

## WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE AT COMMON GROUND CHURCH

What exactly are Christ's standards with regard to divorce and remarriage? When is divorce and remarriage permissible? And when is it not? That is what this document is all about.

Over and above much conversation amongst the eldership of our church over the years, we want to thank Bethlehem Baptist Church, Journey Church, Mars Hill Church, and theologians Michael Eaton, Gordon Fee, Dallas Willard and John Stott for providing writings that shaped much of our own understanding and application of Christ's teaching - even if as a result we end up with an understanding that varies from some of theirs in some aspects.

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### **A. What's the big deal about marriage?**

Jesus answered, "But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."  
Matthew 19:6-9

What do we learn about the nature of marriage from these verses? Six things:

- 1) *Marriage is originally God's idea.* This is implied by "in the beginning". It's his institution, and therefore he's the one who has the authority to say both what it is, and how it is to work.
- 2) *Marriage is between a man and a woman,* where maleness and femaleness come together to complete the image of God (v6).
- 3) *Marriage creates a bond greater than even the blood-bond between parents and child.* This is why a man needs to leave his own parents (v7). It's a way of saying that one's own spouse should be more valuable and cherished than even one's parents or children.
- 4) *Marriage is the union of two people into one new entity.* This entity is more than a legal contract or partnership between two people. It's the deepest bonding humans can experience, so much so, that they are now together described as "one flesh" (v8), which is another way of saying "a

new human being”. Jesus hammers home this same point with his powerful words, “so they are no longer two but one”. Marriage is becoming one with another person, not just sexually, but also emotionally, spiritually, financially, in terms of identity and in other ways too. A contract can bring two people to a place of partnership, but only a covenant can bring two people to a place of oneness.

5) *Marriage is God joining a man and a woman (v9). God himself appears to be the “glue” that makes this one-flesh union.*

6) *Although humans can start a marriage, they are not free to end a marriage.* This is what Jesus means when he says, ‘Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.’ Marriage is a life-long commitment to a living spouse.

## **B. What’s the big deal about divorce?**

Since over half of adults nowadays have divorced parents, there is not much need to convince anyone of the untold devastation that divorce has brought to lives and society. Divorce is painful. It is emotionally more wrenching than the death of a spouse. A divorce is often long years in coming and long years in the settlement. The upheaval of lives is immeasurable. Very often, divorcees are haunted by a sense of failure, guilt and bitterness. Like the psalmist, night after night they fall asleep with tears. Work performance is hindered. People draw near or withdraw with uncertain feelings. Loneliness can be overwhelming. A sense of devastated future can be all consuming. Courtroom controversy compounds the personal misery.

And then there is often the agonizing place of children. Parents hope against hope that the scars will not cripple them or ruin their own marriages some day. Tensions over custody and financial support can deepen the wounds. Not forgetting the backwards-and-forwards lifestyle the children have no choice but to accept in joint custody situations.

But, over and above the emotional and circumstantial devastation caused, divorce is a big deal when held up next to the teachings about marriage in the Bible:

*Firstly, divorce is a big deal to Jesus because marriage is a living union of two people joined together by God. It is more than a mere contract before human witnesses, which at best can make two people close. It is rather a covenant before God, which has already made two people one. It is a covenant made before God (Prov 2:16-17) that makes two people ‘one flesh’ in God’s sight (Gen 2:23-25). As our marriages are meant to be a picture of Christ’s marriage to his imperfect bride, the church (Eph 5:23-25), one’s covenant to one’s spouse is not a conditional covenant dependant on the partner’s performance or commitment levels. Marriage, especially Christian marriage, is a promise of life-long commitment to a living spouse, regardless of the degree to which the other keeps their commitment. Marriage is a living union between two people. It is a union confirmed by God himself. That is why Jesus said, ‘What God joins together, let no one*

(not even the respective spouses) separate!’ It is for this reason that we see divorce as a kind of tragic amputation - a living union torn in two.

*Secondly, divorce is a big deal because marriage has been set apart by God to reflect the relationship between his Son and his bride the church (Eph 5:21-33). That’s why this bond is extraordinarily unique among all human bonds. Marriage is a human relationship ordained and instituted by God (Malachi 2:14-16). His original design was one man and one woman united by covenant and sexual union for life (Genesis 2:23-4). Marriage is also meant to symbolise the relationship God has between himself and his people (Eph 5:21-33; Isaiah 54:5; Hosea 2:14-23; Ezekiel 16; Jeremiah 3:20). God hates divorce because it hurts people and shatters the picture of his own covenant with the church.*

### **C. What are the biblical standards concerning divorce?**

- A believer and unbeliever should not marry (1 Cor. 7:39; 2 Cor. 6:14-15), but if they do, the believer should remain committed to the marriage (1 Cor 7:12-14).
- Biblically, divorce may be permitted when the other spouse 1) deserts the relationship because they are not a Christian (1 Cor 7:15) or 2) commits adultery (Matt 19:9). Though we have no Bible verse to directly support an addition to these two exceptions, we add another to this list that, in our view, so deeply devastates the marriage relationship that it can be beyond repair - namely, 3) dangerous, continuing abuse, that is legally and pastorally confirmed.
- Reconciliation between the two people is preferable to separation or divorce *even where adultery or abuse has occurred*. Of course this requires real repentance from the offending spouse and real forgiveness in the other. Think of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 18:21-22, "Then Peter came and said to Jesus, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?' Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.'" Serious efforts over a long period of time if need be, should be made toward reconciling the aggrieved partners, involving the leadership of the church, before the marriage can be allowed to be regarded as irreparably broken.
- Lesser reasons (other than abandonment by a non-Christian spouse, adultery and abuse) are not sufficient grounds for divorce. In Jesus’ analysis, the main reason people opt for divorce is ‘hardness of heart’ (Matt 19:8). ‘Hardness of heart’ can be defined as 1) an unwillingness to listen to God, and 2) an unwillingness to draw on the resources of grace that we so desperately need, and that He so willingly makes available. In a similar vein, in Malachi 2:14-16, divorce is spoken of as a result of not guarding one’s spirit (or heart) and of ‘breaking faith’: ‘ "I hate divorce," says the Lord... So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith.’ God calls the church to lovingly confront one another whenever hardness

of heart is evident. With this in mind, we will certainly not endorse a person's decision to divorce that has sprung from a hard heart. Over and above hardness of hearts, there is a further cultural factor that greatly increases the enticement to divorce. It is this: *the prevailing values of our culture tempt us to believe that marriage is primarily designed for our personal happiness*. But this is not entirely true. Rather, in a fallen world that Christ is at work in to redeem, marriage is designed for our spiritual growth. At the core of the devastating divorce rate we see all around us, is our society's prevailing, but flawed, pledge to *eudemonism*, a philosophy that places immediate happiness and fulfilment as the highest achievement of humanity. According to this philosophy, an action is morally right if it makes a person happy. God's ways are expected to agree with and serve this goal or be abandoned. Yet following Christ does not guarantee short-term fulfilment, only long-term growth in Christ-likeness, which will always flow over into long-term joy and eternal reward.

#### **D. What are the biblical standards concerning remarriage?**

- Since death breaks the marriage bond (Rom 7:2-3), remarriage is permissible for a believing widow or widower, provided the new marriage is with another believer (1 Cor 7:39).
- A previously divorced couple could be reconciled and remarried. Think how even after long periods of separation and alienation, reconciliation can happen, as when the people of God return to the Lord after periods of waywardness (Hosea 2:14-23).
- We believe that if the spouse who initiates divorce on unbiblical grounds remarries or remains unwilling to reconcile after a substantial length of time, the rejected spouse may be free to remarry another believer (Matthew 19:9). Certainly a period of restoration would be required before one were to remarry that would include such milestones as confessing all sin that contributed to the break-down of the previous marriage, an overcoming of these destructive habits and a considerable measure of personal healing. We also would want to remove any pressure to remarry by affirming the goodness and beauty of a life of singleness in God's service both before marriage and after marriage. It is commended in 1 Corinthians 7:7,11,32-35, and elevated by the examples of Jesus and Paul and hundreds of great single saints.
- The partner who caused the divorce through abandonment, adultery or abuse should repent and be reconciled to God and to their spouses (1 Corinthians 7:11; 1 John 1:9). If it is too late to reconcile, because their spouses have remarried, then they should remain single because they left their first marriage without biblical warrant. This call to life-long singleness may seem harsh, but Jesus is not ambivalent on the matter: 'I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.' (Matt

19:9) ‘Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery.’ (Mark 10:11-12) ‘Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.’ (Luke 16:18) Paul applies the teaching of Jesus when he says: ‘To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.’ (1 Cor 7:10-11).

- Last point being said, in some rare situations where we as elders have sufficiently discerned the restoring grace of God, we would endorse a remarriage of a person who failed their marriage some years or decades before. Let me devote the next section to this controversial subject...

#### **E. Jack’s situation and the teachings of Christ and Paul on remarriage**

Meet Jack. Jack got divorced many years ago, having contributed to the breakdown of his marriage through neglect, a pornography habit, and a general unloving and un-Christlike character toward his spouse. Since his divorce, he has pursued God and has embraced a long season of singleness. In this time, he has explored every possibility of reconciliation, but this has proved impossible. He has involved himself in the life of the church, and has deeply owned up to his foolishness, weaknesses and the sins that contributed to his failed marriage. He also has experienced some significant healing and spiritual growth. Many of his Christian friends have noticed a greater consistency of Christlike character, including a greater ability to love others. And in the last year, he has met a fellow-believer whom he has fallen in love with. She reciprocates his love. Jack believes this to be God’s second chance at marriage - a chance to get it right this time. He comes to us as elders and says, ‘If you would agree, I would love to marry this person. Please speak into our relationship and help us prepare for a marriage that pleases Christ and lasts for life.’

The question is, ‘Would we as elders consider remarrying them?’ The answer is, ‘Though we’d be reluctant, we would explore the situation prayerfully and thoroughly, and would seriously consider the possibility - especially considering the many extenuating factors.’

At this point, you might feel we have contradicted the above quoted teaching of Scriptures, which clearly appear to reject the possibility of a person who caused their marriage to divorce to ever get remarried. So, how is it that we would dare consider remarrying this kind of person?

To be honest, the answer is that we can’t be sure that the Scriptures do permit this at all, but we have come to believe that there are contextual

reasons that suggest that the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels, and the single verse by Paul on this matter, do not directly address the situation described here. Here is an explanation:

*Firstly, the situation behind Jesus' teaching*

'I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.' (Matt 19:9)

We need to understand the specific context that Jesus was addressing in his teaching here. Jesus addresses a situation happening in ancient Israel, whereby a man would divorce his wife for any reason, give her a legal document permitting her to remarry. Rationalising that since all was legal, all was right, he would then promptly find her replacement (assuming he hadn't found her already). When we consider this context we understand Jesus' teaching to be saying, 'Do not think just because you've legally terminated a contract that all is fine. There is more than an earthly contract here. This is a covenant before God, and a covenant that God was involved in. You can't just dispose of someone. It's wrong. And remarrying someone off the back of it is nothing short of adultery, even if the law doesn't call it that.' *So here's the point we make: Jack's situation is something very different to the situation Jesus was addressing here.*

*Second, the situation behind Paul's teaching*

'To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife. (1 Cor 7:10-11)

Notice how Paul here is emphatically addressing some women in the Corinthian church. Notice how he seems to mention the husband only as an afterthought. Why is this? Gordon Fee, in his commentary of 1 Corinthians, says that one key to understanding the teaching of 1 Corinthians 7 (and 1 Corinthians 6, 11 and 14 for that matter) is to realise that it addresses an unusual situation that had arisen in the Corinthian church. Many women in the church believed that since they were saved, things such as sex and marriage were not spiritual, so they simply refrained from sex and walked out on their husbands - as though sex and marriage were the 'unspiritual old order' that they'd been saved out of. Of course, as Paul would argue throughout this letter, they were totally wrong. Sex and marriage were part of God's original creation, and if anything, they were being redeemed not rejected by Christ. Having said that, we now understand what Paul is saying here: 'Wives, don't think you can walk out on your husbands. Remember the teaching of the Lord Jesus on the matter! If you already have walked out on him, be reconciled to him if at all possible. But don't think this is an opportunity to remarry someone else. It's not.' *Again: Jack's situation is something very different to the situation Paul was addressing here.*

If Jesus' and Paul's teaching on remarriage don't directly speak to Jack's situation, then what in the Scriptures does? The answer is the entire message of the Bible, which is the Gospel. We believe that the essence of the Gospel is that sinners get forgiven, that no sin (including divorce) is unforgivable, and that God is able to restore what is broken. The Gospel wonderfully presents to us the God of the second chance. This does not minimise the horrid realities of sin and the devastating realities of brokenness that result from sin. But it does mean that it is God's grace, not any sin, not even the sin of adultery or divorce, that have the last word on the matter. 'Sin doesn't have a chance in competition with the aggressive forgiveness we call grace. When it's sin versus grace, grace wins hands down' (Romans 5:20, The Message).

#### **F. Some further pastoral comments on divorce and remarriage**

- What happens if a person remarries against the clear teaching of the Bible? Are we to declare this marriage illegitimate? The answer is that we will affirm that the marriage is valid - a covenant is a covenant and must be kept. However, whenever we do anything against the will of God, we always come off second best. Obedience, not disobedience, is the way of God's highest blessing in our lives. And God is committed to dealing with any hardness of heart in our lives until there is sufficient humility and repentance.
- We believe it is the responsibility of every believer to be very diligent and teachable with regards to spousal selection, pre-marriage preparation, and constant marriage enrichment. Impulsiveness in spousal selection, or a refusal to seek counsel in this regard, signal great danger. We also believe that it is the responsibility of the church to do all we can to support people in these matters. By doing this, we're convinced that the divorce rate will significantly reduce. Since marriage is sacred it deserves to be entered into very carefully and nurtured with great priority.
- The number one deterrent to divorce is not making a vow never to get divorced, but rather a heart after God. For example, think about the first chapter of Christ's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5), where Christ forbids divorce (in verse 32). A simple reflection on the teaching shows that if we were to take his teaching seriously in verse 1-30, divorce would be totally unlikely. Chrysostom, an early church father, commented on this passage: "He that is meek, and a peacemaker, and poor in spirit, and merciful (Matthew 5:3-11), how shall he cast out his wife?" In other words, a person who takes Christ's leadership seriously, and drinks of Christ's transforming grace and wisdom, is very unlikely to get divorced. In the old order, people got divorced because their hearts were hard (Matthew 19:8), but in the new order we can remain tender-hearted toward each other. As we are poor in heart toward God (Matthew 5:3), as we eliminate anger, contempt and insult from our lives (v21-22), as we cherish, guard and restore

relationships (v23-26), and as we pursue sexual purity (v27-30), we also set up our marriages to succeed! The point is that divorce is often symptomatic of a heart that has drifted from God. The best thing one can do to avoid ever being in danger of divorce, is to daily seek first Christ and his kingdom, and everything else (including an ability to stick in marriage) will be added.

- Christians are people who trust in Jesus Christ as Saviour and as Lord. As such, we have the privilege and responsibility of living by the teachings of Christ. God's plan is that, in a church, we hold each other accountable to these non-negotiable standards. When one of God's children chooses to ignore or disobey one of Christ's clear standards - especially in a way that damages another and/or the witness of Christ - it is the responsibility of fellow-believers and shepherd-leaders to lovingly call that person to repentance. If, sadly, they refuse to repent, and choose to go on sinning, Scripture commands us to put them under various levels of church discipline, which are all designed to lovingly bring an unrepentant person to repentance. Many people mistakenly think that loving care is incompatible with confrontation—that the tenderness of Jesus and the toughness of his demands can't both be love. But surely this is not right. Jesus was an extraordinarily caring person. This did not make him less confrontational. For example, his teaching on divorce and remarriage was firm: "What God has joined together let no man separate" (Mark 10:9). We believe Christ's firm and loving confrontation is a form of caring, far more so than leaving a person to sin unchallenged - causing untold pain down the line.
- This document represents our first draft on the matter. We are open to revising it if we believe we have failed in any way to serve God's people, and to affirm the clear teachings of Scripture. We are aware that some divorced people may feel really wounded by some of the things mentioned in this document. Of course, we don't want to cause pain, but rather freedom in the people we lead. We urge you not to be defensive. We are not seeking to hurt anyone. We believe the most loving thing we can do is to simply offer people the truth, even if that truth hurts in some ways. If you have divorced or remarried another illegitimately, it is too late to do anything about it, so instead of defending yourself, own up to your failure, and drink of Christ's mercy and grace. 'If we confess our sins, God is faithful and will forgive us and cleanse us of all unrighteousness' (1 John 1:9). This 'unrighteousness' includes illegitimate divorce and remarriage, both of which are not unforgivable sins. And if you are now married (despite Christ's teaching that you should not have remarried), then receive this partner as a gift from God, and love them as Christ insists you do. In dependence on Christ, make this marriage work - let it become an icon of grace in your own life. Remember, 'Where sin increases, God's grace increases all the more' (Romans 5:20).