

Divorce and Remarriage

Introduction

The biblical teaching on divorce should not be considered in isolation, but always against the backdrop of the biblical understanding of marriage. At Gresham Bible Church we consider marriage, biblically defined, as the covenantal union of one man and one woman, which is publicly pledged and exclusive for life. Jesus clearly confirms the permanence of marriage, saying, “they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Matt 19:6). One of the highest goals for the church is to build strong marriages and families. This is because marriage is intended to re-image the permanent, faithful relationship of Christ and the church (Eph 5:22–32; 1 Pet 3:1–7). God’s design for marriage is that a man and woman are to reflect and represent His image by a permanent, faithful, intimate marriage covenant (Gen 2:23–25). The biblical norm is that “marriage be held in honor among all” (Hebrews 13:4).

Reconciliation

Because marriage is to be held in honor, husbands, wives, and the church should give much time and effort to reconciliation of right marriage relationships. When people experience marital difficulty, it may be easier to search for a way out rather than through the struggle. Divorce may seem like a good solution to a difficult problem. Often couples resort to divorce against the inner voice of God’s Spirit and in violation of the clear teaching of God’s Word. In the absence of biblical grounds for divorce, divorce is a grievous act. There is something much worse than living with a mate in disharmony; that is, living in disobedience to God. Therefore, couples should make genuine and sustained attempts to extend forgiveness and acceptance, and to rebuild and restore marital relationships.

Separation

Separation should not be an impulsive or independent decision. We advise that couples should address the decision to separate under the counsel of the church elders. Separation is advised and even encouraged in three cases:

- Abuse
- Illegal activities
- Immoral actions

Separation is not to be viewed as a prelude to divorce, but as a means to break hurtful patterns and eventually rebuild the marriage. It is not a remedy for tottering relationships. Separation incurs financial and emotional costs for the couple and for children in the family. It can result in the emergence of immature coping mechanisms, like fleeing from the problem, which can delay progress toward reconciliation or even subvert the entire effort. The couple must continue working on their marriage while separated, and the separation should create an increased urgency to reconcile.

Divorce

Divorce entails a formal recognition that the destroyed marital relationship is beyond hope of recovery, that the severance between husband and wife cannot be repaired. The bible addresses two specific things that can be fatal to a marriage: sexual uncleanness (*porneia*: various kinds of sexually immoral behavior. Matt 19:9); and desertion by an unbelieving spouse (1 Cor 7:15–16). Covenant-breaking is an extreme measure, and should be considered preferable only in the most calamitous situations. Couples should always pursue the option of repentance, forgiveness, healing and reconciliation. But when all efforts and options have been exhausted so that option is no longer possible, where entrenched sin results in irreconcilable abandonment, divorce is a reality.

Remarriage

Jesus condemns husbands who leave their wives for other women. Yet he also expects the abandoned wife to be remarried, charging the adultery to the original husband (Matt 5:32). Remarriage in these cases is not mandated, nor is it presented in any way as the solution to the prior, sinful situation. Yet remarriage is assumed as a permissible circumstance following divorce. Though the issue of remarriage after divorce arouses controversy, GBC holds that remarriage is scripturally justified in the following circumstances:

- When the former spouse is deceased (Rom 7:2; 1 Cor 7:39).
- When divorce has occurred on scriptural grounds (unrepentant immorality or desertion by an unbelieving partner).

Conclusion

Divorce, because it is a violation of God's plan, carries with it painful consequences and complications. Through the death of Christ, God has made perfect provisions for the complete forgiveness of all our sin, even the sins of sexual infidelity and unjustified divorce (1 Pet 2:24; Col 2:13). Forgiveness, however, does not remove the temporal consequences of our sins, or the pain and grief involved in the destruction of a relationship. The church is to minister to individuals and families suffering these consequences, and to help them respond in healthy ways to their life circumstances.

The goal is to move divorced people back into the recognition and experience of God's healing grace, back to God's pattern for life. This should begin with support from the church body. The church should provide the couple with forgiveness and cleansing from the trauma that results from breaking the marriage covenant.

When restoration has brought the person back to wholeness, there is the possibility of another marriage. This can be successful under the care of the church, with honesty about sin, and the power of the Spirit for Christlike living. Grace never ignores sin, but it effects God's healing and moves broken, sinful people to God's pattern for all of life.