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A Statement on Divorce & Remarriage in the Life of Grace Bible Church*

Part 1 Introduction

Divorce is painful. It is emotionally more wrenching than the death of a spouse. It is often long years in coming and long years in the settlement and in the adjustment. The upheaval of life is immeasurable. The sense of failure and guilt and fear torture the soul. Like the psalmist, night after night a spouse falls asleep with tears. Work performance is hindered. People draw near or withdraw with uncertain feelings. Loneliness can be overwhelming. The sense of a devastated future can be all consuming. Courtroom controversy compounds the personal misery.

And then there is often the agonizing place of children. Parents hope against hope that the scars will not cripple them or ruin their own marriages someday. Tensions over custody and financial support deepen the wounds of years. And then the awkward and artificial visitation rights can lengthen the tragedy over decades.

Because of these and many other factors, people with sensitive hearts weep with those who weep. They try not to increase the pain. And sometimes this care is confused with compromise. People think that loving care is incompatible with confrontation—that the tenderness of Jesus and the toughness of his demands can't both be love. But surely this is not right.

Jesus was an extraordinarily caring person. His teaching on divorce and remarriage was also firm: "What God has joined together let not man put asunder" (Mark 10:9). In fact, firm and loving confrontation with the demands of Christ IS a form of caring, because a sinful decision is just as harmful to a person as the emotional pain.

The great challenge to the church in the face of divorce and remarriage is to love Biblically. John wrote, "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments" (1 John 5:2). In other words, the test of true love to people is not only the feeling of compassion in the heart but also conformity to the commandments of God in behavior. The great challenge is to mingle the tears of compassion with the tough love of obedience. This alone will honor Christ and preserve the spiritual health and power of the church.

Why is there a Special Concern with Divorce and Remarriage?

There are at least nine reasons for devoting a special position paper to this issue.

1. People who come to Grace want to know where we stand on this issue.
2. Inside the church, people need clarification about where the leadership of the church stands and what the church position is.
3. Divorce involves sin that is more destructive than many others. The hurtful impact of a broken marriage on the spouses and the children, and the web of relationships surrounding the marriage is immense.
4. Divorce is thrown into the public limelight by the recognition in our society that it must be handled by the civil courts.
5. Marriage, divorce, and remarriage involve the mingling of solemn oaths and sacred physical union unlike any other relationship.
6. Marriage is unique among all relationships in that it is set apart by God to signify to the world the relationship between his Son and his bride, the church (Ephesians 5:21-33). Therefore the breaking of this bond is extraordinary among all human bonds.
7. Divorce falls into that group of acts which when they are committed are very hard to undo. The words "I'm sorry" can make right many sins against another person, but divorce and remarriage cannot be made right like that.
8. Divorce happens by plan and intention of one or both spouses. It is not like a habit against which one struggles with successes and failures.
9. Divorce has reached epidemic proportions in our culture to the extent that everyone in our society is groping for a place to stand that may preserve the stability of the home.

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.

"Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (Hebrews 9:22). "(Jesus said) this is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28). "Every one 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 12:31) 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 hearty affirmation of the will of Christ. Therefore, trusting Christ involves confessing sin as sin and taking up arms against it.

Therefore, the ultimate form of church discipline (excommunication) is never a simple response to past sin.

It is always a response to sin that a person continues to affirm or practice. No past sin that is renounced, confessed, and forsaken is grounds for church discipline.

Therefore, marital sin is in the same category as lying and killing and stealing when it comes to church discipline and church membership. 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?

If a person in the church was known to affirm lying, killing, or stealing as appropriate behavior for a Christian, that person would be liable to the discipline of the church. Not because they have lied, killed, or stolen in the past and cannot be forgiven, but because they go on affirming NOW that sin is not sin.

Or if a person was openly planning to lie, kill, or steal with a view to receiving cheap forgiveness afterward, that person too would be liable to church discipline.

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 church discipline and church membership 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, or 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).

If a person has stolen things in his past and wants to join the church, no one would say that we are treating stealing as the unforgivable sin if we insist that this person confess his sin and begin to make amends to those he defrauded. A sin is not unforgivable because it must be confessed as sin, renounced as an option, and its effects made right (as far as possible).

So it is with illegitimate divorce or remarriage. It should not keep anyone out of the church nor put anyone out of the church any more than a past life of robbery. But there must be a heartfelt confession of the sin committed and a renouncing of it and an affirming of what is right, just as

with all other sins of the past.

When we affirm the church covenant, we are not only affirming what we pledge to do. We are also affirming what we believe ought to be done. In other words, church membership is a commitment to hold in common convictions about what is right and wrong in behavior (Church Covenant) as well as in doctrine (Statement of Faith). Without this shared conviction, the possibility of holding each other accountable is gone.

So the decisive issue concerning divorce and remarriage at Grace 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?

Diversity of Viewpoints at Grace Bible Church and the Wider Church

Among the elders at Grace, complete unanimity does not exist concerning the question what divorces and what remarriages are Biblically permissible. This lack of unanimity is a reflection of the evangelical church worldwide.

For example, the Westminster Confession of 1647 says this on the issue of divorce and remarriage:

In case of adultery after marriage, it is lawful for the innocent party to sue out a divorce, and after the divorce to marry another, as if the offending party were dead. (Article 24, paragraph 5) [1]

Interestingly, when the Baptists of England adapted the Westminster Confession for their own use in the Second London Confession of 1689 this paragraph permitting divorce and remarriage was deleted from the section on marriage. [2]

Even more startling and convicting is the following fact: "In the first five centuries (among Christians) all Greek writers and all Latin writers except one agree that remarriage following divorce for any reason is adulterous. The marriage bond was seen to unite both parties until the death of one of them." [3]

This is all the more startling in view of the fact that both the Jewish and Roman culture of the time allowed divorce with remarriage. The followers of Jesus stood against this culture with their radical prohibition of remarriage. In spite of this extraordinarily high, counter-cultural standard,

the church grew like wildfire for 400 years.

If we are to be a Biblical church—a church with mutual accountability and proper discipline—the question that must be faced is, “What convictions concerning divorce and remarriage can we agree as a church to make the foundation of our accountability and discipline?”

When the Church Covenant binds every member to be “walk together in brotherly love,” to “exercise an affectionate care and watchfulness over each other,” and to “sustain (the church's) worship, ordinances, discipline, and doctrines,” what will we understand as faithfulness in the engagement of marriage vows?

Church discipline cannot be based on the convictions of a pastor or of a small group of leaders. The Bible says that a matter of discipline is to be taken "to the church" (Matthew 18:17). This means that under the Lord the church is the final court of appeal in all church discipline. This is only possible if the leadership and the church are largely in agreement on the matter at hand.

No one in leadership can be asked to act against his conscience (Romans 14). Therefore, each pastor will teach, counsel, and perform marriages according to his personal conviction within the parameters of this statement. But when it comes to church membership and church discipline, we must find a level of expectation for marital relations that we can agree no member of Grace may violate while remaining a member in good standing.

In other words what we need is a statement of the kind of divorce and remarriage which the church, as a concerned and responsible body, will regard as clearly outside the Biblical limits of what is acceptable.

Let it be made clear again what was said above: there is NO past divorce or remarriage that in itself brings church discipline.

Even if a person is already a member of Grace and finds himself or herself among a small minority that cannot affirm even the minimal expectations of this statement, they will not be disciplined or excluded from membership for that reason because they joined the church during a time when these expectations were not made known to them. Our prayer is that all divorced and remarried brothers and sisters will gladly affirm this statement either because they believe their situation was Biblically legitimate, or because they now see that it was not, and are genuinely repentant as they look back.

Part 2

Statement of Guidelines for Mutual Accountability

Marriage is a human relationship ordained and instituted by God (Malachi 2:14-16). [4] His original design was one man and one woman united by covenant and sexual union for life (Genesis 2:23-4). The relationship was a mystery in that it set forth symbolically in physical form the relationship between himself and his people (Ephesians 5:21-33; Isaiah 54:5; Hosea 2:14-23; Ezekiel 16; Jeremiah 3:20). Therefore God hates divorce for what it does to people and for what it does to the glory of his own covenant with the church.

Nevertheless, because of the deceit and power of sin and because of the remnants of corruption in our own hearts, divorce still happens in the lives of some Christians. A mature and spiritual Christian may be forsaken by a disobedient or unbelieving spouse. Two professing believers may drift so far from the Lord that they no longer acknowledge in their hearts the authority of the Lord Jesus or the binding nature of their marriage covenant.

The church, as a spiritual family with radical commitment to Christ and earnest love for each other, should be ready to minister forgiveness, healing, reproof, discipline, correction, and restoration wherever appropriate to its members. General guidelines for our life together are found in the Church Covenant. Specific guidelines are needed regarding divorce and remarriage, and these are given below.

The following guidelines should be read in the light and spirit of the preceding introductory pages.

They should be read with the constant awareness that for many of us in the church, they represent a minimum expectation for Christians and a weakening of Biblical standards. Even those of us who affirm them as entirely Biblical can imagine a married couple, previously held back from a divorce by the conviction that it would be contrary to Scripture, now going ahead with it because they can see an "out" in one of the statements below. None of us wants these guidelines to encourage divorce or weaken the commitment God means for us to have to our marriage covenant.

To encourage this kind of sensitive reading and careful application of the following statements, we will expound on the statements with words that bring out the differences among us. In this way, we will avoid giving the impression that all the statements are put forth as ideal positions.

The Guidelines

1. A believer and unbeliever should not marry (1 Corinthians 7:39; 2 Corinthians 6:14-15).
2. Since death breaks the marriage bond (Romans 7:2-3; 1 Corinthians 7:39), remarriage is permissible without sin for a believing widow or widower, if the marriage is with another believer.
3. Divorce may be permitted when a spouse deserts the relationship, commits adultery, or is dangerously abusive (1 Corinthians 7:15; Matthew 19:9; 1 Corinthians 7:11). [5] Here, we are not dealing with remarriage (see #4 and #5). We simply acknowledge that there are times when the Bible permits separation.

Some of us want to stress that "divorce" in this statement should not imply a decisive and permanent end to the relationship while the spouses are alive and not remarried. Even after long periods of separation and alienation reconciliation can happen, as when the people of God return to the Lord after periods of waywardness (Hosea 2:14-23). Others of us want to stress that decisive divorce in certain cases is permitted, and that this leaves the deserted, or abused spouse free to remarry (see #5).

We all want to emphasize that the phrase "may be permitted" holds out the possibility that inquiry may reveal that the deserted partner engaged in a wrong behavior that drove the other away, so that a change is called for at home rather than divorce.

In addition we all want to stress that forgiveness and reconciliation between sinning spouses is preferable to separation or divorce even where adultery has occurred. This is implied in Matthew 18:21-22, "Then Peter came and said to Jesus, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?' Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.'" (See Luke 17:3-4)

4. The remarriage of the aggrieved, divorced spouse may be viewed as severing the former marriage so that the unmarried spouse whose behavior did not biblically justify being divorced, may be free to remarry a believer (Matthew 19:9), if he or she has confessed all known sin in the divorce, and has made significant progress in overcoming any destructive behaviors and attitudes.

Moreover, we want to affirm the goodness and beauty of a life of singleness in God's service both before marriage and after marriage. It is commended in 1 Corinthians 7:7,11,32-35, and elevated by the examples of Jesus and Paul and hundreds of great, single saints.

5. After serious efforts have been made toward reconciliation, the aggrieved partners referred to in guideline #3 may, together with the leadership of the church, come to regard their marriage as irreparably broken. In such cases, remarriage may be a legitimate step if taken with serious reckoning that this cuts off all possibility of a reconciliation that God may yet be willing to produce.

This guideline is for some of us the hardest concession to make. Remarriage after a divorced spouse marries again (see #4) at least has in its favor that the possibility of reconciliation was decisively cut off before. But while the spouse is still unmarried and alive, reconciliation is still Biblically possible. This makes it very hard for some of us to condone a step that decisively cuts asunder what God meant to be permanent and which could yet be permanent (1 Corinthians 7:10-11).

Others of us believe that 1 Corinthians 7:15 ("If the unbelieving partner desires to separate, let it be so, in such a case the brother or sister is not bound.") gives freedom to a Christian to remarry if abandoned. We also believe that denying remarriage puts an unwarranted strain on the chastity of the aggrieved person who may not believe he or she has the gift of celibacy (1 Corinthians 7:7).

But we all agree that serious efforts should be made at reconciliation, including the intervention of the church if necessary, before any aggrieved spouse is resigned to singleness or is free to remarry.

6. The aggrieving partners referred to in #3 (who were guilty of abandonment, adultery or abuse) should repent and be reconciled to God and to their spouses (1 Corinthians 7:11; 1 John 1:9). If it is too late because their spouses have remarried, then they should remain single because they left their first marriage without Biblical warrant (Matthew 19:9; Luke 16:18; 1 Corinthians 7:11).

7. If a second marriage ends in death or divorce, the widow or widower in this case is not permitted to return to the first spouse in marriage (Deut. 24:1-4).

8. The amount of time that has passed and the change in standing from unbeliever to believer does not alter the application of the guidelines for divorce and remarriage (See Matthew 19:4-6 which highlights the fact that enduring marriages are part of God's plan for all his human creation, not just his redeemed people.)

[1] Found in Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), p. 656.

[2] See William Lumpkin, ed. *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1959), pp. 284-5.

[3] The evidence for this is compiled in Heth and Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce*, pp. 19-44. The quote is taken from p. 22. Some of the writers in view are Hermas, Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, Theophilus of Antioch, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origin, Tertullian, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory Nazianzus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, John Chrysostom, Ambrose, Jerome, etc. The one exception was Ambrosiaster.

[4] "The Lord has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. But not one has done so who has a remnant of the Spirit. Take heed then, to your spirit, and let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth. For I hate divorce" says the Lord, the God of Israel, "and him who covers his garment with wrong," says the Lord of Hosts. "So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously."

[5] Note: Not all of us would want to use Matthew 19:9 as a support for this statement, since we believe the "exception clause" in this verse ("except for unchastity") refers to fornication not adultery, and is meant to exonerate those, like Joseph in Matthew 1:19, who break a betrothal because of unfaithfulness. Others of us believe it refers to adultery in marriage and is meant to exonerate those who divorce and remarry after a spouse has been impenitently unfaithful.

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