

# CHURCH *of* GOD

A WORLDWIDE ASSOCIATION, INC.

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## **DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE** *Statement of Belief*

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**M**arriage was given to mankind at creation. Marriage is a natural union and a divine institution—a lifelong, spiritual covenant before God. Christians are not required to marry; but when they do, they are bound by God’s spiritual laws that govern marriage. These laws and instructions also govern the dissolution of marriage, which unfortunately occurs far too frequently. Divorce and remarriage must, therefore, be viewed in the light of biblical directives.

This paper focuses on the Church’s doctrinal understanding of the conditions in which divorce and possible remarriage may be judged acceptable or unacceptable in God’s eyes. The Church maintains the biblical teaching of the sanctity and lifetime commitment of marriage and encourages counseling as part of an effort to resolve problems within a marriage. It is outside the scope and purpose of this paper to include specific instruction on how to reconcile a troubled marriage. But we also must acknowledge there are circumstances in which there are scriptural grounds for divorce and remarriage.

### **Why the Church renders judgments on divorce and remarriage**

God holds the ministry responsible to give an account of the spiritual lives of the membership they serve, “for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account” (Hebrews 13:17). Marriage was designed by God. It transcends the human plane and is a reflection of the relationship Christ has with the Church (Ephesians 5:22-33). Those living in adulterous marriages will not be allowed to enter the Kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9-10); therefore, the Church’s judgment in cases of divorce and remarriage is a sobering responsibility that must be borne so as not to abdicate ministerial responsibility toward God’s precious brethren. Concern for the well-being of the congregation sometimes requires the Church to judge matters of sin that affect all. The principle that a little leaven leavens the whole lump must be kept in mind (1 Corinthians 5:6-8).

The term “judge” is used above as it refers to both God’s stated judgments in His Word and to judgments delegated to His ministry within the Church. Any judgment by the ministry must be based on God’s Word and law. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament give us guidance for judgment.

The Bible clearly authorizes the Church to intercede in cases involving sin:

- 1 Corinthians 5: While this example of immorality is not a divorce and remarriage case, it is a case where the apostle Paul used ministerial authority to intervene in a sinful relationship. Paul instructs the Corinthians to take action toward the individual who was involved in sexual immorality (*porneia*).
- James 5:19-20: “Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.” The Church is not to ignore sin; rather we are to be our “brother’s keeper,” to help save a person’s life.
- Ezekiel 33:8: If “you do not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at your hand.”
- Matthew 18:17: The Church is required to make a judgment when members cannot resolve a conflict that disrupts the Church.

- Hebrews 13:17: “Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.”
- 1 Corinthians 5:9-13; 6:1-4: Paul shows the Church has the responsibility to judge biblical matters.

Loving our brother demands a willingness to point out sin and help that brother come to repentance (1 John 5:16; Jude 22-23). Numerous scriptures warn us not to fellowship with individuals who are practicing sin. This is certainly true in the case of unscriptural divorce and remarriage.

The God-ordained union of marriage-for-life is upheld by the Church. We instruct husbands and wives to remain faithful to each other and the ideals of the marriage covenant. When advising separated couples in the Church, the ministry normally has the goal of bringing about reconciliation. Our purpose is to motivate the couple to save their marriage, if at all possible. We offer pastoral counsel and advice when asked and render judgments when appropriate.

### **Biblical overview—the sanctity of marriage**

At creation, God said, “It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him” (Genesis 2:18). The biblical instruction is, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (verse 24).

In Malachi 2:13-16 it is confirmed that God intended for this marriage relationship to be a lifelong covenant and that breaking the covenant could result in sin, an act of treachery:

And this is the second thing you do: You cover the altar of the LORD with tears, with weeping and crying; so He does not regard the offering anymore, nor receive it with goodwill from your hands. Yet you say, “For what reason?” Because the LORD has been witness between you and the wife of your youth, with whom you have dealt treacherously; yet she is your companion and your wife by covenant. But did He not make them one, having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly offspring. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth. “For the LORD God of Israel says that He hates divorce, for it covers one’s garment with violence,” says the LORD of hosts. “Therefore take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously.”

Jesus Christ was asked whether divorce was permissible in any situation. He put the question in context by asking, “Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?’” (Matthew 19:5). Next He stated, “So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate” (verse 6). The marriage covenant is an agreement to be glued together (“joined”) with no intent to ever dissolve the relationship. Christ makes it clear in Matthew 19:3-6 that marriage is a lifelong commitment:

The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?” And He answered and said to them, “Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For

this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?’ So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.”

“Let not man separate” is not a suggestion. Men and women entering marriage must realize that, apart from baptism, marriage is one of the most important and serious steps they will ever take. God commands husbands to nourish and cherish their marriages (Ephesians 5:29); He simply hates divorce. Divorce is not to be considered outside those biblical exceptions addressed in Scripture. And, as we read in Malachi, marriage without divorce is a key to raising “godly” children.

If a Christian couple knowingly enters the marriage union contrary to God’s instruction and without the Almighty Creator’s blessings and without the full intention to marry for life, the marriage is destined for failure. A prohibited remarriage could prove to be spiritually fatal since remarriage is considered adultery in certain cases as we read in Luke 16:18:

Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced from her husband commits adultery.

Christ understood that circumstances resulting in divorce would happen, although God’s intent was that marriages would be until death. God’s intent is seldom man’s practice. Mankind, cut off from God, ignores God and His instructions. True, God did allow judgments to be made concerning marriage, divorce and remarriage under the Old Covenant. In Deuteronomy 24:1 we find that Moses granted divorce in certain cases:

When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some uncleanness in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house ....

In Matthew 19:7-9 we read why Christ evoked this judgment and what God’s intent was:

They said to Him, “Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?” He said to them, “Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted 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; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.”

God intended marriage to last for life. The reason it does not is because men and women have “hardness” of heart. Without God’s Spirit, men and women simply do not by nature have the heart to fear God and keep His commandments, nor do they have a heart of mercy to forgive repentant sinners, even when the sinner is one’s mate.

God’s intent has always been that marriage is for life. Yet the New Testament does show three circumstances where a marriage is either not recognized or dissolved (Matthew 19:9; 1 Corinthians 7:15; Matthew 5:31-32). Under such circumstances, annulment or divorce and subsequent marriage or remarriage are permissible without transgressing God’s law. These circumstances can be summarized as:

1. Sexual immorality.
2. An unbeliever “not pleased to dwell” with a believer.
3. Fraud/annulment (deception before marriage).

Each instance needs to be fully understood by closely examining God’s Word along with other pertinent information.

### **Sexual immorality**

Christ clearly stated that one commits adultery if he or she puts away his or her mate for any reason “except [for] sexual immorality” (Matthew 5:32; 19:9). This statement has become known as the “exception” clause concerning divorce and remarriage. Two other scriptures referring to the same subject (Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18) explain that neither husband nor wife can divorce for “just any reason,” without danger of adultery.

The Greek word translated “sexual immorality” in Matthew 5 is *porneia*. Insight into the meaning of this word can be found in quotes from two lexicons and two Bible dictionaries:

**88.271** πορνεύω; ἐκπορνεύω; πορνεία, ας *f*: to engage in sexual immorality of any kind, often with the implication of prostitution—“to engage in illicit sex, to commit fornication, sexual immorality, fornication, prostitution.”<sup>1</sup>

πορνεία, ας, ἡ (Demosth.+; LXX, Philo, Test. 12 Patr.) *prostitution, unchastity, fornication*, of every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse.<sup>2</sup>

*porneia* [πορνεία , (4202)] is used (*a*) of illicit sexual intercourse, in John 8:41; Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25; 1 Cor. 5:1; 6:13, 18; 2 Cor. 12:21; Gal. 5:19; Eph. 5:3; Col. 3:5; 1 Thess. 4:3; Rev. 2:21; 9:21; in the plural in 1 Cor. 7:2; in Matt. 5:32 and 19:9 it stands for, or includes, adultery; it is distinguished from it in 15:19 and Mark 7:21.<sup>3</sup>

*Porneía* means “fornication” (sometimes involving adultery); figuratively it is a term for apostasy as unfaithfulness to God. ... Later Judaism shows how the use of *Porneía* broadens out to include not only fornication or adultery but incest, sodomy, unlawful marriage, and sexual intercourse in general.<sup>4</sup>

Fornication would be included in the definition of *porneia* as indicated in 1 Corinthians 7:2. But the implication of the word *porneia* is more comprehensive than simply *fornication* (as translated in the King James Version). It also refers to any type of sexual immorality, including adultery. Some of the more modern versions translate *porneia* in Matthew 19:9 as “immorality” (New

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<sup>1</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Walter Bauer, F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> W.E. Vine, *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Fleming H. Revell, 1981).

<sup>4</sup> Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Abridged in One Volume*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985).

American Standard Bible), “marital unfaithfulness” (New International Version), “sexual immorality” (New King James Version) and “unchastity” (Revised Standard Version).

Along with the information above, we can understand *porneia* in the full context of Matthew 19:3-9 and all four Gospels. Christ was responding to Pharisees who misinterpreted Moses’ command (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). Their question was, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?” So Christ asked them, “What did Moses command you?” (Mark 10:3). The Pharisees incorrectly quoted Moses when they said, “Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce, and to dismiss her” (verse 4). The Pharisees failed to give the *only reason* divorce was allowed by Moses.

Christ then explained that it was clearly God’s intent from the beginning that all marriages should be for life (Matthew 19:4-6). However, “the hardness of your hearts” required that an exception would be needed for those who found themselves married to one who had committed sins that destroyed any hope for a successful marriage. Such hardness of heart applies to all humanity, who, from the time of Adam and Eve, rejected God’s way of life.

Christ was not taking issue with the “certificate of divorce” (Deuteronomy 24:1) any more than He would have taken issue with His stepfather’s decision to put away Mary, His mother, *if* she truly had sinned. Just as Joseph thought he had found sexual immorality (the Jews later accused Jesus of being “born of fornication”—*porneia*) in his wife and was going to put her away secretly, so was the case in Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

“Uncleanness” was the only reason Moses allowed divorce. The Hebrew word for “uncleanness” (*ervah*) is most often translated “nakedness.” In the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament into Greek, the Hebrew word *ervah* is translated *porneia*. This word is used 50 times, usually in the literal sense of revealing one’s private parts or in the metaphorical sense of having sexual relations. In the context, this word most often refers to sexual immorality (e.g. Leviticus 20:20; Ezekiel 16:36). Paul referenced the “nakedness” of a father’s wife (Leviticus 20:11) when addressing the “sexual immorality” (*porneia*) of the son who had sexual relations with his father’s wife (1 Corinthians 5:1). John the Baptist lost his head for instructing Herod to obey Leviticus 18:16; 20:21, (marrying a brother’s wife is *uncleanness*): “For Herod himself had sent and laid hold of John, and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife; for he had married her. Because John had said to Herod, ‘*It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife*’” (Mark 6:17-18, emphasis added throughout).

From the beginning, husbands and wives were commanded to cleave (join together) and become one flesh. God has joined man and woman in marriage through a sexual union: “They shall become one flesh”; “she shall be his wife because he has humbled her”; and “he who is joined to a harlot is one body” (Genesis 2:24; Deuteronomy 22:29; 1 Corinthians 6:16). The sexual union is the central element of becoming one flesh. *Sexual intercourse within the covenant relationship cements the marriage. Sexual activity (porneia) with another can tear it apart.*

God’s intent was that divorce not occur. There is absolutely no place for sexual immorality within a godly marriage covenant. But when sexual immorality does take place in God’s Church, a judgment must be made. Under God’s inspiration, Moses made the judgment; and

Christ simply repeated the exception clause (“nakedness” in the Old Testament; “sexual immorality” in the New Testament).

As is shown in the sources quoted earlier, Christ’s statement in Matthew 19 can cover a wide range of sexual misconduct. The Old Testament laws prescribed the death penalty for an extensive list of sins. Six of the 15 examples involved matters of sexual immorality that God’s Word would describe as *porneia* when translated into Greek:

- Adultery (Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 22:22).
- Rape, including sex with a woman pledged to be married to another man (Deuteronomy 22:23-24).
- Incest (Leviticus 18:6-18; 20:11-12, 14, 17, 19-21).
- Homosexual acts (Leviticus 20:13).
- Bestiality (Exodus 22:19; Leviticus 20:16).
- Prostitution/harlotry (Leviticus 21:9; Deuteronomy 22:13-21).

The Church does not dictate whether or not members must always forgive *and* accept back a repentant mate guilty of *porneia*. Sexual immorality in marriage is different than other sins: “Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body” (1 Corinthians 6:18). In context, “body” is found to refer to husbands and wives being “one body” (verse 16). Only the offended mate can determine if the marriage can be saved. The Church will not put any pressure on the offended mate but will instruct him or her to forgive the truly repentant mate even if the marriage is loosed. God does not want bitterness to spiritually destroy those who are sinned against.

Matthew 5 and 19 use *porneia* and another word that describes sexual immorality in the same verse. *Moicheia* is translated “adultery” in both chapters. *Porneia* allows for a wide range of deviant sexual behavior. *Moicheia* does not. It has a more narrow focus; it simply means adultery.

**88.276** μοιχεύω μοιχάομαι μοιχεία, ας *f*: sexual intercourse of a man with a married woman other than his own spouse—“to commit adultery, adultery” ... sexual intercourse of either an unmarried or a married man with someone else’s wife was regarded as adultery, both on the part of the man as well as the woman. In view of the married status of the woman being the determining factor in μοιχεύω, μοιχάομαι, μοιχεία, and related terms (88.277-278), there is a significant contrast with πορνεύω [*porneia*] and related expressions (88.271). πορνεύω [*porneia*], however, may be regarded as more generic in meaning, and thus in certain contexts including adultery.<sup>5</sup>

μοιχηναοτ [to commit adultery], μοιχηναοτ [to commit adultery], μοιχηηιαα [adultery], μοιαχησο [adulterer], μοιχηαλιασ [adulteress, adulterous].<sup>6</sup>

Adultery can be *one act* of sexual intercourse with a married woman or man (possibly the example of the woman taken in the very act of adultery—John 8:4). It can also be *living with or being married to* a person who is not free to remarry. Christ identified the following cases as being adultery:

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<sup>5</sup> Louw and Nida.

<sup>6</sup> Kittel and Friedrich.

1. A man who divorces his wife and marries another (Matthew 19:9; Mark 10:11; Luke 16:18).
2. The wife who is divorced by her husband (see No. 1) and remarries (Matthew 19:9; Luke 16:18). Her first husband has caused her to commit adultery (Matthew 5:32).
3. The man who marries the woman (see No. 1) divorced by her husband (Matthew 5:32; Matthew 19:9; Luke 16:18).
4. A woman who divorces her husband and marries another (Mark 10:12).

Whereas the law of God concerning marriage and divorce has not changed, the way judgment is conducted in the Church—spiritual Israel—has changed, based on the exception clause. Marriage is still binding until death except when spiritually loosed by the judgment of the Church based on the exception clause and actions covered by that principle. If the Church’s judgment is being sought by only one marriage partner, such a judgment may free one mate from a marriage and allow that mate to remarry. When this occurs, the marriage bonds are loosed. Subsequent dating and marriage of either party is to be viewed in the light of this judgment.

As we will read in more detail below, Paul referred to several categories of married people in 1 Corinthians 7. Believers who were not free to remarry and would be committing adultery if they did received the following admonition in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11:

Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband. But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife.

Except for *porneia* (Matthew 5:32), “a wife is bound by law as long as her husband lives” (1 Corinthians 7:39). Both men and women who continue living with those not loosed from a previous marriage are living in adultery: “So then if, while her husband lives, she marries another man, she will be called an adulteress” (Romans 7:3). Herod was instructed by John the Baptist to stop living in adultery with his brother’s wife (Mark 6:17-18).

In summary, sexual misconduct is biblical grounds for divorce. Christ gave this as the “exception” clause, although the divine intent was for marriage to last until death. If a divorce does occur as a result of *porneia*, the marriage covenant may be loosed and remarriage may be permitted. Those remarrying in such a case would not be living in adultery.

### **Believer and unbeliever**

In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul used a godly principle to make a judgment regarding a new category of broken marriages. After addressing the topics of unmarried Christians, conjugal rights and married believers, Paul moved to the subject of *believers married to unbelievers*. Before doing so, he emphasized, “Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord” (1 Corinthians 7:10). Paul recognized that this *second reason* for freeing believers would need an explanation.

Whereas all people are accountable under the laws of God, most are oblivious to them. Ever since Christ established the Church, converted Christians have been called out of the world and are actually seeking to obey God in the letter and the spirit of the law. Yet when one mate is converted



and the other is not, there can be a vast difference of understanding of marriage responsibilities. The Christian's first duty is to God, not to an unbelieving mate who may interfere with that duty. Paul judged, therefore, that if an unbelieving mate rejected the Christian mate or refused to live in peace, the Christian mate was no longer bound in that marriage. Therefore, Paul's inspired judgment in 1 Corinthians 7:12-14, *based on God's law* but not addressed by the Old Testament, was necessary:

But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her. And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy.

But what if the unbeliever did depart? We read in verse 15:

But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace.

*The Bible Knowledge Commentary* and Matthew Henry's commentary expound the term "not under bondage" as follows:

[1 Corinthians] 7:15. However, there were exceptions to the rule of no divorce. If **the unbeliever** insisted on a divorce, he was not to be denied (the word trans. **leaves** is  $\chi\eta\omicron\mu\pi\rho\iota\zeta\epsilon\tau\alpha\iota$ , the verb used in v. 10). Should this occur, the Christian was **not bound** to maintain the marriage but was free to marry again (cf. v. 39). Paul did not say, as he did in verse 11, that the Christian in this case should "remain unmarried."<sup>7</sup>

[1 Corinthians 7:10-16] The believer is not by faith in Christ loosed from matrimonial bonds to an unbeliever, but is at once bound and made apt to be a better relative. But, though a believing wife or husband should not separate from an unbelieving mate, yet if the unbelieving relative desert the believer, and no means can reconcile to a cohabitation, in such *a case a brother or sister is not in bondage* (v. 15), not tied up to the unreasonable humour, and bound servilely to follow or cleave to the malicious deserter, or not bound to live unmarried after all proper means for reconciliation have been tried.<sup>8</sup>

Paul's directives establish the proper position for the Church of God. It is permissible for a Christian who is married to an unbeliever to be eligible for remarriage if the unbeliever departs. If the unbeliever doesn't depart, but simply makes life miserable for the believer, what happens? In such a case, an unbeliever shows clearly by his willful *conduct* that he is not pleased to dwell ("willing to live with," NKJV) with the believer.

In such cases, the believer may be the one to actually initiate the divorce, but it was the unbeliever who "departed," through his or her actions. God's purpose is to build holy character and raise

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<sup>7</sup> John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press Publications, Inc., 1983, 1985).

<sup>8</sup> Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Bible* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991).

godly offspring in a peaceful environment. An unbeliever who interferes with a mate's religion or teaching is not pleased to dwell with that mate. This is one reason God charges Christians to marry "only in the Lord."

In addition to recognizing that unbelievers are usually those who have never been converted, the Church also recognizes that there are professed "believers" who have been among us who have never been converted (Jude 12, 16; 1 John 2:19). Titus stated that "they profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work" (Titus 1:16). There are also those who, once having believed, become unbelievers (Hebrews 6:6; 10:26; 1 Timothy 5:8).

### **Fraud/annulment**

Laced within the context of sexual immorality is the problem of fraud. In legal terms, the definition of fraud would be *willfully deceiving someone with the intent of inducing that person to alter his or her position to a particular injury or risk*. There are cases of fraud in marriage. If *significant information*, such as *porneia*, is deliberately withheld by either party in the covenant relationship of marriage, the marriage might not be binding and could be annulled.

In other words, fraud is committed when one member of the marriage deliberately keeps back information that, if known, would cause the other partner not to marry. If fraud is discovered soon after the marriage, annulment would be the proper course of action—a fraudulent marriage is put aside. If discovered later, a divorce may be required to break the legal contract. Consensual fornication with one's mate before marriage could possibly invalidate the claim of sexual fraud (Deuteronomy 22:29).

### **Summary**

In summary, there are three biblical reasons for the dissolution of a marriage: *porneia* (sexual immorality), *an unbeliever who is not pleased to dwell with a believer* and *fraud*. In each case the marriage covenant has been broken, and a remarriage can result without the fear of committing adultery. Remarriage must be "only in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 7:39).

### **Divorce prior to conversion**

What about those individuals who were married and divorced prior to their calling and conversion? Scripture addresses their predicament also.

God has *not personally* looked down from heaven and bound every marriage of everyone on earth. They have been bound by law (Romans 7:1), but their marriage has not been personally sanctified by God. Humans have made wrong choices, often with significant and serious impact on their lives. God, in His mercy, has made provision for the acceptable and satisfactory resolution of man's sins through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. When they become believers, they, their children and their unbelieving mates who are pleased to dwell with them, become sanctified (1 Corinthians 7:14).

Baptism, preceded by repentance, brings believers forgiveness and frees believers from past sins. They are not bound to past sins in marriage any more than they are to other sins (Romans 6:1-7).

Baptism pictures the death of the old man; therefore, Paul states, “For he who has died has been freed from sin” (verse 7). So, those who have divorced and have remarried prior to baptism are not required to leave their current mate. Nor is the person who is single because of divorce bound to a previous mate. If they choose to remarry, they have broken no law.

Baptism marks a new beginning. New converts have a fresh start thanks to God who “according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a *living hope* through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3). Past sins are forgiven. Therefore, a newly converted person is accepted in his current marital status—whether remarried or single as a result of divorce.

### **The Church’s teaching on divorce and remarriage**

The teachings of the Church of God, a Worldwide Association, on divorce and remarriage can be summarized as follows:

1. Believers can be judged free to remarry for only three reasons:
  - Sexual immorality or *porneia*, including in the broader sense all cases of sexual deviancy, adultery being an example. The implication is habitual sexual misconduct, but it is not limited to this.
  - An unbeliever is not pleased to dwell with a believer. A Christian is not “under bondage” for separating from an unbeliever who is not pleased to dwell and departs the marriage. Hostility towards God’s way of life is the key issue; but *habitual* misconduct such as criminality, addictive behaviors, abuse, desertion or willful failure to provide physical support (1 Timothy 5:8) demonstrates unwillingness to live in peace. The “believer” may need to initiate the legal divorce proceedings.
  - Fraud (meaning deception) and annulment. A marriage may be annulled or put aside if either party was deceived by the other partner prior to marrying by withholding significant information. Only the person defrauded can claim fraud. Fraud or deception should be acted upon at the time of discovery.
2. Irreconcilable differences between believers are not scriptural reasons to divorce. A believer should not divorce a believing mate who is willing to dwell with him or her when there are no scriptural grounds for such a separation. In many cases it would be a sinful violation of one’s vows and God’s instruction on marriage (Matthew 19:6; 1 Corinthians 7:10-11).

However, in rare circumstances some believers may choose to divorce for what they see as legal necessity, such as financial liabilities, child custody or other unresolved conflicts that could jeopardize personal freedoms. Such a serious act should not be done lightly, as the couple is still bound by scriptural guidelines that require them to either reconcile or remain unmarried.

3. The definition of an unbeliever is based on behavior and attitude. A mate who was once considered converted may become an unbeliever in the eyes of the mate and the Church if he or she demonstrates an unconverted heart by continuous abusive, irresponsible, ungodly behavior (Titus 1:16; 1 Timothy 5:8).

4. A believer should not divorce an unbeliever who is “willing to live” with him or her (1 Corinthians 7:12). It is possible for unbelievers to be called because of the conduct of the believing mate (1 Peter 3:1). Whether or not an unbeliever is truly willing to dwell in peace will be evident in words and actions.
5. All sin is removed upon repentance and baptism (Romans 6:7). Individuals who are called into the Church having already experienced divorce are given a new start in life and are accepted in their current marital state—divorced and now single, or divorced and now remarried.
6. For one’s spiritual good, any marriage should be “only in the Lord.” Believers are admonished to marry only other believers (1 Corinthians 7:39; 2 Corinthians 6:14).

### **Conclusion**

Marriage is a microcosm of the Kingdom of God. While marriage is a temporary covenant until ended by death, it has far greater importance because it is designed to picture the eternal relationship between Christ and the Church. All mankind will eventually be “godly offspring” dwelling forever in God’s family.

When couples have marital problems, the ministry of the Church of God, a Worldwide Association, will always seek first to help members apply biblical principles to salvage their marriage. Christians are to become perfect, just as our Father in heaven is perfect (Matthew 5:48). We will direct couples to seek God’s Kingdom and His righteousness so that everything our Father intended for them, including a happy marriage will be theirs.

Sadly, because of the hardness of the heart or deep scars from sin, there will be marriages that are not salvageable. If reconciliation is not possible, we still focus on the couple’s salvation. Church members should be sensitive, considerate and helpful to those suffering such a traumatic event in their lives. We will not compromise God’s law, but we must demonstrate understanding and compassion toward those who have been involved in divorce.