

In the overwhelming flood of broken marriages we are experiencing today, we need to remember that God still rules; He sees all; He knows all; and His holiness is still the absolute standard that determines right and wrong.

God has a permanent hatred for all sin. His Word specifically states that He hates divorce (Malachi 2:16). God does not hate divorced people—He loves them, as unconditionally as He loves all of us as sinners. But He hates divorce because it is an assault on His covenant-keeping character and defiles the beautiful object lesson He has given to the world of the eternal love relationship between the believer and the Lord Jesus.

I recognize that the position on divorce and remarriage that we have set forth in this issue is not a popular one. We will be perceived by some as being intolerant, judgmental, condemning, or uncaring.

None of us really wants to “go against the flow” on an issue as volatile and emotional as divorce and remarriage. Frankly, I would like nothing better than to take a stand that none finds offensive.

But I know in my heart that God’s way is the truly caring way for those who have failed! And stronger than my concern about what others may think or say is a longing to please God; to see His holiness exalted in the Body of Christ; to see unhealthy marriages healed before it is too late; and to see those who have been divorced and remarried truly set free, forgiven, and given hope of a future life of fruitfulness.

Many years ago God placed in my heart a longing to see Him fulfill the promise of Isaiah 58:12: “And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places: thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in.”

May God so use each of us—for His glory.

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# What God Hath Joined

*An Appeal to Return to God’s Plan for Marriage*  
by Del Fehsenfeld Jr.

As an increasing number of Christian marriages are failing, pastors and lay people are asking what the Bible has to say about marriage, divorce, and remarriage. In a special feature, Del Fehsenfeld Jr. addresses the crisis in the home, and examines the biblical teaching on this crucial matter.

## **The Crisis in the Home**

More than one million divorces will split American households this year. At least 40 percent of all married couples will eventually divorce. The rapid increase in present-day divorce statistics should not surprise us. Indeed, the new Testament writers prophesied of the deterioration of moral standards in the last days.

What ought to surprise us, however, is the way in which the church seems to be following the trend of the world. Twenty years ago a prominent evangelist pointed out that, although two out of every five marriages were being broken by divorce nationally, the ratio in “church-related” families was one to 4,000. If we were to make the same survey in our Bible-believing churches today, we would be shocked at the figures. I frequently preach in fundamental churches where fewer than half of the couples are married to their original partner.

This rise in divorce and remarriage in the church has sparked intense theological controversy. Unfortunately, I believe there has been an alarming tendency to approach the Scripture, and to change views, based on emotional or personal considerations. One conservative pastor frankly admitted that the overwhelming number of divorced and remarried couples in his church had in large measure determined his own pragmatic position on these issues.

We must not give in to the temptation to develop a theology that is compatible with our experience. Neither should we interpret Scripture to justify our own preconceived conclusions. The clear teaching of Scripture must be placed far above all of the opinions and writings of mere men. The question is not “What does so-and-so say?” but “What is the will and heart of God?”

Some years ago I committed myself to a careful study of the teaching of God’s Word on divorce and remarriage. As I fasted and prayed and sought the mind of God, He kept driving me back to certain indis-

putable truths. Since that time, as we have applied these truths in our counseling ministry, we have seen literally hundreds of “hopeless” marriages reconciled. Others, who have already been divorced and remarried, have been released from guilt and set free for fruitful ministry.

I do not offer these thoughts as the final word on the subject. Only God’s Word is final. I simply desire to share my heart and understanding on this critically important subject. I realize that there are godly men who share my commitment to the Word of God and the permanence of marriage, though they would not agree with every conclusion.

My purpose in writing is not to spark further controversy, but to encourage you to seriously evaluate the evidence of God’s Word and to draw biblical conclusions under the leadership of His Spirit.

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### **Marriage Is Permanent and Not to Be Put Apart**

Any discussion of divorce must begin with the clear teaching of Scripture that marriage was designed by God to be permanent and not to be put apart by any man.

God’s original pattern for marriage requires that one “cleave” to his partner (Genesis 2:24). This word means “to cling, to adhere, to abide fast by.” It means to cement together—to stick like glue—to be welded together so that the two cannot be separated without damage to both. There is no question that God intended marriage to be a permanent, life-long bond and commitment between a man and a woman. In fact, at the point of marriage, God declares the man and woman to be permanently united together as “one flesh.” This is a physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual oneness.

In the New Testament, Jesus affirmed God’s plan for marriage by repeating the statement of Genesis 2:24. He further emphasized the permanence of marriage by adding, “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder” (Matthew 19:6).

The apostles held to the teaching of Jesus and were inspired by the Holy Spirit to lift high the standard of the permanence of marriage. Paul set forth the general principle: “And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband” (1 Corinthians 7:10). This principle is not based on the spiritual condition of one’s mate, for Paul proceeded to apply the principle to the marriage where there is an unbelieving mate: “If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased [willing] to dwell with him, let him not put her away. And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased [willing] to

and faithfully for God’s best in the life of your former partner.

5. **Purpose to remain unmarried (or to be reconciled) as long as your former mate is living** (1 Corinthians 7:10-11). Although your emotions may cry out and long to enter into another marriage, to do so is in direct violation of God’s Word and will only result in further conflict.

I frequently hear well-meaning friends, counselors, and even pastors say, “It isn’t fair for her (him) to have to be single [implied, *miserable*] the rest of her life.” What they are really saying is that we have a right to be happy, and that it is not possible to be single and fulfilled. Both thoughts are rooted in selfishness. God created us to make Him happy (Revelation 4:11), and our greatest fulfillment comes from obeying Him. The primary concern of a divorced person should be to obey God and to seek the spiritual well-being of his former partner—not to pursue his or her own happiness.

The divorced man or woman will be infinitely better off remaining single, with a humble, obedient lifestyle, than he or she would be married, out of God’s will.

Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 7 that singleness is sometimes to be preferred to the married state, for single individuals may devote themselves “without distraction” to loving and serving the Lord Jesus.

6. **Turn the failures of your past into a present message and ministry.** One of the most powerful tools to restore God’s standard for marriage in our generation is for believers to confirm out of their own lives that God’s ways are right. As God rebuilds your life and transforms you into the image of Christ, allow Him to use the message of your life to illustrate and confirm the truth of His Word and to rebuild other marriages.

7. **Make it your highest motivation and lifetime goal to seek God, to please Him, and to bring Him glory.**

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### **Rebuilding the Foundations**

In a day when lawlessness and ungodly men seemed to be prevailing, David cried out to God, “If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?” (Psalm 11:3).

The answer came back with great assurance: “The Lord is in His holy temple, . . . His eyes behold, His eyelids try, the children of men” (Psalm 11:4).

but He will bless a repentant and broken spirit (Psalm 51:17). Remember, "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy" (Proverbs 28:13).

**2. Agree with God about the failures in your life that contributed to the failure of your marriage.** One of the basic needs in the life of a divorced person is to remove all guilt. The easiest way to deal with guilt is to balance it with blame ("He was mostly wrong!"). But you will never experience the full cleansing and forgiveness of God until you are willing to stop blaming your mate and agree with God about your own needs.

True repentance involves humbly and honestly identifying your basic offenses against God and others. Ask God to reveal to you if you are guilty of these or other offenses:

- A willful, independent spirit against your parents as you were growing up
- Marrying against the counsel or authority of your parents
- Pre-marital sexual relationships
- Wrong attitudes toward your partner—selfishness, pride, ungratefulness, anger, resentment, impatience, laziness
- Hurtful, harsh, critical words that damaged your partner's spirit
- Failing to love, cherish, and nourish your wife as Christ loved the church
- Failing to meet the emotional and spiritual needs of your wife
- Failing to reverence, honor, and obey your husband
- Failing to serve your partner and put his/her needs and desires before your own

Recognize that every sin reveals that you have pushed Christ off the throne of your life and crowned yourself as "lord." Repentance is not just being sorry for the consequences of your sin; it is confessing and grieving over the cause of your sin, which has greatly offended God.

**3. Purpose to clear your conscience with those you have wronged, and begin to cooperate with God in reconciliation of all damaged relationships.** You may need to seek forgiveness from your parents, your former mate, your former partner's parents, your children, your present partner, and any others whose lives have been affected by your sin. Remember that the primary purpose in seeking forgiveness is not to restore your marriage but to obey God and restore a right relationship with Him.

**4. To whatever degree it is possible, rebuild broken relationships (Romans 12:18).** Begin to rebuild love and communication by seeking to discern and meet the needs of those you have offended. Commit yourself to pray fervently

and dwell with her, let her not leave him" (1 Corinthians 7:12-13). Paul further explained that the death of one partner is the only thing that dissolves the permanent, "one flesh" relationship of marriage in God's sight: "For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; . . . So then if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man" (Romans 7:2-3; cf. 1 Corinthians 7:39).

It is important to understand that the permanence of marriage is not an arbitrary law of an old-fashioned God. All of God's laws regulating human life are based on His righteous, unchanging character. God is a covenant-keeping God. He has never broken a covenant. He never will break a covenant. Even when his chosen people, Israel, were spiritually adulterous and unfaithful, He remained faithful to his covenant. Today when the Bride of Christ forsakes her first love and follows after other loves, God continues to keep His eternal promises. Moral laws and standards of right and wrong are absolute and unchanging because they are determined by God's unchanging nature. As long as God is a covenant-keeping God, it will never be right for a man and woman to break their marriage covenant of companionship.

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## Divorce Violates Other Biblical Commands

In addition to the clear commands of Scripture not to divorce, there are several other biblical principles violated by divorce.

- 1. God commands husbands to love their wives unconditionally, in spite of their impurities or failures** (Ephesians 5:25-26). Wives are also commanded to love and reverence their husbands (Titus 2:4; Ephesians 5:33). This kind of love is not a feeling; it is a lifelong commitment that is not dependent on the behavior or response of the other partner. To divorce, for whatever reason, is an admission of failure to love one's mate as commanded by God.
- 2. A divorce between two believers violates the command of 1 Corinthians 6:1-8 which forbids believers to go to law against one another before unbelievers.** It is better, Paul says, to "take wrong" and to "be defrauded" than to dishonor the name of God before unbelievers.
- 3. Ecclesiastes 5:4-6 underlines the seriousness of breaking a vow made before God.** God promises to be angry with and to destroy the work of the hands of those who break a vow. There is no vow more sacred or binding than the marriage vow.

4. **When Jesus' disciples came to Him and asked how many times they should forgive someone who wronged them, they felt they were being extremely gracious to suggest seven times.** (The Pharisees only required three times.) But Jesus stunned his listeners by requiring essentially forgiveness without limit. This is the consistent teaching of the new Testament—not revenge or defense, but forgiveness. “. . . longsuffering; forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye” (Colossians 3:12-13). Divorce reveals an unwillingness to forgive without limit the wrongs of the other partner.

How can it be right to do anything that violates these and other clear commands of Scripture? We never have scriptural grounds to do something when we must violate other Scripture to do it.

### **Marital Unfaithfulness Is Not a Biblical Basis for Divorce**

“What about the exception clause?” This question is inevitably asked in any discussion on divorce and remarriage. The question refers to two statements of Jesus, both found in the Gospel of Matthew: “But I say unto you, that whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery; and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery” (5:32). (A similar statement is found in Matthew 19:9.)

Matthew is the only gospel writer to record this clause. Mark and Luke, in parallel accounts, make no reference to any exception permitting divorce. The Apostle Paul never speaks of such an exception in his teaching on divorce and remarriage.

There is a danger of focusing on one phrase (i.e., the “exception clause”), rather than on the clear message Jesus was trying to communicate.

The setting of Matthew 19 is an encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees. They initiated the discussion by trying to trap Jesus into taking sides with one of the two Jewish rabbinical schools of thought on divorce. The liberal school of Hillel permitted divorce for any reason. The more conservative school of Shammai permitted divorce only on the ground of unchastity. So the Pharisees asked, “Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?” Jesus refused to take sides. Instead, he pointed the Pharisees back to the original design of God for marriage, reminding them of how God made male and female, and commanded them to leave their father and mother and to cleave to one another. “Wherefore,” Jesus insisted, “they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder” (Matthew 19:6).

5. **Remember that, even in the case of persistent immorality and unfaithfulness, forgiveness and reconciliation are the goal—not divorce.** The Old Testament provides a beautiful illustration of this kind of love and forgiveness. The prophet Hosea married a woman and lavished gifts on her. She took the gifts and used them to buy other lovers. She became a prostitute and ended up in slavery. Though she expressed no desire to return to her husband, Hosea went into the slave market and bought her back to be his wife once again. This tender picture reveals the loving heart of God toward us. And it is a powerful reminder that we are to be partners with God in the business of redemption—not breaking up marriages because of offenses.

### **What if I Am Already Divorced?**

When these biblical truths are taught, there is a common reaction among those who have been divorced (or who have married a previously divorced mate). They say, “If this is true (that there are no biblical grounds for divorce or remarriage), then I’m condemned to spend the rest of my life guilty and unclean before God.” I have also been asked, “Do you mean that God can never use me again?” Those who have been remarried or have married a divorced mate often ask, “If this marriage was wrong, does that mean that I’ll be living ‘in sin’ for the rest of my life?”

The answer to these questions is, “Of course not!” God is as able and willing to forgive the sin of divorce as He is any other sin. And when God forgives our sin, He does not hold it against us any longer. Rather, His goal is to restore us to greater usefulness for His glory. But His forgiving, restoring ministry is only available to those who are willing to deal with their sin His way.

There is no magical formula for resolving past marital failures. But a few simple statements will help you to get started.

1. **You must come to the place where you agree with God that your divorce was sin and you are willing to repent of that sin.** (If you married a divorced partner, you must agree with God that that marriage was contrary to His Word—Matthew 5:32, 19:2; Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18.)

Often a divorcee feels like a social leper. The church seems more willing to forgive and accept drug addicts, thieves, liars, and embezzlers than a divorcee. I believe the main reason for this is that the drug addict, thief, liar, or embezzler is usually willing to acknowledge that what he has done is sin. On the other hand, I find that most divorcees continue to justify their divorce based on “innocence,” “circumstances,” “counsel received,” etc., instead of agreeing with God that they have sinned and repenting. God cannot bless your disobedience,

discussions on divorce, the focus is on the “innocent party.” Often it is the presumed “innocent party” who comes for counseling. I have begun to ask these men and women, “if your mate had been married to Jesus, would she (or he) have behaved this way?” Invariably the answer is no. The realization then begins to dawn that, “Everything in my life that is not like Christ has been a contributing factor to the failure of my marriage.” I encourage these individuals to make a list of every area in their life (attitudes, values, priorities, actions, words) that is not like Jesus, and to ask God to change them, so He will then be free to change their mate.

After talking with thousands of married couples, I have seldom found a loving, submissive woman with a husband who is abusive or immoral. Just as rare is a loving, committed, unselfish man with a domineering or immoral wife. Ask God to reveal to you from His Word any failures in your own attitudes, actions, or spirit. Then cooperate with Him to become all that He wants you to be.

**3. You must be willing to allow God to use the pressures of your marriage to achieve eternal spiritual results in your life.** God is committed to conforming us to the image of Jesus. This is a lifelong process, and one which requires many tools and much pressure (much as the purest gold is formed under intense pressure over long periods of time). God uses the adverse circumstances in which we find ourselves as opportunities to learn to respond in Christ-likeness. He actually may create circumstances from which we cannot escape so that we will be forced to learn what He wants to teach us. God intended for marriage to be one such binding relationship, knowing full well the inevitable conflicts that would arise because of our human selfishness. In these times of hurt and apparent failure, the most natural thing to do is to squeeze our way out of the vice in which He has placed us. As a result, we automatically forfeit the full expression of His character that He was trying to develop in us. However, if we will patiently remain in that binding relationship, He will ultimately be able to achieve His purposes in our lives.

**4. If you are committed to becoming like Jesus, you must be willing to suffer in a quiet, patient spirit.** Our human nature wants to find the easiest way out of painful situations. But Jesus was willing to suffer abusive, harsh, and unjust treatment so that we might be reconciled to God. In the same way, God’s Word teaches that we have been called to suffer (1 Peter 2:21) on behalf of others. First Peter 2:21 – 3:6 emphasizes that a believer’s willingness to stay in his marriage and suffer quietly may be the only means by which the other partner will eventually be healed.

Notice that the exception clause was not in Jesus’ original answer to the Pharisees. It came in response to their search for a “loophole.” The Pharisees, like many believers today, were preoccupied with establishing grounds for divorce. Jesus was concerned about the permanence of marriage.

Unable to accept such a high standard, the Pharisees appealed to the Law of Moses, in which he recognized the existence of and regulated divorce (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).

While Jesus acknowledged Moses’ regulation of divorce, He reminded the Pharisees that such laws were merely concessions to the hardness of their hearts. Then He returned to the heart of His message, a restatement of the intent of God when He created marriage: “From the beginning it was not so. . . .”

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### The “Exception Clause”

Jesus went on to say, “And I say unto you, whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whosoever shall marry her which is put away doth commit adultery” (Matthew 19:9). If the exception clause does not establish marital unfaithfulness as a ground for divorce, what did Jesus mean when He said “except it be for fornication”?

We must remember that Jesus was speaking with a group of men who were well versed in the Old Testament law. A careful study of the Old Testament passages regulating marriage, divorce, and remarriage reveals two possible explanations for Jesus’ use of the word *fornication* as a ground for divorce.

The first understanding of the word *fornication* comes out of the Jewish betrothal laws. In the Middle Eastern culture, an engaged couple was considered to be legally married. The law of Moses made a provision for “divorce” if the bride was found to be unfaithful during the time between their engagement and marriage. (This was the sense in which Joseph wanted to divorce Mary when she was found to be with child during their engagement period.)

Another often forgotten use of the word *fornication* is based on the marriage restrictions of the Old Testament law. Used in this sense, fornication refers to certain unlawful marriages that were to be terminated according to scriptural command. Incestuous and sodomite marriages were forbidden in the Jewish “Holiness Code” (Leviticus 18:6, 22). Such marriages were unlawful and were not considered valid. (Acts 15:29 and 1 Corinthians 5:1 are two other New Testament passages that clearly use the word *fornication* to mean incestuous or homosexual marriages.) In order to be consistent with the rest of Scripture, we must recognize that Christ’s

use of the exception clause in Matthew 5 and 19 does not refer to marital unfaithfulness, but rather to unchastity during the engagement period (in which case the engagement may be broken) or to incestuous or homosexual marriages (in which case the marriage is to be terminated because it is null and invalid in God's sight).

That Jesus was disallowing divorce, even on the grounds of marital unfaithfulness, is evident from the response of His disciples. Their reaction of astonishment was not what one would expect if they understood the exception clause to mean immorality in general. They were startled and thought Jesus was teaching the absolute permanence of marriage so clearly that they suggested it would be better not to marry at all.

Indeed, if the exception clause meant that divorce was permissible on the grounds of marital unfaithfulness, Jesus would have, in effect, justified divorce for everyone, based on his re-definition of adultery to include lust (Matthew 5:28). Far from establishing grounds for divorce, the spirit of Jesus' words was to establish an ideal even higher than that of the Old Testament law.

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### **What About Remarriage After Divorce?**

Recent studies by Greek and Hebrew scholars indicate that the early church fathers were nearly unanimous in their opinion that Christ taught that remarriage after a divorce (for whatever reason) is adulterous. With one exception, all the Greek and Latin writers of the first five centuries agreed that the marriage bond unites both parties until the death of one of them.

The Western Church held the view of the early church fathers until the 16th century, when the classical humanist Erasmus suggested a different approach. Erasmus was a Roman Catholic priest and a contemporary of Martin Luther. For a short time he joined Luther's reformed movement. Eventually, however, he broke with Luther over justification by faith, was denounced by Luther as a heretic, and returned to the Roman church.

During his brief stay in the reformed camp, Erasmus suggested that remarriage after divorce ought to be permitted, thus giving the church greater opportunity to minister to divorced and remarried people. For some reason, Luther agreed with Erasmus and adopted what has become the popular, traditional Protestant view—the only view which allows remarriage after divorce.

This view has been accepted without question by many evangelicals, in spite of its scholarly problems and shaky historical foundations.

Once again we need to return to the teaching of Jesus that (1) if a man divorces and

remarries, he commits adultery, and (2) if a man divorces a woman (for whatever reason) and another man takes her as his wife, he is guilty of adultery (Matthew 5:32; 19:3-11; Mark 10:2-12; Luke 16:18).

God does not permit remarriage after divorce, as long as the first partner is still alive. Although the marriage bond may be legally dissolved, the "one flesh" relationship (and the vows made to God) does not become non-existent until the death of one of the partners.

Paul affirms this position on remarriage in 1 Corinthians 7:10-15. Simply stated, he makes it clear that two married believers are not to be divorced. However, if they do divorce, only two options remain: they must remain unmarried, or be reconciled to their original partner (7:10-11).

Verses 12-15 of 1 Corinthians 7 deal with a marriage between a believer and an unbeliever, a common situation in the early days of the church. Again, Paul's instructions are clear. The believer is not to leave; on the contrary, he is to do everything possible to preserve the marriage, and nothing to break it. The unbeliever must be allowed to stay as long as he is willing. Paul did recognize that the unbelieving partner in such a marriage might leave and divorce his mate, in which case the believer could not prevent it. But in no case was the believer free to remarry. Verse 39 establishes the conditions of remarriage: the death of the first mate, and that the new partner must be a believer.

The issue of remarriage after divorce is simplified by the question, "Did you vow, 'Till death do us part,' or 'Till divorce do us part'?" Although one partner may break his part of the vow and destroy the marriage, the other part of the vow must still be kept to God—"till death do us part."

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### **God's Purpose for Conflict in Marriage**

Some who are in the midst of marital difficulties will read the biblical teaching forbidding divorce and feel a desperate sense of being "locked into" an "impossible" situation. Let me address a few thoughts to you.

1. **Let me emphasize that there is no conflict too great for God to reconcile.**  
There is no partner too immoral or wicked for God to change. You must begin to exercise faith that God is bigger than your situation, and be willing to wait for Him to work.
2. **Learn to transfer your focus from your mate's failures (although he or she may be 95% wrong!) and begin to accept personal responsibility.** In many