

Downtown Church of Christ

Strengthening Marriages/Preventing Divorces

Marriage is under attack. There is little in the world around us—our culture, the media, popular attitudes—that values and upholds marriage. These days, divorce is considered a minor issue, not a serious problem. So marriages fall apart and divorce rates are correspondingly high.

As a church, we want to swim against the prevailing tide.

A Biblical View of Marriage ...

1. Marriage was established by God (Gen. 2; Matt. 19:1-12), and has always been seen as a holy union between a man and a woman with profound spiritual dimensions. Something that matters so much to God should matter to Christians, leading us to take marriage very seriously (Heb.13:4). The Bible is consistent in urging Christians to keep their marriages together (Mark 10:2-12; 1 Cor. 7:10-14).
2. When people marry, they make solemn vows before God. Keeping those vows is serious business and breaking them is sin (Eccl. 5:4-7 and Matt. 5:33-37).
3. Marriage is one of God's best tools for teaching us the life he has called us to live—selfless, serving, respectful, forgiving, loving (Eph. 5:22-33). Because we are serious about new life, we are serious about marriage.
4. Marriage is a foundational element of society—as God intended. The protection of women afforded by marriage, the environment it offers for rearing children, the civilizing and stabilizing influence it exerts, mean that strong marriages are the basis of a strong society. Because we believe that "righteousness exalts a nation" (Prov. 14:34), we want our marriages to strengthen, not weaken, our culture.

. . . and Divorce

5. When a couple marries, God joins two people together as one. When a couple divorces, they presume to separate what God has joined together (Matt. 19:4-6). Divorce leaves scars. Christians can and do survive divorce and go on to live vibrant, faithful, powerful lives for Jesus. But it is only "as one escaping through the flames" (1 Cor. 3:10-15).

In Matthew 19:9, Jesus permits divorce only in the case of "marital unfaithfulness." Biblical scholars tell us that the word used in the original refers to sexual immorality. We cannot know what other forms of "marital unfaithfulness" Jesus might have had in mind, if any. But we take the offense of adultery very seriously in obedience to his commands.

6. Marriage and divorce have an impact on the community of faith. Just as marriages are blessed and enjoyed in the context of the church community, so marital struggles and dissolution spill over to the church

and impact a wider circle of people—including children, friends, and those who care for us (Rom. 14:7, 21). If we at Downtown truly care about people, we have to care about strengthening marriage and preventing divorce.

7. There is often an unintended effect of divorce on other families in the church. If divorce becomes too readily accepted and appears to be a consequence-free solution to marriage problems, more and more couples may be tempted to give up working on their marriages, and divorce can actually become contagious (1 Cor. 12:26).

Downtown's commitment to strengthen marriages

The church has a responsibility to encourage strong marriages—not just by conducting weddings where the right words are said, but through constant teaching, mentoring, counsel, and prayer. As leaders of the Downtown Church, we pledge the following in our ongoing attempt to support your marriage:

1. We will provide a marriage enrichment experience periodically (seminar or workshop) to which all married couples at Downtown will be invited and encouraged to attend. If finances are tight, we will make scholarships available to you.
2. We will ensure that there is periodic preaching and teaching on the subject of godly relationships, so that God's desire for our marriages is frequently reviewed.
3. As shepherds and staff, we make ourselves available to you for prayer, counsel, and encouragement. Call us. Let us help you through difficult marital seasons.
4. Younger couples who desire it will be paired with older, more experienced couples for mentoring in the art of strengthening marriage.
5. We will partner with you for marriage counseling, should the need arise. We can refer you to godly counselors who will work hard for the benefit of your marriage. We will help you cover the financial costs associated with counseling, should that be necessary. And we will pray for you as you are in counseling.
6. If you are experiencing specific issues in your marriage (financial, child rearing, time management, etc.), we will connect you with Downtown members who have specific skills to share and teach.

We care about your marriage. And we pledge to do all in our power to encourage a healthy, loving, Christ-like marriage for all at Downtown. If you will partner with us in this pursuit, we believe God can make this happen.

For those who are struggling in their marriages:

Even in the best of circumstances, it is hard to make a marriage work. And every marriage goes through seasons of struggle and drought. So when you and your spouse find yourselves in such a season, how are you to interact with your church family—the people who love you in the Lord?

1. Let us walk with you. We have a stake in your marriage. Because we love you and have entered into covenant relationship with you, because you have a network of friends at Downtown who will be impacted by your struggle, because others—in the church and in the world—are looking to see whether Christ makes a difference about such matters, your church family expects to walk with you through marital difficulties. At the very least, this will involve praying with you and ensuring that you have godly counsel through a difficult time. Always, this will involve our expectation that you will conduct yourself in a Christ-like way, with a real hunger to do what is right and a readiness to confess and repent.

2. If you are a Downtown leader. If you are part of the leadership of the Downtown Church (elder, staff member, teacher, ministry leader, etc.) or if you lead in public worship in any way and you are encountering serious problems in your marriage, we expect you to talk about it with the elders and participate in a process of restoration and relational healing. If, after personal consideration and the advice of others, it seems advisable to withdraw from leadership for a season, we would hope you do so voluntarily and willingly—at least until you can again give testimony to God's power to heal.

3. Confess. Satan's greatest power to work comes in the shadows created by our attempts to deny, evade, or pretend. God's greatest opportunities come when we confess, repent, and seek the help of our Father and our Christian family. If you are facing serious marital problems, please ask for help early. An elder, your small group leader, or one of the church staff can be a valuable resource. They will ask you to follow the guidelines presented in this paper.

4. Lean on us. Take advantage of every resource Downtown can offer to address your problems and heal your marriage. Whether prayer or counseling or mentoring, please hold us to the pledges we have made to support and encourage your marriage.

5. Persevere. Remember the solemn vows you made when you got married: "for better or for worse." Failing to honor those vows is a serious matter. You should make every effort to save your marriage, including professional counseling, patience, and prayer.

Sometimes, though, even our best efforts are not enough. Sometimes the hurt and pain go too deep. Sometimes—even among Christian couples—divorce happens.

How does Downtown respond to divorce?

So what happens if you don't solve your marital problems and save your marriage? What does it mean to be a member of Downtown who is divorcing? Churches respond in various ways to couples who separate and plan to divorce.

1. Some do nothing, and end up seeming to condone divorce.
2. Some require reconciliation, and pressure one or both parties to leave the church if they don't reconcile, seeing divorce as a sin which cannot be tolerated in a Christian community.
3. Some try to help the parties save their marriages whenever possible, and if that doesn't happen, they try to help couples deal with the dissolution of their marriage in the most Christian way possible—a way that is always penitent, respectful, compassionate, and forgiving.

The third option is our chosen option at Downtown.

For those who are divorcing

In order to accomplish that preferred option, we make the following requests of people who are separating and contemplating divorce.

1. Repent. If your marriage still fails, we will mourn with you over that failure. God hates divorce, whatever the reason (Mal. 2:16). You took vows ("til death do us part"); don't gloss over the seriousness of failing to keep them (Matt. 19:1-15). Do not try to minimize your role or defend yourself or blame everything on your spouse. It is far better to acknowledge your own fault as fully as possible, and to prayerfully and publicly repent of your contributions to the breakdown of your marriage. "God is close to a contrite heart," Scripture makes clear (Psalm 32, Psalm 34, and Psalm 52, for example).

2. Forgive. If divorce occurs, you must work for relational reconciliation to the greatest degree possible with your estranged partner (Rom. 12:14-18). You should acknowledge and ask forgiveness for your failures, from God and from the congregation, realizing that forgiveness is a process and that your former spouse may not be able to forgive you immediately. You should also make it your goal to extend complete forgiveness to your partner, too, though it may take time to reach that goal. Walking through a divorce with deep grief, humility, and forgiveness is a very different thing from walking through it with bitterness, self-justification, and anger. The former wounds can heal; the latter will scar you for life—and others will likely be wounded too.

3. Be pure. If, before or since your separation, you have been sexually involved with another person, you should acknowledge that you have committed the sin of adultery or fornication. No amount of focusing on the failures of your partner will justify this behavior of yours (Matt. 5:27-32). Even if you have not physically committed adultery, but have developed an emotional attachment which kept you from giving your best efforts to your marriage and encouraged you to leave your spouse, that shows a deep failure which calls for deep repentance. The best way to move ahead is to face your sin, repent of it, and prepare to move on with an appropriate humility and spiritual contrition (Prov. 28:13). Please be clear on this: sex outside of marriage is sin, and cannot be condoned among professing Christians (1 Cor. 6:18-20). If a Christian commits sexual sin, he or she needs to repent and get back on the path of wholehearted discipleship.

4. Refrain. If the divorce still goes through, even if you believe your spouse is guilty of marital unfaithfulness, we strongly urge you not to date anyone until you are legally divorced. To do so can signal danger for a number of reasons:

- you may not have taken adequate time to process the failure of your marriage; moving into another relationship is not fair to yourself or your partner under these circumstances.
- your marriage still may be salvageable; to jump into another relationship could ruin those chances.
- your behavior could reflect a lack of seriousness about the failure of your marriage.
- you could be setting a bad example for other Christians.

5. Heal. If there are contributing factors which led to your divorce—addictions, violence, uncontrolled anger, mental or emotional illnesses, lasting effects of past traumas—please commit yourself to uncover and deal thoroughly with every deeper issue. It will be hard—but if you don't deal with the underlying issues, in the long run you will suffer far more. We can make referrals to qualified and caring Christian counselors to help you through this important healing process.

6. Be open. Since, as a church, we publicly celebrate marriages, you should expect that we will also, as a church, publicly mourn divorce. We will not ignore or feign ignorance when one of our families comes unraveled. Be aware that, if you divorce, we will address that as honestly and openly as we deem necessary. However, since no two divorces are the same, we commit to responding to each divorce with all the sensitivity and grace that God's Spirit grants us. The purpose of dealing openly with the fact of divorce is not to punish but to restore and heal . . . to bring the full resources of the church to bear on broken people and families.

7. Encourage. When you speak with others about your divorce, please join us in urging people to build and preserve healthy marriages. Please do not make it easier for others to give up on a marriage because of your influence. Saving a troubled marriage is hard, but few if any divorced people will say that surviving a divorce is, in the long run, an easy thing either. Be a force to strengthen marriages, not weaken them, in the Christian community and beyond.

Downtown's commitment to those who are divorced

We understand that any effort to touch on the subject of marriage and divorce scratches at old scars and resurrects feelings of guilt, anger, and fear. So let us speak a few words directly to the divorced among us. This is not an attempt to single out one sin or segregate a particular group of sinners. It is an attempt to stem the flood-tide of divorce among Christian couples. If you are at Downtown as a divorced person, we welcome you with open arms and want you to find with us a place to begin again the pursuit of God's purposes for your life. We love divorced people. We—the greedy, gossipy, proud, lustful, impatient strugglers who make up this

church family—stand with you as failed people who have been saved by the grace of Jesus.

In fact, just as we commit to support married couples, we commit to support those who are divorced. As leaders of the Downtown Church, we pledge the following in our ongoing attempt to support Christians who have suffered through the dissolution of their marriages:

1. We are eager to provide divorce support and counsel for those who desire it and for their children. We can refer you to godly counselors. If this involves a financial commitment and money is tight, we will make scholarships available to you. And we will pray for you as you are in counseling
2. We will ensure that there is periodic preaching and teaching on the subject of emotional, spiritual, and relational healing.
3. As shepherds and staff, we make ourselves available to you for prayer, counsel, and encouragement. Call us. Let us help you through difficult seasons.
4. If you are experiencing specific issues (financial, being a single parent, time management, etc.), we will connect you up with Downtown members who have specific skills to share and teach.

If you take the dissolution of your marriage seriously, and if you acknowledge the failings, weaknesses, and unhealed wounds that led to it, and if you sincerely turn to God for healing and strength and forgiveness, divorce is a tragedy that you can survive, move beyond, and grow through. We at Downtown want to be part of helping you in that. Divorce is not an unforgivable sin. Nor is failure, even in marriage, fatal to our walk with the Lord and his people. But like all sin, divorce must be treated seriously, repented of sincerely, and mourned deeply.

Conclusion:

If you are a member of the Downtown Church and you disagree with these guidelines regarding marriage/divorce, feel free to continue attending here, but understand that protecting our marriages is this important to us. If you are committed to these guidelines, we urge you to benefit from every possible resource here at Downtown—worship, small groups, mentoring opportunities, seminars, retreats, classes, etc. All of us need the support and encouragement, the accountability and comfort of our Christian family, especially as we form, cultivate, and restore marriages that honor God (2 Cor. 1:3-11).

To summarize, marriage must be protected and honored. Divorce must be avoided to every extent possible. When divorce occurs, it should be faced courageously, grieved deeply, and learned from thoroughly, so healing can begin.

As in every other area of life, we thank God that we are not alone in our marriages, in our struggles with marriage, and even in our divorces. God is ever present.

(We wish to acknowledge our debt to the Otter Creek Church of Christ who provided us with an excellent statement about marriage and divorce which we used as the basis for our own statement.)