

## GRANDVIEW BAPTIST CHURCH

### RECOMMENDED POLICY ON DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

#### 1. GENERAL PRINCIPLES.

The mind of Christ on divorce and remarriage is stated most clearly in Matthew 19: 3-9 in response to a question from some Pharisees. There are brief statements on divorce in Matthew 5: 31-32; Luke 16: 18, and Mark 10: 2-12 gives a parallel account of the response to the Pharisees. However, both the original question and the answer of the Lord are stated in more general terms in Mark's account, so that the Matthew 19 account gives the more complete statement of Christ's teaching.

The foundational principle is that marriage is designed to be a life-long commitment between one man and one woman. This relationship rooted in a covenant promise and sealed by sexual union is described in the creation narrative as "one flesh," and this implies that neither the husband nor the wife should break this covenant by divorce. The Mosaic Law gives only minimal regulations for divorce, but this represents God's realistic approach to statutory law for a hard-hearted people – it is not the essence of God's moral law. Disciples of Christ are called to practice God's moral ideal for marriage, which implies a radical commitment to maintain one's marriage.

To divorce one's spouse, therefore, is to violate the covenant of marriage and thus to sin against that person to whom the covenant promise was made. To remarry after the divorce is to enter into a sexual union in competition with the original marriage, and thus, to commit adultery against the first spouse. Therefore, the fundamental principle is: do not initiate divorce.

There is, however, one exception to the general rule that divorce + marriage = adultery, and that is the case in which one partner is guilty of sexual infidelity (*pornela*). The Greek word *pornela* is a comprehensive term for sexual sin, including within its scope adultery (Jeremiah 3: 2, 6), incest (I Corinthians 5: 1), and homosexual behaviour (Jude 7). Although divorce is not demanded when sexual sin occurs, and Christians must be ready to extend forgiveness, divorce (and consequent remarriage) does not constitute sin in such cases.

The application of Christ's teaching to the life of the church can be seen in Paul's treatment of the issues in I Corinthians 7: 10-16. We are not to seek divorce, and if we have in fact divorced, then we are called to seek reconciliation rather than seeking a new marriage (10-11). But what about a situation in which one's spouse refuses to continue the marriage? The Corinthians faced this in cases where only one spouse had become a Christian. Paul's answer is that the Christian must do everything possible to maintain the marriage, especially in view of the chance to influence the unbeliever

toward conversion. However, if the unbeliever refuses to continue the marriage, then the Christian is free to allow the divorce, free from the marital obligation, and thus free to remarry.

It is important to note that way in which Paul interprets the words of Christ on divorce. When he addresses the possibility of Christians initiating divorce (10-11), he indicates that he can quote the word of the Lord. But when he treats the case of a Christian being divorced by his/her spouse (12-15); he indicates that he does not have a word of Christ to quote. This implies that the explicit teaching of Christ is not a comprehensive law which covers every possible case, but is directed at those who would choose to break a marriage covenant. In the case of those who are the victims of such covenant-breaking, when their best efforts have faulted to maintain their marriage and they are divorced against their will, they are free to remarry.

Since Paul does not interpret the explicit teaching of Christ as if it were intended to be a comprehensive law, it would seem that the approach of I Corinthians 7: 12-15 is capable of broader application. For example, cases of abuse which make it impossible to continue living together, or a refusal to maintain a sexual relationship, or the perverse refusal of a professed believer to seek reconciliation (thus functioning as an unbeliever) may leave a believer in the same essential condition a Paul envisions in I Corinthians 7: 12-15.

In summary, a Christian should never seek divorce and remarriage, and if divorce has occurred, the Christian should seek reconciliation. However, if in spite of higher faithfulness to the marriage covenant, the Christian is the victim of spousal adultery, then divorce and remarriage may be initiated. Furthermore, if the Christians' spouse refuses to maintain the marriage, then divorce may be accepted and remarriage is allowed.

## **I. DIVORCE AND CHURCH MEMBERSHIP.**

The church is by definition a community of forgiven sinners, and divorce is not an unforgivable sin. Therefore, repentant believers may be admitted to church membership, no matter what their marital history may be.

Church members who seek to violate biblical teaching about divorce and remarriage must be exhorted to refrain from such action. If they persist in such disobedience, then church discipline is in order.

If an applicant for membership has sinned in regard to divorce or remarriage, and thus would be under church discipline as a member, then this matter must be dealt with so as to secure repentance before admission to membership.

### **III. DIVORCE AND CHURCH OFFICE.**

Both elders and deacons are required to be “the husband of one wife” (I Timothy 3: 2, 12; Titus 1: 6) and to manage their families well (I Timothy 3: 4, 12; Titus 1: 6), and elders are to be irreproachable (I Timothy 3: 2; Titus 1: 6). Divorce may be relevant for all of these criteria, but it is especially relevant for the criterion, “husband of one wife.” Interpreting this phrase is not easy, but in doing so it must be noted that the reverse phrase, “wife of one husband” occurs in I Timothy 5: 9 as a criterion for widows who are to be supported by the church. Therefore, whatever interpretation we adopt must explain both contexts.

If the female phrase, “wife of one husband,” can be applied to widows, then it clearly refers to marital history, not to present conditions. Therefore, the phrase, “husband of one wife,” seems to denote an unblemished marital history of the elder or deacon. This would seem to demand at least that the person not be responsible for divorce during his Christian experience, and given Paul’s concern for both character and reputation, it may have a more extensive application.

It is impossible to dogmatically assert that we know the mind of Paul in his use of this phrase, but in view of his concern for both character and reputation, the following policy would seem to be appropriate:

A person is disqualified for service as an elder or deacon if (1) the person has sinned in regard to divorce or remarriage as a Christian, or (2) there is a divorce in the person’s (or spouse’s) marital history which would be likely to create a problem of reputation and, thus, to diminish credibility as a church leader. With regard to divorced persons serving in other church ministries, any questionable case will be individually evaluated by the elders.

## **DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE**

### **SCENARIOS FOR APPLICATION OF PROPOSED POLICY**

1. John is married to Jane. John admits that he has been involved in an adulterous relationship with another woman for the least two months. Jane is willing to forgive John, but he is not convinced that he is really in the wrong, since he feels that he doesn't really love Jane any more any way. Jane justifiably divorces John, and she is free to remarry.
2. Bill and Sue recently got a divorce, just because they had gotten tired of dealing with a series of irritations that wouldn't go away. The elders urge them to seek reconciliation and to refrain from looking for another spouse. However, Sue marries another man. This second marriage is essentially an act of adultery against the first marriage. Bill is free to remarry.
3. Ron and Nancy are having marital problems, and Nancy wants to be free from the marriage. Ron wants to get counseling and work on their problems, but Nancy adamantly refuses to get any help. She claims that they made a mistake when they married each other in the first place. Ultimately, they live apart for a year and get a divorce. The elders urge Nancy to seek reconciliation with Ron (who wants to be reconciled), but she steadfastly refuses to do so. The elders declare that her actions fit the pattern of I Corinthians 7: 12-15, and they advise Ron that he is free from his previous obligation and, thus, free to remarry.
4. Jack has been a member of the church for five years. Prior to that he was a member of another evangelical church in another city, and while in that church he divorced his wife in order to marry another woman in the church. Since then, both he and his new wife have repented of that sin and have been living as faithful Christians. They are both members of our church now, but because of his record of unfaithfulness, Jack is not able to serve as an elder or deacon.
5. Mark was married at age 20, but he was divorced at age 22. He remarried at age 25, and two years later he and his wife became believers in Christ. He is now 45 years old, and he displays evident gifts and character to serve as an elder. Since his divorce and remarriage were pre-conversion and occurred in Vancouver, those sins do not affect his reputation in Kitchener. Mark is able to serve as an elder.
6. Doug was divorce and remarried before he became a believer. He and his wife are now faithful members of the church. Doug shows positive Christian character now, but his divorce was due to his infidelity, and he was the mayor of the city at the time. Due to the very public nature of his divorce, he is still remembered as an unfaithful husband by many people in the community. He does not have a positive reputation, at lease for now, and thus, it seems unwise to appoint him as an elder or deacon.

7. Rick has been a member of the church for 15 years. About 10 years ago, his wife (also a member of the church) left him and ran off with another man, leaving him with three children to raise. He has since remarried, and both he and his wife are faithful Christians. Everyone in the church and community recognizes that Rick was the victim of the divorce, and no one seems to think any less of him because of it. Therefore, it seems that the divorce is no blemish on his Christian character, and it has not created a problem of public reputation. Rick is able to serve as an elder or deacon.
8. Bill has been a member of the church for 10 years. About seven years ago his wife sought and was granted a divorce. Bill did not initiate the divorce, but many people thought that he had made life very difficult for his wife and that he was to some extent responsible for the divorce. Although he is technically not responsible for his divorce, his reputation is not all that it could be, and he is judged unqualified to serve as an elder or deacon.
9. Randy and Ruby are both recent converts. Both of them lived in a long-term common-law relationship (not with each other), each of which broke up about a year ago. Not long afterward, they both were saved and became members of the church. They are now talking about getting married. Are they free to do so? Or should they seek reconciliation with their previous common-law spouses? Would it be right to seek reconciliation with an unbelieving former spouse? It seems that it would be wrong to seek marriage to an unbeliever, especially one who was never a spouse in the full sense any way. And, if there is no obligation to pursue marriage with the former partner, then Randy and Ruby appear to be free to marry each other.
10. Joe is married to Gwen, and they are both faithful church members. This is Joe's first marriage, but Gwen was divorced by her first husband, because she had an adulterous relationship with another man, even though she was a professed believer at the time. After the divorce Gwen repented, and later she met Joe and married him. Joe has clearly never been to blame for any divorce, but there are some lingering questions in the mind of some as to whether he ought to have married Gwen. It might be judged that his reputation is too problematic for him to serve as an elder, but that he can rightly serve in a less public deacon's role.