

Preface:

It has never been my policy (or that of the churches I served) to pursue public and church-wide action when marriages in our congregation foundered and sank. I believe that more personal, intensive, and pastoral approaches serve better with hurting couples. Sometimes, however, the divorce is so blatant and public and messy that the peace of the church and the credibility of its leaders are at stake. In the following instance, the divorcing couple had been in a leadership role in our church for a long period (even leading our marriage ministry!). Everyone knew what was happening. We were neither breaking confidence nor surprising anyone in our church with this letter. The question facing us as leaders was: Are we going to pretend this isn't happening and allow this marriage to die un-noted and un-mourned? Or was there a way that we as a church could respond in compassion and honesty about yet another broken home? The answer, in part, involved two letters to the church: one a "cover" letter providing some context; and one a letter about the particular couple in trouble. I include the first letter only in a desire to protect the people involved.

A Statement to the Family at _____

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Recently, we elders shared our concerns for many of the marriages in the family here at _____. We encouraged all of you who are married to nurture your marriage in the Lord, and dedicated ourselves to helping husbands and wives who were struggling. It is obvious—judging by the divorce rate—that our culture no longer values marriage. Sadly, we see more and more of that attitude in the church. We are especially heartbroken by the breakup of families in this church and have spent a great deal of time discussing how we can curb this epidemic that so opposes the nature and will of God.

As to the past, we confess that we have often “turned our heads” and pretended not to see problem marriages and divorces. For that we repent and ask your forgiveness. Addressing difficult and personal matters as a church is never easy. But silence is no longer an option.

God hates divorce. When Christian marriages fail, we not only break God’s heart and tear at the fabric of our church family, we undermine our testimony to the power and hope of the gospel in our lives. Yes, sometimes divorce is inevitable—even for Christians. But it is very difficult to see divorce, in the majority of circumstances, as a godly solution to a problem marriage. Divorce may be forced upon Christians because of circumstances or a failure of character in a spouse. But it should never be a “solution” that disciples pursue when other options still exist.

The enclosed letter addresses the break-up of a marriage within our church family. The letter was difficult to write and, no doubt, will be difficult to read. Please read it understanding that our desire is to honor marriage, to protect those who are wounded, and to call all of us to a deeper commitment to marriages that honor God.

In a few weeks, you will receive a longer paper that addresses the issue of divorce in general, how we as a church are committed to interacting with divorcing people, and how those considering divorce are expected to conduct themselves in our faith family. Its tone will be loving and kind. Its purpose will be to guide us all through the messiness of divorce. This paper is a “work in progress.” It is intended to begin a conversation among God’s people at _____ about how to respond lovingly to divorcing people while also upholding a high view of marriage. Your input and feedback are welcomed.

Now, to those among us who are divorced: we know that any effort to touch on this subject scratches at old scars and resurrects feelings of guilt, anger, and fear.

So permit us to speak a few words directly to you. 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 came to Otter Creek as a divorced person, we welcome you with open arms and hope you can 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. Do not hear our concerns about marriage and divorce as concerns about you. We love you and will continue doing so even as we speak up (as we must and as, we believe, you do to) about the evils and disastrous consequences of divorce.

To all our church family, thank you for your understanding and support. And may God bless every marriage and family in the _____ Church.

Your Shepherds