

SOUTH RIDGE COMMUNITY CHURCH

Statement of Position Related to Divorce and Remarriage

A. Divorce and the Church

We recognize that the debate over divorce and remarriage constitutes an incredibly sensitive and emotionally charged issue in the church today. The debate over this subject has raged through innumerable books, articles, and sermons. What is a Christian to think in the midst of all this? Nearly all of us have been affected in some way by divorce in our lives, whether it be in our own families, among our friends, or in our churches. In spite of all that has been said about divorce and remarriage, there are Christians still grappling with these issues and uncertain what to do. We recognize the challenge of addressing this subject and thus, we approach it with a great deal of humility. It is our aim in this paper to present some of the basic biblical teaching concerning divorce and remarriage and to guide the manner in which South Ridge will interact with such situations as they emerge in the life of the church.

The command to “love your neighbor as yourself,” first presented in the Old Testament Law (Leviticus 19:18), is reiterated several times in the New Testament as the peak and fulfillment of the Law (e.g. Matthew 22:34-40; Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8). Marriage is one of the greatest opportunities God has given to express such love. In fact, marriage not only serves as an incredible opportunity to love one’s neighbor, but also is a reflection of the relationship between Christ and the church. Paul says in Ephesians 5:31-32, “‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a profound mystery - but I am talking about Christ and the church.” Marriage is an incredible institution with astounding potential for a man and a woman to cultivate for one another the kind of selfless, sacrificial, God-exalting love that the Lord first had for us.

In light of the fact that marriage is intended to be a picture of Christ’s love, every divorce is tragic because it constitutes a shattering of this image. The former love and care are replaced with anger, pain, embitterment, and countless other problems. It is no surprise then, that God says in Malachi 2:16, “I hate divorce.” Divorce is always the result of a failure of spouses to love in some very substantial ways. Thus, divorce is always the result of sin (a point which we will reiterate later). Every marriage is plagued by sin, since both husband and wife are sinners, but only in some instances does this sin wound the relationship so much that it culminates in divorce. The breakdown of a marriage is always a seriously damaging experience. Deep, long-term relationships are severed and homes are divided. Where children are involved, they often suffer greatly by feeling torn between their parents and losing the possibility of growing up in a family that is intact and whole.

It is important to note the many damaging results of divorce for two reasons: 1) We live in a culture that has made divorce incredibly easy, and 2) Today’s church has generally done very little to guide its members in this area. Due to the sensitive nature of the subject, the church has not engaged divorce and remarriage to the degree that it ought. It is our hope that the church will thoughtfully attend to the issues of divorce and remarriage so that believers will have biblical answers to significant difficulties in life. If the church is faithful to proclaim God’s truth about divorce and remarriage, it will provide Christians with careful, thoughtful counsel as a valuable alternative to the lies of a world that encourages easy divorce.

B. What is Marriage?

In developing a biblical understanding of divorce and remarriage it is essential to begin with a biblical definition of marriage. One of the key texts is Genesis 2:23-24:

The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman', for she was taken out of man." For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

The one flesh union described here is one of the crucial components of the marriage relationship. Jesus also comments on this text which is recorded for us in Matthew 19:6, "So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate." On the grounds of the one flesh union described in Genesis 2, Jesus commands us not to separate a husband from a wife. Some have used this verse to argue that it is *impossible* to separate a husband and a wife, but such a position fails to adequately take note of what Jesus said. His command is that we *ought not* to separate a husband and wife, not that it is impossible to do so. Jesus' command to keep marriages together is crucial for us to hear in a culture where divorce is easy and is often seen as a better solution than working through problems in a marriage. The inclination to divorce when marital problems arise is rooted in an attitude contrary to that demanded by the marriage covenant. Marriage is a bond of self-sacrificial love which requires great humility to uphold. Many divorces today, on the other hand, are the result of a self-centered refusal to serve one's spouse and a pride which refuses to submit in love to the other's needs.

But what does it really mean to say that a husband and wife are one flesh? The language of "leaving" and "cleaving" (*be united to* in the NIV) is actually covenantal. Exactly the same verb is used several times to describe covenantal relationships, either between people (Ruth 1:14-16) or between God and his people (Deuteronomy 10:20; 11:22; 13:4; 30:20; Josh 22:5; 23:8). Thus, because the description of marriage in Genesis 2:24 is covenantal, we must define marriage in terms of a man and a woman uniting themselves to one another in the bond of a covenant.

We may thus conclude that marriage is a covenantal relationship established by God. However, in understanding the exact nature of the marriage covenant, it is important to recognize that not all covenants can be lumped together into the same category. In fact, there were different types of covenants in the Ancient Near East, some of which were breakable and some of which were unbreakable. Some covenants, especially those between equals, were accompanied by oaths or vows by both members and could be broken by the unfaithfulness of either member. When one party was unfaithful to the covenant, the sanctions would necessarily be imposed on him and the covenant could be dissolved by the offended member. Both then and now, marriage fits into this category, a covenant based on vows exchanged between two parties.

Just like the covenants in the Ancient Near East, marriage is a public commitment in the presence of witnesses. When ancient covenants were made, the testators took vows before the gods. In the modern marriage ceremony all of the guests serve as witnesses to the covenantal commitment of husband and wife. The difference here between a Christian marriage and a non-Christian marriage is that the Christian couple calls on God as a witness to their union. Nevertheless, any marriage has witnesses present to testify to the vows the couple makes. These witnesses ought to surround the couple through their marriage, supporting them with guidance and accountability when the marriage grows difficult. The help of others to encourage and give wisdom to struggling spouses is a crucial element of any marriage.

Many who identify marriage as a covenant immediately assume that it has the unbreakable, everlasting status like that of the covenant God made with Abraham (cf. Gen 17:7). God made an irrevocable promise and invoked on himself all the responsibility and the covenant curses if this bond was ever broken. Thus, it is sometimes argued that the one flesh union of a husband and wife inviolably binds them together as long as they both live, even if they separate or are divorced. However, this is not consistent with the nature of marriage or with the nature of covenants in biblical times. Marriage is manifestly *different* from God's unconditional covenant with Abraham. Neither

spouse assumes all the weight of punishment if the covenant is not upheld and neither spouse takes the sole responsibility to give what is promised regardless of cooperation.

Marriage is much more similar to the covenant of Sinai, in which Israel took vows of loyalty to God (“We will do everything the LORD has said” Exodus 19:8). This resembles the manner in which a husband and wife take vows of loyalty to one another. And much like the covenant God made with Israel, marriage is “a covenant of personal obligation requiring the oath-taker to fulfill all the terms and conditions or suffer the consequences.”¹ In fact, it is helpful to note that God frequently compares his covenant with Israel to a marriage (e.g. Isa 54:5; Jer 31:32) and condemns their unfaithfulness as adultery (e.g. Jer 3:8-9, 20; Ezek 16).

So, marriage is a covenantal bond between a man and a woman, similar to the covenant that God made with the people of Israel after they came out of Egypt. Though it must not be seen as unbreakable, this covenant is nonetheless one which no one *should* break. The enduring quality of marriage must be something to which we cling tightly because we are constantly surrounded by voices claiming, contrary to the Bible, that marriage is cheap and easy to cast off. But from Scripture, we understand that marriage is a lasting bond which we need to strive to sustain.

Nevertheless, we recognize that every marriage suffers from the sinfulness of both husband and wife. A perfect marriage has never existed. Every union of a sinful man and sinful woman is riddled with sin and requires immense labor to uphold. However, some marriages are so utterly broken that one or both partners may want to be freed from a situation which seems inescapable and unbearable. In such cases a spouse may turn to divorce as the solution. Does the Bible permit this? If so, in what cases does Scripture permit divorce?

C. What is Divorce and is it ever Permissible?

1. Important Old Testament Texts

The Pentateuch contains at least two texts that are helpful in framing our understanding of divorce. Deuteronomy 24:1-4 states, “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...”² This passage describes a situation in which a husband divorces his wife on account of finding in her *something indecent*.³ This could also be translated as “a cause of sexual immorality.” Thus, many ancient Jewish interpreters rightly concluded that it meant the woman was guilty of adultery. If sexual immorality was discovered in a woman, her husband was permitted to divorce her. Therefore, this text indicates that the Old Testament permits divorce in the case of sexual immorality in one’s spouse.

Another Old Testament text that deals with divorce is Exodus 21:10-11, which states, “If he marries another woman, he must not deprive the first one of her food, clothing and marital rights. If he does not provide her with these three things, she is to go free, without any payment of money.” This law refers to a man who has purchased a slave as his wife, then takes a second wife in addition to his previous slave wife (since such was acceptable in a polygamous society). In this situation, the husband would be likely to give all his attention to his new wife and he could be inclined to ignore his first wife, especially since she was a slave. David Instone-Brewer says of this law, “It says that the

¹ Michael Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 40.

² The entire context is not included here for brevity’s sake. The rest of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 prohibits a husband from remarrying a wife whom he has already divorced. This is presumably intended to protect the wife from being temporarily abandoned through divorce and then brought back through remarriage.

³ *Ervat dabar* in the Hebrew text. BDB states regarding this verse, “*nakedness of a thing*, i.e. prob. *indecenty*, improper behavior”

husband would not be permitted to withhold food, clothing or conjugal love from her. If he did neglect any of these, she would be able to go free—that is, she could get divorced.”⁴ This is an instance of case law in Exodus. Case law arises from the decision of a judge in a specific circumstance. While case laws describe very particular circumstances an Israelite judge was expected to apply these laws to any related circumstances. For example, laws about a man’s ox goring his neighbor (Exodus 21:28-36) would also apply in situations where other animals (e.g. a donkey) did harm. Case laws are not limited to the specific situation described. Instone-Brewer notes how this worked out in the Jewish interpretation of Exodus 21:10-11

The rabbis found the following principles in this text... They reasoned that if a slave wife had the right to divorce a husband who neglected to supply food, clothing and conjugal love, then a *free* wife would certainly also have this right. And they argued that if one of two wives had this right, so did an only wife. Furthermore, if a wife had these rights, then a husband was also entitled to divorce a wife who neglected him. The biblical principle that is established, therefore, is the right of someone to divorce their partner if they neglect their vow to provide food, clothing or conjugal love.⁵

Thus, three grounds in addition to sexual immorality are established as legitimate grounds for a divorce: neglect of food, clothing, or conjugal love.

In both of these texts we must observe that only the wronged partner can legitimately initiate a divorce. In neither text does the offending partner determine to end the marriage. The covenantal arrangement does not allow this. It is important to note that there is a difference between covenant breaking and covenant dissolution. Whenever a partner fails to keep the terms of a covenant in any circumstance, the covenant has been broken. Nevertheless, the offended partner then has the choice of either keeping the covenant intact or dissolving it on account of the broken vows. This is demonstrated in God’s relationship with Israel. The Israelites quickly broke their covenant with God (which had been established in Exodus 19 and 20) when they built and worshipped the golden calf (Exodus 32). Though it would have been fully within God’s covenantal right to punish instantly his people and cut them off from his covenant, he nevertheless chose to remain faithful to covenant-breaking Israel. God persevered with his faithless spouse for centuries before bringing upon Israel and Judah the curses of the covenant which they had long deserved by sending them into exile. The covenant remained intact because God chose not to terminate it. Likewise, only the offended spouse can choose to end a marriage when his or her partner has broken the terms of the covenant. The marriage, however, does not *need* to be dissolved by the offended spouse if he or she desires to persevere.

2. Important New Testament Texts

One of the most important texts dealing with divorce in the New Testament is Matthew 19:3-12 which says:

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. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."
"Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"

⁴ David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2003), 35.

⁵ Instone-Brewer, 36.

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 marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."

The disciples said to him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry."

Jesus replied, "Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it."

In this passage, the Pharisees come to Jesus in order to test him on the question of divorce. They ask whether it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife “*for any and every reason*,” a phrase which is more literally translated “for any cause” or “for any reason.” These words are especially important as we focus on the interchange between Jesus and the Pharisees. The background for this question is the fact that there was a disagreement among the Pharisees regarding the issue of divorce: one group followed the teaching of Hillel, another group followed the teaching of Shammai. These two groups differed primarily in their interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1. The followers of Hillel argued that the words “a cause of sexual immorality” meant that a man could divorce his wife for “any cause.” Followers of Shammai, on the other hand, claimed that these words were intended to communicate only that a man could divorce his wife for marital unfaithfulness. This background sheds important light on the issue the Pharisees were addressing when they asked Jesus, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” The Pharisees (most likely followers of Hillel because of the use of *any cause* in their question) were plunging Jesus into the midst of a raging rabbinic debate and wanted to see how he would respond to this highly controversial question.

Jesus responds by first pointing the Pharisees back to Genesis and telling them not to separate what God had joined together. As we noted before, Jesus is emphasizing the permanence of marriage and pointing out that we ought not to be looking for loopholes and ways out of marriage. Rather, we must strive to sustain marriage, because it is an incredibly significant covenantal relationship, formed by God himself. In spite of Jesus’ poignant response, the Pharisees continue to push the issue by bringing up Deuteronomy 24. They say, “Why then did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?” Why is Jesus so emphatic about steering clear of divorce, when it is part of God’s law?

Careful observation of Jesus’ response reveals that he changes a key word in the Pharisees’ question. They ask him why Moses *commanded* them to get divorced, but Jesus answers that Moses *permitted* them to divorce and that it was because of their hardness of heart. Jesus emphasizes the fact that divorce is not necessary if one’s spouse breaks the covenant, but that it is permitted. After this, he firmly stands against the followers of Hillel by stating, “Anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.” Jesus states in no uncertain terms that sexual immorality is the only legitimate ground for divorce in the debate over Deuteronomy 24. Does this mean that Jesus is merely a loyal follower of Shammai? Certainly not! Jesus’ teaching goes farther than that of Shammai, because he says divorce is merely permissible, not necessary. This is a radical shift from Pharisaical teaching, which demanded divorce on any occasion when a marriage covenant was broken and testifies to the high value that God places on marriage as a covenant and a reflection of his character.

If Jesus is saying that sexual immorality is the only legitimate grounds for a divorce, how do we reconcile this with Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 7? Here, Paul states, “But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace” (1 Cor 7:15). Paul is addressing the marriage between a believer and an unbeliever. He says that if the unbelieving spouse leaves, the believer ought to *let him do so*; he or she is *not bound*. A non-Christian spouse would have no impetus to heed Paul’s words in verses 10-11 (“A wife must not separate from her husband... and a husband must not divorce his wife”), so there is

nothing the Christian spouse can do. This is consistent with Roman law (by which Corinth was governed), under which when one spouse would permanently leave the house, this was enough to initiate a divorce. How can this allowance by Paul be reconciled with Jesus' apparent prohibition of all divorce except in the case of marital unfaithfulness? The best solution is that Jesus was addressing a particular rabbinic debate, as we illustrated, and thus was not crafting a complete picture of legitimate divorce. As a result, Jesus did not address any further grounds upon which divorce could be valid, even though he may have acknowledged them. Jesus' statement in Matthew 19 must be read in the context of the particular debate he is addressing, not as a comprehensive teaching on divorce.

Thus, it is apparent that the New Testament allows for divorce in the case of marital unfaithfulness, thereby affirming the condition given in Deuteronomy 24. But what about the other three grounds given in Exodus 21? These three grounds (neglect of food, clothing, or conjugal rights) appear to saturate the argument of Paul in 1 Corinthians 7. Early in the chapter, Paul notes that a husband and wife have made a vow to each other to share conjugal love (*marital rights* in the NIV). He emphasizes this because there were some in the Corinthian church who wanted to stop having physical relations. Paul also points out later in the chapter that married couples are "anxious about worldly things, how to please" each other (1 Cor 7:32-34). Thus, Paul affirms the obligations of husband and wife to provide for one another's needs. The three grounds of Exodus 21 would have been quickly heard in these verses by any first century readers because they were so prevalent in ancient divorce procedures. In fact, the divorce Paul affirms in verse 15 is a divorce where one partner has neglected to fulfill all three of the grounds we found in Exodus 21, thus the divorce is permissible.

We have seen by means of this brief summary of key biblical texts that there are four legitimate grounds for a valid divorce: marital unfaithfulness, and neglect of food, clothing, or conjugal love. This provides us with a pastorally sensitive policy on divorce whereby we can best care for those who are involved in truly broken marriages. This position gives answers for victims of abuse and neglect who may wonder whether a divorce is permissible. Again, we want to emphasize that just because one spouse has offended the other by breaking one of these four obligations does not *mandate* a divorce. There is room for reconciliation which should *always* be the first recourse when marriage grows difficult. Only when one's partner is entirely unrepentant and refuses to turn from such offensive behavior does divorce even become an option. The offended partner is also the only one who can decide when such behavior has gone too far. The offender never has the right to end the marriage, and the offended is not obligated to do so.

This brings us full circle back to Malachi 2:16, where God says, "I hate divorce." In spite of his hatred of divorce, God has permitted it in some few instances for the sake of cutting off regular, unrepentant, sinful behavior. "No one expects divorce to bring happiness, but sometimes divorce is necessary in order to end the sinfulness of repeated and unrepentant breaking of marriage vows. Divorce is never good, but sometimes it is the only way to end the evil of a broken marriage," says David Instone-Brewer.⁶ Divorce is only permissible when one of the four grounds we have addressed is broken, thus divorce is always the result of sin. To fail to provide any one of these obligations is to fail to love one's spouse and to seriously offend him or her in addition to God. Divorce is never a happy ending, but sometimes it is a necessary step in removing a husband or wife from a dangerous or devastating circumstance where sin is being perpetuated. Since divorce is legitimate in these several cases, we should also note that the valid divorce itself *is not sin*. It is always the result of sin (the breaking of covenantal vows) but cannot be seen as a sin in and of itself.

D. What about Remarriage?

⁶ Instone-Brewer, 171.

One's position on remarriage naturally flows out of his conclusions regarding marriage and divorce. Since we have noted the covenantal nature of marriage and the fact that such a covenant *can* be dissolved, we claim that remarriage is permissible in instances where prior divorce was permissible. However, if someone has divorced their spouse in an invalid manner, he or she ought not to seek remarriage. Rather, repentance should be expressed and restoration sought between the divorced partners. The first marriage should be restored when the divorce was impermissible. Furthermore, we recognize that in some situations reconciliation will not be possible. For instance, one's previous spouse could already be remarried in which case reconciliation would be more harmful than helpful. In such cases where reconciliation has been attempted, but one's former spouse has reached a point where reconciliation is impossible, we acknowledge that remarriage may be permissible. In such situations we also want to remind the reader that God forgives us wherever we are at. If one has remarried after an illegitimate divorce, do not seek a divorce to right the wrong. To do so would be an attempt at righting a wrong by means of another wrong.

We recognize that there are innumerable circumstances which could arise in relation to divorce and remarriage. Certainly, many of these situations are challenging to sort out and much careful discernment is required in any situation. One action we want to emphasize which applies to every situation is to seek first reconciliation. Paul urges this in 1 Corinthians 7:11 (a case of an illegitimate divorce) and we exhort all who are either struggling in marriage and contemplating divorce, or who have been divorced to seek reconciliation. When reconciliation is no longer possible it may be possible that divorce (in the case of broken obligations) or remarriage (in the case of an unrepentant ex-husband or wife) may be advisable.

E. Leaders in the Church

As South Ridge interacts with potential leaders, the issue of divorce and remarriage may arise. It is our hope that through the principles demonstrated in this paper, the reader can see that divorce itself is not necessarily sinful thus it does not necessarily bar one from leadership in the church. Nevertheless, in cases where a potential leader has been divorced, the church will need to dig deeper into the situation that brought about such action. Paul emphasizes several times that leaders in the church should be "the husband of one wife" (1 Timothy 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6). This does not mean that a church leader must be married and neither does it mean that a remarried leader is automatically excluded from the possibility of involvement. Rather, Paul emphatically states that a leader in the church must be faithful and loyal to one wife if he is married. If a potential leader has been divorced then the situation that brought that about would need to be examined. If the divorce occurred at a time before the potential leader was a believer, then the situation will be treated differently than if the potential leader was a believer during the divorce. We acknowledge that divorce is forgiven along with any other sins a leader may have committed. Nevertheless, if one was divorced while a believer in Christ, then there are many more questions to be asked about the potential leader's commitment to a life of faithfulness and love. The potential leader's current spiritual condition would then be addressed in light of the prior experience and if he is repentant from any prior sins and has maintained a life characterized by faithfulness, then he may be admitted to leadership. It is necessary that such faithfulness be sustained for a substantial period of time to demonstrate a lifestyle appropriate for leadership.

F. Questions

There are numerous potential objections to the position South Ridge holds on divorce and remarriage. We seek to address several of the more significant ones here:

Q: How does your view account for Mark 10:11 and Luke 16:18, both of which provide no explicit grounds for legitimate divorce?

A: We acknowledge that Jesus' statements in Mark 10 and Luke 16 are very challenging to reconcile with Jesus' statements in Matthew 19. It is important for us to allow Scripture to interpret Scripture when things seem unclear, but in an instance such as this it is difficult to know how that should work. Should Matthew interpret Mark and Luke? Or should it go the other way around? We believe that the exception clause in Matthew is a very important aspect of biblical thinking on divorce. It seems that Mark and Luke did not include it because the people they were addressing were familiar with Jesus' argument in Matthew or because they did not consider it worth addressing the nuances of permissible divorce. Instead, Mark and Luke were striving to emphasize (and rightly so!) the importance of lifelong commitment in the marriage covenant. It is not ever to be lightly cast off. Matthew, on the other hand, saw this as important material to include either because his audience was unfamiliar with it or because he wanted to emphasize Jesus' comments on when divorce is permissible.

Q: How do you reconcile your view with Paul's statements in 1 Corinthians 7:39 and Romans 7:2 which appear to say that a husband and wife are considered married as long as they are alive?

A: This question is a bit simpler than the prior question because both of these passages deal with widows. As Paul is discussing the freedom of widows in the light of a spouse's death it would be absurd for him to bring up the subject of divorce as an exception. Paul's focus in these verses is on the freedom of one spouse to remarry after the other spouse has died. His focus is *not* on making declarations about the lifelong nature of the marriage covenant in the case of divorce.

Q: How could the average believer ever arrive at these conclusions? Doesn't this require too much historical information to be the true understanding of the Bible?

A: It is very true that there is a lot of historical information that goes into arriving at this position. We thoroughly understand the concern that this sort of understanding of Scripture appears to move the interpretation of the Bible into the hands of scholars and academics while making it impossible for the average reader to understand on his own. This argument, however, makes the case that the Bible should never require us to know the historical context. While we must be very cautious with history because of our limited understanding, it always informs Scripture. We may not be conscious of it, but we are very often aware of the historical background to passages of the Bible and allow it to help us understand them. But when we are unaware of the historical background it makes us less comfortable because it can change the way that we view things. Ignorance of historical backgrounds does not mean that we can say those backgrounds are unnecessary. Rather, we must be discerning about what historical information is actually germane to the text and allow only that to inform our study of the Bible.

We would also say that Jesus' and Paul's arguments are fairly understandable without the historical context as well. It is clear that Jesus makes an exception in the case of sexual immorality and it is also apparent that Paul allows divorce in the instance of an unbelieving spouse leaving a believing spouse. One could, even without the historical circumstances recreate the argument that we have fleshed out above. Nevertheless, the background and setting of these texts makes such an argument more feasible and easy to understand.

Q: Don't these conclusions permit nearly any couple to get a divorce? Is there any marriage where these obligations have not been broken?

A: We understand the fact that our conclusions regarding divorce and remarriage could be construed by some couples to legitimize the dissolution of nearly any marriage. Nevertheless, any situation where a couple is considering divorce should be brought before those with oversight in the church. The leaders in the church will examine the claims of the spouses and see whether they are sufficient and major enough to validate pursuit of a divorce. The decision to divorce will be

supported only when there are *major, harmful* violations of the covenantal commitment of husband and wife.

Q: I have heard other people in the church talk about separation as an option for struggling marriages. Do you think this is a good idea?

A: We at South Ridge do not believe that separation is a legitimate alternative to divorce. Many churches who possess different views of divorce recommend that a couple be separated permanently, but we believe that any permanent separation ought to be accompanied by a divorce. Temporary separation may be advisable for a time for tensions to cool off or for issues to be resolved, but South Ridge will never advise permanent separation as an alternative to divorce on account of the fact that we find no biblical basis for the practice.

G. Recommended Resources

Adams, Jay, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible*
Engle, Peter (editor), *Remarriage after Divorce in Today's Church: 3 Views*
Instone-Brewer, David, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church*
Instone-Brewer, David, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*
Shelly, Rubel, *Divorce & Remarriage: A Redemptive Theology*