

When a Church has to be the Church...

Navigating Divorce

By Dan Deeble

Navigating the tragedy of divorce for any couple is, in a word, *excruciating*. The devastation it causes within the heart of each spouse is incalculable and the unintended consequence it bears upon their kids, friends, counselors, and the community lasts for years.

For a church family, it is also extremely complex. I wish it were true that such hardships only happen among seekers or new believers, but mature Christ-followers are also not immune. Sadly, we've had to come alongside marriages in peril among beloved key leaders, elders, and staff throughout our 23 years as a church. Whenever that happens, it begs a lot of sincere questions such as "*How does Heartland respond to these situations?*" Additionally, those who have been divorced simply ask: "*How will you respond to me?*"

The short answer is that we *have to be the Church* the Scriptures call us to be: the Church that loves, the Church that guides, the Church that fights, the Church that confronts, and the Church that forgives.

However, since our mission is "to build a church for the unchurched," a longer answer is important. For the many "unchurched" people that we are trying to serve, their *last* church involvement may have ended when their marriage did - often because of the church's response. Therefore, it is essential that we answer these questions with care.

Below are some principles that explain our approach and the process we take in navigating such difficult situations:

1. There are Biblical grounds for divorce, but there are *always* Biblical grounds for reconciliation. I'm convinced that God's greatest gift to humanity is intimacy – the opportunity to experience it with Him and with one another. And the pinnacle of that human experience is found in the covenant of marriage (Genesis 2:24-25). This is why God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16), because intimacy is permanently severed between a husband and a wife. Of course, He doesn't hate *us*. He hates divorce *for us*. He hates what it does to us, in our hearts. In fact, divorce is a result of when a heart gets hardened. This is why Moses had to *allow* for divorce (Deuteronomy 24:1-4 and Mark 10:1-12). It is also why Jesus and the Apostle Paul collectively limit the justifiable grounds for divorce only to sexual misconduct and abandonment (Matthew 5:31-32; 19:3-9, & 1 Corinthians 7:12-15). Naturally, we agree with these

Biblical grounds and believe the spirit of this teaching also includes those rare and unique instances where a marriage has become literally destructive and *unsafe*.

However, it should not surprise us that God would guard the marriage covenant so fiercely. This is because reconciliation is at the very epicenter of His heart. When we surrender our lives to Jesus, He makes us new and He calls us to be reconcilers ourselves (2 Corinthians 5:17-20). Reconciliation, therefore, should also be at the epicenter of *our* hearts - permeating every relationship we have and beginning with the covenant we've made with our spouse.

2. The reason for divorce is never *that* simple. Whenever we hear of a marriage in crisis, it is natural to search for a culprit. We hunt desperately for some tidy explanation that helps us make sense of it all. So we take sides and create a "good guy/bad guy" dichotomy. We blame the enemy, the small group or the pace at work. We look for the smoking gun. Such oversimplifications can lead to all sorts of additional problems. Not in the least, they are incredibly hurtful to the couple, they undermine any hope for restoration, and they quickly bring division within the community. In short, the reason a couple divorces is never that simple. Never. Each spouse makes their own contribution *to it* and there is no end to the pain they feel *in it*.

3. Communicating to the right people, in the right order, and at the right amount of detail. Within a church community, there is often an expectation that the entire church deserves to know the details. This rationale is based on the teachings of Jesus that reads "*and if (the sinner) refuses to listen...tell it to the church...*" (Matthew 18:15-20 AND 18:21-35). Suffice it to say that this is an ecclesiological question: "*What did Jesus mean by 'the church' in this teaching?*" Context is really important here. For example, what does it look like for a church of 2,000 people in the 21st century to practice this command? How does this differ or not differ with what the church in 1st century Palestine practiced? These are difficult questions and there is no shortage of interpretations.

In this case, we believe "the church" should be represented by elders, staff, the couple's small group, and others within their sphere of care and influence. Therefore, we communicate according to the principle of "*the right people, in the right order, at the right level of detail.*" We keep the circle of communication small to protect the spouses and children involved, to protect the truth, and to hold out all hope for

reconciliation. Conversely, widening the circle runs the risk of gossip, shaming the ones we hope to see restored, and clashing with Jesus' larger narrative of grace.

4. The path requires both grace and truth. Every situation is unique and we respond to each accordingly. But our charge is to be Jesus to one another in these moments - a people who bring both truth and grace into the conflict (John 1:17). And frankly, it is really tough to do both well. Some get the truth part right but lack the grace. Others bring the grace but forget the truth. The former can smack of condemnation, the latter can be confused for condoning sin. This is why both truth and grace are needed, in full, together.

Honestly, I hope that Heartland – if it has to err - will always lean on the side of grace. However, the Church must also ask a person to walk a path of truth that could also include correction, discipline, and sometimes even intervention (Matthew 18:15-20 & Hebrews 12:7-11).

This path often begins with a *restoration team*. Generally at the request of a spouse, the Management Team will commission a group of 4-6 people who are uniquely devoted to the couple's reconciliation. This group often includes a MTEAM member, pastoral elder and the couples' small group leader, to name a few. The purpose of this team is to come alongside the couple for prayer, pastoral care, professional counsel and – if necessary – correction.

If the person is a leader within the church, then we will pause, alter, or suspend their responsibilities in order to assess:

- *for their own healing*, whether the serving role has become an obstacle to wholeness.
- *for the community*, whether their situation undermines their ability to lead others
- *for their effectiveness*, whether they can adequately fulfill their responsibilities at this time

While only God can ultimately judge the heart on such matters, we create this path to help us discern whether the leader is authentically doing everything within their power to restore their marriage, admitting their own contribution to the conflict, and seeking genuine healing in their life.

5. Brokenness does not disqualify us from leadership, disobedience does. It is Biblically correct to expect a higher level of character from our staff and elders (1 Timothy 3 & Titus 1:6-9). However,

should we expect perfection? And should we give greater weight to one sin over another? These are difficult questions and they don't lead to easy answers. But if we look at the major themes and even the vast stories of blunders in the gospels, it's hard to conclude that Jesus required perfection from His leaders. And so I've asked the question, *"If brokenness does not disqualify us from leadership, then what does?"* In a word: disobedience. This is evidenced when a person traffics in things like denial, dishonesty, blame, slander, and a resistance towards the truth.

What is required in the midst of our brokenness, then, is a spirit of humility; confession, ownership of mistakes, and a willingness to be fully transparent and accountable to a trusted few (see Psalm 51 & the entire life of King David, for example). This is why a restoration team's path and process is so crucial to help us discern the difference.

6. The goal is always restoration. The goal is never to punish, condemn, or to judge (Matthew 7:1-2). It is to restore someone into a more intimate walk with Jesus and, hopefully, with their spouse. And in that order.

The temptation, though, is to expand beyond what the Scriptures say and develop black and white, air-tight rules. The problem with this is three-fold: (1) Jesus was strongly adverse to extra-biblical rules and those who tried to enforce them (Matthew 23) (2) these rules tend to squeeze out grace and (3) they trample on souls.

In other words, they become punitive and not restorative.

I mentioned the need for both truth and grace in these situations. Let me now add two more qualities: faith and hope. These four are the necessary ingredients for mediation: faith in a God who is bigger than the conflict, truth that holds up the mirror and proclaims what they need to hear, grace that says all can be forgiven, and hope that "does not deny brokenness in a person's life. It just denies brokenness has the last word."ⁱ

Lastly, for us - the community - a 5th quality is required: trust. Trust in the process, trust in the leadership, trust to believe the best of those walking through it, and trust in a God who is greater than our hearts (1 John 3:20).

7. We hope to be a grace place. Jesus came for the sick and not for the healthy (Matthew 9:11-13). Shouldn't His church, then, also be for

the hurting and the broken? Since we're all inherently sick and because we gather solely in grace (Romans 3:23-24), Heartland should be a safe place to belong *for everyone*. We welcome all - no matter their story; regardless of their past. Because, of all places, shouldn't the Church be that place? Gordon MacDonald says it best, "*There is one thing the world cannot do. It cannot offer grace.*"ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ Brennan Manning, exact reference unknown

ⁱⁱ What's So Amazing About Grace; Yancey, Phillip, pg. 15