



Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage

A position paper submitted by the Elders of Genesis Church

Marriage is God's idea. He gave marriage as a gift to us as humans, as a way to display His glory and give joy to His creatures. While sin has corrupted God's perfect plan, the fact remains that from the beginning to the end of the Holy Scriptures, God's plan is for one man and one woman to become one flesh for one lifetime. God's people are to see marriage as a covenant relationship designed by God and intended to be done under His purposes. Yet, we live in a culture that has amazing confusion in marriage, and where even the church has often been unclear as to the Biblical principles. As a church, it is our deepest desire to honor God and conform life to the Scriptures. We believe that God's instructions will always produce the best, even if the path is the most difficult. And we believe that the Gospel applies to every area of life, producing faith, repentance, and obedience in the lives of those who know Jesus as their Lord and Savior. The purpose of this position paper from the Elders is to give clarity to our position on marriage and divorce, and provide direction as to how we would counsel people in a myriad of life situations. While every situation is different, if we are not careful we will let the situation and our emotions dictate the direction rather than being moved by the principles from Scripture. So, while we want to always be moved by compassion, and realize that God's grace applies to every situation, we also want to let our beliefs and practice be driven by the Scriptures and obey God's direction. The following explains what we believe the Scriptures clearly say on this topic, and therefore the Elders will follow these principles in our interaction with this very difficult issue.

Within our culture a massive shift has been taking place over the past few decades, as traditional marriage and the nuclear family have been losing their importance. The impact of this has been felt in the American church. In the past few years some studies have shown that the divorce rate among those who call themselves Christian in our country is actually a bit higher than the divorce rate of those who are not believers.¹ While there are some factors that skew those numbers (the most significant being that non-believers often live together without ever getting married), the truth remains that marriage is hard and way too often the God ordained relationship dissolves. And as in Jesus' time, the church struggles to maintain a balance between adhering to Jesus'

¹<http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/15-familykids/42-new-marriage-and-divorce-statistics-released> (accessed July 12, 2011)

words and those of the rest of Scripture and offering grace to those who have sinned and been hurt.

What makes this topic difficult is that we as followers of Jesus must maintain a balance between holding the truth and doing it with grace. But we must make sure that we do not try to soften Jesus on this, and his words are direct. “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” (Mark 10:9). Jesus goes on to say that whoever divorces his wife or husband and marries another commits adultery against him or her. God’s plan has always been for one man and one woman become one flesh for one lifetime. And Jesus’ words here and in other passages are clear, it is sinful to divorce without Biblical cause and remarriage is an act of adultery. So for us to get a handle on this, we must first recognize the reason God gave this relationship.

What is the purpose for marriage?

Before examining the relationship between a man and a woman, the study of marriage must first begin with the God who gave this institution to the first two people. The Bible presents a God who is one God existing in three persons eternally existing in the context of relationship within the Godhead. God is one, yet existing as three persons, God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. Each person within the Trinity is equal in essence, but there is also submission by the Son to the Father and by the Holy Spirit to the Son for the purpose of mission. The “oneness” of the Trinity is both the foundation and the model for all human relationships, especially marriage. God is communal and relational. He created people in His image and designed them to live in relationship with God, but also with other people. And then He gave marriage, bringing two people into a relationship where they would become “one flesh.”² In the marriage relationship God gave us a human relationship where we can experience the depth of relationship God has within the Trinity, as two people (plus kids) function as a family to the glory of God.

From the account of the first marriage between Adam and Eve, the Bible presents a consistent picture that marriage is given by God for several reasons. There is so much more at stake in marriage than two people in love. God is showing something about himself to the world through our marriages. So here are three key reasons for marriage.

- **What it provides** – As humans created in the image of God, we are created for deep relationship and community. First, we are created for relationship with God himself. But God also formed us to enjoy and experience intimacy in human relationship as well. Marriage is the most significant and most intimate of those relationships. In marriage, God literally provides another person through whom we experience the love of God and the Gospel. Like God, we give ourselves freely and unconditionally to another person, and we receive the beauty of being loved unconditionally from that person. Sin has

²Genesis 2:24.

messed this up, but it is still God's plan.³

- **What it produces** – Malachi 2:15 explains that God gave the covenant of marriage with a goal in mind, to produce godly offspring. In other words, God is creating a people for His glory and mission, and one of the primary ways He develops this plan is through your kids. The context of this passage is a Divine rebuke to the people of God for their failure to honor the covenant men made with their wives as they quickly entered into divorce. God warns them that the outcome of hardened hearts and broken marriages can and will be devastating, not just for them personally, but also for the nation as a whole. God's purpose is to create a people who live out the Gospel in a world that does not believe. The process of having kids growing up in a home where mom and dad love each other and live out the Gospel is a path to this outcome. Godly marriages produce Jesus-loving kids. While this is not a formula, it generally is true.
- **What it pictures** – Throughout Ephesians 5, Paul appeals to married couples to fulfill certain roles,⁴ but as he does this he appeals to them that marriage is really a snapshot of something much greater. It is an earthly, tangible picture of God's love for His people, the church of Jesus Christ. When a man and woman live in the covenant relationship of marriage in love with each other there is an image of God's beautiful love for His church as displayed in Christ. Women's submission to their husbands images the church's devotion to Jesus. A husband's sacrificial love for his wife is designed to be a tangible demonstration of Jesus' sacrificial and dying love for His Bride, the church. Divorce is discouraged so strongly because God would never leave His people, no matter how far they may stray.⁵

³The Bible continually refers back to the first marriage in Genesis 2:18-25 as a model, but also as the outlining of the purpose for marriage. In Genesis 3, the sin of Adam and Eve bring sin into the world, skewing these purposes and leading us to the mess we are in. But the purpose in creation stands, and remains God's ultimate purpose. This is exactly what Jesus appeals to in Mark 10, "From the creation..."

⁴See Ephesians 5:22-33. As a church, we hold a position called Biblical Complementarianism which is the belief that men and women are created equal as image-bearers of God, but with God-given differences that also relate to roles they are called to fulfill in the home and church. For more information, see the book *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* edited by Wayne Grudem and John Piper.

⁵Read the first two chapters of the Old Testament book of Hosea to see this demonstrated in the Scriptures.

For these and other reasons, the Bible holds marriage very high and has clear words about divorce, for the most part forbidding Christians to divorce and remarriage. Marriage is a God-given place for us to both experience and live out the Gospel. This means the people of God should do marriage differently than the world. That being said, sinfulness and hardness of heart often leads to deep marital struggles and problems. The culture, and often those in the church point to divorce as an easy solution. Generally, this is not God's best. Rather, if following the teaching of Scripture, the counsel of church leaders in most situations should be to seek reconciliation with your spouse. Yet, the Bible does give a few situations that allow for the end of a marriage and the opportunity for remarriage.

The first hope - reconciliation

Before exploring specific Biblical grounds for divorce, we need to begin by stating the conviction that the hopeful end to all marital strife is reconciliation. Repentance and reconciliation is the best option, and often demonstrates the grace and mercy of God in beautiful ways. Sin is the root of all strife, and the goal of any sin-marred relationship is the reality that God came Himself to pay the price for our reconciliation with Himself.⁶ The answer to all sin begins with reconciliation with God, which leads us to renewal and reconciliation with each other. Sometimes divorce will happen, but even in these situations the Gospel call is for believers in Jesus to seek repentance, reconciliation, and renewal. It is always our encouragement to take things slowly when a marriage is struggling, and to pursue every option to seek reconciliation rather than divorce. In the case where there are not Biblical grounds, Scripture forbids those who follow Jesus from initiating a divorce or from remarrying (and by implication entering into another relationship) until either reconciliation has happened, or the spouse remarries or dies.

What are legitimate reasons for ending a marriage?

- **The death of a spouse** – while this may seem obvious, some cultures do not allow people to remarry after the death of a spouse. But the Bible teaches that marriage is binding as long as both are alive. (1 Corinthians 7:39, Romans 7:2-4)
- **Adultery** – The Bible does permit a Christian spouse to leave a marriage when sexual sin is involved, but also presents the possibility that the best option would be to display the Gospel through forgiveness to a spouse who has failed. The Biblical words for adultery cover a wide range of sexual activity that constitutes a violation of the covenant relationship. This is a deep, difficult issue and our encouragement to anyone who has been sinned against is to lean into Jesus, trust Him, and proceed carefully. (Matthew 5:32, 19:9, Mark 10:10-12)

⁶2 Corinthians 5:11-21.

- **Abandonment of a believing spouse by an unbelieving spouse** – In 1 Corinthians 7:12-16 Paul is addressing people who have become believers in Jesus after they were married but the spouse did not follow their Christian path. For these people, their first allegiance and love is Christ, and the commission is to obey Him. Sometimes this will cause incredible conflict in the marriage. Paul’s instruction is for the believing spouse to stay in the marriage and display the Gospel, which will have a beautiful impact on the children, and potentially could be the path of salvation for the spouse. But if the unbelieving spouse leaves, the believer is released from the marriage.
- **There are no other legitimate reasons** – “Irreconcilable differences” does not constitute a biblical reason for dissolving a God-ordained covenant relationship. There are a myriad of reasons people may choose to separate, but in all except the three previous exceptions, the Biblical call is for people to move toward being one man, one woman, one flesh, for one lifetime. This may take counseling, hard work, and deep self-sacrifice. But that is a good thing and demonstrates the Gospel and grace.

The big question that often arises is, “What about abuse?” First, any type of physical, sexual, emotional, spiritual, or verbal abuse is sinful violence and should never be tolerated among the people of God. Of course, we would never expect a person to stay in a situation where they or their children are being harmed. The church should and must get involved to protect the innocent in these situations. But the primary goal for the long-term is to help people get healthy and find reconciliation and forgiveness. This may require a period of separation, counseling, and a “no tolerance of future harm” agreement with a great deal of accountability. While Scripture does not submit abuse as a legitimate grounds for divorce, a spouse who is abusive, refuses to get help, and is unrepentant can breach the covenant in such a way that they effectively act as an unbeliever who abandons his or her spouse (#3 above). For one going through this, the encouragement is to get counsel from the Elders and allow their pastoral leaders to search the Scriptures and the direction from God together with them.

What if my Christian spouse insists on divorcing me?

We take the instructions on marriage very seriously, so when divorce happens within our church the Elders will always seek to bring reconciliation and restoration. If a Christian and member of Genesis Church initiates divorce without Biblical grounds, the Elders will initiate church discipline, seeking to mediate and lead both members to repentance and reconciliation. But if reconciliation is not obtainable because of the hardness of heart of one or both of the people, the church discipline will continue to the ends as outlines in Matthew 18 and I Corinthians 5. Specifically, this means that the Elders will begin by sending one person to the offending party,

asking for a meeting with the spouse and a path toward reconciliation. If the person responds favorably, the Elders will help the couple with a path toward health and restoration. If the person refuses, the next step is to send a couple people. If this does not work, the situation is brought before the entire church (at a Member's Meeting) and the church will be asked to treat the individual as an unbeliever. The goal of church discipline is always repentance and restoration, but discipline also provides justice and protection for an offended person who is truly seeking to honor Christ in his or her life. In this case, each spouse is expected to remain unmarried and celibate until such time that the other spouse repents and returns, remarries, or dies, keeping the door open for reconciliation and the application of the Gospel. We do understand that there are legal implications here, and that in a divorce a person must protect themselves and their children. But even with this, we believe the path a Christian should take should always be full of grace and allowing the greatest possibility for reconciliation.

What if I married the wrong person?

Often people will ask if divorce is wrong when they truly believe they married a person that was not God's best for them. This may be because of feelings of incompatibility between spouses, religious and philosophical differences, or feelings of regret. Whatever the reason people may have, the Scriptures speak clearly to this. Mark 10:9 declares, "What God has joined together, let not man separate." What this passage, and multiple others like it indicate is that there is a mystery in marriage, and when a man and woman enter a marital relationship, make a covenant together, and consummate the covenant sexually, God also affirms this as a one-flesh relationship which He has joined together. Therefore, a Christian married person must know that God's will is for them to live out the implications of the Gospel and love the person with whom they are married, this is God's "right" person for them. To do this, the married person should search the Scriptures and follow the guidance given therein, and live life for God's glory. He or she should also understand that God's desire is to conform His children into the image of His Son Jesus, working all things for our good,⁷ Marriage is one of the paths God uses to accomplish our sanctification, which happens as we obey God and the principles from the Scriptures.

Can I remarry after going through a divorce?

In the case where one of the Biblical grounds for divorce has taken place, we believe the Scriptures allow the follower of Jesus the freedom to consider remarriage. While there is some difference of opinion on this among Christians, the Elders of Genesis would be willing to counsel and perform a marriage when a divorced has happened in these situations.

On the other hand, when a divorce has happened for any other reason, we believe the counsel of Scripture is for the people who have been divorced to remain unmarried, leaving the door for

⁷Romans 8:28-30

reconciliation open until such a time when the spouse repents, remarries, or dies. The instruction for the offending person is that they are never to remarry.⁸

Do the Elders of Genesis honor cohabitation as marriage?

We hold that any sexual relationship that does not fall within a covenant marriage is sinful and not God's best. It is deceitful not to get married for the purpose of receiving financial aid from the government. Choosing to live together in order to avoid other obligations available to married people without entering into a marital relationship both dishonors God and seeks to circumvent both the theological and civil purposes of marriage while experiencing the benefits. We would urge such a couple to separate for a season until the time where they can enter a covenant marriage relationship where they can honor God and obey civil authorities. We would also encourage people to wrestle deeply with the Gospel and work through the implications of repentance as a couple as they move toward marriage.

What if I was divorced (and remarried) before I became a Christian?

Though marriage is a blessing given to all humanity and is to be honored as a binding covenant even when entered into before being in Christ, it is understood that the non-Christian is ignorant of God's decrees and expectations. Therefore, a non-Christian cannot be bound by the same expectations governing a Christian. The atonement Jesus achieved by His blood is sufficient to pay the penalty of previous sin. Therefore, that person would be eligible to remarry a Christian, but only after every effort is made to restore the previous marriage through a reconciliation process. Once a person has been remarried the instructions on marriage apply to the marriage one is currently in, and therefore, we would not condone an effort to dissolve one marriage in order to make a previous one right. Yet, the effort to seek forgiveness and reconciliation still applies, as a believer in Jesus should live out the principles of the Gospel in any broken relationship.

What if I have been divorced and remarried without grounds for the divorce?

First of all, the reality of the Gospel is that the atoning death of Jesus covers all sin, provides forgiveness, and the hope of restoration. How beautiful the grace of Jesus that makes our lives new even when brokenness abounds. Therefore, as with all sin in our past, the key is to wrestle deeply with the Gospel, to figure out what repentance looks like, and to find a new beginning in Christ. In this situation it would mean that you start with your life as it is today. This would mean, first of all, that God's desire is for you to spend the rest of your life with your current

⁸I Corinthians 7:10-11 - "To the married I give this charge (not I but the Lord); the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife."

spouse, and to live for the glory of God with him or her. If a previous divorce is part of your story, your current marriage will be that much more difficult. Seek counsel when necessary, and stay in the marriage. Second, forgiveness and reconciliation do need to happen with the previous spouse. This includes being gracious with their faults and asking them to forgive you for yours. If kids are involved this is all the more important. The key here is that we have been forgiven by Christ, and the call of the Gospel is to see the forgiveness and grace translated to others.⁹

Conclusion

So a final thought here, specifically about how the church should respond to divorce and remarriage. First of all, we should respond to this like any other sin. We should be very clear about the truth, and when necessary exercise church discipline when a person is willfully rebellious and unrepentant. If a person is committing adultery or choosing to leave a spouse who is honoring God, we as believers need to be abundantly clear that this is not God's will and deal lovingly but firmly with the person who is sinning, calling for their repentance and restoration. Jesus is clear, when a person divorces without Biblical grounds and chooses to remarry, that act is adultery and is sinful. So we must stand for the truth of Scripture clearly. Yet, on the other hand, when a couple has divorced and remarriage has taken place, the call is for us to treat this as any other sin, offer forgiveness, redemption, and hope. Divorce is never God's plan, we ought to discourage it, and help people move toward God's best. But we also must realize that life is often painful and hard, and the deep answer to all of our sin is the grace of Jesus provided through the cross. Striking balance here is a real challenge, but we MUST seek to find that place.

Primary texts concerning divorce and remarriage

Genesis 1:26-28

Genesis 2:18, 23-25

Exodus 20:14; Deuteronomy 5:18

Exodus 20:17

Deuteronomy 24:1-4

Malachi 2:14-17

Matthew 5:27-32

Matthew 19:3-12

Mark 10:2-12

Luke 16:18

Romans 7:1-4

1 Corinthians 7:1-40

Ephesians 5:21-31

1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9

1 Timothy 5:8,14

1 Peter 3:1-7

⁹Colossians 3:13, Matthew 18:21-22, Matthew 6:14-16, Romans 12:14. Ephesians 4:32