

A STATEMENT ON MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE FOR HEBRON BAPTIST CHURCH

Introduction

Marriage was created by God for the display of His glory and for the joy of His creatures. Through this gift, we are called to consider not only God's covenantal love, but also His incredible patience and unconditional mercy toward His beloved. Because marriage was designed to portray God's goodness and fidelity, marital discord, division, and divorce obscures and corrupts the image of God painted within the world. In other words, marital strife fails to glorify God. Since the pursuit of the glory of God is the chief end of all things, divisions in marriage are very sober and serious problems with implications and consequences far outside ourselves.

The image of marriage as it relates to the glory of God is particularly vivid and explicit in the fifth chapter of Ephesians which parallels the relationship between husband and wife to that between Christ and the Church. Just as marriage is intended to point us to God, so we are able to look at the relationship between Christ and His bride to better understand our roles as husbands and wives. Our call within the sacred institution of marriage is to reflect the gospel: a gospel of forgiveness, longsuffering, unconditional grace, compassion, covenant and humility. Failure to display these virtues corrupts the very essence of our calling and distorts the picture of the gospel which marriage is intended to portray.

The labor of trusting and displaying the gospel in our marriages is an exceedingly difficult task because of sin. In the beginning, man and woman lived in rhythmic harmony with each other and the Lord. However, as creatures rebelled against the Creator, they were subjected to disharmony with Him, as well as with each other (Genesis 3:16). This conflict within the sacred union of man and woman continues even today and will do so until creation itself is set free from its bondage (Romans 8:19-23). The Scriptures declare that the source of quarrels and fights, whether marital or otherwise, is directly related to sinful desires within each party (James 4:1). Sin is our enemy in the fight for unity and peace within all relationships.

Given that divorce springs directly from the sin of at least one party and that it fails to properly reflect God's character, it is clearly never the best option. However, there is sincere disagreement by devout evangelical Biblical scholars and theologians as to whether or not, and in what circumstances, divorce might be permissible. Complete agreement does not exist within the evangelical church or even amid our own pastors and leaders as to the exact application of the Scriptures which deal with this issue. That being the case Hebron Baptist Church has a general boundary of beliefs on this topic which no counseling or teaching will exceed. Certain pastors might have more restrictive or conservative convictions, but none will go beyond these parameters.

Is Divorce or Remarriage the Unforgivable Sin?

When divorce begins to be discussed in this way it is common for someone to ask whether divorce is the unforgivable sin. The answer is found in the following texts.

Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name (Acts 10:43)

All sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin (Mark 3:28f).

Let the wicked man forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon (Isaiah 55:7).

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

From these wonderful promises we learn that forgiveness for sins is available on the basis of the shed blood of Jesus. Forgiveness is available for all sins, without exception. Forgiveness is received freely through trusting Christ. And trusting Christ involves confessing sin as sin and turning away from it to embrace the ways of God with joy.

The only unforgivable sin is the sin that we refuse to confess and forsake. We commit unforgivable sin when we cleave to a sin so long and so tenaciously that we can no longer confess it as sin and turn from it. The blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Matthew 12:31f) is the resistance of his convicting work to the point where he withdraws, leaving the sinner in helpless hardness of heart.

Neither divorce nor remarriage is in itself the unforgivable sin any more than murder, stealing, lying or coveting. "All sins will be forgiven the sons of men." God is faithful and just to forgive—he will honor the worth of his Son's sacrifice for all who confess their sin and bank their hope on the saving work of Christ.

Forgiveness is NOT unconditional. It is conditional. This does not mean it can be earned. It means forgiveness is given to those who truly trust Christ. Trust is not an act by which anything can be earned. It calls attention to the worth of God's grace, not the worth of our action. But trust is not mere intellectual assent to Biblical facts. It involves sincere affirmation of the will of Christ. Therefore trusting Christ involves confessing sin as sin and taking up arms against it.

Therefore marital sin is in the same category as lying and killing and stealing when it

comes to forgiveness. If someone has lied, killed, stolen, or illegitimately divorced, the issue is not, can they be forgiven? The issue is do they admit that what they did was sin? Do they renounce it? And do they do what they can to make it right?

In all these ways illegitimate divorce and remarriage are NOT in a class by themselves. They are not the unforgivable sin. When it comes to forgiveness they should be treated the same way other public sins are treated.

What makes divorce and remarriage seem to be a special matter of concern in the church is that very seldom does someone affirm the rightness of lying, killing, and stealing. But people often affirm the rightness of divorce and remarriage.

In other words what usually causes the conflict is not whether divorce and remarriage are unforgivable sins, but whether they are sins at all —to be confessed (from the past) and to be avoided (in the future).

So the decisive issue concerning divorce and remarriage is what we can agree on from the Scripture is right and wrong. Is there a Biblically legitimate divorce and remarriage which is not sin and so does not need to be confessed or avoided? If so what are the circumstances that define it?

The Hope of Reconciliation

Before discussing possible situations which might allow for divorce and eventual remarriage, it is first necessary to explicitly state the conviction that the hopeful resolution to all marital strife is reconciliation. Repentance and reconciliation is always the best option. Even if divorce is possible in some instances, patiently working through the process of reconciliation in the context of a community of believers is always preferable. Praise God that He has initiated reconciliation with us through the person and work of His beloved Son. This is how the Scriptures speak of this reconciliation: 2 Corinthians 5:17-6:1
“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them...”

The foundation for a healthy marriage is a right relationship with God, a relationship that will only come as we embrace the gospel of the love, mercy, forgiveness, grace and humility displayed in the person and work of Jesus Christ, Who died for our sins to reconcile us to God. (1 Peter 3:18).

As ambassadors entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation, our urgent plea is for souls to be reconciled to God and to each other. Within the body of Christ, we not only have the right, but also the responsibility to call our brothers and sisters to holy and God-honoring obedience to His commands of marital fidelity and unity. Though the work of reconciliation

may not be easy, it is certainly worth any cost to see God glorified and His children walking in the light.

Grounds for Divorce

Though once again stressing that divorce is not the best option, there are texts which would imply that it is sometimes permissible after all attempts at reconciliation have been exhausted. The two grounds upon which the Scriptures would possibly grant such release are sexual immorality and desertion by an unbeliever. Here are the pertinent texts:

*It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' 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. **Matthew 5:31-32***

*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. **1 Corinthians 7:15***

In Matthew 5:31-32 Jesus seems to make a concession for divorce in the case of "sexual immorality." This term in the Greek is very broad and would include such things as adultery, homosexuality, incest, and bestiality. In the case of adultery, the offended spouse is encouraged to engage their husband or wife with the gospel and offer forgiveness and restoration (though it might be a slow process), but ultimately they may have freedom to be released from the marriage. In 1 Corinthians 7:12-15 Paul discusses the case of a marriage between believer and unbeliever. In such an instance, the overarching command is clear; the believer should not divorce the unbeliever who is willing to remain married. However, if the unbelieving spouse does desert the marriage, the believer is therefore free.

In the case of unrepentant and continued abuse, the abused is encouraged to immediately separate and is also expected to inform Hebron Baptist Church who will attempt to engage both the abuser and the abused with the gospel in hopes of repentance and reconciliation. If such does not occur, the pastors may deem the abuser an unbelieving spouse according to the tenets of Matthew 18:17 and allow for divorce on the basis of the spiritual desertion caused by the abuse.

In all other issues of marital difficulty and division, the command of the Lord is clear, divorce is not to be pursued (1 Corinthians 7:10).

If one is currently considering divorce (or if his or her spouse is considering divorce) for any reason whatsoever or if one is currently divorced and is considering remarriage, he or she is encouraged to immediately contact Hebron Baptist Church for biblical counsel regarding the process of reconciliation.

The Possibility of Remarriage

As with the interpretation of the texts on permissible grounds for divorce, there is not complete unanimity on the possibility of remarriage. However, in instances involving one who was divorced on the grounds of sexual immorality or desertion by an unbeliever, remarriage will be considered acceptable within Hebron Baptist Church.

Since death breaks the marriage bond (Rom. 7:2-3; 1 Cor. 7:39), remarriage is permissible without sin for a believing widow or widower, if the marriage is with another believer.

For all divorces which have occurred for reasons other than sexual immorality or desertion, the expectation for both parties is to pursue reconciliation. Until such time as reconciliation with the former spouse occurs, both spouses are to remain unmarried as indicated in 1 Corinthians 7:11.

In addition, some pastors may feel freedom to remarry one who was divorced before conversion on the grounds that such a person is a new creation in Christ.

Conclusion

The Church has not always given very wise counsel regarding divorce. At times it has been too loosely allowed or even encouraged while at other times it has been weighted down with the stigma of some unforgivable sin. Both of these extremes are unfortunate. Though divorce is tragic and costly, the cross of Christ is sufficient to cover all sin and thus we plead His blood for our hope.

The Scriptures are not given to merely weigh us down with God's rules, but are rather intended to lead us into the joys of God's intended order. Though forgiveness and reconciliation are never really easy, they honestly bring about the greatest satisfaction in the end. We are a people who have been called by grace and mercy and thus called to extend grace and mercy to others. Let us do so with glad hearts confident that He who calls us to obey Him will equip us to do so.

We have read and understood Hebron's Statement of Divorce and Remarriage.

Signed this the _____ day of _____, 20_____.

Groom

Bride