

SCC Statement on Divorce and Remarriage (Approved by the Board of Elders on July 21, 2011)

Marriage is the natural union of a man and a woman—a divine institution, ordained by God. In the beginning, God gave us the pattern for marriage by joining Adam and Eve. God united them as husband and wife, saying: *that is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.* (Genesis 2:24). Jesus reaffirmed these words in Mark 10:6-8.

There is no closer human relationship than a Christ-centered marriage between a man and a woman, and our church honors marriage as God's divine design. God's ideal for marriage is a loving life-long relationship. Our role as the Church is to encourage and fight for God's ideal.

Although the Bible encourages people to strive for God's ideal, the Bible still gives practical guidelines for people who find themselves going through a marriage break-up. There are differences in interpretation, however, of what the Bible says about divorce and remarriage. Some teach there are no grounds for divorce. Others teach there are two valid grounds - adultery and abandonment - but that remarriage is not allowed unless one of the former spouses has died.

Many quote Malachi 2:16: God "hates divorce." As a community of faith, we lament divorce as well. Most people recognize the devastating, long-lasting consequences of divorce upon couples and their children. God's heart is a heart of faithfulness, commitment, forgiveness and reconciliation. God does mourn divorce, but also mourns unhealthy and broken marriages. God hates divorce, but also hates spousal and child abuse. Scripture teaches that God hates all sin, which is why He planned for our Redeemer, Jesus, from the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8).

We all are sinners in need of a Redeemer (Romans 3:23-24). We should be very careful about portraying certain sins, such as divorce, as among the "worst" sins, or even as being "unforgiveable."

Understanding the full counsel of Scripture regarding the issues of divorce and remarriage has its challenges. In Mark 10 and Luke 16, Jesus seems to say there are no grounds for divorce. Yet in Matthew 19:9, he gives an exception for marital unfaithfulness. Paul adds another exception for abandonment in I Corinthians 7:15.

In the Bible's literary, historical and cultural context, we discover clues that help guide our understanding about divorce and remarriage. Jesus' discussions in the Gospels regarding divorce and remarriage refer to Deuteronomy 24:1-4, the central Old Testament text about divorce. In Jesus' day "there was a dispute between the Pharisaic schools about the interpretation of Deut. 24:1-4 and what constituted permissible grounds for divorce. (This frames the way Matthew asks in 19:3: 'Is it lawful

to divorce one's wife *for any cause?*) The Pharisees of the school of Shammai interpreted Deut. 24 in a strict way: divorce was permitted only for serious sexual sin. The more liberal Pharisees of the school of Hillel believed that it permitted divorce for trivial reasons." ¹ We at Springs Community Church believe Scripture teaches neither of these two extremes.

The Old Testament allowed divorce for the breaking of marriage vows, including neglect and abuse, based on Exodus 21:10. This text allows the victim of abuse or neglect to be freed from the marriage. The law is actually about a slave who has married her master, and it states the rights she has, if he decides to marry a second wife. The man is not to neglect his first wife when he marries a second - **Exodus 21:10-11** - *If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, or her conjugal love. And if he does not do these three things for her, she shall go out for nothing, without payment of money.* ²

In the Gospels, Jesus was not asked about these biblical grounds for divorce, though Paul alluded to them in 1 Cor. 7 as the basis of marriage obligations. David Instone-Brewer in his book, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church*, argues that God never repealed these biblical grounds for divorce based on broken marriage vows. They were exemplified by Christ (according to Eph.5:28) and they became the basis of Christian marriage vows (love, honor, and keep)." ³

By considering the full counsel of Scripture, including both Old and New Testaments, we can form clear and consistent guidelines for divorce. Divorce is only allowed for a limited number of grounds found in the Old Testament and affirmed in the New Testament:

- *Adultery* (in Deuteronomy 24:1, affirmed by Jesus in Matthew 19)
- *Emotional and physical neglect* (in Exodus 21:10-11, affirmed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 7)
- *Abandonment and abuse* (included in neglect, as affirmed in 1 Corinthians 7)

Therefore, while divorce goes against God's ideal for people, he allows it (and subsequent remarriage) in certain circumstances. God himself divorced Israel (Jeremiah 3:8). And yet no one should ever feel "entitled" to divorce, even after an affair or when another of the above situations has occurred. God wants each of us to first seek forgiveness and reconciliation. And that usually takes time and often includes some extended marital counseling.

¹ Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, Edited by Walter A. Elwell, Baker books, c. 1984, article: *Divorce*

² *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church*, by David Instone-Brewer, IVP, c. 2003, p. 35.

³ <http://www.divorce-remarriage.com/>

What about remarriage—is it a sin? The above scriptures and historical context also help inform us regarding remarriage. The right to remarry was taken for granted in both Old and New Testaments. “Moses allowed, but did not command divorce, because of the hardness of the people’s hearts (Deut. 24:1-4, Mt. 19:8-9). Divorce was practiced, a contract was given to the wife, and she was then free to remarry... It is difficult to exclude permission to remarry from Matthew 19:9, and among the Jews there was no such custom as separation without permission to remarry.”⁴ Remarriage was a legal right that was recorded in all Jewish divorce certificates. Under Roman law remarriage was a legal duty. Much of Paul’s teaching assumed remarriage was allowed for Christians.⁵ *If the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.* (1 Cor. 7:15).

What about leaders? Some think Paul prohibited divorce and remarriage for pastors and elders in 1 Timothy 3:2, but most biblical scholars agree this passage is not about one being divorced or remarried, but about fidelity and monogamy; that the leader is to be faithful to his or her spouse.⁶ “This doesn’t mean someone who has never been divorced or married only once. Most scholars understand the Greek expression to mean that an elder is to model faithfulness and purity to his wife. He is not to be a man of loose or questionable morals.”⁷

Our denomination, RCA, gives some wise guidelines for those who hope to remarry:

- “Where the one flesh relationship has been irreconcilably shattered, there one has divorce (*de facto*) and it must be recognized. In fact, where a marriage has been destroyed, the Christian community may even counsel severance to prevent further damage to persons involved.
- “Those who have undergone the trauma of divorce need time to reflect upon their experience and time to rebuild. First, persons should reflect on the causes of the previous failure. Repentance is necessary. It involves not only penitence for one's own part, but a change in one's attitude and actions. Harmful personality traits and behavioral patterns should be modified before any remarriage.
- “Second, personal realization of God's forgiveness is a vital part of one's readiness for remarriage. This includes forgiving the former partner and seeking forgiveness. Otherwise a residue of bitterness can cloud future interpersonal relations. Continuing obligations to the former mate or children, financial and otherwise, should be met.
- “Third, there must be a vision of what the new marriage can mean and the determination to make it Christian. Recognition of human limitations

⁴ New Bible Dictionary, Ed.: Marshall, Millard, Packer & Wiseman, Third Edition, IVP, c. 1996, Article: *Marriage*, pp. 732-736.

⁵ Instone-Brewer, Op. cit., pp. 107-110.

⁶ The Expositors Bible Commentary, Vol. 11, Ed.: Frank E. Gaebelein, Zondervan, c. 1978, p. 364.

⁷ *Divorce & Remarriage, A Redemptive Theology*, by Rubel Shelly, Leafwood Pub., c. 2007, p. 156.

at this point rightly leads one to a reliance on Christ and on the supportive family of faith. Willingness to be a full participant in the people of God is prerequisite to proceeding with remarriage. Where the forgiveness of God has been accepted and life redirected to obedient service, the prospects for a sound marriage exist.”⁸

The role of the Church is to fight for marriages and to offer healing and restoration. But the Church should also help those broken by abuse, abandonment, neglect or adultery. The Church exists to portray God as our Redeemer; to offer grace, healing and hope for all people, including those who have gone through divorce.

*“Divorce does not have to be the end of your spiritual life.
God deals with you where you are today. He forgives failure. He heals wounds.
He helps you move ahead with your life...
In spite of your past, God offers you a future.
It is a future with the potential for every good thing he has ever dreamed for you.
His forgiveness is complete and not partial, absolute and not contingent
on your future penance of forfeiting natural human companionship.”⁹*

⁸ <https://www.rca.org/sslpage.aspx?pid=497>

⁹ Shelly, Op. cit., pp. 163, 165.