

Divorce and Remarriage

Marriage was created by God for the display of His glory and for the joy of His creatures. Through this gift, we are called to consider not only God's covenantal love, but also His incredible patience and unconditional mercy toward His beloved. Because marriage was designed to portray God's goodness and fidelity, marital discord, division, and divorce obscures and corrupts the image of God painted within the world. In other words, marital strife fails to glorify God. Since the pursuit of the glory of God is the chief end of all things, divisions in marriage are very sober and serious problems with implications and consequences far outside ourselves.

The image of marriage as it relates to the glory of God is particularly vivid and explicit in the fifth chapter of Ephesians which parallels the relationship between husband and wife to that between Christ and the Church. Just as marriage is intended to point us to God, so we are able to look at the relationship between Christ and His bride to better understand our roles as husbands and wives. Our call within the sacred institution of marriage is to reflect the gospel: a gospel of forgiveness, longsuffering, unconditional grace, compassion, covenant and humility. Failure to display these virtues corrupts the very essence of our calling and distorts the picture of the gospel which marriage is intended to portray.

The labor of trusting and displaying the gospel in our marriages is an exceedingly difficult task because of sin. In the beginning, man and woman lived in rhythmic harmony with each other and the Lord. However, as creatures rebelled against the Creator, they were subjected to disharmony with Him, as well as with each other.¹ This conflict within the sacred union of man and woman continues even today and will do so until creation itself is set free from its bondage.² The Scriptures declare that the source of quarrels and fights, whether marital or otherwise, is directly related to sinful desires within each party.³ Sin is our enemy in

¹ Genesis 3:16

² Romans 8:19-23

³ James 4:1 What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?

the fight for unity and peace within all relationships.

Given that divorce springs directly from the sin of at least one party and that it fails to properly reflect God's character, it is clearly never the best option. However, what is not absolutely clear within the Scriptures is whether or not, and in what circumstances, it might be permissible. Complete agreement does not exist within the evangelical church or even amongst our own elders and pastors as to the exact application of the Scriptures which deal with this issue. That being the case, The Village Church has a general boundary of beliefs on this topic which no counseling or teaching will exceed. Certain pastors and elders might have more restrictive or conservative convictions, but none will go beyond these parameters.

The Hope of Reconciliation:

Before discussing possible situations which might allow for divorce and eventual remarriage, it is first necessary to explicitly state the conviction that the hopeful resolution to all marital strife is reconciliation. Repentance and reconciliation is always the best option. Even if divorce is possible in some instances, patiently working through the process of reconciliation in the context of a community of believers is always preferable.

As sin is the root issue in all strife, marital or otherwise, our greatest problem is not first and foremost the marital conflict itself, but rather one or both party's rebellion against God. Unless one has responded to Him in the gospel by faith and repentance, attempts to reconcile marital or other relationships will never get to the root and will therefore only treat symptoms. Praise God that He has initiated reconciliation⁴ with us through the person and work of His beloved Son. This is how the Scriptures speak of this reconciliation: 2 Corinthians 5:17-6:1 "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ

⁴ The meaning of reconciliation is derived from the word for "exchange." The idea is that God has taken the initiative to exchange hostility for peace.

reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them...”

The foundation for a healthy marriage is a right relationship with God, a relationship that will only come as we embrace the gospel of the love, mercy, forgiveness, grace and humility displayed in the person and work of Jesus Christ, Who died for our sins to reconcile us to God.⁵ For this reason, we want to be faithful to preach Christ and not merely healthy marriages. The rationale for forgiveness, humility, grace and patience with a spouse is the Christian’s desire to be like Christ. Failure to patiently forgive and extend grace thus reflects an unwillingness to be conformed to the image of Christ, which is the ultimate hope of God’s children.⁶

In light of Christ’s reconciliatory work toward us, we have been given the task of reconciliation within the world. This is the application of Paul’s words in the second half of the 2 Corinthians passage: “...and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.”

As ambassadors entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation, our urgent plea is for souls to be reconciled to God and to each other. Within the body of Christ, we not only have the right, but also the responsibility to call our brothers and sisters to holy and God-honoring obedience to His commands of marital fidelity and unity. Though the work of reconciliation may not be easy, it is certainly worth any cost to see God glorified and His children walking in the light.

Grounds for Divorce:

Though once again stressing that divorce is not the best option, there are texts which would imply that it is sometimes permissible after all attempts at reconciliation have been exhausted. The two grounds upon which the Scriptures would possibly grant such

5 1 Peter 3:18

6 See Romans 8:28-30

release are sexual immorality and desertion by an unbeliever. Here are the pertinent texts:

- Matthew 5:31-32 It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.
- 1 Corinthians 7:15 But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace.

In Matthew 5:31-32 Jesus seems to make a concession for divorce in the case of “sexual immorality.” This term in the Greek is very broad and would include such things as adultery, homosexuality, incest, and bestiality. In the case of adultery, the offended spouse is encouraged to engage their husband or wife with the gospel and offer forgiveness and restoration (though it might be a slow process), but ultimately they may have freedom to be released from the marriage.

In 1 Corinthians 7:12-15 Paul discusses the case of a marriage between believer and unbeliever. In such an instance, the overarching command is clear; the believer should not divorce the unbeliever who is willing to remain married. However, if the unbelieving spouse does desert the marriage, the believer is therefore free.

In the case of unrepentant and continued abuse, the abused is encouraged to immediately separate and is also expected to inform The Village Church who will attempt to engage both the abuser and the abused with the gospel in hopes of repentance and reconciliation. If such does not occur, the elders may deem the abuser an unbelieving spouse according to the tenets of Matthew 18:17 and allow for divorce on the basis of the spiritual desertion caused by the abuse.

In all other issues of marital difficulty and division, the command of the Lord is clear, divorce is not to be pursued (1 Corinthians 7:10). If a member of The Village Church pursues divorce on any non-biblical ground, they will be engaged by the pastors and elders of the church and called to repentance and reconciliation.⁷

7 It is important here to note that divorce and remarriage within a member’s past life will not in itself bring about church discipline. Rather, we are speaking of present instances of pursuing divorce or remarriage.

If one is currently considering divorce (or if his or her spouse is considering divorce) for any reason whatsoever or if one is currently divorced and is considering remarriage, he or she is expected to immediately inform The Village Church for biblical counsel regarding the process of reconciliation.

The Possibility of Remarriage:

As with the interpretation of the texts on permissible grounds for divorce, there is not complete unanimity on the possibility of remarriage. However, in instances involving one who was divorced on the grounds of sexual immorality or desertion by an unbeliever, remarriage will be considered acceptable within The Village Church. In addition, some pastors and elders may feel freedom to remarry one who was divorced before conversion on the grounds that such a person is a new creation in Christ.

For all divorces which have occurred for reasons other than sexual immorality or desertion, the expectation for both parties is to pursue reconciliation. Until such time as reconciliation with the former spouse occurs, both spouses are to remain unmarried as indicated in 1 Corinthians 7:11.

Conclusion:

The Church has not always given very wise counsel regarding divorce. At times it has been too loosely allowed or even encouraged while at other times it has been weighted down with the stigma of some unforgivable sin. Both of these extremes are unfortunate. Though divorce is tragic and costly, the cross of Christ is sufficient to cover all sin and thus we plead His blood for our hope. Whether you have been divorced or are currently going through a divorce, we would hope to encourage you to repentance and the pursuit of reconciliation if possible, while resting confidently in the love of the Father for those whom He calls to Himself.

The Scriptures are not given to merely weigh us down with God's rules, but are rather intended to lead us into the joys of God's intended order. Though forgiveness and reconciliation are never really easy, they honestly bring about the greatest satisfaction in the end. We are a people who have been called by grace and mercy and thus called to extend grace and mercy to others. Let us do so with glad hearts confident that He who calls us to obey Him will equip us to do so.