

Divorce And Remarriage After Reconciliation

A husband learns that his wife has committed fornication, but he expresses his decision to not put her away but to retain her as his wife and does so. Some time later, (the time is indefinite and without limits) he decides to change his mind and put her away for that fornication after all. Besides, she is no longer behaving in a godly manner, flirting with other men and talking inappropriately with them, but to his best knowledge she has not actually committed fornication again. Does he have the right to put her away?

In another example, a husband learns that his wife has committed fornication, but he is undecided whether to divorce or keep her. He therefore does not express his intention either way, but he nevertheless continues cohabitating with her, participating in the sexual privileges as one who had fully decided to reconcile. Some time later, (the time is indefinite and without limits) he declares that he has made up his mind and expresses his intention to put her away for that fornication after all. Besides, she is no longer behaving in a godly manner, flirting with other men and talking inappropriately with them, but to his best knowledge she has not actually committed fornication again. Has he retained his right to put her away?

There is a doctrine heard today which claims the innocent spouse in both these cases maintains the right to put away the other. This outline seeks to determine whether this is the correct understanding of God's law on the matter.

I. Marriage is a covenant

Marriage is a covenant of God and of man (Mal 2:14; Prov 2:16, 17). The Israelite nation called it "the baryth Elohiym," that is, "covenant of God." A covenant is an agreement between parties with the terms of acceptance and conditions of violation and severance clearly stated. A covenant requires ratification and contains obligations, commitments and responsibilities. In turn, members bound in the contract enjoy rights, benefits, and privileges. No member has a right to the privileges without commitment to the terms and conditions (Heb 13:10).

A. The nature of covenants

The original New Testament word for covenant is *diatheke* {dee-ath-ay'-kay} which according to Thayer includes "1) a disposition, arrangement, of any sort, which one wishes to be valid, 2) a compact." According to Louw-Nida it is "the verbal content of an agreement between two persons specifying reciprocal benefits and responsibilities."

Two basic kinds of covenants are seen in scripture: independant and dependent. An independent covenant is one-sided, that is, only one party has responsibilities; the other party must comply with nothing to receive the benefits. An example of such is God's covenant with Abraham, that He would make of him a great nation (Gen 15:18), and with David, that David would always have an heir on Judah's throne (Psa 89:2, 3). A dependant covenant is two-sided, that is, both parties have benefits which depend on meeting specified responsibilities. When one party is known to have broken the covenant, he has broken the relationship, meaning placing it at odds, and the other party is released from his obligation as stipulated by the terms. A relationship of tranquility becomes damaged and becomes a relationship of turmoil. Restoration will require attention to the matter. Note some examples of dependant covenants.

1. Human covenants as an example

This is easily illustrated by observing the character of a secular covenant, that is, a contract, as it is generally called. When we take out a car loan, we ratify the covenant by signing a contract which, in simplified terms, states that if we keep making our monthly payments (responsibility and commitment), we get to keep the car (benefit and privilege). If the payment terms state that our check needs to be in the hands of the loan company by the 15th of the month, then the moment it becomes the 16th of the month, if they have not received our payment, we have violated the contract and defaulted on our loan that very day, placing enmity between us and the loan company. The loan company is then free to repossess the car. Scripture makes reference to similar kinds of binding agreements among men (Gal 3:15; Heb 6:16).

2. The covenant of God with Israel as an example

Consider a covenant from scripture. God offered the nation of Israel a covenant. The agreement was to be that if they followed God's law (responsibility and commitment), God would drive out the nations before them and dwell among them (benefit and privilege) (Ex 19). The nation of Israel agreed, and the covenant was ratified with animal sacrifices (Ex 24). When they violated the covenant, they introduced hostility into the relationship, and God removed Himself from among them (Ex 33:1-3).

3. The covenant of God with Christians as an example

Now consider another covenant from scripture: the covenant all Christians have with God, ratified by the blood of Christ. The contract states, in essence, that as long as we remain faithful and keep ourselves pure from sin (responsibility and commitment) God forgives us and promises us eternal life (benefit and privilege) (Rev 2:10). The moment we sin, we violate our covenant with God, and that changes our relationship with Him: sin separates us from God (Heb 10:26). This is the fundamental principle upon which a covenant operates.

B. Covenant principles applied to marriage

The covenant stipulates that the husband and wife are singularly obligated to one another for life (responsibility and commitment) and that only by this institution is sexual contact permitted (benefit and privilege). The terms of the covenant divinely appointed for marriage are that the contract is binding as long as the spouses both live (Rom 7:2,3; 1 Cor 7:39), or, as the only exception stated, if one is known to have committed fornication, the innocent one is no longer bound by the covenant and has the right to put away or reconcile (Matt 5:32; 19:9). No member has a right to the privileges of this covenant without commitment to its terms and conditions (Heb 13:4).

If the knowledge that my spouse has committed fornication against me does not change my relationship with her, then our relationship with God also does not change the moment we enter into sin. We know this is not true. A popular doctrine today, called "continuous cleansing," proposes that, even as we are sinning, the blood of Christ is automatically sweeping the sin away so that it does not cause hostility before God. The sound Bible student rejects this doctrine (Acts 8:20-24; Jas 1:15; 4:4).

Most interestingly, the last verse cited above likens the Christian's covenant with God unto a marriage. To explain our relationship to God, the New Testament writers used something the early Christians seemed to understand intuitively: marriage (Eph 5:21-33). Today, with the decline of healthy homes and incline of divorces, people seem to have a better understanding of our relationship to God than marriage. We can use the same principles of reasoning in reverse to teach about marriage from what we understand about our spiritual relationship with God. When a Christian sins, he does not automatically become a non-Christian. He is still a Christian, but having placed hostility into his covenant with God, reconciliation is required to put his relationship with God back where it was before. When God restores His fellowship, it can only be that the sinner has restored his commitment (Acts 28:27). If he sins again, God breaks His fellowship, not because of the previous sin which God had put out of His remembrance in the restoration, but because he has sinned afresh.

The fact that the relationship changes in a marriage when fornication is known is self-evident from Matthew 19:9. The change in relationship is diagrammed as follows:

<u>Party</u>		<u>Relationship</u>		<u>Party</u>
Non-fornicating Husband	>	no right to put away (bound)	>	Non-fornicating Wife
Non-fornicating Husband	>	right to put away (not bound)	>	Fornicating Wife

The known fornication immediately and automatically places enmity in the relationship that was previously peaceful. To change it back from enmity to peace is the process of reconciliation.

II. Reconciliation is a restored relationship

A. Reconciliation defined

Several original New Testament words are translated as reconciliation, the most common of which is, *katallasso*, (1 Cor 7:11) describing a restored relationship: "1) to change, exchange, as coins for others of equivalent value 1a) to reconcile (those who are at variance) 1b) return to favour with, be reconciled to one 1c) to receive one into favour." The root word, *allasso*, is "1) to change, to exchange one thing for another, to transform." Other variations translated "reconcile" include *diallasso* (Mat 5:24) which is "1) to change 2) to change the mind of anyone, to reconcile 3) to be reconciled, to renew friendship with one," and *apokatallasso* (Eph 2:16) which is "2) to reconcile back again, bring back a former state of harmony" (all definitions per Thayer). Any time a relationship changes from enmity to friendship, hostility to harmony, turmoil to tranquility, variance to favor, or conflict to fellowship: that is reconciliation, as the Bible uses the term (Eph 2:12-19).

Reconciliation is what happens when sinful men are obedient to the faith through baptism; God restores the former relationship which sin had broken back to its original state through the blood of Christ (2 Cor 5:17-19). So complete is this restoration that Paul indicates the enmity is utterly abolished and put to death (Eph 2:15, 16). Likewise, in marriage, when the innocent party disregards the enmity, he reconciles the relationship, and it is restored back to what it originally was before the fornication. The covenant is renewed; the original terms and conditions are again binding.

Once the innocent party reconciles the relationship, he cannot at some later date reinstate his right to put away based on the past fornication already put behind them. For the covenant to be broken again, it will require, as before, nothing other than death or the sin of fornication committed once again. This is the meaning of reconciliation.

B. The right to put away

The scriptures indicate no other reasons for putting away a lawful marriage other than fornication. The scriptures make no allowance for men to place other agreement terms, pending conditions, or exception clauses into the marriage covenant beyond what God has set forth. This is true whether it involves the original marriage or a restored marriage because, in reconciliation, the covenant is reinstated in totality just as it was in the marriage originally.

C. False ideas concerning reconciliation

1. It is a false notion that there is no reconciliation without separation.

This is redefining reconciliation to the restricted meaning of coming together again after being separated physically. The true definition and scriptural use of the term shows a broader view of restoration not limited to cohabitation alone. In a marriage, reconciliation is not merely the coming together again, but the covenant restored. Coming together again after being separated is not the reconciliation itself but the result of the reconciliation. For example, any separation involving the couple in 1 Corinthians 7:5 was by mutual consent, without enmity, so in coming together again, there is no damaged relationship needing to be restored; no reconciliation is required. Thus the apostle simply uses the word *sunerchomai* {soon-er'-khom-ahee} "1) to come together 1a) to assemble 1b) of conjugal cohabitation" (Thayer). However, concerning the estranged couple in verse 11, he says "reconcile." Therefore, if on the very day a man learns of his wife's unfaithfulness, he decides to not put her away, he thus removes the hostility and replaces it with harmony, which is, by definition, reconciliation. Even if they return to the marriage bed that very night without any physical separation in the process, a reconciliation of the marriage relationship has nonetheless occurred.

2. It is a false notion that a trial reconciliation is a good thing.

Some will claim that this encourages couples to at least "give it a try," which supposedly promotes reconciliation. They suggest this be done by the couple resuming all aspects of marriage intimacy with the option remaining for the innocent party to put away at a later date if he simply feels he cannot cope with the situation. There is absolutely no scriptural support for this idea. A commitment for life "for better or worse" as the marriage was originally undertaken is God's pattern to ensure that a reconciled marriage also endures. They have to stick to it and make it work just as they would have had to do in the marriage originally (Mat 19:5, 6).

3. Reconciliation is not to be viewed as a process which matures over a period of time.

Reconciliation is simply a restoration of the covenant, and as the original marriage covenant was not established by a time process, neither is the restored covenant. Marriages are established by ratification, which in our culture typically involves witnesses observing the exchange of vows before God with a qualified mediator saying "I now pronounce these husband and wife." Confirmation of reconciliation is likewise just this direct; either you are bound to the covenant or you are not bound to the covenant. There is no other condition indicated within divine law. Other aspects of the relationship, such as unquestioning trust and confidence, may take some time to be fully restored, but these have nothing to do with the covenant bond.

4. Some claim that the known fornication does not automatically sever the marriage bond.

When the fornication becomes known, the civil marriage is certainly still intact until they are divorced, but the covenant bond is clearly no longer intact for the innocent party. Common false doctrines arise from misunderstanding that it is possible to be civilly married but not bound (Matthew 19:9) and possible to be bound but civilly divorced (Romans 7:2, 3). The claim suggests that, even with fornication being known, the bond for the innocent party is still intact until such future time as the innocent party may arbitrarily decide to terminate the bond, which could even be after a reconciliation. No scripture will support this. Moreover, the fact that the known fornication does not automatically sever the civil marriage is significant. Since the known fornication does not automatically end the civil marriage, then if the unique privileges and benefits (the marriage bed) are accepted, the responsibilities and commitments (until parted by death) are also accepted. When a woman is known to have committed fornication, she violates the covenant (or breaks the covenant), but this does not mean they are automatically no longer married. Breaking the covenant places enmity between the spouses, but they are still civilly married. Now, if the unique privileges are assumed, the nature of a dependent covenant relationship demands that the commitment is also assumed. As has already been scripturally established, a tenet of dependent covenant relationships is that privileges and commitments are inseparable; you can't have one without the other.

D. No time limit

Scripture does not state a time limit for one deciding to put away. However, while taking the time to decide whether to reconcile, one cannot continue partaking in the unique benefits and privileges of the covenant but not continue accepting the unique responsibilities and obligations of the covenant, which include commitment for life. The benefits and privileges are only for those who are bound by the covenant, having a lawful marriage or a reconciled marriage (Heb 13:4; 1 Cor 7:2, 3, 9, 11). When contemplating reconciliation after fornication, acceptance of the former privileges constitutes acceptance of the former commitments. This is a forced conclusion; there cannot be one without the other. The Bible is silent regarding any such thing as a trial, partial, temporary, experimental, special case, or probational marriage bond.

III. The basis of reconciliation

The scriptures are absolutely silent regarding any terms, conditions, qualifications, or stipulations upon which a reconciliation might be based, and we dare not add words to God's silence. The innocent party certainly has the right to wait before making the decision to reconcile (but during that time he must remove himself from such intimacy of the relationship that is the privilege of life-time covenant members only, as previously established). During any such waiting period, the innocent party would obviously have the opportunity to observe if the guilty party changed her behavior, which might or might not affect his decision. After as much or as little time waiting and observing as he feels he needs, he can decide to reconcile. He can base his decision on anything he wants or on nothing at all. However, what he cannot do is add any other agreement terms, pending conditions, or exception clauses to the reconciliation beyond what God has set forth, which is for again the sin of fornication exclusively, as the original marriage covenant stipulated. Once the marriage is reconciled, it is restored to its former state where only death or fornication again has the power to break it.

Therefore, reconciling or not reconciling a marriage is not based on repentance. There is no scripture that states reconciliation is dependant upon the guilty party's penitence. A person can choose not to reconcile even if the guilty party repents, or a person can choose to reconcile even if the guilty party does not repent. In the church, most Christians would never consider reconciliation if they thought their partner would likely commit fornication again. However, this is not necessarily the case in the world, but God's law concerning marriage is the same for Christians as for non-Christians (Mark 16:15). Moreover, a non-Christian is effectively incapable of true repentance in this matter. She may say she is sorry, but without faith (Heb 11:6) any penitence is vain; without godly sorrow (2 Cor 7:10) there can be no true repentance. Nevertheless, the marriages of non-Christians can be reconciled just the same.

IV. Consequences

If we hold to the doctrine which says the innocent party has the right to put away the guilty party without any time limits after the marriage bond is reconciled, then there are some serious consequences. This would effectively provide the innocent party a get-out-of-marriage-free card they could play at any future time. The couple could even go on and raise 3 or 4 children, and 20 years later, if he finds a younger, richer, prettier woman who shows him attention, he can then supposedly choose to get his divorce and marry her. If one holding this doctrine claims that this is ridiculous or absurd, then he creates a dilemma: where should the line be drawn and who draws it? If 20 years is enough time for him to loose his right to put away, is 10 years? If not 10 then would it be 5 years? Who would have the authority to say 3 years is short enough but 4 years is too long? This is certainly not the realm where elders have a right to make rules. These are legitimate questions which are generated by this doctrine. He who holds this position is obligated to give the answer or else abandon this teaching. It is irrational for one who affirms there is no time limit to say "I don't know the time limit; it's not revealed." That is self-contradicting, like saying, "There's no such thing as unicorns, but I don't know where they come from." The opposing doctrine, which says the innocent party has the right to put away the guilty party without any time limits BEFORE the marriage bond is reconciled, does not possess this dilemma and is worthy of acceptance.

Additionally, situations exist where both spouses committed adultery at different times, and each one reconciled the relationship with the other. Holding to this doctrine would necessarily mean that both of them have the right to divorce the other if they should change their mind at some later date. Then, if at some time one of them decides to exercise his supposed right to put away, the other could reciprocate, and they would both have a right to remarry. This is outrageous and totally without scriptural support, but it is a necessary consequence of this doctrine.

Furthermore, the innocent party can decide to put away his spouse and the next day, before taking any legal action, change his mind and decide to reconcile. He can do this because, by deciding to put her away, he does not enter into any covenant with his former spouse. Therefore, when he changes his mind, he violates no covenant. (Those who hold to the subject doctrine would say that he indefinitely maintains his right to put her away after the marriage is thus reconciled). By the same rights, the innocent party can also decide to put away his spouse and carry through with a legal divorce. Then (it could be years later) if he has not remarried another, he could yet change his mind and decide to reconcile if she were willing (1 Cor 7:11). To do so, he would need to remarry his former spouse to meet the requirements of civil law. The evangelist who might conduct this wedding ceremony, if he holds to the subject doctrine, would not be able to simply ask the innocent party to vow "until death do we part." Instead, he would need to clarify

by rewording the vow for the innocent party, since he will supposedly maintain his right to put her away without time limit if he would ever decide to do so, since she is the guilty party. This is a necessary consequence of the doctrine. There is no scripture that would indicate there is any difference between the marriage bond that is reconciled after a separation and legal divorce and the marriage bond that is reconciled before a separation and legal divorce.

If the view is held that repentance is required for reconciliation in marriage and that committing any other of a host of all different kinds of sins indicates a failure to truly repent, then any sin which the guilty party may commit after reconciliation gives the innocent party the right to put them away. It does not have to be a sin pertaining to sexuality (other than fornication), it can be for the sin of lying, gossiping, drunkenness, forsaking the assembly, or anything. This throws the door wide open, because sooner or later, we all usually somehow sin again.

V. Conclusion

To state the matter concisely, the innocent spouse in the presented examples absolutely would NOT maintain the right to put the other away.

This writer believes the above explanations to be the truth on what God's word does and does not say concerning the issue under consideration. If any error can be found in this presentation, please point it out that we may come to a better understanding of God's word. However, if this represents the truth, then accept it as such and teach it to others.