

Divorce and Remarriage

A Policy Statement

The following is a restatement of the Covenant policy on divorce and remarriage, and is intended to be a guide for Covenant pastors and laity in dealing with this issue. The statement is the result of a study of the Scriptures, their application to the contemporary social climate, and the actual practice of Covenant churches and pastors.

I. The problem of divorce

The New Testament is clear in its absolute command that marriage is for life. Both Jesus (Mark 10:1-12; Matthew 5:32,33) and Paul (1 Corinthians 7:10-16) clearly enunciate this position. These are not merely laws but commandments that represent God's absolute intention for our lives. Behind these inflexible commands stands the Genesis idea that the indissolubility of marriage belongs to the very order of creation.

Thus, the permanence of marriage is more than a subjective conviction of the person of faith. It is based on the perception of reality as that which God intended for man and woman in marriage.

If there is an exception, it is Matthew's reference "except on the grounds of unchastity." This may not be so much an exception as a confession of the parallel fact that marriage can actually be broken by adultery or by other tragic acts of moral and spiritual destruction, such as apostasy and desertion (1 Corinthians 7:1). When this happens one can, and must, seek forgiveness for such tragic sinfulness, just as one seeks forgiveness in such matters as lust, swearing, and violence. The Church, therefore, is committed to the permanence of marriage and the inviolability of the family by the force of the New Testament commandment and the order of creation. As Helmut Thielicke comments: "Divorce is an accommodation to the hardness of men's hearts; it does not belong to the life of man as it was meant to be." Yet the Church must also recognize the tragic fact of the failure in marriage.

Divorce is evidence that some people, Christians as well as non-Christians, do not realize a permanent marriage, and that in this as in other relationships we do not measure up to the absolute commandments of God. Yet, while divorce is evidence of our sinfulness and cannot be condoned, it may be forgiven. The Apostle Paul recognized this fact and tried to bring health and wholeness into humanity's broken existence (1 Corinthians 7:10-16).

The protection and preservation of innocence is not the ultimate human goal. God's higher goal is redemption in all our relationships through Jesus Christ, who said, "Behold, I make all things new!"

II. The preventive

The following preventive measures can and should be taken within the context of the ministry of the local church:

- 1) Through preaching and teaching create an atmosphere in which the highest respect and reverence for marriage and family prevails. Contrary to the prevailing winds of our culture, the Church is called to proclaim the essential nature of family unity and the permanence of the marriage relationship.
- 2) Provide increased opportunities for fellowship where relationships can be deepened within the Christian community.

- 3) Conduct thorough and positive premarital counseling with those seeking to be married. Also conduct general seminars on courtship and marriage.
- 4) Be alert to detect any signs of danger to marital harmony in the families of the church.
- 5) Arrange for pastoral counseling or other professional help for those whose marriages are in serious trouble. Such help should be sought from those who are committed to the biblical ideal for marriage.
- 6) The church and pastor alike must provide the kind of supportive environment in which healing can take place for couples going through the anguish of divorce.
- 7) Pastor and laity together must seek to create by example a wholesome attitude among the youth of the church for the marriage relationship. Young people most often bring to their own marriages the attitudes and examples of parents and other adults.

It is assumed that pastors and concerned laity would be especially helpful in preserving the sanctity of marriage and the dignity of the family. Where the marriage has, in fact, been broken and divorce is inevitable, the pastor should be especially sensitive and compassionate in counseling and seeking to be redemptive.

III. Remarriage

Once divorce is acknowledged as a tragic fact, the question of remarriage emerges. Here it is incumbent on the pastor to be a sensitive and concerned counselor in situations with divorced persons who are anticipating remarriage.

The question of remarriage is a sensitive one for the church and for the pastor who is seeking to counsel persons in this situation. There are some biblical guidelines that may give us direction:

- 1) The Apostle Paul, for example, suggests the possibility that the one who is deserted in a marriage may no longer be "bound" (1 Corinthians 7:15).
- 2) Jesus' concern for the welfare of persons superseded the law (John 8:1-9). Jesus was not seeking to impose a new legalism.
- 3) The whole question of remarriage must be put in the context of Christian redemption.

When a marriage has ended in failure and there has been true repentance, there is forgiveness, and the moral onus of that failure is past. When steps are taken to understand the dynamics that went into the failure of the previous marriage, and forgiveness is experienced, then the possibility of remarriage may be considered.

The pastor, after wise and thorough counseling, may then choose to conduct the marriage service.