

What the Bible Teaches about Divorce and Remarriage

JANUARY 18, 2018 | [Paul Carter](#)

CHRISTIAN LIVING

[Pixxel Creative via Lightstock](#)

There are few issues that require more pastoral sensitivity than the issue of divorce and remarriage. Getting it wrong one way can have massive consequences, particularly for women who feel trapped in abusive and unsafe relationships. Getting it wrong the other way can bring shame and infamy upon the name of Christ. Pastors and elders therefore have a responsibility to know what the Bible says and to teach, counsel, lead, correct and discipline their people accordingly.

The Key Passages In Scripture:

In developing Biblical perspectives and policies on divorce and remarriage in the church, pastors and elders will want to begin by wrestling with the teaching on this topic recorded in Matthew 19.

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 the two 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.” ([Matthew 19:3-9 ESV](#))

The key word in the above passage for our purposes is the Greek word *pornea* translated in the ESV as “sexual immorality”. The word has a range of meanings, but is almost certainly a reference to the entirety of the Holiness Code as recorded in Leviticus. The Holiness Code exhaustively itemizes prohibited forms of sexuality:

And you shall not lie sexually with your neighbor’s wife and so make yourself unclean with her..... You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. And you shall not lie with any animal and so make yourself unclean with it, neither shall any woman give herself to an animal to lie with it: it is perversion. ([Leviticus 18:20-24 ESV](#))

If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death. If a man lies with his father’s wife, he has uncovered his father’s nakedness; both of them shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them. If a man lies with his daughter-in-law, both of them shall surely be put to death; they have committed perversion; their blood is upon them. If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them.... If a man lies with an animal, he shall surely be put to death, and you shall kill the animal... “If a man takes his sister, a daughter of his father or a daughter of his mother, and sees her nakedness, and she sees his nakedness, it is a disgrace, and they shall be cut off in the sight of the children of their people.... ([Leviticus 20:10-21 ESV](#))

Thus by *pornea* we can safely conclude that Jesus considered adultery, homosexual sex, incest and bestiality as constituting grounds for divorce.

The Apostle Paul adds another exception in 1 Corinthians 7:

To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. 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. For how do you

Please partner with us as we serve Canadians during this difficult time

DONATE

The Biblical Grounds For Divorce:

Based on the passages above, we can say with confidence that a believer may initiate divorce in the following cases:

1. Her husband [1] has committed adultery with another man's wife.
2. Her husband has had homosexual sex with a man.
3. Her husband has had sex with an animal.
4. Her husband has had sex with a relative.
5. Her husband no longer wishes to be married to her because of her Christian faith.

In any of the five above cases the believer may pursue a divorce.

What About Physical Abuse?

The Bible doesn't address the issue of physical abuse as a potential justification for divorce, but it does say a variety of things that will be helpful to any pastor, elder, counselor or friend giving counsel to an abused person. The first thing that should be said is that physical abuse is a sin. The Bible commands a Christian to: Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness ([1 Timothy 6:11 ESV](#)).

Husbands are told: Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered ([1 Peter 3:7 ESV](#)).

The Bible commands all Christians to be gentle in their dealings with one another, and it tells husbands to be understanding towards their wives and to treat them with special honour. Therefore all forms of physical, emotional, verbal and sexual abuse would be forbidden.

Physical abuse is a sin and should be named as such by pastors, elders and counselors.

It's also worth noting that the Bible disqualifies abusive men from serving in leadership positions within the church. In 1 Timothy 3 Paul says:

If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded ... not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.... (etc.) ([1 Timothy 3:1-4 ESV](#))

The Greek literally says "not a *plektes*" – not a "striker". A man who hit his wife was disqualified from serving as an elder in the church. Most commentators understand the qualifications for an elder as simply the marks of an actual Christian. Paul is therefore insisting that elder candidates be genuinely born again – that they have given reasonable evidence they are growing by degrees into the image and likeness of

Please partner with us as we serve Canadians during this difficult time

DONATE

A woman who has been hit by her husband should do two things immediately. First, she should call the police. The Bible says that the king does not bear the sword in vain: For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer ([Romans 13:4 ESV](#)).

The Bible says that God gives to the government the authority to restrain evil and to punish evildoers, so if a wife is struck by her husband she should call the police. God gives guns and Tasers and handcuffs to the police for the protection of the vulnerable. A wife should make appropriate use of that provision. Government officials are charged by God to restrain evil and to punish evildoers. The church must never stand in the way of that commission.

The second thing an abused Christian woman should do is call her pastor or the elders of her church. If the husband is a member of the church he should immediately come under discipline. If he does not repent, he should be excommunicated. Excommunication implies that the church can no longer credit his profession of faith. It does not "make him an unbeliever", but it does declare that the church does not believe that he is truly saved.

In the eyes of the church, the woman is now married to an unbeliever, with all that that implies - see grounds for divorce #5 as detailed above.

Can A Rightly Divorced Person Remarry?

When the Bible permits divorce, it is so that the wronged or abandoned party may remarry. That's what a certificate of divorce is. Therefore, in any case where a divorce is biblically permissible, it is by definition also permissible for the wronged or abandoned party to remarry. In [Matthew 5:31-32](#) Jesus says:

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 5:31-32 ESV](#))

Here Jesus is simply saying that if a divorce is not legitimate, then the remarriage is not legitimate. If the divorce is legitimate (he uses the word *pornea* again), then the remarriage is legitimate.

Similarly the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7 that if the unbelieving spouse does not want to stay in the marriage and does not want to live with an active and obvious Christian, then the believer should let them go. In such cases the believer is not bound - that is to say they are free to remarry. The Pillar Commentary on 1 Corinthians 7 makes that point clearly:

Not bound here refers to freedom to remarry. Instone-Brewer explains: "The only freedom that makes any sense in this context is the freedom to remarry ... [A]ll Jewish divorce certificates and most Greco-Roman ones contained the words 'you are free to marry any man you wish,' or something very similar [27]

Please partner with us as we serve Canadians during this difficult time

DONATE

No.

The Pharisees thought that divorce was required and commanded in the Scriptures, but Jesus sets them straight. In [Matthew 19:7](#) the Pharisees challenged Jesus saying: “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” ([Matthew 19:7 ESV](#)).

Jesus corrected them saying: “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so ([Matthew 19:8 ESV](#)).

The Bible does not command divorce – it permits, regulates and limits divorce. The Bible allows divorce – in certain situations – because of the hardness of human hearts. Hard hearts cause people to persist in sin and hard hearts make it hard to forgive others but becoming a Christian is about getting a new heart – a soft heart filled with the Holy Spirit. Such a heart is capable of change in the direction of Jesus Christ and is capable of forgiving a brother or a sister of even the most grievous of sins.

Therefore, there really is no reason for two legitimately born again Christians to ever get divorced. By the grace of God they can change and they can forgive.

But because of the hardness of hearts – because some professed believers are not truly born again – a spouse may persist in sexual sin or a spouse may not wish to be married to a true believer – in such cases, the believer is not bound. He or she is free to remarry – thanks be to God!

Pastor Paul Carter

[1] I’ve used consistent gender pronouns for the sake of simplicity, but the same principles apply in the case of a husband pursuing a divorce from his wife.

[2] Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 302.

N.B. To listen to Pastor Paul’s Into The Word devotional podcast on the TGC Canada website see [here](http://canada.thegospelcoalition.org/into-the-word/) (<http://canada.thegospelcoalition.org/into-the-word/>); to listen on SoundCloud see [here](https://soundcloud.com/user-698548829/daniel-1-october-16-2017) (<https://soundcloud.com/user-698548829/daniel-1-october-16-2017>). You can also find it on iTunes.

How Did the Apostles Relate to the Law? (5 Observations from the Book of Acts)

JANUARY 7, 2018 | [Paul Carter](#)

Please partner with us as we serve Canadians during this difficult time

DONATE

BIBLE & THEOLOGY

North American Christians increasingly find themselves facing the pointy end of the law. This is a relatively new experience for us. For most of the last 200 years the law has been our friend, our ally and even at times our weapon. But now all of a sudden, that weapon has seemingly been turned back upon us.

This has given rise to all manner of new and untested thinking. Thankfully we have been down this road before. The early days of Christianity in a particular culture often resemble the latter days, and so it is with respect to our interactions with the law. Therefore it is with fresh urgency that we read through the Acts of the Apostles. As a new faith in a hostile world, the early disciples had many run-ins with the law and there is much that we can learn from their example. Chief among those gleanings would be the following 5 observations.

The Apostles understood that the authorities had a mandate from God

The Apostles were not anarchists. They understood that the authorities had a mandate from God - whether or not those authorities acknowledged God. The Apostle Paul said:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ([Romans 13:1-2 ESV](#))

When Paul said that, it's very likely that Nero was Caesar of Rome. Even bad leaders have a mandate from God. Even a bad King does not bear the sword in vain. The authorities have a job to do and they have been given power and divine right by God to do it.

Support the Gospel Coalition by becoming a member today. [Join Now](#) | [Learn More](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#)

Please partner with us as we serve Canadians during this difficult time

[DONATE](#)

Peter didn't say: "You have no right to judge me" because he knew full well that they did. A Christian's loyalty to God does not remove his or her obligation to the state.

The Apostles understood that they were ultimately subject to a higher power

Peter did not contest the fact that he was subject to his earthly authorities, he knew full well that he was. But he also knew that he was ultimately subject to a higher authority. When he and the other Apostles were arrested again in Acts 5 and brought before the council he says: "We must obey God rather than men" ([Acts 5:29 ESV](#)).

The context helps us understand how to interpret that sentiment. 4 verses earlier we are told that he allowed himself to be arrested – he did not protest and force was not required in order to bring him before the courts. Peter recognizes the right of human authorities to summon him to account. He further recognizes their right to administer punishment in accordance with their judgment. 11 verses after Peter claims his higher authority, he and the other Apostles endure a beating and a scourging at the hands of their human authorities. Their reaction to this punishment is instructive:

they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus. ([Acts 5:41-42 ESV](#))

They did what they had to do and they counted it an honour to pay a heavy price for so doing.

Notice what they didn't do. They didn't write letters to their elected representatives; they didn't file a protest with the Human Rights Commission, nor did they take their story to the press.

They got on with the mission.

Being subject to warring authorities made the prospect of conflict seem inevitable and the likelihood of avoiding suffering minute. So they got on with it.

The Apostles understood that legal rights should be exercised with discernment

The Apostle Paul was very discerning in his use of the legal privileges that he enjoyed as a Roman citizen. In his first missionary journey Paul never appears to have made use of his legal protections despite that it placed him at the mercy of the mob. In [Acts 14:19](#) it says:

But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. ([Acts 14:19 ESV](#))

No mention is made there of an attempt to claim the legal privileges Paul was entitled to as a Roman

Please partner with us as we serve Canadians during this difficult time

DONATE

The “once I was stoned” might conceivably refer to the incident in Acts 14, and the 40 lashes minus 1 was the standard synagogue punishment, but what are we to make of the “three times I was beaten with rods”? That sounds like a Roman punishment – a punishment Paul could have avoided by identifying himself as a Roman citizen.

He does that very thing in Acts 22. Just as he is about to be flogged he says to the centurion who was standing by:

“Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?” When the centurion heard this, he went to the tribune and said to him, “What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman citizen.” So the tribune came and said to him, “Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?” And he said, “Yes.” The tribune answered, “I bought this citizenship for a large sum.” Paul said, “But I am a citizen by birth.” So those who were about to examine him withdrew from him immediately, and the tribune also was afraid, for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him. ([Acts 22:25-29 ESV](#))

A Roman citizen could not be bound or flogged without trial – so why did Paul submit to those injustices on other occasions?

Perhaps he was travelling with a non-Roman companion such as Barnabas or Luke – we don’t know. What we know is that Paul claimed his legal rights with discernment. They were not ultimate to him – the mission was ultimate. If the legal rights would advance the mission – as when he appealed to Caesar in [Acts 25:11](#) – then he would use them. If they did not advance the mission, then he was content to suffer injustice along with other believers who did not enjoy similar benefits.

The Apostles understood that legal proceedings could be used for the glory of God

There is no doubt that Paul wished to be released from his various imprisonments – and equally no doubt that those imprisonments did a great deal to further the cause of Christ throughout the world. Through the several stages of his journey through the Roman legal system Paul was able to give testimony before governors, kings, queens and Caesars. It is highly unlikely that any of these people would have heard the Gospel otherwise. In addition Paul was able to witness to the many Roman guards who watched over him in rotation. He refers to this unexpected benefit in [Philippians 1:12-14](#):

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. ([Philippians 1:12-14 ESV](#))

Please partner with us as we serve Canadians during this difficult time

DONATE

will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name's sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives. ([Luke 21:12-19 ESV](#))

The Apostles did not seek out imprisonment – and when the Lord released them they rejoiced – but neither were they surprised or disheartened when they found themselves in chains. They understood that their chains would open doors that would otherwise remain closed. They cared more about the mission than they did about their freedom so they looked upon their imprisonments as a Gospel opportunity.

The Apostles understood that legal power could be wielded as a weapon by the enemy

The Acts of the Apostles was likely written while Paul was in Rome awaiting his hearing before Caesar. The book ends without recording the outcome of Paul's trial. It says simply:

He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance. ([Acts 28:30-31 ESV](#))

Historians disagree as to whether Paul was released from his Roman imprisonment – some say he was and that he made his way to Spain where he was rearrested and returned to Rome – others say that he was not. What we know with reasonable certainty is that around the year AD 64 Paul was beheaded by order of the Emperor Nero about a mile outside the city of Rome. The Apostle Peter was killed around the same time.

The Apostles knew that this was coming because Jesus had told them plainly: “some of you they will put to death” ([Luke 21:16 ESV](#)).

Jesus did not tell his disciples to expect a cordial relationship with the power of the state. On the contrary he said: “If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” ([John 15:19 ESV](#)).

Jesus predicted that his people would attract the ire and animosity of the secular powers. We have allegiances they don't understand, we have values they don't share, we have a mission they resent and we serve a Master that they condemned and crucified. Therefore, the Apostles expected conflict. They didn't seek it, they expected God to redeem it, but they did not attempt to avoid it. Instead, they ministered through it. When they lost their freedom and mobility they wrote epistles to encourage the churches. When they were flogged they rejoiced. When they were questioned they witnessed and when they were martyred they were remembered. For, “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints” ([Psalms](#)

Please partner with us as we serve Canadians during this difficult time

DONATE

N.B. To listen to Pastor Paul's Into The Word devotional podcast on the TGC Canada website see [here](http://canada.thegospelcoalition.org/into-the-word/) (<http://canada.thegospelcoalition.org/into-the-word/>); to listen on SoundCloud see [here](https://soundcloud.com/user-698548829/daniel-1-october-16-2017) (<https://soundcloud.com/user-698548829/daniel-1-october-16-2017>). You can also find it on iTunes.

Please partner with us as we serve Canadians during this difficult time



DONATE