

The Crossing Church's Position Paper on 'Divorce & Remarriage'

Adopted by TCC elders, (28 March 2024).

Introduction

This is a positional paper to explain the biblical position on Marriage, Divorce & Remarriage in the life of The Crossing Church. While this paper is written technically for biblical clarity, we know that this topic is anything but technical. It is deeply personal, very real, raw, and painful for some of our brothers and sisters in our midst. And as life and doctrine cannot but intertwine, the biblical position stated here isn't merely academic but will give shape to the pastoral care and mutual love on the ground. We need God's grace to help us be wise, sensitive and compassionate as we navigate this topic together as His church.

What the Bible teaches on Marriage

This section will not cover comprehensively all the biblical teaching on marriage. But it will outline the key aspects that especially explain our position on divorce & remarriage.

- God's Word shows us that marriage is not a human but divine institution, wisely designed and woven by God into the fabric of Creation and deemed good by Him (Gen 2:18-25, Matt 19:3-8).
- God instituted marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman that lasts this lifetime. The man and woman voluntarily enter this life-long permanent relationship (Mark 10:9) when they make vows to each other before God and their witnesses. In this union, the couple shares an exclusive intimate and sexual relationship.
- This marital union is patterned upon the union of God with His people who are his bride, Christ with His church (Eph 5:22-33). With husbands exercising a role of self-sacrificial loving headship, and wives a posture of godly submission to their husbands, marriage points to our hope of Christ returning to claim his bride (Rev 19:7, 21:2). God's covenant faithfulness (Exo 34:6, Hos 2:14-15, Mal 2:13-16) is to characterize spouses' life-long faithfulness to each other in marriage.
- The Scripture holds such a high view of marriage that the apostle Paul called for Christians to prioritize and value marriage faithfulness and to not divorce an unbelieving spouse (1 Cor 7:12-13).
- The Bible expects marital conflict between sinful spouses (James 4:1-6, Matt 7:3-5) and speaks into marriages to correct, rebuke, and encourage spouses (2 Tim 4:2-5) who are being progressively sanctified by the ongoing ministry of the Word & Spirit (Rom 8:29). When marriage is lived out under Christ's lordship, spouses, and their family flourish even through difficult life challenges.

Diversity of Views on Divorce & Remarriage

- While there are diverse views on divorce and remarriage among godly Bible-believing Christians (distant past and contemporary) there is unanimous consensus in affirming

the sanctity and permanence of marriage, and being resolute in preserving marriages through difficult times.

- From Augustine of Hippo to Zwingli, to Luther, to Calvin, to John Murray, to Don Carson and John Piper, the differences are primarily on the biblical legitimacy for divorce and remarriage. View 1 holds that Christians must not initiate or consent to divorce, and must not remarry as long as the spouse is still alive. View 2 holds that sometimes divorce is permitted (in adultery or desertion) but never remarriage as long as the spouse is still alive. View 3 holds that sometimes divorce is permitted and Christians can initiate or consent a divorce (in adultery or desertion). And remarriage is permitted when the divorce is legitimate. View 4 is basically View 3 with more accepted grounds for divorce.
- We believe that God's Word leads us to affirm View 3, with a strong reluctance to permit divorce - not without first relentlessly pursuing, assisting, counseling distressed marriages towards repentance and forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration. While we accept the biblical freedom to divorce (in adultery or desertion), we will not direct or counsel troubled marriages towards divorce.

What the Bible teaches on Divorce & Remarriage

This section will not cover comprehensively all the biblical texts relevant to divorce & remarriage. Detailed exegesis of these texts is readily available and is beyond the scope of this paper. But it will seek to explain how we come to the biblical position we take.

On Divorce:

- Given the covenantal nature of marriage and its inherent connection to God's character (being unceasingly faithful), we can see why divorce is blankly contrary to God's purpose for marriage, and hence why God hates divorce (Mal 2:16).
- God's Word holds an extremely high view of marriage, and speaks of divorce only as God's concession to man's sin and a last resort, and never a command or necessity. Divorce is permitted, not required. Every effort must be made to keep the marriage covenant, and exceptions not to be used lightly. Honest, genuine attempts to reconcile must be made before exceptions are exercised. There are only 2 biblical exceptions for divorce: i) unrepentant adultery (Matt 5:32, 19:9), ii) abandonment by the unbelieving spouse who pursues the divorce against the wishes and actions of the believing spouse (1 Cor 7:15).
- In Matthew 19, Jesus explained that Moses' divorce certificate (Deut 24) is an accommodation to the hardness of the human heart. And it was not to legislate but to discourage divorce by underscoring its irreversible consequence, 'may not take her again' (Deut 24:4). So, Jesus taught that whoever uses Deut 24 to divorce their spouse for no good reason, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery. The spouse is misusing the Law for self-gratification. Because in God's eyes the first marriage is not dissolved, when either spouse remarries (Matt 5:32), they are essentially committing adultery. Jesus taught that given God's high view of

marriage, the 'exception clause' for divorce on grounds of adultery is to be used reluctantly and only as a concession and last resort, when genuine pursuit of reconciliation and restoration fails.

- In 1 Corinthians 7, the apostle Paul taught that a Christian spouse is 'not enslaved' and ought to prioritize 'peace' and allows separation (divorce) if the unbelieving spouse chooses to (1 Cor 7:15). This leads us to understand that abandonment or desertion as the second exception where Scripture permits divorce. The deserted spouse has the freedom to pursue reconciliation or to regrettably assent or initiate divorce.
- Physical or sexual abuse, as evil as it is, does not always necessarily warrant divorce. However, it's non-negotiable that the victimized spouse be separated and protected promptly, and the abuser's actions be reported to authority and be disciplined to repentance and reconciliation. Such abuse, if persistent and unrepentant, could be grounds for divorce, but the decision shouldn't be made alone but in consultation with the church's elders and pastors.

On Remarriage:

- The apostle Paul taught that death 'releases' (Rom 7:2-3) the surviving spouse from marriage covenant, and hence no longer 'bound' and is 'freed' to remarry (1 Cor 7:39).
- While the union of human marriages is divinely designed to reflect the union of Christ to the church, it is only the latter union that is indissoluble (Rom 8:38-39, Matt 22:30). Christians are called to imitate God's unceasing covenant faithfulness, but nowhere in Scripture does God hold the aggrieved spouse to maintain unceasing commitment when the marriage is broken by the sinning spouse (in adultery or desertion). Hence, the aggrieved spouse who is divorced on these 2 biblical grounds, is given a passive allowance or freedom to remarry, or to remain unmarried.
- When 1 Cor 7:11 is understood alongside Matthew's exception clause, we see that Paul's prohibition for remarriage is meant for those who divorce flippantly.

Pastoral care for God's people

This section seeks to elaborate on the posture our church is to take towards those caught in divorce and remarriage circumstances:

- The first and primary response towards couples caught in troubled marriages and exploring divorce is one of patient, loving and tender support. We weep with those who weep (Rom 12:5), and speaking the truth in love (Eph 4:15), we let Scripture speak into the situation to correct, rebuke, and encourage each spouse accordingly.
- While we accept the biblical freedom to divorce (in adultery or desertion), we will not direct or counsel troubled marriages towards divorce. Instead, sharing God's high view of marriage, we'll labour to support and counsel the couple towards reconciliation and restoration through repentance and forgiveness. We'll strive to

support the aggrieved spouse who has been hurt by betrayal and abandonment, and counsel patience. Should the aggrieved spouse decide to pursue divorce more quickly than we hope, we'll allow for the liberty of choice before the Lord and support accordingly.

- Believers who pursue divorce on unbiblical grounds are openly rejecting the Word of God and disobedient towards Christ's rule. Out of our love for them with the aim to restore them (Gal 6:1), we are to exercise church discipline, first privately then publicly, in the form of correction, rebuke, and where necessary, ex-communication (Matt 18:15-17, 1 Cor 5:1-13) which is loving not only to the couple involved but also to our church community. The unrepentant spouse will be warned by the leadership that his/her marital sin and his/her unrepentance may, where necessary, be told to the CG, which he/she can no longer participate. He/she ought to attend Sunday Service to receive God's Word and reflect on his/her sin to work towards repentance and faith. During this time, he/she is not to partake in the Lord's supper so long as he/she remains unrepentant. He/she will also be warned that after an agreed timeframe, should he/she remain unrepentant, his/her congregation may, where necessary, be told and he/she will be regarded as an unbeliever in our sight.
- Sin can affect our lives in deep and complex ways. As we seek to pastorally care for those affected by divorce and remarriage, we acknowledge the uniqueness of each person and situation e.g. troubled marriages involving domestic abuse, addiction, or children. In each situation, we seek to wisely shepherd each accordingly, protecting the vulnerable and restoring the broken, in prayerful dependence upon God for wisdom.
- Among us, there would be divorcees and those who remarried before coming to know Christ, and before they joined our church. This paper is not meant to condemn or judge those who have already walked through the pain of divorce, or to speak into these past issues if already remarried. The church disciplinary steps mentioned do not apply to them indiscriminately. This paper aims to build up our church by having us grow in a deeper biblical understanding of God's good purpose and design for marriage.

Closing words

As noted previously, while this paper is technical in nature, this topic is anything but technical. There are brothers & sisters in our Crossing who are deeply and personally hurt and still hurting in broken marriages. Let's pray together as a church for God's grace to help us be wise, sensitive and compassionate as we navigate this topic together as His church. The theological conviction on marriage as stated in this paper, will act as our guide for our church life and discipline.