

WORD OF CHRIST INTERNATIONAL CHURCH
POSITION PAPER

Topic: Divorce and Remarriage

INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT

We must agree that Scripture is our final authority in settling questions of faith and practice. But when born-again, Spirit-filled Christians, following proper biblical principles, come to reasonable but differing interpretations; we do well not to become dogmatic in support of one position. We affirm the inerrancy and authority of Scripture and we desire to know for certain what God expects of us. When we come to a sure understanding of His divine Word, we are committed to declaring and obeying those clear instructions.

In the following position paper we address one of many topics that have raised a fair degree of discussion, and, at times, arguments among the brethren. It is not our intention to fuel these arguments but rather to state our position based on our earnest understanding of the Scriptures. With this said, we also exercise caution in not stirring unnecessary strife or division among the brethren, and have made every reasonable effort to base our positions on Scripture, not personal opinion or conjecture. We respect and love our brothers and sisters who hold alternative interpretations on issues that are not critical to our salvation or standing before God.

DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

To understand our view of divorce one must first understand our position on marriage. We believe marriage is a sacred, holy and monogamous union between a man and a woman, involving a lifelong binding agreement made before God (Gen 2:24; Mal 2:14).

Because marriage forms the foundational element for a healthy society, we believe low marriage standards are hurtful to individuals, to the family, and to the cause of Christ. Yet the prevalence of divorce in our culture and within the church community demands that we address this tragic issue.

The importance of marriage, and therefore the seriousness of divorce, is highlighted in Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus. Towards the end of the 5th chapter, Paul expounds on the importance of a healthy relationship between a husband and a wife. However, it is not until verse 32 that Paul reveals the hidden mystery of marriage ... that it was and continues to be a living reminder of the relationship we, as believers, have with Christ. Ephesians 5:32 "This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church." In turn, divorce, is a reminder of our frailty in maintaining a sacred relationship.

BIBLICAL PRECEDENCE - DIVORCE

At the outset, we want it to be clear that we strongly discourage divorce as we teach on the sanctity and permanence of marriage. This stand is obviously more stringent than the permissive attitude of society in general and the judicial system's interpretation of the laws of the land. This position against divorce grows out of the clear statement in the Bible that God hates divorce (Mal 2:16) and that no human being should separate two persons joined together in holy matrimony (Matt 19:6). Yet the reality of divorce forces us to draw from Scripture guidelines for instances when God's ideal is not maintained.

Scripture regulates divorce as it pertains to Christians by providing guidelines for two separate groups: marriages in which both partners are Christians; and marriages where only one spouse is a Christian. In the first case, where both husband and wife are professing Christians, neither party is ever to seek a divorce (1 Cor 7:10, 11). In the second case (the mixed marriage) the Christian

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husband or wife should never initiate or seek a divorce from an unbelieving spouse (1 Cor 7:12-14). There are only two exceptions that allow for this initiative. A Christian may divorce a spouse only when his/her partner is repeatedly committing the sin of adultery (Matt 5:32; 19:9), or if the spouse refuses to live with him/her and departs (abandonment) (1 Cor 7:15).

Both exceptions present the believer with an option, but never a mandate, of divorce. A better course whenever grace enables it is to forgive marital infidelity and seek healing in the marriage. This choice is especially desirable in cases where children would be further hurt and the family destroyed through divorce. Abandonment (a long-term withdrawal from the home with neglect of the responsibilities, support, and duties required of one partner within a marriage) would also prove the spouse's sinful conduct and could eventually allow for divorce. Abuse poses another threat to marriages. Thousands of women and in some cases men face serious battering and other forms of abuse from their spouses. God is concerned with the physical safety and well-being of all. He does not look lightly upon such actions within marriage or families. In such circumstances a period of separation without divorce may be justified and useful for the healing of persons. If, after serious attempts of counseling and reconciliation, the abusing spouse departs rather than turn from actions of abuse, permitting divorce would apply. (1 Cor 7:12-15)

Children are greatly victimized by the wake of divorce. All too often a parent or parents who pursue divorce become so embroiled in meeting their own perceived personal needs, they never stop to consider the full impact of their actions on their children. To children, divorce brings great emotional trauma. The fallout is felt for years and in some cases a lifetime. Persons who find themselves contemplating divorce would do well to consider the full implications of such an action and its impact on children, extended family, and friends. The church is called to reach out to all who are hurt and love them as Jesus does ... especially the children (Matt 18:1-6).

BIBLICAL PRECEDENCE - REMARRIAGE

Under what conditions may remarriage take place? Jesus taught that if a divorce occurs under a biblical exception as stated earlier, one is free to remarry. In other words, one who has been divorced because of the repeated adultery of a partner (Matt 5:32; 19:9) is not bound by the former marriage and is free to remarry. Wherever possible, sexually immoral practices should be dealt with through repentance, confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation, thus saving the marriage. In no case does Jesus command divorce when unfaithfulness has occurred; He simply allows it. Nor did Jesus command remarriage when divorce has occurred. However, from Matt 19:9 it seems that Jesus understood that the divorced will often remarry. Remarriage, like the first marriage, should be "in the Lord" (with a Christian).

The second exception for the remarriage of a divorced person is found in 1 Cor 7:15. When an unbelieving spouse is unwilling to remain in the marriage and initiates a divorce, the believer is set free from the marriage and can remarry if he or she so chooses without committing adultery.

Where these exceptional circumstances exist, the question of remarriage must be resolved by the believer as he or she walks in the light of God's Word (1 Corinthians 7:15,27,28). Remarriage is a new contract or covenant. Even though the first covenant, because of sin, did not endure, the new covenant must be treated with all the love, commitment, and permanence the first marriage contract should have received.

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TREATMENT OF DIVORCEES IN THE CHURCH

At times, the victims of divorce and remarriage have been treated as outcasts in the church. However those who have gone through divorce, and in some cases remarriage, are persons God loves deeply. He does not show favoritism (Rom 2:11, Jam 2:1). The church must receive with love and compassion all who are repentant and desire to follow Christ. For this reason, we openly embrace into our church family those who have experienced failed marriages. There is, however, one exception. In no case should a person living with a member of the opposite sex (without actually being married) be accepted into membership. Such living arrangements are sinful in practice and unacceptable to God as they lack the seal of lifelong commitment before God and as such constitute fornication. Couples living together, but unmarried should be instructed in the Bible's teaching on marriage and guided to observe God's law in forming a monogamous lifelong marriage covenant in Him.

Though the remarriage of divorced persons is called an act of adultery by Jesus, this does not mean that the remarried persons are living in a state of perpetual adultery. Persons who have remarried and now understand God's truth should be led to repentance for that sin and into a clear pattern of thinking about what the scripture teaches. They are not to divorce and return to their former marriages. Further divorce is a confusion of grace. Nothing is gained by committing another mistake in an attempt to rectify a previous sin. Furthermore, the Old Testament forbade a divorced and remarried partner from returning to the original partner (Deut 24:4). The divorced and remarried, no matter how grievous their past sin or faults, upon genuine repentance can be forgiven and restored to function in truth and integrity as part of God's family.

CONCLUSION

As stated in the beginning of this paper, we strongly discourage divorce. It is an unfortunate and destructive practice that our culture has readily accepted as normal. As believers, we understand that marriage is a lifelong, holy union between a man and a woman with the blessing of God. With that said, the Scriptures do provide instruction and guidelines on what to do when relationships fail. In some of these cases, divorce and remarriage are permitted. Failed relationships usher in a great deal of pain and anguish. It is our hope that couples facing hardships avoid this pain and allow the Holy Spirit to heal their hurts and restore their marriages.

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