

THE GOSPEL AND DIVORCE

This document represents the overall teaching of the elders of The Church at Brook Hills regarding a biblical understanding of divorce. It includes biblical truths taught in our pastor's sermon on "The Gospel and Divorce" as well as answers to the ten most common questions posed by our faith family following this sermon. We pray that the grace of God exemplified in His Word will bring healing, restoration, reconciliation, and redemption to the broken pattern of marriage that has become so prevalent in our culture today. We therefore provide this to the church under the authority of Christ as shepherds who pray that the glory of Christ will be put on display before the world in the marriages of our faith family.

The Gospel¹ and Divorce

As soon as one hears the word "divorce," a swell of emotions sweeps over each of our hearts and minds. We have all been affected in some way or another by divorce in our lives, in our families, among our friends, and in the church. Few things are more painful than divorce, and its prevalence in and effects on our culture cannot be overestimated. More specifically, its prevalence in and effect on the church cannot be overestimated.

We are uneasy, in a sense, in even addressing this issue. We are uneasy in part because divorce in our culture, and in the church, has become so easy. This is not to say divorce has no cost (we will discuss this later), but to say that there have been few times in history when the ability to leave one's commitment of marriage has been so easy. A minimum statement of irreconcilable differences is all that is required. You can get divorced online cheaply and quickly without even leaving your computer.

We are also uneasy because we want to shepherd our faith family. We, in no way, want to hurt men and women whose lives have already been wounded by the pain of divorce. We know that any discussion of divorce uncovers these wounds, and our intention is to lead every member of our faith family beside the still, soothing water of the Word. We know this is a delicate journey, but we press on because we are convinced the Gospel has radical, transforming, beautiful, challenging, and eternal implications for divorce.

The Word Our Authority

Our approach to divorce, we pray, is thoroughly rooted in the Word. We know that our authority to speak on divorce is directly related to our alignment with God's Word. As a result, we start here with four primary passages on divorce.

The most logical place to begin a biblical discussion of divorce is 1 Corinthians 7:10-15. There, in the context of Paul's discussion on marriage, singleness, and divorce, he writes these words:

To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife. 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 him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.

¹ We understand the Gospel to be the good news that the just and gracious God of the universe looked upon hopelessly sinful people and sent His Son, Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, to bear His wrath against sin on the cross and to show His power over sin in the resurrection so that all who have faith in Him will be reconciled to God forever.

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul is quoting from Jesus' teaching on divorce in the Gospels. Jesus teaches on divorce in Matthew 19:3-12, Mark 10:1-12, and Luke 16:18 (which is likely the passage Paul is quoting from). We include here Jesus' statement on divorce from Matthew 19:3-12:

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. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not 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 marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery." The disciples said to him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry." Jesus replied, "Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.

The context surrounding Matthew 19 is grounded in Deuteronomy 24, which contains the statement in Mosaic Law regarding divorce. This passage was the focus of much discussion in Jesus' day as many were wondering under what circumstances God permitted divorce. We lament that in many cases today, this question is often not even being asked. We pray that God will lead us each back to the place where we are sincerely asking, "What does God say about divorce?" The answer to that question in Deuteronomy 24 includes these words:

If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the Lord. Do not bring sin upon the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance.

The final text we will include at this time is Genesis 2:24, the verse from which Jesus quoted in Matthew 19 and the foundational picture in Scripture of God's pattern for marriage. In the inception of the marriage covenant, Scripture says:

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

The Church and Divorce

As we consider these passages, we are convicted as leaders in the church that all too often *we have insulated ourselves* in the church regarding divorce. Sadly, there is a shortage of teaching, a void of biblical understanding when it comes to God's Word on divorce. Many in the church have rarely, if ever, heard messages on divorce, which we believe is a considerable problem when half of the couples in our culture and in the church have experienced divorce firsthand.

We have not only insulated ourselves in the church, but *we have isolated each other* when facing divorce situations. As a result of a lack of biblical teaching on divorce, many followers of Christ have little understanding of how to walk alongside brothers or sisters who are considering divorce or have been divorced. The tragic consequence is an isolation that plagues men and women associated with divorce in the church at a time when they most need the body of Christ around them.

The result of the church's insulation and isolation has ultimately been a situation where *we have virtually ignored the problem* of divorce in the church. We would prefer not to talk about it, not to deal with it, and not to address it, at least in the context of the church. Instead, we have moved the conversation about divorce to courts and other civil arenas. As the Elders at Brook Hills, we believe this is wrong. We believe it is wrong when *Christians are running to the courts when they should be running to the church* to talk about divorce.

If a Christian today is contemplating divorce, the first person they contact is often a divorce lawyer. They soon find themselves in divorce court. While we in no way advocate disobedience to civil law in such cases, we wholeheartedly acknowledge the responsibility of the church to settle disputes between believers. The Bible is very clear on this in passages like 1 Corinthians 6. There, Paul is shocked that believers are taking one another to court (on a variety of issues), and he says these words (1 Corinthians 6:1-8):

If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the saints? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life! Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church! I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers? But instead, one brother goes to law against another—and this in front of unbelievers! The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated? Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers.

The Bible encourages a Christian husband not to take a Christian wife to court (and vice versa). Instead, the Bible sets up other avenues in circumstances such as Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5 mention to handle disputes among believers. The purpose of this document is not to provide a complete biblical understanding of church discipline and its practice in the church, but suffice to say that believers are not supposed to take one another to court.²

We as the church have sat back, abdicated our biblical responsibilities, and watched the state take over the institution of marriage in such a way that the church is hardly involved at all. This is wrong, and it desperately needs to change, particularly regarding divorce. While we greatly respect and thank God for men and women who work in the legal profession, we should not let lawyers or judges determine the fate of our families when such conflict can and should clearly be handled in the church. When we do not heed this admonition in 1 Corinthians 6, Paul says very clearly that *we are discrediting the testimony of the church* and *we are disgracing the name of Christ*. What are we saying to an increasingly secular court system when half of the divorce cases they are dealing with involve two supposed Christians? Likewise, we urge any person involved in building their career on making divorce cheap and easy to repent and seek the forgiveness of God for scorning the design of God and the glory of Christ in marriage.

The question remains, though, "*What should the church do?*" We want to be extremely careful in our response to this question to assure that anyone who reads this document understands that the church is a body of people. When we say that we should be running to the church in issues such as these, the primary emphasis in this exhortation is that we should be running to each other. We are not primarily alluding to classes or seminars or even staff members. We are primarily referring to the body of Christ. We are called to share life with one another, and among married couples, this inevitably involves sharing marital struggles with one another. We believe authentic biblical community can provide a nurturing environment for all sorts of conflict in our lives, and we reiterate our desire for every member of the faith family to be involved in a small group sharing life with other believers.

At the same time, we realize that some situations require additional help beyond the relationships we currently have in the church. In such situations, church leadership is available to provide help through a variety of avenues. Moreover, in more severe situations requiring professional attention, we would like to refer you to biblical counselors who are able to take the Word and their expertise to provide wisdom in such circumstances.

Regardless of who is involved, the church has a twofold responsibility in addressing divorce among her members. First, we must *comfort one another with love*. God calls us to be a faith family that comes alongside divorced persons to stand by them and help them find joy and forgiveness, strength and healing in Christ. God calls us to stand by and uphold children of divorce. And God calls us to come alongside each other in marital difficulties so that when a brother or sister is contemplating divorce, we don't isolate them or ignore their issue. Instead, we weep with them and we serve them and we point them to the ever-constant presence of God and the ever-faithful Word of God.

² *Clearly, in extraneous circumstances, such as abusive situations, civil authorities should by necessity be involved (in addition to the church).*

The second responsibility we have is to *confront one another with truth*. We are careful to comfort, but we don't comfort with falsehood; that is no comfort at all. We want to avoid saying what feels best in divorce situations or possibly even twisting what Scripture says to make it fit what a struggling husband or wife wants to hear. This is unloving and deceptive, and though it may seem to have benefits in the short-term, we believe it has disastrous consequences in the long-term. We have a responsibility in love to communicate to each other what Scripture says about divorce. This may be the more difficult path in the short-term, but in the long-term we trust that this will produce countless blessings for future generations.

Comforting and confronting – we pray that both of these actions will be evident in our faith family when it comes to divorce. We are a community of faith, and when a couple in this community is contemplating divorce, we cannot isolate them or ignore their struggles. We are members of one body that we might love each other, care for each other, and build one another up in Christ. If we sit back and do nothing, we leave our brother and sister to walk their journey alone. If we comfort but we do not share truth, we deceive them. If we confront them but do not comfort them, we only harden their hearts. We must do both, and we must take responsibility for each other's growth in Christ for the glory of God in our lives and His church.

God and Divorce

Based on the passages of Scripture quoted above, we assert four primary truths regarding God and divorce: (1) God created marriage; (2) God hates divorce; (3) God regulates divorce; and (4) God redeems divorce. We will unpack these truths one-by-one below.

God created marriage.

This truth was the starting point for Jesus when he talked about divorce. Jesus quoted from Genesis 2 and asserted that what God had joined together, man should not separate. The picture to which Jesus points us from the beginning of Scripture is that *marriage is defined by God*. The Bible teaches that *only God can make marriage*, and as a result, *only God can break marriage*.

One author of numerous books on biblical counseling wrote: "If marriage were of human origin, then human beings would have a right to set it aside. But since God instituted marriage, only He has the right to do so. Marriage as an institution (which includes individual marriages, of course) is subject to the rules and regulations set down by God. Individuals may marry, be divorced and be remarried only if, when and how He says they may without sinning. The state has been given the task of keeping orderly records, etc., but it has no right (or competence) to determine the rules for marriage and for divorce; that prerogative is God's."³

We believe the state not only lacks the right and competence, but we all lack the right and competence to determine the rules for marriage and divorce. This is the starting point for any discussion of divorce. We must be willing to submit our lives and our church to God's Word on marriage and divorce. God defines marriage. He makes it and only He can break it.

Marriage is defined by God, and *marriage is a covenant under God*. Marriage is not a contract that can be broken when one party breaks its terms. Marriage is a covenant that is kept by both parties under the authority of a higher power. Our God is a covenant-keeping God, and in His design covenants represent a true, authentic commitment between two parties. If marriage is a covenant, then divorce slanders the covenant; it presents the covenant of marriage as a lie.

This is important not only because of the seriousness of the covenant between a man and wife, but ultimately because *marriage is a demonstration to the world of Christ's covenant with His people*. From the beginning, marriage was intended by God to be a reflection of the relationship between Christ and His church (Ephesians 5:22-33). If this is the case, then divorce is never good, and the reason is because Christ never divorces His people. If Christ ever abandons or discards His church, then a man can divorce his wife. But as long as Christ is faithful to His bride and the covenant or marriage represents Christ's relationship with His church, then husbands and wives should love each other and not divorce each other. Whenever we divorce, we mar the picture of Christ's covenant relationship with His bride before the world, and we must avoid this at all costs. What God has joined together, let not man separate.

³ Jay E. Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 4.

God hates divorce.

This second truth concerning God and divorce is a direct quote from Malachi 2:16. God created marriage to be the union of a man and a woman, and therefore divorce is fundamentally at odds with the purpose of God in creation. At the same time, a passage like Jeremiah 3:8 actually associates God with divorce regarding His people, and Matthew 19 and 1 Corinthians 7 provide possible exceptions for divorce, so what does the Bible mean when it says that God hates divorce?

First, we believe this means that *God hates the causes of divorce*. We must realize that *divorce is always a result of sin*. This is the point of Deuteronomy 24, and it's what Jesus alludes to in Matthew when he says that Moses permitted them to divorce their wives because their hearts were hard. The reality is that marriage is the uniting of two dreadful sinners. Not just one, but two! Every husband and every wife needs to remember this. No marriage is perfect because every marriage involves sin – in both spouses.

This is important to remember especially when a spouse is considering going through a divorce process. We believe it is extremely difficult to go through a divorce process (even one for biblical reasons) without sinning. In many circumstances of divorce, there is an offending spouse and an offended spouse.⁴ For example, one spouse commits adultery (the offending spouse) and the other spouse is not guilty of adultery (the offended spouse). Even in such cases where fault clearly lies with one spouse over the other, the offended spouse is tempted to sin throughout the divorce process. He or she is tempted to become bitter, malicious, or spiteful, all of which the Bible warns against.

The danger is when a spouse justifies such behavior with thoughts such as, “But look at what my spouse has done to me!” While we have great empathy for an offended spouse in such a situation, we warn such spouses to be careful not to let their offending spouse's sin now become the justification for sin in their own lives. When this occurs, God's design for restoration and reconciliation is tragically undercut in this process of divorce. We are not saying that such resistance of sin is easy in such situations; in fact, we are saying it is impossible, but this is the Gospel and marriage! Every Christian spouse has the person and presence of Christ, the attitude of Christ, and all the resources of Christ at their disposal. So at all times, even if there is biblical grounds for divorce, we must resist sin and run to Christ.

Divorce is always a result of sin, and *divorce is almost always sinful*. We make this caveat because there are narrow circumstances in Matthew and 1 Corinthians in which God allows divorce. In such situations, divorce is not necessarily sinful. These cases are extremely limited, as we'll see in the next truth, and all divorces outside of the exceptions allowed in Scripture are indeed sinful and both disobey and dishonor God.

Not only does God hate the causes of divorce, but second, *God hates the consequences of divorce*. These consequences are primarily twofold. First, *divorce negatively affects physical offspring*. We want to be especially careful at this point not to bring further discouragement upon men, women, and children in our faith family who have already experienced divorce. God has not left men, women, and children in these situations to experience these consequences alone; He is gracious, and as we will affirm, He redeems the worst evils in this world for His glory.

At the same time, we want to warn brothers and sisters who have not divorced of the danger of divorce for your children. This is biblical. The context of Malachi 2 (where God states His hatred for divorce) involves God's design for a father, mother, and children in a home. God is supremely wise in His design for the family. He knows the emotional implications for children as their mom or dad is no longer living with them. He knows the dangers of contentious relationships, parenting agreements, custody disputes, and children being used as pawns in the chess match between mom and dad. God knows the financial implications that strain not just how to provide for children, but the time parents have with children to nurture them. God knows the social implications for children not just in the present but for years to come in the future.

To every married couple in our faith family, we plead for you to hear God saying to you, “Don't divorce your husband or wife. I hate it.” God is exposing the myth of divorce in our culture that once a divorce is final, all of the problems will be over. This is a lie, and Scripture here warns us that the problems will continue for you, your children, your parents, your grandchildren, and others as a result of divorce. The world says, “Things will be better after divorce.” God says, “I hate the consequences of divorce.”

⁴ We want to intentionally avoid language that refers to a “guilty” or “innocent” spouse since the biblical reality is that even the best of us is guilty of sin and the fault for conflict in marriage rarely, if ever, lies with one spouse alone. However, for the sake of this facet of our discussion, we are referring to one spouse as the primary “offending” spouse and the other as the one who has primarily been “offended.”

Not only does divorce affect physical offspring, but *divorce negatively affects spiritual offspring*, as well. The effects of divorce on the portrayal of Christ in the world are real and eternal. We affect the advancement of the Gospel to the nations by divorce because we lie to the world about Christ's love for His people. For the sake of souls headed to a Christ-less eternity, we urge men and women not to divorce.

God regulates divorce.

Divorce was not a part of God's plan for marriage in Genesis 2, and in that sense, God never willed divorce. However, Deuteronomy 24, Matthew 19, and 1 Corinthians 7 all make clear that the Bible acknowledges the reality of divorce, and in these texts God gives us certain regulations concerning divorce. These are regulations, not suggestions. Many people have misconstrued Paul's comments in 1 Corinthians 7 to claim that Paul is just giving his opinion here. This is not true. Paul is speaking authoritative Scripture as he differentiates between direct quotes from Jesus and fresh revelation appearing on the pages of Scripture for the first time in 1 Corinthians 7.

This is extremely important because the Bible is not merely making suggestions about divorce. God is not giving us truths that are open to be added to or taken away from by pastors, counselors, lawyers, or anyone else in the twenty-first century. God is not giving us optional suggestions to be considered; He is giving us non-negotiable commands to be obeyed. God is saying, "These are the only biblical grounds for divorce." We see one such ground in Matthew 19 (pertaining to divorce between two Christians) and one other ground in 1 Corinthians 7 (pertaining to divorce between a Christian and a non-Christian). We will begin with Matthew 19.

The context of Matthew 19 involves a conversation between first-century Pharisees and Jesus. In order to understand the mindset of Jesus' audience, we must understand the Deuteronomy 24 text mentioned earlier. Much debate in the first century surrounded Moses' statement that a man may divorce a woman "who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her." This was the exception, so to speak, mentioned in Deuteronomy 24. One school of thought in first-century Judaism interpreted this phrase to mean that a man would divorce his wife if she had committed some type of immodest behavior, most likely understood to be sexual immorality. The other school of thought (the more dominant school of thought) interpreted this phrase much more broadly. According to the words of Moses, they reasoned, divorce was possible whenever a wife did anything displeasing to her husband. The result of this interpretation was among many men in the first century a broad understanding of justification for divorce. Simply put, a man could divorce his wife for any reason.

Jesus brings this picture of Deuteronomy 24 into the New Testament, and He makes this statement: "Anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery." In one sweeping statement, Jesus clearly narrows the grounds for divorce and offers only one exception. [On a side note, this exception is not mentioned in Mark, Luke, or 1 Corinthians 7, prompting some biblical scholars to question if even this is grounds for divorce, but we believe based on Matthew 19, as well as Matthew 5:32, that Jesus is indeed presenting one possible exception for divorce.]

Therefore, based on Jesus' words in Matthew 19, He is allowing for *one ground for divorce among believers: adultery*. The word translated "marital unfaithfulness" in the New International Version is translated "sexual sin" or "sexual immorality" in most other translations. In many senses, "marital unfaithfulness" is a poor translation of the original word used by Jesus here, *porneia*. It is a word used throughout Scripture to refer to various kinds of sexual sin and fornication. In the context of marriage, such sexual sin is adulterous. Jesus therefore gives one (and only one) ground for divorce among believers: *porneia*.

This obviously narrowed most of the crowd's understanding of divorce possibilities, and we must catch the gravity of Jesus' statement. When you read the Old Testament, you find that the penalty for adultery was death. Obviously Jesus was not saying here in the New Testament that an adulterer should die, but we must not miss the implication. Adultery is a grievous sin that at one time caused God to warrant that a husband or wife guilty of such sin would die. Now Jesus says this is the only reason why a believing husband or wife could divorce his or her spouse.

Why adultery? This one exception makes sense in light of Jesus' quotation from Genesis 2:24 in Matthew 19, which pictures man and woman as "one flesh" in marriage. Adultery, in defiance of God, places another person within the "one flesh" picture of marriage. Adultery demeans, shames, and abandons a husband or a wife for selfish gain. Such sexual immorality, Jesus says, is extremely serious, and it alone is grounds for divorce.

Some might think that Jesus is lining up with the first school of thought in first-century Judaism mentioned earlier, but this is where we must see the heart of Jesus' teaching on marriage. Those who interpreted Deuteronomy 24 to refer to immodest behavior or sexual immorality would have thought such behavior rendered divorce not only possible, but certain. However, when we read Matthew 19, we do not see a command from Jesus to divorce in such a situation. Instead, Jesus says *divorce is permissible in this situation*.

This is where we begin to see the radical implications of the Gospel for divorce in Scripture. In the Gospel, sin is not the end of the story. With the Gospel, there is hope. There is hope for an adulterous spouse to be forgiven, and there is hope for an offended spouse to forgive.

We believe this is the thrust of what Jesus is teaching here. *Divorce between believers is not desirable*. Jesus is approaching the possibility of divorce in a redemptive manner and the way in which he approaches it directly confronts the thought patterns of his day. The Pharisees were searching for circumstances in which it would be permissible for them to divorce, and Jesus is saying in his response that *we are not looking for reasons to divorce*. The goal is not to look at the letter of the law for a loophole that allows divorce, and we must not look at God's Word this way today. When it comes to divorce, we are not looking for reasons or justifications for divorce. Such thinking misses the heart of Jesus' teaching. In fact, it's what Jesus is countering. Jesus is showing us that divorce is not desirable when He says that even in the worst of circumstances – adultery – even then He does not require it. As a result, even in particular cases where divorce may be technically permissible, it may still be undesirable. [For more elaboration, see Question 2.]

Not only is divorce not desirable, but *divorce between believers is not inevitable*. The Pharisees saw the law as mandating divorce for adultery, and Jesus challenges that notion in a redemptive approach that ultimately encourages offended spouses to forgive and take back unfaithful spouses who are repentant. This is the same "radical" in Matthew 19 who said in Luke 17, "If a brother sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."

"Forgive him? How can I forgive him? It's just not that easy," one spouse may reply. And Jesus is not saying it's easy; instead, He's saying it's Gospel. Jesus is saying to them then and us now, "I came to die for your sins. I came to count you as righteous. I came to show you love that supersedes your sin and unfaithfulness. And I came to show you how to do the same in others' lives."

This is the Gospel and divorce! And because of the Gospel, divorce between two people who have the Gospel in their hearts is not desirable and not inevitable. There is always hope for every follower of Christ, and *we are always looking for reconciliation to occur*. Reconciliation is always the goal of the Gospel.

Obviously no person can control another, and a wife cannot control her husband anymore than a husband can control his wife. Most certainly there will be cases when a husband or wife may commit adultery and persist unrepentant in their sin. Though the offended spouse offers to forgive by the power of the Gospel and wants to continue in marriage by the power of the Gospel, sometimes the offending spouse does not seek forgiveness and refuses to turn from adulterous sin. In such a case, Jesus says, divorce is possible. Likewise, Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5 give specific instructions on how such unrepentant sin should be addressed in the church. [For more on confronting unrepentant sin in the church, see the forthcoming Brook Hills document on "Church Restoration."]

This is the ground for biblical divorce among believers: adultery.

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul quotes from Jesus and then identifies *one ground for divorce between a believer and a non-believer: abandonment*. As we read 1 Corinthians 7, we remember that this was a young church filled with new Christians, and many cases existed where a wife or husband had come to faith in Christ while their spouse had not. We can imagine that such radical change caused great strain in marriages where one spouse remained an unbeliever. As a result, many people in Corinth were teaching that it would be better for the Christian spouse to divorce and be single than to stay in that marriage.

Paul counters this teaching as he exhorts his readers to continue in marriage with an unbelieving husband or wife. In other words, Paul says, "Do everything you can to keep your marriage alive. Love your spouse in a way that is peaceful and demonstrates Christ to them."

Like Jesus, Paul is after reconciliation here. Divorce is not desirable or inevitable from the Christian's point-of-view. Staying together is best, according to Paul, not only for the Christian spouse, but for the children, and hopefully for the eventual salvation of the non-Christian spouse.

However, Paul acknowledges that there may be situations where the unbelieving spouse may insist on divorce. The unbelieving spouse may leave or abandon his believing wife or husband in this case. If this occurs, Paul says in verse 15 that the believing wife or husband is free to let their spouse go. *Divorce is preferable in this situation.* The verb in verse 15 is a passive imperative – “Let him do so.” In other words, such a divorce is not initiated by the believer, but by the unbelieving spouse in this case.

Two biblical grounds for divorce: adultery and abandonment. The most shocking facet of the biblical treatment of divorce is most likely the grounds that are not included here. Some in the church have concluded that Jesus’ teaching is “impractical” and “narrow.” Certainly He meant more than sexual immorality, some have said. Others have suggested that when Paul talked about abandonment by an unbeliever, he is referring to any spouse who acts like an unbeliever in certain circumstances. Such quests for justifiable divorce not only twist Scripture to say something it is not saying; they undercut the thrust of what Scripture is saying. Marriage is a permanent covenant, and we are not looking for reasons to divorce.

At this point, we are sympathetic with the variety of serious conflicts marriages face that are not mentioned here. Abuse (including physical, verbal, and emotional abuse) is not mentioned here. Neglect (including physical, sexual, financial, and other forms of neglect) is not mentioned, either. The New Testament does not mention lack of love, support, encouragement, or the many other things that are necessary for a vital marriage. But we must not be misled. Scripture is not silent on any of these things and addresses these issues in a variety of contexts.

Scripture takes abuse seriously. Very seriously. As a result, issues like abuse need to be addressed very seriously in marriages and in the church. No wife, husband, or children should live in harm’s way because of an abusive spouse or parent, and separation may be necessary in such cases. When spouses are guilty of these things, they must be addressed and confronted in the context of the marriage and in the context of the church. As mentioned previously, a process in Scripture (Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5) exists for such circumstances.

The necessary truth to conclude from Matthew 19 and 1 Corinthians 7, though, is that none of these other situations create biblical grounds for divorce. As a result, to divorce for any of these other reasons (as well as much lesser reasons like “incompatibility” or “irreconcilable differences”) is sin according to Scripture.

Further, both Matthew 19 and 1 Corinthians 7 clearly teach that divorce without biblical grounds leads to adultery in remarriage. However, the exception clause in both Matthew 5 and 19 implies that *remarriage is biblically permissible only after biblical grounds for divorce.* In other words, remarriage is permitted only when divorce is permitted. Therefore, if a husband or wife divorces his or her spouse without biblical grounds for divorce, then he or she is not free to remarry. Such a remarriage would be adulterous.

Practically speaking, then, the non-adulterous spouse in the first exception for divorce and the Christian spouse in the second exception for divorce can remarry, according to these passages. Mark 10:11-12 makes clear that if you marry a woman or a man who divorced for unbiblical grounds, you commit adultery.

This remarriage question is particularly difficult in our culture today, but not because the Bible is unclear. The primary reason for the difficulty is that so many instances of divorce without biblical grounds abound in our culture. The snowball effect is overwhelming, to say the least. Nevertheless, the Bible is clear that only people who have come out of biblical divorce (allowed by God) can biblically marry (with widows and widowers, of course, being the only other exception).

God redeems divorce.

We include this truth particularly for the sake of divorced men and women in our faith family. We know that the subject of divorce uncovers both old and new wounds. However, our prayer is that a biblical treatment of divorce brings fresh healing to those wounds. We realize the toughness of these words we have seen in Scripture. The Bible clearly shows that the marriage covenant must be kept, but we must see the reason behind this. The reason God is so serious in His Word about our marriage covenants is because He is so serious about His marriage covenant with us. And this is the good news. Even if the marriage covenant in your life was broken in the past, be assured of this: the ultimate marriage covenant is still intact.

Divorced men and women in the Brook Hills faith family, we implore you to gaze upon a God who picks you up where you are, not where you wish you were, where you thought you’d be, or where you think you should have been. He picks you up daily where you are, and He carries on His covenant with you. We cannot undo our pasts, but God can clear them. And no matter what sin caused divorce in your life or what facets of your divorce were sinful, know this: *Your Eternal Husband is always forgiving* (2 Corinthians 11:2; Revelation 19:6-9).

Divorce is not the great sin, the unforgivable sin, or the unpardonable sin. Divorce is not beyond the reach of God's grace; in fact, it is well within the reach of God's grace. We know that saying these things might cause some married spouses who are contemplating divorce to think misguided thoughts like, "Well, then, I'll divorce, even if it's on unbiblical grounds, and God will forgive me," a thought process that completely misses the Gospel. But we are willing to take the risk of being misunderstood in that way to say to our divorced brothers and sisters: You have an Eternal Husband who is great and gracious and merciful. He always sustains, always strengthens, always provides for you and for your children with extra measures of grace that abound from heaven.

Your Eternal Husband is always forgiving, and *Your Eternal Husband is always faithful*. Praise be to God – *He will never commit adultery against you* and *He will never abandon you*. No matter what happens in this world, Jesus never forsakes His bride – never. He never abuses you. He always loves you and He always takes you back when you wander. He is always patient, He always cares for you, He always protects you, and He always delights in you. Regardless of whether you have been married once or fifty times, as a follower of Christ, the reality is: you are His bride forever. This is the Gospel.

The Gospel and Divorce

We therefore affirm the following practical implications of God's Word for men and women across our faith family.

If you are single, maximize your singleness to advance the Gospel. The context of 1 Corinthians 7 is couched in great contentment with the place and position where God has put you. Paul assures singles that God has given them a gift in their singleness and they are free from the troubles of marriage. As long as this is the case, Paul says, maximize that gift of singleness for the advancement of God's kingdom.

If you are married, love your spouse in a way that portrays the Gospel. Husbands, love your wives with sacrificial love and take responsibility for the glory of Christ in your marriage. Wives, respect your husbands and honor Christ through building him up as the spiritual leader of your home.

If you are married and considering divorce, remember the preciousness of the Gospel and the power of the Gospel. If you are a spouse and you are considering divorcing your husband or wife, we want to encourage you to ask, first, if you have biblical grounds for divorce. If you do not, we want to urge you to consider how in the context of your marriage, and possibly with the help of the church, you can resolve the conflict that is so real and damaging. This is only possible through the preciousness and power of the Gospel, but any other route is sinfully disobedient to God. On the other hand, if you do have biblical grounds for divorce, we want to likewise encourage you to consider the preciousness and power of the Gospel with a view toward reconciliation in your marriage, possibly with the help of others in the church. The Gospel can change even the hardest and darkest of hearts, so keep restoration and reconciliation at the forefront of your desires even if you begin the process of divorce.

If you divorced your spouse for a biblical reason and are single, rest in the Gospel in your singleness or possibly in a future marriage. If you were divorced on biblical grounds, i.e., in cases of unrepentant adultery or unsaved abandonment, then we encourage you to rest in the singleness God has given to you at this time. If He grants you continued singleness, we pray that by the power of the Gospel He will enable you to rejoice in it. If He doesn't and He leads you to remarry, we pray that by the power of the Gospel you will display the love of Christ for His church in your remarriage.

If you divorced your spouse for an unbiblical reason and are single, repent and rely on the Gospel to glorify Christ as you stay single. Repent of your sin to both God and to your former spouse. Then let the Gospel of Christ give you great hope for a life that thrives in the advancement of the Gospel as a single while you await the next wedding where we will join Jesus together for all of eternity.

If you divorced your spouse for an unbiblical reason and you have already remarried, repent and reflect the Gospel in your current marriage. If you divorced for unbiblical reasons, Scripture encourages you to repent genuinely before God and your former spouse. However, Scripture nowhere indicates that you should break another covenant marriage by divorcing again. Instead, Scripture encourages you to focus on magnifying Christ in the marriage you have now by the power of the Gospel.

10 MOST COMMON QUESTIONS REGARDING THE GOSPEL AND DIVORCE

We answer the questions below with great hesitation. We have seen in Scripture what the New Testament teaches about divorce. The teaching of the New Testament is completely sufficient for life and marriage in godliness. At the same time, Scripture does not answer every question we have, particularly when it comes to this issue. Therefore, we are left with the responsibility of taking what we do know in Scripture and bringing it to bear on the questions for which we do not know the answers. You will find us constantly coming back to the truths already delineated above from Scripture in an attempt to keep the focus on what God has revealed instead of speculating too widely on what He has not revealed.

Furthermore, the views expressed below are presented to you by the consensus of the Elders. However, because of the speculation involved, some of the Elders have slightly different convictions on different issues. The responses below represent our consensus view but also leave room for personal convictions (grounded in Scripture) that differ at points.

Finally, we do not want to fall into the trap that inhibited Jesus' audience in Matthew 19. They were looking for reasons to divorce, searching for ways out of marriage, and working to justify their desires for divorce. Unfortunately, this attitude also pervades the church today, and we want to reiterate the redemptive approach, which Jesus brought to marriage. In answering the questions below, we want to avoid all attempts to try to justify divorce or make it possible for divorce to happen. Instead, we want to avoid divorce altogether. In the spirit of Hosea, we do not want to give up on the Gospel as the power of God for restoration and reconciliation in the darkest of situations (see especially Hosea 1-3).

There are two ways to read these questions and our answers, and the way a reader chooses will greatly influence how our answers are understood. The first way to read these answers is in an honest search for God's best in your life, in your spouse's life, and in your marriage. It is to read these answers (and this document altogether) with a passion to obey God's commands no matter what they are. This is the path of blind abandonment, a complete surrender of one's life and relationships to God that submits to His Word in every way. Such a path seeks the attitude of Christ in all things. This is a path that involves the love of Christ for one's spouse and the desire for restoration and reconciliation at every turn, always resisting divorce if at all possible. This is not the easy path, but we believe it to be the Gospel path, and we urge you to read these questions and answers in this way.

The other option is to read these questions and answers looking for a way out or a way in. What do we mean? First, there is unfortunately a way to read this document looking for a way out of marriage. Many spouses have been so hurt and so damaged in marriage that they are longing to get out more than they are longing to see the glory of Christ restored in their spouse's life and in their marriage. As much as possible, we feel the weight of the pain and wounds of readers like this. However, we believe that marriage is a permanent covenant, and God desires by the power of the Gospel to rebuild broken marriages, no matter how shattered they are. As we have seen, extremely narrow circumstances exist in which Scripture acknowledges divorce is possible, but this is neither desirable nor inevitable. The danger of reading these documents looking for a way out of marriage is the danger of the Pharisees who listened to Jesus speak in Matthew 19 and missed the Gospel altogether.

Likewise, many readers will be tempted to read these questions and answers looking for a way in. Maybe divorce for unbiblical reasons has been a reality for such readers in the past, and they are looking for justification to remarry. We know that situations vary and, as we mentioned, there are not always clearcut answers to questions about remarriage. However, we want to encourage readers who have been divorced and are considering the possibility of remarriage to read this document not with a view toward remarriage but with a view toward Christ. Marriage is not the answer for satisfaction in any of our lives, and neither is remarriage. Christ is. Christ is sufficient. Christ is supreme. Christ is Savior. Christ is enough. This is one of the primary points in 1 Corinthians 7 as Paul exhorts singles to stay single – for the sake of Christ and His mission. The world would have us think that marriage is the goal for a single; the Word tells us that Christ is the goal for a single. So we invite you to read these questions and answers with a view toward Christ above anyone or anything else in this world and with great contentment in the hope of an eternal marriage to Christ that will never spoil or fade.

Before reading on, we invite you to pray, search your heart, and ask God to reveal how you may be reading these questions and answers. Ask Him to give you the heart of Christ, the heart of the Gospel that God might platform the glory of Christ in the difficult situations we face in marriage for which we do not have all the answers.

1. At what point does adultery become biblical grounds for divorce?

Various people have asked this question in different ways. Some look at Jesus' words in Matthew 5 where He says if a man looks lustfully at a woman, he has committed adultery with her in his heart. Would this mean that lust is biblical grounds for divorce? Further, since the word Jesus uses as an exception for divorce in Matthew 19, *porneia*, refers to various types of sexual sin in Scripture, does this mean that various types of sexual sin provide biblical grounds for divorce according to Jesus?

Starting with the Matthew 5 reference, this passage (Matthew 5:27-30) occurs in the context of the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus is challenging the religious leaders regarding their view of righteousness. Throughout Matthew 5, Jesus is raising the bar, so to speak, to show them that God's standard of righteousness is far higher than any of them imagined. This climaxes in Matthew 5:48 when Jesus tells them they need to be perfect. All of this to say, when Jesus says that looking at a woman lustfully is committing adultery with her in his heart, he is not saying that physical sexual involvement with a woman is exactly the same as having a lustful thought. He is saying that if they really believed they could gain their righteousness by their works, they would gouge their eyes out and throw them away (5:29). Praise God – Christ came to make us perfect when there is no way we could ever be righteous on our own!

So then, at what point does adultery become grounds for biblical divorce? The word Jesus uses in Matthew 19, *porneia*, does refer to various types of sexual sin and sexual immorality in Scripture. We believe the key to understanding *porneia* as grounds for divorce is to tie it with Jesus' quotation of Genesis 2:24. Sexual sin within the context of marriage that provides grounds for divorce involves a violation of the "one flesh" meaning of marriage.

2. If my Christian spouse repents of adultery, does this mean I no longer have biblical grounds for divorce?

Jesus said plainly, "Anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman, commits adultery." From this plain statement, Jesus offers this one exception for divorce that we have discussed – *porneia*, or adultery. So, in a plain sense, yes, divorce is permissible in this situation.

But is divorce desirable in this situation? In light of the totality of Jesus' and Paul's teaching on divorce in the redemptive context of the New Testament and in view of the picture of the Gospel in marriage, we do not believe divorce is always desirable or inevitable, even in the context of adultery. We do not pretend to know all the pain involved in having your husband or wife commit adultery in your marriage. At the same time, if your spouse is repentant, has sought and received the forgiveness of Christ, and is seeking forgiveness from you, we would encourage you, by the power of the Gospel, to forgive and embrace your spouse. This is the picture of Hosea in the Old Testament displayed even more clearly by Christ in the New Testament (see especially Hosea 1-3). He loves us unreservedly, and He welcomes our unfaithful souls with His ever-faithful arms. He does this repeatedly, and in the process He enables us to do it repeatedly with others, including our spouse. As a result, by the Spirit of Christ and for the glory of Christ, we would encourage you to consider not divorcing your spouse for adultery until you have exhausted every means possible for him or her to repent and seek forgiveness. We believe a divorce in adulterous circumstances would involve the offended spouse offering to forgive and praying fervently for restoration at every point in the divorce process, ready to forgive even at the last hour if the offending spouse should turn in repentance.

3. What if my Christian spouse is abusing me?

We start an answer to this question by pointing to Malachi 2:16. In the same breath that God says He hates divorce, He also says He hates a man's covering himself (or his wife) with violence. God hates divorce and He hates abuse. Abuse is sinful and is not tolerable in a marriage relationship. We would not encourage any spouse or child to be in a home with a man or woman who jeopardizes their safety. Without question, we would implore any spouse in such a situation to remove themselves from all danger. Physical separation from a spouse may obviously be necessary in such cases.

While the seriousness of abuse cannot be overestimated, it is still not included in Scripture as biblical grounds for divorce. Our fear in recognizing this is that an abusive spouse might feel vindicated in their abuse since it apparently is not serious enough for divorce. But we want to resolutely affirm that though abuse is not a part of the exception clause in Matthew 19, it is extremely serious and it must be dealt with seriously according to Scripture.

Scripture outlines processes and procedures for addressing sin in the church. This process, outlined in Matthew 18, involves confronting a believer in his or her sin. If he or she does not respond in repentance (and prove their repentance with their actions according to Acts 26:20), other believers become involved in loving confrontation, and if necessary the church as a whole becomes involved. The goal of church discipline in these sorts of cases is always restoration and reconciliation. This is true even in situations of physical abuse. As heinous as violence in the home is, we follow a Savior who loved, pursued, and prayed for His abusers. This is the power of the Gospel at work in one of the darkest situations a marriage can face.

In rare cases where a spouse continues to be abusive even when confronted by the church, then Matthew 18:17 says a point may come where the church treats this person as a pagan or a tax collector (basically, as an unbeliever). Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 5, Paul exhorts the church to expel the immoral brother. Such a step would be taken with great caution and with many tears after repeated attempts at restoration and reconciliation by the church as a whole.

However, if this becomes a reality, that person is then treated as an unbeliever by the church. Consequently, this changes the context of marriage, for now the marriage is between a believer and someone who has shown so little evidence of grace in their life that the church is now treating them as an unbeliever. As a result, church leaders would then help the offended spouse in evaluating whether or not grounds exist for divorce in light of the second ground for divorce: abandonment by an unbelieving spouse. Again, though, we reiterate that throughout this whole process divorce is neither desirable nor inevitable, and restoration and reconciliation of the offending spouse and damaged marriage is always the goal.

4. What if my Christian spouse abandons me?

This question is similar to the above question in that it involves unbiblical grounds for divorce. We do, however, realize that situations exist where a Christian spouse will pursue divorce without biblical grounds. In such a situation, we would encourage church discipline in the vein of Matthew 18 to be implemented. A believer pursuing divorce without biblical grounds is sinning. Therefore, they would be confronted in their sin first by the offended spouse, then by others, and ultimately, in rare cases, by the church if the believer continues in unrepentant sin. At this point, this question becomes similar to the question above regarding the process by which sin is dealt with in the offending spouse and consequently in church leaders' guidance for the offended spouse. Also similar to the above situation, restoration and reconciliation to Christ, the marriage, and the church are always the goal.

5. What constitutes abandonment as grounds for biblical divorce between a Christian and non-Christian?

Because Scripture is not specific in describing certain actions as indicators of abandonment, we hesitate to be specific without knowing the circumstances faced in these sorts of situations. On a whole, the thrust of Scripture's exhortation to the Christian spouse is to try to make the marriage work. The initiative for divorce in this situation would come from the non-Christian spouse. We would encourage the Christian spouse to counsel with church leaders to determine at what time and under what specific circumstances it would be best to "let him/her leave."

6. What if I was divorced without biblical grounds before I came to Christ – is remarriage a possibility for me?

We as Elders have concluded that Scripture does not explicitly and decisively answer this question. On one hand, we know that when someone comes to faith in Christ, their heart is regenerated and they become a new creation; the old has gone and the new has come. Before coming to Christ, that person is ignorant of God's Word and expectations for marriage. They now have the Spirit of Christ and for the first time understand covenant marriage as God designed it. As a result of the grace and forgiveness of Christ, some of us see remarriage as a possibility. We would also add that remarriage to the person's former spouse, if that spouse is a believer, would be the primary goal, if possible. If this is not possible because the former spouse is remarried or is unsaved and shows no evidence over time of coming to faith in Christ, then this person would be free to remarry another.

On the other hand, we understand marriage as a covenant that includes all people, including non-Christians. As a result, any person who has divorced for unbiblical reasons has broken covenant in disobedience to God. At salvation, this sin is obviously forgiven and cleansed, but many earthly consequences of sin prior to salvation still persist in a believer's life. If reconciliation and restoration with the former spouse is not possible, then remarriage is not possible.

In the absence of a clear and explicit answer to this question in Scripture, we encourage you to seek out church leaders to examine your situation and seek Christ and His Word regarding how to best glorify His Name.

7. So when am I free to remarry if I've been divorced?

Based on our understanding of Jesus' and Paul's teaching on remarriage and adultery, remarriage is permissible for men and women whose divorce was biblically permissible. In other words, the offended spouse in an adulterous situation and the offended spouse in the abandonment situation are free to remarry and not commit adultery.

However, even in these cases, we want to encourage the offended spouse to seriously and persistently pray, hope, and work for reconciliation with their former spouse before considering remarriage. Remarriage eliminates all possibilities for reconciliation that God may still yet bring about. As a result, remarriage should not be entered into lightly or without much prayer and biblical counsel.

If you are the offending spouse who divorced your spouse for unbiblical reasons, we encourage you to repent and turn to Christ and seek reconciliation with your former spouse. If your former spouse is remarried, you are not free to remarry because you left your first marriage without biblical warrant.

8. I am single. Is it unbiblical for me to marry someone who divorced for unbiblical reasons?

Yes, Jesus made it clear that marrying an adulterer or adulteress constitutes adultery (Mark 10:10-12; Luke 16:18).

9. What about separation?

We do not see evidence of separation in Scripture, and we believe that conflict in marriage should be confronted quickly, swiftly, and biblically. As a result, we are wary of prolonged separation that often isolates spouses from one another and gives them unhealthy "divorce practice" or "divorce experimentation." We recommend separation in the worst of circumstances (such as abuse) and for as short a time as possible (provided, of course, that a spouse or children are not in danger because of a potentially abusive situation).

10. Is God's grace a license to divorce and/or remarry without biblical grounds?

No, just as God's grace is not license to sin, His grace is not license to divorce and remarry apart from His design. His grace is motivation to treat divorce, marriage, and remarriage with greater honor, not less honor. The glory of Christ in the world is on display in the picture of marriage, and we guard it with everything we have.

FINAL NOTE

This document is the elders' attempt to apply the gracious, authoritative, and timeless truths of Scripture to the church's contemporary understanding of divorce. We realize that even with these explanations and answers, many areas of confusion and question still remain. Consequently, we encourage members of our faith family to seek godly counsel from church leadership for specific situations, and we want to make ourselves available to you for that purpose. We pray that the glory of Christ will be displayed in the way we approach marital conflict and promote marital harmony in the context of The Church at Brook Hills for the glory of Christ in Birmingham and in all nations.