

Divorce and Remarriage: A Position Paper

Calvary Baptist Church of Santa Barbara

Without exception, divorce brings pain and sorrow to everyone it touches. It breaks homes, families, and businesses. The lives of children are turned upside down. Divorce tears apart friendships and divides loyalties. More devastating than the physical death of a spouse, divorce is the death of the covenant relationship between two who had earlier stood together and promised to remain together forever. Divorce brings with it feelings of guilt, fear, and shame as what was once declared to be an unbroken bond is now reduced to a legal relationship that is severed with the bang of a gavel.

The elders of Calvary Baptist Church understand that divorce is painful for everyone involved. We intend for this document to be a declaration of our position on the topics of divorce, remarriage, and the church's responsibilities to shepherd and care for its members and regular attenders who find themselves in struggling marriages, considering divorce, or considering remarriage after a divorce. After all, the Lord Jesus came to heal the sick and minister to those who are broken and this is why the church exists today. In their role as shepherds of the believers who assemble at Calvary Baptist Church, the elders seek to counsel couples and individuals as they deal with the issues that either lead to or result from divorce.

Marriage First

Before we embark on a discussion of divorce, we must first briefly state our position on marriage. Marriage is the cornerstone of family and society. It is the God-ordained institution wherein He joins two separate individuals together who then "shall become one flesh" (Matthew 19:5). We believe that this oneness is critical to understanding why, by God's design, divorce has no place in the life of the believer. From the beginning, God intended marriage to be an inseparable union that would point to the future relationship between Jesus (the bridegroom) and the Church (the bride)¹. The elders of Calvary Baptist Church affirm the clear teaching of Scripture that the marriage of one man to one woman is intended to be, as traditional marriage vows state, "til death do us part."

Forgiveness, Not Condemnation

Perhaps you have been divorced. You may be reading this to learn how Calvary Baptist Church will treat you. Will we accept you into our congregation? Will you be a target of our sideways glances? Will you be allowed to participate in communion? Volunteer in ministry? Become a member?

Let us be clear from the outset: The elders of Calvary Baptist Church do not believe that divorce is the unforgivable sin. None of us is without sin (Romans 3:23) and forgiveness is offered to all who would put their faith in Jesus (Acts 10:43). There is no sin that is beyond the reach of God's grace, so long as there is confession and repentance (1 John 1:9). Not lying. Not stealing. Not murder. And not divorce. Even so, we need to make our position on divorce clear so that, as those charged

¹ Revelation 19:7-9

with the task of shepherding the flock, we can offer guidance, counsel, and even discipline to those who would submit themselves to the authority of this local church body. It is in that vein that this position paper is written and offered.

When is Divorce Biblically Permissible?

Our strong position on the sanctity of marriage raises the question: Does Scripture ever allow a believer to get a divorce. In Matthew 19:3, some Pharisees ask Jesus the same question: “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” It may be helpful to note here that, while this conversation between the Pharisees and Jesus seemed to center on a man’s right to divorce his wife, the same principles apply to a wife who seeks to divorce her husband. In answering, Jesus relied on a biblical understanding of the origin of marriage. “He answered, ‘Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate” (vv. 4-6). But the Pharisees pressed him, asking “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” Jesus responds in two parts.

First, Jesus points out the root of both the Pharisees’ question and the main issue even today. He said, “Because of your hardness of heart...”² In our fallen state, it is our tendency to ask the question “How far can I go?” or “Where is the line that I should not cross?” That tendency is something with which we all wrestle every day. We may not all wrestle with questions about divorce, but it might be about our taxes, our work, our driving habits, or a million other things. But the hardness of our hearts causes us to ask the wrong questions for the wrong reasons. The God-honoring, Christ-exalting, Gospel-centered question ought to be “What can I do to save my marriage?” or “How can I be faithful to the commitments that I have made?”

But then Jesus went on to give his only valid reason to divorce. In verse 9, Jesus says “And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, *except for sexual immorality*, and marries another, commits adultery” (emphasis added). The elders of Calvary Baptist Church believe that Jesus’ statement is clear: sexual immorality (e.g., adultery) provides the only biblically permissible basis for a believer to initiate a divorce. Adultery severs the “one flesh” bond that was intended by God and created at the time of marriage. That is, Jesus says that the sexually immoral actions on the part of one spouse have the *ability* to allow the offended spouse to, in effect, nullify the marriage covenant. Lest we leave it open to too broad an interpretation, the Greek word that is translated here as “sexual immorality” is *porneia* and refers to any sexual relations with anyone other than one’s spouse.

It’s important to note here that Jesus does not say that the offended spouse *must* seek a divorce in the case of sexual immorality. In this case, divorce is *permitted*, but not *required*. **“Since God’s intention is that marriage should be for life, this provides good reason to make every reasonable effort to achieve restoration and forgiveness in marriage before taking steps to**

² Matthew 19:8

dissolve a marriage through divorce.”³ We find this to be a critical point. Forgiveness and restoration in instances like this, where there is such deep hurt and betrayal, provide a beautiful picture of the believer’s relationship with Christ, who died for us “while we were still sinners” (Romans 5:8). Even so, Jesus makes it clear that it is permissible for a believer to initiate divorce proceedings in the event one’s spouse engages in adultery.

The apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 7, provides one more biblical justification for divorce. Verses 12 through 16 of that chapter give us helpful guidance on the topic of how believers should relate to an unbelieving spouse. Specifically, verse 15 indicates that a believing spouse is not “enslaved” if an unbelieving spouse abandons the marriage. While there is much debate within evangelicalism on the meaning of the term “enslaved” (other translations, like the NIV, use the term “bound”), we believe that Paul’s main point is that when an unbelieving spouse wants to leave a believer, while the believer cannot initiate a divorce, he or she has not sinned if the unbelieving spouse chooses to do so: “But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace.” The elders of Calvary Baptist Church affirm Paul’s teaching that a divorce initiated by an unbelieving spouse is not counted as sin to the believer.

To summarize the official position of Calvary Baptist Church on the topic of divorce: there are two (and only two) biblical grounds that justify the divorce of a believer. The first, as instructed by Jesus, is adultery (Matthew 19:9). The second, expressed by Paul, is abandonment by an unbelieving spouse (1 Corinthians 7:15), but this divorce must not be initiated by the believer. Members and regular attenders of Calvary Baptist Church would be advised to seek the counsel and judgment of the elders before taking a path that would lead to divorce.

Remarriage After Divorce

The elders of Calvary Baptist Church are convinced that remarriage after divorce is permitted for the faithful partner only when the divorce was on biblical grounds. In our view, the fact that Scripture allows for divorce in any instance at all implies that the faithful partner is free to remarry. Furthermore, Paul’s use of the term “enslaved” in 1 Corinthians 7 would seem to indicate that “the brother or sister” is no longer bound to the commitments made as part of marriage, including the commitment to remain true to the offending spouse. We hold that either a faithful spouse who chooses to divorce an unfaithful one or a believing spouse who is abandoned by an unbelieving one who initiates a divorce is free to remarry. It should go without saying, though, that any remarriage should be to another believer who is equally free to marry (1 Corinthians 7:39). One who finds himself or herself considering remarriage is advised to seek the counsel of the elders.

³ *The English Standard Version Study Bible*, note on Matthew 19:9, [www.ESVBible.org](http://www ESV Bible.org), Crossway.