

Aim of lesson

To encourage in the young people an attitude that marriage is for life and that therefore they should not rush into it, but that if they do marry they should have an absolute determination to make it work.

It is not the aim of this lesson to discuss how an ecclesia should respond to marital problems that may affect its members. If the young people raise the subject you should be prepared to discuss it, but remember the aim of the lesson is to help the young people to lay foundations for the future which will help their marriages.

The general principles involved in dealing with sin within an ecclesia are discussed in the section on Ecclesial Life.

Bible background

Principles of marriage: Ephesians 5:21 - 6:4; Genesis 2:18-25; Proverbs 5:15-23; Hebrews 13:4; 1 Corinthians 7:1-7.

Divorce and remarriage: Malachi 2:14-16; 1 Corinthians 7:10-15, 39; Matthew 5:31-32; 19:3-9; Mark 10:2-12; Luke 16:18.

Preparation required

Bear in mind that there may be students in your group whose parents' marriages may be unhappy, or broken. They will all, probably, have been affected by difficulties in the marriages of a friend's parents.

Read through the notes and think carefully about what is helpful and appropriate for the students in your group. Think about what they may suggest and ask. Divorce and remarriage is a sensitive subject and there are different views held within the Christadelphian community. Try to avoid getting bogged down with discussions about the 'exceptive' clause in Matthew 5:32 (and the parallel passages). For your own information you may refer to reprints from *The Christadelphian* 'The Lord Hateth Putting Away', 'Reflections on Marriage and Divorce' and 'Marriage and Divorce' by brother John Carter. A generally helpful book is 'Family Life in the Lord' by Don and Ellen Styles.

Suggested outline of lesson

What makes a marriage fail?

Ask the students why they think they should be discussing this subject. This is an opportunity to discuss the aims of the lesson.

Ask them what they consider to be the causes of divorce and the breakdown of marriage. Surveys have suggested that some of the main areas of confrontation within the home are: children, in-laws, jobs, hobbies, religion, money, and sex. Discuss how these common areas of confrontation can lead to the breakdown of marriage? Why might some married couples seem able to cope with these difficulties? Is it that 'successful' marriages have no problems, or that the husband and wife deal with them in a godly way?

Bible Principles

What God has joined

Begin by getting the young people to look at Matthew 19:3-6, and bring out the points that

- The word 'cleave to' (AV), 'be united to' (NIV) comes from a Greek word meaning 'to glue together'.
- This joining is done by God. It is possible in all the fuss and palaver of a marriage to forget that behind the scenes God is taking two people and making one out of them. What right have we to undo something that God has done?

What makes a marriage work?

Ask the class about the principles which should be applied in a marriage. Read Ephesians 5:21-6:4 if they need help.

- Husbands and wives should submit to one another - this means each putting the other first, being genuinely concerned for each other's welfare, listening properly to each other, sharing good times and bad, being willing to talk about problems and difficulties.
- A wife should submit to and respect her husband, making him her head, and the head of the household.
- A husband should love his wife as Christ loves us. Think of a husband washing his wife's feet (or even the dishes), and in the end being willing to die for her.
- The husband should provide spiritual food in the household.
- Children should be taught to honour their parents.
- Parents should bring up children 'in the training and instruction of the Lord'.

Ask the young people whether any marriage would work if both partners behaved like this. The broad conclusion should be that it would - marriages break down where one partner, or both, fail to live up to these ideals. This is not to downplay the importance of romantic love: it can make all the good things above so much easier, though on its own it is no guarantee of a long term marriage.

Suggest that these may be summed up by mutual love and respect, conciliation and commitment to God and to each other. Compare these principles to reasons commonly cited in divorce courts: selfishness, violence, neglect, incompatibility, adultery and poor communication.

Marriage should be a spiritual, mental and physical union of one man and one woman, approved and recognised by God. Choosing a partner is a very important decision.

Is divorce acceptable?

This section is not really about divorce in the modern sense of the word. To make a comparison with a marriage: when a couple marry, the legal process of signing the register is merely the confirmation of the union that is being formed, and it is the marriage that ultimately matters, not the legal document. In the same way it is not the divorce - the piece of paper - that is the real issue but the breakdown of the marriage.

It follows from what has already been said that any breakdown of a marriage is the result of wrong behaviour on the part of one or both parties. God's intention is that both should continue to care for each other through thick and thin, and in any marriage breakdown the partners in a marriage are falling short of this ideal. We should avoid simplistically labelling the parties in a broken marriage as 'innocent' and 'guilty'; things are never that straightforward.

In the Old Testament the Hebrew word which modern versions translate 'divorce' literally means to 'send away'; or 'put out'. An example is the occasion when Noah sent the raven and dove out of the ark.

In the New Testament there are two words translated 'divorce': one means 'to send away'; as in Matthew 14:22, when Jesus sent the multitude away; the other means 'to leave', as in Matthew 4:20-22, when the disciples left their nets and ship.

Marriage Breakdown

In this section, therefore, the emphasis should be on the breakdown of the marriage, not the legal confirmation that it has happened.

Malachi 2:14-16 - God hates divorce - AV 'putting away'. This remains the fundamental position of the Almighty.

Jeremiah 3:6-14. Before you read this with the young people remind them that in the time of Jeremiah the northern kingdom of Israel had been exiled because of their idolatry (which God equates to prostitution and adultery), but the kingdom of Judah was still continuing in the south. Emphasise the following points:

- God had pleaded with Israel to return to him, despite her faithlessness - a model of the forgiveness which all husbands and wives should offer to each other (v 7).

- Because Israel had refused to return, God had put her away, literally; the people had been taken to Assyria (v 8).
- Even now, God was willing for Israel to return if she would repent (v 12,13).
- He still regarded Israel as his wife (v 14). For your own benefit, you may like in passing to note verse 1. Although the law forbade a wife to return to her first husband once he had divorced her and she had remarried (Deuteronomy 24:1-4), God was willing to have Israel back.

Divorce

There may be occasions where divorce, in the legal sense of the word, is little more than the formalisation of a situation which, de facto, already exists. In a situation where a husband and wife both agree that a marriage has terminally failed, the legal process of divorce may be seen as a necessary piece of tidying up, so that the two can in practice get on with their lives, living apart with separate finances. The law of Moses allowed, 'for the hardness of their hearts', that a 'Bill of Divorcement' be produced.

What has to be avoided is a situation where one party is using the law to hurt the other, or as a way of taking decisions that should be the result of discussion between them or the decision of the ecclesia. That is the subject of 1 Corinthians 6:1-8.

Is remarriage acceptable?

Matthew 19:3-9; (you may like to look at Matthew 5:31-32, which says the same). 'Fornication' (AV) or 'marital unfaithfulness' (NIV) is the only acceptable cause for divorce. The word (Greek porneia) means sexual sin in general. Where a married person is involved it includes adultery (compare Revelation 2:20-22, where the two terms 'fornication' and 'adultery' are used to describe the same sin).

Mark 10:4-12. The exception is not mentioned and God's ideal of the permanence of marriage is affirmed. This passage also confirms that the principles are the same for both husband and wife.

1 Corinthians 7:10-15. This passage emphasises the command that a believing husband and wife must not separate, but seems to say in verse 15 that a believer may remarry if deserted by an unbelieving spouse.

1 Corinthians 7:39. Remarriage 'in the Lord' is acceptable after the death of a partner.

What if it all goes wrong?

As mentioned in the 'Aim of Lesson' above, it is not part of this discussion to deal with the stance any ecclesia should take when cases of marriage breakdown have occurred. It is important, however, to deal with one point in all this: where an

individual stands in relation to God when the worst has happened and divorce and remarriage have occurred.

Suffice it to say that there is always a road back. It involves:

- Confession - realising one's sin and confessing it to God.
- Repentance - as far as possible, putting things right. If there are things wrong in one's life that can be put right, they should be. In the case of a broken marriage it is rarely possible to put the pieces together again, but that does not mean that nothing can be done.
- Forgiveness - as God forgave David his sin, he will also forgive ours.

As in the case of David, however, things will never be the same again. We can't expect that at the same time as God forgives the guilt of our sin he will necessarily remove the consequences.

Problems often arise regarding divorce and remarriage. This lesson is not the time to discuss specific cases, but it may be worth pointing out that God's ideals are consistent and we don't usually disagree on these things. The problems arise when ecclesias have to decide what to do when the ideals are not lived up to.

Relevance to our lives

Although you are unlikely to have any married students in your group, ask the young people in what way this subject is relevant to the way they live their lives now. The important thing is that these things feed back into the way we conduct our friendships now. So advice would be:

- Choose carefully in the first place.
- Recognise that the first commitment you make is before God. Marriage is not just an arrangement between the two of you.
- Realise that problems do arise in marriage but they can be overcome, and when you are thinking of marriage discuss the principles that should apply during a marriage.
- Build up a good relationship of love and trust and praying together, so that you are prepared to stand together.

Prayer

Psalm 51 (after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba). Read the verses aloud together. 'Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love, according to your great compassion, blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.' Amen.

Other suggestions for activities

You may like to discuss with the young people how we should behave, as individuals, towards people with broken marriages. What lessons can we learn from the way God treated people in Bible times?