

Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage

The purpose of this document is to communicate Woodland Park Baptist Church's position on marriage, divorce and remarriage and our understanding of the relevant Scriptural passages.

Synopsis

- God designed marriage. It is not the creation of culture.
- God hates divorce. It violates His original intention for marriage and family.
- Divorce and remarriage are allowed, but not commanded in two circumstances.
 - In the case of fornication.
 - In the case of desertion by an unbelieving spouse.
- In cases of fornication God allows divorce, but His desire is for repentance and reconciliation.
- Lust and mental adultery involving pornography, although clearly sinful, do not constitute Biblical grounds for divorce and remarriage.
- A divorce does not necessarily disqualify a person from being in a ministry leadership position. A church member pursuing an unbiblical divorce, either the divorcer or the divorcee, may be subject to the ministry of church restoration as described in Matthew 18:15-17.

Explanation

From where does marriage originate? Marriage was originated by God. It is His creation, His idea, and His design. Because it is not the creation of culture or society, it cannot be arbitrarily redefined by public opinion. In the Book of Genesis, as God created day after day, everything was declared good except one thing: It was not good for the man to be alone. He needed a companion—someone to complete him. Genesis 2:20-22 tells us: "...For Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. And the Lord God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man and the Lord brought her to the man." God has also given us clear instruction through Scripture on how marriage ought to be. "After the Lord brought the woman to the man Adam said, 'This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: She shall be called woman, because she was taken out of man.' For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:23-24). The Scriptures clearly identify marriage as between one man and one woman. Jesus reiterated this distinction as well: "And He answered and said, 'Have you not read that He who

created *them* from the beginning MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE’, and said, ‘FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.” The Bible defines marriage as a permanent, life-long union between one genetic man and one genetic woman. It is not merely a civil union or contract between two individuals, but is a covenant a man and woman make between themselves and God. It is God, not society, who joins the two together.

Why should we follow God’s design for marriage? Marriage serves a larger purpose than simply the comfort and fulfillment of two individuals. Scripture teaches that God created marriage to serve as an earthly picture of the permanent relationship between Christ and the Church. After quoting the Old Testament foundation of marriage, the Apostle Paul writes, “This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church.” Just as the wife chooses to submit to her husband as the leader in the relationship, the church is called to submit to Christ as her head.

What is God’s attitude toward divorce? Clearly it is not desirable. “*God hates divorce*” (*Malachi 2:16*). While Scripture permits divorce under certain circumstances, all consideration of the subject begins at the heart of God. Jesus said, “...*what therefore God has joined together, let no man separate*” (*Matthew 19:6*). Marriage was originated by God. It was His idea, his design. The estate of marriage holds His favor. It is significant that Jesus’ first miracle was performed at a wedding. Marriage holds importance to God as a tangible, visible picture of the mystical union between Christ and the Church (*Eph. 5:32*). Divorce distorts a God-given picture for understanding our relationship to Him. Another reason God hates divorce is that it destroys the fundamental building block of society, the family. A divorce is the death of a miniature civilization. When parents divorce, all family traditions change (many of them die) and if there are children, they too must help pay the price for the choices of the parents. God has designed the home at the center of His plan for passing Biblical truth from generation to generation (*Deuteronomy 6:1-9*). Divorce interrupts this design. While this does not mean that divorce cannot ever be God’s will, it must be recognized that it is not His design or desire.

Who has the right to initiate a divorce? The Bible lists one legitimate reason for a believer initiating a divorce: *fornication*. Fornication would be any unlawful sexual intercourse as laid out in the Levitical code which would include adultery, marriage of near relatives, incest, polygamy, homosexuality, and bestiality; (see *Leviticus 18*, *Matthew 5:32, 19:7-9*). In addressing fornication, it is important to clarify, that while mental adultery is still sin, it is not the same as completing the act and does not

constitute Biblical grounds for divorce. The Levitical code clearly has the action in view, not the thought. That *porneia* requires the sexual act, is supported by an etymological study of the New Testament use of the word (see Zodhiates, What About Divorce?, pg 130-136). A second legitimate Biblical divorce which would carry the freedom to remarry is *desertion by an unbelieving spouse*, a spouse who is not a believer initiates the divorce, (see 1 Corinthians 7:12-16). In addressing desertion, the emphasis must be placed on a lack of oneness because of faith, **and** a refusal to live together initiated by the unbelieving spouse. While God allows divorce and remarriage in both of these circumstances, He does not command it. The Scriptures encourage forgiveness as illustrated in Hosea 1-3 where the adulterous wife is forgiven and restored. God sometimes allows divorce as a concession because of “*your hardness of heart*” (Matthew 19:8). God recognizes that in order for a marriage to succeed you need two people who are willing to die to self and walk with Him, but in order for a marriage to fail all you need is one person with a hardened heart. This hardness of heart may be expressed by an unfaithful partner who refuses to repent of their sin and acknowledge God’s will and way. It may also be expressed by a faithful partner who, because of pride, refuses to forgive the unfaithful partner who has violated the marriage vow even though they may now be predictably repentant. Finally, the point should also be made that avoiding divorce alone isn’t God’s aim. His design is for the family to be an expression of His love, grace and mercy as Christ rules in the heart of each member, especially in the example set by the husband (father) and wife (mother). Even if a couple chooses not to divorce, there often remain unholy attitudes and actions which severely damage the fabric of the marriage. Children pay an extremely high price in this climate as they can internalize a life message contrary to God’s intended will for them.

Does lust and mental adultery of a partner give the right to initiate a divorce?

In Matthew 5:27-32 Jesus raises two points. First, He reframes the concept of adultery. Instead of limiting the standard of holiness to actions, He states, “...*everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*” Second, he reframes the concept of “approved” divorce. Instead of permitting divorce for any reason, He limits initiating a divorce to cases of adultery. To rightly interpret both passages, the context must be understood. These are two of six examples He gives to redefine holiness as a matter of the heart, not just externals. It is dangerous to take these verses out of their larger context. Lust and adultery are both sin, and in one sense, all sin is equal. One sin makes us guilty. Every sin put Christ on the cross. Every sin is forgivable except rejecting Christ’s forgiveness. However, all sin is not equal in terms of consequences. If one equates lust with adultery in terms of the consequences, then consistent treatment of Scripture means that anger should be equated with murder (Matthew 5:21-22). To argue that lust gives the same freedom to divorce as adultery means you must say that anger should receive the jail term of an

actual murder. This interpretation is just as wrong as the flaw Jesus corrects from Moses' day of making it too easy for people to initiate a divorce for trivial reasons. We need to call lust a sin. But we need to be careful of redefining the standards of permissible divorce. The phrase Jesus uses that the unbiblical divorcer “*makes* [his wife] *commit adultery*,” should be clarified. This is a passive verb, indicating the wife here is not an adulterer. She is guilty of an unintentional transgression. It is wrong, but not the same as intentional (presumptuous) sin. Now, although lust may not lead to a behavior which permits divorce, lust unchecked by repentance is damaging to the marriage relationship.

Does the Greek word *porneia* include pornography? In Matthew 5, the Greek word translated “unchastity” (NASB) or “fornication” (KJV) or “immorality” (ESV) is *porneia* which is also related to one of the etymological roots of the English word, “pornography.” This has led some to incorrectly assume that the two words are synonymous. While there is a relationship between the words, they are not synonyms. The English term “pornography” is a compound of two Greek roots: *porne* (meaning prostitute, hence the connection with *porneia*, to fornicate) and *grapho* (meaning “to write”). In other words, pornography literally means to write about *porne* or *porneia*, not to commit such an act. If Jesus wanted to say “pornography” the Greek term would be *pornographien* (not found in the Bible). To equate *porneia* with pornography because of the relationship with one of the roots is sort of like saying since “butterfly” includes the word “fly”, a butterfly and a fly are the same thing. This misinterpretation is easily cleared up when the comparison is made between pornography and the English translation of *porneia* – fornication or immorality. An English reader would not think pornography and fornication mean the same thing. In clarifying what is and isn't behavior which Biblically permits divorce, it is equally important to recognize the relational costs of the sin of pornography. Pornography is an affair of the mind. It is degrading to the mate and contrary to the marriage covenant. When viewed by a child, it is destructive to his/her emotional health and sexual innocence. Pornography leads to a skewed sense of God's design for sexuality.

What are the Biblical grounds for remarriage? While there are only two Biblically legitimate reasons for initiating a divorce, it must be recognized that remarriage is a separate issue with separate parameters. The first definition is fairly straight-forward. When the divorce was for Biblical grounds then there is the freedom to remarry. But when the divorce was not for Biblical reasons, then a distinction must be drawn between the divorcer and the divorcee. The divorcer is the one who initiates the divorce and/or gives whole-hearted support to dissolving the marriage. The divorcee is the one on the receiving end – one who is committed to making the marriage work and resists the pursuit of divorce. A spouse who initiates an unbiblical divorce is sinning in the eyes of God. Second, it must be recognized that if a spouse is not the

initiator of the divorce, and there are not Biblical grounds for divorce then they should resist the divorce and pursue reconciliation. If they do not, then they can be just as guilty as the one who begins divorce proceedings. Third, it must be recognized that one who does not initiate an unbiblical divorce, but instead, resists this and pursues reconciliation, is a divorcee and has not sinned.

Consider the focus of Jesus' quoting from the Old Testament in Mat 5:31: (NASB) *"And it was said, 'WHOEVER SENDS HIS WIFE AWAY, LET HIM GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE.'"* The whole focus of this is on taking care of the one being divorced. She is to be given a certificate of divorce so that remarriage is possible (Deuteronomy 24:2). Some would argue that Jesus said in Matthew 5:32 (NASB), *"But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery."* It is of central importance that the focus is on the sin of the divorcer, not the sin of the divorcee. Of greater importance, the phrase, *"makes her commit adultery"* is passive in the Greek. It is impossible to sin passively, so this sin is not imputed to the divorcee. The focus is not on any sin that the divorcee has committed. The focus is on the sin of the divorcer.

Does a divorcer's sin dictate that his or her victim may never remarry? The apostle Paul addresses the subject of remarriage in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 (NASB) *"But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband (but if she does leave, let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not send his wife away."* This particular instruction really revolves around the issue of separation, not divorce. If believers separate (presumably without Biblical grounds for divorce), they are to reconcile or remain unmarried. They are not free to become a divorcer. This does not address the issue of a divorcee, one who is the unwilling victim of the divorcer's sin.

Can a divorcee remarry? The apostle Paul says yes. In 1 Corinthians 7:27-28 (NASB) he writes, *"Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you should marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin should marry, she has not sinned. Yet such will have trouble in this life, and I am trying to spare you."* In verse 26 Paul refers to *"this present distress,"* indicating that his advice about sparing them trouble had an immediate historic application. Notice to whom this is addressed: the one who is *"released"* from their mate. The word *"released"* in the Greek is perfect indicative passive. In other words, it speaks of one who is in a state of having been released by another; not one who has released themselves. Finally we have a text that directly relates to the one who is a divorcee. The key statement Paul makes is this: *"But if you should marry, you have not sinned."* We believe the innocent victim of an unbiblical divorce does have the right to remarry.

What about one divorced on non-Biblical grounds who is now repentant? If one initiated a divorce without Biblical justification, they have sinned and must repent of that sin. Restitution is necessary, which means that reconciliation should be pursued. If the divorcer has remarried, they are not required to divorce their second mate to remarry the first. This would add sin to sin. If the divorcee has remarried, then the repentant divorcer is free to marry since reconciliation is no longer possible. In either of those cases, the divorcer should pursue forgiveness. If neither has married, then reconciliation should be pursued. Additionally we would like to offer this caution. Although every believer rejoices to see a heart truly broken and contrite before God and man, 2 Corinthians 7:9-10 points out a difference between Godly repentance and worldly sorrow. A couple seeking reconciliation after the sin of fornication, or remarriage after an unbiblical divorce should seek Godly counsel to spiritually evaluate that true repentance is present. Genuine repentance is characterized by lasting change produced by the Spirit of God, not simply a temporary change driven by embarrassment over being exposed or caught in the sin.

What about someone considering divorce? First, one must recognize the seriousness of such a choice, and look long and hard at the consequences of this action both on the marriage partners' relationship and their testimony, and on any children of this union. Second, reconciliation and forgiveness should be the priority pursuit since divorce is never a requirement, but a concession. Third, if this is determined to be impossible, there must be an affirming of the Biblical grounds of such a divorce. If Biblical grounds clearly exist the divorce may be pursued. If not, this action of pursuing an unbiblical divorce must be repented of, or else the divorcer will be in sin and subject themselves to the ministry of church restoration.

What about separation? The Bible does permit separation, but this does not carry with it the right to remarry. First Corinthians 7:10-11 states, (NASB) *"But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband (but if she does leave, let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband)."* In some situations this may be necessary after marital unfaithfulness to allow time for healing. We also believe separation may be warranted in situations of emotional, verbal, and sexual abuse to preserve the sanctity of the marriage covenant or protect the children from unrepentant continual sin on the offending party or parties. Separation should not be interpreted as a first step towards divorce. When warranted, it is done so for the purpose of protecting family members. In many places separation can be secured legally if necessary. A legal separation, if granted by the courts, provides certain protections under the law, while preserving the legal status of the marriage. One should seek to balance legal counsel and Biblical counsel when considering this action.

What about one who was divorced before salvation? Salvation means that one begins a new life. They are a new creature in Christ. The apostle Paul's counsel in 1 Corinthians 7:20, 27 is that a believer is to recognize their state at salvation as being from God. If they are married they should remain so. If they are divorced, they are free to be remarried to another who is a believer (1 Corinthians 7:39, 2 Corinthians 6:14).

What about the Divorced pursuing ministry leadership responsibilities? The church is responsible before God to uphold the Biblical standards of church leadership. In cases where there has been a divorce in a person's past, the church is obligated by God to restrict this person's involvement in leadership until they have demonstrated that the present marriage exemplifies Christ's relationship to His church. First Timothy 3:2, 12 establishes the marital requirements for leaders in the church. The phrase, "*the husband of one wife*" does not require that there be no divorce in the past, for then it would also disqualify the widower who has remarried. None of the other qualifications listed refer to the past, but rather, to qualities that presently are characteristic of his life. It should be taken to mean that he is to be a "one-woman man," a model of marital faithfulness. This requires that adequate time has passed to establish a proven track record.

What is the process of church discipline and restoration?

If a member is in a state of sin (any sin) and is unwilling to repent the Bible gives a clear path to restoring a right relationship with God. The church offers an application guide which provides specific details of the process for this difficult but often effective demonstration of God's love. Don't hesitate to contact any of our Elders or Pastors if you need further information. The steps of this process are detailed by Christ in Matthew 18:15-17.

In Conclusion...

This document could never address all of the pain and complexities associated with marital discord and sin. Our desire is to communicate clearly our understanding of the heart of God from the Word of God. Please contact any of our Elders or Pastors to assist if further discussion or clarification is needed.

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