

DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

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Grace Covenant Church, Austin, Texas

The subject of divorce and remarriage is one of the major subjects for debate in the evangelical church today. Scripture is not absolutely clear in answering the questions that arise concerning the issues, which is why the debate is so common. While we all desire certainty in our beliefs, we do not always have that luxury. Therefore, in such matters, we must ascertain what we believe to be the weight of evidence and make our decision, based not on certainty, but on what we believe to be the weight of evidence.

SUMMARY STATEMENT

Certain positions are easily agreed upon:

1. God's overall plan for people includes marriage. His ideal for marriage is one man and one woman for life. (Genesis 2:18-25, Mark 10:9, 1 Corinthians 7:2-5).
2. God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16).
3. What God joined together, He commanded men not to separate (Matthew 19:4-6).
4. Because of the hardness of man's heart, divorce has always been a reality (Matthew 19:8), and provision appears to exist for divorce in the Scripture.
 - a. Moses, in Deuteronomy 24:1-4, while not condoning divorce, recognized it and regulated it for the sake of protecting the innocent party.
 - b. God, Himself, divorced Israel because of her spiritual adultery and fornication, after taking her as His wife (Jeremiah 2:2, Jeremiah 3:8, Jeremiah 2:20, Ezekiel 16:8, Ezekiel 23:17-19, Ezekiel 23:29, Hosea 2:2, Hosea 2:13).
 - c. While Jesus' words do not encourage divorce, He seems to have allowed for divorce in the case of an unrepentant, fornicating partner, though it appears as an option, not a command (Matthew 19:9).
 - d. Paul seems to have allowed for divorce in the case of an unbeliever permanently deserting a believer (1 Corinthians 7:13-15).
 - e. In the case of those who have been divorced on these grounds, Scripture does not explicitly indicate whether or not they are eligible for remarriage. Any conclusion on this subject is a matter of extrapolation from indirect evidence.

However, the weight of evidence from the exception clause in Matthew 19:9 and of the phrase "is not bound" in 1 Corinthians 7:27-28 seem to suggest that remarriage is an option.
 - f. In the case of those who, after having become a Christian, initiate a divorce on grounds other than fornication or desertion, remarriage is not an option.

- g. For those divorced before becoming a Christian, that restriction, in the church's opinion, does not apply.

The variables produced by sin are virtually infinite, and it would be virtually impossible to construct a policy statement that would cover all possible divorce and/or remarriage situations in which a person might find himself. In cases that go beyond the definition of this statement, wisdom, prayer, and godly counsel must be used as the basis for making decisions.

Grace Covenant Church wants to emphasize the value of bringing healing to those who have been divorced. We want to extend to them all the forgiveness, restoration and freedom that is afforded them in the Scripture. Compassion and acceptance are qualities we want to portray to all who have experienced the upheaval of divorce.

At the same time, we want to stress our commitment to the Scriptural ideal of "one man and one woman for life." In the case of couples who are separated, or who are divorced but neither party has remarried, reconciliation is the priority goal.

It is our prayer that by healing weak relationships and nurturing strong ones, we can foster the ideal of strong families in the ministry of our church.

References:

(The following books are a suggested list on the subject which may be consulted for further study. These books offer the entire spectrum of perspectives on the divorce/remarriage issue.)

Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage, Jay Adams
The Divorce Myth, Carl Laney
The Family, John MacArthur (the last two chapters)
Divorce and Remarriage in the Church, Stanley Ellisen
Divorce and Remarriage, Guy Duty
Divorce, John Murray
Meant to Last, Paul E. Steele and Charles Ryrice

EXPANDED STATEMENT

The Biblical Ideal of Marriage

- la. Marriage is a sacred institution ordained by God. In Genesis 2:18, the Lord God said, "It is not good for man to be alone; I will make a helper suitable for him." And Genesis 2:24, "For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother and shall cleave to his wife and the two shall become one flesh." Eph. 5 presents the close spiritual union between Christ and the church and demonstrates that the husband and wife relationship is to be a picture of the relationship between Christ and the church.
- lb. Biblical standards of marriage are experiencing severe erosion in today's society. Therefore the church today must do everything in its power to encourage the institution of marriage and to do so on God-given grounds. Therefore in setting forth this policy statement, Grace Covenant Church endeavors to say but to be careful not to go beyond what Scripture says. There are of necessity some decisions which must be made about

which there is room for responsible disagreement. When these decisions are made, Grace Covenant will endeavor to express wisdom and compassion.

Marriage

- 2a. God instituted marriage as an honorable estate (Heb. 13:4) for the blessing of companionship (Gen. 2:18) and as a continuation of the Divine Work of creation in the history of the human race (Gen. 4:1). Marriage is not a requirement for perfection of personhood, nor is it a necessity for fulfillment in God's highest purpose. Marriage may, in fact, hamper a person's unconditional readiness for the call of God. There are those who are given the ability to refrain from marriage (Matt. 19:12, I Cor. 7:7).
- 2b. God intended marriage to be a monogamous (one man, one woman) lifelong union as clearly implied in Genesis 2:24, "For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh". Jesus recalled this original order of creation to overthrow the lax interpretation and practice of the Mosaic Law (Mark 10:6-9). Although polygamy was sometimes practiced in Old Testament times, the Bible makes clear that God intended marriage to exist between one man and one woman for as long as both of them would remain alive. Rom. 7:2, "For the woman which hath a husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband." Note also I Cor. 7:39.
- 2c. The strict and lofty terms with which the marriage bond is described in the New Testament has its primary focus on human fellowship and the family. The example for all Christian marital love is the love of Christ for the church (Eph. 5:31-33). Marriage is bound together by a mutual covenant. It is a solemn agreement entered into before God and man (Mal. 2:14). Ezekiel 16:8 used marriage to illustrate the relationship between God and Israel and speaks of this relationship as a covenant entered into through the swearing of mutual oaths or pledges. Jesus, in John 2:1-11, sanctioned by His presence a marriage being recognized and solemnized by a public celebration. Therefore, men and women should enter marriage with a legal agreement and pledged vows. Marriage is essentially a spiritual agreement which two Christians make with one another before God and therefore the ceremony should reflect the solemnity and spiritual nature of this agreement. Living together does not constitute a marriage. The new Testament calls this fornication (I Cor 6:9, 18). In Second Corinthians 12:19-21 the apostle Paul warns the Corinthian church that the impenitence of those who committed sexual immorality would necessitate his intervention.
- 2d. Marriage is both a physical and spiritual union. It is designed to be a unity of flesh and spirit and represents the wholeness of that unity. Genesis 2:24, "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife; and they shall be one flesh." Matt. 1:24-25, "Joseph ...took unto him his wife, and knew her not till she had brought forth her first born son..."
- 2e. A Christian should not marry a person who does not know Christ as personal Savior. Second Corinthians 6:14 is explicit, "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers." First Corinthians 7:39b suggests the same standard; widows who remarry are told to do so "only in the Lord." Love for Christ is never to have second place. (Matt. 6:33). Neither should a Christian marry a person who is not living in faithful obedience to Christ. Many Christian marriages fail because one partner is living in faithful obedience to Christ and another is not.
- 2f. In no case ought any person to enter into a "marriage" with a person of the same sex. Homosexual unions are specifically forbidden and are described in Scripture as

manifestations of the basest forms of sinful conduct. It degrades human dignity and desecrates God's creational design (see Lev. 20:13; Rom. 1:26-27, 32; I Cor. 6:9).

Divorce

- 3a. Divorce is a departure from the purposes of God. While in the Old Testament divorce was allowed and was apparently easily secured, this was contrary to God's highest intentions. Jesus explained that provisions for divorce in the Old Testament were an accommodation to "the hardness" of people's hearts (Matt. 19:8). The prophet Malachi declared, "For I hate divorce, says the Lord the God of Israel" (2:16, RSV). Jesus said, "What therefore God hath joined together, let no man put asunder" (Matt. 19:6; see also Mark 10:6-9).
- 3b. While divorce is always contrary to God's intentions, there are certain circumstances when it is permitted. Jesus said in Matthew 5:32 and 18:9 that a person is not to divorce his mate except for the cause of fornication. The above two passages which permit divorce are not negated by Mark 10:2-10 and Luke 16:18 passages which leave it out, since "All scripture is given by inspiration of God" (2 Tim. 3:16). The Greek word used for "fornication" refers to habitual sexual immorality for which the synonym "whoredom" may be used implying all kinds of immorality, including adultery, which desecrates the marriage relationship -- a view generally accepted by Greek scholars. A believer cannot consider divorce as a reason to marry someone else. When one partner of a marriage has become involved in adultery, the offended mate is permitted though not required to get a divorce. It is the very character of our Christian faith to work through such situations with love, forgiveness, and the power of God's Spirit.
- 3c. If an unsaved husband or wife refuses to continue to live with his or her mate, who is a Christian, and deserts,* or in some way forces or creates a separation, the believer may agree to this separation: "But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart... A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases." (I Cor. 7:15). Such separation may result in divorce, and in that event the Christian is guilty of no wrong.

(Desertion is defined as the deliberate, physical permanent departure of the spouse. Involuntary separation such as imprisonment, or commitment to a mental or health institution (temporarily or permanently) does not constitute desertion.)

Remarriage

- 4a. The information in the Bible is not complete enough to remove all doubt about the divorced person's right to remarry. Nevertheless the traditional Protestant interpretation is that the weight of evidence leans in the direction of allowing remarriage in the case where there was a proper Biblical divorce. Remarriage is permitted for the innocent party when the divorce was on Biblical grounds. In cases where divorce was obtained between believers on non-Biblical grounds the person who remarries first commits adultery (Matt. 19:9) and the person who marries a person who was divorced on non-biblical grounds also commits adultery (Luke 16:18). According to the Old Testament pattern, remarriage was allowed after the divorce (see Deut. 24:1-4 for an exception). The New Testament also seems to allow for remarriage when the divorce was based upon Biblical grounds (I Cor. 7:15). In instances when divorce was not for the two reasons stated above, the believer is exhorted to (1) seek for reconciliation or else (2) remain unmarried (I Cor 7:10-11). When one party remarries after a divorce which was on non-biblical grounds that person has committed adultery because God did not recognize the validity of the divorce (Matt 5:32 and Mark 10:11). Since the remarried partner has committed adultery, the marriage bond is now broken and the remaining partner is free to remarry.

- 4b. When an adulterous relationship has brought about a divorce, only the party who is innocent of adultery has a right to remarry. The words of Jesus, "Whosoever shall put away his wife, except for the cause of fornication, and marries another" implies the right of remarriage. When He adds, "And whosoever shall marry her that is divorced (the guilty party) committeth adultery: (Matt. 5:31-32), the right to marry anyone guilty of adultery is denied; to marry anyone who obtained divorce for the express purpose of remarriage is also forbidden. (Mark 10:11-12).
- 4c. I Cor. 7:1-11 states that believers are to remain married. However, if they separate they are not to divorce but rather to remain separate or be reconciled. Should one party commit adultery that opens the door for the possibility of the other party remarrying. That would be the case only when all reasonable attempts to encourage repentance and reconciliation have failed.
- 4d. In I Cor. 7:15 if a Christian is deserted by a non-believer the passage seems to suggest that the Christian is free to remarry (I Cor. 7:27-28).
- 4e. Remarriage is never commanded and is permitted only in limited cases. Divorced persons who have scriptural grounds for remarriage should be exceedingly cautious before remarrying. It is not likely that any marriage failure is entirely the other person's fault. Therefore the innocent persons seeking to remarry should have received adequate counsel and allowed sufficient time to pass for spiritual growth to ensure that any significant contributions to the original marriage failure would not be carried into the new marriage.
- 4f. Concerning remarriage when the person was divorced prior to becoming a Christian, again the scriptures do not answer this question so completely as to remove all questions. Nevertheless the traditional Protestant position is that when a person becomes a Christian he becomes a new creation (II Cor. 5:17). The believer is responsible to live up to what God has revealed about marriage and divorce from the point of his or her salvation. This suggests then that that person is free to remarry in the Lord. Regarding this and the other issues which are not completely clear by the information we have in scripture, George Peters lays down the principle in his booklet "Divorce and Remarriage" (Moody Press) that each man must then be persuaded in his own mind as to whether not these possibilities are allowed.

Service

- 5a. A believer who has been divorced and remarried on Biblical grounds is welcome for fellowship and service at Grace Covenant Church. A person who has been divorced on non-scriptural grounds is eligible for fellowship, membership and service, assuming he or she reflects genuine repentance.
- 5b. The one area of limitation for either person would be serving as an elder, deacon, or pastor. Again it is not completely clear that the qualifications for elder in I Tim. 3 and Titus 1 limit an elder to someone who has never been divorced. However that possibility is resident in that list of qualifications, therefore the more cautious position is held by this church.
- 5c. This in no way suggests that sins concerning the divorce are not forgiven. Nor does it suggest any lessened potential for spiritual fellowship or general ministry in the church. Nevertheless the qualification for an elder in I Tim. 3 and Titus 1 appear to be qualifications which are more restrictive than those qualifications necessary for general fellowship and service.

