

ARTICLE 11

Marriage, Singleness, and Family

We believe that marriage and the family are instituted by God. The church blesses both marriage and singleness and encourages families to grow in love.

Marriage

Marriage is a covenant relationship intended to unite a man and a woman for life. At creation, God designed marriage for companionship, sexual union, and the birth and nurture of children. Sexual intimacy rightfully takes place only within marriage. Marriage is to be characterized by mutual love, faithfulness, and submission. A believer should not marry an unbeliever.

The community of faith blesses and nurtures marriage relationships, and makes every effort to bring reconciliation to troubled marriages. Human sinfulness, however, may sometimes lead to divorce, a violation of God's intention for marriage. With truth and compassion, the family of God offers hope and healing while continually upholding the biblical ideal of marital faithfulness.

Singleness

Singleness is honoured equally with marriage, sometimes even preferred. The church is to bless, respect, and fully include those who are single. Those who remain single may find unique opportunities to advance the kingdom of God. God calls all people, single and married, to live sexually pure lives.

Family

God intends family relationships at all stages of life to be characterized by love. Children are a gift from God. Godly parents instruct and nurture their children in the faith. Parents are to discipline their children wisely and lovingly, not provoking them to anger. Children are to honour and obey their parents.

Genesis 1:26-31; 2:18-24; 5:1-2; 12:1-3; Exodus 22:16-17; Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Deuteronomy 6:4; 24:1-4; Psalm 127:3-5; Proverbs 31; Matthew 5:32; 10:34-39; 19:3-12; 22:23-33; Mark 3:31-35; 7:9-13; 10:6-11; Luke 16:18; Romans 7:2-3; 14:12; 1 Corinthians 7:8-40; 2 Corinthians 6:14-15; Ephesians 5:21-6:4; 1 Timothy 3:1-13; 5:3-16; Hebrews 13:4; 1 Peter 3:1-7.

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COMMENTARY

The Bible teaches that the covenant commitment of marriage is for establishing a lifelong relationship which will provide the context for child rearing. Some will not marry, and Scripture teaches that single persons are positioned to serve the Lord without the distractions of family life. The Bible forbids divorce, laments its occurrence, restricts remarriage, but suggests that pastoral care for those who have experienced divorce should include forgiveness and restoration to fellowship. Article 11 deals with the matters of marriage, divorce, singleness, and family.

Marriage

Marriage in the Old Testament:

God created humans as sexual beings, male and female (Genesis 1:27). The creation narrative expresses the Creator's design for men and women. Humans, male and female, are given the mandate to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth . . ." (Genesis 1:28 NRSV). It was not good for a man (Adam) to be alone; God saw that he needed a helper as his partner (Genesis 2:18). The narrative teaches that "a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24 NRSV). In this pristine state, the first pair was naked, yet unashamed (Genesis 2:25).

The story seems to suggest several principles. Marriage has multiple purposes. First, marriage responds to the human need for intimacy. Man and woman were created to be companions. Second, it provides the context for reproduction, a mandate that is part of the creation order that God saw as "very good" (Genesis 1:31). Marriage is the foundation for families. Third, marriage is the context for starting a new family unit. At marriage, the narrative teaches, the man leaves his parents and cleaves to his wife. Fourth, marriage is the context for sexual intercourse. Husband and wife cling to each other as a single flesh. Fifth, intimacy seems to be blessed with a sense of holy mutual delight. There is a frankness, a loosening of restrictions, that is encountered in marital union. Sixth, marriage is a one-to-one commitment. Although later Old Testament saints engaged in polygamy, the creation order does not anticipate that this practice is good. Seventh, marriage is heterosexual. Creation order precludes the possibility that homosexual union will be blessed with the goodness of marriage between a man and woman.

The narrative of the fall (Genesis 3) indicates that sin has marred the goodness of creation. The distortions include an alienation between the first marital pair, which is destined by the curse of sin to continue to afflict later couples. The wife faces pain in childbirth and pain in her relationship with her mate, characterized as desire for her husband who would rule over her (Genesis 3:16).

The legal code reinforces the creation mandate. Adultery is prohibited in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:14; Deuteronomy 5:18). An extensive catalogue of rules related to sexuality includes prohibition of incest and homosexual unions. (Leviticus 18 contains a series of these rules.) The law assumes that marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman for life.

The Old Testament narrative raises issues for marriage. The complications of Abraham's relationship with Sarah when he takes Hagar as a surrogate include not only the pain that Sarah feels but alienation in later international relations with the children of Ishmael. Jacob's wives and concubines struggle in the face of jealousy and favouritism. David, the man after God's own heart, acts like an ancient Near Eastern despot by taking multiple wives and faces the consequences of the resulting rivalries within his family. His son Solomon attempts to establish his royal power by taking 1,000 wives and concubines.

The prophets use the demand for loyalty within the marriage covenant as an illustration to confront Israel's unfaithfulness to Yahweh. Hosea takes a wife of prostitution to demonstrate what Yahweh has experienced in the covenant with Israel. Malachi condemns a husband's failure to be loyal to the wife of his youth (2:14-16).

The wisdom literature, especially the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon, celebrate the joy of marriage. Proverbs calls a happy marriage a gift from Yahweh (12:4; 18:22; 19:14). Ecclesiastes teaches that a man should enjoy life with the wife he loves (9:9). Song of Solomon celebrates the sensual delight of intimacy.

Marriage in the New Testament:

When Jesus teaches about marriage, he bases his instruction on the creation mandate (Mark 10:6-9). Jesus cites the maleness and femaleness of the marriage partners, the resulting unity of the marriage union, and the permanence of the covenant commitment. Jesus assumes that marriage is a gift from God.

The best interpretation of Paul's household rules of Ephesians 5:22-33 and Colossians 3:18-19 recognizes the revolutionary character of Paul's instruction. Paul addresses the wife as an independent moral individual, calling her to be subject to her husband. This call is part of a larger instruction for mutual submission (Ephesians 5:21). The word comes from military

terminology, indicating that there is a proper way for members of the household to align themselves with one another. The husband, who receives about twice as many words of instruction as the wife in Ephesians 5, is called to exercise headship as Christ did for the church. This imitation of Christ's love is to be characterized by self-giving devotion. If the husband loves the wife as Christ loved the church, footwashing rather than demanding service and obedience will be the rule.

First Peter 3:1-7 also gives instructions to wives and husbands. Wives are warned against seeking beauty in "outward adornment." Husbands are warned that neglecting their marital vows may hinder their prayers.

Divorce

Although both Old Testament teaching and Jesus agree that divorce contradicts the will of God, both also recognize that, due to human hardness of heart, divorce is a reality.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4:

Four important truths are noted in this text of Mosaic civil law. First, Moses accepts the occurrence of divorce. When he writes, in part, "If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him ... and writes a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house..." (24:1), Moses simply acknowledges that marriages fail. He doesn't harass the man who is filing the divorce, nor does he rail against the violation of the sanctity and permanence of marriage.

Second, the grounds for divorce in Hebrew society were very general and rather ambiguous. The words of the Deuteronomy text refer to the wife "who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her..." (24:1). The phrase "something indecent" may have included adultery with another man, but this is highly unlikely because the penalty for adultery was death, not divorce (22:22).

Third, a divorced woman who has married another man may never again marry the first husband even if her second husband has died (24:2-4). She may, however, marry her first husband if she has remained unmarried after the certificate of divorce has been issued. The reason given for this restriction is that, if she has remarried and her second husband has either divorced her or has died, "she has been defiled" (24:2-4).

And fourth, Moses, quoting Yahweh, gives a warning: "Do not bring sin upon the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance" (24:4). The context of this statement is the remarriage of a man to his former wife after she has had a second husband. The defilement of the land is not due to divorce being present within the people of God—this is simply part of

human tragedy and fallenness. Rather, defilement occurs when a man, who has divorced his wife, remarries her after she, in the intervening period, has been married to another man.

Malachi 2:13-16:

Although the prophets use the image of divorce to indicate the broken covenant between Yahweh and Israel, it is Malachi who addresses God's response to divorce. In Malachi 2:16, God says simply, "I hate divorce." The context links divorce to violence. The broken covenant is an act of violence against the spouse, the children, and the institution itself.

In Jesus' day, the matter of divorce was hotly discussed. There were two schools of thought on the subject. The school of Shammai, named after a very influential rabbi, was conservative and rigorous in its position. "It maintained that man 'must not divorce his wife unless he has found her in a matter of shame'" (Beare, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 154). The rival school of Hillel held a much more permissible position. A man could divorce her for the merest trifle, "even if she burnt his food in cooking it" (Beare, 154).

Matthew 5:31-32:

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus enters the debate and, as with adultery, strengthens and raises the standard immeasurably. With the phrase "But I tell you...", Jesus, while not slamming the door on divorce, calls for a new way of living. The words of Jesus can be divided into three distinct parts. First, Jesus concedes that divorce is a reality in society. Divorce, however, must never be trivialized. The only legitimate grounds for divorce is *porneia*, a debated term which may be defined as "unchastity, fornication of every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse" (Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, Vol. I. p. 15).

Second, the divorced woman is at risk to commit adultery (5:32b). The clause, "causes her to become an adulteress" is somewhat ambiguous in meaning. We can read this clause two ways. First, the words have been taken to mean that in the very act of having been divorced by her husband, the woman now commits adultery. Although some scholars support such a reading, it is very difficult to pin "adultery" on a person who is divorced but who has either not remarried or who is not sexually active. Second, we can interpret this clause to mean, perhaps more logically, that the divorced spouse who has been divorced for *porneia* is continuing in her ways. The words of Jesus then are to be taken as a caution against the newly divorced person living in a reckless, promiscuous manner.

The final word of Jesus is very troublesome: that is, whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. Old Testament Hebrew culture was a

strongly patriarchal society. Women were regarded as the property of men. Therefore, it was the prerogative of men to initiate divorce procedures, although the parallel synoptic passage also includes women in this role (Mark 10:1-12). By saying “anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery,” Jesus likely regarded “the remarriage of the divorced woman as adultery both on her part and on the part of her new husband” (France, *Matthew*, 123). Therefore the statement places the same value judgment on all post-divorce sexual liaisons regardless of gender.

Mark 10:1-12 (Matthew 19:1-9):

Jesus revisits the question of divorce in Mark 10 after some Pharisees question him. First, Jesus clarifies the Mosaic law as not commanding but allowing divorce. Second, Jesus attributes divorce to hardness of heart. Third, Jesus uses the creation mandate to enjoin lifelong marital faithfulness. Fourth, Jesus reiterates his earlier teaching that remarriage involves adultery. Although one may read the text to prohibit all remarriage, it is at least clear that Jesus is teaching that for a married person to get a writ of divorce *for the purpose* of marrying a more appealing person is as adulterous as an affair. In 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, Paul repeats the Lord’s command and calls for celibacy for the divorced.

1 Corinthians 6:12-20:

What this text adds to the discussion is the profound biblical understanding that sexual union between two persons is more than simply sex. In the act of sexual union, Paul argues rhetorically, a person (in this case, a man and a prostitute) are inseparably united as one “with her in body” (6:16). In fact, through this sexual act, “the two will become one flesh.” The act of sexual union is such a powerful bonding force that it is likened to our union with the Lord: “But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit” (6:17). Little wonder that Jesus concedes that *porneia*, illicit sexual union, is grounds for divorce. This adds power to Paul’s cry of warning: “Flee from sexual immorality” (6:18).

Although Scripture warns against remarriage for divorced persons, remarriage has become rather common among believers. The confession of faith implicitly recognizes that divorce and remarriage is a pastoral concern by calling the church to offer “hope and healing” to the divorced. The pastoral application of Article 11 deals with the issues of remarriage.

We need to caution one another about the complexity of remarriage. Many will do well to avoid the complications of remarriage and remain single. Those who contemplate remarriage must address issues of the characteristics

which led to marital failure, relations with former spouses, and relations with children from earlier marriages.

Singleness

The creation narrative teaches that humans are created with the need for intimacy. The Genesis text appears to assume that the common pattern for finding intimacy will be within the marriage covenant. Although it is not specifically stated, the Old Testament narratives seem to assume that singleness is not a desirable state.

Within the Old Testament, however, we do find the roots of a theology of service that recognizes the unique contributions of single persons. Yahweh commands that Jeremiah the prophet never marry, as a sign to Israel (Jeremiah 16:1-4). The marriages of Ezekiel and Hosea face interruptions related to their mission.

The story of Ruth results in marriage, but her relationship as a single person with the widow Naomi is characterized by covenant loyalty which is often cited as an example for a couple about to be married. Ruth pledges to go with Naomi, to join her people, and to worship her God. She declares an inseparable love for Naomi.

In the New Testament, both Jesus and Paul minister as single persons. Although Scripture is silent regarding Jesus' celibacy, Paul encourages the church at Corinth to consider celibacy as a gift from God (1 Corinthians 7:1-9, 25-35). The benefits of singleness include freedom from distractions that a spouse and children create. Single persons in difficult times are not preoccupied with the security of their family members. Paul considers singleness to be superior to marriage, at least for those who have the gift of celibacy.

The church is called to recognize the honour due, even preference for, the single state. The church must take care not to exclude single persons from church life or from ministry. Special concern must be given to include those who live as singles.

The need for intimacy presents unique challenges to the single person. Sexual chastity is the biblical mandate for single persons (1 Corinthians 7:8-9). The need for partnership recognized in the creation story, however, is not absent in the celibate person. Healthy and pure relationships for single persons are necessary for living fulfilling lives in society.

Family

The family in the Old Testament:

The family is the God-ordained social structure designed to nurture children. The primary confession of Israel in Deuteronomy 6:4-9 teaches that spiritual

training best happens within day-to-day family life. The Old Testament develops three themes which declare God's intent for families.

First, children are seen as a gift from God to families. Children are a blessing (Psalm 127:5). The stories of the births of Isaac to Sarah, Jacob and Esau to Rebekah, Joseph to Rachel, and Samuel to Hannah are central to the story of the people of Israel.

Second, children are commanded to honour and respect their parents. Not only were children called to "Honour your father and your mother" (Exodus 20:12), but it was also a capital offence to curse or to strike one's father or mother (Exodus 21:17).

Third, the blessings of being a covenant people were to be perpetuated through parental instruction and guidance (Deuteronomy 6:1-25). This instruction was to include reciting the narrative of deliverance from Egypt, of keeping the feasts and holy days of Israel, and of speaking of these things each day.

Deuteronomy 6:1-25 highlights four distinct points: First, wellness results when children hear about the great salvation deeds of God and live a life of obedience to the commands of God (6:1-3). Second, the heart of the covenant with Yahweh is to "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (6:5). Third, when the people of Israel would enter the promised land, this knowledge of God would keep them from turning to pagan gods (6:13-19). Fourth, when the people are a long time-period away from the exodus events and their children ask what these symbols and stories mean, they are to be answered clearly and unambiguously (6:20-25).

The family in the New Testament:

Although Jesus blesses the children who were brought to him by their parents (Mark 10:13-16), Jesus makes it clear that in the kingdom of God, our family ties take second place to obeying the will of God (Mark 3:31-35; Luke 14:26). In a real sense, the new community of faith which emerges through belief in Jesus Christ is family for believers.

Jesus' relationship with his parents reflects his primary commitment to God the Father and the reign of God, as well as his concern for family. In the story of young Jesus at the temple (Luke 2:41-52), it is recorded that Jesus went back to live with his parents in Nazareth and continued under their authority (2:51). Thus "Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature, and in favour with God and men." When Mary comes to see her son during his ministry, Jesus seems to postpone contact with her until he has completed his teaching (Mark 3:31-35). At the cross, Jesus speaks to the beloved disciple about caring for Mary (John 19:26-27).

Church leaders are to model healthy family life. Among the leadership qualifications mentioned in 1 Timothy 3:1-13, godly leaders are to be those who also demonstrate their ability to manage their families and households well (vv. 4, 12).

In Ephesians 6:1-4, we have the most definitive text of the New Testament on the subject of children and parents. The fifth commandment (Exodus 20:12) is repeated to remind the new people of God of the obligation of children to be courteous and respectful toward their parents. Added to this well-known epithet is an equally important command to parents: "... do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord" (6:4).

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PASTORAL APPLICATION

Those who apply this confessional article to the life of the church will have to get used to seeing through a glass darkly. That does not mean God's *design* is unclear. The ideals for singleness, marriage, and family are clearly visible in the Bible—put into place from the very beginning. But sin wreaks havoc on God's design. The fallout from broken relationships, marriages, and families often makes it difficult to see a clear pastoral path. So it is important to be at peace with some ambivalence in this area of ministry.

It is equally important, however, to seize every opportunity to promote the ideals. These include sexual purity, believers marrying believers, lifetime marriages, loving families, and fulfilling singleness. The best times to preach and teach these ideals are in the absence of crisis—when individuals and couples and families are relatively healthy. There are also times, of course, when teaching and counsel need to be offered in situations of difficulty and brokenness. Thus there are two positions from which Article 11 can be applied: a proactive position and a reactive position.

Proactive Applications

Take Care of Yourself:

It is hypocritical to offer help in the interpersonal, marriage, and family relationships of others when the “helper’s” own relationships in these areas are unattended. Before presuming to speak to the difficulties of other singles, couples, and families, care-givers must be open to hearing the voice of God in their own relationships. Before offering practical steps to others, there must be a continuing willingness in one’s own life to forgive and be forgiven.

Continue Learning:

The temptation in all pastoral work is to rely on momentum. There is so much to do and so little time to pursue new insights and develop new skills. But faithfulness in ministry, especially in these relationship areas, demands it. Read. Attend conferences on singleness, marriage, and family. Take a single person to lunch and invite candid comments on how they experience life. Interview some people within the church family who have survived a divorce and ask them to rate the church’s performance during that time. Spend an evening with some “empty nesters” who have done a great job of parenting, pumping them for their secrets. Invite yourself to an older adult

meeting in the church and ask them whether they feel part of a family. Such vulnerability will open new windows for learning.

Establish Guidelines:

The worst time to decide how to respond to a failure in a relationship is when there are names attached. Every “decision” at that point will be taken personally and judged subjectively. It is better to anticipate the all-but-certain eventualities in the life of a church and be prepared with a set of response guidelines.

How one approaches such a “documented response” is critical. The temptation is to draft something that fits all people at all times and in all places. Hence the church formulates “Position Papers” and “Policy Statements.” But simple formulas rarely satisfy the complexities surrounding issues such as divorce and remarriage and even more rarely provide a redemptive response. It is better to establish a set of guidelines for creatively working through complicated failures in human relationship.

The genius of “guidelines” is that they can be cited rigidly or flexibly, in consultation with the Holy Spirit. For example, if the Marriage Guidelines state that “the couple must be open to submitting to a discernment group when extraordinary issues arise” and a couple currently living together is unwilling to do that, one can simply say, “those are our guidelines.” On the other hand, if the guidelines also state that “application for marriage must be submitted to the church at least four months in advance of the wedding date” and a repentant couple six months pregnant wants to get married before the baby comes, one can flex with some integrity for it is “merely” a guideline.

Whatever a given community establishes as a non-negotiable needs to be applied uniformly. Given the complexity of most marriage and family issues, inflexible positions and policies should be few and thought through carefully.

Program Marriage, Family, and Singleness Enrichments:

It would seem obvious that marriages and family systems need to be repaired before they fall apart, not after. Still, churches continue to invest considerably more resources trying to rebuild marriages and families rather than working to reinforce them. It is the wrong formula. Investments in marriage and family enrichment will pay huge dividends, while returns on crisis interventions will continue to be meagre. Enrichment efforts and expenditures may not always produce quantifiable results, but failure to do so will—in the form of more broken homes.

Leaders and congregations should also consider ways to provide enrichment opportunities for often overlooked singles and single parents.

These could focus on particular needs and challenges facing singles such as the call to sexual purity, the need for relational fulfillment, the discernment of ministry gifts, the enhancement of parenting skills, the development of support networks, and so on.

Give Attention to Curriculum:

Another proactive step is the intentional introduction of relational curriculum. It begins at the preschool level with lessons on how to get along with one another. It appropriately introduces elementary age children to their human sexuality. If the church is reluctant to offer the Creator's version, the Deceiver's version will rush in to fill the void. By the time our children are at the middle school level, if they don't have some strong convictions about their self-worth and God-honouring ways of relating to one another, it is too late. Yet very few churches intentionally move their children through a curriculum that can grow healthy Christian singles, marriages, and families.

Premarital counselling ought to be lodged in the youth curriculum. Such an assertion simply faces up to the fact that most important decisions about dating, marriage, and family begin to firm up in junior high or middle school. If sexual purity, believers marrying believers, and lifetime marriages are ever to become defining values, they need to be established long before courtship.

Dedicate Children:

Rightly understood and carried out, child dedications can proactively provide parenting advantages. Child dedications are fundamentally mislabelled—they are more accurately parent dedications. With their Christian sisters and brothers as witnesses, parents make a vow to God to provide their children with a Christian home.

Practical responses from the church family might include mentor couples or prayer partners for the parents dedicating their children. Minimally, the dedication service should signal in some way a reciprocal commitment from the church family. It has been said that "It takes a village to raise a child," but even more certainly it takes a Christian community to raise a child.

Affirm Singleness:

Too often, the presence and the particular needs of singles and single parents are ignored in congregations where "traditional" family units predominate. Many larger churches are able to invest resources and staff into effective singles ministries, but smaller churches seldom have this option. In such cases it is imperative that thought and effort be put into how singles and single parents are being integrated into church life.

Just as there are ways to disregard singleness, there are also ways to validate

it. Often this involves simple things such as setting an odd number of chairs around tables or making sure singles are welcomed and included in small groups and fellowship activities. Qualified singles should be encouraged as much as anyone toward involvement in worship leading, administering the Lord's Supper, serving in leadership and team capacities, and pursuing other ministries and positions in the church. Singleness is best affirmed not so much by making special provisions for unmarrieds, but by intentionally including them in the ordinary life of the church family.

In some areas, however, more specific steps should be taken. First, we need to consider our use of language. Sermons and teaching can incorporate not only stories and illustrations about family and married life, but also about other life situations including singleness. References to church members could be termed more often as “households” rather than “families.” Names and emphases for Bible classes and small groups can be reviewed—for instance, if a Sunday school session referred to as the “Young Marrieds” is also the only class available for career-age singles or young single parents, such a name will immediately put up a barrier against attendance by those singles.

Second, we need to be consciously inclusive with church activities and functions. Of course it is appropriate to target certain activities toward marrieds and families, but not all activities. In many ministry and social events, we need to make it clear that singles are not only welcome but essential to the proper functioning of the body of Christ and the full enjoyment of the fellowship of believers.

Third, we need to refute the unsaid but ubiquitous assumption that those with spouses and children are somehow more blessed of God than those without. It is appropriate to offer regular reminders that ultimate worth is found in our relationship with Christ and his body rather than in earthly ties or marital status.

Fourth, Paul's teaching should be emphasized regarding the unique capacity and calling of single persons to serve God and others without the distractions of family life. This is not just a word for singles—it can also serve as a strong reminder to the whole congregation that every believer, whether married or unmarried, is called first to serve the Lord wholeheartedly and commit loyally to the family of faith.

Reactive Applications

Request for Marriage:

Marriage is not a command. While it is held in highest regard in Scripture, even providing an apt picture of God's love for His people (Hosea 1-3; Ephesians 5:21-33), it is not a mandate. Marriage is a decision. It is a decision of such

huge proportion that each couple requesting marriage should be required to go through a well-thought-out pre-marriage process.

The first step should be an initial interview by the pastoral leader who will likely walk with the couple through the pre-marriage work and officiate at the wedding. The initial interview should be understood as a singular session without any further obligation from either side. It is an opportunity to explore the faith journey of the prospective bride and groom (are they believers/non-believers?), their previous relationships (has there been a divorce/loss of a spouse?), their present relationship (are they living together/sexually active?), and their expectations for marriage (is it a lifelong commitment?). Gathering these conversations together brings, finally, an opportunity to lay out the guidelines for marriage in that particular faith community. (See “Establish Guidelines” under Proactive Applications.)

These guidelines should include a minimum time frame from the time of the initial interview to the wedding date, probably not less than four months. This provides the amount of time necessary to walk a couple through the pre-marriage process. The guidelines should require premarital counselling, which is helpful in determining strengths and growth areas in a couple’s relationship, and in dealing with a variety of issues impacting marriage. Finally, the guidelines should call for the couple’s openness to submitting to a discernment group at any time in the process, initiated at the counselling pastor’s discretion. When extraordinary or complex issues arise, it is helpful to share the burden of discerning readiness for marriage with a group of wise members of the faith community.

At the end of the initial interview both the couple and the pastor have the option to continue down the road together toward marriage, or not. Sometimes the answer will be clear immediately. Sometimes it may be good to mutually commit the decision to an agreed-upon time of prayer. Once the decision to continue is made, however, it should be understood as a long-term commitment on the part of the pastor, reaching well beyond the wedding day.

Divorce:

Each pastoral leader and church body needs to hammer out a practical theology of divorce in advance. That may be something other than what we believe about divorce, even though what we believe profoundly impacts our practical responses.

The reactive dimension of such a practical theology (it should also have a proactive dimension) produces a plan of action beginning at the point of knowledge that a marriage is in trouble. It should include guidelines for identifying a point person for possible intervention, referrals designed to

address reconciliation, ministry involvement during a divorce in process, support systems for the couple and children, referrals for divorce recovery, and information-sharing with the church family. Even though each marriage failure plays out a bit differently, it is important for the pastoral leader to at least have a game plan for hope and healing.

Request for Remarriage:

Those who deal with the practical application of the biblical material relating to remarriage tend to make one of two equal and opposite errors: either they apply the texts too “legally” or too “gracefully.” It is easy, for example, to apply Jesus’ words in Mark 10:11-12 as an injunction against remarriage—as a mandate never to solemnize a marriage where there has been a divorce. It is equally easy to apply a “cheap grace” where vows become trivial and multiple marriages acceptable. What is difficult is a pastoral response that maintains integrity with Jesus’ hard sayings and abounding grace.

There is no explicit biblical warrant for remarriage, other than the death of a spouse. In fact, the material addressing this issue directly in the New Testament tilts toward remaining single. Therefore, requests for remarriage remain one of the most enduring pastoral dilemmas.

The approach that retains the most integrity with Scripture is for the community of faith to make remarriage decisions on a case-by-case basis. This is the best assurance that “law” and “grace” will be applied redemptively.

As a practical matter, the specific “community of faith” that would directly address such a case needs to be a small (6-8 people), spiritually mature cross-section of the church family. That requires a set of guidelines for identifying and putting into place such a group. Such guidelines are best embedded in an overall set of marriage guidelines, communicating a cohesive theology of marriage.

Among the responsibilities of the small group are the following: to listen to the couple’s story, assess the degree of healing following the divorce(s), mediate forgiveness (if necessary), offer insights, and determine readiness for marriage. A great deal of care must be taken to assemble a group with the spiritual maturity and the gifts to do this kind of work. For the process to have integrity, however, the couples must submit to the group for a final decision regarding marriage within that community of God’s people.

Support:

A failed relationship may not only leave the affected parties emotionally paralyzed, it can also paralyze the church. Fearing that they will do or say the wrong thing, or fearing that they will encourage a wrong decision, Christian sisters and brothers often withhold their support at a time when it is needed

most. When a marriage or family is in trouble, the most immediate action needed is to reach out. Emotional support at these times should not simply be deliberated, it should also be delivered.

Discipline:

One way to maintain a balance between “law” and “grace” is to embrace discipline. Discipline should never be understood as punishment, but rather as spiritual conditioning for renewed commitment and service. To be effective, such an understanding cannot be applied arbitrarily, but must rise out of a pre-existing discipline culture in the church.

In the midst of divorce proceedings, for example, both partners might be asked to set aside their ministry responsibilities in order to give full time and energy to the work of recovering their marriage. They may be asked to pair up with a mentor-caregiver who can gently lead them through the “heart work” associated with marital failure. If there is sin involved in the breaking of relationship, one or both partners might be asked to confess that sin to a small group of caring leaders. Should the divorce become final, discipline might require a regimen for healing and refitting for service.

Discipline should not be reserved only for public sins such as an illicit pregnancy or a divorce. It also needs to be applied to the more private sins that impact marriages and families: substance abuse, spousal or child abuse, premarital sex, adultery.

Discipline will always be painful and imperfect. But if it is applied with integrity and compassion, it remains the best hope for recovering from relationship failures.