

# Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage

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The church is in a unique position within the community. It is responsible before God to maintain an example of holy living. The quality of relationships, particularly those found in family life, are an integral part of its witness to the world. The lifestyle of the Christian serves to rebuke a culture drifting away from high moral standards, and offers hope for those who want more from life than what the culture offers. Thus, the Elders of Village Church of Barrington (VCB) have written this document to instruct the congregation on matters of marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Each section provides an overview of biblical teaching, as well as practical implications.

## I

### *Marriage*

In previous generations, the broader culture had a common understanding of marriage—an understanding shaped largely by the Judeo-Christian worldview. Yet that consensus no longer exists, at least not to the same degree. So it is essential for us to define what we mean by marriage and how we practice it at our church.

#### **Overview of Relevant Scriptures**

Marriage is the oldest institution on earth. It began in the Garden of Eden with our first parents. After the creation of Adam, God said, ‘*It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him*’ (Gen 2:18). God then made Eve from Adam and ‘*brought her to the man*’ (v.22). Adam declared himself to be one with her (v.23). From that point on, Eve is called ‘*his wife*’ (v.25; 3:8, 21; 4:1, 25; cp. 3:17). This was the beginning of marriage.

The Bible defines marriage as a lifelong covenant between one man and one woman. Gen 2:24 says, ‘*Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.*’ The Hebrew word rendered *hold fast* denotes a permanent bond. It is used elsewhere for welding two pieces of metal into one. The marriage bond is so tight that the two are described as ‘*one flesh.*’ It is within the safe boundaries of marriage that a couple finds companionship, emotional and physical intimacy, and a stable platform for the raising of children. Both Jesus and Paul affirmed this creation ideal (Matt 19:5; Eph 5:31). Paul adds that marriage uniquely pictures the relationship between Christ and the Church (Eph 5:32).

Marriage is neither a bare legal contract nor a private commitment of love. At least three things are required for a marriage to occur: *legally*, the couple obtains governmental recognition of the union through a marriage license or the equivalent (Rom 13:1-7); *socially* and *spiritually*, they make vows to one another before witnesses (Ecc 5:4-7); and *physically*, they consummate the marriage sexually (Gen 4:1). These three strands of the cord tie a man and a woman together. None of them, in isolation from the others, is sufficient for the formation of a marriage. Once a marriage has been formed, it has significant legal and spiritual implications. Some of these will become evident as the paper unfolds.

The principle of ‘*one flesh*’ includes many things, but primary among them is unity of *faith*. The original plan for marriage was given before Adam and Eve fell into sin. Sin ruptured their relationship and has negatively affected all marriage relationships since (Gen 3:16). It is crucial, then, for a couple to be in agreement on the big questions of life—to share the same worldview. Thus, the Bible teaches that Christians should only marry another Christian (2 Cor 6:14-18; cp. 1 Cor 7:39).

As permanent as God intends the marriage bond to be, it is not absolutely permanent. The Bible teaches that the marriage bond is dissolved by the death of one of the partners (Rom 7:2-3; 1 Cor 7:39). A person whose spouse has died is free to remarry (see section III below). Also, marriage is for this earthly existence only; there will be no marriage in heaven (Matt 22:23-30).

### **Our Practice at Village Church of Barrington**

In light of these biblical truths, we undertake the following practices:

- Since God created marriage to be a life-long covenant between one man and one woman, VCB will officiate only heterosexual, monogamous marriages. We will not conduct nor condone same-sex or polygamous marriages. This applies regardless of where the ceremony is conducted, whether on church property or not.
- VCB will only officiate a marriage between a man and a woman who both profess faith in Jesus Christ. We will not officiate a marriage between a believer and an unbeliever. If the officiating Pastor is uncertain about the spiritual status of one of the prospective partners, he shall refer the matter to the Elders for judgment. **Note:** *This applies to new marriages only.* If a couple were married as unbelievers, and one spouse has since become a Christian, the Christian should remain in the marriage (1 Cor 7:12-14, 24).
- While this policy does not prohibit VCB’s Pastors or Elders from conducting a marriage ceremony for two *unbelievers*, the church’s wedding policy stipulates that those who get married at the church must be members and, therefore, believers (see “Village Church of Barrington Board Policies”). But a Pastor or Elder may officiate a wedding for two unbelievers offsite. It is a matter of individual discretion and conscience.
- Sex is reserved for marriage (Heb 13:4). Thus, VCB will not condone premarital sex nor extramarital sex. Nor will it condone *cohabitation*, that is, couples living together as a married couple, yet without being married. If it comes to light that a couple in the church is cohabitating, the Elders will counsel them privately to get married. If they agree, they will be required to separate until they are married (exceptions to this will be considered by the elders on a case-by-case basis). The couple will also promise to remain chaste until marriage. If they refuse to remain chaste, the situation will be treated as a matter of church discipline (see “Position Paper on Church Discipline”).
- Premarital sex is not automatic grounds for marriage, even if it results in pregnancy. An unmarried pregnant couple should consult the Elders, to ascertain whether marriage is wise in this instance. Couples who are still dependent on their parents should also

consult their parents. Where the couple desires to marry, counseling will be given to encourage repentance and to deal with issues that could arise later, potentially harming the marriage.

## II *Divorce*

The previous section showed how God intends marriage to be a lifelong covenant (Gen 2:24; Matt 19:3-9). Sadly, as fallen people living in a fallen world, not every marriage goes the distance. So the Bible has provisions for divorce. As with the previous section, the paper surveys the relevant Scriptures, and then draws out practical implications. The paper also covers a few special circumstances, because each situation is somewhat unique.

### **Overview of Relevant Scriptures**

Divorce is the legal disillusion of a marriage. Under normal circumstances, the marital bond should not be broken until the death of one of the partners (Rom 7:2-3; Mark 10:9). Divorcing one's spouse without biblical grounds is not pleasing to God (Mal 2:14-16). If a person marries someone else after an unbiblical divorce, it is tantamount to committing adultery; God still recognizes the original marriage covenant as being in force (Matt 5:31-32; 19:9; Mark 10:11; Luke 16:18; Rom 7:3; 1 Cor 7:11). So divorce is a serious matter for a Christian, and should only be considered in exceptional situations.

Though the Bible never commends nor commands divorce, it does seek to regulate it. Moses places stipulations on divorce and remarriage (Deut 24:1-4). The New Testament permits it for at least two reasons. First, a believer may divorce his or her spouse for *adultery*, that is, the other partner has violated the marital covenant by having sexual relations with someone else (Matt 5:32; 19:9; cp. 1:18). Second, a believer may divorce his or her spouse for *abandonment*, that is, the other partner has walked away from the marriage and is no longer fulfilling the obligations of the marital covenant (1 Cor 7:13-15). In this text, the abandonment is specifically done by an unbeliever who no longer wants to be married to a Christian. If the unbelieving partner does not abandon the believing partner, the believing partner is not normally at liberty to initiate the divorce (v.13). It is less clear what is permissible in situations where the person who has abandoned the marriage claims to be a believer (although walking out on one's marriage would raise the question of whether or not the person is a genuine Christian).

Is there a third biblical ground for divorce? Consideration may be given for self-protection in situations where one spouse violates the marital covenant by inflicting substantial harm on the other spouse, such that the abused spouse must leave the home for self-protection. This is based on 1 Cor 7:15, where the phrase '*in such cases*' may include abuse. Other situations similarly destructive to a marriage could also fall into this category. Separation or divorce could be options, depending on the severity of the situation. Whether or not the person is biblically eligible for remarriage would need to be decided by the Elders on a case-by-case basis (see section III below).

## Our Practice at Village Church of Barrington

In light of these biblical truths, we undertake the following practices:

- When marital difficulties arise in a home, VCB's default position will be to save the marriage whenever possible. Even if the situation involves adultery, the Elders will encourage confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation, alongside counseling. There could be situations that warrant a temporary separation, whether informal or formal. But even then the hope would be eventual reconciliation. Divorce will be considered a last resort, particularly if children are involved.
- Divorce will be permitted in cases that involve adultery, particularly when the sin is repeated and unrepentant. While bonding emotionally with someone other than one's spouse is a serious issue and could eventually lead to physical bonding, the Bible seems to limit divorce to cases involving actual physical adultery. The same principle applies to internet pornography as well. In such situations, the Elders recommend that both partners work at saving the marriage.
- Divorce will be permitted in cases that involve abandonment by an unbelieving spouse. If the one who walks away professes to be a Christian, a determination will need to be made by the Elders as to whether that claim is justified. A believer will not be permitted to divorce an unbelieving spouse who wants to remain in the marriage and otherwise fulfills the marital covenant.
- The Elders are sensitive to situations involving physical, emotional, and verbal abuse. Their first priority in such situations is the safety of the person being abused. Once the abuse becomes known, they will act swiftly to get the abused spouse and any children to a safe place. Once their safety has been secured, the Elders can more precisely discern the nature of the marriage difficulties and recommend a course of action. They will seek to help, support, and counsel the couple, particularly the one who has been abused.
- All other difficult marital situations will be handled by the Elders on a case-by-case basis.

In situations where one spouse has sinned against the other, particularly when the sin is repeated and unrepentant, the Elders will determine whether or not to begin the church discipline process with the offending partner (see "Position Paper on Church Discipline").

## Special Circumstances

Certain cases involving divorce require special consideration.

- *Divorce Prior to Conversion.* How should the church respond to a person who divorced their spouse unbiblically, but the divorce took place before they came to faith in Christ? In one sense, they should be treated no differently than anyone else who has come to faith. Everyone sins (Rom 3:23; 1 John 1:8). Those sins are forgiven and cleansed when a person receives Christ (Rom 6:23; 8:1; 1 Cor 6:9-11; 1 John 1:9). So those who have no divorce in their past should not condemn those who do (Mark 11:25). On the other hand, some sins have ongoing consequences. A person might not only need to get right with God; they might also need to get right with another person, perhaps the former

spouse or estranged children. The Elders should explore with the new believer what confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation could look like in that situation. If both of the former partners are still single, could they be remarried (after counseling and the like)? Even if one or both of them have already married someone else, is there some way the broken relationship could be mended, so that they are at least on amicable terms with one another going forward? Whatever the case, the new believer should not divorce their current spouse to remarry the first spouse (Deut 24:1-4; 1 Cor 7:20).

- *Divorce and Prospective Leaders in the Church.* Does a previous divorce disqualify a person from leadership in the church? Potentially, but not necessarily; it depends upon the circumstances. The qualifications for Elders in both 1 Tim 3:2 and Titus 1:6 put ‘*the husband of one wife*’ near the top of the list. This is a qualification for the office of Deacon as well (1 Tim 3:12). The phrase literally means ‘a one-woman man.’ This probably has less to do with divorce and more to do with faithfulness to one’s wife—not flirting nor philandering. It also rules out polygamy. It does not mean that a leader cannot be single, or that they cannot have remarried after being widowed or divorced in the past. So while a recent, unbiblical divorce would almost certainly be disqualifying, a divorce that happened many years ago—particularly if it happened before the person was a believer—may not be. The biblical qualifications are intended to measure the prospective leader’s *current* pattern of behavior, not what may have occurred in their distant, pre-conversion past. Has the person matured and borne fruit in keeping with repentance (Matt 3:8)? Have they demonstrated Christ-like character and a consistent testimony over time? Do they have a stable marriage now (if remarried)? Do other mature believers vouch for their character and service? Or is there concern that the same problems could recur? Years of consistent living are necessary to be entrusted with a leadership role. These same guidelines would apply to someone seeking a pastoral position on the church staff.
- *Divorce and Current Leaders in the Church.* What about a person who gets divorced while in church leadership? If the divorce is unbiblical, and they are driving it, then they will step down from leadership (or else be removed). But if the divorce is biblical (i.e., their spouse committed adultery or else abandoned them) and they are otherwise the “innocent party,” discernment is needed. Though the divorce may not be disqualifying *per se*, it would still be advisable for the person to step out of leadership for a season, to get counseling and heal from the experience. This should not be construed as punishment or discipline of any kind.

As with so many things in the Christian life, there is a balance between grace and truth (Eph 4:15; John 1:14). Someone with a divorce in their past should not be immediately disqualified from leadership. Divorce is not the unpardonable sin. At the same time, biblical standards need to be upheld. Only qualified individuals should be entrusted with leadership positions.

### III

#### *Remarriage*

Having already covered the other two sections in some detail, this section on remarriage is fairly straightforward. In short, a person who has divorced his or her spouse on biblical grounds is free to remarry someone else, as long as the new spouse is a believer (1 Cor 7:39). An unbiblical divorce, however, is not eligible for remarriage (Matt 5:31-32; 19:9; Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18). The two partners must remain single or else be reconciled to one another (1 Cor 7:11). If one of the partners does not abide by this, but forms a sexual relationship with someone else (whether through remarriage or otherwise), that would constitute adultery. The partner who remained chaste would then be free to remarry. Or if one of the partners dies, the other would be free to remarry. In cases that are not clear-cut, however, the Elders will investigate the facts and make a decision. As part of the fact-finding process, an attempt should be made to contact the former spouse, especially if the Elders have only heard one side of the story (Prov 18:17).

The Elders recommend that a divorced person eligible for remarriage wait at least one year before beginning to date again. This will allow time for healing, as well as the possibility of pursuing reconciliation with the former spouse. But if a year has passed, and attempts at reconciliation have not been successful, and there are no additional causes for concern, the person would be eligible to be remarried in the church—provided they meet the other qualifications for being married at VCB (see “Village Church of Barrington Board Policies”).

#### *Conclusion*

Issues related to marriage, divorce, and remarriage are some of the most complex, difficult issues faced by Pastors and Elders. It is a burden often carried silently, behind the scenes. This document is intended to provide wisdom and guidance to those who shepherd the flock. Some of it has been bought with pain. May God use it to promote the health of his church, for his glory.