

What we believe about marriage

A Brethren in Christ approach

Preamble

Those who take seriously the authoritative teaching of the Scriptures view with alarm the seismic shifts in marital norms that are occurring in western culture. An ever more tolerant attitude toward alternate sexual lifestyles and casual disregard for marital fidelity have seriously eroded the long-held standards that undergirded marriage and the family in the church and society. During this time of cultural shifting, the church's responsibility is to clearly articulate the biblical principles that define Christian marriage and reassert the sanctity of marriage as ordained by God.

Defining convictions

We affirm our commitment to biblical authority in our understanding of marriage. We are committed to following the teachings and example of Jesus. Like Jesus, we affirm the creation account as God's design for marriage.ⁱ Marriage is to be an exclusive, lifelong commitment between one man and one woman.ⁱⁱ It is ordained by God to be their primary human relationship and is nurtured within the community of faith.

The marital relationship is a gift from God. It is to be characterized by humble obedience to God and mutual care that respects each person's uniqueness and dignity. Marriage lived out in sacrificial love is life-giving, resulting in joy, intimacy, and healthy sexuality. It becomes a safe place for honesty and openness.

Marriage is to be a witness to the world of Christ's love. Significant purposes of marriage include companionship, partnership, and procreationⁱⁱⁱ in a setting that provides children a nurturing environment for their physical, emotional, social, and spiritual development.^{iv}

The church will commit its resources to proclaim, celebrate, and nurture the marriage relationship. The church is called to redeem strained relationships by encouraging repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation, thereby seeking to bring about healing and restoration.^v

The Biblical story makes clear and human experience confirms that patterns of unhealthy attitudes and unloving behaviors can lead to marital breakdown. Given the high value God places on marriage, divorce—with the pain it brings—grieves God's heart.^{vi} Yet God responds with grace, healing, and the offer of new life; and calls the community of faith to partner with him in this process.

Ministry responses

We affirm God's power that enables people to live in healthy marital relationships. We also affirm God's power to transform broken, unhealthy marriages and devastated individuals as they seek to allow the Holy Spirit to do a new thing in their lives and marriages.

We recognize and accept the church's call to model the Gospel by speaking the truth in love through ministries and language applicable to our times and cultures.

Promoting health

The community of faith is called to be compassionate and proactive in the development of healthy people and healthy marriages. In faithfulness to such a mandate it will teach biblical values and personal skills regarding wholesome marriage and healthy relationships. Such teaching will occur at all age levels in a wide variety of settings and will include an emphasis on life application.

With its commitment to the development of healthy people and healthy relationships, the congregation will provide counseling that is both preventive and remedial. Such counseling begins with young teens as they begin early dating and continues as pre-engagement and pre-marital counseling. Eventually it is offered in the form of marriage counseling.

Congregational leaders will exemplify a vulnerability that models and illustrates that the church is a safe place for openness. There will be sensitivity to early signals of marital distress in order to respond with appropriate interventions. In the life of the congregation there will be mentoring and modeling that is intergenerational, or one-on-one, or at times gender-specific. Such mentoring can occur in small groups, family-to-family, or couple-to-couple.

Providing healing

In faithfulness to its calling, the community of faith will be prompt to respond to people who are in the midst of crises and experiencing pain. Proclamation and care form a creative partnership that balances the truth of God's Word with compassion in a relationally authentic manner.

There will be intentional efforts to equip and mobilize the congregation as a healing community. As a healing community it becomes a safe place where people are freed to confess, grieve, pursue forgiveness and seek reconciliation. Such a therapeutic environment opens the way for an honest assessment of personal responsibility in relational conflict.

Those who serve as agents of healing must be vulnerable, respectful, non-judgmental, skilled listeners, willing to be present with people in the depth of their pain.^{vii}

Processing recovery

When there is marital distress and breakdown, the faithful church is called to speak the truth in love. Its message following the pain of divorce will include words of assurance and hope with the prospect of rebuilding one's life.

Throughout the process of marital recovery, the church in its role will seek to extend grace in various ways. It will provide opportunities and space for those who grieve their loss. It will walk with those who find themselves in broken relationships brought about by divorce. It will give special attention to the needs of the children of wounded marriages.

People in the process of recovery will be helped to honestly assess the reality of their situation and take responsibility for their attitudes and behaviors. Such responsibility will include the path of repentance.

Throughout the process recovering people will receive words of assurance regarding their identity in Christ. And they will be helped to understand that recovery may open the way to a chaste and fulfilling single life or to a healthy subsequent marriage.

When the church has clearly marked the path to reconciliation and restoration, it may still encounter persistent resistance to the grace that is offered. Then the redemptive ministry of the church may include a restorative disciplinary process, being ever prayerful and hopeful that there will be a return to faithfulness.

Summary

The challenge facing the church in upholding the divine design and sanctity of marriage is daunting, but with God's enabling grace, quite possible. The prospect of promoting wholesome relationships and healthy marriages as a witness to the world is energizing. Thus, as a body of believers called to faithfulness, we are committed to resourcing our pastors and congregations to enhance their redemptive ministry to the marriages and families in their care.

ⁱ Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:4–6

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Genesis 1:27, 28

^{iv} Luke 2:52

^v Matthew 18:15–20

^{vi} Malachi 2:14–16

^{vii} Galatians 6:1,2