



Towards A Biblical Perspective on Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage

RIVERSTONE COMMUNITY CHURCH
of Christian Brethren

Introduction

This statement of Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage is the result of prayerful consideration by the elders of Riverstone Community Church and is intended to present a Biblical view of the issues involved. (The NKJV Bible has been used where there are direct quotations.)

This is an extremely complex subject. Correlating all the diverse Bible passages on this topic is not a simple process. Despite the difficulty, however, it is important that every church leadership grapples with Scripture and arrives at their own conclusions regarding "Biblical Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage." The adjective "Biblical" in the title is intentional.

Assumptions

Before summarising the elders' position on "Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage" it is important that we clarify two assumptions.

This position paper is a compass, not a roadmap.

A compass points in a direction; a roadmap shows the exact route from point A to point B. The positions presented in this document serve to outline the broad biblical direction that will be taken by the elders of Riverstone Community Church. The purpose of this paper is not to stipulate a specific course of action for each possible scenario. Each case will require the prayerful understanding of all factors plus the wise application of these general principles.

This position paper is not intended to be applied in isolation.

It assumes the involvement of the elders in its application. The risk we take by putting a position in writing is that some people may be tempted to implement the conclusions independently of the insight and counsel of the church leadership. To do so would be contrary to this paper's intent.

God intended for His church to be led by godly, qualified elders (1 Tim. 3; Tit. 1) under the authority of Scripture (Tit. 1:9; 2 Tim. 4:1-4) with loving guidance to the local church (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2). The aim of this document is to outline the biblical principles that will guide the elders as they handle matters related to marriage, divorce and remarriage.

Principles

1. God's overall plan for people includes marriage.

There are four basic characteristics that define marriage (Gen. 2:24.)

- a. *"Therefore a man* [the singular indicates that marriage is an exclusive union or covenant between one man and one woman]
- b. *shall leave his father and his mother* [a public occasion]
- c. *and be joined to his wife*, [loving care, companionship and faithfulness],
- d. *and they shall become one flesh* [including, but not limited to sexual intimacy]."

His ideal for marriage is one man and one woman for life. (Mark 10:9, 1 Cor. 7:2-5).

2. Sexual intimacy, by and of itself does not constitute marriage.

This is illustrated by Exodus 22:16-17 *"If a man seduces a virgin who is not betrothed and lies with her, he shall give the bride-price for her and make her his wife. If her father utterly refuses to give her to him, he shall pay money equal to the bride-price for virgins."* The father of the girl had the right to allow or disallow the couple to marry.

Their relationship needed to be formalised in order to constitute a marriage.

By extension, sexual infidelity does not of itself nullify a marriage. Adultery does great damage and untold harm, but it does not mean that the end of a marriage is inevitable.

3. God intends for marriage to be lifelong.

Jesus made this clear to the Pharisees by appealing to the divine order at creation *"Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate."* (Matt. 19:4-6).

Divorce was never God's intention for man (1 Cor. 7:10-11) and reconciliation is the priority in the case of couples who are either separated or divorced, but neither party has remarried.

4. What God joined together, He commanded men not to separate (Matt. 19:4-6).

In view of that, any consideration of divorce and remarriage should not be taken lightly. His ideal is that one man and one woman remain married until death breaks the union.

5. Scripture permits, but does not encourage divorce.

- a. Moses, while not condoning divorce, recognized and regulated it (Deut. 24:1-4).
- b. Whilst Mal. 2:16 states that God hates divorce, this statement must be qualified by God's own actions.
 - i. God sent Israel away with a certificate of divorce (Jer. 3:8) because of her spiritual adultery and fornication, after taking her as His wife. (Jer. 3:8, Eze. 23:17-19 and Hos. 2:2).
 - ii. The Israelites who had married "forbidden" wives were to divorce them: *"You have broken faith and married foreign women, ... make confession to the Lord, the God of your fathers and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives."* Ezra 10:10-11

- c. Matt. 1:19 records that Joseph, being a *"just man"* decided to divorce Mary quietly on the assumption that she had been sexually immoral. The use of the phrase *"just man"* is plainly a commendation of his contemplated action. Scripture does not condemn Joseph for determining to divorce Mary.
- d. Jesus allowed for divorce in the case of an unrepentant adulterer, though it appears as an option, not a command. In Matt. 5:32 and Matt. 19:8-9 Jesus gave a provision for divorce on the grounds of sexual immorality. In Matt. 19:9 Jesus said, *"whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery."* The plain reading of this passage reveals that Jesus forbade divorce, *"except for sexual immorality"*.
- e. However, Paul seems to have allowed for divorce in the case of an unbeliever permanently deserting a believer (1 Cor. 7:13-15). This was an additional provision to address a new circumstance.

From these passages it is clear that divorce is sometimes permitted by God.

6. In some cases God permits remarriage.

Several biblical passages provide evidence that persons are not forbidden to remarry after divorce:

- a. Deut. 24:1–4 allows at least some divorce and remarriage.
- b. The two passages in Matthew (i.e. Matt. 5:32; 19:9) apparently provide an exception in which divorce and remarriage are permitted. It appears that a person who has been divorced in accordance with the exception stated in Matt. 19:9 is free to remarry because the exception *"except for sexual immorality"* applies not only to the phrase *"whoever divorces his wife,"* but also to the phrase *"and marries another"*.
- c. 1 Cor. 7:15 seems to teach a further exception allowing divorce and remarriage.
- d. 1 Cor. 7:27-28a likewise: *"Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be loosed. Are you loosed from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But even if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned."* This verse teaches that a person who is divorced according to these biblical provisions is free and no longer bound. That is they are free to remarry, because the *"But even if you do marry"* very clearly applied to the one who was *"loosed from a wife"*, not the *"virgin"* that follows.

We believe these passages in Scripture allow for both divorce and remarriage in certain circumstances.

7. Divorce severs the original marriage relationship, though the believer is exhorted to either seek reconciliation or else remain unmarried (1 Cor. 7:10-11).

- a. The divorce that Moses permitted in Deut. 24:1-4 actually severed the original marriage relationship. God permitted the woman to marry again, and her second marriage was not considered adulterous. The second man she married was called a "husband" and not an adulterer.
- b. It is evident from John 4:16-18 that Jesus understood that divorce severed the original marriage relationship. He acknowledged that the woman of Samaria had had five "husbands" and that she was currently in a relationship with a man who was not her husband. Since it is highly unlikely that this woman had been widowed five times, we deduce from this passage that Jesus was of the opinion that divorce severed the original marriage relationship.
- c. However, remarriage makes reconciliation of the original couple to each other impossible, hence the exhortation to remain unmarried. *"Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband. But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife."* 1 Cor 7:10-11

It only takes one person of the now divorced couple to marry a third person for this reconciliation to be impossible (see also Deut. 24:4.)

The marriage is then irrevocably severed; the remaining person is released from the covenant and so is free to marry another.

8. What about the "guilty" party?

While the Bible does recognise guilt and sinfulness in an individual's behaviour, with respect to the matter of divorce and remarriage and treatment of the individuals involved, the Bible does not make a distinction between "innocent" and "guilty" parties.

In view of these principles we must be careful not to take a stronger stance than Scripture itself takes. Since divorce severs a marriage, when it comes to the topic of remarriage the application and teaching must apply in both directions, that is for both the "innocent" and "guilty" parties. The reason for this is that if the marriage is severed for one it is therefore severed for the other.

It is difficult to envisage a situation where the marriage bond is broken for the "innocent person" (meaning they are now single and therefore free to remarry) whilst in the eyes of God the "guilty one" is still bound in marriage to the first person (therefore not single or free to remarry).

For if the marriage bond has been severed then both parties are single and thus are able to remarry. In the absence of a Scriptural differentiation of "guilty" and "innocent" parties, we would like to approach this with the same gracious spirit as Jesus in John 8:10-11.

When Jesus had raised Himself up and saw no one but the woman, He said to her, "Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said to her, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more."

9. **God permits believers who have committed adultery to be restored to Church fellowship upon repentance.**

They should confess their sin and if these believers are still living in a state of adultery, they should cease their adultery. *"But if anyone has caused grief, he has not grieved me, but all of you to some extent—not to be too severe. This punishment which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man, so that, on the contrary, you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow. Therefore I urge you to reaffirm your love to him. For to this end I also wrote, that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things. Now whom you forgive anything, I also forgive. For if indeed I have forgiven anything, I have forgiven that one for your sakes in the presence of Christ, lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices."* 2 Corinthians 2:5-11

Conclusion

In this position paper, the elders of Riverstone Community Church have sought to draw a distinction between what God *permits* and what He *desires*. Scripture *permits* divorce when the marriage covenant is broken by sexual immorality or abandonment by an unbelieving spouse. However, God *desires* faithfulness to the marriage covenant, and so reconciliation of a broken covenant should be pursued before divorce is counselled or contemplated. Therefore if at all possible the elders feel it is wise for divorced people to remain unmarried and prayerfully seek reconciliation with their former spouse in the same way that God seeks His people (Matthew 18:12-14). In cases where that is not possible, the elders see remarriage after divorce as biblically permissible (1 Cor. 7:1-2).