

Elder Statement Paper on Marriage

I. Marriage Defined Biblically

Marriage is an institution that was designed and implemented by God at the close of the Creation Week (Gen 1:26). God created the first man, Adam, and the first woman, Eve, in His image, to represent Him and to carry out His rule over the world that He had made. Because it was not good for Adam to be alone, God made him a help-mate from his rib, Eve, to be his companion and to aid him in subduing the earth, filling it, and ruling it (Gen 1:27-28; 2:15-23). This union between Adam and Eve would be a one-flesh union and would stand as a model for every subsequent marriage (Gen 2:24).

The Lord Jesus Christ affirmed this design for marriage when he said, “Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined 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 no man separate” (Matt 19:4-6).

The Creation account of Genesis, the testimony of Jesus as Lord of Creation, and the uniform testimony of all the Scriptures, define for mankind what marriage is. Marriage is the one-flesh union of one biological man to one biological woman who each are covenantally bound together by God in an exclusive commitment to one another until God parts them in death.

II. Christian Marriage

As one moves from the book of Genesis through the rest of the Bible to see how God interacts with His people, it becomes clear that God intends marriage to communicate to the world His covenant commitment to that redeemed people. Listen to how God speaks to His

people in marital language: “For your husband is your Maker, whose name is the LORD of hosts; and your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel, who is called the God of all the earth” (Isa 54:5).

This was the case with Israel under the Old Covenant, but what about with the Church under the New Covenant? When we come to Ephesians 5 we see that this is still the case. In verses 22 through 24, Paul exhorts wives to be subject to their own husbands “as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything.” Paul then directs his attention to husbands in verses 25 through 33. “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her...” (v. 25). Paul quotes from Genesis 2:24 and connects it to Christ’s relationship to the church: “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and shall be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church” (vv. 31-32).

Christian marriage is intended by God to be a reflection of Christ’s relationship to His Church. The implication of this is that the man and the woman entering into a Christian marriage must both be Christians, meaning they both must have been born again by God’s Spirit, have repented of their sins, have trusted in Christ alone to be their Lord and Savior, and are continuing to live a life of repentant faith as they follow Christ. If this is not a reality in both the man and the woman, their marriage will fail to adequately portray Christ’s love for His Church and the Church’s respect for Christ. Only a Christian man, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, will be enabled to love his wife as Christ loved the Church. Only a Christian woman, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, will be enabled to submit to her husband in all things as the Church submits to Christ. An unequal yoking together of a Christian to a non-Christian will not be able to clearly communicate

Christ to a watching world (cf. 2 Cor 6:14-18). This is not to say that a Christian who is currently in an unequally yoked marriage cannot exalt Christ in that marriage, but it is to say that a single believer looking to get married must be careful to marry “in the Lord” (1 Cor 7:39).

III. The Role of the Local Church in a Christian Marriage

To gain an understanding of the role of a local church in the marriage of believers, it is important to consider three different points. After making note of each of these points, we will draw them together to better see the tie between the local church and a couple’s Christian marriage.

First, according to Genesis 2 and according to Jesus in Matthew 19:6, God is the one who joins a man and a woman together in marriage. Marriage predates the establishment of governments and it predates the Church. It is a Creation ordinance and, as a Creation ordinance, God alone has the authority to sovereignly and providentially establish marriages via covenant and to dissolve marriages by death. This, however, does not rule out the involvement of duly appointed authorities to whom God delegates the task of recognizing, pronouncing, and regulating marriages. When it comes to the institution of the Church, though not strictly necessary for a marriage to be a legitimate marriage, it is appropriate to have the wedding ceremony officiated by one of God’s delegated authorities in the local church. Legitimate marriages can also be conducted by duly appointed governmental authorities in our society as well. The Bible calls the delegated authorities in the church by a few different names: pastor, elder, overseer (1 Tim 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-3). Such men are responsible to Christ to care for His flock/body/bride, the church. And since, in a Christian marriage, the man and woman getting married are a part of the church, it follows that they will continue to be shepherded in their new marriage by elders, pastors, overseers.

Second, the Bible often portrays the marriage ceremony as being a public affair that is witnessed and affirmed by others (Gen 24; 29; Ruth 4; Ps 45; Song 3:11; John 2:1-11). The Bible also speaks of marriage as the establishment of a covenant between the groom and the bride (Mal 2:13-16). Being a public ceremony, the community is aware of this covenantal commitment that husband and wife have made to one another.

Third, in the church, the relationship of the church members one to another is a relationship of mutual accountability (Matt 18:15-17; Gal 6:1-2; Eph 4:11-16). Believers are responsible for one another before God. They are responsible to build one another up in Christ, speaking the truth in love to each other, steering one another away from sin, and fostering a deeper love for Christ in one another.

Taking these three points together (surely more points could be added), we can see what role the local church plays in a Christian marriage. The married couple will have a network of support and accountability built in around them in their particular local church. They will have elders overseeing them and shepherding them, helping them to cultivate a God-honoring marriage. They will have brothers and sisters in Christ who are well aware of their covenantal commitment to one another and who will be able to lovingly admonish them when the husband or the wife begin to consider breaking that covenant or to encourage them when the going gets tough. Not only that, but this husband and wife, insofar as they are faithful to carry out their respective roles in the marriage, will be a continual reminder to the church at large of Christ's love for them as His bride and their obligation to submit to Him as their Bridegroom.

IV. Divorce and Remarriage

Marriage is an institution that God put in place before man's fall into sin. Marriage was a part of God's "very good" Creation. As such, it was intended to be an inseparable, unbreakable

bond between husband and wife. When sin entered the world, marriage was marred, as was the image of God in man. The effects of sin upon the marriage of Adam and Eve were seen almost immediately: 1) Man sought to blame his wife, as well as God, for his own sin (Gen 3:12) and 2) God indicated that the wife would seek to unsuccessfully usurp the husband's role as leader in the marriage (Gen 3:16; 4:7).¹ Man was designed to live forever in the presence of God, but due to sin, man dies and is separated from God. Marriage was designed to be an unbreakable union, but due to sin, marriage becomes a divisive battlefield where that union is too easily broken. Divorce is only a reality in this fallen world because of sin. Is it any wonder then that God says, "I hate divorce" (Mal 2:16)?

In Mark 10:1-12, we find the general rule that God does not permit divorce. In verse 9, Jesus forbids any man from separating what God Himself has joined together. Jesus also pronounces that the husband or wife who divorces his or her spouse and marries another person commits adultery. Yet, in this passage, Jesus states that divorces do in fact occur as a result of sin, due to the hardheartedness of mankind (seen in verses 2-5 and implied in verses 11-12). So, a Christian should not ever seek to dissolve the union that God has formed between oneself and his or her spouse, but there are times when one's spouse will sinfully dissolve that union by his or her actions. What then is to become of the spouse who desired to remain in the marriage, but who was left with no choice in the matter? After all, it takes the faithful participation of two individuals for a marriage to be established and to endure.

In Romans 12:18, the Apostle Paul says, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men." There are circumstances in which peace between a husband and a wife cannot be maintained due to the hardheartedness of one against the other. In those cases, is the

¹ In Gen 3:16 and 4:7, see the parallel between A) Eve's desire for her husband and his rule over her and B) sin's desire for Cain and God's exhortation of Cain to rule over his sin; these are the only two passages in the entire OT where these specific words for "desire" and "rule/master" occur together.

husband or wife who is seeking peace ever permitted by God to resort to seeking a divorce?

Scripture clearly indicates that there are two general cases in which God permits this.

A. Adultery

In Matthew 19:9, Jesus does give an exception to the general rule that a spouse should not seek a divorce. There, Jesus says, “And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.” Jesus indicates that it is lawful for a person to divorce his or her spouse when that spouse has committed immorality. The word for “immorality” is the Greek *porneia* which is a broad term for unlawful sexual intercourse. It includes, but is not limited to, fornication and adultery. In such cases a person is permitted to divorce his or her spouse because that sinning spouse, through his or her immorality, is the one who has broken the union. In such a case divorce would simply be the legal recognition of the destruction the sinning spouse has inflicted upon the marriage by virtue of his or her immorality. In this case, the spouse who was faithful is permitted to remarry. His or her remarriage should not be considered adulterous.

B. Abandonment

In 1 Corinthians 7:12-16, we find in verse 15 another exception to the general prohibition against divorce. After Paul affirms the general rule in verses 10 through 11, verse 15 states, “Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace.” This exception clause applies only to a Christian who is married to an unbeliever. If an unbeliever “leaves” the Christian spouse, that spouse is “not under bondage” because “God has called us to peace”. For a Christian to divorce the unbeliever who abandoned him or her would simply be to legally recognize that unbeliever’s sinful destruction of the marriage bond.

But what about the case in which you have two professing believers who are married to each other and one of them abandons the other? The faithful spouse ought not to divorce the one who left until the church they belong to has carried out church discipline upon that sinning spouse. If the sinning spouse does not repent and return to the marriage, that sinning spouse has given every indication that he or she is actually an unbeliever and the church is to treat that person as such. At that time, the faithful husband or wife may consider himself or herself to have been abandoned by an unbelieving spouse at which time he or she is “not under bondage” and is free to divorce and remarry.

In each of these two general cases it is good and right for the faithful spouse to seek reconciliation with the faithless spouse. That is, after all, what the Gospel is all about. As far as it depends on us, we should seek peace and restoration with one another, but there are times when restoration is not possible. Each believer who is considering divorce, or who has been divorced and is seeking remarriage, ought to seek godly counsel from church leadership before making this most serious of decisions. In the cases of adultery and abandonment, many factors can be involved which make it unwise to come to a decision about divorce and/or remarriage without seeking input from one’s elders in the church.

Here are just a few examples of questions that could come up and that should be answered with your church leadership before making a decision: 1) My husband is physically abusive in the home; should I consider myself abandoned by him?² 2) My wife kissed another man; can I divorce her? 3) My husband committed adultery with another woman and has confessed it to me and wants to be reconciled; am I still right to automatically divorce him? 4) I had an unbiblical divorce as an unbeliever. Now I am a believer and my unbelieving ex-wife

² In such cases of serious physical abuse, a crime is being committed and the spouse and/or church leadership ought to contact the authorities immediately for the victim’s physical safety.

wants to restore our marriage. Is it right for me as a believer to reenter a marriage covenant with my ex-wife who is still an unbeliever?

As you can see, the questions can be quite complex and we must be hesitant to trust our own judgment in making final decisions.

The two exceptions to the rule of no divorce have been experienced by God Himself. Many times, God uses the language of adultery and abandonment to describe the sins that His bride, the nation Israel, committed against Him. This is seen very clearly in Jeremiah 3:6-8. God testifies against Israel that she had committed adultery against Him *and* had not returned to Him, proving their unbelief. Therefore, God “sent her away” and gave her “a writ of divorce”. Then, in the book of Hosea, God again describes the faithlessness of Israel in terms of adultery and abandonment against Him (1:2; 2:5, 13). But God does something quite remarkable. He pursues His people to take them to Himself as a bride again (2:14-23). This is the God that believers have been redeemed by and who can heal and renew broken marriages. He is still the One we must look to when considering the weighty questions of marriage, divorce, and remarriage.