (1 Corinthians 7:39), and the new marriage covenant is to be permanent.
- 5) Due to a prior divorce, some churches may assess an individual’s suitability for various church leadership positions, such as teacher, elder, deacon, and board member. A proven successful remarriage, or a sufficient time past the divorce for

those who remained single, could demonstrate that spiritual concerns stemming from the failed marriage no longer exist. A church may determine that, rather than a disqualifier, a healthy long-term remarriage qualifies as evidence of the level of maturity needed for someone to hold a leadership position even outside of the previously mentioned exceptions for divorce.

Summary

- 1) Marriage between one man and one woman for a lifetime is the historic Christian standard based on the full witness of Scripture. The Assemblies of God holds marriage in such high regard that it only recognizes the right to divorce under a narrow set of biblically warranted exceptions. **Where we recognize the right to divorce, we should also recognize the freedom to remarry.** Even when those exceptions do not exist, divorced and remarried Christians belong to the people of God and should be treated as members of the body of Christ.
- 2) All Christians need to hear regular and consistent instruction on the nature, permanence, and nurture of marriage. An uncompromising declaration of the sanctity of marriage must be articulated in ways that affirm and comfort the divorced and equip them to be successful in any new marriage that may have already been undertaken.
- 3) **The Church must also deal purposefully and uncompromisingly with professing believers who willfully violate their marital vows and engage in behaviors that destroy their marriage covenants.**