

A Pastoral White Paper on Biblical Marriage Riverwood Community Chapel

Purpose Statement: This Pastoral White Paper is offered to present Riverwood's understanding of marriage from a biblical perspective. It is our hope that it encourages clear biblical and theological understandings as well as promotes healthy and vibrant marriages. We call this a *Pastoral White Paper on Biblical Marriage* realizing there are two types of marriage: "legal/civil marriage" which is sanctioned and regulated by the state, and "sacramental marriage" which is defined and regulated by communities of faith who use the Bible as their authority.

Definition and Purposes of Biblical Marriage: Marriage was established by God as a life-long covenantal union between one man and one woman. The primary purposes of marriage include: 1) complementary companionship, 2) a context for the cultural mandate to be fruitful and multiply, and 3) as a spiritual illustration of the triune Godhead and the relationship between Jesus and the Church.

Established by God

The first two chapters of Genesis give two complementary accounts of creation; the climax of each is the creation of humans. In the first account men and women are described as being created in the image of God (*cf.* Gen 1:27) and then given the mandate to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and care for it (*cf.* Gen 1:28). Genesis 2 gives a more detailed account of the creation of a man and subsequently a woman as his companion. Here we see the biblical norm for the covenant of marriage: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24, ESV).

The account in Genesis does not explicitly define this as marriage, however it does establish the biblical norm for the covenant relationship between one man and one woman, and soon after this relationship is called a marriage.

Primary Purposes of Marriage

Within the context of these creation accounts we see three pragmatic purposes for marriage. The first is complementary companionship. God created men and women and gave each to the other for mutual companionship (*cf.* Gen 2:20b-25). Marriage is also the context God designed for what is called the "cultural mandate." After creating them, God gave them a mandate, a task: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Gen 1:28). The couple were commanded to create what would ultimately become culture; that is,

beginning with the family unit, the call was to build society. Included in this is the command to multiply, marriage is the context God designed for reproduction.

Beyond these pragmatic purposes, marriage also serves as a mystical/spiritual model for the relationship between Jesus and the church. This is found in the New Testament epistles (*cf.* Eph. 5) as it relates to the relationship of husbands and wives to each other and in *Revelation* as a metaphor for the future eternal relationship between the Godhead and believers. Therefore, when a biblical marriage is on display it represents more than just a relationship between two people. When two people keep this covenant they are demonstrating the relationship that Jesus Christ has and promises with his church, a beautiful picture of love, sacrifice, and commitment.

Adding to the spiritual significance of marriage, the biblical injunction that two people become one flesh serves as a faint echo of the mystery of the Trinity itself. Just as each member of the Godhead remains eternally distinct and separate, yet form one God, a couple remains separate and distinct persons yet now form “one flesh.”

A Life-long Covenantal Union

Promises and covenants are important, and when God established a covenant with his people it was always taken seriously and seen as binding and permanent. The biblical expectation is that marriage will be a life-long commitment. It is in this context that marriage is referred to as a covenant.

At Riverwood, we go to great lengths to assure that those in, or planning to enter into, this covenant realize its joys as well as its great responsibilities. Our preaching, teaching, and policies have in mind that those who enter into this covenant see it is a life-long journey of two imperfect people in a perfectly designed institution.

Within marriage, men are called to “love [their] wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word” (Eph. 5:25-26). Women are given a call of their own, to “submit to [their] own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands” (Eph. 5:22-24). This is the design of the Designer. Husbands are to love their wives and provide sacrificial servant leadership, protection, and provision for his wife’s needs that mirror Christ’s sacrificial love for his church. For wives, the challenge is to affirm and submit to her husband’s leadership, helping to carry it through according to her own gifts.

This is the biblical design that can be pursued, but never fully attained. Therefore, as Christ followers we are to be quick to practice forgiveness. Our role model for forgiveness is that which was extended to us through Jesus Christ's sacrifice on the cross. God has forgiven us, so we too need to be men and women, husbands and wives, of forgiveness. As a church we want to foster a spirit of forgiveness, restoration, and repair of marriages. These are the expectations and biblical norms for marriage. The reality of life, however, is that even though there is a perfect design, too often we deviate from it.

Divorce

Divorce is the breaking of the permanence of marriage and is a deviation from the biblical norm. Scripturally, we believe divorce is allowed as a consequence of unremitting sexual immorality (Matt. 5:31-32). Through the Law, God regulated allowable divorce to protect the sanctity of marriage from "indecency" which defiled the marital relationship; to protect the woman from a husband who might simply send her away without any cause; and to document her status as a legitimately divorced woman so that she was not thought to be a "harlot" or a runaway adulteress. Though permitted in some cases, God hates divorce because it tears apart what should have been a permanent union (*cf.* Mal. 2:13-16). Furthermore, Jesus taught that a divorced person commits adultery when they remarry unless their divorce was based on biblical grounds (*cf.* Matt. 5:31-32).

When a divorce has occurred it will be the practice of Riverwood Community Chapel to encourage restoration and reconciliation and provide encouragement with learning and growing opportunities toward that end. According to Scripture there are two primary biblical options for those who are divorced; remain unmarried or be reconciled (*cf.* 1 Cor. 7:10-11).

Remarriage

Although the emphasis of our ministries is the restoration and reconciliation of those who have experienced divorce, there are circumstances when remarriage is biblically permissible, such as: the marriage bond was violated through sinful sexual activities to such a degree that the union has been torn apart - *e.g.* adultery (*cf.* Matt. 19:8-9); when reconciliation is impossible due to the death or remarriage of the spouse (*cf.* 1 Cor. 7:39); or when a believer has been divorced by an unbelieving spouse (*cf.* 1 Cor. 7:15).

While we promote what God has instituted and designed, we also recognize that sinful human nature corrupts God's intentions for marriage. As a church we will walk with those who are struggling, helping as we can to strengthen marriages. For those

who have experienced divorce we will challenge any sinful behavior that led to their divorce, while offering love and support toward emotional and spiritual healing.

Between One Man and One Woman

We have delineated our understanding of the biblical norm regarding marriage as a life-long covenantal union. We have also acknowledged and addressed the issue of divorce and remarriage which is a deviation from the “life-long” aspect of this design - a deviation that is, even among Christians, all too common. In this section we briefly address the biblical norm of marriage as a “union between one man and one woman.” As well, we touch on a deviation from this biblical norm; homosexuality and the related issue of same-sex marriage.

It is not within the scope of this paper to present a biblical argument on homosexual acts as sin and same-sex marriage as a deviation from the biblical norm. We are familiar with the relevant texts from both the Old and New Testaments. We are familiar with the historical positions of orthodox Christianity as it has been understood through the ages. We are familiar with the issues related to Bible translation, Jesus’ silence on the matter, and the cultures in which the Scriptures were written. We are familiar with the more current arguments and interpretations that attempt to reconcile the biblical prohibitions against homosexuality with its practice. The conclusion of the matter is that the arguments and interpretations which promote the acceptance of homosexual acts, even within committed and/or covenantal same-sex relationships, fail to make their case. Therefore, it is our position that the Bible declares all sexual relationships between same-sex partners to be sin, even those within state-sanctioned relationships.

There are, however, all manner of biblical parameters related to sexual behavior that are to be considered sin when violated (*e.g.* fornication, adultery, lust).

Homosexuality is another in that list. It is not a special class of sin. The homosexual is not an especially offensive class of sinner. Nor is it a sin that is more offensive to God than other sins. In every instance that homosexuality is mentioned as a sin in the Bible, it is done so within a greater list of sins, the likes of which include idolatry, greed, disrespect of parents, and slander. Therefore, our attitudes and reactions toward homosexuality (and more importantly, toward homosexuals) should be that of grace. Or, to put it another way, we should view and treat the homosexual in the same manner we would the greedy or the gossip. It is also important to remember that the orientation toward homosexual desires is, in and of itself, not sin.

The Christian and Culture

As vastly different as the world’s cultures are, marriage is a nearly universal phenomenon. Equally universal is the existence of the two types of marriage;

sacramental marriage (that which is performed and ordained by a religious structure and ceremony) and legal/civil marriage (that which is regulated by a governmental agency).

The topic of this white paper has been sacramental marriage based on the design, limitations, and expectations found in the Bible. As the church addresses issues related to marriage we are under the obligation of the Scriptures. When the state defines and regulates legal/civil marriage it is under no such obligation to the biblical text. The state is free to define and regulate marriage as it sees fit and it is no surprise that its definitions and regulations depart from the Bible. Such departures from the Bible include historical prohibitions against interracial marriage, and current common law marriage, easy no-fault divorce, and same-sex marriage.

When speaking of marriage, the two types are routinely blurred with little thought of their distinction. This distinction between sacramental marriage and legal/civil marriage is another expression of the relationship between church and state. As we live as Christians under the authority of a state, it should come as no surprise that the state behaves in ways that we find offensive. Whether these offenses are related to areas such as economic policies, foreign policies, use of the military, or social policies such as marriage, it is our duty as citizens of the state, and even more so as citizens of heaven, to be salt and light to our culture.

We are salt in the sense we exercise our rights to prod the state and its members to higher standards in all areas. We are light as we exemplify and live out those higher standards as our normal way of life. Our aim as citizens should be to live good lives among our unbelieving neighbors. Then even if they accuse us of doing wrong, they will see our honorable behavior, and they will give honor to God (*cf.* 1 Peter 2:12).