"Marriage: God's Care for
the Institution and the Individuals"
Deuteronomy 24:1-4
October 25, 2026
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

This morning, we continue our series in the Book of Deuteronomy.

And today, Moses turns to the topic of divorce.

I didn't plan this, but it's an interesting topic to preach on today, on Reformation Sunday, because one thing the Reformation did was that it eventually restored a biblical view on divorce.

In the period leading up to the Reformation, the Church had embraced a view that divorce and remarriage were impossible in any circumstances. Marriage, they claimed, was indissoluble. And so even in cases of adultery, or abandonment, or abuse, the marriage bond could not be broken. It was the Reformation that restored the Bible's teaching that in such situations divorce and remarriage could be possible.[1]

Drawing from Scripture, the Reformation restored the biblical view that God cares both about the institution of marriage, and the individuals within it. And that's the teaching we find in our text this morning.

Because God cares about the institution of marriage, under many circumstances, divorce is not allowed, but spouses are called to remain faithful to their marriage vows, even in difficult marriages.

At the same time, because God cares about the individuals within marriage, there are circumstances where, when one spouse breaks their marriage vows seriously enough, the innocent party has the option to seek a divorce, for their wellbeing, and in some cases for their safety.

God's Word combines this care for both the institution and the individuals when it comes to marriage.

The unbiblical temptation is to choose one or the other. The medieval church embraced God's high value on the institution of marriage, but it discarded his concern for innocent and vulnerable individuals within broken marriages. Meanwhile, our secular culture today does the opposite – embracing the value and dignity of the individual, while discarding the value God places on the institution of marriage.

But what the Bible teaches, and what the Reformation helped restore, is the truth that we are called to embrace both teachings of Scripture: that God cares deeply about the institution of marriage,

[1] It is true that some in the medieval church came up with workarounds, like annulling a marriage, claiming it was never valid. But the Reformation restored the view that the previous marriage could be real, but that if broken seriously enough by one spouse, the innocent spouse could be free to divorce and remarry.

and that God cares deeply for individuals in marriage, in such a way that divorce is permitted in some situations, but not in all.

That will be our focus this morning – that's what our passage in Deuteronomy is about. Next week, in the very next verse of Deuteronomy, we'll talk about our calling to invest in our marriages so that they can be healthy and thrive. But first, our text this morning focuses on the topic of divorce.

With that said, let's turn now to out passage: Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

And please do listen carefully. This is God's Word for us this morning.

Moses said to the people:

24:1 "When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, 2 and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, 3 and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife, 4 then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before Yahweh. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that Yahweh your God is giving you for an inheritance."

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

"All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever." [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let's pray …

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, you are our hiding place and our shield,
we hope in your word.
Help us to turn from all false ways,
and keep instead your commandments.
Hold us up, that we may be safe
and have regard for your statutes continually.
For we know we will one day stand before you and give an account,
and so, with that in mind, help us now to attend to your word.
Grant this in Jesus's name. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:114-117, 120]

Introduction

Our text this morning, though it comes at it from an odd angle, gives us a window into God's teaching for us on marriage and divorce. And as we consider this text, we'll also bring in key passages from Exodus, and the teaching of Jesus, and Paul.

I'll also be drawing from several sources this morning to help us interpret those Bible passages: from two PCA study committee reports, the work of John Frame, and the work of David Instone-Brewer.

And I'll mention that I covered this topic in more technical detail in an adult Sunday school class a couple years ago. I've included both a link to that class and the four-page handout from it, in an appendix to the sermon manuscript, available in the tray, back in the narthex.

But for now, let's turn now to our text.

This passage lays out a very specific situation in verses one through three, with the overt command only really coming in verse four – and there it's focused on what's allowed for a person's third marriage.

And the truth is … there's a variety of views on what the command in verse four is really meant to address.

Some see it as closing a loophole that could have been exploited in the ancient world to create a legalized form of adultery [Craigie, 305-306]. Others see it as protection for women from being passed back and forth in short-term marriages between different men [Wright, 255]. Still others see it as being designed to protect the second marriage by forbidding someone in a second marriage from returning to their first spouse [R. Yaron, cited in Wright, 262; J.A. Thompson, cited in Brown, 228], while others argue that its purpose is to prevent unjust financial gain by men exploiting women through the manipulation of ancient dowry laws [Westbrook, 393-404]. Still others claim it's a made-up and unlikely hypothetical designed just to illustrate general principles [Miller, 139].

All of which is to say that the command in verse four is complicated, and how it might apply to such remarriages today may be a complex question, and I suspect more than one principal may be being demonstrated in it.

And so, I don't think that the most valuable way to focus on this passage this morning is to zero in on the detailed issue in question in verse four. Rather, as we examine this passage as a whole, and as we see its connections with other Biblical passages, I think we can see the Bible's overall teaching on marriage and divorce.

And a good place to start, is by considering the first divorce described here in this passage, in verse 1.

That first divorce seems to be treated as valid – remarriage is permitted. Later Jewish rabbis viewed it that way too.

And the basis of that first divorce, we're told, is that the first husband divorced his wife "because he has found some indecency in her."

By Jesus's day, God's people understood that phrase as describing something that merited biblical grounds for divorce. And I think Jesus affirmed that assumption. But there are a couple objections some raise to this view.

For one thing, some assume that "some indecency" in verse one can't be adultery, because adultery was a capital crime in ancient Israel. But as we discussed a few weeks ago, in the Old Testament

law it seems that with the exception of murder, capital crimes could be given lesser sentences, and it's quite possible they ordinarily were. We see an example of this in Matthew 1[:18-20] where a righteous Jew responds to perceived adultery not by seeking capital punishment, but with a quiet divorce.

For another thing, when the Pharisees ask Jesus about Deuteronomy 24:1, many Christians assume that Jesus isn't interpreting that passage, but that instead Jesus is modifying it, or even correcting it. But I think that's a mistake. Rather, I think Jesus, in his teaching, is explaining the right interpretation of our passage this morning. And I've been especially convinced of this by the work of David Instone-Brewer.

In Matthew 19, the Pharisees ask Jesus about divorce, and they bring up Deuteronomy 24:1 from our text. But we often misunderstand that interaction, because we read it in a historical vacuum.

But in Jesus's day, there was intense debate about what was meant by the phrase "some indecency in her" in verse 1 of our text. The assumption was that that phrase referred to a biblical ground for divorce. The debate was about what the phrase meant – which is why the Pharisees referred to that verse when they asked Jesus about divorce.

And this debate in first-century Judaism was summarized, years later, in the Mishna as the debate between two schools of rabbinic thought – the school of Hillel and the school of Shammai.

The school of Shammai's teaching, as it's recorded in the Mishna is: "The school of Shammai say: A man may not divorce his wife unless he has found unchastity in her, for it is written, *Because he had found in her* indecency *in anything.*" [*Gittin* 9:10]

In other words, one school of Jewish rabbinical thought in the first century taught that that phrase "some indecency in her" was referring to some kind of sexual unfaithfulness, and saw that as the biblical grounds for divorce that Moses was teaching in our text.

But the other rabbinical school – the school of Hillel taught that a man could divorce his wife for any cause at all. Here's how the Mishna summarized their view – it says: "The school of Hillel say: [He may divorce her] even if she spoil a dish for him, for it is written *Because he hath found in her indecency in* anything. [Rabbi] Akiba says: Even if he found another fairer than she, for it is written *And it shall be if she find no favour in his eyes.*" [*Gittin* 9:10]

So, the rabbinical school of Hillel taught that a man could divorce his wife for any cause – because she messed up dinner one night, or there was another prettier woman he now liked better. And this view could be referred to as "any cause" divorce. And so, Instone-Brewer argues that in Matthew 19:3, when the Pharisees ask Jesus "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" what they're really asking is: "Is the rabbinical school of Hillel correct, that a man can divorce his wife for any reason at all?" [Instone-Brewer (2003), 54-59]

And in the verses that follow, Jesus's answer is basically: "No, the school of Hillel is wrong."

The Pharisees then point him explicitly to Deuteronomy 24:1 and ask him to explain. And Jesus there states even more clearly that in his view the school of Shammai is correct – if Deuteronomy is read in light of Genesis, then it's clear that God did not intend in that passage to allow divorce

for any reason at all, but Deuteronomy only allowed it when the marriage covenant had been broken by a sin like sexual unfaithfulness.[2]

And so, Jesus was not overturning Moses's teaching here in Deuteronomy 24. Rather, he was affirming it. He was speaking into a controversy in the Jewish world of his day about this very text. And the correct interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1 he says, is that divorce is allowed for sexual unfaithfulness.

And as such, Jesus wasn't addressing every biblical ground for divorce in the Law of Moses, but only what comes up in in Deuteronomy 24.

The other biblical grounds for divorce established in the Law of Moses are reiterated later by Paul, in 1 Corinthians 7.

There, the Apostle Paul affirms that desertion is also biblical ground for divorce. And in making this affirmation Paul was simply repeating an aspect of what the Law of Moses taught in Exodus 21.

There, addressing a situation in which a man marries a former slave but then takes a second wife, God says that if the husband does not give his first wife food, and clothing, and her marital rights, then she is free to go, and to leave him. [Exodus 21:10-11]

In Jesus's day and in Paul's day this passage from Exodus was understood by the dominant rabbinical schools to constitute a second text providing biblical grounds for divorce. [Instone-Brewer (2002), 99-110] The rationale seems to have been that if this law was meant to protect a former slave woman, it must also provide the same level of protection to a free woman. And it would seem that this was the law Paul was applying in 1 Corinthians 7[:15] when he addresses the topic of those who had been abandoned by their spouse.

What we see in Exodus 21 is that in a case of serious neglect, or abusive oppression, which cannot be resolved, the innocent spouse is free to divorce, because the guilty spouse has functionally abandoned the marriage.

In the ancient world, especially in a more rural setting, failing to provide food or clothing to a family member could constitute a dangerous form of abusive oppression. But it's not limited to that – neglect of her marital rights is also identified as a form of neglectful abandonment.

Now we should be careful here. Marital dynamics can be complex. This verse is not addressing situations, for example, where one spouse refuses sexual intimacy because the other spouse has sinned against them or abused them in serious ways. What's in view here is a case of pure neglect out of selfishness or disinterest.

And so, what we have in Exodus 21 is a law establishing that persistent and harmful abuse, neglect, and oppression are also biblical grounds for divorce – a form of abandonment.

[2] If that reading of Matthew 19 is right – and I think it is – then when Jesus goes on to refer to Moses allowing divorce because of hardness of heart, he didn't mean that Moses allowed divorce without sufficient grounds because of people's hardness of heart, he meant that divorce was allowed (and still is) because of sins like sexual immorality, which grow out of hardness of heart.

The Law of Moses provides these two categories of biblical grounds for divorce, and Jesus and Paul reaffirm them.

And so, what we see here, as we take these texts together, is that ordinarily, people are called to be faithful to their marriage vows, and so faithful to their spouse – even when it's difficult, even when it's costly to them. But, in cases of sexual unfaithfulness, or in cases of persistent and unresolvable abuse, oppression, abandonment, or neglect that constitutes abandonment – in those cases, divorce is permitted. Though we should add that it's not required.

And that same teaching came out of the Reformation, and was summarized in the Westminster Standards, and lived out in much of the Presbyterian tradition.[3]

So, if we step back from these texts, the pattern that emerges is that the Bible both has a high view of marriage, and a view that there are times when divorce is allowed, in order to protect the innocent and the vulnerable.

What we end up seeing then, is that God cares deeply about protecting the institution of marriage, and protecting individuals in marriage, because both are meant to image him.

Let me say that again: God cares deeply about protecting the institution of marriage, and protecting individuals in marriage, because both are meant to image him.

Let's consider now what that means for us in a bit more detail.

God's Care for Protecting the Institution of Marriage

First, God cares deeply about protecting the institution of marriage.

Ordinarily, in many circumstances, even when it's difficult, God calls on his people to be faithful to their marriage vows, and to invest in and sacrifice for their marriages, even when it's hard, even when it's costly.

He calls on husbands and wives to love one another sacrificially, with the love of Jesus. That means that there are situations where one spouse might be happier in this life if they left their marriage, but God calls them to remain in their marriage anyway, and even to invest in it.

And this shouldn't come as a shock. That promise is right there in the traditional marriage vows themselves – where we vow to be faithful and loving towards our spouse:

> for better, for worse,
> for richer, for poorer,
> in plenty and in want,

[3] The Westminster Standards identify adultery and abandonment as biblical grounds for divorce [WCF 24.6]. And as our denominational study committee report points out, the puritan tradition itself saw certain forms of abuse as the basis for desertion, and thus possible grounds for divorce. They referred to such situations as "malicious dealings" by the first spouse, which led to the imposition of "intolerable conditions" on the innocent spouse, and argued that even if it was the innocent spouse who had to leave the home, it was the abusive spouse who was guilty of desertion, because they drove the innocent spouse away. And so, if the situation could not be resolved, the innocent spouse could seek a divorce on the grounds that the abusive spouse had deserted them by driving them from the home. [W.S. Barker, cited in the *PCA Report (1992),* 199]

in joy and in sorrow,
in sickness and in health;
as long as we both shall live.

Not just when it makes our lives better … but even when it makes our own lives worse. Not just when it enriches us, but even when it impoverishes us. Even so, we promise our faithfulness and love in marriage.

Those are the kinds of vows we make in marriage. And God calls us to keep those vows.

But why? Why does God call his people to keep marriage vows like that – vows that we will love and serve the other person even when it's to our hurt?

There might be a number of answers to this, but one foundational reason the Bible gives is that he calls us to love our spouse like that, because he has loved us like that. And marriage was made to be an image of the love of God for his people.

This concept is introduced in the Old Testament [e.g.: Jeremiah 3:20, Isaiah 54:5] and emphasized further in the New Testament [e.g.: Ephesians 5:22-32; 2 Corinthians 11:2; Revelation 19:7, 21:2]. Jesus, God the Son, is the bridegroom and the Church is his bride. And marriage is designed to be an image of the love Christ has for his people.[4]

And so, when a husband or wife abandons their spouse out of selfish or self-interested motives, when they leave them for someone else, or leave because staying faithful to them would be hard, or when the walk away from the relationship for some other reason not permitted by Scripture, they twist the image of God that marriage was supposed to convey.

And, of course, in the process, they usually harm their spouse too. Where Christ used his strength to bless and to serve his bride the Church … in an unbiblical divorce, one spouse uses their earthly strength to serve themselves, harming their husband or wife in the process, which is the opposite of the gospel that marriage was made to image.

Now, if you've had a divorce without biblical grounds, of course your sin can be forgiven. I'd encourage you to meet with one the pastors here, or another ministry leader in the church, to discuss both what repentance might mean for you, and to be assured of the promise that God's grace can cover your sins if you repent and trust in him.

For those of you who are currently in a difficult marriage, I know this teaching can be hard. Next week we'll talk more about some ways you can try to invest in your marriage. Our pastors and other ministry leaders would also be happy to talk with you about this, or to connect you with other resources.

But to start, I hope the Bible's teaching this morning will motivate you to keep making the effort to remain faithful to your marriage. Because as hard as your situation may be, it's also an opportunity to image Jesus, by loving your spouse like Christ loves the Church, even when it's costly. And remember, when it's hard, that Jesus knows how you feel. You can talk to him about

[4] We could also add, based on 1 Corinthians 11:3, that that marriage is also meant to reflect something of the love in the inter-trinitarian relationships. And so, both the love of God for his people, and the love within God himself, is meant to be reflected and imaged in marriage.

it. He understands. He's also had to do the difficult work of persevering in a difficult relationship, in his relationship with his people.

So, God cares deeply about protecting the institution of marriage, because it's meant to point to him – to bear the image of his love.

That's one key thing we see here.

God's Care for Protecting Individuals in Marriage

But the second thing we see in these texts is that God also cares deeply about protecting individuals in marriage.

And so God allows for divorce in certain situations.

We see this first in our passage in God's concern for the innocent spouse in cases of sexual unfaithfulness.

As we've noted, that's what's in view in verse 1 of our text.

When a husband or wife was sexually unfaithful, their spouse had a choice. They could seek reconciliation and remain married to them. Or they could seek a divorce. By providing these options, the God's law protected the innocent spouse in such situations.

They weren't required to seek a divorce. They also weren't forbidden from it. They were free to seek reconciliation, and to try to restore the marriage. And many have taken that route. And many of those marriages were able to be rebuilt even stronger. But they were also free to pursue a divorce. The choice was theirs. God's law protected the innocent spouse by giving them those choices. That's the first thing we see.

But second – and this is important – if we're understanding Jesus correctly, that verse one of our text is a situation where the wife has been sexually unfaithful, then we need to notice that God's law here also protects the guilty spouse in a case of adultery or sexual unfaithfulness.

For one thing, the innocent spouse could agree to seek reconciliation with them – divorce is not required. And so, the guilty spouse may receive the grace of reconciliation with their husband or wife, and a new life together with them going forward – that's one possibility.

But also, as we see in our text, if the innocent spouse does choose to divorce the unfaithful spouse, the unfaithful spouse's life doesn't come to an end. They aren't banished from the land. And they aren't forbidden from ever remarrying. Instead, we see here that they could remarry – verse 2 implies this, and studies of divorce certificates in Jesus's day seems to confirm it. [Instone-Brewer (2003), 105-117; Instone-Brewer (2002), 288-289] And so, the guilty spouse could repent, and receive grace from God, and an opportunity at a new beginning even if their spouse chooses to divorce them – God's law protects the guilty as well as the innocent in such cases. [See the 1982 Report of the RPCES, quoted in the *PCA Report (1992),* 203]

Third, we see that God's law, where it strengthens the institution of marriage also protects individuals from being abandoned. By forbidding husbands and wives from abandoning their spouses, God is also protecting those spouses from the devastation of abandonment.

Fourth, God's law, is also concerned to protect the innocent spouse when abandonment happens anyway. An abandoned spouse was not sentenced to isolation for the rest of their lives, or to endure the kind of destitution described in Exodus 21, but they were free to go, and even to remarry. [*PCA Report (1992),* 226-229]

Fifth, God's law also seeks to protect the individual who is being oppressed or abused. Exodus 21 describes what could be a serious situation of oppression and abuse. And God cares for that

individual – he wants to protect the woman described there. And so, God declares that she is free to leave such a marriage. Even though she felt powerless in her marriage, God speaks into the situation, and says that her husband does not have the right to oppress and abuse her. Where her husband had sought to strip her of power and resources, God gives her power.

Now if you're dealing with a situation of marital oppression, or abuse, or abandonment, or severe neglect, or betrayal, it can be painful and complex. And I hope you'll reach out to a pastor or ministry leader that you trust for help and support, so that we can come alongside you.

We want to be there for you, because we want to be the hands and feet of Jesus in your life. Like Jesus, we want to care both about your marriage and about you. And like Jesus, we too want to comfort the betrayed, and support the abandoned, and help to protect and care for the oppressed.

We care for individuals in such situations, because God cares about individuals in such situations.

And God cares about individuals because they too point to him – they too bear his image.

Every human being bears his image. And so God cares about the dignity and the protection and the peace of every individual person.

He cares for the betrayed, because they bear his image. He loves them, and he cherishes them, and he understands what they are going through because he too was betrayed. And so, if you have been betrayed, Jesus knows your pain, and he will draw close to you in compassion if you will turn to him. When others are faithless, God remains faithful.

God also cares for the abandoned. They too bear his image. And so, if you have been abandoned, if you have been treated by someone as if you were worthless, God remind you that to him you have incredible worth. You bear his image. And he loves you. And he wants you for himself, and he calls you to rest in his embrace. When others abandon us, God calls us close.

God also cares for the abused and the oppressed. Because they too bear his image. The God of the Bible is the God who rescues the oppressed, and who hates oppression and injustice. He is the God who rescued Israel from their oppression in Egypt, and he didn't do that just so that they could start oppressing one another in their own homes. God hates oppression. And he comes to rescue the oppressed. And so, if you have been abused and oppressed, God wants to deliver you. He wants to see you flourish. Because you bear his image, and he delights in seeing you thrive. And so, when others oppress you, God would set you free.

God cares for the dignity, and the safety, and the protection, of the innocent and the betrayed, the abandoned and the oppressed, because they bear his image.

But also, our God, the God of the Bible, is also a God who cares for the guilty. Because despite their sin, they too bear his image. We see this in our text, where God is concerned for the welfare of the sexually unfaithful wife. It's an important reminder that the God of the Bible does not desire the death of a sinner, but he desires that they would turn from their sin, come to him, and live. [Ezekiel 18:23]

And so the God of the Bible calls the adulterer, the abandoner, the abuser to repent – to confess their sin, to lament it, and to turn from it, and to accept his grace. And if they do, he offers them new life, and hope, and dignity.

No matter our sin, God always holds out his grace. And so, even if reconciliation with a spouse is not possible because of your sin, reconciliation with God is always possible. He cares for the weak. He cares for the innocent. And he cares also for the guilty and the sinner.

God cares deeply about every individual.

Conclusion

Our God cares about marriage. And our God cares about people.

He heals the broken. He rescues the oppressed. He saves sinners.

And even when others are unfaithful to us, even when we ourselves are unfaithful, he remains faithful.

And so, brothers and sisters, let us place our faith in him.

Let us entrust ourselves to his faithfulness.

And then, let us go out, and try to show his faithfulness to others, by being faithful to them, as he has been to us.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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The PCA's "Report of the Ad Interim Committee on Domestic Abuse and Sexual Assault" (2022) (https://pcaga.org/aic-report-abuse/)
Westbrook, Raymond. "The Prohibition on Restoration of Marriage in Deuteronomy 24:103." In *Law from the Tigris to the Tiber: The Writings of Raymond Westbrook.* Edited by Bruce Wells and F. Rachel Magdalane. Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009.
Wright, Christopher. *Deuteronomy.* NIBC. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must

exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.

APPENDIX:
Material from Steven Nicoletti's December 15, 2024 Adult Sunday School Class on Biblical Grounds for Divorce

Audio for this class can be found here:
https://www.faithtacoma.org/podcast/westminster-confession-part-71

The handout for this class follows below (with some edits for clarification made in 2026):

Adult Sunday School: "WCF 24: Of Marriage & Divorce"
December 2024

28 Statements on Divorce & Remarriage
Steven Nicoletti

Bibliography:

- The PCA's "Report of the Ad-Interim Committee on Divorce and Remarriage" (1992) (https://pcahistory.org/pca/studies/divorce-remarriage.pdf)
- John Frame. *The Doctrine of the Christian Life.* Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008.
- David Instone-Brewer. *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible.* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002.
- David Instone-Brewer. *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church.* Downers Grove, IL: ICP Books, 2003.
- The PCA's "Report of the Ad Interim Committee on Domestic Abuse and Sexual Assault" (2022) (https://pcaga.org/aic-report-abuse/)

#1: God intended marriage to be life-long.

- See Matthew 19:4-6, Genesis 2:22-25

#2: Because sin has entered the world, the marriage covenant can be broken by one or both members in such a way that God allows for divorce.

- See Matthew 5:31-32, Matthew 1:18-20, Matthew 19:6, 1 Corinthians 7:15, Charles Hodge (*Systematic Theology, Vol III*, 1961, p.391), *PCA Report (1992)* p.205-206

#3: The Westminster Standards, summarizing the Scriptures, gives two biblical (i.e. God-permitted) grounds for divorce: adultery and willful desertion.

- See WCF 24:5-6 with Matthew 19:9, 1 Corinthians 7:15.

#4: In the two grounds given for biblically-sanctioned divorce (adultery and willful desertion) there are both clear-cut cases where the sin allowing for divorce has obviously been committed, and unclear cases, in which a difficult wisdom-based judgment is required.

- See *PCA Report (1992)* p.215-223 with Matthew 5:32, Matthew 19:9, 1 Corinthians 7:15, WCF 24.6.

#5: Especially for such unclear cases, God has given elders to serve as judges to make an assessment and render a judgment.

- See WCF 25.6 and *PCA Report (1992)* p. 223, 226.

#6: Elders, in addressing these unclear cases must beware of the opposing temptations to either add to or take away from God's law.

- See Deuteronomy 4:2, WCF 1.6 and David C. Jones ("The Westminster Confession on Divorce and Remarriage," p. 25, quoted in *PCA Report (1992)*, 214) regarding one temptation, and WCF 24.6 on the other.

#7: Adultery, as biblically-sanctioned grounds for divorce, can include more than sexual intercourse in the strictest sense, and where the line of unfaithfulness is that constitutes biblically-sanctioned grounds for divorce due to unfaithfulness, is not always clear.

- See *PCA Report (1992)* p. 219-223, with Matthew 5:32.

#8: Some have argued that the sin of "adultery" is best understood as a category of sins, that are grievous acts that are significant enough to break the marriage covenant, and so warrant grounds for divorce, and that this category can include other, non-sexual and non-romantic sins as well.

- See *PCA Report (1992)* p. 186, and 204-205.

#9: The Confession seems to state (and some have argued) that the sin of "willful desertion" is biblically grounds for divorce whether it is committed by a non-Christian spouse, or a Christian spouse.

- See the views of Puritan William Perkins in the *PCA Report (1992),* p.191, and observations of John Murray in *PCA Report (1992),* p.196.

#10: "Willful desertion" must be "willful," in that it is the result of the acts and choices of one of the spouses.

- See 1 Corinthians 7:15 and WCF 24.6.

#11: The sin of "willful desertion" as it appears in 1 Corinthians 7 is not so much a second set of "grounds" for divorce as it is an acknowledgement that while a marriage may still exist on paper, it may no longer exist in practice (it is a *de facto* divorce). In this case, the "innocent" party is free to acknowledge it as such by seeking a legal divorce.

- See Gordon Fee, quoted in *PCA Report (1992)* p.224, John Frame, p.770, and *PCA Report (1992)* p.224, 226.

#12: "Willful desertion" not only includes one spouse leaving the other, but can include one spouse driving the other away, through "malicious dealings" that impose "intolerable conditions," so that the innocent spouse can no longer live with the malicious spouse (what is often identified today as abuse or marital oppression). In such cases, the spouse that drives the other away is the guilty party, and the spouse driven away is the innocent party, who may seek a divorce on biblically-sanctioned grounds of desertion.

- See *PCA Report (1992)* p. 190-199 (including quotation from W.S. Barker on p. 199), and p. 227-229, with comment and adjustments from Frame, p. 780-781.

#13: Some have argued that there is additional biblical grounds for viewing "willful desertion" as including persistent neglect, and that in such cases of persistently broken marriage vows, the neglected spouse has biblically-sanctioned grounds for divorce

- See Exodus 21:10-11 in light of Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church*, p. 54-70, and his arguments regarding Deuteronomy 24:1-4 and Matthew 19:1-9. Also Frame, 780-781.

#14: The distinction between a "bad" marriage on the one hand, and a "dead" or "functionally non-existent" marriage (i.e.: a *de facto* divorce by some form of desertion) on the other hand is not always clear, and is a judgment call that elders are called to make.

- See Frame, 770.

#15: Sins of "willful desertion" are only biblically-sanctioned grounds for divorce when it's determined that the situation "can in no way be remedied by the church, or civil magistrate."

- See WCF 24.6.

#16: The "guilty" spouse's claims of being willing to remedy the effects of their "desertion" may not be sufficient grounds for a session to conclude that the breach can be remedied, and so the elders must make a sober assessment as to whether they think such a remedy is realistically possible at that point.

- See Frame, 780-781.

#17: Determining whether a marriage covenant broken by desertion can be remedied is a difficult call that must be made taking into account not only what God is able to do, but what, from a human perspective, seems likely and realistic.

- See #4 above, and WCF 24.6.

#18: When one of these biblical grounds for divorce is present, the innocent party (i.e. the one sinned against in this way) may seek a divorce, but is not required to seek a divorce.

- See *PCA Report (1992)* p.192-193, 209-209.

#19: When a divorce is sought and acquired on biblical grounds, both parties afterwards are permitted to remarry.

- See the 1982 Report of the RPCES, quoted on p. 203 of the *PCA Report (1992)*. See also *PCA Report (1992)* p. 206, 227, 229.

#20: Though an individual may be free to remarry according to God's law, it is a separate question for them to consider (and for others to offer wise counsel) as to whether or not it is wise for them to remarry.

#21: The "guilty" party in a case of divorce on biblical grounds (i.e. the one who committed the sin justifying the divorce) may in some cases be subject to church censure (BCO 30), but the church must be careful to distinguish between discipline designed for the unrepentant vs discipline for the repentant, and take that into account in how they proceed.

- See especially *The Book of Church Order* (BCO) 30-1, along with BCO 30-2 through 30-5 for more. See also the example of William Perkins in *PCA Report (1992)* p.191.

#22: Forbidding someone to remarry is not an act of church censure linked to the gravity of a divorced spouse's sin. It is instead an assessment the session can make that 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 applies to an individual because they have sought a divorce without biblically-sanctioned grounds.

- See BCO 30 and 1 Corinthians 7:10-11.

#23: When two Christian spouses seek a divorce without biblical grounds, the church should not ordinarily take steps of church discipline against them, but, after attempting to heal the marriage, they are to inform the couple that if they proceed, they must either remain unmarried or be reconciled to one another.

- See 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 compared with 1 Corinthians 5, and *PCA Report* (1992), p.225.

#24: When one spouse seeks a divorce without biblical grounds, while the other spouse resists it, after attempting to heal the marriage, the session should inform the spouse seeking the divorce that if they proceed they must either remain unmarried or be reconciled to their spouse.

- See #23 & #22 above.

#25: When one spouse seeks a divorce without biblical grounds, while the other spouse resists it, the session may assess that the spouse that resisted the divorce is free to remarry after the divorce, as being willfully deserted.

- See the situation in 1 Corinthians 7:15 as opposed to the one in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11.

#26: When a spouse seeks a divorce without biblical grounds and must remain unmarried or be reconciled to their spouse, then, if reconciliation becomes impossible (through the death of their spouse, the remarriage of their spouse, or other circumstances that would render remarriage impossible or immoral), then the spouse who sought a divorce without biblical grounds is free to remarry. (In cases where this is unclear, the assessment of the session should be sought.)

- See *PCA Report (1992)* p.229-230.

#27: When a spouse who obtained a divorce without biblical grounds seeks remarriage to someone else when reconciliation to their spouse is still possible, the session must determine whether to take action in the form of church discipline.

- See 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 with 1 Corinthians 5.

#28: When a spouse has obtained a divorce without biblical grounds, and reconciliation to their spouse becomes impractical or improbable (though not impossible), they may come to the session for an assessment of whether other biblical commands may supersede the command to remain unmarried in those particular circumstances.

- See 1 Corinthians 7:9, 1 Timothy 5:14-15 on one end, and 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 on the other.