

## Divorce & Remarriage

### A Policy Statement

Marriages are struggling and failing at alarming rates today. Our culture seems to consider divorce a minor problem and divorce rates are correspondingly high. Divorce is occurring—often in spite of good counsel, support from family and friends, and against the desire of one of the partners. And it always occurs where biblical principles were either unknown, ignored, or violated. Typically, very few individuals are given help from Scripture as they struggle against the currents of guilt, depression, public put-downs and rejection by fellow believers.

But we want to stress the sanctity of marriage, the happiness of a spiritual Christian home, and the tragedy of divorce under any circumstance. How happy we would be if the seriousness and sanctity of marriage were fully realized by all who take the marriage vows. We therefore encourage careful and prayerful consideration preceding and encompassing each marriage – and we encourage genuine seeking of God’s guidance and will so that His purpose would be achieved in each marriage.

Unfortunately, sin and failure accompany the footsteps of frail men and women. Selfishness, self-will and rebellious hearts lead into ways not pleasing to God or healthy for marriage. We hope that nothing written here will be misconstrued as an attempt to lower divine standards or promote laxity in our application of scriptural truths. We grieve over the dissolution of marriages. Nevertheless, we must carefully consider the reality of strained relationships and broken marriages, not only to preserve marriages, but also to help bring guidance and support when divorce is approaching or after divorce has occurred. We cannot avoid these issues.<sup>1[1]</sup>

We take divorce seriously for the following reasons<sup>2[2]</sup>:

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<sup>1[1]</sup> See “What Does the Bible Teach About Divorce and Remarriage”, Harold G. MacKay, paper written October, 1969.

<sup>2[2]</sup> This paper is not meant to be a comprehensive analysis and defense of our doctrinal interpretation of the subject of divorce and remarriage. It is simply an explanation of our interpretation and how we apply this interpretation to real situations.

- a) Marriage was established by God and it is a holy union with profound spiritual dimensions (Gen 2:24). The Lord characterizes His love relationship with us as a husband/wife relationship. In fact, marriage is so important to God that he seals it with a “one flesh” characterization. This bond is so strong that only adultery can break it apart, something which God Himself forbids (Matt 19:9).
- b) God hates divorce (Mal 2:16). Something that matters so much to God should matter to Christians, leading us to take divorce seriously (Heb 13:4).
- c) When people marry, they take solemn vows before God, and breaking vows is a serious issue of morality and integrity (Eccl 5:4-7, Matt 5:33-37.)
- d) The dissolution of a marriage has profound effects on both adults involved, and on any children who are caught in the crossfire. If we truly care about people, we must care about marriage (Rom 14:7, 21).
- e) An under-rated problem has to do with the unintended effects of each divorce on other families in the church. If divorce becomes too readily accepted and appears to be a consequence-free solution to problems, more and more couples may be tempted to give up working on their marriages, and divorce can actually become somewhat contagious (I Cor 12:26).
- f) The success rates for subsequent marriages are low. If couples don’t receive adequate counseling to uncover the issues which sabotaged their first marriage, there is a good likelihood that they will repeat their mistakes. Also, the pain of a failed marriage can run deep, suggesting the need for competent counseling (Gal 6:1-5).<sup>3[3]</sup>

There is considerable debate among Christians on this subject and widely disparate views. Churches respond to the fact and the prospect of divorce in various ways, and each must answer in good conscience before the Lord, who is the head of the Church (Col

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<sup>3[3]</sup> Parts of this paper have been adapted from Brian McLaren.

1:18). After much study, prayer & consultation, the following is our policy and perspective on the subjects of separation, divorce and remarriage:

Our policy in brief is:

God's intention is for the believer to marry only another believer (II Cor 6:14) and that marriage is for life (Matt 19:6). To enter into marriage with an unbeliever is not only disobedience to our Lord, but completely unfair to the unbeliever.

As well, God hates divorce! (Mal 2:16) Initiating a divorce is disobedience to God's word that "the two shall be one flesh" and "what God has joined together, let no man cast asunder" (Matt 19:6). We recognize one (and only one) condition under which divorce and remarriage is permissible, namely when one spouse is guilty of adultery and is unwilling to repent and live faithfully with his/her spouse. If this happens, the offended spouse is free to remarry (Matt 19:9). The better way, though, is forgiveness and continual attempts at restoration.

Remarriage after divorce is allowed only when the elders are fully agreed that the circumstances, in light of Scripture, allow for it.

Realizing that no divorce is cut and dry and that there are many influencing factors, each case will be treated individually.

In order to accomplish this policy, we make the following requests of people who are divorced, separated or faced with divorce.

1. Acknowledge that God never desires divorce. It is not His plan nor wisdom.
2. Do not gloss over the seriousness of breaking solemn vows made to another human being in the presence of God (Matt 19:1-15). Do not try to minimize or defend this tragedy, or to blame everything on the other party. It is far better to acknowledge your own fault as fully as possible, and to prayerfully repent of your part in the failure of your marriage.

*"God is close to a contrite heart,"* Scripture makes clear (Ps 34:18, Ps 32 and 51).

3. If you are capable, with the Lord's help and strength, of saving your marriage, you should continue to do everything you can to save it. If you walk away from a marriage that you could save, you are sinning. You are breaking the solemn vows that you made when you got married and are disobeying God.
4. As far as it depends upon you, you should achieve the greatest degree possible of reconciliation with your partner (Rom 12:14-18). You should acknowledge and ask forgiveness for all of your failures—naming them as specifically as possible. You should extend complete forgiveness to your partner, too—even in the case of adultery. Working through a failing marriage or a divorce with deep grief, humility, and forgiveness is a very different thing from walking out of 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.
5. There is a delicate balance here. If your partner is completely unwilling to reconcile and initiates separation and/or divorce, you should acknowledge the failure of your marriage with real sadness. This should be seen and acknowledged as a real tragedy.
6. Where adultery is not involved, there may be deep problems such as physical or mental abuse which may endanger the physical and emotional well-being of one partner and/or the children involved. Under advisement, a temporary separation may be a wise "time-out" to gain respite and a renewed perspective. But, in such cases, we strongly urge that during this time both partners seek counsel that will provide accountability and spiritual insight. Under no circumstances are we stating that an individual should put herself or children into a dangerous situation, but should seek an alternative course of action under advisement of godly counsel.
7. If before or since your separation, you have become sexually involved with another person, you should acknowledge that

you have committed the sin of adultery. 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 if you have allowed yourself to cultivate an emotional relationship which encouraged you to leave your spouse, without giving your sincere best effort to patiently work to save your marriage ... that shows a deep failure which calls for deep repentance. The best way ahead for you is to face your sin, repent of it, and prepare to move on with appropriate humility and spiritual contrition (Prov 28:13). Please be clear on this: sex outside of marriage is sin, and can not be condoned among professing Christians (I Cor 5:9-11). If a Christian commits sexual sin, he or she needs to repent and get back on the path of wholehearted discipleship. We do not expect non-Christians to act like Christians, but we do expect Christians to act like Christians. That includes taking seriously the Christian's call to a holy life (I Thess 4:3-4).

8. If your spouse initiates divorce, we strongly urge you not to date anyone until you are legally divorced. To do so can be a danger signal for a number of reasons. First, you may not have taken adequate time to process the failure of your marriage and moving into another relationship is not fair to yourself or your partner under these circumstances. Second, your marriage still may be salvageable—to jump into another relationship could ruin that possibility. Third, your behavior could reflect a lack of seriousness about the failure of your marriage. Fourth, you could be setting a bad example for other Christians.
9. If there are contributing factors involved in the breakdown of your marriage - 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 strongly encourage you to get competent counseling in this regard. If you had cancer or heart disease, you wouldn't expect to treat your illness yourself. Similarly, it is foolhardy to try to heal yourself from a problem of this magnitude. We can make

referrals to qualified, caring Christian counselors to help you through this important healing process.

10. When you speak with others about your divorce, please join us in urging people to work 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. Just as a person who has survived a serious car accident will urge others to wear their seat belts, drive carefully, etc., you should become a force to strengthen marriages, not weaken them., in the Christian community and beyond.
11. If you are facing divorce, please ask for help early. The elders or your small group leader should be valuable resources.
12. If you are divorced, it may be you were the one who initiated the divorce for unbiblical reasons—either through your own infidelity or through selfish reasons. This is not an unforgivable sin—however, you must recognize and acknowledge your sin with deep humility and repentance. If reconciliation with your former spouse is not possible due to remarriage of either party, we encourage you to go on from here in faithfulness and support of God's standard for marriage. This is also true in the case of divorce before you became a Christian.
13. If you have been divorced, this may influence the effectiveness of your ministry, particularly in the area of leadership (I Tim 3:2-7, Titus 1:6-9). Sin confuses this issue considerably and there is honest disagreement among churches and Bible scholars over whether a divorced man may be an elder or deacon. The phrase in the list of qualifications for elders and deacons (i.e. "husband of one wife"), is a "painfully controversial one."<sup>4[4]</sup> We understand this to mean that a spiritual leader must be "a one woman kind of man," that is, he is not a "womanizer" or "flirt". In other words, he is

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<sup>4[4]</sup> Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, (Colorado: Lewis & Roth Publishers), 1995, p. 192.

characterized as being faithful to his wife and his relationships with other women are appropriate for a godly man<sup>5[5]</sup>. This does not restrict a widower who is remarried, nor does it flatly reject a divorced person. But, there are other qualifications and issues that may affect a divorced person's suitability for leadership. Divorce may reveal otherwise hidden characteristics or traits that may seriously affect the person's ability to lead. For example, an elder or deacon must be above reproach, not self-willed, not quick tempered, etc.

If you are committed to these guidelines, we urge you to continue enjoying fellowship with us and to benefit from every possible resource, including our Sunday 11:00 service, Lord's Supper, small groups, etc. You need the support, encouragement and accountability of your Christian community now more than ever. And as you learn and grow through this experience, you will have much comfort and help to offer others who face similar struggles (II Cor 1:3-11).

If you are "in fellowship" here and you do *not* wish to follow these guidelines regarding your divorce, we ask you to pray and study the scriptures concerning this matter. If you still do not wish to follow these guidelines, we ask that you withdraw from fellowship here (Matt 18:15-20). Feel free to continue attending the 11:00 service, but out of respect for God's call for a high standard of holiness for the church, we ask you to withdraw from the Lord's Supper and active ministry until the time comes when you can again identify fully with these scriptural guidelines.

**Conclusion:** If a person has a terrible accident, perhaps breaking or losing a leg or arm, it is a very serious emergency. But it need not be fatal. The person can be healed. But if he or she doesn't take the injury seriously enough soon enough, the condition will only get worse and become harder to heal. Similarly, the breakdown of a marriage is serious, painful and potentially crippling—and there may be long lasting scars. But if you take it seriously, with God's

help, you can become healthy and strong again. That is our prayer for you.

If you take the dissolution of your marriage seriously, if you acknowledge the failures, poor judgment, personal weaknesses, and unhealed wounds from the past that led to its dissolution, and if you sincerely turn to God for help, strength, forgiveness and empowerment—then divorce is a tragedy that you can survive, move beyond and through which you can grow. We want to be part of helping you do that.

In short, whenever possible, divorce must be prevented. When it cannot be prevented, it should be faced courageously, grieved deeply, learned from thoroughly, and recovered from fully. As in every other area of life, we thank God that we are not alone in the process.

*Chuck Gianotti, revised 02/26/2003*

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<sup>5[5]</sup> See William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary*, "Exposition of The Pastoral Epistles" (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House), 1979, pp. 121-122 and Walvoord & Zuck, *Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Wheaton: Victor Books) 1983, pp. 736-737