

## **Divorce and Remarriage: What Does 1 Corinthians 7 Contribute?**

Few subjects are more complicated and emotionally charged than divorce and remarriage. Church leaders are inundated with ministry issues directly or indirectly related to the break down of family. These leaders also face confusion and conflict over questions related to divorce and remarriage. This is *not* a matter of theory for those who minister in the Church. People we deeply care about are being profoundly affected by the fragmentation of the family—at all levels in the life of the Church. There is never a time in our own ministry when we are not dealing with matters related to separation, divorce and remarriage. Sadly, I only expect this challenge to increase in the days ahead. I also firmly believe young pastors in particular have not been adequately prepared for dealing with marital crisis and the consequences created by it. We need solid biblical guidance and large doses of wisdom. Recently, I was asked an important question about what Scripture teaches concerning divorce and remarriage. Here is the question and response.

**Question: Does 1 Corinthians 7:12-16 allow for a believer to divorce an unbeliever if abandoned by him/her?**

The New International Version is *not* helpful in understanding the meaning of this text. It reads as follows:

**1 Corinthians 7:12-16** (New International Version)

**12 To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. 13 And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. 14 For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. 15 But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. 16 How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?**

**Answer:**

While it appears that the text makes a provision for divorce and remarriage, I do not believe it is the proper use of it. A key question focuses on the meaning of the phrases “not bound in such circumstances” and “God has called us to live in peace.” Although many quickly jump to a provision for divorce in this text, the emphasis of it is on staying together not divorcing (see: vv. 12-13). The key to interpretation is the “But...For” construction from v. 15 to v. 16. Unfortunately, the NIV does not retain the exactness of the Greek structure as the NASB does (See below). In verse 15,— **“BUT”** —that is, “in contrast with leaving” — “God has called us to peace”— that is, “seeking to stay together”. This way of interpreting the text is strengthened by the **“FOR”** of v. 16 which focuses on potential spiritual influence through ongoing contact and relationship.

The NIV gives the impression that “God has called us to peace” means “you don’t have to live in the bondage of a marriage to an unbeliever.” This is simply wrong. The primary emphasis is

on staying together. While the text makes a provision for separation, one should not use it as a blank check for divorce and remarriage. Instead, the emphasis is on doing the believing spouse seeking to reach the unbelieving spouse with the gospel:

**Verse 16** —“**For** how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?”

“Not under bondage” does indicate an allowance for marital separation which, in the text, is the choice of the unbeliever to abandon the marriage. But, based on the rest of the text, it would not be right to stretch this to a “just let him go” attitude without some kind of effort to preserve and protect the union—with the aim of Christian witness. The text simply does not go on to explain where the marriage itself “ends up.” This is where pastoral counseling must look at a case by case evaluation and include application of other biblical principles. Now, it could be the case that a believer is abandoned by an unbeliever and has done all he/she can to preserve the marriage. We (the Church) must not jump to superficial judgments when hearing of a separation. I’ve dealt with cases where the unbeliever has left and chosen to be unfaithful.

This is where the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 19 must enter the evaluation. Jesus made a provision for divorce and remarriage based on marital unfaithfulness. BUT, Jesus does not “prescribe” divorce and remarriage, He “permits” it. This is an important distinction because Scripture does *prescribe* forgiveness and reconciliation as the highest ethical calling for the believer. Therefore, even in cases of unfaithfulness, the prescription of forgiveness and reconciliation should be pursued. Yet having said this, Jesus does make a clear provision for divorce and remarriage in cases of marital unfaithfulness.

This is an important but not widely understood interpretation of I Corinthians 7. The divorce and remarriage issue is complex and if you want a more in-depth study, I would recommend my 5 part series on the subject: “Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage” (originally produced on cassette but transferred to CDs). This can be ordered by contacting our Church office at 717-872-4260 or through email at [office@millersvillebiblechurch.org](mailto:office@millersvillebiblechurch.org)

Provide full mailing information. The cost to cover expenses of production is \$10.00 plus shipping. I also have a recent series: “Marriage as God ordained it”. This series is more about the marriage relationship itself. The other series deals specifically with what the Bible teaches about “Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage.” The cost is the same for this series .

### **I Corinthians 7:13-16 (NASB) A better translation:**

**13** And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away. **14** For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy. **15** Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, **but** God has called us to peace. **16 For** how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?