

STATEMENT ON MARRIAGE – DIVORCE – REMARRIAGE

The following instructional statement is intended as an expository guideline of common understanding to which Assembly 1986 (Edmonton) subscribed.

For some, the interpretation may be too broad and, for others, too confining. But a common standard is needed in order to deal adequately with the problems of divorce and remarriage. The position set forth here neither promotes divorce nor weakens the scriptural stance represented in former legislation. The Commission of Divorce Study endeavoured neither to take from nor to add to scriptural teaching on divorce.

An Instructional Statement of The Christian and Missionary Alliance

1. Introduction

1.1 Today, more and more marriages are failing; divorces and remarriages are becoming increasingly common. If couples who live together without the benefit of a registered marriage contract and then separate are counted, half the marriages that take place today in North America fail.

1.2 Yet marriage is an essential, sacred institution, a cornerstone of society. It was established by God himself when in Genesis 2:18* the Lord said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make an help meet for him," and marriage has enjoyed divine sanction and blessing across the centuries. Ephesians 5 reveals the sacredness of marriage when the union between Christ and the Church is used to illustrate the husband-wife relationship.

1.3 Therefore, the church today must do everything in its power to encourage and maintain the institution of marriage and on God-given grounds. Some today would set standards for conduct in this area other than by the authority of the Word of God. Even among those who seek to hold to biblical authority there are divergent opinions, particularly with respect to the right of divorced persons to remarry. It seems imperative, therefore, that The Christian and Missionary Alliance in Canada set forth what we understand to be the scriptural teaching on these subjects.

1.4 This statement is designed not to answer all questions and cover all situations, but to provide guidelines from which can be drawn scriptural applications to varying situations. This has been written with the social conditions of North America in view. Consequently, some adaptation may be necessary in countries overseas because of special social situation.

* Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations throughout are from the King James Version of the Bible

2. Marriage

2.1 God instituted marriage as an honourable estate (Heb. 13:4) for the blessing of companionship (Gen. 2:18) and as a continuation of the divine work of creation in the history of the human race (Gen. 4:1). Marriage is not a requirement for perfection of personhood, nor is it a necessity for fulfillment in God's highest purpose. Marriage may, in fact, hamper a person's unconditional readiness for the call of God, and there are those who have the gift of refraining from marriage (Matt. 19:12; I Cor. 7:7).

2.2 God intended marriage to be a monogamous, life-long union as clearly implied in Genesis 2:24. "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife; and they shall be one flesh." Jesus recalled this original order of creation to overthrow the lax interpretation and practice of the Mosaic law (Mark 10:6ff). Although polygamy was sometimes practiced in Old Testament times, the Bible makes clear that God intended marriage to exist between one man and one woman for as long as both of them remain alive. In Romans 7:2 the Apostle Paul wrote: "For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth: but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband." (See also I Cor. 7:39)

2.3 The strict and lofty terms with which the marriage bond is described in the New Testament has its primary focus on human fellowship and the family. The basis of all marital love is, for the Christian, the love of Christ for the Church (see for example Eph. 5:31 ff.). Marriage is constituted first in mutual covenant. Marriage is a solemn, binding agreement entered into before God and man (Mal. 2:14). Ezekiel 16:8 uses marriage to illustrate the relationship between God and Israel and speaks of this relationship as a covenant entered into on the basis of swearing on an oath or a pledge. Jesus, in John 2, sanctioned by his presence a marriage being recognized and solemnized by a public celebration. Therefore, men and women should enter marriage with a legal contract and pledged vows, preferably under the administration of a Christian minister, and not just by deciding to live together.

2.4 Marriage is a physical union. This is clearly set forth by the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 6:16ff. Marriage is designed to be a unity of flesh and spirit and represents the wholeness of that unity (I Thess. 4:3-5). In II Corinthians 12:19-21 the Apostle Paul warns the Corinthian church that impenitence of those who committed sexual immorality would necessitate his intervention.

2.5 In no case ought any person to enter into any so-called "marriage" with a person of the same sex. Homosexual unions are specifically forbidden in Scripture (see Lev. 20:13; Rom. 1:26-27, 32; I Cor. 6:9).

2.6 A Christian should not marry a person who does not know Christ as personal Saviour. II Corinthians 6:14 is explicit, "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers." The final few words of I Corinthians 7:39 suggest the same standard; widows who remarry are told to do so "only in the Lord." Love for Christ is never to have second place (Matt. 6:33).

3. Divorce

3.1 Divorce is a departure from the purposes of God. While in the Old Testament divorce was allowed and apparently easily secured, this, like polygamy, was contrary to God's highest intentions. Jesus explained that provisions for divorce in the Old Testament were an accommodation to "the hardness" of people's hearts and a necessary evil (Matt. 19:8). The prophet Malachi declared, "For I hate divorce, says the Lord the God of Israel" (2:16 RSV). Jesus said, "What therefore God hath joined together, let no man put asunder" (Matt. 19:6; see also Mark 10:6-9). The Church, therefore, should seek always to discourage divorce as a solution to marital problems. The Bible teaches that even when a Christian is married to an unbeliever, the Christian should continue to live with his or her mate if at all possible (I Cor. 7:12-13).

3.2 While divorce is always contrary to God's intentions, there are certain circumstances when it is permitted. Jesus said in Matthew 5:32 and again in Matthew 19:9 that a person is not to divorce his mate except for the cause of fornication. The Greek word used for "fornication" refers to habitual sexual immorality for which the synonym "whoredom" may be used, implying all kinds of immorality, including adultery which desecrates the marriage relationship - a view generally accepted by Greek scholars.

3.3 The absence of this allowance in Mark 10:6-12 and Luke 16:18 does not set aside the practical conditions for carrying out the Mosaic practice of divorce in the new age Christ establishes. But he makes a sharper interpretation which handles the problem of divorce as a lesser evil to the continuation of an impossible situation. Divorce is expressly denied for the immediate purpose of marrying someone else (Mark 10:11-12). It is incumbent, therefore, that a believer entertain divorce only as a last resort and because of violations through whoredom - never as a reason to marry someone else. When one partner of a divorce has become involved in adultery, the offended mate is permitted, though not required, to get a divorce. If an unsaved husband or wife refuses to continue to live with his or her mate and departs, the believer may agree to this separation: "But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases" (I Cor. 7:15). Such separations may result in divorce, and in that event the Christian is guilty of no wrong.

4. Remarriage

4.1 The remarriage of persons who have been divorced is permitted by Scripture under certain circumstances. If, after being divorced, one of the original marriage partners dies, the remaining partner is free to remarry. Romans 7:2 and I Corinthians 7:39 make clear that death dissolves the marriage relationship.

4.2 When an adulterous relationship has brought about a divorce, the party who is innocent of adultery has a right to remarry. The words of Jesus, "Whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication," implies the right of remarriage. When he adds, "And whosoever shall marry her that is divorced (the guilty party) committeth adultery" (Matt. 5:32), the right to marry anyone guilty of adultery is denied and also to marry anyone who obtained a divorce for the express purpose of remarriage (Mark 10:11-12).

4.3 The consistency between the Old Testament and the New Testament is recognized as Jesus interpreted it. The passage in Deuteronomy from which Jesus quoted in Matthew 5:31 and Mark 10:2-12 indicates that the "putting away" of a wife dissolves the marriage and allows remarriage. Jesus did not change the nature of divorce as dissolving marriage and permitting remarriage; he simply rejected all rationalization and excuse for divorce and made clear that only the innocent party whose former marriage was revoked by divorce could remarry without guilt.

4.4 According to the teaching of I Corinthians 7, which permits divorce when an unbelieving husband or wife of a believer "departs" (note 3.3), remarriage on grounds of desertion alone is not permitted according to verse 11: "But if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife." In other words, if the unbelieving, deserting party is not deceased and does not remarry, neither should the one who has been deserted remarry.

4.5 When two unbelievers have been divorced and one is subsequently converted and neither has remarried, the Christian should attempt to restore the marriage. If the non-Christian refuses, this makes the marriage the same as the kind described in I Corinthians 7:15.

4.6 If a person is divorced on other than the above scriptural grounds and his or her former partner remarries, that partner by remarriage has, according to scriptural standards (Matt. 5:32 and 19:9), committed adultery and has dissolved the original relationship.

4.7 Remarriage is never commanded; it is in some cases only permitted. Divorced persons who have scriptural grounds for remarriage should enter into such remarriage only with the greatest caution. Seldom is there a marriage failure for any cause in which one of the partners is “completely innocent.” The applicant for remarriage should demonstrate an attitude of repentance for any part he may have had in the original failure. He should receive counselling from the church so as to avoid repeating destructive attitudes and action.

4.8 Persons who remarry after being divorced on other than scriptural grounds are guilty before God of adultery. Jesus said, in Matthew 5:32, “Whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.” Such marriages should not be performed by a Christian clergyman.

4.9 Persons who have been divorced on other than scriptural grounds, who subsequently become Christians, are not absolved from the necessity to remain unmarried by having become Christians. While it is true that we are made new creatures in Christ, we continue to bear legal and moral responsibilities that existed before conversion. A person, for example, who contracted a debt as a non-Christian, is not absolved of an obligation to pay that debt by becoming a believer. A man who brought children into this world as a non-Christian must still provide for those children after his conversion. A man who contracted a marriage while a non-Christian must honour the terms of the marriage contract even after he is in Christ.

4.10 Persons who were divorced and remarried without scriptural grounds prior to conversion should not feel obligated after conversion to withdraw from the subsequent marriage. The remarriage that was entered into wrongly constituted an act of adultery that broke the former marriage. With his former marriage, then, having been dissolved, the remarried person is responsible to be faithful to his new contract. Having broken the former marriage, he is “living in adultery” only if he is unfaithful to his present marriage contract.

4.11 Persons who are divorced, or divorced and remarried on scriptural grounds, are entitled the full privileges of fellowship and membership in the church. A believer who was divorced, or divorced and remarried on other than scriptural grounds while still a non-believer, should likewise be received into full Christian fellowship. The grace of Christ forgives all sin; the person in Christ is a new creation.

4.12 Discretion, however, must be exercised in the choice of divorced and remarried persons for places of leadership in the church. While all believers are equal members of the Body of Christ, not all members are qualified equally for every office in the church. The offices of elder (spiritual leader) and deacon (business leader) in the church are to be filled by those of high moral and spiritual qualifications, whose pattern of exemplary Christian living is so established that it may be followed.

4.13 A believer who knowingly secures a divorce on other than scriptural grounds, or a believer who knowingly marries someone who was divorced on other than scriptural grounds, or a believer whose divorce was granted on other than scriptural grounds and who remarries, should be disciplined by the church and be granted full privileges of Christian fellowship only after a demonstration of genuine repentance for deliberate departure from scriptural standards.

Amendments

This Statement may be amended by a majority vote of General Assembly, written notice having been given prior to General Assembly.

Adopted – General Assembly 1986

Amended – General Assembly 2004 (amending formula)