

MARRIAGE, DIVORCE & REMARRIAGE

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The following represents the Biblical position of “Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the life of Northampton Bible Church” and should be used to guide those involved in the upholding of this sacred institution. This statement of Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage is the result of prayerful consideration by the Elders of Northampton Bible Church and is intended to present a Biblical view of the issues involved.

Statistically speaking, marriage is in a state of disorder, and the unfortunate reality is that faith in Christ seems to have little impact on the divorce rate. The Elders of Northampton Bible Church affirm the sanctity of marriage and desire to prepare those looking to enter into the marriage covenant, as well as encourage those who have already been joined together.

Northampton also recognizes the reality of brokenness that already exists within the church. Divorce is a painful process that affects those involved very deeply. These experiences will shape the lives of all whom they influence. This statement 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. Our aim is to strengthen the marriages that exist within Northampton and help every marriage avoid the pain of divorce.

This statement is necessary for several reasons:

- People who come to Northampton want to know where we stand on these issues.
- Marriage is in a state of confusion that needs to be clarified.
- Divorce involves sin that is destructive to the marriage, the children, the family, and the web of relationships surrounding the couple.
- Marriage is a unique representation of God’s relationship to His people, and the family serves as the foundation of spiritual formation. Therefore, marriage and the health of the family should be preserved and protected.
- The depth of pain of divorce and the on-going consequences are severe enough to deserve the utmost attention.
- Divorce has reached epidemic proportions in our culture to the extent that even secular sources are reaching for answers.

1. WHAT ABOUT MARRIAGE?

- a. God designed marriage as a lifelong covenant relationship¹ between a man and woman² for the purposes of mutual companionship³, bearing children⁴, marital satisfaction⁵, relational oneness, and to display the nature of the relationship between God and his people.⁶ In marriage, one is “leaving” primary bonds of mother and father and permanently “cleaving” to a husband or wife.⁷ Marriage is therefore solely a union of man and woman in an enduring bond of commitment and fidelity. Marriage is enacted by a vow to this effect and its consummation, sexual union; in this way God makes the couple “one flesh.”⁸ Every marriage is permanently binding under God’s authority.⁹
- b. Marriage is not a human institution, but a divine one, initiated by God at creation and deemed good by Him along with all of God's creation.¹⁰
- c. God's perfect plan for marriage is that it be a lifelong pursuit of intimacy between a man and a woman and that it never be ended by anything but death.¹¹ He desires that two people would not merely live together, but that they would pursue oneness within their marriage relationship. Being in an estranged marriage and ignoring this call to oneness and love is also a violation of His intention for marriage.¹²
- d. Marriage is an illustration of the covenant relationship between God and believers. Where Christ is the head of His bride the church, husbands are to follow His example in His sacrificial love for His bride. Where the church is to lovingly submit to the authority of Christ as the head, wives are to lovingly submit to the authority of their husband, which has been established by God.¹³

2. WHO IS QUALIFIED TO MARRY?

- a. Scripture is clear that the marriage of a believer and a non-believer is considered sin.¹⁴ The marriage of two unbelievers is permissible.
- b. Although not a Scriptural requirement, premarital counseling is required before a wedding can be performed at Northampton Bible Church in order to discern if marriage is appropriate and to prepare the couple for marriage.
- c. For the follower of Christ, premarital sex is a presumptuous sin and is incompatible with Christian marriage preparation and sexual purity.¹⁵ Before a marriage can be performed in this case, repentance and abstinence will be expected. There is no Biblical basis to regard premarital sex and/or pregnancy as grounds to get married. There are consequences for premarital sex, as two become one flesh and breaking off of that relationship will have consequences even if that relationship was not perceived as being of one flesh. In these cases of premarital sex and/or pregnancy, repentance, accountability, and discipleship are necessary before marriage.¹⁶

- d. For the follower of Christ, cohabitation is also considered sin because it is an arrangement that is not above reproach.¹⁷ Unrelated men and women are not permitted to live in the same dwelling, even in the case of “platonic” relationships or for financial convenience.¹⁸

3. WHAT ABOUT DIVORCE?

- a. Because of the sinful nature of this world and the hardness of the human heart¹⁹, God tolerates divorce in three cases. This allowance is never to be confused with His preference. These are not Biblical commandments. Divorce should always be viewed as the last step in lovingly disciplining a rebellious and unrepentant spouse. It should be noted that the Biblical toleration of divorce does not necessarily answer the question of God’s position on remarriage after divorce takes place. God tolerates divorce in the cases of:
- **Adultery**²⁰ - Where there has been sexual immorality.
Note: Certain gross sexual sins such as pornography and other sexual addiction issues may at times be considered adultery. In cases where the offending spouse is in habitual, repeated, and unrepentant sin, there are grounds for divorce.
 - **Abandonment**²¹ - Where an unbelieving spouse has deserted a believing spouse.
Note: This must be the choice of the unbeliever and not by the initiative of the believer.
 - **Abuse**²² - Where there is danger to the spouse or children due to physical or sexual abuse, separation may be advisable. Should the offending party remain unrepentant in this sin, divorce may be the end result of this separation.
- b. “Irreconcilable differences,” “Incompatibility,” “falling out of love,” “being unhappy,” or “things not working out,” are never grounds for a Christian to divorce.
- c. Openness to reconciliation is always preferred to divorce.²³ In the case of adultery, abandonment, or abuse, the offended spouse and the community of faith should pursue the unrepentant spouse in accordance with the Scriptures.²⁴
- d. In the case of an unrepentant spouse²⁵, the Scriptures instruct us to treat them as an unbeliever, and love them back to obedience and repentance.²⁶
- e. While reconciliation is always God’s best and preference, divorce is tolerated for the Biblical reasons of adultery, abandonment, and abuse. Divorce is not required or automatic. God’s own relationship with His people, Israel, is described as a husband-wife relationship in which Israel is constantly unfaithful to her husband, the Lord God. There is a frequent reminder that it is within God’s right to “divorce” Israel, yet ultimately He will be reconciled to her.²⁷ Also, Hosea’s

marriage to Gomer is an example of an unfaithful wife being restored. This is a startling highlight of God's plan, because restoration in the case of adultery is beyond normal expectation.²⁸

- f. It is true that God hates divorce.²⁹ It is not true that God hates the divorced person. He hates divorce, not only because it distorts the picture of His unending love for His bride, but He also hates divorce because it is devastating to children, society, and the individuals themselves.

4. REMARRIAGE

- a. As followers of Jesus Christ, we have been called to a "ministry of reconciliation,"³⁰ calling all people to be reconciled to God. Though consistently unfaithful to our Creator, our Bridegroom has faithfully pursued all people that they might be reconciled to Him. As those who have been reconciled, believers have been given this message and this ministry to call unfaithful lovers back to a reconciled relationship with God. A believer who is divorced has this unique ministry with their former spouse, and should view the issue of remarriage in light of this higher calling.

- b. Remarriage is permitted when the former spouse is deceased.³¹

- c. Where the former spouse has not remarried, absolute dogma is more difficult to establish in the Scriptures regarding remarriage. Though reconciliation or remaining single is always preferable, there is flexibility given to those who have been divorced for the Biblical reasons of adultery, abandonment, or abuse. These individuals may remarry.

Note: Remarriage after a divorced spouse marries again at least has in its favor that reconciliation was decisively cut off before. However, while the spouse is still unmarried and alive, reconciliation is still Biblically possible, and preferable. This makes it very difficult, and raises great concern that counsel would be given that would condone a step that decisively ends what God meant to be permanent and which could yet be potentially restored (**1 Corinthians 7:10-11**). Others believe that **1 Corinthians 7:15** ("Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace.") gives freedom to a Christian to remarry if abandoned. Since it cannot be absolutely established that this position is incorrect, we extend grace to those who hold this position even as those who hold to it should see the basis for and extend grace to those who hold to the other position. It should be noted that in either case, all agree that every effort should be made at reconciliation and much time and counsel given before any new relationship should be considered.

- It must be stated that forgiveness and total restoration of fellowship with the Lord and the church are always available to the genuine believer upon repentance.³² For those who abandon a spouse or commit adultery as a

believer, this forgiveness does not bring permission to remarry as long as the offended spouse is living, or when reconciliation is still possible.³³

5. WHAT ABOUT DIVORCE BEFORE COMING TO KNOW CHRIST?

- a. Where divorce has occurred prior to conversion, the new believer should take responsibility for their part in the dissolution of the marriage and seek forgiveness and reconciliation in accordance with the warnings and admonitions given in Scripture.³⁴
- b. Remarriage is also possible where divorce has occurred before Christian conversion.³⁵ However, if the new believer is guilty of pre-conversion adultery or desertion, and the abandoned spouse is still unmarried and desires reconciliation, it is necessary for conversion to lead to reconciliation of that marriage. Therefore, if possible, a reasonable attempt at reconciliation should be made. If unsuccessful, the new believer is permitted to remarry.

6. WHAT ABOUT DIVORCE BEFORE ATTENDING NORTHAMPTON?

- a. If an individual was divorced prior to attending Northampton, a conversation with an Elder of Northampton or member of our pastoral staff is necessary for mutual understanding of those circumstances. Guidance will be given based on a former church's determination if it was of similar orientation, or in the absence of an evangelical church, based on what a Biblical church would have determined with the information currently available. If those circumstances are in doubt, remarriage may not be supported.³⁶

7. WHEN MUST THE CHURCH BE INVOLVED?

- a. In the case of a failing marriage between two professing Christians where a husband or wife is involved in adultery, abuse, or has perhaps abandoned the marriage, the Biblical process according to **Matthew 18:15-20** is as follows:
 - Private confrontation in which the offending spouse is confronted by his or her own husband or wife.
 - If the offending spouse will not listen, repent, and be reconciled in the marriage, the one seeking reconciliation should bring one or two others from the church to confront them.
 - If the resistant spouse still will not listen, the problem must be submitted to the Elders who will confront the offending spouse and restore the marriage, or determine an adamant refusal to be reconciled. Such a refusal demonstrates a lack of repentance and faith. The church must regard the unrepentant man or woman "as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer," meaning a non-believer, since he or she has disregarded the marriage vow and shown contempt for the church.³⁷
 - After reasonable attempts to reconcile an individual to the church and to the marriage, the believer who has been unjustly abandoned must then be

regarded as “not under bondage” to the unrepentant spouse, since this offending spouse is now regarded as a non-believer who has deserted the marriage.³⁸

Note 1: Where the church Elders have determined Biblical grounds for divorce, there is no necessary waiting period imposed upon the offended spouse; they are free to “let him/her leave.”³⁹

Note 2: Where proper grounds for divorce have been established, the matter of who “files for divorce” is irrelevant.

- If during this process, in the case of desertion, the offending man or woman responds, thus showing evidence of repentance and faith, the church and the spouse are obligated to forgive and work to fully restore the marriage.⁴⁰ Church discipleship and counseling are strongly recommended. However, in the case of adultery, the sin itself destroys the marital bond and constitutes desertion. God likens adultery to marrying another.⁴¹ Therefore, the offended spouse is not under obligation to reconcile in this case, however reconciliation is preferred.

FOOTNOTES

[1] 1 Corinthians 7:39; Malachi 2:14

[2] Genesis 2:7;18-25

[3] Genesis 2:18

[4] Genesis 1:28

[5] Proverbs 5:18-19; 1 Corinthians 7:2-5

[6] Ephesians 5:22-33

[7] Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:5-6

[8] Genesis 2:18-24; Matthew 19:5-6

[9] Matthew 19:6

[10] Genesis 2:18-24

[11] Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:5-6

[12] Ephesians 5:22-31; 1 Peter 3:1-7

[13] ibidem

[14] 2 Corinthians 6:14

[15] 1 Corinthians 6:18; 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8; Hebrews 13:4

[16] 1 Corinthians 6:16-17; 2 Corinthians 2:5-8; 1 John 1:9; 2:1

[17] Ephesians 5:3; Philippians 2:14-16; 1 Timothy 5:2

[18] Philippians 2:14-15; Ephesians 5:3

[19] Matthew 19:8

[20] Exodus 20:14; Matthew 19:9

[21] 1 Corinthians 7:12-16

[22] Malachi 2:16

[23] 1 Corinthians 7:10-11

[24] Matthew 18:15-17; Ephesians 4:32; Galatians 6:1-2

[25] Matthew 18:17

[26] 1 Peter 3:1-2; 1 Corinthians 7:12-16; Galatians 6:1; Matthew 7:3-5

[27] Isaiah 50:1; 54:6-7; Jeremiah 3:8

[28] Hosea 1:2; 3:1-3

[29] Malachi 2:15-16

[30] 2 Corinthians 5:16- 20

[31] Romans 7:2-3; 1 Corinthians 7:39

[32] 2 Corinthians 2:5-8; 1 John 1:9; 2:1

[33] 1 Corinthians 7:10-11; Romans 7:2-3

[34] 1 Corinthians 7:11; James 5:16

[35] 2 Corinthians 5:17; Romans 6:4-7

[36] Hebrews 13:17; 1 Peter 5:1-3

[37] 1 Corinthians 5:1-5, 9-13 and section 3.4

[38] 1 Corinthians 7:15

[39] ibidem

[40] 2 Corinthians 2:5-11; Matthew 6:14; 18:21-35; Mark 11:25; Luke 17:3; Ephesians 4:32

[41] 1 Corinthians 6:16