

Island ECC Positional Paper

# Divorce and Remarriage

There are few issues that require more sensitivity than the issue of divorce and remarriage. Getting it wrong one way can have significant consequences, particularly for women who feel trapped in abusive and unsafe relationships. Getting it wrong the other way can utterly devalue the core value of Christian marriage as God's plan for human relationships. In developing perspectives and positions on divorce and remarriage, there has been extensive discussion and a wide diversity of views expressed over the last 1900 years on biblical teaching, specifically the teaching of Jesus as recorded in Matthew 5:31-32, 19:3-9, Mark 10:2-12 and Luke 16:18. Churches hold a wide diversity of views from the total prohibition of divorce to those permitting divorce within broad biblical parameters and willing to accept remarriage under certain circumstances. At IslandECC we lean towards the latter group regarding divorce as a last resort and accepting that remarriage is possible in certain biblically founded circumstances.

Marriage for Christians is understood as a lifelong relationship rooted in the biblical understanding of God's purpose for humanity. Culturally speaking, the bible presents a diverse picture of marriages between the OT and the NT, however, the Bible is abundantly clear that marriage is God's plan for humans (Genesis 2) and therefore, by definition, divorce is not part of God's plan – a point which is made explicit by Jesus in Matthew 19:4-6. Tragically, as with all things human, marriage has been infected and affected by our rebellious fall from grace (Genesis 3) and is, subsequently, subject to the corruptions of every age. In our present age, the decline in the value placed on marriage and family life is apparent in the high rates of divorce in society generally and consequently the Church must be on the forefront of support for the biblical understanding of marriage.

It is true in our present age that couples face pressures far removed from a biblical culture in the roles of men and women, social mobility, family economy, laws and social mores. Hence, whilst acknowledging these contemporary pressures and recognising that, for many, divorce can appear to be the obvious solution, Island ECC is unequivocal in its proclamation of God's plan for marriage and dedicated in providing every opportunity to support and sustain marriages in practical ways offering wise, compassionate advice to those who are struggling to cope with modern day pressures.

## Biblical Grounds for Divorce

We understand that apparently irrevocable marital breakdown is emotionally painful and extremely stressful for the adults and especially for children caught in the upheaval. For Christians this pain is often compounded by a deep sense of failure to live up to the promises made before God, family and friends. Our task then is to derive from the bible the principles by which we can guide Christian couples whose marriages are failing to find solutions if at all possible; to give compassionate counsel encouraging reconciliation wherever possible to those who are contemplating divorce, minimising the adversarial nature and fault finding that are often part of our current judicial process; and to support those, who being divorced, face the challenge of reconstructing their life and that of their children, whose welfare is a very important consideration.

The following are considered biblical reasons for divorce, following appropriate counselling, changes of behaviour, and repentance and forgiveness, if a healthy marriage cannot be re-established:

- **Adultery.** Adultery is and has been widely accepted as the only grounds for divorce because it attacks the very nature of the relationship ordained by God. Much of the discussion on this has centred upon Matthew 19:3-9, which gives Jesus' answer to the Pharisees when asked about grounds for divorce. Jesus directs their attention to God's plan outlined in Genesis to remind them of the original purpose of marriage, and then continues to provide an instruction on what constituted for him the only scriptural grounds for divorce. The key word used in this passage is the Greek word *porneia* most appropriately translated as "sexual immorality" and best understood biblically as rooted in the Holiness Code of Leviticus. From this, it can be concluded that adultery, homosexual sex and incest all constituted grounds for divorce.
- **Unbelief.** Apostle Paul, in addressing the complex situation in which early Christians found themselves, provided in 1 Corinthians 7:10-16 the issue of abandonment due to spiritual incompatibility (desertion of belief) as a potential justification for divorce in the last resort.

Beyond the explicitly biblical grounds given for divorce, there are further issues which may give grounds for divorce that are supported by scripture.

- **The presence of continued abuse.** The Bible does not address the issue of physical abuse as a potential justification for divorce but it does command all Christians to love one another. It specifically tells husbands to be understanding towards their wives and to treat them with special honour (Ephesians 5:25-28). The Bible further disqualifies abusive men from serving in leadership positions within the church (1 Timothy 2:2-4). Therefore physical, sexual, verbal and



significant emotional abuse is contrary to the marriage covenant and should be dealt with in the same way as marital unfaithfulness requiring radical intervention and if necessary separation and protection for the abused partner.

- **Relationships that are chronically toxic.** Such marital relationships can be extremely stressful for the adults and especially for the children who are caught up in crossfire and who can be used in taking sides. In such situations, divorce should be a last resort but it may be a considered option since pressure upon Christian couples to remain married can lead to abusive homes and exposing the children to undue psychological distress.
- **Physical or sexual abuse of children.** This specific situation has shamefully become highlighted in our present age. It has ramifications for marriage where it is a parent who is the abuser. Situations of abuse of this nature are complex in every respect. However, for our purpose it must be noted that all abuse of children, including that within a family, is illegal and must be treated as such with due diligence to reporting. Children ‘at risk’ must be protected which, if the danger persists, will mean separation of parents or children from the abuse.

In each of these situations, divorce is not necessarily a foregone conclusion and, where possible, the church should exercise a ministry of reconciliation and call marriage partners to confession, forgiveness, reconciliation, and renewed obedience. The church must minister with special concern to those involved in the traumatic experience of divorce, speaking with clarity where sinful conduct is overt and apparent and exercising formal discipline when there is disdain for biblical teaching and where there is refusal to admit wrong doing.

Although divorce publicly declares that a marriage no longer exists, other covenantal relationships resulting from the marriage remain, such as the nurture and support of children and extended family ties. Consequently, we urge respectful negotiations in deciding the custody of minor children, and support the consideration of either or both parents for this responsibility free from factors such as financial support, control, or manipulation. The welfare of each child is the most important consideration.

### **Can A Divorced Person Remarry?**

The church applies biblical principles to concrete situations in the light of its best understanding of what happened in a particular divorce and what is being planned for a particular remarriage. When the Bible permits divorce, it is so that the wronged or abandoned party may remarry. Therefore, in any case where a divorce is biblically permissible, it is by definition also permissible for the wronged or abandoned party to remarry.

However, it is important to clarify what is meant by re-marriage in the Church. There is a distinction between the Church “re-marrying” a divorced person, i.e. permitting them to re-take marriage vows before God, and the Church blessing a marriage that has taken place legally between divorcees or a divorcee and a previously unwed partner. Many churches, whilst unwilling or reluctant to remarry divorcees in certain circumstance, may be willing to pronounce a blessing on a marriage of Christians who, having been through divorce, obtained a legal marriage, and wish to begin their new married life with the blessing of their Christian community.

We believe that divorce does not preclude a new marriage. Island ECC affirms that a divorced person may marry again in church during the lifetime of a former spouse. Since remarriage is an act which could cut off any possibility of reconciling with a former spouse, it is encouraged that this possible step be patiently wrestle with through prayer and study of scriptures, seeking God’s wisdom and the counsel of pastors or leaders in the church. For remarriage, the church treats its responsibility with the same compassion, care and thorough examination that is given to those who have not been previously married. The pastoral team provide for quality preparation of those who have divorced backgrounds through pre-marital counselling with programs and materials that adapt well to this situation, with special attention to the circumstances of the past marriage(s) and personal movement beyond that history.

Remarriage can, in the hands of God, be both redemptive and regenerative. People should not get in God’s way in this respect. The church neither issues a clear prohibition against remarriage nor attempts to list with legal precision the circumstances under which remarriage does not conflict with biblical teaching. Thus, in addition to the significant opportunities for support that we make available to all our married couples, it is our commitment, and even our joy, to minister compassionately to members of divorced and remarried families in the community of faith where God’s grace is shared by all.