

Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage: A Position Paper

Introduction

Marriage carries immense significance within the Christian faith. The healthy covenant union between a husband and a wife creates human flourishing within a family, a church, and society at large. The concept of marriage has been chosen by God to exemplify the beauty and goodness of His relationship with his chosen people (Ephesians 5:25-27) and our eternal hope of redemption (Revelation 21:1-4)

With eyes of faith, believers can look up with wonder at God's great design for marriage. We can heartily agree with the Scriptures, saying, "let marriage be held in honour among all." (Hebrew 13:3). Yet, the pains of sin has caused many of us to experience untold heartache through the very relationship that was meant to allow us to thrive. We grieve the damaging effects of sin that cause husbands and wives to suffer greatly and sometimes seek divorce.

Understanding the delights and pain that come with Christian marriage in a fallen world, the Bible teaches believers how to nourish a healthy marriage, reconcile a conflicted one, and (in some circumstances) pursue valid grounds by which a spouse may seek a divorce.

The goal of this position paper is to explain the theological position of the elders at Grace Fellowship Church East Toronto regarding divorce and remarriage that will provide the basis for congregants to receive pastoral care if, God forbid, it may ever be required.

We have chosen to outline this paper in the four parts.

- First, **important qualifications** readers should be aware of as they read it.
- Second, a **summary of the position** of the elders.
- Third, the **theological rationale** for this position with brief responses to contested issues.
- And finally, **pastoral implications** that will guide elders and members to cooperate with care if an issue of divorce or remarriage arises.

Important Qualifications

Given the sensitive and consequential nature of divorce, readers should be aware of a few qualifiers that may help provide caution as they consider this paper.

- **True believers hold differing positions on the grounds for divorce and remarriage.** There are several different views that faithful Protestant, evangelical Christians hold in this topic. Each of them can be coherently and reasonably argued by leaders that we hold in high esteem. While we can charitably disagree with respected theologians, it is necessary to establish a definitive position within our own church so that we can faithfully shepherd the flock that is among us.
- **This position provides a compass, not a roadmap.** Our collective experience has shown that concerns with marriage are often the most complicated pastoral circumstances that we come across. It is not helpful to apply a “one-size-fits-all” approach to situations that will have different variables affecting their circumstances. Yet, we hope that establishing a clear position that is faithful to the teaching of Scripture and the witness of the church will help to navigate any situation regarding divorce and remarriage.
- **Personal experiences can influence bias.** When we are in need of care, it is hard to be impartial. It’s easier to seek a perspective that provides immediate relief or

vindication. We advise caution against using this paper in order to self-evaluate a present experience or re-adjudicate a previous experience. Properly applying the principles of this position paper into real life circumstances requires humility and patience with the guidance of local church eldership.

Summary of Position

Marriage is an oath-bound covenant union between one man and one woman. It has been designed by God to be permanent in this life. The relationship between a husband and a wife mysteriously exemplifies the union between Jesus Christ and his Church.

Divorce is never affirmed or required in Scripture. Yet, some sins against a spouse, by their nature, violate the marriage covenant and can permit valid grounds for the offended spouse to seek divorce. The most clear and obvious of these are often categorized as "desertion" and "sexual immorality" which transgress the prototypical covenant obligations in Genesis 2:23-24 for a husband and a wife to "hold fast" to one another as "one flesh". Other sinful behaviours, like abuse, may constitute sinful violations of the covenant.

The safety and care of the offended spouse and other vulnerable people will always be of primary pastoral concern. Even if an offended spouse has valid grounds that permit divorce, the path towards forgiveness is always right and fitting in the gospel. Reconciliation of the marriage is always desired, but may not be attainable because of unrepentance and could in fact be unjust if such attempts perpetuate offences.

Remarriage is only valid after the death of a spouse or after a valid divorce has been fully processed. Maintaining singleness in the hope of reconciliation through the offending spouse's true repentance is commended. If a married person has divorced their spouse for grounds outside of the scope of sexual immorality or desertion, they

do not have grounds for remarriage and should remain single or be reconciled to their former spouse, if possible.

Theological Rationale

The Creation Design of Marriage

The basis for understanding the nature of marriage and the grounds for divorce and remarriage are built on the foundation of God's ideal design for marriage in Genesis 2:23-24. It says,

"Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh."

Marriage was originally fashioned by God prior to the curse of sin entering into the world. Though it is a human relationship, it is not a social construct that adapts or evolves with surrounding culture. God assigned Adam the duty as the representative authority and Eve the role as a dignified helper. These complementary roles were not meant to serve either the man or the woman; rather, the man and the woman are to cooperate together with distinct roles and fulfill God's blessing to be fruitful and multiply.

Though sin has corrupted everything in creation, the goodness of God's original design for marriage endures. From the beginning, the shape of marriage has mysteriously symbolized the beauty of the gospel. The Apostle Paul describes marriage as a symbol of Christ and the church in Ephesians 5:22-33 exemplified through the dynamic of a husband's loving headship and a wife's respectful submission.

Malachi 2:3-16 and Proverbs 2:17 explicitly describe marriage as a covenant. Often, when Christians think about the idea of a covenant, they primarily understand the way that God relates with his chosen people like in the covenants that He made with Abraham (Genesis 15:17-21) or David (2 Samuel 7:4-17). But, covenants are not just reflective of divine-to-person relationships but also person-to-person relationships. In Scripture, “covenant” relationships can define the terms of tribal alliances (Genesis 14:13), personal arrangements (Genesis 31:44), or national agreements (Jeremiah 34:8-10). In the simplest terms, Gordon Hugenberger defines a covenant as “*an elected... relationship of obligation under oath.*”

The features of covenant are demonstrated in the union between Adam and Eve in Genesis 2:23-24. This passage is more than a jubilant welcome of a wife to a husband. It is the prototype that defines the terms of every marriage covenant. This passage outlines the two obligatory mutual duties of a husband and his wife which sustain the union that is brought together and witnessed by God: holding fast to one another and living faithfully as one flesh.

- **Holding fast** means that a husband and a wife obligate themselves to exclusive and lifelong, companionship as a new family unit distinct from their home of origin with the highest love and loyalty to one another surpassing any other human relationship.
- **Becoming one flesh** refers to a holistic oneness between a husband and wife including emotional, spiritual, relational, and sexual intimacy shared with one another exclusively. As a benefit of becoming one flesh together their union contains the hope of flourishing with children.

When Christ interpreted the significance of Genesis 2:23-24, he exclaimed, “*What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.*” (Mark 10:9, Matthew 19:6). This is affirmed by the Apostle Paul who upheld the “binding” nature of the covenant obligations (Romans 7:1-3). Clearly, marriage was designed to be permanent. Yet, the very nature of marriage as a covenant with oath-bound obligations evidences that certain actions by their nature violate the marriage, betray their oath, thus break the

covenant, and provide limited yet valid grounds to dissolve a marriage. In a world where such violations do occur, the law of Moses with the teaching of Christ and the Apostle Paul affirm the truth of the creation ideal yet clarify these limited parameters for divorce.

The Principles of the Law of Moses

The fundamental teaching on marriage and divorce in the Old Testament is found in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Outside of this passage, Andreas Kostenberger admits that

“these scattered citations are, for the most part, passing references and not expressly didactic in nature. Not surprisingly, a reading of these passages - all of which portray divorce in a negative light - reveals a continued espousal of the creation ideal of marriage given in Genesis 2:24, [with] persistent divine opposition to divorce.”

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 is the foremost passage of the Old Testament that describes circumstances surrounding divorce. It states,

“When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favour in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, and if she goes and becomes another man’s wife, and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife, then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the LORD. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance.”

In the context of the Mosaic law, this cannot be referring to adultery since this kind of sin in a marriage would be subject to capital punishment (Lev 20:10, Deut 22:22).

Evidently, in the time of Moses, husbands were sinfully choosing to divorce their wives

for various reasons, even if their spouse was not violating the Genesis 2:24 “holding fast” and “one flesh” obligations. The LORD’s attitude towards these kinds of divorces is made clear in Malachi 2:16 where he condemns those who divorce their faithful wives as “faithless” men who “cover their garments with violence”.

The legal stipulations requiring a certificate of divorce does not affirm or condone divorces. So, what is the purpose of this passage? It regulated divorce with a protective legal framework in an attempt to prevent Israelites from practicing prohibited forms of remarriage that were an abomination to God. The ESV Expository Commentary states,

"By requiring a certificate of divorce and forbidding remarriage to the person who gave it, the law guarantees a woman's protection on two counts. She is assured of the right to remarry without fear of further interference from her first husband or any claims from him. She achieves financial independence and is perpetually free to remarry anyone else. Remarriage to her first husband would be a denial of the original reason for the divorce and a compromise of the freedoms she had received. Denial of the protection given in the divorce certificate is abhorrent to the Lord and brings wrong on the land the Lord is giving them."

The Teaching of Gospel Accounts

The creation ideal of Genesis 2:22-24 is upheld through the law of Moses and the prophets. The Scriptures consistently affirm marriage as a covenant union with oath-bound obligations which can be violated yet is intended to be permanent.

Unfortunately, throughout the history of Israel, the ideal of Genesis 2 and the regulations of Deuteronomy 24 were disregarded at worst and misunderstood at best. At the time of Christ, different Jewish schools wrongfully interpreted that the law of Moses was commanding and requiring divorce in certain circumstances. It's in response to this misinterpretation that the teaching of Jesus on divorce is introduced.

All that our Lord explained on marriage, divorce, and remarriage is fully comprised in Luke 16:18, Mark 10:1-9, and Matthew 5:31-32, 19:1-12. These passages are mostly in the context of the same dialogue between Christ and the Pharisees. There is a significant difference between Mark and Matthew's accounts which have led Protestant Christians to different interpretations, which will be considered in the Appendix.

Matthew 19:3-9 says,

“And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast 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 not man separate.” They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”

In this passage, Christ is not providing a comprehensive doctrine on marriage, divorce, and remarriage. He is responding to a specific issue raised by a group of people with malicious intent against him in a way that corrects and condemns their particular perspective. Throughout the Gospels, jealous groups of people sought to trap Jesus in his words hoping that they would fulfill their plans to have Jesus put to death. The dialogue in Matthew 19 (and Mark 10) was another one of those circumstances. John the Baptist had been put to death for criticizing King Herod's unlawful marriage (Matthew 14:1-12). Also, two different Jewish schools had two different interpretations of Deuteronomy 24:1-4. One school believed that the term “some indecency” validated divorce for adultery while another school believed it referred to anything displeasing to the husband. So, this question was asked in the wicked hope of seeing Jesus suffer

the same fate as John the Baptist if not at least see the two Jewish schools divided in hatred against him.

Christ's masterful response upheld the creation ideal of Genesis 2 and corrected both Jewish schools' misunderstanding of the law of Moses. The Jews had wrongly assumed that Deuteronomy 24 required for divorce to follow "some indecency" but Jesus clarified that though the law allowed for divorce because of their hardness of heart, it did not command it.

Crucially, he also clarifies valid grounds for divorce. Matthew 19:9 is arranged as a conditional statement addressing a specific "if/then" scenario where a spouse has not committed sexual immorality. As such, the same logic can be reasonably applied to the inverse scenario where a spouse has committed sexual immorality. This logic is explained in the two following statements:

Matthew 19:9 Logic Within Invalid Divorces

If a husband divorces his wife,
 but she has not committed sexual immorality
 and he remarries another woman
then the act of consummating a second marriage *is adultery*

Matthew 19:9 Logic Inferred to Valid Divorces

If a husband divorces his wife
 because she has committed sexual immorality
 and he remarries another woman
then the act of consummating the second marriage *is **not** adultery*

Marriage is an oath-bound covenant with mutual obligations which is designed to be permanent in this life, yet can be dissolved for actions (like sexual immorality) that violated the duties to one another. If a covenant has been dissolved for valid grounds, the offended spouse is free to remarry and is not committing sin.

The Application of the Apostle Paul

Outside of the Gospels, the Apostle Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 7:10-16, 29-40 (with a passing reference for illustrative purposes in Romans 7:1-3) is the only other passage that directly teaches about divorce and remarriage. Here, Paul is addressing a specific situation occurring at the church in Corinth. In 7:10-16 he says,

“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. To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?”

In the above passage, Paul draws a direct connection between Christ's teaching in the Gospel accounts and, by implication, to the creation ideal of Genesis 2:22-24. Then, he affirms in general that for marriage between believers, spouses should not divorce. But, if one spouse chooses to do so, they should not remarry but seek reconciliation. Paul then moved from a general principle to a specific situation where a new convert is deserted by their unbelieving spouse. Here, it may seem that Paul is adding an

additional exception that extends the parameters for valid grounds of divorce beyond the limitations given by Christ. But, instead of seeing this as a second exception or privilege, Paul's teaching on this circumstance should be understood as an application of covenant obligations from the creation ideal of Genesis 2:23-24. Craig Blomberg says,

“But how could Paul, even under the inspiration of the Spirit, add a second exception to Jesus’ “no divorce” policy if he recognized Jesus’ words as comprehensively addressing all possible situations? ... Perhaps the best approach is to ask what these two exceptions of Jesus and Paul have in common. Both destroy at least one of the two fundamental components of marriage, either the “leaving and cleaving” or the “one flesh” unity. Both leave one party without any other options if attempts at reconciliation are spurned. Both recognize the extreme seriousness of divorce as a last resort and as an admission of defeat.”

In this scenario, a believing spouse is abandoned by their unbelieving spouse, likely over disagreements stemming from their new-found faith. Even though the unbeliever who abandons their marriage is not a person of faith, that spouse is still held accountable to the covenant obligation to “hold fast”. Since that spouse sinfully violated God’s design for the covenant, the Apostle concludes that the abandoned believer is no longer bound or enslaved to an irreconcilable spouse who has broken the covenant and is therefore free from their obligations to this spouse. Accordingly, it is reasonable to consider an unrepentant, abusive relationship to be a sinful violation of the covenant obligation to “hold fast”. Abusive relationships would force one spouse to separate for the sake of safety. Andreas Kostenberger says, *“such separation usually produces one of two results: (1) the offending party, if regenerate, will repent and seek reconciliation; (2) if the offending party is unregenerate, after a time, he or she will likely depart.”*

Neither Christ or the Apostle Paul are individually offering a comprehensive, systematic understanding of divorce and remarriage. They were separately responding to specific

situations in ways that share a common unity which is built upon the prototypical covenant paradigm from creation. Together, they clarify that sexual immorality and desertion are sinful violations of the two covenant obligations outlined in Genesis 2:23-24. Such violations constitute valid grounds for the offended spouse to dissolve the covenant through divorce and enable them to be free to remarry.

Pastoral Implications

Prioritizing Safety and Care

We sympathize with husbands and wives who may be reluctant to seek help through pastoral care or even police intervention in the midst of challenging times within their marriage. Though there may be difficult questions to evaluate regarding the longer term preservation of the marriage, these are always subservient concerns to issues of safety. In his guidance regarding the way a church should triage the priorities for care, Biblical Counsellor Brad Hambrick says,

"When the basic requirements of safety are not present, then safety takes priority over any other concern. Safety is never an "unfair expectation" from a relationship. If safety is a concern, then you should immediately involve necessary authorities or advisors (i.e., pastor, counsellor, parents of a minor, or legal authorities)."

Providing help for safety will be assessed according to the specific situation. This might mean recommending alternative housing for one spouse or their children over the short-term. Under such circumstances, material support from the church's Benevolence Fund or other resources from within the church or external partners can be provided. If there is suspicion of abuse involving a minor, our church has a legal [duty to report](#) any such incident to Children's Aid Society which is consistent with our Abuse Prevention Policy. In circumstances of domestic violence that does not involve a

minor, the church leadership is able to make the offended party aware of their legal options consistent with guidance from the [City of Toronto](#).

Care for a husband, wife, or children will generally involve a small team of trusted church members requested from the married couple with specific expectations of relational and physical support that is overseen by a Pastor at the direction of Elder Board. This can be offered for both the offending and offended spouse.

Determining Grounds for Divorce

We have observed that the earliest indicators of an unhealthy marriage occur when a couple has isolated themselves from their church community. When a marriage is in trouble, husbands and wives can begin to withdraw from community for a variety of reasons like fear, shame, bitterness, anger or confusion. Lingering troubles and isolation can easily allow a heart to harden and become unwilling to receive wise guidance that will allow for forgiveness and reconciliation. Though it might feel like a risk to come forward and ask for help, we recommend that any husband or wife who has been thinking about divorce speak with their assigned elder or a trusted friend to seek help.

It is our desire to be able to shepherd conflicted spouses so that they can aspire to hold fast to their covenant obligations even when sin has been committed. Every couple has the hope of the redeeming grace of Jesus Christ who has shown us lavish and abounding grace with inexhaustible mercy which we can humbly learn to extend to others also.

When sins have occurred which may seem like they constitute covenant violations, it is important to allow pastoral leadership to help consider if there are grounds for divorce, and even so, if possible, how reconciliation could be pursued.

Valid Grounds of Divorce for Sexual Immorality

There is clear evidence from Scripture when "sexual immorality" has occurred and thus constitutes valid grounds for divorce. Extra-marital sexual intercourse is a clear and obvious violation of the one flesh union of marriage. In 1 Corinthians 7:3-4, the Apostle Paul says,

The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.

God intends sexuality in marriage to be mutually enjoyed and regularly expressed, reflecting the oneness and care spouses have for one another. In their covenant, a husband and a wife exchange the rights over their own body. Intimacy is not meant to be "given" or "taken" but mutually "shared" with each other alone. Sexuality within Christian marriage fosters a close bond between each other so that they regularly enjoy physical intimacy, as long as their health enables them to do so, without depriving one another by withholding sex (1 Corinthians 7:5). If a husband or a wife exchanges the rights of their body to another person joining themselves in intercourse, they have committed adultery. This is a clear, sinful violation of the marriage covenant.

In Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9, Jesus does not use the term "adultery" as the exception for divorce, but "sexual immorality". Some people who hold to a view that there are no valid grounds for divorce or remarriage in this life, attempt to interpret the term "sexual immorality" with a variety of different meanings (discussed further in the Appendix). But, it is more fitting to view "sexual immorality" as a general term describing any kind of sexual activity that violates God's design for sexuality between a husband and a wife.

Does this mean that use of pornography or masturbation constitute "sexual immorality" and be grounds for divorce? Though it is possible, this is less clear. The instructions of

the Lord Jesus teach that sinful thoughts of lust are committing adultery in our hearts (Matthew 5:27-30). Yet, while the transgressions of our heart are judged as equally sinful before the eyes of God, they are not consequentially sinful against one another. Lust in our hearts does not have the effect of breaking the one-flesh union of joining bodies together in intercourse. Jim Newheiser comments on this issue saying,

“There is a difference between a spouse who fights against lust but occasionally stumbles and a person who relentlessly pursues sexual sin through pornography and masturbation without apology or effort to change.”

It may be possible that one spouse's spiritual condition regresses to such a state that they are unrepentant in their use of pornography and masturbation, thereby knowingly depriving their spouse of the obligations of one flesh intimacy, and in so doing, violating their covenant. Citing theologian John Frame and the Presbyterian Church in America, Jim Newheiser again states,

"If a person becomes so obsessed with [pornography and masturbation] that they become a substitute for fulfilling the conjugal rights of the spouse, then they could be understood to break the one flesh union."

Valid Grounds of Divorce for Desertion

When a husband and a wife are joined together in marriage, they are meant to "hold fast" to one another. There are obligations and benefits in this new union that sustain the social welfare for a new family unit. Andreas Kostenberger cites the commands of husbands for physical provision Exodus 21:10 with the exemplary care of Boaz for his Moabite wife in Ruth 1:9 to explain that the a husband specifically has the duty to sustain his family's welfare, while his health permits, so that the family experiences the kind of refuge and peace that comes from God.

The obligations of husbands to provide this kind of care to their wives and their children reflect the heart of God as the "father of the fatherless and protector of widows" (Psalm 68:5). While this instruction is primarily oriented around the duties of a man in marriage, husbands and wives can each act so negligibly towards their spouse such that they sinfully violate their covenant. Just like the concerns with sexual immorality, there are clear and obvious examples, while there are other examples that require more wisdom applied within specific situations.

The example cited above from 1 Corinthians 7:10-16 explain that if an unbelieving spouse abandons the believing one leaving no hope for reconciliation, then the abandoned spouse should no longer be considered "enslaved" to that marriage and is "free". A variety of other complicated circumstances may arise which are parallel but not identical to 1 Corinthians 7 and seem like it might sinfully violate the covenant stipulation to "hold fast". For instance, what if the negligent spouse is a believer? What if one spouse is excessively controlling over finances? What if there was an isolated instance of physical violence to a spouse or children? An ongoing pattern of verbal abuse? Threats of harm towards oneself?

Some theologians have judged that the principles of enslaving one spouse to another from 1 Corinthians 7:10-16 can occur through "constructive desertion". In a scenario like this, one spouse does not leave the other, but as Jim Newheiser explains, "*one partner's evil conduct ends the marriage because it causes the other partner to leave.*" This destructive and unrepentant behaviour (which can occur intentionally or by negligence) creates intolerable conditions which functionally desert their marriage obligations even though they have not physically left the marriage. In such a circumstance, the determination of whether or not certain actions would prove to be sinful violations of the covenant, and therefore, grounds for divorce, would be evaluated through a process of church discipline.

In keeping with the principles of Matthew 18:15-20, church discipline is a corrective process enacted when church members are acting in a manner that is contrary to their

Christian witness. Guided by the pastors, it places limits or restrictions on the individual with the intention of guiding them towards repentance and restoration as a fellow brother or sister in Christ. But, if over time, it is clear that the church member will not listen and continues in unrepentant behaviour, then the individual will be barred from observing the Lord's Supper and treated by the church community as if they were an unbeliever since their ongoing sinfulness invalidates their confession of faith. If a spouse persists in acting in such a way as to perpetuate intolerable conditions that have functionally deserted the marriage, it could be judged that the offending spouse has sinfully violated the covenant allowing valid grounds for divorce.

Pursuing Divorce or Remarriage

Remarriage Following Bereavement

Most pastoral scenarios for remarriage are considered after the circumstances of divorce. But, special concerns of remarriage should be evaluated after the death of a spouse. We sorrow when a family has to grieve the loss of a husband, a wife, and a parent. The church will strive to provide special care for those grieving after the loss of a loved one.

After the death of a husband or wife, the remaining loved one has the freedom to remarry in the Lord (Romans 7:1-3). The Apostle Paul specifically instructs younger widows of the benefit of seeking remarriage in the Lord (1 Timothy 5:9-16). Given the deep emotions attached with grief, the wider implications of remarriage for children or the parents and family of the bereaved, it would be wise to seek time for healing with pastoral and professional care along with the broader church community before rushing into a new relationship.

Remarriage Following Valid Divorces

Christian ethics hold forgiveness as vital to our relationships with one another and as an expression of our understanding of our own relationship with God. Following the Lord's Prayer, Jesus said, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." (Matthew 6:14-15). Even if people commit the same sins against us, if they return to us in true repentance, Jesus says that we must "forgive your brother from your heart."

Heartfelt forgiveness is right, but it is not easy. It takes true humility and long-suffering patience on the part of the offended person and true godly grief from the wrongdoer with a true commitment to restitution and amendment. Following God's creation ideal for marriage to be permanent in this life, and the commands of the gospel to forgive one another as Christ has forgiven us, the heart of the GFC East Toronto elders is to seek every opportunity for conflicted marriages to heal and thrive together rather than to seek divorce.

Yet, in a scenario where a church member has sought assistance in the midst of marriage conflict and it is clear that one spouse has committed a sinful violation of the marriage covenant, the offended spouse has the freedom to pursue a few options with the guidance of church leadership which are all faithful to teaching of Scripture.

First, the offended spouse may seek legal divorce with the freedom to remarry. Where there are valid grounds for divorce, the offended spouse is free to remarry once the divorce has been officially finalized according to legal processes. But, until that time, it would be unfitting for that individual to begin pursuing any other romantic or dating relationships.

Second, the offended spouse may seek legal divorce yet choose to remain single. Though remarriage is permitted, it is not required after valid divorce. As a matter of personal conscience or faith, the offended spouse may choose to remain unmarried in

the hope that their former spouse may demonstrate true repentance which could allow for a reconciliation of the marriage.

Third, the offended spouse may not seek divorce, but remain in their marriage in the hope of reconciliation. It is not required and may not be possible based on the nature of the circumstances. It may take a long time with much heartache. Yet, with humility, repentance, and patience, we have seen the Lord restore broken marriages when the offended spouse chooses to remain.

Remarriage Following Invalid Divorces

What if someone pursues divorces without valid grounds? Choosing to divorce without valid grounds is sinful. If a divorce is processed without valid grounds, both should remain single or else be reconciled to one another in remarriage in keeping with 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 says,

*"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."**

Furthermore, if either party enters into a new marriage after an invalid divorce, the initial act of consummating this new marriage would constitute adultery as detailed by Matthew 5:32,

"But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery."

If someone has entered into another marriage after an invalid divorce, but they realize their sins from the past and desire now to be faithful to God, what should they do?

Though the act of invalid divorce would be sinful, and the act of remarriage would also be sinful, the new marriage must still be recognized. Jim Newheiser writes,

“According to the overwhelming majority of scholars, even including most who take the permanence view of marriage, once a new marriage has taken place, it should be respected because this couple has been joined in covenant by God. It is too late to try to undo sins of the past.”

We're sorrowed to see the effects of divorce that have a significant effect on individuals and families. Breaking off the marriage covenant in haste or without oversight should not be considered in isolation, but through the guidance of local church leadership. Still, even if a Christian person has divorced for invalid grounds, the hope of the gospel offers healing to those who receive it through humility and faith in Christ.

Conclusion

We know that many people in our congregation, now and in the future, have very different experiences in family and marriage. We hope to be able to foster the kinds of households that reflect the flourishing families of Psalm 127 and 128: husbands and wives who fear the Lord with children who walk in the way of God. We hope that each family stands as a witness to Christ in homes, workplaces, schools, and the church.

Yet, know that the flesh, the world, and the devil can afflict all men and women, eroding the foundation of marriage and family. Each pastor, church member, and newcomer to Grace Fellowship Church East Toronto who are in Christ all share the same identity as beloved sinners yet broken saints. Yet, "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more." (Romans 5:20)

The damage of sin is severe, but in keeping with the redemptive heart of our Lord, we hope that our church will be a haven for those who are hurting. And, we pray that that

all who come to Grace Fellowship Church will be able to experience the restorative grace that Paul Tripp says can enable "fresh starts and new beginnings."

Appendix 1 - Works Cited

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Paul David Tripp. [Lead: 12 Gospel Principles for Leadership in the Church](#). Crossway, 2012

Appendix 2 - Recommended Reading

[Craig Blomberg - Commentary on Matthew 19:1-12](#)

[Jim Newheiser - Why did God permit divorce?](#)

[William Heth - Jesus and Divorce: How My Mind Changed](#)

Appendix 3 - Responding to the "Permanence" View

An understanding of marriage that recognizes valid grounds for divorce and remarriage is generally identified in theological circles as the "majority position". It is described this way, because the majority of Protestant Christians adhere to it. In contrast, many faithful believers hold to the "minority" view which does not recognize any valid grounds for divorce that would permit remarriage while their spouse remains alive. Traditionally, this view has also been referred to as the "Permanence" view. What are the differences in the position that lead some to a permanence view of marriage rather than the majority view?

- The Nature of Marriage as a Covenant
- The Basis for the "Exception Clause" in Matthew
- Alternative Translations of "Sexual Immorality"

The Nature of Marriage as a Covenant

All Christian positions understand that marriage is a covenant, but the implications of its covenant nature differ. The Permanence position emphasizes the marriage covenant as a creation ideal that must be upheld as a permanent "ordinance". Also, the position underscores the correspondence between the marriage covenant and God's covenant with humanity; therefore, offended spouses must remain faithful to the marriage covenant just as God remains faithful to his covenant.

Creation ordinances are divine laws that were inaugurated before the curse of sin and before the law of Moses which, in a sense, has been "hardwired" into humanity. Other creation ordinances include work and Sabbath, gender and sexuality. Though the law of Moses regulated marriage, the Permanence view believes that a proper reading of Christ's teaching sees marriage as a creation ideal, and there is therefore absolutely indissoluble. After all, this is why Christ said, "What therefore God has joined together,

let not man separate" (Matthew 19:6). This position, in their opinion, is supported by the correspondence of the covenant between a husband and a wife with the covenants between God and his chosen people. Just as God's covenants are irrevocable, so the covenant between a husband and a wife is irrevocable, even if one spouse violates the oath bound obligations of holding fast together in one flesh.

This position rightly esteems the creation ideal of marriage. Those who hold to the majority position acknowledge that marriage is a creation ordinance and that it does mysteriously symbolize God's covenant in Christ. But, the Permanence view does not seem to recognize the true consequential nature of sinful violations upon the covenants.

Covenants are not inherently indissoluble. Gordon Hugenberger states that in the Old Testament,

"Covenants may be both violated and dissolved - with both of these concepts expressed by the same underlying Hebrew expression which is customarily rendered "broken" in most English versions."

While the LORD has been faithful to his covenant with the whole of his chosen people, individuals who violated covenant stipulations were broken off from God's people (eg, Genesis 17:14). Over time, when God's chosen people as a whole transgressed his covenant, the LORD announced his true right to "divorce" Israel for the "adultery" of their idol worship (Hosea 2:1-2, Jeremiah 3:6-10).

It is astounding to us sinful people that the LORD willed the preservation of the covenant through his own love and faithfulness even though Israel was loveless and faithless. When sinful violations occur in a marriage covenant, it is commendable for the offended spouse to seek reconciliation, thus aspiring to the creation ideal, and as a reflection of the steadfast love of God. Yet, there are real consequences for sinful violations. The aspirations of the creation ideal and the correspondence between the

marriage covenant and God's covenant does not negate the true right of offended spouses to dissolve the marriage.

The Basis for the "Exception Clause"

Those who hold to the Permanence view believe that the "exception" clauses of Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 do not truly provide valid grounds for divorce on the basis of sexual immorality. There is a clear difference between Matthew's gospel with that of Mark and Luke. The reference from Mark 10:12 reads,

And he said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

In contrast, Matthew 19:9 (which recounts the exact same interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees) seems to add an extra statement,

*"And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, **except for sexual immorality**, and marries another, commits adultery."*

The Permanence view believes that the absolute prohibition against divorce should be prioritized. Why is this? First, they argue that Mark's gospel is older than Matthew's. It is true that the best data from church history and theological scholarship recognizes that the account from Mark is likely the earliest transcribed chronicle of the life of Christ. Since this is the case, they argue that the "exception" clause must have been added for a reason which was uniquely specific to Matthew's audience which does not contradict the absolute prohibitions of Luke and Mark.

Most Permanence proponents believe that the exception clause was for the Jewish audience to whom Matthew was primarily addressing. In Matthew's gospel, Joseph

(the betrothed husband of Mary) intended to divorce Mary when he realized that she was pregnant, since he must have attributed this pregnancy to sexual immorality. The reference says in Matthew 1:19

“And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.”

The Permanence view argues that the "exception clause" was only added to vindicate Joseph's just intention to divorce. But, at that time, Mary and Joseph were not yet married. They were only engaged in a pre-marriage betrothal agreement common to that time and culture. So then, applying this argument to Matthew 5:32 or Matthew 19:9, the minority position concludes that Matthew's "exception clause" that gives grounds for divorce does not apply to consummated marriages but is only related in a pre-marriage betrothal or engagement period when one of the individuals is found in sexual immorality. They conclude then that once the marriage has been consummated, there are not valid grounds for divorce.

Though this position is coherently argued, it struggles to contend with the larger context of Matthew 19 in particular. It is evident from the plain reading of Jesus' interaction with the Pharisees that they were not discussing a scenario of divorce that deals with pre-marriage betrothal or engagement period, but rather, to genuine, consummated marriages. The "Betrothal" argument inferred infers an argument into Matthew 19 that is not being imagined by Jesus or the Pharisees. But then, proponents of the Permanence view will ask why this "exception" is only included in Matthew but not Mark or Luke. Why is this the case? Craig Blomberg says,

“Probably Mark simply takes this exception for granted, since in both the Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures, divorce and remarriage were universally permitted and often mandatory following adultery. Matthew merely spells out several parts of Jesus' dialogue more fully for his largely Jewish-Christian audience.”

The English Translation of Some Critical Words

Finally, the Permanence view contends that Matthew's exception clause cannot apply to consummated marriages because they infer meaning onto the original Greek term *porneia*, which the English Standard Version translates in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 as "sexual immorality". It is true that this term can be translated in different ways based on the context. For instance, *porneia* can refer to a variety of other kinds of sexual sins such as marriage within forbidden degrees of kinship.

Following the existing presuppositions explained previously, proponents of the Permanence view infer translations of *porneia* that are much more limited in scope (like forbidden degrees of kinship); thus, they conclude that Jesus is only permitting divorce for behaviours such as incest in contravention of Leviticus 18:6-18.

Translations that limit the general meaning of "sexual immorality" support their view that once marriage has been consummated there are no valid grounds for divorce.

Andreas Kostenberger says,

As indicated by every major Greek lexicon, the word porneia is a general term for sexual sin. The exact meaning of porneia is always informed by the context in which the word occurs; yet the term porneia always refers to specific sexual sin.

Though there are alternative translations of *porneia*, the exact meaning should be inferred from the context. In contrast to other passages of Scripture, there is nothing in Matthew 5:32 or 19:9 that would limit the broad translation reflected in the ESV as "sexual immorality"