

## **Our Perspective on Divorce and Remarriage: The Elders of the *LA Church of Christ***

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At this time, the Elders of the *Los Angeles International Church of Christ* wish to communicate our convictions and teachings regarding God's ideal for marriage and his view of divorce. Our purpose and intent for doing this is for the spiritual strengthening and protection of God's church. This is necessary for many reasons. The attack on godly marriage in our secular world is relentless, with an appalling prevalence of divorce. The consequences bring despair to damaged families and their circle of friends left to cope with broken hearts. Our members wrestle daily with holding to their biblical convictions about the sanctity of marriage without passing hard-hearted judgment toward those opting to divorce or in reducing their effective witness by seeming to do so. This paper is also prompted by the alarming increase in the degradation of some marriages within the church. Most notably, we aim to discern the difficult matter of remarriage, or the eligibility to remarry with church approval, among those who have divorced or are contemplating divorce.

The following is meant to communicate the principles and standards regarding marriages in the LA Church that we expect to be upheld by every leader and member in teaching, counseling and practice. We also wish to affirm our support for the convictions put forth by the Teachers of the International Churches of Christ from February, 2001 in their paper entitled: *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage (see attached)*.

First, marriage is honorable and should be regarded as a holy relationship to be encouraged, respected, protected and nurtured by Christians. God uses marital imagery to stress how God rejoices in his people: "...as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you." (Isaiah 62:5b). God delights in us and we make his heart skip a beat. Jesus used similar marital imagery referring to himself as the "bridegroom" (Matthew 9:15) and to the kingdom of heaven as a "wedding banquet" (Matthew 22:1-14). This picture is carried over into the culmination of earthly history, as the book of Revelations talks about the "*wedding of the Lamb*" in which "*his bride has made herself ready*" (Revelation 19:7). God's Holy Scriptures in Revelations 19:4-8 beautifully inform us that Jesus and His church, as bridegroom and bride, begin eternity together as husband and wife.

God holds marriage high. Therefore, as God's people, we must hold marriage high in this evil and spiritually indifferent world. As stated in the Teacher's paper, we must therefore explore God's view of divorce, which is stated clearly and succinctly in Malachi 2:16: "*I hate divorce, says the Lord God of Israel.*" Here Malachi warns husbands to stay faithful to the wife of their youth. Obviously, this was a problem in their culture. Why stay faithful? Simply put: God hates divorce. Since he does not take our vows lightly, neither can we. In Ecclesiastes 5:4-6, we read: "*When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger, 'My vow was a mistake.' Why should God be angry at what you*

*say and destroy the work of your hands?”* Proverbs 2:17 describes the wayward wife as one *“who has left the partner of her youth and ignored the covenant she made before God.”* Obviously, marriage vows fall into a realm of utmost seriousness before God.

Secondly, divorce is not part of the divine ideal. To the contrary, divorce represents a departure from God’s will and always attests to sin. The essence of marriage is the establishment of a covenant between a man and a woman. Therefore, the rejection of one’s marital vows either by sexual infidelity or abandonment of one’s spouse constitutes adultery (i.e., covenant-breaking). Therefore Paul insists that neither a husband nor wife is ever to take the initiative to disregard the vows of covenant love and faithfulness (1 Corinthians 7:10 -11). Jesus came to bring us a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees of His time. Early in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:20), He went on to say that if we do not have this type of righteousness we would certainly not enter the Kingdom of Heaven. This righteousness reflects a whole-hearted, whole-life discipleship of Christ and is freshly focused on internal intent as opposed to external action—anger as the internal equivalent to murder in Matthew 5:21 and lust as the toxic root genetically identical to sprouted adultery in Matthew 5:27.

In this same sermon, in which He has already discussed the previous issues involving a *“righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law,”* Jesus went on to address the issue of divorce. In Matthew 5:31 -32, Jesus states that divorce and remarriage constitute adultery (precisely, covenant breaking) with the exception of divorce resulting from marital unfaithfulness. We must be careful when reading this that we do not fail to understand the context of that proclamation. What was Jesus dealing with in this speech? He was addressing a legalistic, hard-hearted culture and people who overvalued the letter of the law and neglected its spirit. These are people who had lost the meaning of the heart of God’s law and had turned it into rules and regulations. He was removing the yoke of legalism, the perceived short cut to righteousness, and was restoring the standard of a Spirit-led life guided by a sensitivity to the heart of God. Taking the marriage vows lightly was never acceptable to God. Surely the “legal means” invented by the (predominantly male) Jews to dismiss an unhappy or inconvenient marriage arrangement were also a target of Jesus’ reformatory truth telling. Similar to the clarity He brought to the degraded heart condition illustrated in murder and adultery cited above, He also required something more of his followers than the legalistic sidestepping of the vows of matrimony for convenience. Hence, these accounts state unequivocally the ideal divine marriage law.

Jesus also addresses divorce in Matthew 19:1-9. Here the author makes the effort to tell us where Jesus is preaching, and this is significant. He is in the territory of Herod Antipas. He was a puppet Roman ruler who had left his own wife, seduced his brother’s wife Herodias, and then married her. He then had John the Baptist put to death—beheaded for calling Herod out for his wicked and sordid action. The Pharisees questioned Jesus in a way that could potentially trap him. (This is why they came with the question similar to that which led to the death of John the Baptist.) So Jesus appealed to the divine ideal, as expressed in Genesis, rather than be caught up in their question. He reframed the conversation by affirming God’s original intent for marriage as a one-flesh union that is never to be dissolved. He appealed to Genesis and the divine plan for

marriage “*at the beginning*” (vs. 4-6). Seeking another chance to have Jesus contradict Himself, the Pharisees then asked why Moses *allowed* divorce (implied by the issuance of an administrative order regarding it). Jesus then went on to explain that Moses did not bless or create divorce as a good thing, but as a concession to protect the vulnerable. Because of the hard-heartedness of people spoiling their marriages in a very male-dominated culture (such as men tossing out their wives), the requirement of a divorce certificate protected the rights of women, which Moses implemented. Jesus went on to state that those who divorce, except for marital unfaithfulness, stand convicted before the Law of faithless, covenant-breaking adultery. No one has the right to be faithless toward his wife. The moral law is the same then as now, although the civil law has evolved from Moses’ certificate to contemporary laws of the land. But the underlying pretense of the questions was the unexpressed moral judgment of Herod’s actions. Later, when questioned privately by his disciples (see the parallel passage in Mark 10), it can be read that Jesus reaffirms that anyone who did what Herod did stands condemned of adultery (covenant-breaking).

The Apostle Paul supplements Jesus' words in Matthew 5 and 19 about "permissible" divorce in 1 Corinthians 7. Specifically, Paul states in 1 Corinthians 7:15 that if a non-believing spouse leaves (or abandons) his/her Christian spouse, the believer is "not bound" in such circumstances. Looking at God's Word in its entirety, then, would lead us to believe that God permits a divorce in the event of either sexual infidelity within a marriage or abandonment by one's spouse. Either of these events would be a tragic development within the sanctity of any marriage, and as such, neither can be treated as a "check list item" or a rule to follow in permitting divorce within the church. There is much discernment and shepherding work that must surround either of these events. That assumed, a Christian would have a scriptural basis to seek a divorce given either of these situations.

Furthermore, 1 Corinthians 7 states several important principles that will be briefly discussed (lengthier discussion can be found in the Teacher’s paper and other references). First, a related teaching of this chapter is both obvious and striking: some people should remain unmarried simply on practical grounds (1 Corinthians 7:1, 7). The stigma of remaining single should be removed. No one can question Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 7:33-34 that “*a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world--how he can please his wife—and his interests are divided.*” Purely on practical grounds, many disciples should be advised against marriage or remarriage, or at the very least not be encouraged to marry or remarry (1 Corinthians 7:25-28). Getting married, according to Paul, is not always ideal. Marriage is neither commanded nor absolutely forbidden. Putting undue pressure on people either way is not biblical or practical. Remaining single may be the wisest choice.

In 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, Paul addresses the married: “*To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): 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.*” A comparison of these verses with those immediately following them will demonstrate that the *married* referred to here are both disciples. If either spouse separates from the other, then both disciples must remain unmarried or else

be reconciled to one another. Neither disciple should remarry. While God's ideal will is stated clearly in this passage (no separation), the very mention of separation shows that God allows this concession as long as no remarriage to other partners takes place. In some rare cases, church leaders might counsel or approve, albeit reluctantly, ongoing separation between two married disciples without church discipline being applied.

Paul's statements must be harmonized with the exception clause of unfaithfulness in Matthew 19, but the general application was evidently the need of the hour in the Corinthian church. Although the text does not mention other reasons for separation, in certain extreme cases it might be recommended. However, if both spouses are disciples, any on-going sin in the life of either disciple in this situation would be dealt with by counseling, and if need be, by church discipline, resulting in repentance or removal from the church. If one disciple was disfellowshipped or fell away, the marriage would then move into the category of a believer married to an unbeliever, which is discussed next.

In 1 Corinthians 7:12-16, Paul moves on to address those he terms *the rest*. Contextually, it is evident that this marriage is comprised of one disciple and one non-disciple. If the non-Christian is willing to live with the Christian, the Christian must stay in the marriage. It should be noted that the non-believer must be willing to live with the disciple *as a disciple*. It is important to remember that 1 Peter 3:1-6 is a continuation of the admonition to be submissive in less-than-ideal situations. If the unbeliever departs, the believer is no longer bound, but if the unbeliever is content to live with the believer, the believer is still bound. Paul writes in verse 14 that the unbeliever is *sanctified* through the Christian mate. This, of course, does not mean that they are thereby saved; it merely means that God recognizes the marriage as valid and they can remain in it. Verse 16 most likely is saying that the Christian should accept the departure of their spouse and the subsequent divorce it will bring rather than try to hang on to a lost cause in the hope of saving the spouse. If the unbeliever leaves, they are demonstrating their lack of openness to the gospel by the very act of leaving. The breakup of a marriage is always tragic and the Christian should always do everything within reason to avoid a breakup. A disciple must focus on the principles of 1 Peter 3 in seeking the most righteous solutions, not on trying to justify getting out of a marriage. Exhibiting an arrogant attitude violates both 1 Corinthians 7 and 1 Peter 3. If one is doing all one can to make the marriage work and the unbeliever leaves anyway, so be it, but our consciences must remain clear. An unbeliever here would include a spouse who has left the Lord and has fallen away.

Understanding God's will for Christian marriage is guided by examining the scriptures expounded on above. As well, there is a need for church leaders to help disciples apply these principles to their particular situations. Despite the ideal plan of God, since Old Testament times marriages have had serious problems. Many problem marriages have led to divorce. If we are to minister to these people we must ask ourselves, what are we to do about it? To this, we must understand why things begin to break down and what happens when they do. The simple but indisputable answer is that this happens because there is a failure (isolated or systemic) to follow God's plan (Ephesians 5:22-33). A husband or a wife makes a bad decision and deeply wounds the relationship. Or just as often, sexually faithful marriage partners begin falling into bad patterns, habits and sins leading to unhappiness, indifference, resentment, bitterness and then coldness. They then begin to

believe Satan's lies regarding the hopelessness of their marriage. But scripture maintains that even when "love grows cold" and doubts creep in, there is hope.

There may be a need for temporary emotional separation or even physical separation, "a cooling off period." Separation with the guidance and support of the Church would be appropriate in serious situations particularly involving someone's safety. The hope and expectation would be that this temporary period for the couple would allow for intervention, counsel, and prayer. Often, the couple should proactively pursue targeted counseling services, such as those found for substance abuse, sexual addiction, grief recovery, psychological assistance, medical help, etc. These would hopefully contribute to the process of repairing and rebuilding the trust and love of the relationship through repentance and forgiveness. (Colossians 3:12-14)

Knowing why we married and should remain so is crucial during difficult periods. The key question for couples during tenuous times is: Will we approach marriage from a God-centered or man-centered view? In a God-centered view, we preserve our marriages because that effort brings glory to God, leading us to repentance instead of resignation, and points us as sinners to a reconciling Christ. In a man-centered view, we will maintain our marriage as long as our own earthly comforts, desires and expectations are met.

As stated earlier, those who divorce, except for marital unfaithfulness (in both the sexual and the abandonment sense), stand convicted before the Law due to faithlessness and covenant-breaking adultery. They have divorced without scriptural grounds. If they then seek to become disciples or be restored as disciples, the teachings of Jesus found in John 8:1-11, the well-known story of the woman caught in adultery, should be applied. Jesus did not enforce upon the adulteress the teachings of Deuteronomy 22:22-24; instead, he dealt with the hypocrisy, hard-heartedness, and self-righteousness of her accusers. Rather than the prescribed stoning, he admonished the adulterous woman to leave her life of sin, thereby repenting of her adultery. This must be the same grace given those individuals who are willing to repent of their covenant-breaking adultery. For most sins, repentance means something like this: "What I did was wrong. I wish I had never done it. If I had it all to do over, I would not have done it. I will never do it again in the future." In addition, the life of the sinner should reflect his or her renewed faith, display actions that reflect that repentance, and exhibit the times of refreshing that accompany it (Eph. 4:20-28 & 2 Cor. 7:8-11).

In the case of the unscriptural divorce, it is the adulterous heart that can always be repented of. But that is not always the case with the consequences of divorce. In other words, repenting of divorce cannot mean for those individuals (or partners) who are now remarried that they must break up a subsequent marriage to allow an earlier marriage to be reestablished (see Deuteronomy 24:1-4). Similarly, we would not advise someone to repent of divorce if it meant him/her going back to a now-ended marriage with an unwilling former spouse. 1 Corinthians 7:17-24 also lends us some wisdom to how and whether we should try to clean up the history of the new convert or restoration candidate.

Therefore the following points sum up most of the key issues:

- 1) Though there are definite Biblical commands and principles regarding divorce and remarriage, we cannot overestimate the need for leaders to pray for wisdom and seek advice in order to properly apply them. Divorce is a divinely hated reality of our fallen world, and the role of the church is to illuminate the path to redemption.
- 2) The need for preventive counseling, including the disciplinary steps of Matthew 18:15-17, should always remain our first and strongest line of defense against divorce.
- 3) Disciples should not separate from one another for unsanctioned causes, but if they do, they must remain unmarried or be reconciled (1 Corinthians 7:10-11).
- 4) With someone in the church whose spouse has been unfaithful, he/she has the right to divorce and remarry since the cause of the divorce was immorality or abandonment on the part of the spouse. When chosen, this recourse allows the marriage bond to be broken for the innocent party. But it also breaks the bond for the guilty party, and hence both can remarry. Each local leadership will need to consider what repentance appears as in the life of the guilty spouse as well as the hardships anticipated by formerly married parties (along with other affected members of their church family) who are participating in the same ministry in the new reality. It is noteworthy that although the leadership of a local church might respond to an isolated act of adultery with a private warning to the one who sinned, the spouse of such a person would be within his/her biblical rights to demand a divorce. Although reconciliation would always be strongly encouraged, the unfaithfulness may be so devastating that the faithful spouse can no longer stay in marriage with the adulterous partner. Divorce should always be considered the last possible, but not unscriptural, resort. It is important for church leadership to allow this option—when scripturally supported—without endorsing it, and for those involved to consider the impact upon the *chemistry* within the body of Christ.
- 5) In the same manner, if a non-Christian spouse leaves a disciple, then the disciple is not bound and can divorce the one who departs.
- 6) At conversion, people are accepted in their present marital status.
- 7) Those who leave the fellowship and are later restored to it are also accepted in their present (possibly altered) marital status.
- 8) Any Christian who leaves God is considered an “unbeliever” in light of 1 Corinthians 7:12-15. If the unbelieving spouse deserts the disciple and is no longer willing to live with them, the faithful spouse can then divorce the unbeliever.
- 9) Divorce is an ugly and painful affair for those involved and the family and friends surrounding the broken marriage. The option of remarriage can seem to permit the guilty but penitent party to carry on with impunity. However, we must remember our place and our purpose. Jesus’ mission is about redemption. He has saved worse (using the term in the humanistic sense) than the “guilty party” in a divorce. Our mission is to help as many as possible be saved. Our brothers and sisters who have lived in more difficult times had to “accept” the redemption of many who had hurt them, perhaps personally, beginning with some of Paul’s

acquaintances. Our role as leaders in the church is to equip the saints for these good works through training, admonition, the example of unconditional love, and the self-denial of our personal grievances, especially toward the penitent.

To that end, and in light of our culture's rapid and shocking departure from godly matrimony, the Body of Elders of the LA church exhorts its members to honor God by honoring marriage in all ways. As a minimum we expect the following:

- A. A measure of the resources of the church will be used to promote, teach and support biblical teaching and training on marriage. This will be accomplished through classes, retreats, workshops, printed material, small groups and the like. Such teaching will not be limited to the currently married, but should engage the entire congregation at appropriate levels. We are especially mindful of the role the married ministry staff, shepherds and elders, and other trained and seasoned disciples must play in preparing dating and engaged couples for marriage through counseling and accountability.
- B. The shepherds and ministers of the church will create an environment where biblical marriage is honored and adherence to the vows given in marriage is expected. Undoubtedly, failure to keep these vows will come, for every couple in some form, but the expected standard will be to "see to it" through the discipling structure in a ministry, a return to those vows, and where they are lacking, a return to the biblical expectations of sexual fidelity, regular, appropriate and sufficient care, and spiritual submission between spouses.
- C. The shepherds and ministers of the church will not create an oppressive expectation regarding marriage, where those who choose to remain single or find themselves in this situation against their choices are discriminated against, in either practical or less tangible ways. It shall be everyone's right, unless married, to select a pure, godly single lifestyle and to enjoy the favor of the church.
- D. The shepherds and ministers of the church will commit to cooperation between ministries and regions such that inconsistencies in standards or principles shall not prevail. To this end, we strongly advise all situations concerning divorce and remarriage that are not easily answered in scripture, be brought for discussion and advice to the Body of Elders and or the Ministry Leadership Council (MLC) to coordinate a just and redemptive approach.
- E. Last but certainly not least, our role as shepherds of the LA Church of Christ is to oversee the affairs of the church, relying on God and the wisdom He provides. We have made great efforts in our discussions and this paper to exercise this responsibility herein. That expressed, each disciple of the church will stand before God and be judged for his/her own actions. As stated in Hebrews 4:13, *"Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account."*

To God Be the Glory,

The Body of Elders of the LA Church of Christ

## References

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