



## **MARRIAGE, DIVORCE, REMARRIAGE**

(October 2021)

Marriage is a sacred union between one man and one woman. God's original intent for marriage is seen in the first couple, Adam and Eve (Genesis 2:18ff). Designed by God, this relationship is to be uniquely personal and intimate; a covenant relationship exemplifying a committed, lifelong, loving union. Such faithfulness in a relationship is meant to reflect God's faithful love for His people (Hosea 2:19), even in the face of extremely difficult realities.

One of the great joys within our church is when a man and woman unite in the covenant of holy matrimony. Much preparation usually occurs where attention is given to the details of the wedding. The couple spends significant time in premarital counseling. The realities of living faithfully to marriage vows go well beyond the celebration of the wedding day, so every effort is given for couples to enter marriage with biblically informed minds and committed hearts.

### **Biblical Marriage: A God-Ordained Covenant**

God has ordained marriage (Genesis 2:24). The Apostle Paul taught that marriage is a profound mystery (Ephesians 5:33), likened to Jesus Christ's new covenant relationship to His own bride, the Church (Ephesians 5:23).

Scripture affirms the permanence of marriage in many places. Jesus instructed us that what God has joined together, man must not separate (Matthew 19:6). However, marital love between men and women often falters, regardless of God's clear commands for how married couples are to uphold and treat one another. Christian Family Chapel recognizes the challenges that occur in marriages, so we provide biblical counseling services and marriage enrichment opportunities for married men and women who are struggling in their marriage. Varying degrees of conflict occur within marriages at different times and for different reasons. Biblical counseling helps marriages improve and even thrive when couples get help and seek to grow in Christ-likeness. By God's grace and to His glory, countless marriages in our church and community have been restored through this process. If you are struggling in your marriage the Elders encourage you to reach out for Biblical Counseling (<https://cfcjax.com/hopecenter/request-counseling/>)

The Bible also speaks about limited grounds for divorce. Christian Family Chapel believes in taking the entire Bible seriously (2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:3). The purpose of this paper is to discuss the biblical grounds for divorce and how they apply to a variety of real-life situations. This document will seek to provide overall direction and guidance to help

elders, pastors, and biblical counselors, as well as members of Christian Family Chapel, understand the topic of divorce. This will not cover every situation or possible outcome. One reason God gave His Church elders is for them to prayerfully weigh and arbitrate different cases, seeking to determine how best to apply God's Word. Though Scripture is sufficient, it is not exhaustive in detailing every possible situation that may arise in the life of a married person. Therefore, this document seeks to lay a foundational pattern of thinking and interpretation of Scripture but will not attempt to address every circumstance where divorce may occur.

## **Biblical Grounds for Divorce**

### **Sexual Immorality**

Both Matthew 5:32 and Matthew 19:9 state that if sexual immorality (porneia) has occurred, biblical grounds exist for divorce. This clearly includes a spouse having physical sexual relations with another person outside of marriage even once.

Porneia is a broad word that encompasses any sexual sin outside of God's will. As discussed below, each situation must be examined on a case-by-case basis. There are other types of sexual sin that the elders may judge as meeting this biblical test, especially if the questions enumerated below demonstrate clear patterns of unrepentant sin.

There are also cases where a sinning party may say that he or she has repented, but because of the nature of the sin (i.e. sexual immorality), the spouse who has been sinned against would still have biblical grounds for divorce. In some cases, the sinning party would also be disciplined or remain under church discipline by Christian Family Chapel even if they have asked for forgiveness. In such cases, asking forgiveness is not the issue, but whether or not the sinning party has demonstrated fruits of repentance (Matt. 3:8; 2 Cor. 7:9-11). Therefore, restoring active fellowship or membership may involve a longer process. True repentance is often a slow process and the fruit of it becomes evident over time.

There are also certain situations where the person who was sinned against would be determined to have biblical grounds (such as in the case of physical adultery), but their spouse would not necessarily be disciplined by the church if the elders believed there was repentance on the part of the sinning person.

### **Abandonment (Not Being "pleased to dwell<sup>i</sup> with" – 1 Corinthians 7:12-13)**

1 Corinthians 7 teaches that if a person is married to an individual who is not a follower of Jesus Christ, the Christian spouse should remain in the marriage. However, verse 15 explains that if the unbelieving spouse does not want to remain in the marriage, that act of desertion frees the believing spouse to divorce if he/she chooses to do so.

There are some situations where an unbelieving spouse says he or she is "pleased to dwell with"<sup>ii</sup> their married partner, but their actions indicate otherwise. This includes behavior that is physically abusive (and in some extreme cases, being mentally or verbally

abusive), an unwillingness to fulfill basic marital responsibilities, such as providing material support or engaging in sexual intimacy.

Sometimes the person behaving in this fashion says he or she is a Christian and might even be a member of Christian Family Chapel. Since “abandonment” only applies to situations where the offending spouse is an unbeliever, the offended spouse should bring his/her evidence to the elders. If their investigation reveals that the person is not “pleased to dwell with” their spouse, there may be biblical grounds for divorce based upon the fruit of the offending spouse contradicting the profession of their belief in Christ.

If the offending party is a member, he/she will be lovingly pursued by Christian Family Chapel in accordance with process laid out by Jesus in Matthew 18:15-17 in an effort to encourage the offending party to repent. Although this process may be referred to as church “discipline”, the goal is to “win” the brother or sister through his or her repentance. However, if the offending party refuses to listen to the church, the Scriptures says the elders and the church are to treat the individual as a non-believer (Matthew 18:17).

One aspect of desertion is abuse<sup>iii</sup>, a word that is used in many different ways in our culture. The elders will listen carefully to any report of abuse in any form (physical, mental, verbal, etc.). We believe a married person has the right to feel safe and experience an appropriate amount of peace in his/her own home (1 Corinthians 7:15). Care will especially be shown to those who are in the most vulnerable position in the home, often the wife and the children.

### **Determining Biblical Grounds for Divorce**

The Bible describes the role of the church in a variety of ways, including affirming the church’s responsibility to function as a court to arbitrate matters between members (1 Corinthians 6:1-8). At Christian Family Chapel the elders serve our church family as the leaders determining what discipline should occur when irreconcilable disputes happen within our membership. When it comes to evaluating the grounds for biblical divorce, the elders serve as the designated group responsible for reviewing the case and making determinations when the question arises.

This document seeks to provide a general framework for the elders, pastors, and biblical counselors of the church. However, the facts in each situation are different and will need to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis and weighed carefully. Our elders take this responsibility very seriously and are committed to spending significant time listening, praying, and searching the Scriptures in each case. Work will be devoted to investigating the claims of each person and seeking to establish what is true. However, there may be times when it is impossible to determine the full extent of what is true (e.g., he said, she said). In cases where it is hard to determine the full extent of truth, the elders may choose to err on the side of protecting the spouse that is in the weaker and more vulnerable position in the marriage<sup>iv</sup>.

If a man or woman believes the conditions are present for a biblical divorce, he or she should contact one of Christian Family Chapel's elders to present the evidence. The person presenting their evidence is welcome to bring an advocate of his or her choice. In accordance with Proverbs 18:17, time will be spent listening to the other spouse and any other appropriate parties. The utmost care will be given to listen carefully, compassionately, and completely. Prayer will be devoted to the process before a decision is reached. Since discussions and prayer takes some time, we believe it is best for members of Christian Family Chapel to not file for a divorce until the elders are able to come to a decision as to whether there are biblical grounds for divorce.

### **Must a Person Divorce?**

Even if there are biblical grounds that allow for divorce, that does not necessarily mean the divorce must occur. Christ makes it clear that divorce happens because of the hardness of our hearts (Matthew 19:7-8; Mark 10:2-6). On numerous occasions over the years, offended parties have chosen to forgive, reconcile, and remain in the marriage.

Scripture is clear—people must forgive. It is needed and necessary. Lack of forgiveness is often at the heart of problems that lead to bitterness between spouses, even to the demise of the marriage (Mark 10:2ff). In the New Testament, biblical forgiveness occurring between Christians encompasses two elements; there is a vertical as well as a horizontal dimension. The vertical dimension emphasizes a readiness to forgive based upon what Christ has done for us (Mark 11:25). It is a God-focused, merciful, tender-hearted attitude toward those that sin against us (Ephesians 4:32). Scripture warns that a lack of a forgiving attitude hinders prayer and is even dangerous (Matthew 6:14ff; 1 Peter 3:7). It also fails to reflect Christ's attitude toward those that sinned against him (Luke 23:34; Romans 5:8), which we should seek to emulate as we each seek to grow in Christ-likeness.

The horizontal dimension actually emphasizes forgiving a repentant person (Luke 17:3ff). This includes granting forgiveness to spouses that sin in ways that provide biblical grounds for divorce. Even if biblical grounds for divorce are substantiated, believing spouses must forgive, even though they may still choose to divorce.

### **Repentance**

One of the defining characteristics and actions of all believers is that they live a life of repentance. The church is not made up of perfect people but individuals who are striving to become more like Christ in their personal holiness (Philippians 3:12-14). It is because a person has been determined by the local church to be unrepentant that a person is disciplined from the body of the local church, not because of one sin, per se (Matthew 18:15-20). Determining if a person is unrepentant falls to the elders based on some of the criteria listed here as well as later in this document. Examples of the fruit of repentance include things like: confession of sin and not trying to obscure what happened (Psalm 32:5; James 5:16); bringing sin into the light before being caught (Proverbs 28:13); a desire to make things right both in confession and action (Luke 19:8); truly biblically

evident repentance (Acts 19:19; 2 Cor. 7: 10ff); patience with those who have been sinned against (Matthew 18:21-35); a willingness to face consequences (Galatians 6:7); a welcoming of accountability (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12; Galatians 6:1-2); a teachable spirit (Colossians 1: 28).

### **Understanding the Reality of Degrees of Severity**

As discussed above, the two general categories of grounds for divorce are sexual immorality or desertion on the part of an unbelieving spouse (Matthew 5:32, 19:9; 1 Corinthians 7:15). All sin is offensive to God, but that does not mean that all sin has the same consequences. Similarly, not all sin is of the same degree. For example, a wife sending a sexually suggestive message to a man who is not her husband is different than her doing so on multiple occasions or having physical sexual relations with him. A man shouting at his wife in sinful anger is different from a pattern of sinfully angry behavior or him physically abusing her.

When evaluating the biblical grounds for divorce, below are some of the issues the elders will take into consideration:

- Has one spouse abandoned the other spouse? Things like physically leaving the home or not paying bills and supporting children will be considered for this question. (1 Corinthians 7:15).
- Has one spouse committed physical adultery with another person (defined by sexual contact with another person—even one time)? (Matthew 5:32; 1 Corinthians 6:16).
- Has a person been unwilling to stop visiting massage parlors or strip clubs, engaging in virtual sexual relationships, or internet pornography?
- Has a person been unwilling to stop developing inappropriate relationships through text, calls, sending suggestive or pornographic pictures, or visits with someone other than their spouse? (1 Corinthians 6:18).
- Has a person been unwilling to stop physical abuse or was the physical abuse such that serious injury either did or could have occurred? (Galatians 5:17-21).
- Have the police or other law enforcement officers been involved?
- How wide and publicly known are the marriage issues that the couple may be experiencing? Is the sin resulting in a “blaspheming of God” to others? (Romans 2:22-24).
- Has a person been unwilling to stop using sex (either depriving or demanding) as a weapon to manipulate, control, and oppress their spouse? (1 Corinthians 7:3-5).
- Has a person been guilty of physical confinement, financial cruelty (e.g., cancelling credit card, emptying bank accounts, etc.), or withholding common physical provision such as food, clothing, and basic needs? (Ephesians 5:2, 25).
- Has a person been guilty of extended oppression with behavior like: words that seek to control; name calling including names that are sexually derogatory, repeated non-violent acts of oppression; relational sabotage with children;

intimidation regarding relationships; sharing information with others for the purpose or result of tearing down their spouse? (Ephesians 4:29-32).

- Is there a mitigating health condition or previous sexual/physical abuse that is impacting the behavior of a spouse (e.g., an injury that changes sexual relationships, a disease that prevents sex, or a mental condition that impacts a spouse's ability to think or reason)? (Ephesians 4:2; Philippians 2:3-4; 1 Peter 3:7).
- Is there evidence that the spouse wants to be married and is contributing to a peaceable, amiable marriage<sup>2</sup>? (1 Corinthians 7:12-13).
- Are family circumstances simply part of common human suffering (e.g., loss of a job, hurting economy)?
- Is each person faithfully attending, serving, and participating in the body life of the church? (Matthew 6: 33; Acts 2:42; Romans 12:1, 11; Hebrews 10:25).
- Has each person been willing to submit to biblical counseling (not just attending, but working to change and grow)? (1 Peter 2:2; 2 Peter 3:18).
- Are the children old enough to express an opinion? Do the children have a level of spiritual maturity that allows them to connect Scripture with the behavior in their home and render a wise opinion? (Proverbs 18:13, 17).
- Is the person/couple asking the church leadership for prayer and counsel in order to make a decision or are they simply informing the leadership of a decision already made? (Proverbs 12:15; Hebrews 13:17).
- Is there ongoing character-defining evidence that either husband or wife is unwilling to live submitted to Scripture with regard to the directives of how husbands and wives are to live with one another? (Ephesians 4-5; Colossians 3:12-18)

### **Remarriage**

When a person has pursued a divorce on biblical grounds, he or she is free to remarry (1 Corinthians 7:15-16). However, there are cases where a person has been involved in an unbiblical divorce, either initiating or being sued for divorce by another person prior to, or even while a member of Christian Family Chapel. The past can be messy and complex, especially when discerning past marital brokenness and what is pleasing to God going forward. In these cases, the elders desire members of the church to discuss their previous marriages with them prior to remarrying. The elders and pastors intend to come alongside those thinking about remarriage to discern a biblical, redemptive course of action that honors God and His design for marriage.

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<sup>i</sup> 1 The Greek word *συνευδοκέω* (NASB: consents to live with, KJV: pleased to dwell) carries the idea that the person heartily agrees (Luke 11:48; Acts 8:1, 22:20; Romans 1:32). This means there is evidence that the person is striving both in word and deed to live peaceably with their spouse. They are working hard to make the marriage work.

<sup>ii</sup> 2 Examples of this word used elsewhere in Scripture are Acts 8:1 and Romans 1:32 where the picture is of a person giving hearty approval. There is a real desire and outward evidence that what is happening is pleasing to them.

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<sup>iii</sup> 3 The Biblical term for “Abuse” would be “Oppression” or “Affliction”. In marriage it would refer to a pattern of physical or verbal behavior that is used by one spouse to gain or maintain power and control over (the oppression and the affliction) another spouse and (frequently) to prevent the other spouse from seeking help or protection. Such oppression can include physical violence (including sexual), economic, or threats of actions that influence another person. This includes any behaviors that intimidate, manipulate, humiliate, isolate or restrain (physically and relationally), frighten, terrorize, coerce, threaten, blame, hurt, or injure someone.

<sup>iv</sup> 4 While this is often the wife, that is not always the case. For example, there may be times when the male spouse may be in a weaker state because of a physical, financial, or mental ability.