



“How Do We, as a Small Group, Walk Well with Someone Considering Divorce Because of Adultery or Abuse?”

Host: David Talbert, Pastor of Small Groups

Guest: Brad Hambrick, Pastor of Counseling

This training is intended to facilitate discussion among small group leaders about how to most effectively steward their shepherding role in the church. It is best used as a prompt for deeper conversations with other leaders, a small group coach, or pastor over small group ministries.

Suggested Training Agenda:

The agenda below is for a 45-60 minute discussion-based training. Some campuses may prefer to address two topics during a 90 minute gathering.

1. Campus Pastoral Team: Welcome and Introduction of Subject (5 min)
2. Training Content (13-15 min)
 - a. Play the video from www.bradhambrick.com/SGdivorce during this segment of the training **or**
 - b. Have a staff member teach the training based off the video and supplemental resources
3. Campus Pastoral Team: Summarize Content and Contextualize Current Relevance (5 min)
4. Transition to Discussion Questions (20 min); meant for small group leaders to discuss with one another around tables

Summary of Big Ideas

A decision about divorce after adultery or because of abuse is a "**journey to be walked**" more than "**question to be answered.**" Questions, once answered, are clear. Journeys, even with a sense of direction, can be hard. Questions can be answered quickly if you know the right answer. Journeys take time even when you know the desired destination.

Being pro-marriage does not mean being weak on abuse or adultery. *God is not more concerned about the institution of marriage than he is the individuals in the marriage.* God is passionate about both and, therefore, his church should be as well.

“People who are destructive should lose the privilege of your fellowship. That does not mean that you have to turn your back on the person in question. Step back while facing forward, inviting that person to change so that reconciliation may be possible (p. 167)... I always warn my clients that even if their marriage fails and they no longer live with their spouse, they will always have to live with themselves. Therefore, it is crucial to their long-term well-being that they conduct themselves in such a way that they will have no regrets (p. 185).” Leslie Vernick in *How to Act Right When Your Spouse Acts Wrong*

Even secular experts in the area of sexual addiction, without a Christian high view of marriage, advise caution about hasty divorce:

“To abandon the relationship at this point, however, is akin to having a broken bone and not setting it. Broken relationships require attention as well... And if there are children involved, problems are inevitable. Whether you go or stay, it makes no difference. Mending will be required. And as painful as it is, there will be less pain and more effective healing when the fracture is dealt with as soon as possible (p. 54)... The irony of using divorce as a way to escape the inevitable grief is that it creates more (p. 59)... You’ll likely feel pressure from others to end your relationship as though that would end the emotional turmoil you’re in... Most therapists suggest you make no significant changes during the first year of recovery (p. 75).” Stephanie Carnes in *Mending a Shattered Heart*

In making a decision about divorce, the recommended priorities are:

1. **Safety** – marriage is not the place for martyrdom (Matthew 7:1-6, Romans 12-13); illegal is “next level” immorality
 - a. **DO:** Report if children are involved; this is not optional (www.bradhambrick.com/SGabuse)
 - b. **DON’T:** Prematurely confront an abuser. This can be dangerous for the abuse victim.
 - c. **DO:** Develop a safety plan (www.bradhambrick.com/safetyplan) and recommend counseling
2. **Ethics** – marriage is a place for sacrifice; the question is the order of allegiance in the sacrifice would be:
 - a. 1st for Christ – we want to honor Christ in *what* we do and *how* we do it
 - b. 2nd for children – in this entire process we are teaching children how to think about and respond to dysfunction
 - c. 3rd for unruly spouse – we desire the redemption of our spouse, but we are not a slave to their folly
3. **Commitment to a Plan** – passive waiting results in more suffering now and reactionary decision making later
 - a. **False Love / True Betrayal** – resource tandem for marriages affected by adultery or pornography
 - b. **Addiction / Codependency** – resource tandem for marriages affected by substance abuse or addiction
 - c. **Anger / Codependency** – resource tandem for marriages affected by abuse or toxic conflict
 - d. There are support groups for each of these at Summit through our G4 ministry (www.summitrdu.com/G4).



Divorce is public. Divorce completely changes a couple's social spheres. For this reason, embarrassment is not a reason for isolation. Resistance to engaging the necessary social resources (i.e., pastoral involvement, accountability, counseling, etc.) is a frequent, but irrational, point of resistance that does not take into account the type of decision that is being made.

Frequent mistake: The offended spouse talks to pastoral team too late; after their decision is made. The effect is asking church leadership to approve a morally complex decision about which they have limited information the first time they learn of it. The **church discipline policy of The Summit Church** is designed to bring the elements of pastoral authority, small group accountability, and counseling expertise together in a way that allows for maximum protective and restorative possibilities. *Involving church leadership at this stage ensures that the unruly spouse is the focal point of the church's restorative-disciplinary efforts.*

To summarize, what does this practically mean for the small group?

1. **Listen** – your presence is what is going to help this spouse-marriage-family feel less alone in a hard time (this is huge)
2. **Connect** – this is more than a small group should handle on their own; talk with pastors and recommend counseling
3. **Support** – as pastors and a counselor are involved, the role of the small group shifts to a supportive role
4. **Pray** – we feel overwhelmed as we talk about this; that reveals how much we need to God to change hearts

Discussion Questions

1. **Self-Awareness:** How comfortable are you being in an advisory role on a decision over which you do not have the final say? How comfortable are you in complex situations where what “ought” to happen (i.e., restored marriage) is contingent on other things that “ought” to happen (i.e., the unruly spouse gets help for addiction or abuse)? Often when we are uncomfortable, we try to oversimplify situations to resolve the tension that we feel. *When we comfort our consciences by artificially conceptualizing situations as simpler than they are, we do not care well for those in the complex situation.*
2. **Ethical Reasoning:** The Bible clearly gives permission for divorce in cases of adultery (Matthew 19:7-9) and abandonment (1 Corinthians 7:12-16), even though God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16; in the same way God hates the abuse of roles He intends or protection and nurture, Ezekiel 34:1-10). In cases of chronic abuse and addiction, the question becomes: at what level of severity and unwillingness to engage recovery do abuse and addiction become a form of abandonment or the covenant-violating equivalent of adultery? The spectrum of addiction and abuse is too subjective for a firm answer to this question, but it is the appropriate way to frame the question. Further, the ethical question becomes: how can we (spouse) support the spouse in limiting the damage being done by the unruly spouse's addiction or abuse?
3. **Ministry Effectiveness:** Think of an instance you know where divorce was being considered because of adultery or abuse. How would the three priorities above (1st Christ, 2nd Children, 3rd Unruly Spouse) have guided involvement? How does the manner in which early “yellow flag” conversations are handled impact how/if “red flag” conversations are had? Role play an ideal “yellow flag” conversation. Then role play foreseeable points of resistance. Finally, role play responses to those rebuttals or non-cooperation.

Follow Up Resources¹

- Pastor J.D. Greear's sermon “When Is It Okay to Divorce?”
- Blog on Abuse: [We Are Equally Sinful. We Are Not All Equally Broken or Toxic.](#)
- Blog on Abuse: [Why We Should Always Teach Romans 13 with Romans 12](#)
- Blog: [An Open Letter to Someone Having an Affair](#)
- Blog Series: [Marriage with a Chronically Self-Centered Spouse](#)
- FAQ Article: [Is Pornography Biblical Grounds for Divorce?](#)
- Blog: [Where to Begin with Complex Situations?](#)
- Blog: [How to Conduct an Effective Intervention](#)
- Blog: [Four Principles for Thinking Well about Boundaries](#)
- Blog: [The Three Levels of Relational Strain in Matthew 7:1-6](#)
- FAQ: [What is the difference between marriage enrichment and marriage restoration?](#)

¹ All hyperlinks can be found at www.bradhambrick.com/SGdivorce if they are unavailable in your printed handout.