

Divorce & Remarriage

This document sets out the elders' current thinking and policy with regard to divorce and remarriage at Hope City Church Edinburgh. We must always continue to examine and refine our beliefs and practices to ensure they conform to Scripture. This principle applies to our understanding of divorce and remarriage and this is a living document as a result.

We know this issue is painful

Few issues can provoke such pain to Christians as talking about divorce. The church has often handled this badly, heaping shame upon those who are hurting and showing judgemental self-righteousness instead of the loving kindness and grace of Christ (Jn 4:16-29). Every one of us need to cling to this mercy and grace that is found uniquely through Christ. So to anyone who has been hurt in marriage, or by the church's response to you, we want to say there is compassion, grace and tender care for you here at Hope City. Anyone is welcome at Hope City church no matter what your background in marriage and divorce. We love you and we want to care for you as you strive to live for Christ.

Yet we must tackle it

It is challenging to produce a policy on this topic because every scenario has its own unique details. All situations require tremendous wisdom and care as discerning the wisest counsel may be very challenging. In light of this, it may seem simpler and safer simply to ignore the issue - don't take a position, and don't ask about it. It is far harder to take the few principles in scripture and try to apply them prayerfully and wisely to each unique situation. We seek to be constantly reformed into the likeness of Christ by his word and that means working hard to find out how to bring all areas into conformity with the Lordship of Christ even where this is difficult, painful and potentially unpopular or even divisive.

There will be some who read this document and disagree passionately with our position. Godly humility demands we acknowledge our grasp and interpretation of scripture is imperfect, and recognise there is always scope for legitimate challenge. We have attempted to form all our positions from the teaching of Scripture and our desire is always to do what pleases God, seeking to reflect his righteousness and grace in our lives and in our care towards those around us. Alternative understandings must be argued from scripture alone rather than experience, emotion or current cultural values.

Summary position

- Marriage is not the right destination for every Christian. Paul commends the advantages of being single (1 Cor 7:7) and we want to commend singleness as fulfilling and God-honouring.

- Marriage is intended by God to be a life-long and exclusive relationship between a man and a woman.
- All marriages post-fall are marred by human sinfulness and weakness and so we should expect challenges in every marriage.
- Husbands and wives are obliged before God to do all in their power to honour God's design and purpose for marriage. Failure to do so is commonplace but is harmful and to be regretted.
- In our fallen world, in some circumstances God has allowed divorce: the ending of marriage before death.
- Divorce is therefore not always sinful. It has been allowed by God in recognition of our 'hardness of heart' where because of human sinfulness it is not possible for marriage to be life-long.
- This provision is often abused: marriages are terminated that need not be or should not be. This is a failure to honour God's design for marriage and undermines God's purpose for it.
- While the bible lays out two specific grounds for legitimate divorce (Mt 19:9; 1 Cor 7:15), it does not provide a definition of all circumstances in which divorce is permissible. It requires prayerful, Godly application of biblical principles and wisdom in any particular situation.
- Where divorce is legitimate, remarriage is legitimate (1 Cor 7:15).
- Jesus' atoning death on the cross is sufficient for all sin; forgiveness and reconciliation with God is always possible through repentance and faith.

Theological understandings

God's intention is for marriage to last a lifetime

God's design for human relationships is seen from the beginning of creation and in Genesis 2:24 marriage is simply and profoundly defined: "a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh." The focus is on 'leaving' and being newly 'united'. The bond to parents is replaced by a new bond and a new family unit is formed as they become 'one flesh'.

Marriage is an anticipation of the relationship God will establish with himself and the people of Israel (e.g. Isa 54:5) which finds ultimate fulfilment in the relationship between Christ and his church (Eph 5:32, Rev 21:2).

In Mark 10:1-12 the Pharisees attempt to trap Jesus over the issue of divorce. Jesus outlines that God's preference from the beginning was for marriages to last - these are unions that God has joined together, designed to last and not be separated (Mk 10:8-9). But law

regulating divorce was given as a concession to human sinfulness and hardness of heart (Mk 10:5).

The primary teaching of this section is "don't get divorced, it is not God's intention for marriage". Whatever else we will say about the topic, we must first feel the weight of what Jesus is saying in this passage. The pharisees want to talk about when a marriage can be broken but Jesus wants to talk about why marriages should not be broken.

Although the union is 'one flesh', we understand this covenantal union to represent profound emotional, physical and psychological union with promises and obligations. However we do not believe this means the 'one flesh' *cannot* be broken but that it *ought not* to be broken.

Divorce is not always sinful

Divorce and marriage failure is a result of sin but that does not mean divorce itself is always a sinful act.

- Jesus acknowledges that marriages can be legitimately broken in some circumstances (Mt 19:9).
- In his account of Christ's birth, Luke records "Because Joseph was a righteous man he had in mind to divorce her quietly..." (Mt 1:19). Although not directly teaching about divorce (since they were only betrothed and the marriage had not been consummated (Mt 1:18)), it shows us that despite considering divorce because of Mary's assumed infidelity, Joseph would still have remained righteous by planning to divorce Mary privately so as not to bring shame upon her. The act of divorce in itself would not have rendered him unrighteous.
- God metaphorically 'divorces' his people (e.g. Jer 3:8) - although he goes on to woo his bride back to himself welcoming her as she turns and repents.

Divorce is permitted but not required on grounds of sexual immorality

Jesus in Matthew 19:9 tells us sexual sin breaks the marriage covenant and we understand this to be because it is the ratifying action of the marriage covenant. Promises are made in public and before God and then sealed with the act of sex.

This does not mean divorce must or should happen wherever there is sexual immorality. Just as we have been forgiven by God, we may with God's enabling be able to forgive those spouses who have sinned against us sexually. It may seem impossible in the moment of discovery, but God can do immeasurably more than we can even imagine. Where there has been adultery, we believe healing, forgiveness and restoration are possible and often preferable to divorce.

Divorce is permitted but not required on the grounds of desertion by an unbelieving spouse

In 1 Cor 7:15 the apostle Paul describes a situation where following conversion, the unbelieving spouse of the convert decides to leave. Here divorce is legitimate but, mirroring Jesus, he affirms that it is preferable to remain married if this is possible as "God has called you to peace".

There are other grounds for divorce - but we must be cautious & wise

The elders understanding of the New Testament teaching on divorce is that it represents 'case law' rather than exhaustive regulation. This concept is common in the Old Testament for example Ex 21:33 commands anyone digging a pit and failing to cover it, to pay for any ox or donkey which falls into it and dies. This does not mean there is no liability if a sheep or horse were to fall in. The text is teaching a principle by example, not giving exhaustive legal guidance for all cases.

In support of this understanding, Jesus' teaching in Mt 19:9 initially seems to be giving the only valid ground for divorce ('except for sexual immorality'), and to exclude all other options - but Paul under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit goes on to give an additional legitimate ground in 1 Cor 7:15.

The New Testament teaching on divorce is very brief and both passages we have referred to above deal with divorce indirectly - one in answer to a provocative trick question and the other in a section responding to false teachers' demands for asceticism. It is our understanding that these passages teach a principle by example which must then be applied carefully and prayerfully in different situations rather than an exhaustive legal definition of permissible divorce and remarriage situations.

It is the elders view then, that there may be other circumstances where divorce could be permissible in line with the principles the bible teaches regarding marriage but it is not possible to list these as every situation is unique. What must be stressed is that it is God's intention for marriages to be lifelong.

When divorce is permissible, remarriage is also

Where divorce has occurred legitimately it is our position that remarriage is also legitimate:

- Rom 7:3 and 1 Cor 7:39 teach remarriage after the death of a spouse is permitted and so remarriage is permissible in some cases.
- Mt 5:32 and Lk 16:18 reject the remarriage of either party after a divorce but we understand the exception clause in Mt 5:32 to mean this is limited to illegitimate divorce.
- 1 Cor 7:10-11 teaches a wife divorcing her husband must remain unmarried or be reconciled but we understand this to be referring to the actor in an illegitimate divorce (hence the prohibition of their act from the Lord stated in v10).

- 1 Cor 7:15 teaches the deserted believer 'is not bound' in such circumstances which we understand to mean they are no longer married and could legitimately remarry since no prohibition is given.
- Mt 19:9 teaches divorce without valid grounds followed by remarriage of the actor is adultery which implies divorce on valid grounds followed by remarriage is not.

Improperly divorce & remarried Christians should stay as they are

The principle in 1 Cor 7, repeated in verse 17, 20, and 24, is to 'remain as you are' and we would not counsel someone to divorce a second time in order to attempt to be reconciled to the initial spouse. Does this mean one has "gotten away" with the sin of illegitimate divorce? Not at all - we are never better off for having sinned. There are consequences in our relationships and there may be consequences in our spiritual lives (Gal 6:7-8). Grace covering sin is not a licence for sin (Rom 6:1-2).

Instead someone in this position should desperately grieve the sin of this previous divorce and earnestly ask for the Lord's forgiveness. They will desire to make things as right as they can be with their ex-spouse and any others involved. The original sin cannot be undone, nor whatever damage has occurred because of it, but some measure of healing and restoration is possible with God's help.

Practical implications

For people being abused

We oppose abuse of all kinds (both emotional and physical) with every fibre of our being. It dishonours the name of Christ, it dishonours our witness, it dishonours the church, it dishonours marriage. It damages the abused and sears the conscience of the abuser, potentially creating lifelong pain.

If you are being abused, get out of the situation as quickly as possible. If necessary, call the police and follow their advice. Ask the elders for help and counsel.

People abusing their partners are breaking God's moral law, invalidating their claim to own Christ as saviour and likely breaking the secular civil law of the land. Such abusers have no right to claim Christ as saviour without genuine repentance. We call anyone engaged in such behaviour to cease, repent and seek help to immediately make your spouse safe.

Unrepentant abusers will be barred from the communion table and placed under church discipline. In some circumstances for the safety of the victim they may be barred from attending gatherings.

For those who are married

Stay married and do everything within your power to guard and protect your marriage. You have taken solemn vows publicly and more importantly, before God who has joined you together until death and who wishes for this union to last a lifetime. You have entered into a covenant which cannot be broken without causing hurt and pain.

If you are contemplating divorce, please talk to the elders and don't give up. Even if you have biblical grounds for divorce, consider what glory it might be to God to patiently work toward reconciliation. And if you don't have biblical grounds, consider what offense it will be to God to break the promises you have made in his name. Consider the harm to your children and wider family if you divorce.

Having honestly and prayerfully considered that, if you wish to pursue divorce, please speak to the elders to discuss your situation. As your leaders, you have agreed to sit under our authority under God (Heb 13:17) and so you should seek our counsel on whether your divorce is legitimate. We will prayerfully discuss and consider your situation and where we unanimously agree your divorce is legitimate we will support your action. We require the unanimous agreement of the elders before counselling for divorce given the importance of marriage to God.

For the legitimately divorced & single

If you had grounds for a divorce, Hope City Church wants to do everything we can to support you and to make sure no one looks down on you. We do not want you to run from the church, but find grace, support and fellowship here. You are welcome at Hope City as a full participant in every aspect of church life and there are no limitations in how you may serve in church or be involved in family life with us.

For the illegitimately divorced & single

If you are divorced but can see from scripture that you should not have been, ask yourself whether there is still a possibility for reconciliation? Can you find hope in your heart that God might be able to restore your marriage? It would be a great trophy of his grace to bring you back together. If that does not happen, our advice is not to get remarried but to honour the vows you made before God, even if your partner chooses not to. Honour the name of Christ by remaining unmarried and pray that God would miraculously restore your marriage even where this seems impossible (Eph 3:20).

For the illegitimately divorced and now remarried

To those who have sinfully divorced, to those whose sin caused the divorce, to those who are now remarried when you should not have been: run to the cross. It is no small thing to separate what God joined together and to have entered into an adulterous new marriage. But God's grace is greater than any of our mistakes. Divorce is not the unforgivable sin - but

contrition must be real, the admission of guilt must be honest, the repentance must be earnest. The Lord will not despise a broken spirit and a contrite heart (Ps 51:17, 147:3).

Our counsel from scripture is to remain married – it is better to stay as you are. But you must acknowledge the hurt and pain your sinful actions have caused and must seek to act in repentance. True repentance will look different in every situation and you should discuss with the elders what this might look like in your case.

FAQ

Why do we single out divorce and remarriage as something to ask about proactively when someone seeks to join the core? We don't challenge people on their idolatry or their love of money in the same way and the bible says more about those things than divorce or remarriage.

The lordship of Christ must reform your view of divorce and remarriage as it must do in every area of your life when you are a Christian. We think there is something unique about divorce and marriage compared to other areas: you have made a public vow, entered into a public covenant and made lifelong promises. You have also done those things before God and entered into a unique covenant designed and blessed by God for the flourishing of human life. God has mysteriously joined you together with the sign of sex. And now these public and God-ward promises and covenants are being broken. Sin in marriage is unique as a result, and has an unavoidably public aspect.

Is abuse grounds for divorce?

Marriage is a covenant with promises made by both parties, witnessed by others before God. It is our view that where sinful behaviour towards a spouse is unrepentant and manifestly invalidates the commands of scripture to love one another (Rom 12:10 13:34), care for one another (Gal 6:2, Phil 2:4), give oneself up for others (Phil 2:3), love as Christ did (Eph 4:32), this dishonours the name of Christ and the institution of marriage and may break permanently the covenant of marriage and be grounds for divorce. We are cautious to give examples as every case is unique and the elders will require unanimous agreement before counselling for divorce. If you are being mistreated in any way by your spouse, find a place of safety and come and speak to us in confidence.

I was divorced a long time ago and I see now it probably wasn't legitimate. What should I do?

Grieve the sin of divorce and the hurt and pain that it has caused to all who were affected and with the help of the elders seek ways of reconciling and forgiving those you have hurt and who hurt you. This will not be easy and will look different in every situation. In some

cases, we may want to encourage you to prayerfully consider how God could reconcile you with your former spouse unless either party has been remarried.

I don't know if my previous divorce was legitimate, what should I do?

Stay as you are and speak to the elders. We will try to help you discern what has happened and the implications.

I'm new to the church and I have divorced someone or been divorced by someone, what are you going to ask me?

We ask about divorce and remarriage because it is important to God and it is his intention that marriages last a lifetime. Where marriages have failed it may have been for sinful reasons and in keeping with all areas of our new life in Christ, we seek to put off sin through repentance and live in right standing before God.

Up until the point you join the core of Hope City we won't seek to ask you about your divorce and remarriage unless you wish to discuss it. But at the point of joining the core, you are committing formally to the church and to sit under us as your leaders. We believe we have a biblical responsibility to help you live under the lordship of Christ in all areas of your life which will mean confronting any unrepentant sin wherever that is in your life, including the area of marriage.

If you have divorced someone or been divorced, we will meet you privately to discuss the situation. We will encourage you to prayerfully reflect on this document with us and discern whether the divorce was legitimate. If it was legitimate we will encourage you fully into the core without restriction and ensure you are welcomed into the church family without judgment.

If the divorce appears illegitimate we will encourage you to consider what repentance would look like in your situation and whether possible reconciliation is appropriate. Repentance may involve admitting your role in the divorce, seeking forgiveness from those who have been hurt and making efforts to seek whatever restoration is appropriate.

None of us are perfect and we all carry sin around with us in numerous areas of our lives. We do not require you to have sorted out every sin in your life before joining Hope City core – that's impossible. But we do require a desire to repent, a journey towards Christ in acknowledging these areas that still need work. Journeys of repentance and restoration in divorce can take many years and you do not need to have completed them before joining the core - but you must have evidence of starting that journey and allowing the Holy Spirit to work in your life.

I'm in the Hope City core and have never been married but I wish to marry someone who has been divorced

Seek the counsel of the elders. We will encourage you to prayerfully reflect on this document with us and discern whether the person you are courting has been legitimately divorced or not. If the divorce is legitimate, we will gladly encourage your marriage. If the divorce was illegitimate, we will not marry you and will encourage you to obey God's teaching in this area. This will be a painful and costly submission to the rule of Christ but his lordship requires nothing less (Luke 9:23-25)

I completely disagree with your position. Can I still be a part of the core of Hope City?

You are welcome to hold a different view on this topic from the elders however to be a part of the core of Hope City you must be willing to abide by this policy.

Further reading

We strongly encourage you to carefully study and reflect on all relevant Scriptures for yourself. A good starting set would be:

- **Genesis 2:24** - That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.
- **Deuteronomy 24:1-4** - If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the LORD. Do not bring sin upon the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.
- **Malachi 2:16** "The man who hates and divorces his wife," says the LORD, the God of Israel, "does violence to the one he should protect," says the LORD Almighty. So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful.
- **Matthew 1:18-19** - This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly."
- **Matthew 5:31-32** - "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery."

- **Matthew 19:3-9** - Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." "Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?" Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery."
- **Mark 10:2-12** - Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" "What did Moses command you?" he replied. They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away." "It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law," Jesus replied. "But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. He answered, "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery."
- **Luke 16:18** - "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery."
- **1 Corinthians 7:10-15** - To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife. To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.

Many of the points and wording in this document draw heavily from other works. The major source documents other than scripture are listed below. If you would like a copy of these documents, the elders can supply these to you or you can find them online:

- **What the New Testament Teaches about Divorce and Remarriage.**
Andrew Naselli. *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal 24 (2019): 3–44*. Naselli's exegesis and application of scripture is very much in agreement with our position. This document is very technical but we share his understanding of the texts.
- **Divorce & Remarriage – An exploration of my understanding of what the Bible teaches on this issue.** John Woodhouse. *The Priscilla & Aquila Centre Conference 3 February 2014*. This presentation given at a conference is a less technical document than Naselli and we mirror his summary outline in our document and largely agree with his position.
- **A Sermon on Divorce and Remarriage.** Kevin DeYoung. Preached at University Reformed Church on 24/10/10. DeYoung holds a slightly more narrow view than we do (what Naselli calls the 'minority' view compared to the 'majority' view we hold) but since this is a sermon, it is full of practical application and personal warmth. Although we disagree with his interpretation and application in places, this is a great introduction to the basic arguments and texts surrounding this issue.