

Sacredness of Marriage and Sexual Relationships

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Marriage has long been a foundational covenant of our Judeo-Christian heritage and a significant part of our American cultural tradition. However, the traditional definition of marriage as a spiritual and physical lifelong commitment between a man and a woman has become a debated issue. As a result of a social shift, the Church is being pressed to accept an alternative definition of marriage.

This paper represents the view of the Elders and Pastors of Grace Covenant Church on the topics of marriage, sexual relationships, divorce and remarriage. The following six perspectives may help as you read this paper.

1. Our first and primary focus is to look at what God’s Word, the Bible, says about these topics. Our church’s value is to love the Lord, our God, and glorify Him by obeying His instruction to us. We firmly believe His Word has final authority in all matters to which it speaks. We believe that God speaks clearly and consistently on these topics despite shifts in cultural norms and values. So, it is incumbent upon us to understand His perspective and align with it.
2. The Bible sets the standard for faith and practices. It sets a high standard for righteous living for those who seek to follow God. Therefore, you, as the reader of this paper and we, as the writers, are compelled to ask, “Who can live up to these standards?” The correct answer is none of us. Our falling short can invoke a feeling of fear, shame and guilt. The righteousness of God’s standard should drive us toward the love and grace offered through Jesus Christ, the Savior.
3. Jesus came to demonstrate God’s love for people who have rejected or fallen short of His standard. Therefore, as followers of Christ, we, too, are to love those who have rejected God and His standards. We submit the thoughts of this paper, not in judgment of those that disagree with us, but as those who fall short of these same standards and who put their hope and trust in Jesus to forgive our sin and extend grace which is not deserved.
4. Our response to God and His instruction goes in one of two directions: to reject it or to accept the forgiveness and grace found in Jesus. To reject the standards God sets doesn’t free us from the guilt, shame or condemnation we experience. The hope of the Gospel and the love of God sets us free from guilt, shame and condemnation.
5. Our church is made up of those who are seeking to follow Christ yet continually fail to live according to His will for our lives. We are all in need of mercy, grace, forgiveness and reconciling fellowship. We have all fallen short of meeting God’s best desire for our lives. Therefore, our hearts’ intent is to receive those who come to Grace with compassion, love and kindness. We encourage every person at Grace to pursue the Lord wholeheartedly and follow His commands and instructions while remaining under His love, truth and grace.

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Sacredness of Marriage:

Marriage is a human institution established and defined by God in Scripture as a unique, holy bond of one man and one woman for their shared lifetime (Genesis 2:18-25; Mark 10:9; 1 Corinthians 7:2-5). Note: All references to man, woman, male or female throughout this paper are based on the genetic distinction of a male and a female, not to any self-concept of a person's own gender identity.

Also, before addressing the concept of marriage, it is important to remember that the biblical instruction on marriage does not imply that marriage is for everyone or that being single is inferior to marriage. God calls some people to singleness for a season or a lifetime (Matthew 19:10-12; 1 Corinthians 7:6-8). Singleness is therefore viewed as a gift from God and should be embraced as such.

Marriage is unique in its origin and purpose.

1. Marriage is introduced in the first book of the Bible, Genesis. Moses, under God's inspiration, describes the origin of all creation, the uniqueness of mankind and events in the Garden of Eden. It is in this context that the institution of marriage is established by God for mankind. Since the roots of God's definition for marriage are found in the creation story, it means that it is an institution that is foundational in human history.
2. God's design and purpose in marriage was to allow a man and a woman to enter into a unique relationship so that they could experience an embodiment of the unity that exists between the three members of the Godhead (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), who although independent persons, are unified into one. In addition, marriage is a picture of the relationship between Jesus and the Church (Genesis 1:26-27; Ephesians 5:31-32).
3. Marriage addresses the need most men and women have for a partner (helpmate) with whom to walk through life. Marriage is a unique relationship that God established to address our need for companionship with another person. He created us with that need before the fall of man and that need is not met in a relationship with God (Genesis 2:18; 20).
4. It was into this marriage relationship that God commissioned the couple to share life, be helpmates and to "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28).
5. Jesus reaffirms the Genesis description of marriage between a man and a woman in Matthew 19:4-6 and Mark 10:6-9.

Marriage is a unique covenant.

1. Marriage is a sacred covenant, a holy agreement between two people, in which we call upon God to witness and affirm the relationship. It is unique among all our relationships with fellow humans. A covenant binds two people together into a holy union.
2. God says He hates it when the marriage covenant is broken or violated and warns us not to break our covenant (Malachi 2:16).
3. In the New Testament, marriage is also used as a picture of Jesus' faithful and sacrificial relationship with His Church (Ephesians 5:21-33).
4. Marriage is both a physical and spiritual union designed to provide a full sense of unity of body and spirit (Genesis 2:24; Ephesians 5:31).
5. Marriage is the sole relationship God reserves for a man and woman to enjoy the pleasures and joy of a sexual relationship. Therefore, sex is sacred (i.e., "holy" or "set

apart”) and a gift reserved only for those in marriage (1 Corinthians 7:3-5; Proverbs 5:18-19; Hebrews 13:4).

Marriage is unique in its vows.

1. Generally, in marriage we pledge unilaterally to love, cherish, protect and serve one another. Further, we commit to uphold our pledge whether in sickness or health, wealth or poverty and until death separates us from each other.
2. Generally, we have a special ceremony for marriage in which we invite family and friends to witness us making that lifelong pledge.
3. The violation or breaking of our pledge causes emotional, spiritual and social hurt to ourselves, our spouse, our children and extended family, as well as to our spiritual and social community.

Marriage is unique in its exclusions – Same-sex marriage.

In Scripture, there is never a reference to a marriage of persons of the same genetic sex (Matthew 19:4-5).

1. While we acknowledge that same-sex attractions are real and can be experienced by people as part of their emotional and physical state, homosexual *practices* are not condoned by God in Scripture. These are considered immoral acts and are contrary to God’s intent for sacred sex, which is reserved solely for heterosexual (male and female) marriage (Romans 1:24-27).
2. All believers are called to be holy and to present their bodies as instruments of righteousness (Romans 6:11-14).
3. In holding this view, we recognize that we may offend those that support same-sex marriage. We’ve committed ourselves to aligning with clear biblical instruction, even when that puts us at odds with cultural norms. However, we acknowledge that the church has often failed to serve and love those who are struggling with same-sex attraction. It is our sincere desire to welcome all who are genuinely seeking God, while at the same time, holding to the truth of Scripture.

Marriage Summary

It is our strong commitment to continue to hold to a biblical definition of marriage: a unique, holy bond of one man and one woman for a lifetime. Since marriage is a sacred union, it is ideal and advisable for a believer to enter into the marriage covenant with another believer so there is a shared value for God and the covenant (2 Corinthians 6:14). We encourage individuals pursuing marriage to seek pre-marital counseling so they can identify issues of incompatibility in advance of marriage.

We also encourage married couples to seek counsel to work through difficult circumstances in obedience to God’s commands to honor their marriage covenant and vows.

Our church ministries, events and discipleship on marriage will be taught from this biblical perspective of marriage. We will invest time, energy and resources to train, encourage and disciple individuals and couples to experience all that the Lord would want for them to experience (i.e., an “abundant life” (John 10:10)) in their personal and married life.

Sacredness of Sexual Relationships

Our sacred view of marriage also implies a sacred view of sexual relationships and gender. Sex is a unique expression of intimacy in a relationship. It is described as “knowing another person” and “becoming one flesh.” Biblical instruction clearly states that the only appropriate context for sexual intimacy is between a man and a woman in a marriage relationship (Genesis 2:18-25).

In Romans 6:12-14, we are instructed, “Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace.”

Our culture has become saturated with sexuality. We’re encouraged to believe that we have the right to determine what is right or wrong for ourselves - autonomy. As a result, we are being lied to by the world. All of us are being told that freedom will bring happiness and that personal and sexual autonomy is freedom. At the core, we are being told the same lie that Satan told Eve in the garden: if we reject God and His standards, we will be free to create our own identity, escape guilt and shame and feel good about ourselves and our choices. We’ve been encouraged to place our sexuality at the center of our personhood, to give into its passions and to let it define us.

When we do this, our passions become our “god” and we are enslaved. Other people become objects to satisfy our lust, not persons to love. Sexual autonomy can never answer the deeper questions of our identity, purpose and intimacy.

Only God can address those real issues of our souls. What we really desire is to be known and loved. The Bible teaches us that God knows us fully and loves us deeply. Our desire for identity, purpose and intimacy are best met in a relationship with God, our Creator, provided to us by Jesus, our Savior. Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31b-32). It is in the context and by the support of the church that we are encouraged to live out our identity in Christ.

Even though following God’s instruction is difficult at times, it provides the prescribed path to joy, contentment and true freedom from guilt, fear and shame. Therefore, we encourage all to strengthen each other to pursue the Lord and experience His grace and truth in all aspects of our life. Since sexual intimacy is reserved for marriage, we believe expressions outside of that context are properly viewed as sexually immoral and as unfit for a believer.

Acts of sexual immorality include, but are not limited to:

1. **Promiscuity:** This is any sexual intimacy outside the covenant of marriage. Whether this sexual sin occurs on an ongoing basis or as a single event (e.g., “one-night stand”), the Bible describes this behavior as sexual immorality. This is true for those that have heterosexual desires and for those that have homosexual desires (Matthew 15:19-20; Colossians 3:5-7).

Even though a man and a woman may be in a committed relationship that is progressing

toward marriage, we would not encourage a believer to enter into a cohabitation arrangement. In choosing this, the believer would be seeking to have the benefits and appearance of marriage, (sexual intimacy), without the commitment to lifelong fidelity.

2. **Adultery:** This specifically refers to a married person seeking sexual satisfaction with another person outside of the marriage relationship (Exodus 20:14).
3. **Seeking sexual satisfaction through pornography:** Seeking sexual satisfaction through pornography rather than through a healthy, sexual relationship within the bounds of marriage is analogous to adultery for the married individual or promiscuity for the single person. Because of the widespread and easy access to all types of pornographic materials and the weakness of our sinful flesh, it is easy for a believer to fall into this addictive trap (Matthew 5:27-30).
4. **Homosexual acts:** This is defined as physical intimacy or sexual relations between two people of the same genetic sex (Leviticus 18:22; Romans 1:26-27).

Sexuality Summary

The biblical writers of the both Testaments were very aware of sexual immorality of all kinds including homosexual and extra-marital practices. These practices were widespread during the first century in the Roman empire. One distinction of the new Christian faith was a call to a counter-cultural sexual ethic. It was a call to live according to God's design for sacred sex and marriage.

By God's design, we are sexual beings. He is not surprised by the level of our drives and desires, but He provides guidance through His Word about how, when and why we should express our sexual desires. When we align with His design and instruction, it is for our greater protection and provision. When we choose to be focused on our self and our fleshly desires, we are in danger of being enslaved by those desires. In Galatians 5:1 we read, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery." A believer entrapped by the weakness of his/her sinful flesh should be gently called to repentance, forgiveness and accountability.

Gender

Gender has also become a debated issue of our time. We believe that God creates us male and female (Genesis 1:27-28; Matthew 19:4). We acknowledge that there are also individuals that wrestle with their God-given gender but we believe that a person's gender is a gift from God and is also sacred. Further discussion of this issue is outside the scope of this paper.

Divorce and Remarriage

Our view of the sacredness of marriage has implications regarding the dissolving of a marriage. We will counsel those who are considering divorce to proceed with the utmost caution and sincere prayer and to do all they can to reconcile.

Violating the Covenant of Marriage

Divorce is the breaking or termination of the sacred marriage covenant. God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16), but does allow for a man or woman to be released from the bond of marriage under very limited circumstances. Even though these grounds for biblical divorce might be present, the Bible is clear that it does not mean that a person must or should seek divorce. Because marriage creates a one flesh bond, violating or ultimately breaking that bond is painful for all those involved, including children. Since His great desire is to preserve the marriage covenant, as believers, our first response to a couple in crisis will be to encourage forgiveness, healing, obedience and reconciliation instead of divorce.

There are two specific situations in which the Bible describes as grounds to consider a divorce; a breaking of the marriage covenant.

1. **Sexual immorality** - Matthew 19:3-9 says: "Some Pharisees came to Him to test Him. They asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?' 'Haven't you read,' He replied, 'that at the beginning the Creator "made them male and female," and said, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh"? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.' 'Why then,' they asked, 'did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?' Jesus replied, 'Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.'"
 - a. Jesus' answer to the question, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?", clearly advocates a limited context in which a person can be released from a marriage covenant. Divorce must not be pursued on capricious grounds.
 - b. Based on this passage, it is clear that Jesus holds a view that sexual intimacy is so sacred that seeking sexual satisfaction outside of the marriage relationship violates the marriage covenant.
 - c. The term "sexual immorality" in Matthew 19:9 is generally viewed as adultery. It is seeking sexual satisfaction with someone other than your marriage partner. Adultery violates the sanctity and exclusivity of the marriage covenant. Therefore, a single act of adultery does provide biblical grounds for considering a divorce because it is a serious violation of the marriage covenant.
 - d. However, based on other passages (1 Thessalonians 4:3-7; 1 Corinthians 6:13), there are broader implications to the Greek term "porneia," which is translated into our English term "sexual immorality" or "adultery." Seeking to satisfy sexual desires outside of marriage is a violation of the sanctity and

exclusivity of the marriage covenant, even if another person is not directly involved (e.g., pornography). Habitual or continual use of pornography to satisfy sexual desires without repentance and change of behavior may well constitute a level of sexual immorality that could be grounds for divorce. Since each situation can be unique the offended party should seek wise counsel from church leaders and/or a professional counselor.

- e. Fellow believers should call a person who has participated in or continues to participate in sexual immorality to repentance and encourage him or her to seek forgiveness for violating the marriage covenant. The offended spouse is also commanded to forgive the offense, even if trust has been so damaged that the marriage cannot survive (Colossians 3:13).
- f. In no case should a believer ever divorce as a reason to marry someone else. That is an act of adultery.

2. **Abandonment by a non-believing spouse:** In 1 Corinthians 7:12-16, Paul describes a second possible ground for divorce. "To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?"

- a. It is ideal and advisable for a believer to only enter into the marriage covenant with another believer (2 Corinthians 6:14).
- b. Sometimes, a Christian marries a non-believer or one partner in a marriage becomes a follower of Christ after they are already married. Paul is stating that if the non-believing spouse is willing to fulfill their marriage covenant, then the believing spouse should remain. But if the non-believing spouse chooses to leave and breaks the marriage covenant, the believing spouse is freed from the marriage covenant.
- c. This principle does not give a believer freedom to leave his or her non-believing spouse just on the basis of the spouse being a non-believer.

Violating the Marriage Vows

Even though a person may not have violated their marriage covenant, it is possible for the marriage to be damaged by violating the vows of marriage. In a marriage ceremony, we vow to love, cherish, protect, provide for, lead and follow. Because the laws of Texas do not contain a provision for legal separation, it may be necessary to seek the legal protection that filing for a divorce provides. There are two particular issues that may cause a believer to consider filing for a divorce. We do not believe that these are additional biblical grounds for divorce but are options for the protection and provision in these specific circumstances.

1. **Abuse:** Physical, emotional or sexual abuse represent severe violations of the marriage vows. It is a direct contradiction of the pledge to love, cherish and

protect. Marriage is not a justification or protection for abuse of any kind. Physical and emotional abuse always put a spouse and children at risk. In the case of physical abuse, we strongly recommend reporting incidences to the proper civil authorities and removing the abused spouse and the children immediately from any dangerous situation. If a church leader or volunteer becomes aware of the possibility of child abuse, the church will report it to Child Protective Services as required by law and to ensure the safety of those involved.

2. **Neglect or abandonment:** As part of the marriage vows, the man and wife pledge to fulfill their vows to each other whether in prosperity or poverty. Not providing an “expected lifestyle” does not constitute neglect. But when one person fails to provide at all or abandons the responsibilities of the marriage, the other spouse may need to seek the legal protection that filing for divorce provides.

To clarify, as we understand Scripture, abuse, neglect or abandonment, though they may be necessary legal protective reasons to file for divorce, are not biblical grounds for divorce. It is our recommendation that the offended person who proceeds with divorce under these circumstances should remain unmarried until other biblical grounds become a factor in the relationship or the marriage is reconciled (1 Corinthians 7:10-11).

Remarriage

1. **Remarriage after divorce with biblical grounds:** We hold to the traditional interpretation that biblical grounds for a divorce (sexual immorality, abandonment by a non-believer) releases the offended party from the marriage covenant, just as death does. Therefore, the remaining spouse is free to marry another believer in the Lord.
2. **Remarriage after divorce with non-biblical grounds:** In cases where a believer(s) sought divorce on non-biblical grounds, both spouses should seek reconciliation or remain unmarried after the divorce. When one party remarries after a divorce which was on non-biblical grounds or engages in sexual immorality, that person commits adultery. The original marriage covenant has been broken by that adultery, and the remaining partner is free to remarry (Luke 16:18, Mark 10:11-12).

Divorce Summary

Divorce for any reason causes personal, emotional and spiritual hurt and pain. Recovery takes time due to the depth of the wounds. We offer ministry opportunities to heal from the hurts experienced. We encourage believers to seek a deeper understanding of God’s grace, mercy and forgiveness so they can move forward with their lives and pursue the Lord. Anyone desiring to seek the Lord will be welcomed for fellowship, membership and volunteer service in the church.