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# DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

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*This statement on divorce and remarriage was approved as the official statement by the General Presbytery of the Assemblies of God on August 1973. It was revised by the General Presbytery in August 2002 due to changes made in the 2001 General Council regarding the credentialing of those with a preconversion divorce.*

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## Application of Biblical Principles

### A. Marriage

#### 1. Marriage is a basic human relationship.

a. Marriage is God-ordained. “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). The very nature of the way God created human beings to live on the earth indicates He intended man and woman for each other.

Their relationship was to be social as well as physical. “The LORD God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him’ ” (Genesis 2:18). The first woman was a “helper” (a counterpart) for the man, taken from his side, bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh, his perfect complement (Genesis 2:23). It is obvious that God meant them to share in both privilege and responsibility.

b. God intended marriage to be a lifelong, monogamous union. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). When this is quoted in Matthew 19:5, a Greek word for *united* is used that means “to be glued to, be closely bound to.”

The Old Testament factually recognized that polygamy did exist. It notes that the first case of polygamy was in Cain’s line (Genesis 4:19) and shows that monogamy was still the ideal (Psalm 128:3; Proverbs 5:18; 31:10–29; Ecclesiastes 9:9). Jesus also acknowledges that God’s ideal in the beginning was monogamy (Matthew 19:8).

#### 2. Marriage involves a covenant.

Marriage is a covenant, a solemn binding agreement made before God and people. “The LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage *covenant*” (Malachi 2:14, emphasis added).

Ezekiel applies the idea of marriage to the relationship between God and Israel. “ ‘I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a *covenant* with you,’ declares the Sovereign LORD, ‘and you became mine’ ” (Ezekiel 16:8, emphasis added). From what is said we see that the husband “gave [a] solemn oath” (pledged faith) to the wife and entered into a covenant not intended to be broken. The Hebrew word used, however, implies no sacrifice, thereby distinguishing it from the word used for the more sacred and binding “cut a covenant.” The love involved is fundamentally the Hebrew *hesed*, “a loyal, covenant keeping love,” which God shows us even when we are unworthy.

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## B. Divorce

### 1. *God hates divorce.*

a. “The LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not the LORD made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. ‘I hate divorce,’ says the LORD God of Israel, ‘and I hate a man’s covering himself with violence as well as with his garment,’ says the LORD Almighty. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith” (Malachi 2:14–16).

This passage shows that divorce is treachery (deceitful unfaithfulness) against your companion. It is also a violent thing coming from a wrong spirit. Worst of all, it hinders the growth of a “godly seed.” Broken homes do not tend to produce the healthiest offspring.

b. “Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate” (Matthew 19:6). Divorce was not in God’s original intention for humanity. God’s purposes in marriage are not helped by breaking the yoke. They can only be carried out as the pair subject themselves to Christ and each other. Such a relationship is beautifully described in Ephesians 5:21–31.

### 2. *The Law restricted divorce.*

The Law recognized the fact that divorce was taking place in Israel (as were many other practices common to the ancient world). In giving Israel the Law, God accepted people where they were, put restrictions on their wrong practices, and tried to direct them.

In their confrontation with Jesus about divorce, the Pharisees were obviously in error when they said Moses *commanded* that a man give a certificate of divorce when putting his wife away (divorcing her). Jesus said that Moses only “suffered,” or permitted, them to do so—and then not for “every cause,” as was commonly practiced at that time (Matthew 19:3,7,8).

This is borne out in Deuteronomy 24:1–4. The Hebrew that Moses used there is a simple sequence that does not command divorce. He simply recognizes that men were divorcing their wives. The passage literally says that when a man divorces his wife “because he has found in her an unclean matter [a Hebrew word connected with uncovered stools (Deuteronomy 23:12–14), with Noah’s nakedness (Genesis 9:21–23), and with Edom under the figure of a drunken woman (Lamentations 4:21)—that is, some moral or sexual uncleanness apart from adultery, since adultery would call for her death under the Law] and has written for her a certificate of divorce and given it into her hand and sent her away from his house, and she goes out of his house and has another husband [it is assumed she would do this] and the other husband hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and gives it into her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the other husband dies who took her to be his wife, her first husband who sent her away shall not be able to return and take her (again) to be his wife.”

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In other words, a man is to think twice before he divorces his wife even for what seems to be a good reason. He might want her back, but if she has married again, he could not have her.

**3. Jesus forbade divorce as contrary to God's will and word.**

He made this clear in Matthew 19:5,6 and Mark 10:6,9.

**4. Paul forbade a Christian couple getting a divorce.**

“To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord [Paul had an actual saying of Jesus to back this up]): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife” (1 Corinthians 7:10,11).

Although Paul recognized that Christians were getting divorces, he commanded that they keep the way open for reconciliation.

**5. Paul forbade Christians taking the initiative in getting a divorce because their partner is an unbeliever.**

“To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord) [Paul did not have an actual saying of Jesus to back this up, though Paul was speaking under the inspiration of the Spirit]: If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him [as a faithful wife], he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. . . . But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is *not bound* [not enslaved] in such circumstances” (1 Corinthians 7:12–16, emphasis added).

Thus Paul indicates that the Christian cannot stop the unbelieving partner who insists on leaving (getting a divorce).

**6. Jesus permitted a Christian to initiate a divorce when fornication was involved.**

“I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery” (Matthew 5:32; see also Matthew 19:9). This is permission, however, not a command.

The Greek word for “fornication” (*porneia*) may include especially repeated acts of adultery, but usually means habitual sexual immorality of any kind, both before and after marriage. (A *porne* was a prostitute.) A few scholars would limit the meaning of fornication here to incest, but this is not the normal usage of the word.

Some would rule out this exception because it is not found in Mark and Luke, not wanting to build a teaching on just the two passages in Matthew. However, we accept the length of the Millennium as spanning 1000 years even though this time period is mentioned in only one Bible passage (Revelation 20:2–7). The same principle applies to other Bible teachings.

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It is seldom, if ever, that any single passage gives all aspects of truth on any single theme. In order to come to an understanding of any truth, we must take the whole of what the Bible teaches.

### **C. Remarriage**

#### ***1. The Law accepted the fact that divorce permitted remarriage.***

This is clear from the passage in Deuteronomy 24:1–4 already quoted. The same passage shows that the Law put some limits on remarriage. Malachi 2:11 condemned remarriage to an unbeliever. A priest was forbidden to take a divorced woman as his wife (Leviticus 21:7).

#### ***2. Jesus in His basic teaching forbade the remarriage of divorced persons.***

He condemned remarriage as an act of adultery, a sin against the covenant of the first marriage (Matthew 5:32; 19:9; Mark 10:11,12; Luke 16:18).

However, Jesus recognized that the basic problem is divorce itself, for He saw that the divorced could be expected to remarry. By doing so they would commit adultery and cause the new partner to commit adultery. Thus, the basic purpose in what Jesus said is to prevent divorce in the first place.

#### ***3. Matthew 5:32 added an exceptive clause.***

“I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress.” This shows that a husband who divorces a sexually immoral woman does not cause her to commit adultery, since she is already guilty of adultery.

#### ***4. Matthew 19:9 also carried this exceptive clause.***

In this verse the best manuscripts read: “ ‘I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery’ ”<sup>1</sup>

It should be emphasized that the exception has in view sexual immorality, not merely a single act. Wherever possible, sexually immoral practices should be dealt with through repentance, confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation, thus saving the marriage.

Some, including those who follow the traditions of the Roman Catholics, say that the exceptive clause does not apply to “and marries another, commits adultery.” In this view, fornication, or habitual sexual immorality, gives the right to separation from bed and board but does not sever the bond of marriage or give any right to dissolve it. But this is difficult to fit in with other passages that deal with the responsibilities of husband and wife (1 Corinthians 7:25). Therefore, most Protestants have always taken the position that the exceptive clause does apply to “and marries another.”

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It should also be pointed out that in the extreme cases where divorce seems necessary, Jesus did not command remarriage. However, it is clear that in Matthew 19:9 Jesus assumes the man will remarry. The verse deals with divorce *and* remarriage, and the laws of grammar make the exceptive clause apply to both. The Greek word for “divorce” (*apoluo*) is used with regard to the Deuteronomy passage referred to in Matthew 5:31 and Mark 10:2–12. There, the “divorcing” clearly did dissolve the marriage bond. Jesus did not change the nature of divorce as dissolving marriage. He simply threw out all excuses, reasons, or causes except “fornication” (*porneia*, habitual sexual immorality). However, in no case does He command divorce or remarriage. They are merely permitted under this one condition.

Again, the objection is made that Romans 7:1–3 and 1 Corinthians 7:39 make no exception to the statement that marriage is dissolved by death. Thus some take this to mean that marriage is broken by death alone.

But these passages are stating basic principles and do not deal with the exceptions. Romans 7 recognizes that the husband under the Law could get a divorce, but the wife could not. Therefore, the wife was bound by “the law of the husband” (lit.) until his death. We must also keep in mind that under the Law the penalty for adultery was death. This penalty of death was given not to break the marriage relationship, but in recognition that it was already broken.

**5. 1 Corinthians 7:15 also contains an exception.**

“If the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound [not enslaved] in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.”

“Not bound” is a strong expression. Yet some, insisting on the basis of Romans 7:2 that death alone can dissolve a marriage, interpret this passage to mean that the Christian is free to let the unbelieving partner go, but not free to remarry. However, we must remember that in Romans 7:2 Paul is not addressing the subject of divorce and remarriage. He is simply using the unique situation of the woman under the Law in which only death could loose her from her husband to illustrate believers’ complete dependence upon Christ’s vicarious death to loose them from the claims of the Law. Paul was aware that under the Law the husband had the option of divorcing his wife (Deuteronomy 24:1–4), which was not available to the wife. Only death could loose her from the law of her husband. Sound principles of exegesis will not permit one to assume that Paul’s view on the subject of divorce and remarriage appear here.

If a believer is “not bound” when an unbelieving spouse, unwilling to remain in the marriage, follows through with a divorce, the believer must be considered set free. Since it is the unbelieving partner who determines to go and initiates the divorce, the believer’s freedom seems to be more than a freedom to let the partner go, since the partner is going anyway. The plain meaning seems to be that the believer is set free to remarry when choosing to do so.

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Paul, however, does discourage remarriage for the sake of ministering to the Lord. “Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned” (1 Corinthians 7:27,28).

**6. Remarriage is a new contract or covenant.**

Some say that a person who remarries is living in adultery. They say that though adultery is not an unforgivable sin, true repentance will demand quitting the sin, as the thief must quit stealing. They argue that for a person who has remarried, to live with the new partner involves them continually in acts of adultery. But to assume an analogy between marriage and thievery is erroneous. It is obvious that marriage always involves a contract, but thievery does not.

A remarriage entered into wrongly does indeed constitute an act of adultery against the previous contract. This breaks the old contract; the former partner is set free. The person who remarries is then obligated to be faithful to the new contract. Deuteronomy 24 showed it to be wrong to go back to the old marriage contract. (Hosea was later commanded to do so as an illustration of the love of God that would take back apostate Israel.)

The Bible shows that God expects contracts to be kept even when entered into wrongly. When Joshua wrongly entered into a contract with the Gibeonites, God not only expected him to fulfill it, He gave him miracles of a hailstorm and the long day to help him (Joshua 9 and 10). Isaiah warned Ahaz against making a covenant with the Assyrians, but he made it anyway (Isaiah 7). Then God warned Hezekiah against breaking it and going down to Egypt for help (Isaiah 30 and 31).

**D. The place of the divorced and remarried in the church**

**1. Membership is open to all born-again believers.**

This would certainly include those who were divorced and remarried before they were saved. Paul indicates that those in various social and legal positions, such as the circumcised and those who were slaves, should be accepted in the condition in which they were when they were saved (1 Corinthians 7:17–24). “Brothers, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to” (1 Corinthians 7:24).

God accepted the Gentiles at the house of Cornelius (Acts 10 and 11). Knowing the frequency of divorce and remarriage among the Romans of the time, it is very probable that some at the house of Cornelius were so involved.

Paul gives the Christian no option but to continue to live with the unbelieving partner who is willing to remain in the marriage. Again, it is very probable that many of these Corinthian believers were married to unbelievers who had previous spouses still living. If God accepts such believers, who are we to judge? However, in no case shall a person be accepted into membership while living in a common-law state of matrimony.

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**2. The offices of elder and deacon are not open to those who are remarried.**

The offices of elder (corresponding to pastor) and deacon are restricted by the requirement that they shall be “the husband of one wife” (1 Timothy 3:2,12). Some say this refers to polygamy. History clearly indicates, however, that polygamy was not generally practiced at the time, while divorce and remarriage were extremely common among both Gentiles and Jews.

The offices of elder (corresponding to pastor) and deacon are restricted by the requirement that they shall be “the husband of but one wife” (1 Timothy 3:2,12). This is understood to mean that candidates for elder and deacon are to be persons in a faithful heterosexual marriage with neither partner having been previously divorced, except where the divorce occurred prior to conversion.

We must remember that the Bible does not indicate that everyone is to have a turn at these offices in the church. The Bible lays down specific requirements for elders and deacons. The requirement that they be the husband of one wife is in keeping with the requirement that they must have a good report from outside the church. Both for the sake of the witness of the church and for the sake of freedom from entanglements, those who administer the affairs of the local church must meet these and other qualifications. This in no way promotes a double standard of morality, but is simply a matter of qualifications for the specific ministries of elders and deacons.

Some would restrict the remarried from all the ministries of the Church. However, every member of the Body has a function, and the ministries are given by the Spirit (Roman 12:6–8; 1 Corinthians 12:11; Ephesians 4:16).

Application of Biblical Principles to Our Bylaws as Revised and Adopted by the General Council in Session

**Article VIII, Section 5**

***Membership***

1. *Marriage entanglements before conversion.* There are now among Christian people those who became entangled in their marriage relations in their former lives of sin and who do not see how these matters can be adjusted. We recommend that these people be received into the membership of local assemblies and that their marriage complications be left in the hands of the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:17,20,24).

2. *Common-law marriages.* We recommend that in no case shall persons be accepted into membership who are known to be living in a common-law state of matrimony.

***Remarriage***

Low standards on marriage and divorce are very hurtful to individuals, to the family, and to the cause of Christ. Therefore, we discourage divorce by all lawful means and teaching. We positively disapprove of Christians getting divorces for any cause except fornication and adultery (Matthew 19:9). Where these exceptional circumstances exist or

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when a Christian has been divorced by an unbeliever, we recommend that the question of remarriage be resolved by the believer in the light of God's Word (1 Corinthians 7:15,27,28).

***Local Church Leadership***

*Standard for offices of bishop, or elder, and deacon.* Since the New Testament restricts divorced and remarried believers from the church offices of bishop, or elder, and deacon, we recommend that this standard be upheld by all our assemblies (1 Timothy 3:12; Titus 1:5-9), except when the divorce occurred prior to conversion (2 Corinthians 5:17). However, we recommend that all other opportunities for Christian service for which these believers may be qualified be made available to them.

2. *Prerogative of local assemblies.* It is understood that recommendations are not binding, but local assemblies shall maintain the prerogative of setting their own standards (in accord with provisions of Article XI of the Constitution).

***Performing Marriage Ceremonies***

*Ministerial Guidelines.* We disapprove of any Assemblies of God minister performing a marriage ceremony for anyone who has been divorced and whose former spouse is still living, unless the case is included in the exceptional circumstances described in Article IX, B, Section 5, paragraph b. Any minister of our Fellowship who performs a ceremony for a disapproved marriage (indicated above), unless innocently deceived into doing so, may be dismissed from the Fellowship

1. *Violation of conscience not required.* We realize that the remarrying of such persons included in the exceptive circumstances in Article IX, B, Section 5, paragraph b, could violate the conscience of a minister; and if this should be the case, the minister should not be expected to perform such ceremonies.
2. *Same-sex ceremonies.* No minister shall perform any type of marriage, cohabitation, or covenant ceremony for persons who are of the same sex. Such a ceremony would endorse homosexuality which is a sin and strictly forbidden in God's Word (Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Romans 1:26,27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:9-11). Any minister of our Fellowship who performs a ceremony for these types of disapproved relations, unless innocently deceived into doing so, shall be dismissed from the Fellowship.
3. *Counsel.* An Assemblies of God minister is urged to counsel applicants for marriage ceremonies with scriptural guidelines for Christian marriage prior to performing the ceremony. A minister may not perform ceremonies for persons who, in the minister's opinion, approach marriage without proper forethought, wisdom, and sobriety.

***Ministerial Credentials***

We disapprove of any married minister of the Assemblies of God holding credentials if either minister or spouse has a former companion living unless the divorce occurred prior to his or her conversion. (See also Article VII, Section 2, paragraphs i and j.)

*Article VII, Section 2*

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***i. Marriage Status.***

We disapprove of any married persons holding ministerial credentials with the Assemblies of God or district councils granting credentials to such, if either marriage partner has a former spouse living, unless the divorce occurred prior to his or her conversion except as hereinafter provided.

***j. Annulments, Marriage Dissolutions, and Divorces***

The Executive Presbytery shall have the authority to determine whether an applicant's annulment of a former marriage is consistent with the scriptural position of the Fellowship relating to the granting or holding of ministerial credentials; or in the case of a divorce or a dissolution, whether the circumstances would more appropriately be classified as calling for an annulment; or if the divorce occurred prior to conversion. In those cases involving preconversion divorce, they shall be decided on an individual basis, just as those that deal with annulments are decided. The application must be accompanied by clear and satisfactory evidence of an illegal marriage through deception or fraud. Appeals from the decision of the Executive Presbytery may be made to the General Presbytery.

Notes

<sup>1</sup>Some manuscripts omit "and marries another," but others, including the Sinaitic manuscript, contain it, and the sense of the context calls for it. There is no manuscript evidence for leaving out the exceptive clause. (See John Murray, *Divorce*, p. 40.)