

**THE
BIBLICAL
INSTITUTION
OF
MARRIAGE**

Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage

Final Document

**Assembly Committee for Biblical Doctrine and Polity
of the Church of God of Prophecy**

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THE BIBLICAL INSTITUTION OF MARRIAGE

Introduction

The history of Christianity contains divergent views and interpretations regarding the subject of marriage and divorce. Many sincere theologians, counselors, and ministers have agonized laboriously over this subject, yet have been unable to come to a common understanding. Value systems constantly seem to change and divorce runs rampant, even in the church.

The Scripture is clear as to God's original design for marriage: i.e. that a man and a woman be united in a monogamous life-long relationship. While we recognize that the very foundation of this divine institution has been attacked and marred since man's fall in the Garden of Eden, it is still incumbent on us to strive for and uphold God's original design. However, we also recognize that we are working from a fallen state trying to achieve God's purpose. We are commissioned to minister to all without prejudice. As such then, the Church must continue to uphold this principle, yet accept the challenge of ministering God's grace in a fallen world.

Preparation for marriage continues to be one of our weakest areas of training and expertise. And, perhaps preserving of marriages ranks behind this. Therefore, we must aggressively pursue training that will help our ministers better prepare people for marriage and will assist in saving a marriage already in trouble. In the same manner as Jesus, we must be prepared to accept and minister love to those who have suffered the trauma and rejection of a broken marriage. While we understand that this is a very complex issue, we also understand that God is sovereign and that He is the final judge. We will have to leave some things to His sovereignty. We must also be prepared to expand our understanding of God, as we watch Him work in the lives of people, just as the early Church did.

Section I - THE DIVINE DESIGN OF MARRIAGE

From the beginning of creation, marriage was in the mind of our Creator who purposed by His own design that "aloneness" was not good for the relational creature He called "mankind" (Genesis 2:18; 1:27-31). Contrary to modern thinking, marriage is not a human expediency. God designed marriage as the foundational element for all human interaction and for society as a community, including churches, schools, and governments. Marriage is God's platform for creation, maintenance, and development of family. Genesis 2:24 declares, "For this cause shall a man leave his father and his mother and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh." God in the Garden of Eden initiated the institution of marriage. Therefore, it may be defined as the mystical union between one man and one woman as indicated by the above scripture passage. It involves leaving and cleaving, both actions that necessitate decision and commitment.

Marriage was instituted in the context of creation, making it an ordinance of faith. God's purpose in giving marriage to all mankind was (1) to compensate the weakness a man or woman has in being alone; (2) to establish a faithful, monogamous relation, which is essential for the successful survival of society; and (3) to create the one-flesh relationship. The biblical standard for marriage is a relationship in which a man and a woman share a lifetime commitment to each other, second only to their commitment to God (Mark 10:5-9; Matthew 19:4-9). God affirmed

this as the principle of marriage inherent in His creation. Paul cited this key principle to show the sinfulness of sexual relations outside marriage (1 Corinthians 6:12–20) and to emphasize the importance of self-giving love in marriage (Ephesians 5:28). Genesis 2:24 emphasizes the oneness of the marriage and the priority of the bond over all others, including the relationship of the couple to their parents. Marriage is also for companionship (vv. 18–23). Paul described the kind of mutual submission that should characterize the marriage relationship (Ephesians 5:21–33). Although the husband is head of the home, his role is modeled after the role of Christ as Head of the church, who “loved the church and gave Himself for it” (v. 25).

Biblical marriage involves three elements:

- The consent of the partners and of the parents (Genesis 21:21; 34:4–6; Judges 14:2, 3; Joshua 15:16; Ephesians 6:1–3; 1 Corinthians 7:37, 38). It should be understood that there may be circumstances in which parental consent may be impossible.
- The public avowal (*declaration*), which should include a marriage covenant/contract, as well as legal and social customs (Genesis 29:25; 34:12). The legal/contractual aspect was important and made the period of betrothal binding.
- The physical consummation of the union, which normally follows. However, sexual intercourse alone does not constitute a marriage (Genesis 22:24; Judges 8:30, 31; 2 Samuel 3:7; 5:13; 1 Kings 11:3; Deuteronomy 22:28, 29; Exodus 22:16, 17).

As we can see from the Scripture (Genesis 2:18–24), marriage was instituted (established) when man was in innocence and in an environment of peaceful or heavenly bliss, often referred to as “paradise.” In its original state, marriage was designed to be a monogamous relationship involving a committed partnership between a man and a woman and thereby completing God’s creative work, which was concluded as being perfect/commendable/good (Ecclesiastes 7:27–29). Marriage is a foundational institution; it is more than mating. Marriage has a four-fold purpose:

- The Maturation of Personality
- Sexual Fulfillment
- Reproduction and Nurturing
- The Spiritual Enrichment of the Soul

The reason for marriage was to solve the dilemma of “aloneness” (Genesis 2:18–25). Companionship, therefore, is the essence of marriage in the simplest sense. Scriptures like Proverbs 2:17 and Malachi 2:14 are reminders by God that marriage was a “covenant of companionship.” Therefore companionship is a union whereby one man and one woman enter into a close relationship and intimacy, united in thoughts, goals, efforts, and body.

FAMILY: THE FOUNDATION OF SOCIETY

The family is clearly God’s creative design. In Genesis 2:21–25, it is obvious that God had a distinct plan of how the family would be structured. This unit would include a husband and wife; it would also be shaped by the procreation of a father and mother. The family structure consist of lifetime marriages, parents (male and female), and children that may be birthed to this holy unity (Genesis 4:1–2, 5:1–2). As redeemed people committed to the creative purposes of God, this divine design must be guarded to preserve the sanctity and purpose of family life. As God’s people we are mandated by Scripture to be a pillar of this divine plan for the family.

As opposed to emerging new cultural beliefs and deviant values based on relativism, monogamous marriage is central to the biblical concept of family. In the existential environment of education and spirit of relativism in secular courts of justice, these Judeo-Christian principles concerning lifetime, monogamous marriages are being replaced once again by the pagan beliefs that thrive on “whatever feels good.” Broken families, divorced parents, and remarried couples need our prayer, love, acceptance, and help in recovering and healing their lives. Most of all, they need our help in restoring their relationship to God without us placing judgmental or unattainable demands upon them that can often lead them back into sinful lifestyles. But, while we must embrace, love, support, and pray for people who have made mistakes and now courageously seek to build their families, we must never set them up as the normal or healthy role model of God’s original creative design for the family. Furthermore, it should be noted that homosexuality, lesbianism, and bestiality are sinful practices clearly prohibited in Scripture as violations of God’s design (Leviticus 18:22, 23; 20:13–16; Romans 1:25–32). To base any family on a condition that God classifies as an abomination is an affront to His creative pattern. The biblical text also clearly indicates that polygamy deviates from God’s principle of a monogamous, lifetime marriage. Throughout the writings of the prophets, the monogamous marriage is represented as symbolic of the union of God with Israel (Hosea 2:19), Christ and His Bride (i.e. Matthew 9:15), and that polygamy was a counterpart to idolatry (Genesis 4:23) which originated with the descendants of Cain. In fact, the backslidings and calamities of David and Solomon were directly compounded by their polygamous departure from God’s Original Design (2 Samuel 5:13; 1 Kings 11:1–3).

In Psalm 127:3, the psalmist reminds us that children are a heritage of the Lord. This infinite affection and priority of God toward children is clearly revealed in the importance and value given to them by Jesus Christ during His earthly life and ministry (Matthew 18:2; 19:14; Mark 10:14). This emphasis focuses great importance upon the role and place of children in the family. The family is enriched, multiplied, and completed through the conception, birth, and nurturing of children. They add character and meaning to the wholeness of family. Understanding the significance of children within a family, we can now see that any harm or voluntary rejection of them from a proper and healthy assimilation into the family brings disfavor with the Master Designer. Societal departures that justify violent acts such as abortion, incest (Leviticus 18:6), and sexual or physical abuse are contradictions to the created order and purpose of the family.

Tragically, the wide acceptance of abortion as a legitimate option has done enormous damage to the worth and value of children today. Families were considered cursed by God in ancient times when they did not conceive and bear children (Genesis 16:2; 30:1–6; 1 Samuel 1:5, 6). Although this was never a true reflection of God’s thinking, it demonstrates the past value placed on children. Sadly, many societies today consider them a burden, a curse, or an unwanted inconvenience. God sees children who have been conceived as eternal souls and infinitely valuable to His purpose in the world. The description by David sums up God’s high value placed on a child from the time of conception (Psalm 139:11–18).

The blessing of the extended family has also been undermined by the trends and pressures of many societies today. Because the agrarian economy has been eradicated or severely reduced in many nations, the masses have had to immigrate to cities to find jobs or places to live for their families. In addition to this development over the last century, the media and popular culture

have attacked or ridiculed the importance of extended families. In fact, even the role of parents is presently under constant derision and children are quickly being viewed as wards of the State or government. Especially, the role or position of fathers has been both attacked and maligned by the modern media. But we must never allow these current trends or cultural ideologies to shape what God designed for us. His plan foresaw the wonderful blessing of the extended family to their health and strength. The Church must once again emphasize and renew the value of the family as a whole in the lives of children. This renewal is critical in nations where fathers and mothers both work to be able to provide for their families. Young couples need to consider this when building their families, and we must as a church help restore the role of the family unit as critically important.

The loving and disciplined home does not need to be a relic of past generations. Many families today are finding the right components to building a good family environment. This Church must continue to aid and guide families into providing a safe and secure home where children and parents feel acceptance and love. Beginning with our ministers, unbelievers must see a desire among us to model for them a family and home where these qualities are held up as priorities (Colossians 3:17–21). Broken and blended families are a reality of our present culture. While we must hold up the model that was intended by God, we cannot ignore, condemn, or ostracize these families. Jesus came to minister to fallen humanity and demonstrated that in His life. Many families today have been lost from our churches or sent back out into the darkness of this world because they were not accepted and ministered to. While these families certainly do not reflect the creative design of God, we must help nurture a generation of children who will seek and model a biblical marriage. The application of this forgiving principle, as well as the teaching and modeling of God's creative design, will make a more powerful impact upon the harvest.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE FALL

The Bible leaves no doubt that the corruption of sin extends to every area of a person's life, including his intellect, emotions, will, and relationships. People, in and of themselves, have nothing that would make them worthy of God. The fall was an historical event that affected real people who were tempted to disobey God, and committed sin because of their disobedience. Their sin involved listening to the wrong voice, doubting what they had been told by God, looking and desiring the thing that was forbidden by God, and then following through to eat the fruit. Adam and Eve sinned because they made the choice to disobey God. Ever since that time, people sin by nature and by choice.

As a result of the sin of Adam and Eve, there were curses placed on man, woman, and the serpent. The man was sentenced to hard labor for his livelihood. Woman was told that she would have pain in childbirth and would struggle in the relationship with her husband. The serpent was condemned to crawl on his belly. There were also lost privileges because of their disobedience. Adam and Eve were cast from their home in the Garden of Eden. Where there had been only life in the beginning, spiritual and physical death was pronounced on mankind. Where there had been only peace, there would be a spiritual battle to fight. Where there had been serenity and open communion, mankind felt guilt and loss of fellowship with God. From

that moment on, mankind would be born spiritually dead and doomed to eternal separation from God unless a cure was found for this condition.

Just as the Flood affected the whole world, sin affected all of mankind. Also just as there were after shocks and movements that still continued to bring long-lasting effects to the world, sin corrupted the created order of mankind to the point that many marriages end up in divorce, multiple marriages, polygamy, rape, teen pregnancies, abuse, abandonment, and racism. We only need to look at the current statistics of these social ills to see the profound impact that sin has on the family. But in the beginning, marriage was created to give honor and glory to God, who also instituted this wonderful union for the completeness of mankind. This not only affects those outside Christendom, but includes our church homes and families.

THE TRAGEDY OF A BROKEN MARRIAGE

The tragedy of divorce must be approached with much prayer and fear of Almighty God, who is merciful and just. We must confess that the stigma we have placed on this sin has been enormous. In many quarters, the ever-increasing numbers of divorced people are often shown little mercy, quick judgment, and staunch condemnation. We should give careful attention to our Lord's response in Matthew 19:3–12 when He met with those who wanted to start an argument on the subject. His answer drew their attention back to God's original plan, and rebuffed those who wanted to hold up Moses as an excuse for their own sin. Therefore the truth of the biblical design must never be compromised and always held up by the Church as God's standard, but this must be balanced with compassion for the human tragedy. Therefore, the Church must deal with the reality of a fallen world, where sin brings destruction on the human family and exacts a great cost. The tragedy of a broken marriage can be seen from at least six distinctive perspectives:

- Societal Cost
- Emotional Cost
- Physical Cost
- Familial Cost
- Financial Cost
- Spiritual Cost

Therefore, no one wins in the case of a divorce, and all parties suffer the awful consequences of the breakdown of the home. Its effects are seen throughout the culture and society at large, where it not only touches the immediate family members, but many generations to come.

At the root of the breakdown lies a spiritual need for both personal reconciliation with the Creator and interpersonal forgiveness by both marriage partners. No true peace of heart, emotional healing, and harmony in the home can be achieved without these two key and overlooked elements. While the parties may ultimately separate and divorce, both the spiritual and emotional tragedy, reinforced by an unforgiving heart, will continue to plague them. Too often this condition is continued even in a second marriage, which itself may end in divorce, with the statistics for this second group being higher than in the first.

The physical and financial toll of divorce can be seen in escalating domestic violence and neglect, as well as the costly burden it places on the educational, legal, and civil systems of the

nation. But the most tragic aspects of divorce are seen in its effects on the children. The most vulnerable members of our society, the children, find it most difficult to deal with the breakdown in their families. The results are seen in the escalating numbers of runaways and school dropouts, as well as the spiraling drug addiction and suicide rates among teenagers.

Society views divorce as an unfortunate situation, and is only capable of rendering limited therapeutic care to the parties involved. It offers divorce as a remedy to a marriage deemed unhappy. On the other hand, in the religious community, divorce is viewed as a taboo that requires strict adherence to a quarantined break in fellowship. Neither one of these seem to be appropriate because they ignore the basic hurt, pain, and the lifetime damage of the severing of the “one flesh” union.

Recommendations

- 1. Marriage Affirmation:** We whole-heartedly accept the biblical principle of marriage as originally designed by God, being the uniting together of one man and one woman (monogamous) in a lifetime, covenant relationship.
- 2. Family Affirmation:** We recognize the created order of God includes families that were designed as a father and mother who procreate children. We also endorse the value of the extended family in our societies. The family was designed as a home guided by love, discipline, and other nurturing aspects that would include all members under the pattern of God’s Word. Societal maladies such as abortion, incest, abuse, euthanasia, adultery, divorce, or homosexuality/lesbianism are destructive to the unity, health, and prosperity of families and must be diligently taught as contrary to God’s original design.
- 3.** When a marriage is in trouble, the priority should be that of seeking forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing between the injured parties for the sake of restoring the marriage and family at all cost.
- 4.** Where marriages have ended in divorce, separated couples should be encouraged to maintain an open door for reconciliation and healing so that the Lord may intervene to restore the broken marriage.
- 5.** Where marriages have ended in divorce with no clear possibility of reconciliation or restitution, it is still incumbent on the injured parties to seek forgiveness of one another for the sake of healing. “Restitution where possible” has been one of our prominent teachings and should be sought for in every condition where sin has occurred.
- 6.** When a case arises where a pastor feels he/she cannot provide necessary counseling, other credible Christian counseling should be sought for the sake of saving a failing marriage.
- 7.** Educational resources should be made available and the Church should embark on an aggressive program of training our ministers in both pre-marital and marriage counseling.

Section II – The History of Marriage

THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Divorce in the Old Testament

The entire purpose of the Mosaic Law was to reveal the sinful state of humanity and to help them return to a right relationship with God. He knew that people needed guidance for their daily lives, but they also needed the mercy and grace only He could provide. This would allow for the process of returning to Him without forcing them to adhere to the Laws through some radical, arbitrary method. The more gracious, gentle method was to show mankind a higher level of good and let the seed have time to grow, even though this seems to be a slower process.

Divorce did not begin with the children of Israel. When Moses presented the laws for governing divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1–4, God did not permit him to do so in order to give approval for divorce. These laws were simply given to regulate a practice that already existed and was a familiar custom throughout the known world. The Deuteronomy passage tried to dispel this confusion.

In the case of divorce, several things must be kept in mind when studying the Old Testament Scriptures. First of all, God sees the marriage bond as being holy. Second because of God's declaration, the marriage bond is to be a lifetime commitment. It must be viewed as a permanent commitment and not as a temporary arrangement. However, because of the "hardness of the heart," God instructed Moses to provide a way to protect those who were victimized by the sinfulness of another person's heart. We must focus on the sacredness of the marriage bond instead of dwelling so much on divorce. Divorce should never be elevated as being more sinful than other acts of disobedience to God's Word. On the other hand, it should never be excused as simply a regretful necessity. Scripture clearly condemns divorce as violating the expressed design of the Creator. It must be kept in mind that when divorce takes place either one or both parties have allowed "hardness of the heart" (Matthew 19:8) to guide their actions in breaking the marriage bond.

The truth is that nowhere in the Old Testament is divorce recommended or approved, even though it was allowed in specific situations. It is equally true that God hates divorce just as much as he hates sin in any form. God did make provision for man to be forgiven of sin. This includes forgiveness for the choice of divorce. God gave His laws (rules), told us of the rewards we would receive if we followed them, and explained the consequences if we disobey. He then stepped back and allowed us to choose which path to walk in. Whatever choices one makes, there will be consequences or rewards. Even when we suffer the consequences, God never stops caring, loving, nor disowns us. He forgives and forgets. We will never be able to fathom the extent of God's grace and love evident in the fruit grace produces. We must pursue God's standard.

Divorce in the New Testament

In the New Testament, Jesus stressed the seriousness and permanence of the marriage relationship. He reaffirmed the standard for those who wanted to find true fellowship with God. In the Old Testament, there were written rules and consequences that were to be followed. In the

New Testament, Jesus made it plain that God was not interested in people following rules so much as He was interested in their hearts being right. He knew that a person could follow rules and still not be in communion with God.

Divorce and remarriage certainly existed even among God's people, both under the law and under grace. There is no question that these actions were not the chosen design of God. Paul recognized God's perfect will when it comes to marriage. He said a divorced person should be reconciled or remain unmarried.

Finally, when Jesus addressed the subject of marriage, He did so as a preventive measure to encourage the Jews to take their marriages more seriously. The Jews understood the high value God placed on this first and great institution, marriage. Neither the Old nor New Testaments provide divine sanction for divorce. They simply recognized that divorce was practiced among the Israelites and even the early Christians. God never intended for divorce to happen. However, He did recognize that some measures had to be put into place to protect the innocent and provide for their care. It is apparent that miracles of restoration are more likely to happen in an atmosphere of spiritual power and acceptance than in isolation that could drive sincere people away from their Creator God.

The Early Church Fathers

The church fathers of any age do not have the same authority that the biblical writers have nor are they part of the canon of Scripture. What they say is not binding on the Christian. The final authority is the Word of God. However, it is wise to consider their findings when we are trying to determine doctrinal positions.

It should be noted that there have been differences of opinion throughout all history of Christian teaching. These differences have existed within the Church and include the practical application of Jesus' teaching concerning adultery, divorce, and remarriage. While some of the Church fathers believed that the "exception clause" permitted remarriage, the majority believed that there was no allowance made for divorce or remarriage. So there was debate even among the early Church fathers.

The Reformers

Nearly all the reformers of the 16th century rejected the idea of the monks concerning celibacy. They also rejected the idea that marriage is a sacrament and indissoluble except for death. They all agreed that divorce should be granted for adultery, and that the innocent party was free to remarry. Most of them regarded desertion as a second legitimate reason for divorce. However, controversy continued concerning what grounds would be allowable, and changes in opinion happened frequently. The one area where there was universal acceptance of divorce was where there was adultery on the part of the wife.

The Church of God

The question of the divorce and remarriage issue began early on in our fellowship at the General Assembly in 1908. Questions continued to be raised on the subject through the Assembly in 1922 when the General Overseer addressed the subject of divorce and remarriage at length and offered his well-known John Jenson and Sallie Pratt illustration as a way of trying to open the

way for some type of biblical study on the subject so a decision could be reached. He never intended for this illustration to become the final answer, only a compromise at that time. He wanted this compromise to be an invitation to truly study the Scriptures on the subject and seek God for His divine intervention. However, the study never took place in an official manner. Then at the Assembly in 1928, the General Overseer asked the Assembly about adding a teaching concerning divorce and remarriage to the teachings made prominent. The subject had not been discussed for a few years. The Assembly gave orders to have this added to the list of teachings made prominent. Even though the teaching was added, questions were still raised in various Assemblies.

Since this subject has come up so many times in our own history and throughout the history of Christianity, it would seem that even though the issue was settled in the minds of some, it has not been settled to the point that “it seemed good to the Holy Ghost and us.” This is evident by a revisit and a broadening of the definition of the term “fornication” in the Assembly of 1986 (81st *Assembly Minutes*, page 41) under the leadership of M. A. Tomlinson. For this body to move more confidently into the harvest, we must continue this study of Scripture exegetically and without the prejudice of our past opinion, so the Holy Spirit can reveal to us more light.

FOUR CURRENT VIEWS ON DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

Presently, there are four major positions on divorce and remarriage. Each of these views represents an effort by various parties to bring some clarity to the questions and confusion that surrounds this very sensitive subject.

The first view is: *No Divorce and No Remarriage.*

J. Carl Laney, in his book *The Divorce Myth*, espouses the view that the Bible indicates marriages are always intended to be permanent, that there is never a need for divorce, and that remarriage is never permissible after divorce. On the basis of his survey of the major, scriptural passages on marriage, divorce, and remarriage, he concluded that when a divorce does occur, the only two scriptural options for the divorced person are reconciliation or the single life.

The second view is: *Divorce but No Remarriage.*

William Heath contends that while there are legitimate, biblical grounds for divorce, there are no legitimate grounds for remarriage after divorce. Thus, one is to remain unmarried or else be reconciled (1 Corinthians 7:11). Separated or divorced Christians should avoid any thought or action that would hinder the possibility of restoration. But if reconciliation is impossible, primarily because one’s spouse has already remarried, then the path of God’s highest blessing must lie in the direction of pursuing a single life.

The third view is: *Divorce and Remarriage for Adultery and Desertion.*

Thomas Edgar defends the position that allows for divorce and remarriage in cases of adultery or desertion. Jesus states that there is only one valid reason for which a person may properly divorce the other and subsequently marry someone else—adultery on the part of the spouse. Paul further indicates that desertion by the unbelieving spouse is just cause for remarriage (1 Corinthians 7:15).

The fourth view is: *Divorce and Remarriage under a Variety of Circumstances.*

Larry Richards holds that Scripture, while decrying divorce and the pain it causes, points to a God of grace who will not condemn those who divorce and remarry. Because human beings are marred by sin, it will not always be possible for a marriage to achieve this ideal. Persons who have divorced and are remarried have the right to be fully involved in the life of the local church, without prejudice. Their spiritual gifts are to be recognized and affirmed, and they are to be encouraged to find the place of service for which their gifts equip them.

WHAT CONSTITUTES A LAWFUL/LEGAL MARRIAGE?

This question is paramount to every proposed engagement or marriage (Genesis 24). The failure of parents, pastors, churches and societies to properly apply the principles raised from this question, has contributed to the “unequally yoked” problem (2 Corinthians 6:14) existing in many matrimonial situations.

Tension between Church and State

Many Christian churches refuse to recognize the authority of secular institutions (courts) to annul existing marriages, yet embrace the rights of the same institution in determining “What is a lawful marriage?” This is a biblical contradiction! A *legal* marriage may not in fact be a *lawful* marriage (i.e. same-sex union, incestuous marriages and polygamy). Why then would anyone invalidate the “authority of parents” given to them by Scripture; especially, to biblically oppose a marriage of their child to an unbeliever or someone they feel would endanger the life of their child (Romans 1:25–32, Numbers 30)?

If this body is to address the foundational subject of marriage and not just the problem of divorce, we must explore this question on “lawful marriages.” In the case of the well-known command by Jesus, “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder” (Matthew 19:6b), we must be careful not to be too focused on the latter portion of this statement while overlooking the implication of the first phrase. Only God under the governance of His biblical principles can determine if a marriage vow is legitimately done in His eyes since no pagan court or institution was ever given sole authority to solemnize holy matrimony. We must exercise caution in this regard; simply because two people are of age does not mean that they meet all biblical qualifications of a *lawful* marriage. The state can afford to be arbitrary on the requirements for marriage, but the Church cannot!

The Elements of Lawful Marriage

In all societies, two people are married when their relationship is legally recognized; but from a biblical perspective, there is much more involved than mere legal registration. According to God’s Created Order and Design in marriage for two biblically eligible people (male and female) there must be: *Mutual consent* (Genesis 21:21, 1 Corinthians 7:37–38), *Permanence* (binding covenant), *Public Witness* (Matthew 22:21, Romans 13:1), *Consummation of the Physical Union* (1 Corinthians 7:1–6), and *Honest Testimony* (Jeremiah 22:13, 1 Thessalonians 4:3–6). This will also involve the following key principles that must not be ignored for a healthy marriage: *Parental Blessing* (Numbers 30, Colossians 3:20), *Holy Vows* and being *Equally Yoked* (1 Corinthians 7:10-16).

Types of Marriages

Almost all known societies operate a complex system, which involves the co-existence of different legal realms within the same national legal system, such as customary law and common law. In various parts of the world, it is common to find the indigenously based customary law existing side by side with the received law, based on that of the former colonial power. Under Roman law, there were two types of marriages; *manus* marriage, which meant the wife, was in “the hands” of her husband (in his legal control); a *free marriage*, where the wife was not subject to that control; the wife was legally independent (husband not holding legal power over her). The Christian church recognizes these many variations of marriage, with the exception of polygamy, free (common law) marriages, same-sex marriages, or where other elements of biblically lawful marriages have been violated.

Marriage Alternative

A biblical teaching that has been either ignored or misunderstood in our western culture is that of singleness or celibacy.

In 1 Corinthians 7:7–9 and 9:5, Paul makes it very clear that he was unmarried. In the above passages, Paul does not leave any room for anyone to think that celibacy is an inferior state of being or a hindrance to ministry. Paul was an apostle and part of his ministry was to ordain bishops or elders.

Jesus indicated in Matthew 19:12 that celibacy may indeed be His calling on some for the sake of the kingdom. This option should not be overlooked as God’s will after a broken marriage or before a marriage.

Recommendation

1. Due to the departure of societies from Judeo-Christian values, the Church must renounce all unlawful unions, such as homosexuality, incestuous, or polygamous marriages, even if they are legal in the eyes of local, state, or national governments.
2. In light of the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 19:12) concerning some men choosing celibacy/singleness, we further recommend that bishops may also be individuals who have a God-called commitment to celibacy for the sake of their ministry in the kingdom.

Section III – The New Testament and Marriage

THE NEW TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVES

This section is a study of the New Testament passages that are relevant to the issues of divorce and remarriage.

Mark 10:2–12 and Luke 16:18:

Jesus' response in the Mark passage takes us back to God's original, creative design for marriage, i.e. that marriage was for life and what God had joined together man was not to put asunder. Neither Mark nor Luke alluded to or implied Matthew's "exception clause." In both passages, adultery was the result of remarriage. An element that is unique to Mark among the Gospels is that it forbids not only the man to divorce and remarry but the wife as well. This is probably so because Mark had the Roman culture in mind.

I Corinthians 7:10–15:

Even though verses 10 and 11 do not approve of separation, allowance is made for it because a marital bond involves two people, which creates the possibility of the one leaving without the other being able to do anything about it. However, remarriage is not an option. Verse 15 has been understood by some to permit remarriage for the "deserted" believer. However, there are several reasons to show that this is a serious misunderstanding of the passage:

- 1) Marriage is a creation ordinance and is binding on all humanity—irrespective of one's faith or lack thereof (Genesis 1:27; 2:24; Hebrews 13:4).
- 2) In verse 15, Paul uses the same verb *chorizo* (depart) that he does in verse 11 where remarriage is not an option. Interestingly, the only other place where this verb is used is in Matthew 19:6 in the phrase, "let not man *put asunder*."
- 3) There is an obvious connection between verse 11a ("or be reconciled") and the hopeful outlook of conversion in verse 16, which would lead to reconciliation.
- 4) The verbs *deo* (bound) and *douloo* (under bondage/slavery) are etymologically completely unrelated. Nowhere in the Scriptures is marriage likened to bondage or slavery. On the contrary, it is likened to the relationship between Christ and the church. Therefore, we should observe marriage as a love relationship rather than "bondage" or "slavery."
- 5) According to A. Robertson and A. Plummer: All that *ou dedoulotai* (not under bondage) clearly means he or she need not feel so bound to Christ's prohibition of divorce as to be afraid to let the heathen partner go if he or she insists on separation. Many have supposed that this means that they would be at liberty to marry again when the unbelieving wife or husband had gone away, as stated by Calvin, Grotius, Rosenmüller, etc. But this is contrary to the line of the argument used by the apostle. The sense of the expression "is not bound," means, if the one forcibly departs, the one that is left is not bound by the marriage tie to be responsible for the one that departed.

Romans 7:1–3 and 1 Corinthians 7:39:

Both of these passages clearly confirm that marriage can be dissolved only by physical death. The argument that Romans 7:1–3 refers to the Law as it was given at Mount Sinai has no real foundation because the term "law" in the Scriptures is used with various meanings. The meaning

here warranted by the context is in the general sense of the “law of the Lord” often found in the Old Testament, which includes the Creation account in Genesis that contains the foundational Scriptures for marriage (Genesis 2:24). This was quoted by Jesus, to which He (as the Lawgiver) added, “what therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder” (Matthew 19:6). We need to remember that Paul uses almost the same wording in 1 Corinthians 7:39 when he was addressing the case of a widow in the church, who was definitely not under the Mosaic Law.

Matthew 19:3–12 and 5:31–32:

In the context of Matthew 19:3-12, the Pharisees are asking Jesus for His interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1–2. The Jewish leaders were divided into two camps regarding the issue of divorce. Some sided with the more conservative Shammai, who believed that divorce was legitimate only for “moral uncleanness,” and some sided with the more liberal Hillel who allowed divorce for almost any reason. Jesus, however, did not align Himself with any of these, but He referred his inquirers back to Genesis 1:27 and 2:24, thus restoring God’s design for marriage.

In any discussion of the above two passages from Matthew’s Gospel, the most difficult part is what is known as the “exception clause.” Matthew 5:32 states as follows: “saving for the cause of fornication.” Before arriving at an understanding of what this phrase means, it is important to identify the meaning of the word *fornication* (Greek *porneia*). It is used in a broad sense for sexual immorality. Arndt and Gingrich, in their Greek Lexicon, define it as “prostitution, unchastity, every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse.” Most lexical sources agree with this. Depending on the context, it can also take on more specific meanings such as “incestuous relationship or unlawful marriage” (as in 1 Corinthians 5:1; Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25, based on the Levitical decrees in Leviticus 18:1–17). The most widely held view is that in these two Matthean passages it should be understood in its broader meaning.

Needless to say, a great variety of interpretations have been offered regarding the “exception clause.” Since the time of the Reformation, the “innocent party” view has become very popular, according to which the innocent party has the right to secure a divorce and remarry. Very similar to this view is the one according to which the marital infidelity of one of the spouses justifies a divorce, which in this case, would mean the complete dissolution of the marriage.

The difficulty with the preceding views becomes obvious when we look at the statements that come at the end of both passages. In Matthew 5:32, we read, “. . . and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery,” and in 19:9, we read, “. . . and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.” In light of the passages in question, the wife could be put away (or divorced) in two ways: first, for the reason of fornication (unchastity, sexual immorality), or for some other reason (as it was the custom of many Jews at the time of Jesus). According to the “innocent party” view, the guilty wife should not remarry. If she did, she would be involved in adultery. But what if she was not guilty, and yet her husband put her away? According to the closing statement in both passages, if she remarried she would again be involved in adultery. In the case of divorce for the cause of fornication, this would bring about complete dissolution of the marriage. If this is true, why is it adultery if someone marries one of the two divorced spouses? This leads to an impasse. In the light of the above, we are led to

conclude that “divorce” and “putting away” do not mean divorce with the right to remarry, but only separation.

Some scholars, even though they are willing to go along with the above interpretation, use Matthew 19:11: “All men cannot receive this saying, save they to whom it is given,” to introduce the idea that this was not for all of His disciples, but only for those “to whom it is given.” However, a comparison with Matthew 13:11, Mark 4:11, and John 6:65, to John 8:43, leads us to understand that those who do not accept Jesus’ teaching are the unbelievers. The comparison is not between one group of believers and another, but between believers and unbelievers. We also need to keep in mind Jesus’ command to all of His disciples: “be ye perfect as your heavenly father is perfect.”

Celibacy/Singleness

In our Western contemporary society, there is an abhorrence of singleness. Generally speaking, “only life as a couple is really acceptable.” With this view of singleness, it is not surprising that any *block* put in the way of remarriage is perceived as cruel because singleness is seen as such.

Matthew 19:12 constitutes by far the most important teaching of Jesus on the subject of singleness. He uses the image of a eunuch to speak to those who are not able or willing to get married. He distinguishes between three types of people for whom marriage is not a possibility and to whom singleness is what has been “given.” These include: those who are congenitally unable to contemplate full marriage, those who have been rendered incapable of full marriage by castration or other psychological or emotional factors, and those who have chosen the single life and decided not to marry “because of the kingdom of heaven.” In this context, the third group is clearly Jesus’ principal concern. These are the only ones who have taken the decision themselves. There are those who out of obedience to God their King have determined to remain single after their divorce.

NEW TESTAMENT PRINCIPLES

There is no greater model for ministry than that expressed by Jesus in the New Testament. It is undeniable that the early Church embraced and lived by these principles. Some are listed as follows:

- Repentance
- Forgiveness For All Sin
- Restitution Where Possible
- Restoration
- Acceptance and Love
- Understanding God’s Perfect and Permitting Will

While it is true that Jesus is the exalted Son of God, there was something about His earthly ministry that attracted the poor, blind, bruised, broken, and captives (Luke 4:18). What was the difference? It is undeniably the love and acceptance He expressed to the needy. He offered forgiveness and restoration to the destitute and fallen. He did not require conditions of people

that were beyond their ability to fulfill. Jesus required restitution, yet did not make it a condition if it were not possible.

We see these same principles applied in the early Church. The acceptance of the uncircumcised in the early Church (Acts 15) was based on a realignment of the Church's understanding of the Scripture based on what God was doing in the life of these people.

While we must never compromise God's creative order of marriage, we must also discern the heart of the Father and His requirements for those lives that have been devastated by the brokenness of marriage and family. Discerning the Father's heart greatly assists in understanding the application of His universal, divine, and absolute principles. We must always be willing to adjust our understanding of Scripture because we still do see through a "glass darkly." The Church in Acts 15 was able to discern the workings of the Holy Spirit in the lives of those that some would not accept. They were cautious so as not to require "burdens," which the new believers could not fulfill or bear. They recognized there is no difference between "us" and "those" whose hearts have been purified by faith. While we may struggle in knowing how to apply or discern the heart of the Father, we must submit to the fact that He is Sovereign. Only He perfectly understands and applies these principles without violating His absoluteness. He is perfect and knows best. The awesomeness of His grace knows no bounds. We do our best in our human limitations to discern and understand this.

The brokenness of home and family is a "result," not a "cause." We often focus on the results of the Cross, rather than the Cross itself. When we focus on the Cross and the purpose of Christ's suffering, it better helps us understand God's redemptive plan for all humanity.

TURNING TO THE HARVEST

During this past decade, we have seen a shift in emphasis in the Church of God of Prophecy relative to the harvest, the result of which has led to a substantial increase of the Church's membership. In 1994, there was a directive from our former General Overseer to "*Turn to the Harvest.*" Our present General Overseer has continued with that vision by "*Focusing on the Harvest*" with a "*Passion for People.*"

The reality of the harvest field is not always attractive. Speaking concerning His mission on earth, Jesus declared: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor, He hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and the recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, To preach the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18-19). The bruising and brokenness of individuals and families is evident all around us, and Jesus is very clear that this was a segment of society that He was anointed to reach. If Jesus proclaimed this to be the foundation of His ministry on earth, should not this be the main objective of His body, the Church?

We note in Acts, chapter 10, Peter's objection to partaking of the common and unclean animals because of his traditional mindset. God countered his objection by saying, "What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common." God has called us into an imperfect, unclean world with a

life-changing gospel. All sorts of problems devastate people's lives. Jesus came to seek and save those who are lost and to call all people to repentance. This includes those lives that have been shattered by divorce and remarriage. Jesus was not selective in who He ministered to, neither should His Church be.

The responsibility for fulfilling the Great Commission is still upon us. Our former General Overseer repeatedly emphasized the fulfilling of the Great Commission through the motivation of the Great Commandment (our love relationship with God and our fellow man). The ultimate expression of that love is stated in Romans 5:8; "But God commendeth His love towards us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." In the story of the prodigal son, it was love that propelled the father to offer the same grace to both of his sons despite their offences, attitudes, and conditions. In the Church there must also be an atmosphere of openness and welcome, which reflects the heart of the Father. Our Lord associated and ate frequently with sinners in the harvest through acceptance and ministry. Then in His own gentle way, He would admonish them to "Go, and sin no more" (John 8:11) without laying upon them greater burdens than they could bear (Matthew 23:4). The Church of God of Prophecy at all levels must develop and cultivate this openness if we want to retain the fruits of our Lord's harvest. The teaching of Jesus, His public example, and His methods reveal that we must love the lost and accept them as He did as they come in the evangelistic sense, affording them the protection of the house like newborn babes. Every barrier that would hinder the reaping of the Lord's harvest must be eliminated.

MINISTERIAL ETHICS REGARDING SEXUALITY

The high calling in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:14) refers to the calling we have received from Christ to be His disciples. Yet it is a phrase in the modern church that has been aptly applied to ministers or pastors who have received "the call" to be bearers of the gospel through their preaching, teaching, and shepherding the flock of God. It was to this noble calling that the Apostle Paul addressed two young pastors (Timothy and Titus) with specific instructions regarding their positions. The similar vein of these two admonitions bears testimony to the importance of these instructions to the integrity of ministers. To Timothy he writes:

This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach; Not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous; One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; (For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?) Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil (1 Timothy 3:1-7).

When we examine the biblical institution of marriage, we must not only educate ourselves thoroughly with God's design for marriage, but also His design for those who would shepherd His flock. Just as Jesus was a faithful and morally upright rabbi that the disciples desired to follow, we pastors, overseers, and leaders of His flock must take oversight of His work with the same gravity (Acts 20:28). Indeed, ministers must be anointed by the Holy Spirit and be

examples of holiness that will inspire others to follow Jesus. This truth must not only be told, but modeled by those who preach and teach His design to others.

A shepherd's conduct can bring disgrace and dishonor on his "high calling"; therefore, we should be specific concerning his moral and ethical behavior. Some ministers have simply been victims of a spouse that chose not to live by the standards of the Cross and left his or her ministerial companion to suffer humiliation without opportunity to ever seek restitution or reconciliation. In these cases, the Church must be prepared to offer compassion and grace toward their ministry when there has been no stain on their part. On the other hand, we must be careful to point out that immoral conduct by a minister can be of such a nature that returning to leadership might require two or more years of proving themselves and, in some cases, exclude him or her from ever serving in pastoral or oversight leadership again. In any case where a minister has lost the confidence of people, a bad reputation tarnishes their witness and causes people to lose respect for their ministry. The pastoral letters from Paul make it clear that he did not feel that such ministers should be placed in any position of present leadership. Should this divinely inspired counsel be ignored, it would do harm to the reputation of Jesus Christ!

Important consideration also needs to be given to the scriptures from 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6, where it reads "the husband of one wife." The scripture, if interpreted within its original setting and culture, would read perfectly understandable to us. In the context of the same epistle (1 Timothy 5:9), the obvious meaning is that the bishop should have been married only once. There is ample evidence that bishops should not remarry after divorce because of its serious injury to the very institution they want to encourage and foster among the followers of Christ. There is no doubt that Paul is encouraging single-heartedness in a leader, both in heart and in body. He speaks to this cause by using "*the husband of one wife*" expression. Being 'the husband of one wife' refers to the singularity of a man's faithfulness to the woman who is his wife and implies inner as well as outward sexual purity. It is quite possible, and all too common, for a husband to be married to only one woman yet not be a one-woman man because he has sexual desires for other women besides his wife or engages in impure behavior with another woman. Jesus made clear that 'everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart' (Matthew 5:28). A lustful husband, whether or not he ever commits physical adultery, commits moral adultery if he harbors sexual desire for women other than his wife. He is not a one-woman man. When his unfaithfulness becomes known, he is disqualified both in the Church body and in the community around him. This applies equally to female ministers.

When speaking of ministerial ethics and the institution of marriage, we must develop a renewed sense of balance between teaching and modeling godly relationships. With ministers, there must be a corporate consciousness by every Church body that tolerance is insufficient to restrain the sweeping tide toward increased divorces and the rising flood of remarriages among ministers. Counseling ministers who have had indiscretions is inadequate unless there is a corresponding belief among the shepherds of Christ's sheep (1 Peter 5:2-4) that we must be diligent and forthright to deal with our leaders when they have failed to build and maintain their own marital relationships. While we must guard against harshness, insensitivity, and legalism, we must also maintain a proper balance in our approach toward ministers who have committed ethical or moral sins. Therefore, the International Presbytery must develop a disciplinary and restoration

program that will evidence strong belief in biblically sound marriages, yet provide a way whereby such ministers can be lovingly restored as children of God and corporately reaccepted by the body without again placing them in the role of a bishop. A bishop must be held to a higher standard (Titus 1:6–9) than other members of the body because of the biblical mandate and because of their high profile influence on other believers who may be struggling with society’s concept for marriage and family. There is no question that Jesus was preparing His Twelve for a role they would play in the body that would one day be the foundational stones for the early church leadership.

We need to teach all our ministers, especially pastors and overseers, that some of the past epidemic of divorce has occurred because little or no premarital counseling was done before they performed wedding ceremonies. While the honor of being chosen by a family or couple to perform their wedding ceremony is exciting and complimentary, it remains his or her sacred duty as a minister of the Gospel to provide and insist on the couple receiving extensive premarital counseling. Many divorces have resulted when ceremonies were held without the couple ever receiving even one extensive session concerning marriage. We have the greatest opportunity to help prepare men and women for the most important relationship they will ever build with another human. Since a lifetime monogamous marriage is God’s design, we must diligently pursue training to prepare young men and women for their new family. Furthermore, it is imperative that we do not “give in” to parental pressure and to the couple to be lax or negligent in insisting on their completing this kind of counsel. When a minister cannot perform this kind of necessary premarital counseling, he or she should be willing to help the couple find someone who is qualified to guide them. Ministers who violate this trust and responsibility should be reprovved and disciplined by having their privileges to perform weddings suspended if necessary.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Christian church recognizes many variations of marriage throughout the world, with the exception of polygamy, free (common law) marriages, same-sex marriages, or where other elements of biblically lawful marriages have been violated. Where unlawful marriages have taken place, annulments may be required to invalidate these violations of biblical standards.
2. While we recognize that with God all things are possible, we also recognize that some things are beyond human ability to repair or reconcile. This dilemma can best be approached based on the principle in Acts 15:8–11, which states, “And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us. And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. Now therefore, why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they.” Caution must be exercised so as not to require of people something that they are unable to do, lest we put a yoke of bondage around their neck (Matthew 23:4). This means the situation must be left to God’s sovereignty.
3. We accept the biblical principle of forgiveness of all sins by the grace of God through the shed blood of Christ and that in every nation all those who come to God are acceptable without respect of persons (Acts 10:34–35). Ongoing discipleship by the pastor and local

church is very important for all members (Acts 2:42–47, Ephesians 4:11–16). This will require great wisdom and loving care by our leadership and people as we continue in the harvest. Therefore, we further recommend that the International Offices develop a program of extensive discipleship to help all our members mature in Christ Jesus.

4. An ordained minister must be held to a higher standard (Titus 1:6–9) than other members of the body because of the biblical mandate and because of their high profile influence on other believers who may be struggling with society’s concept for marriage and the family. Therefore, we recommend that the International Presbytery use discretion in ordaining ministers to insure that biblical standards are maintained.

The Assembly Committee for Biblical Doctrine and Polity for the Church of God of Prophecy humbly submit this document with deep prayer for your review and consideration for 94th General Assembly.

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