

Appendix C:

Statement on Divorce and Remarriage

For Members of Sovereign Grace Church

In attending to the issues of divorce and remarriage, the pastors of Sovereign Grace Church have attempted to develop a position that reflects the teaching and proportionality of Scripture.

1. Marriage and the Gospel

Because we are a gospel centered church, all doctrinal stances must be grounded in the good news that ‘Christ died for our sins.’ The gospel is particularly concerned with marriage as that mystery which represents the relationship between Christ and the church that he died to save. Any discussion of Biblical allowances for divorce (enumerated below) must be set in the context of Biblical teaching that divorce undermines this glorious intent for marriage—to proclaim the gospel to the world through the one-flesh, life-long relationship of a husband and wife. This being said, we must also remember that the sins of believers that lead to divorce are forgiven by the atoning blood of Christ.

2. Marriage and God’s Glory

As the Westminster Shorter Catechism states, the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. This all-of-life demeanor from created man to his Creator is the foundation stone for our teaching about marriage/divorce. Despite the overwhelming cultural accommodation to divorce, believers are called to live differently, not led by sin but for God’s glory. Convenience and self-centeredness, often the prevailing world view in relation to divorce, can have no place in our consideration of how we live our lives. God’s glory must be the goal of every decision we make in relation to our marriage and in the event of divorce and remarriage.

3. Marriage and God’s Word

God created marriage. Marriage is a sacred covenant between a man and a woman, conceived in the mind of God and given as God’s gift.

“Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” 19 Now out of the ground the Lord God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. 20 The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him. 21 So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. 22 And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. 23 Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.”

24 Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. 25 And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.” Genesis 2:18-25

The marriage covenant is literally, physically binding. It is God’s intention that this covenant would be permanent until the death of one spouse. Through the declaration and consummation of the marriage vows, God joins a man and a woman together. He literally knits the two into one. Therefore, Jesus says:

“For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother, and the two shall become one flesh; so they are not longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.” Mark 10:7-9

It is important to note what Jesus underscores in Mark 10:9. “What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.” Jesus illustrates the holiness of marriage by reiterating that it is the work of God’s hands—that God joins two people into one. Marriage is not merely a contract between two people. Marriage is a creative act of God, intended to last as long as the man and wife are both still living. Jesus sternly reminds us that we, as creatures, would be foolish to vandalize or destroy what God has created.

4. The Origin of Divorce and God’s Perspective on Divorce

Divorce was birthed out of man’s hardness of heart—separating what God has joined.

“And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” He answered them, “What did Moses command you?” They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away.” And Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two but one flesh. 9 What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” Mark 10:2-9

Divorce stems from the sinfulness of mankind. Specifically, divorce reveals our propensity to destroy even the best, most mysteriously beautiful gifts that God gives us. Given the sanctity of marriage and the nature of divorce, there is not a single instance recorded where God communicates any feeling other than hatred for divorce. All sin that leads to divorce, though certainly forgiven in the gospel, should be rejected as contrary to God’s Word.

In addition to sin that leads to divorce, sin often follows divorce in cases of unbiblical remarriage. With two exceptions (enumerated below), the Bible categorizes remarriage after divorce as adultery—thus highlighting the seriousness of divorce in

God's mind. If God has made two people into one, how can they be separated again, and if they part ways and "join" elsewhere, what is that but adultery? Furthermore, Jesus' teaching categorically condemned the rampant divorce and remarriage that characterized the culture of the 1st century and continues today.

5. Is Divorce and Remarriage Ever Permissible?

Matthew and Paul specify two instances where divorce is permissible.

A. God allows for divorce in the case of adultery

"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' 32 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

"He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. 9 And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." Matthew 19:8-9

It is important to see this exception as allowing for divorce but not making divorce inevitable. Adultery does not automatically lead to divorce. Forgiveness can overcome any sin—even the sin of adultery. Matthew is not commending divorce in these passages. He is simply saying that in such cases divorce is permissible.

For the innocent spouse, it is worth noting that as Christians in relationship with one another, we should look to the full counsel of God's word regarding such things as forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven us (Col. 3:13), forbearance, pursuing peace, and ultimately God's enacting redemption in the face of sin. However, adultery does undermine the sanctity of the marriage bond and the innocent spouse is allowed by God's Word to divorce and is then free to remarry a believer.

B. God allows for divorce in the case of an unbelieving spouse "leaving" or "abandoning" the marriage.

"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

This passage does not allow for divorce in the case of "abandonment" by a spouse who claims to be a believer. However, in such a case, a period of confrontation of that spouse by the church would be initiated and would eventually lead to church discipline if the deserting spouse was unrepentant. If unrepentance continued indefinitely, the pastors would eventually identify that person as acting as an unbeliever (through church discipline) and the innocent spouse would be free to remarry.

6. Conclusions

- God loves marriage. God conceived the idea of marriage and actively creates each marriage bond. He even uses marriage to illustrate the relationship between Christ and the church. (Eph. 5)
- Marriage is intended to bring God glory—both as the Designer and the Sustainer of marriage.
- God provides grace to persevere and honor him during difficult moments and seasons in marriage. No marriage is free of conflict, but God is rich in grace and our aim should be to apprehend His grace in order to glorify Him through the marriage He has given us.
- God hates divorce. Insofar as divorce reflects the dissolution of a precious bond He created, God hates divorce. Therefore, divorce should be a sad affair to believers.
- In the instances where Scripture allows divorce, we should proceed with caution, taking care that any pursuit of divorce is done with God at the center of our thoughts, affections, and actions.
- Given the diagnosis of Scripture on divorce, we should always be suspicious of the hardness of our hearts—watching out for anger, self-righteousness, bitterness, unforgiveness, etc.—and not looking for biblical loop holes. The hope of the gospel reminds us that we have been the recipients of grace and now we can extend it to others freely.
- Remarriage is only permissible after a biblically permissible divorce.