

ARE CINDY AND BOB IN YOUR CHURCH?

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The young woman sat across from me in my office, tears streaming down her face as she poured out her story. Cindy had first met Bob at a church function, and they had hit it off immediately. He was active in the church, and they seemed to have similar interests and values. Eleven months later, they were married. Things went well for the first few years, but then Bob began to grow distant. He was no longer affectionate and spent most of his evenings watching TV or going out with his friends. He also stopped going to church and seemed to lose interest in spiritual things. She began to suspect something was wrong when he repeatedly came home late from work and made excuses for long periods of absence. Finally, he confessed to her that he was having an affair with a co-worker and wanted a divorce. Cindy was devastated and tried to convince him to go for counseling. But he was adamant that the relationship was over, and after moving out, he filed for divorce.

After the divorce Cindy remained single for five years, but eventually she started attending a singles group at a church near her home. There she met Dave. Dave's wife had died of cancer seven years earlier, and he had just begun to contemplate another relationship. Cindy continued to attend Dave's church, and the relationship grew serious. She went to her new pastor and spoke about the relationship and about her hopes for marriage. The pastor told her that, while he believed her divorce was justified according to Jesus' teaching, he could not remarry her because to do so was forbidden in Scripture. He referred her to the letter of 1 Corinthians, where Paul wrote that "a wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband" (1 Cor. 7:10–11). Cindy was devastated. She wanted to serve God with her life and to be faithful to his commands. If this meant that she was to remain single, then so be it. But was this really what God desired?

Cindy's story is certainly not unique. Change the names and the scenario a bit, and similar stories play out daily in families and churches across the United States and around the world. The issues of divorce and remarriage are some of the most painful and divisive in the church today. I once saw a cartoon by Larry Thomas in a Christian leadership journal, which showed a pastor standing in front of his congregation wearing a full suit of medieval armor. The caption read, "My sermon this morning is entitled 'Divorce and Remarriage Among Christians.' " Pastors who teach on this topic are likely to take hits—no matter which side they take.

So what does the Bible say about divorce and remarriage? There are many complex questions and few easy answers: Is it ever acceptable for a Christian to divorce? If so, what are the grounds for a legitimate divorce? Adultery? Desertion? Physical or emotional abuse? If a divorce does take place, what are the options for remarriage? Is remarriage forbidden, or is it acceptable as long as there were legitimate grounds for the divorce? What about cases where there were no such grounds? Does the impossibility of reconciliation (due to the death or remarriage of a spouse) or the passage of time open the possibility for remarriage? A whole new set of questions arises concerning how the church should respond to those who have been divorced and remarried, and whether divorce and remarriage disqualify a person from church leadership or even membership.

These questions are not new ones. The rabbis and teachers of Jesus’ day raised similar questions and debated the legitimacy or illegitimacy of divorce. In Matthew 19, some Pharisees came to Jesus and asked him, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” (Matt. 19: 3). The question reflected a lively debate among the religious leaders of Jesus’ day. Some, following the stricter interpretation of the rabbi Shammai, claimed that divorce and remarriage were acceptable only in the case of adultery. The more lenient interpretation of the rabbi Hillel claimed that divorce was acceptable for almost any reason, even as trivial an offense as burning a meal. A century later, the famous rabbi Akiba went even further, allowing for divorce if a man found a more attractive woman to marry! Surprisingly, all of these teachers appealed to the same passage of Scripture (something that happens today as well). Deuteronomy 24: 1 reads, “If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house . . .”

As you read further in this passage, it is obvious that its purpose is not to set out justification for divorce but to prevent remarriage to a first partner after a second marriage and divorce (vv. 2 – 4; the possible reasons for this will be discussed later in this book). But because little else is said in the Hebrew Scriptures concerning divorce, the rabbis appealed to this verse for their judicial pronouncements. Those who took a stricter view stressed the phrase “he finds something indecent about her” and argued that “indecent” meant “adultery.” Others stressed the phrase “becomes displeasing to him” and broadened the grounds to *anything* that displeased the husband.

Jesus clearly rejected a lenient and cavalier attitude toward divorce (Matt. 5: 31 – 32; 19: 8 – 9). But how far did he go in forbidding remarriage? The rabbis almost universally assumed remarriage was acceptable after a (legitimate) divorce. But what about Jesus? Did he accept remarriage as a given, or did he raise the bar and forbid it? Those who claim the former assert that in Jesus’ day a legitimate divorce always meant freedom to remarry, and so Jesus must have meant this. Those who claim the latter point out that Jesus raised the bar elsewhere with reference to the law’s standards — teaching that anger is equivalent to murder, and lust to adultery (Matt. 5: 21 – 22, 27 – 28) — and so it is likely he did the same with reference to divorce and remarriage.

The early church tended to follow a stricter interpretation of Jesus’ words. Most of the church fathers (the generation of leaders after the apostles) allowed separation but not divorce in the case of adultery. They also forbade remarriage in any case except the death of a spouse.¹ Those who hold a stricter interpretation today tend to point to this example, noting that the church fathers were closer to Jesus and the New Testament writers than we are and so were in a better position to understand his teaching. Those who hold to a more permissive view argue that the early church very quickly lost touch with its Jewish roots, and so misunderstood the fact that Jesus would have assumed remarriage was acceptable in the case of adultery. He did not need to state it because his Jewish audience would have assumed it.²

¹ Even remarriage after one’s spouse died was frowned on by many. See Michael Gorman, “Divorce and Remarriage from Augustine to Zwingli,” *Christianity Today* 36 (December 14, 1992): 30 – 31.

² See David Instone-Brewer, Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 238 – 39.

The church, of course, has never been completely uniform in its perspective, and at least one early church father, Ambrosiaster (late fourth century), allowed remarriage after a divorce caused by adultery. The Protestant Reformers, too, adopted a more lenient attitude based on their reading of Scripture. Reacting against the Roman Catholic teaching that marriage is an indissoluble sacrament, the Reformers generally allowed remarriage after divorce in the case of adultery or desertion. The Roman Catholic Church in response held firmly to the doctrine of the dissolubility of marriage but tended toward greater allowance for annulment, i.e., ruling that the marriage was never a true one, and so could be made void.

This book presents three different views on remarriage after divorce:

1. remarriage is never acceptable after divorce;
2. remarriage is acceptable after divorce if the injured party had legitimate grounds for divorce (i.e., adultery or desertion); and
3. remarriage is potentially acceptable also for abuse.

All three of the contributors are renowned and respected biblical scholars, experts in the biblical languages and cultures of the Old and New Testaments. Each has done extensive research and writing in the area of divorce and remarriage. All three are also friends who are able to discuss these issues in a balanced and irenic manner with a true spirit of Christian love. Each also has a pastor's heart. Their passion is to build up the church, the body of Christ, and to help it to be all that God wants it to be.

They write not only for church leaders and students but also for concerned lay Christians who may be facing this issue in their own lives or may want to help affected family members or friends in their church. This book is written for anyone who could profit from an informed but accessible overview in a single volume covering the range of views held in today's church. The discussion will not only open up Scripture but also apply it to some of the practical issues that affect church life. The discussion questions are designed to be used for those who want to use this book in classroom or small group settings.

I hope you will approach this book not as a debate, with winners and losers, but as a dialogue, a conversation that will provide the church with greater wisdom and insight concerning this complex topic. Please do not read simply to justify your own position or to get ammunition to attack other views. Instead, keep an open mind and learn from each position, seeking to discern the mind of Christ. Remarriage after divorce is never merely an academic issue, considered without emotion or passion. Divorce is always painful and damaging, involving the breaking of a sacred covenant before God and a shattering of the most intimate kind of human relationship. The topic can never be discussed without emotions. Yet we can sanctify these emotions by always keeping in mind the fundamental mandate of the Christian life: loving God with our heart, soul, strength, and mind, and loving our neighbors as ourselves (Matt. 22: 36 – 40). Keep this attitude in mind as you read this book, seeking to discern the mind of Christ and God's will for your life (1 Cor. 2: 16).

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