

Harvest Bible Chapel Barrie
Elder Statement on Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage
Adopted: January 16, 2018

Introduction: Marriage is a sacred institution established by God (Genesis 2:18-25). It is sanctioned and blessed by him when it is a heterosexual, monogamous, and life-long covenant relationship.

Our church will seek to stand firmly on the biblical truth of God's intention for marriage, while generously dispensing grace to those living under circumstances that fall short of this mark. Jesus was described as being "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14), and that seems like the right place to be on this critical issue.

Of great concern is the protection of the innocent in all cases. We must ask, who stands to be injured, or who is being injured, and how can we best relieve the suffering? Those who are particularly vulnerable (more often than not women and children) must find a safe place under the care of the church.

Grace for the Divorced: When the Bible says that "God hates divorce" (Malachi 2:16), it is a reflection of God's broken heart for the devastation that results from the dissolution of a marriage union and does not reflect a prohibition on his part. God's intention for marriage is that it is a life-long commitment (Matthew 19:3-12), but because of the hard-heartedness of husbands and wives, divorce will, at times, be an inevitable conclusion to some marriages. Given the challenge of having a strong marriage (Matthew 5:27-30), there should be much grace for those who have been divorced. Those who have experienced the dissolution of their marriage should not be shamed or feel shame simply because it happened, but all believers should share in God's broken heart over its consequences and seek healing for all involved.

Biblical Grounds for Divorce: Divorce is allowable based on three biblical grounds:

- **Adultery or sexual immorality:** this covers all extramarital sexual activity including a repeated pattern of the use of pornography (Matthew 5:27-32; 1 Corinthians 7:1-5).
- **Abandonment by an unbelieving spouse:** only when initiated by the unbelieving spouse (1 Corinthians 7:10-16).
- **Abuse:** based on the general ethic of the Bible, this would include emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, which are inherent violations of the marriage vows and responsibilities for husbands and wives to love and respect one another (Ephesians 5:21-32).

Conditions for Remarriage Following Divorce:

- **The Innocent Party:** In cases where there are biblical grounds for a divorce, the so-called innocent party (the one who did not directly cause the dissolution of the marriage) would be free to remarry. There should be a reasonable time delay and a clear effort toward reconciliation, if deemed possible by the elders or their designates, before such a serious decision would be made. At no time should the innocent party be compelled or coerced to remarry or reconcile with the guilty person. This is a matter between the individual and the Holy Spirit. Further, if the innocent party chooses to remain single, even for a lifetime, in order to wait for the guilty party to repent and return to the marriage, this would seem to be a noble and high calling and one that displays the grace of God in an extraordinary way.
- **The Guilty Party:** Conversely, the so-called guilty party has no biblical grounds for remarriage while the innocent party remains unmarried. If the possibility of restoring the original marriage no longer exists (because the innocent party has died, has an unwillingness to consider reconciliation, or has remarried), the guilty party could potentially remarry with the church's blessing if they have demonstrated repentance for their part in the divorce. Nevertheless, irrespective of the innocent party's status, repentance alone is not enough to free the guilty party to remarry. Remaining unmarried is a consequence of sinful choices that cannot be simply overlooked.

At all stages and in all parties, the elders and their designates will be looking for evidence of genuine repentance, the desire to reconcile and to restore the marriage if at all possible, and a commitment to doing things God's way.

Impact of Divorce on Church Participation: If both spouses are repentant and the marriage still ends, participation in the life of the church should be carefully considered and counsel given that would be satisfactory to all parties and in the best interests of the children, if applicable. In some cases, one party might be directed to another local church or to attend a different service time.

In the case of those who are believers and come to us after a divorce, we would look for the same spirit of repentance and seek to work with their former church, if appropriate, to free the person to unreservedly serve Christ and be part of our church family. The devastating consequences of divorce cannot be reversed, but we can dispense grace and help people live in victory in Christ in the aftermath.

Our heart, as elders and as a church, is to help people obey Christ. Far from being condemning or legalistic, our intent is to come alongside those who are struggling through the pain of a marriage break up and bring healing. The elders will ask, "How can we help you be obedient to Christ?"

Separation: In certain cases, there may be legitimate reasons for the elders to endorse a separation:

- When there are suspicions of abuse, a separation should be immediately arranged to protect any vulnerable parties.
- When a mutually agreed upon period of separation is deemed to be productive in a reconciliation process, those providing counsel and oversight should set goals and time limits to ensure that the separation is effective in moving toward a better marriage.

Special Cases:

- **Same-Sex Marriages:** We do not find biblical support for same-sex marriage, and yet we live in a country where same-sex unions are legally recognized. As we seek to honour God in our fallen world, we would counsel a believer in such a relationship to both turn from sin and seek a legal dissolution to the union.
- **Unequally Yoked Marriages:** Christ followers are commanded in Scripture to only marry another Christ follower (2 Corinthians 6:14-18). Professing Christians who seek to marry an unbeliever should not expect one of our pastors to preside at their ceremony. The elders may consider, under extenuating circumstances where there has been a long-term common-law relationship and where children are involved, whether an unequally yoked marriage is less damaging than the alternative.
- **Pre-Conversion Divorce:** In the case of marriages and divorces that occurred prior to a person's conversion, consideration must be given to what can be reasonably reconciled and restored and what cannot. While marriage is a universal institution recognized by believers and unbelievers alike, the ethic governing its practice differs for believers. Imposing biblical standards retroactive to a pre-conversion situation seems antithetical to the gospel.

Conclusion: The intent of this document is to clarify the biblical position of our church on this contentious issue and to provide a guideline for our elders, pastors, and counselors in the midst of what are always challenging decision-making, discipline, and counselling situations. We have resisted the urge to consider every possible iteration of marriage break ups, because it is essential that every crisis marriage situation be evaluated and considered individually at the time by those closest to it with much prayer and humility before the Lord, who designed marriage as a picture of the gospel.