

Divorce and Remarriage

Biblical Guidance/Our Position

At Trail Christian Fellowship we seek, under the Lord's guidance, to build strong marriages and families, knowing the marriage relationship is to re-image the permanent faithful relationship of Christ with His Bride, the Church (Eph. 5:22-32, 1 Pet. 3:1-7). But we realize that in a fallen age, marriages will undergo extreme difficulties; and some marriages will fail. In both cases we must be ready to respond with grace, truth and love.

Marriage is a God-ordained, public covenant between a man and a woman which joins them together in a "one flesh" relationship that is to be exclusive for life (Genesis 2:24, Malachi 2:14). Jesus speaks to the permanence of marriage by saying, "they are no longer two, *but one*. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate" (Matt. 19:6, italics added). God intends for a married couple to live for each other rather than for themselves. Therefore selflessness and sacrifice are at the heart of marriage, even though selflessness and sacrifice are difficult (Eph. 5:25). When a marriage runs into difficulty (and almost all do) the priority is true forgiveness, true healing, and true reconciliation.

The position we hold at Trail Christian Fellowship allows for divorce and remarriage for either of two valid causes: sexual unfaithfulness, (Matt. 5:31-32; 19:9), or abandonment by an unbelieving spouse (1 Cor. 7:15).

Sexual Unfaithfulness

When speaking to the Pharisee's Jesus said, "whoever divorces his wife, *except for sexual immorality*, and marries another commits adultery (Matt. 19:9, italics added). The word Jesus uses for sexual immorality is the Greek word *porneia* which covers all the cases of sexual sin that deserved capital punishment in the Old Testament (Leviticus 20:10-21).

Jesus' teaching allows, *but does not require*, divorce for sexual unfaithfulness. Sexual unfaithfulness doesn't necessitate divorce, but it is permissible under those circumstances. The marriage bond includes a covenant and then a uniting sexually in "one flesh" (Genesis 2:24), and when the "one flesh" has been violated the other partner may divorce, and after cleansing from the trauma, and experiencing God's healing grace may choose to remarry.

Abandonment

One further exception is found in the Apostle Paul's writing. In 1 Corinthians 7:15, Paul writes, "If the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances." In a marriage between a believer and an unbeliever, the believer should always seek to preserve the marriage, and honor their vows (1 Cor. 7:13-14; 1 Pet. 3:1-2). However, if the unbelieving spouse abandons the believer, after much waiting, and prayer, the believing spouse may divorce and remarry. In the case of a person who

claims to be a Christian leaving their believing spouse, we believe the deserting partner should be treated as an unbeliever (Mt. 18:17, 1 Cor. 7:15).

Ethical Issues

Unfortunately, and to God's great displeasure, in some marriages there are devastating attitudes and behaviors that can destroy the marriage, and threaten the safety of family members. Physical or sexual abuse of the spouse or children is an example of such behavior. While not explicitly stated in Scripture as grounds for divorce it certainly is a serious breach of marriage covenant, which necessitates a mandatory period of separation, and intense marital counseling. Where there is physical or sexual abuse of the spouse or children, we will:

1. Seek to remove family members from abusive situations,
2. Contact the local authorities, and follow legal reporting,
3. Confront the abuser as appropriate,
4. Provide as much practical support as we can to the family and,
5. Bring church discipline as appropriate.

Depending on the circumstance, pastors and/or counselors in such cases might recommend legal separation or divorce for the welfare of the battered spouse and/or safety of minor children. While divorce should not be a desired outcome, when confronted with two bad choices a Christian may choose the lesser of two evils.

If someone divorces without a valid cause, they are still married in God's sight, and the one who initiated the divorce has dishonored the Lord, their marriage vows and the

community of faith. If one of them remarries, their new union is adultery against their former spouse, and the first marriage is ended. The former spouse is now single and free to remarry (Matt. 19:3-12). The new married couple should repent of adultery, receive God's forgiveness, be brought back into God's pattern for life and seek to establish a marriage marked by exclusivity, intimacy, loyalty, and permanence.

Broken marriages cause great damage to all involved---spouses, children and immediate families. Our goal is to help divorced people experience God's healing grace, and yet recognize, and deal with their personal sin in their previous marriage, and allow the Spirit room to grow and restore them to wholeness. When restoration has occurred, and only if restoration has occurred, there is another possibility of marriage.

There are times, however, when the marriage relationship has been so damaged by entrenched sin, and so devalued that the couple (having exhausted all resources) may seek divorce, as a final and undesirable option. Because such divorces have no scriptural warrant, neither person would be eligible for a subsequent marriage. While divorce is always the product of sin, it is not the unforgivable sin (Matt. 12:32, Mark 3:28-29), and we pray that those who have been divorced may find joy, forgiveness and restoration in the person and work of Jesus Christ.