

COMPLETE THEOLOGY OF MARRIAGE, DIVORCE, AND REMARRIAGE

A biblical and early-church witness using the short core WEB verse
set

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1. GENESIS - THE ORIGINAL COVENANT DESIGN

Genesis gives the original design of marriage:

Therefore a man will leave his father and his mother, and will join with his wife, and they will be one flesh.

— Genesis 2:24

Marriage is not presented as a human contract. It is a God-created covenant. The husband and wife are joined into a one-flesh union that is exclusive, lifelong, and covenantal.

The load-bearing truths are clear:

- Marriage is created by God.
- Marriage is covenant, not contract.
- “One flesh” means a real union, not a temporary arrangement.
- No exit clause is given.
- No remarriage is envisioned while both spouses live.
- The covenant is exclusive and lifelong.

This is the foundation Jesus restores and Paul later applies with legal clarity.

2. MOSES - DIVORCE PERMITTED BECAUSE OF HARDNESS

Moses regulated divorce, but Jesus explains that this was not God’s original design. It was a concession because of human hardness.

Jesus says:

So that they are no more two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, don’t let man tear apart.

— Matthew 19:6

Then He explains the consequence of divorce and remarriage:

I tell you that whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and he who marries her when she is divorced commits adultery.

— Matthew 19:9

Divorce was permitted because of sin, but it did not redefine marriage.

This means:

- Divorce was a concession, not the original design.
- Divorce was damage control, not covenant theology.
- Divorce did not erase Genesis.
- Divorce did not dissolve the one-flesh covenant.

The covenant structure from Genesis remains intact.

3. JESUS - RESTORING THE ORIGINAL DESIGN

Jesus does not build His doctrine of marriage on Moses' concession. He returns to Genesis.

His central command is this:

So that they are no more two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, don't let man tear apart.

— Matthew 19:6

Marriage is God-joined. Man does not have authority to dissolve what God has joined.

Jesus then gives the direct consequence:

He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. If a woman herself divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

— Mark 10:11-12

Luke gives the same doctrine in the simplest form:

Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery. He who marries one who is divorced from a husband commits adultery.

— Luke 16:18

Jesus' teaching is clear:

- Divorce does not dissolve the covenant.
- Remarriage while the covenant spouse lives is adultery.
- The one-flesh union remains binding.
- God's original design is restored.

Matthew 19:9 mentions sexual immorality, but Jesus never gives a positive command authorizing remarriage while the covenant spouse lives. The exception clause addresses the divorce question, not a new permission to form another covenant while the first spouse remains alive.

Jesus restores the beginning.

4. JESUS ON EUNUCHS - THE KINGDOM CALL TO CELIBACY

After hearing Jesus' teaching, the disciples respond that it may be better not to marry. Their reaction shows they understood the weight of His doctrine.

If remarriage is not permitted while the covenant spouse lives, then some people will have to remain single.

Jesus does not soften His teaching. Instead, He explains the kingdom life required for those who cannot lawfully marry:

For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother's womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven's sake. He who is able to receive it, let him receive it.

— Matthew 19:12

This is not physical castration. It is voluntary celibacy for the kingdom.

In context, Jesus is addressing the reality of those who cannot lawfully enter another marriage covenant. If a person is divorced while the covenant spouse still lives, the kingdom path is not remarriage. It is celibacy, faithfulness, and obedience before God.

This matches Paul's command:

But to the married I command—not I, but the Lord—that the wife not leave her husband

but if she departs, let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband, and that the husband not leave his wife.

— 1 Corinthians 7:10-11

Jesus gives the kingdom principle. Paul gives the pastoral command.

5. PAUL - MAKING THE RULE EXPLICIT

Paul teaches that only death dissolves the marriage bond.

Romans says:

For the woman that has a husband is bound by law to the husband while he lives, but if the husband dies, she is discharged from the law

of the husband.

So then if, while the husband lives, she is joined to another man, she would be called an adulteress. But if the husband dies, she is free from the law, so that she is no adulteress, though she is joined to another man.

— Romans 7:2-3

Paul says the same thing again in 1 Corinthians:

A wife is bound by law for as long as her husband lives; but if the husband is dead, she is free to be married to whomever she desires, only in the Lord.

— 1 Corinthians 7:39

Paul's doctrine is direct:

- The marriage covenant remains while both spouses live.
- Death releases the spouse from the marriage bond.
- Divorce does not create freedom to remarry.

Paul then applies this to separation:

But to the married I command—not I, but the Lord—that the wife not leave her husband

but if she departs, let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband, and that the husband not leave his wife.

— 1 Corinthians 7:10-11

Paul gives two options:

- Remain unmarried.
- Be reconciled.

There is no third option.

Paul is not creating a new doctrine. He is applying the command of the Lord with legal clarity.

6. GOD'S "DIVORCE" OF ISRAEL - THE COVENANT PATTERN

Jeremiah 3 gives one of the clearest covenant illustrations in Scripture.

Even after Israel's unfaithfulness, God still calls Himself her husband:

“Return, backsliding children,” says Yahweh, “for I am a husband to you. I will take you one from a city, and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion.”

— Jeremiah 3:14

This is extremely important.

God’s covenant pattern shows that separation and discipline do not mean covenant replacement.

That means:

- The covenant was not finally dissolved.
- God did not take a second bride.
- God called Israel to repentance and restoration.
- The end goal was reconciliation, not replacement.

This matches Paul’s command:

But if she departs, let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband.

— 1 Corinthians 7:11

God Himself models covenant faithfulness. He does not treat divorce as permission to replace the bride.

7. MARRIAGE AS A SCALE MODEL OF GOD’S OWN COVENANT

Human marriage is not an isolated institution. It is patterned after God’s own covenant faithfulness.

Marriage reflects:

- God’s covenant with Israel.
- Christ’s covenant with the Church.
- The final marriage supper of the Lamb.

Paul directly connects marriage to Christ and the Church:

“For this cause a man will leave his father and mother and will be joined to his wife. Then the two will become one flesh.”

This mystery is great, but I speak concerning Christ and the assembly.

— Ephesians 5:31-32

Marriage reveals Christ and the Church.

Christ:

- Loves His bride.
- Cleanses His bride.
- Gives Himself for His bride.
- Does not abandon His bride.
- Does not take another bride.

This is why human marriage is:

- Permanent.
- Exclusive.
- Covenant-shaped.
- Death-bound.
- A witness of divine faithfulness.

Marriage reflects the faithfulness of God Himself.

8. THE EARLY CHURCH - THE UNANIMOUS FIRST-THREE-CENTURY WITNESS

For the first three centuries of the Church, the surviving Christian witness is unanimous: remarriage while a covenant spouse still lives is adultery.

The early Christians did not teach that divorce created a clean covenant reset. They did not treat civil divorce as the destruction of the one-flesh bond before God. Even when separation was allowed because of adultery, abandonment, or grave sin, the command remained the same: remain unmarried, live chastely, or be reconciled.

This means the earliest Christian interpretation of Jesus and Paul was not confused or divided. The first centuries of the Church understood the apostolic doctrine plainly.

The pattern was consistent:

- Marriage remains binding while both spouses live.
- Separation may occur in cases of serious sin.
- Separation does not create freedom to remarry.
- Remarriage while the covenant spouse lives is adultery.
- Human law cannot override the command of Christ.
- The faithful path is chastity, reconciliation, or release by death.

Hermas

Hermas taught that if a wife continued in adultery, separation could occur, but remarriage was still forbidden.

Let him divorce her, and let the husband remain single. But if he divorce his wife and marry another, he too commits adultery.

— Shepherd of Hermas, Mandate 4

This is almost exactly Paul's command: remain unmarried or be reconciled.

Justin Martyr

Justin Martyr directly repeated the teaching of Jesus:

Whoever marries a woman who has been divorced from another husband, commits adultery.

— Justin Martyr, First Apology, 15

He also rejected the idea that human law could make remarriage righteous before God:

So that all who, by human law, are twice married, are in the eye of our Master sinners, and those who look upon a woman to lust after her.

— Justin Martyr, First Apology, 15

Justin's point is direct: civil law may recognize the second union, but Christ still judges it as adultery.

Athenagoras

Athenagoras gave one of the strongest early statements:

A person should either remain as he was born, or be content with one marriage; for a second marriage is only a specious adultery.

— Athenagoras, A Plea for the Christians, 33

He then connects this directly to Jesus' words:

"For whosoever puts away his wife," says He, "and marries another, commits adultery"; not permitting a man to send her away whose virginity he has brought to an end, nor to marry again.

— Athenagoras, A Plea for the Christians, 33

Athenagoras understood Jesus to forbid both unlawful divorce and another marriage after that divorce.

Clement of Alexandria

Clement taught that Scripture does not allow the marriage union to be treated as dissolved while the separated spouse still lives.

Scripture counsels marriage, however, and never allows any release from the union.

— Clement of Alexandria, Miscellanies, 2.23

He then explains the consequence of remarriage:

It regards as adultery the marriage of a spouse, while the one from whom a separation was made is still alive.

— Clement of Alexandria, Miscellanies, 2.23

And again:

“He that taketh a woman that has been put away,” it is said, “committeth adultery.”

— Clement of Alexandria, Miscellanies, 2.23

Clement’s doctrine is plain: separation does not erase the first covenant.

Tertullian

Tertullian also preserved the same early Christian boundary around remarriage after divorce.

God wills not a divorced woman to be joined to another man while her husband liveth, as if He do will it when he is dead; whereas if she is not bound to him when dead, no more is she when living.

— Tertullian, On Monogamy

Tertullian’s broader view of second marriage after death became stricter than Paul’s command, but on the question of remarriage after divorce while a spouse lives, he stands with the same early witness.

Origen

Origen made the same point with legal clarity.

Just as a woman is an adulteress, even though she seem to be married to a man, while a former husband yet lives, so also the man who seems to marry her who has been divorced does not marry her, but, according to the declaration of our Savior, he commits adultery with her.

— Origen, Commentary on Matthew, 14.24

Origen's wording is important. He says the second union may "seem" to be marriage, but according to Christ it is adultery.

Council of Elvira

The Council of Elvira treated remarriage after divorce as a serious violation of Christian discipline.

A woman of the faith who has left an adulterous husband of the faith and marries another, her marrying in this manner is prohibited.

— Council of Elvira, Canon 9

This shows that even when the first spouse was adulterous, the early disciplinary pattern still resisted remarriage while the first spouse lived.

Summary of the First-Three-Century Witness

The surviving witness of the first three centuries is unanimous.

Hermas, Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen, and the Council of Elvira all preserve the same doctrine:

Divorce may separate bodies, but it does not dissolve the covenant bond before God while both spouses live. Remarriage during the life of the covenant spouse is adultery.

This is not a later invention. It is the earliest Christian reading of Jesus and Paul.

The first three centuries of the Church stand in unified agreement with the plain words of Christ:

Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery. He who marries one who is divorced from a husband commits adultery.

— Luke 16:18

FINAL CONCLUSION

When the whole biblical arc is followed, the doctrine is unified and consistent:

Genesis establishes marriage as a lifelong one-flesh covenant.

Moses permitted divorce because of human hardness, but did not redefine marriage.

Jesus restored the original design and taught that remarriage after divorce is adultery while the covenant spouse lives.

Jesus then taught the kingdom path of voluntary celibacy for those who cannot lawfully marry.

Paul made the rule explicit: the divorced must remain unmarried or be reconciled.

God's covenant with Israel shows that separation and discipline do not erase covenant faithfulness.

Christ's marriage to the Church reveals that true covenant love does not abandon or replace the bride.

The early church preserved this same doctrine as the unanimous first-three-century witness.

Therefore, the biblical teaching is this:

Marriage is a lifelong covenant created by God. Divorce may separate people physically, but it does not dissolve the covenant bond while both spouses live. Remarriage while the covenant spouse is still alive is adultery. The only lawful paths are faithfulness, celibacy, reconciliation, or release by death.

This is the unified witness of Genesis, Jesus, Paul, God's covenant with Israel, Christ's covenant with the Church, and the earliest Christian tradition.

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