

North Wake Statement on Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage

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 they shall become one flesh'?

So they are no longer two but one flesh.

What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.

Matthew 19:4-6

In the Holy Scripture cited above, our Lord Jesus Christ teaches us that marriage is one of our Father's creation graces, designed from the beginning to inseparably join a man and a woman. However, one of the most tragic and devastating facts of our society is that marriages fail frequently and under a wide range of circumstances.

Many people have gone through a divorce before having a relationship with Christ, and others have experienced divorce through no desire or decision of their own. Still others may have divorced because of their own wrongful choices, but have since experienced the repentance and forgiveness offered through our Lord Jesus. We want all of you to know that you are welcome in our church.

We rejoice that we serve a God who extends his love and comfort to every person who has been unwillingly divorced, as does our church. We also rejoice that we serve a God who graciously extends his mercy and forgiveness to those who have wrongly left their marriages. It is the kindness of God that leads us as leaders of North Wake to call them to repentance, and to encourage and aid reconciliation whenever possible (Rom. 2.4, 12.17-18).

Because North Wake's elders recognize both the divine origin of marriage and the devastating effects of divorce, we are deeply committed to preserving marriages and preventing divorce. Toward this end, we stand together in agreement on the following beliefs.

We believe the primary purpose of marriage is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

We believe marriage so unites one man and one woman that they become one flesh, joined together by God and therefore not to be separated by man.

We believe God's covenant with His people, characterized by relentlessly faithful love, obligations that govern the relationship, and inexhaustible grace is the divine paradigm for the marriage covenant.

We believe that marriage is a lifelong and holy covenant between a man and a woman, initiated by sacred vows, taken before God and the church. It is much more than a sentimental agreement or an interpersonal contract.

We believe marriage is sacred because of the holiness of its Author. This divine institution is intended to reflect divine realities: the love and unity among God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit and the love of Christ for His bride – the church.

We believe that glorifying and loving God is the basis and motivation for distinctively Christian marriages. To love God is to obey Him by loving one's spouse, unconditionally and sometimes in spite of very difficult conditions.

We believe that we glorify God when we love without strings attached, without expectation of return, and particularly when our spouse does not deserve to be loved.

We believe that marriage is a crucible for sanctification, whereby God teaches us to love one another more than ourselves, become like Christ by serving and forgiving, and be holy as he is holy.

We believe that marriage is a platform for ministry and mission, portraying and proclaiming the Gospel of God – the love of God in Jesus Christ. Thus, one of the great joys of marriage is that it provides for us the opportunity and the privilege to intentionally portray and proclaim this Gospel to one's spouse, children, the church, and the world.

What about divorce?

In light of the above mentioned statements about the sacred and enduring nature of marriage, it ought not to surprise us that the Bible consistently warns us against divorce. In the Old Testament, the prophet Malachi cites God's hatred of divorce (Mal. 2.13-16). In the New Testament, Jesus commands us not separate that which God has joined together and that to do so is tantamount to adultery (Mark 10.2-12). Paul joins in this chorus of prohibition when he states that a wife must not separate from her husband and a man must not divorce his wife (1 Cor. 7. 10, 11). He holds marriage in such high regard that, in spite of his prohibition against marrying unbelievers (2 Cor. 6.14), he requires believers in such marriages to live with and not divorce their unbelieving spouses (vv. 13, 14).

Contrary to our "divorce on demand" culture, Jesus is insistent that it is not lawful to get a divorce for any and every reason. When you search the Scriptures for positive, affirming statements about divorce, you find none. Scripture does record a conversation in which Jesus states that divorce was given by Moses, but only as a concession to the hard hearts of the people (Matt. 19.8). This is hardly a ringing endorsement of divorce. The crucial question we should be asking in matters of divorce is, "What would most please and honor our God?" not "What is permissible?"

In light of the universal discouragement throughout Scripture concerning divorce, it is the policy and practice of the elders and pastors at North Wake to discourage divorce and encourage reconciliation and restoration even in marriages where there is great sin and difficulty present. This is what the elders believe to be the most God-pleasing, Christ-honoring path for a Christian to take in a difficult marriage. The willing forgiveness and pursuit of a wayward spouse mirrors the way that God loves us (Hosea 3.1). It pursues the clearest and most central teachings of the Scriptures (forgiveness, grace, faithfulness, the lifelong intent of the marriage covenant) and it asks of God that which only He can do: convict of sin and change hard hearts, restore that which is broken, and bestow His mercy and grace upon those who have been wayward.

It is our clear conviction, based upon the teachings of Scripture, that the most God-honoring and joy-giving outcome in any struggling marriage is the restoration of that marriage to what God intended it to be... a reflection of the love of Christ for His bride, the church (Eph. 5.22-33). In light of that conviction, our elders and pastors at North Wake will counsel and pray and seek to be tools in the hands of God for the restoration of all struggling marriages that include members of the body of Christ at North Wake.

We are deeply convinced that God is able to soften the hardest of hearts (Ps. 51.10) and that it is our responsibility as elders and pastors to encourage and comfort the members of North Wake to trust in and live in light of that great hope. God is more than able to restore broken marriages (Ps. 71.20; Jer. 31.18; Zech. 10.6; 1 Pet. 5.10) if we will but trust and obey him. We have seen many instances where he has done a great work and restored a marriage to a beauty and joy far greater than it had ever experienced before. It is our steadfast commitment to work for and encourage the restoration of marriages that are struggling in light of the great grace and mighty promises of our God. Sadly, many who profess Christ abandon this hope and fail to seek the matchless resources of the promises of Scripture and the prayers of the elders and pastors of the church (James 5).

What about exceptions?

Some of our minds quickly run to the question, “But are there any exceptions when a divorce is acceptable or permissible?” While we understand that we must address this question, we want first to assert that this is the wrong question to begin with if our intent is to seek God’s heart about marriage and divorce. The better questions would be, “What would most please God in this particular marriage? What would honor and glorify Him most? What course of action in this circumstance would most loudly proclaim the Gospel of our holy and loving God?”

The answer to this secondary question is one where our elders and pastors at North Wake do not have complete agreement, as is the case in the broader evangelical Christian community as well. We also recognize that there are voices in the Church at large who advocate divorce for a variety of reasons. In light of the discussion above concerning the strong position the Bible takes against divorce, we believe that if the Bible does allow for exceptions to a “never divorce” position, then those exceptions are intended to be exceedingly rare and only in the most exceptional circumstances. We also believe that those “exceptions” are not intended to function as an automatic justification for leaving a difficult marriage. The Bible does not require us to divorce in any circumstance nor does any potential Biblical exception serve as an easy pathway to avoid taking the hard path of reconciliation and restoration. Once again, we believe that the most Christ-honoring position for a Christian to take is to trust God for great mercy and work toward reconciliation in their present marriage.

At North Wake, some of our pastors and elders hold to the position that there is no such thing as an acceptable or permissible divorce. They hold that the marriage bond is unbreakable, apart from death, and that therefore divorce is never an option for a believer (Rom. 7.1-3; Mark 10. 10-11; Luke 16.18). Others amongst our leaders would allow for divorce in the case of a prolonged, unrepentant adultery (Matt. 5.32), and particularly when there is no chance for restoration of the marriage because the adulterous spouse has remarried. Some of us would also allow for divorce in the case of

abandonment or desertion by an unbelieving partner (1 Cor. 7.15). Again, this is especially so when restoration is no longer possible because of a remarriage.

Since divorce is a grievous sin that does great damage to the reputation of Christ and hurts so many, especially children, our elders and pastors are committed to lovingly exercising church discipline when a divorce is sought and one of these two Biblical exceptions is not present. We will also pursue church discipline in situations wherein an offended spouse sinfully refuses to reconcile in spite of the demonstration of repentance by the erring partner. All such discipline will be carried out with the hope of restoration of the members involved and in order to protect them from falling into the snare of divorce. Discipline is also a form of protection against divorce for the congregation at North Wake and for the reputation of Christ and His body. All discipline would be implemented according to the North Wake Church Discipline Policy, in pursuit of the heart of our loving and holy heavenly Father and in obedience to his Word in Holy Scripture.

What about remarriage?

Along with the epidemic of “no fault” divorce in our day, has also come a nearly automatic belief in the right to remarry. The dominant perspective in our culture is that if you are divorced, you are free to remarry. We do not believe that the Holy Scriptures share this perspective. In fact, Scripture cautions us strongly to consider that remarriage after divorce may add to our sin. Jesus warned his disciples that to divorce your spouse and remarry is adultery (Mark 10.10-11; Luke 16.18; 1 Cor. 7.10-11). Adultery is a grievous sin that betrays the one whom we vowed to be faithful to forever. This should give us great pause in quickly assuming that God desires for us to get remarried following a divorce. It appears that God may consider remarriage to be a sin as grievous as the divorce itself.

As with divorce, the broader evangelical Christian community is divided concerning whether or not there are any exceptions to a “no remarriage” position. This is also the case amongst our leaders at North Wake. While we acknowledge that remarriage to another believer is acceptable for those whose spouse has died (1 Tim. 5.14), some hold that apart from death, nothing breaks the marriage bond so all remarriage would be adulterous since the marriage is still intact. Others hold that in some instances remarriage could be legitimately sought but only by the non-offending partner in a divorce that was, what some believe to be, Biblically permissible (unrepentant, sustained adultery or desertion by an unbeliever)¹. Even in this latter case, this means that we do not believe that remarriage after divorce is an automatically acceptable option before God. In fact, it would seem to us that many remarriages are viewed by God as adulterous in their inception. Again, this should give us great pause in blindly pursuing remarriage following a divorce.

¹ *Because of the lack of total agreement on these matters, the elders and pastors at North Wake reserve the right to not participate in any remarriage ceremony that violates their personal understanding of the Scripture’s teachings regarding divorce and remarriage. Our leaders are committed to respecting one another’s Biblical convictions and protecting each other in situations that would violate those convictions.*

As with divorce, our elders and pastors will exercise loving and restorative church discipline if needed on behalf of those who pursue remarriage when it does not follow the death of a spouse or, what some of us understand to be a Biblically permissible divorce (unrepentant, sustained adultery or desertion by an unbeliever). The aim of this discipline would be to deter them from falling prey to the sin of adultery and turn them away from a sinful remarriage.

It is not our purpose to deny anyone a legitimate grace that God would extend to them. Rather it is to protect them from a sin that would grieve God and cause alienation between them and their heavenly Father.

To those who have been divorced without Biblical warrant, we would first urge you to repent and then pursue reconciliation and restoration of that marriage whenever possible. Divorce is not always final because God's grace is always operative, and is particularly efficacious when we are willing to trust and obey Him, whatever the cost. If the first marriage is not restored, we would urge you to consider the grace that God can pour out upon you in order to remain single. It would be far better to remain single than to remarry outside the will of God. The New Testament clearly highlights the grace of God that abounds towards those who are single (1 Cor. 7.8). Singleness is a status that enables unique opportunities to serve others and to draw near to God in an extraordinary way (1 Cor. 7.32-35).

To those who have suffered through a biblical divorce this same grace of singleness is also available to you. It is in no way necessary for you to remarry to experience God's best for your life. Should one who has been through a Biblically permissible divorce choose to remarry, the Scriptures are clear that you are to marry only in the Lord and not into a relationship that would be adulterous as a result of a preceding unbiblical divorce.

What about those who have divorced and remarried outside of Scriptural permission?
In our day, there are many who were divorced and sometimes remarried either unaware of what Scripture teaches concerning divorce and remarriage or they intentionally disobeyed the teaching of the Scriptures. What are these to do?

First, the scriptures do not give us any clear teaching that would indicate that the second marriage should be ended. Rather, the many teachings noted above that urge us not to divorce should be applied to this marriage as well. We believe that God is most pleased when the new marriage pursues full obedience to His Word, including a lifelong commitment to the current marriage as a way to honor Him. In order to do this, it may be necessary to repent of past sins related to the previous marriage and divorce and the remarriage that followed. Scripture calls us to repent of any and all of our sins when they are made plain to us (1 John 1.9) and the sins involved in divorce and remarriage are surely no exception. Sin does not simply dissolve with time, but instead is resolved through humble confession and repentance leading to forgiveness through Christ. These actions renew and restore our relationship with God. On the other hand, failure to acknowledge and repent of any sin alienates us from God (Is. 59.2.) Fortunately, the kindness of God leads us to repent (Rom. 2.4) and provides a clear path when our choices have transgressed the will and Word of God. They can honor Christ by repenting of any and all past sins related to their previous marriage, divorce and remarriage and

then by endeavoring wholeheartedly to build their current marriage in such a way that it lasts for life and pleases God.

The debate that concerns whether it is ever permissible for a Christian to divorce their spouse is a very difficult one. Godly Bible scholars earnestly differ from one another on what, if any, circumstance would allow a divorce and remarriage to occur. But all agree that God's design for marriage is that it would last a lifetime. All also are agreed that it is sin that destroys a marriage and that there is no such thing in God's eyes as a "no fault" divorce. With a debate this complex and difficult and with our own hearts being so prone to manipulate even the Scriptures to gratify our desires, it is vital that we should move very slowly and with extreme caution in the areas of divorce and remarriage. Rash decisions will likely be regrettable ones. We urge you to prayerfully and carefully study the Scriptures on this matter. We also urge you to study with a predetermination to submit your life to the Word of God in Scripture and obey, trusting that God's ways, however difficult, are always best (Ps. 119. 68).

Our elders and pastors at North Wake are committed to shepherding our families through all stages of marriage - the good and the difficult. We are committed to continue studying and bringing the wisdom of the Scriptures to you with compassion and honesty in your time of need. Should you find yourself in a difficult place in your marriage or if you are considering divorce or remarriage, our elders urge you to meet with us and to seek our shepherding in this crucial area (Heb. 13.17). We are always available to pray for you (James 5. 13-16) and to bring the counsel of the Scriptures to you for your good and for God's joy and honor.