

Mental Divorce

by Casey Head

One of the most controversial issues plaguing the Lord's church today is the false doctrine known as "mental divorce." In recent years, there have been countless exchanges in spiritual publications and formal debates regarding this issue. What is mental divorce? What does the Bible say about it? In this article, we will answer these questions in an effort to show the fallacy of the mental divorce doctrine.

It is not always easy to define the doctrine of mental divorce. Not only is it a complex issue, but there are many variations of it. The basic premise is that when two people legally divorce but are still "bound" according to the law of God, remarriage on the part of one of the divorced spouses equates adultery. The "innocent" spouse can then mentally divorce their previous spouse for the cause of adultery and remarry scripturally. Let us consider an illustration. Bob divorces Sue because she is a lousy cook and housewife. This obviously is not a scriptural reason to divorce your spouse, but Bob doesn't care much about the law of God. After divorcing Sue, Bob finds another woman named Tina and decides to marry her. When Bob and Tina get married, Sue mentally divorces Bob because he has "committed adultery" against her. With this definition and illustration in mind, let us now turn to the scriptures to show the error of mental divorce.

First, we must understand that there is both a civil and a divine aspect to marriage. If we can grasp this point, then the issue should be resolved. In Mark 6:17-18, we learn of a situation involving Herod, Herodias and Philip. Let's begin reading in verse seventeen, "For Herod himself had sent forth and laid hold upon John, and bound him in prison for Herodias' sake, his brother Philip's wife: for he had married her. For John had said unto Herod, it is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife." We see here both the divine and civil aspects of marriage. Civilly, Herod was married to Herodias, but according to divine law, Herodias was bound to Philip, not Herod. The divine aspect of marriage involves an unseen bond. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:39, "The wife is *bound by the law* as long as her husband liveth: but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord." This same point is made in Romans 7:2-3. In this passage, a woman who is bound to her husband leaves him and remarries. Her second marriage is unlawful, however, for she is still bound to her first husband. These two passages again prove that there are two aspects to marriage- civil and divine. Why make this point? Because when two people who are lawfully joined together by God divorce for an unscriptural reason, they are divorced! We cannot discard the civil aspect of marriage and say that a second "mental divorce" can occur. Can you find two divorces in the scriptures? Do you find any indication that the civil aspect of marriage and divorce means nothing in the eyes of God? No.

In Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, Jesus tells us that the only scriptural reason to divorce your spouse is the cause of adultery. In other words, if your spouse engages in sexual relations with another person, you are permitted to divorce them and remarry. If a married couple divorces for any other reason, they have two options according to 1 Corinthians 7:11- remain unmarried or be reconciled. Notice that while they may be bound to each other, Paul considers them to be "unmarried." Would it be wrong for someone in this situation to marry another person? Yes. It would be adultery. But the divorce has already taken place. This goes back to the point made earlier that there are two aspects of marriage- divine and civil.

While the doctrine of "mental divorce" may be appealing, we must recognize that the Bible never authorizes it. We do not find multiple divorces or mental divorces in the scriptures. Let us stand for the truth and reject this false doctrine.