

SHOULD DIVORCEES REMARRY IN CHURCH?

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On this vexed and painful issue, let's start with what the Bible teaches. Although marriage is clearly intended for life, the Bible recognises that, since the Fall, human beings have lived life on a less than ideal level. Deut 24.1-4 therefore allows divorce on the grounds of "uncleanness" - Jews have long debated as to whether this included any inappropriate behaviour or just sexual infidelity. In the context of a society where women could be divorced without any rights, and often for trivial reasons, Jesus upheld the permanent nature of marriage (see Matt 19.5,6); he pointed out that divine permission for divorce had only been given because of human sinfulness (Matt 19.8), and went on to say that "whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery" (Matt 19.9; also 5.32). It is a matter of scholarly debate whether the mention of adultery is an example of the sort of serious sin that merits a permissible divorce, or whether it is the unique exception. My own conviction is that by regarding adultery as the one and only ground for divorce, we may be in danger of falling into the kind of legalism which Jesus often condemned. For although Jesus clearly held a very high view of marriage, he also recognised that there are times when marriages do irretrievably break down and went on to allow for the possibility of re-marriage. Interestingly Paul added a further permissible cause for divorce: viz desertion by an unbelieving partner. In such circumstances he also allowed for the possibility of re-marriage (1 Cor 7.12-16). We also need to recognize that, beyond the immediate texts about marriage and divorce, the Scriptures contain much material relating to God's grace and his forgiveness. Time and again the Bible makes clear that with God there is always a new beginning: the potter, for instance, can rework the clay (see Jer 18)! Grace and not law has the last word. For reasons such as these I am willing in principle to marry in church people who have been divorced. However, before I agree to go ahead with the wedding, there are a number of conditions which I seek to ensure are met. Those wishing to be re-married need to recognise that through failing to be faithful to their original marriage vows they have failed both God as also their previous marriage partners. With few exceptions, there is no such thing as an "innocent" party (as distinct from an "injured" party). They need to be prepared to learn lessons from the failure of their previous marriage. It is unwise to enter a second marriage without personal growth and development. They need to be able to forgive – or at least seeking to come to a place of forgiveness toward- their former partners, and not carrying on a continuing vendetta. Where applicable, they need too to be dealing responsibly with the support of their previous partner and, especially, the children of the previous marriage. And, of course, above all, they need to be prepared to take seriously both God and his pattern for living.

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