

Is it Hypocritical of the Church to Permit Remarriage in Church After Divorce, But Not the Same-Sex Marriage or Blessings of the Same-Sex Relationships?

When questioned about divorce (Matthew 19:3–12, Mark 10:2–12), Jesus says that the provision for relatively easy divorce made in Deuteronomy 24:1 was a temporary concession to human ‘hardness of heart’ (Matthew 19:8) which has now been abrogated in the light of the coming of God’s Kingdom.

In its place, Jesus asserts that the relevant norm or standard is the original created pattern for marriage in Genesis 2, which implies lifelong union between a woman and a man which cannot necessarily be broken by a legal decree. Jesus shows the seriousness of ending a marriage and marrying another person by describing such behaviour as adultery (Matthew 5:31–32, Mark 10:8–12, Luke 16:18). The implication of this is normally assumed to be that it is adultery because the original couple are still truly married, even if they have divorced properly in the eyes of the law. An alternative explanation is that Jesus meant that anyone who divorces their spouse in order to marry another is committing adultery. If so, this restriction would not apply to people whose marriage simply broke up, but not because they already intended to marry someone else.

In at least Matthew’s gospel, Jesus allows a clear exception to the impossibility of divorce, namely when *porneia* (an act of sexual immorality) has been committed (Matthew 5:32, 19:9). (Sometimes this is taken simply to mean adultery, but it has wider connotations than that.) The explanation usually offered for this (although it is not made explicit by Jesus) is that sexual unfaithfulness has already destroyed the marriage, hence the victim is free to remarry. (Some scholars have argued that Jesus only permitted divorce, not remarriage, but this does not seem likely given that the very point of getting divorced was in order to be free to remarry.)

Paul also seems to allow remarriage when a Christian spouse is divorced or deserted by a non-Christian (1 Corinthians 7:15). The Christian is now ‘free’, which probably means ‘free to marry’. Some have argued that the same freedom should apply in other circumstances not explicitly addressed in Scripture, e.g. to those who have been divorced against their will, even if their original spouse was also a Christian, or to those who divorced due to abuse.

The New Testament therefore does seem to permit remarriage after divorce in certain circumstances, in contrast to its teaching on same-sex sexual relationships. However, the New Testament does not seem to recognise the possibility of ‘no fault’ divorce, where a couple separate simply because they feel the marriage is not working or has broken down. The Church of England’s official position is similarly restrictive: “there are exceptional circumstances in which a divorced person may be married in church during the lifetime of a former spouse” (General Synod, 2002). It may be that in practice the church has become overly accepting of remarriage in church after divorce but, if this is so, the correct response is not to say that we should also perform same-sex marriages and bless same-sex relationships, but to adhere more faithfully to the biblical teaching over marriage and divorce.