

# **Position Paper on Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, and Separation**

## **CrossWay Community Church**

### **Approved by the Board of Elders – September 2019**

#### **Preface**

The purpose of this paper is to articulate the position of CrossWay Community Church regarding marriage, divorce, remarriage, and separation. We recognize the absolute authority of God's Word and we understand the role of the elders to be the faithful and caring application of God's Word to the particular situations of people's lives. It is not the purpose of this paper to present biblical arguments. Nor is it the purpose of this paper to present a close look at relevant biblical texts. Rather, this paper is a summation of biblical conclusions with resultant principles and guidelines for application to common situations. It should be noted that this statement is designed to support, not substitute for, prayerful and wise shepherding in these particular situations.

While every marriage has its own history and dynamic, and every failed marriage its own unique set of factors, there are biblical principles that apply to all. We recognize that while caring for people in cases of divorce, remarriage, and separation the elders will need to carefully hear and consider each case individually and exercise pastoral wisdom particular to each case but we will do so by resting on the following biblical understanding. As elders we are eager to be alongside those in challenging marital situations as early as possible to provide care, counsel, encouragement, and support.

#### **Marriage**

Marriage is a sacred union designed and blessed by God (Gen. 2:18-25). It is a complementary union between one man and one woman in which God participates as both witness and gracious presence (Mal. 2:14-15). God's original intention for marriage is that it be exclusive and lifelong (Matt. 19:3-6). According to God's word the purpose of marriage is to provide companionship (Gen. 2:18), to produce and raise godly children (Gen. 1:28; Mal. 2:15), to provide for sexual joy and purity (Prov. 5:15-19; I Cor. 7:1-5), and ultimately to reflect the relationship between Christ and his church (Eph. 5:27-33).

CrossWay celebrates marriage as a significant part of God's common grace toward mankind and as a particular means of benevolence and sanctifying grace for believers. We recognize that while marriage is a good gift from God, due to the presence of sin in this world and in our hearts, it will inevitably include some measure of challenge, suffering, and pain.

#### **Divorce**

God's design for marriage continues to be for it to be lifelong and exclusive. Therefore, divorce must always be seen as a departure from God's intention. However, because of human sin, and

because of the severity of the effect of certain sin on marriage, there are situations in which God allows for divorce as a protection for the integrity of marriage as an institution and, more particularly, for the protection of individuals in destructive situations.

There are two grounds for permissible divorce that are made explicit in Scripture.

The first ground for permissible divorce is sexual unfaithfulness (Matt. 5:32; 19:9). Sexual unfaithfulness is destructive of the marriage bond and is therefore a legitimate grounds for the dissolution of the marriage covenant. We understand "sexual unfaithfulness" to include not only adultery but any illicit sexual activity outside the bounds of a legal and monogamous marriage. We understand that indulging in a pattern of, or in certain kinds of, pornography is a form of sexual unfaithfulness and therefore constitutes legitimate grounds for divorce. The question of whether or not a case of this kind of sexual activity constitutes sexual unfaithfulness will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

It should be noted and emphasized that while in cases of sexual unfaithfulness divorce is allowed, it is not required. Broken marriages can be restored. The grace of God makes seemingly impossible things, like forgiving a sexually guilty spouse, possible. Since marriage is a sacred union, a couple, as well as the church, should do everything they can to preserve the union. Where there is genuine repentance God requires genuine forgiveness and strongly encourages reconciliation. If after a period of careful deliberation the wronged spouse chooses to reconcile with the offending spouse the wronged spouse cannot claim the forgiven offense as grounds for divorce at a later time.

The second ground for permissible divorce made explicit in Scripture is when an unbelieving spouse is unwilling to stay in a marriage with a believing spouse (I Cor. 7:15).

While the aforementioned situations are the only legitimate grounds for divorce explicitly named in the New Testament we believe there is a larger biblical understanding of marriage summarized especially in Genesis 2. In light of that larger understanding we believe there are behaviors that are so obviously destructive to the marriage bond as to constitute covenant breaking and thereby allow for divorce (cf. Ex. 21:10-11). We recognize that a measure of sin and suffering will be present in every marriage and that God calls us to patiently bear with and forgive one another for these common sins against each other. We also recognize some marriages will be hard, having to endure slow-to-change patterns of sin and difficulties for which much help is needed over a long period of time. However, there are sins that are so destructive that they break the marriage covenant and thereby allow for divorce. These would include physical violence, patterns of behavior that are mentally or emotionally dehumanizing, and the refusal to provide materially or conjugally for one's spouse. The determination of warrant for divorce in such cases will require case-by-case deliberation and a careful, prayerful application of biblical principles.

## **Remarriage**

We understand that when there is a biblically allowed divorce that divorce dissolves the marriage bond and consequently there is freedom to remarry. (It should be said, and emphasized, that even if there is freedom to remarry that does not necessarily mean it is wise to remarry.) Those who have been legitimately divorced should bear in mind that even after a period of separation reconciliation can happen. Thus, remarriage should not be entered into without careful and patient deliberation.

In cases of unwarranted divorce, the person(s) pursuing the divorce are to remain unmarried or be reconciled with their former spouse (cf. I Cor. 7:10-11). They should not remarry with another person after an illegitimate divorce. To do so would be adultery.

The Bible does not explicitly address the difficult question of whether the offending party in a legitimate divorce is free to remarry. We believe that where there is genuine repentance and no opportunity for reconciliation with the former spouse (either because of the death or the subsequent remarriage of the former spouse) there is freedom to remarry given the biblically warranted dissolution of the marriage covenant.

## **Separation**

There is no clear teaching in Scripture which sanctions willful separation without divorce. In situations when a person's safety—physical, emotional, mental—is endangered we will recommend and support a limited separation. A spouse should not pursue an *ongoing* separation independent of the knowledge and counsel of the elders. Any separation should be seen as a temporary measure, though it is warranted as long as the situation necessitating it persists. The purpose of such a separation should always be restorative though health and safety must first be reestablished for that restoration to occur. (We recognize that the determination of "health" and "safety" will require wise pastoral judgment.) During the separation both persons should be receiving the care, counsel, and support of the church, and particularly of the elders.

## **Discipline**

Church discipline will be exercised whenever any member deliberately violates his/her marriage covenant or seeks to break the marriage covenant through divorce without biblical warrant. This discipline, as with all church discipline, is designed to bring repentance while, at the same time, it also upholds the sacredness of marriage in the church.

## **When There Has Been Divorce and Remarriage in the Past**

If there has been unwarranted divorce and remarriage in the past the married couple should remain in their present marriage. There should be an acknowledgement of the past wrongdoing with accompanying honest confession, genuine repentance, and the making of whatever amends are necessary but there should also be a laying hold of the gracious

forgiveness of God in Christ. Unwarranted divorce and remarriage are not unpardonable sins. God has good for those who acknowledge their wrong and commit to pursuing a path of Spirit-led holiness.