

Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage Policy

We recognise that the consequences of divorce and remarriage are very complex and can be painful for all involved. As Ministers, we need to approach these situations with integrity and grace, whilst maintaining biblical standards.

The following policy document is designed to provide Executives and Ministers of our Movement with biblical guidelines and policy directives for dealing with the issues of divorce and remarriage in our churches.

National Conference Policy

A STATEMENT ON MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE AND MATTERS WHICH AFFECT THE CHURCH AND INDIVIDUAL BELIEVERS ARISING THEREFROM

April 2007

As revised by the General Conference, Adelaide 1981
and subsequently amended in accordance with the decisions
of the General Conferences Adelaide 1989, Sydney 1991,
Melbourne 1993, Brisbane 1995, and Gold Coast 2007.

SECTION A Marriage and Divorce

Marriage is ordained by God and is designed to be an exclusive covenant between one man and one woman. Divorce is damaging to individuals, to families, to society, and to the cause of Christ. We therefore discourage divorce, and urge that every effort be made to strengthen and restore marriages. We disapprove of any persons getting divorced except for those reasons identified in this policy. Those persons, who as Christians, divorce unbiblically and remarry, may not be issued with or retain any Assemblies of God credential. In this regard, **Section E** provides the guidelines that the National Executive will consider when determining when a credential will be given or removed.

1. Marriage

Marriage is ordained by God as an exclusive covenant between one man and one woman (Genesis 2:18). God designed marriage as the foundational element of all human society. A public exchange of vows, sexual intimacy and loving care, constitute the essential elements of the marriage covenant. These three vital elements expressed by love, loyalty, faithfulness and responsibility, constitute marriage, which Scripture declares is, in principle, permanent. The Biblical support for these three elements is found in the following Scriptures:

- a) ***A public exchange of vows:*** Genesis 2:24 identifies that a public commitment initiates the marriage covenant, in that, “*a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife.*” Here, the security and shelter of one's home is left, and a new relationship is established - a new unit of society begins. Malachi 2:13-15 affirms that the covenant aspect of marriage is witnessed by God.
- b) ***Sexual intimacy:*** Genesis 2:24 identifies that sexual intimacy consummates the marriage covenant, in that, “*the two shall become one flesh.*” While having children is an important factor in marriage, sexual intimacy is designed for more than procreation. Sexual relationship assists in establishing, expressing, and maintaining intimacy in the marriage.
- c) ***Loving care:*** Marriage is more than a publicly declared covenant. It is more than sexual intimacy, and it is more than an outward observance of a marriage relationship. Ephesians

5:25-29 conveys a constant nourishing care in the marriage relationship, while Exodus 21:10-11 speaks of the reciprocal responsibilities and privileges of sexual intimacy, caring support, and domestic interdependence.

2. Divorce

Divorce is damaging to individuals, to families, to society, and to the cause of Christ. We therefore discourage divorce and urge that every effort¹ be made to strengthen and restore marriages. Jesus made it clear that in the beginning, God made Adam and Eve to be “*one flesh*” in a lifelong union (Matthew 19:5-6). However, because of the hardness of people’s hearts (Matthew 19:8)², in certain instances, divorce is permitted on Biblical grounds (Exodus 21:10-11; Deuteronomy 24:1-4; 1 Corinthians 7:1-16). In these instances, the victim of the broken marriage vows is free to end the marriage, although this is never mandatory. There are three instances where divorce may be permitted on Biblical grounds:

a) Divorce on the basis of sexual immorality

Divorce is permitted on the grounds of sexual immorality.³ Jesus, in His answer to the Pharisees’ question (Matthew 5:32; Matthew 19:9), permitted divorce because of the “*sexual immorality*” clause as found in Deuteronomy 24:1.⁴

b) Divorce on the basis of abandonment

Divorce is permitted when a marriage partner, who is not a believer⁵, abandons the marriage (1 Corinthians 7:12-16).⁶

¹ “*Every effort*” in this context may include appropriate pastoral support, professional Christian counselling (personal and/or marriage), and consultation with other medical professionals.

² “*Hard-heartedness*” in this context, refers to the stubborn refusal of a marriage partner to repent of and/or to stop the sinful behaviour that violates and breaks marriage vows. The word used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (Septuagint) in the context of Jeremiah’s warning to Judah that she was in danger of being divorced by God, just as He had divorced Israel because of her hardheartedness. Jeremiah 4:4 “*Circumcise yourselves to your Lord, and circumcise your hard-heartedness...*” This passage would have been familiar to the Pharisees listening to Jesus. “David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church* (Paternoster Press 2003), Ch. 5.” & “David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible* (Eerdmans 2002) Ch. 6.”

³ Sexual immorality in Matthew 19 was expressed by the Greek word “*porneia*.” This word is a generic term for sexually immoral acts and can refer to acts such as incest, bestiality and homosexuality, as well as adultery (Matthew 19:9; 1 Corinthians 5:1; 1 Thessalonians 4:3). W.E.Vine, *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Fleming H. Revell 1981), Johannes Louw, and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains*, (United Bible Societies 1988,1989).

⁴ Jesus was responding to a debate based on Deuteronomy 24:1. There were two main schools of rabbinic thought on this passage at the time Jesus was asked the question. The school of Hillel had interpreted Deuteronomy 24:1 to include two grounds for divorce. The first because of “*sexual immorality*” and the other based on “*any cause*” (in effect, without any grounds). This second basis for divorce had almost totally replaced divorces on Old Testament grounds by the end of the 1st century AD. However, the school of Shammai strongly opposed this reading of Deuteronomy and argued that it referred only to “*sexual immorality*.” Jesus, in His answer to the Pharisees followed the interpretation of Shammai in saying that “*Any Cause*” divorces are unbiblical and that Deuteronomy 24:1 was specifically referring to “*sexual immorality*.” Editors Joel B. Green & Scot McKnight, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Intervarsity Press, 1992) Article on Divorce R.H.Stein.

The question was not whether divorce itself is unlawful, but whether a groundless divorce is lawful. Both the school of Shammai and Hillel accepted the Exodus 21 grounds for divorce (**See Footnote 6**) and there is no reason to suppose that Jesus did not also accept it. Therefore, in context, Jesus was saying that the remarriage of a person after a groundless divorce resulted in adultery. “David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church* (Paternoster Press 2003), Ch. 2, 5, 12,” & “David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible* (Eerdmans 2002) Ch. 5 & 6.”

⁵ Any believer who abandons a marriage for no cause, and rejects the process of reconciliation outlined by Jesus in Matthew 18:15-20, may be treated as an unbeliever who has abandoned the marriage. Jay Adams, *Marriage, Divorce and Re-Marriage in the Bible*, (Zondervan 1980 USA).Ch. 14.

⁶ Corinth was under the Roman legal system that permitted divorce by separation. All a marriage partner had to do was to leave the house (if it was owned by the other partner) or tell his/her partner to leave (if he/she owned the house). There was no requirement to cite any grounds for ending the marriage and, having separated, both parties were legally divorced and free to remarry. Paul opposed this practice for Christians and advised those who had already separated, to seek reconciliation (1 Corinthians 7:10-11). However, if a Christian were the victim of this type of divorce by a non-believing

c) Divorce on the basis of serious physical abuse

Divorce is permitted when there has been serious proven physical abuse that violates the covenant vows of marriage (Exodus 21:10-11; 1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7; Ephesians 5:28-29; Isaiah 58:3-6; Luke 4:18, 19).⁷

Conclusion

These grounds for divorce need to be understood in the context of the Biblical emphasis on grace that empowers forgiveness, and reconciliation. Divorce is the very last option, not the first resort. Ezekiel identifies the aforementioned grounds for God's divorce from Israel, pleading with Judah not to follow her example (Ezekiel 16). God was faithful to His covenant obligations, in contrast to Israel's repeated and unrepentant unfaithfulness toward Him.⁸ He did not immediately divorce Israel, but gave her many opportunities to repent and be reconciled. God's reluctance to divorce Israel despite her repeated violations demonstrates the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation. However, Israel's hardness of heart in refusing to be reconciled resulted in God finally giving her a "*certificate of divorce*" (Jeremiah 3:8). This is one of the reasons why in Malachi 2:16 God says that He "*hates divorce*" because He knows from personal experience the pain it causes.

SECTION B Remarriage

All considerations of remarriage must be examined in the light of the Biblical teaching on what constitutes a biblical or unbiblical divorce. Where a divorce has occurred that falls within the Biblical guidelines referred to above, the person who has not caused the divorce⁹ is free to remarry with a clear conscience before God (Exodus 21:10-11, 1 Corinthians 7:15,16).¹⁰ However, we recognise that in

partner, then Paul's advice was to let that person go (1 Corinthians 7:12-13). David "David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church* (Paternoster Press 2003), Ch. 3, 6, 8." & "David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible* (Eerdmans 2002) Ch. 1, 5 & 7."

⁷ Exodus 21:10-11 speaks about the responsibility of a husband to provide food, clothing and conjugal love. Failure to do so meant that the wife could seek a divorce. The original context of this passage was that of a slave who has been married and whose husband then takes a second wife. The first wife was still entitled to food, clothing and conjugal love and, if she did not receive it, she was allowed to go free.

The rabbis argued that this was an example of case law and that it was necessary to look at the principle that lay behind the specific example given. The Biblical principle is the right of someone to divorce his/her partner if he/she neglects his/her marital obligation to provide food, clothing and conjugal love. Only the victim can initiate the divorce and the choice is always to forgive.

They argued further that if a slave wife has the right to divorce her husband, then so does a free wife; if one of two wives has the right to divorce on the basis of neglect or abuse, then so does an only wife; if a wife has these rights, then so does a husband. This basis for divorce was accepted down through the centuries until it was incorrectly superseded by the "*Any Cause*" divorce that did not require any evidence of mistreatment and therefore was easier to obtain (**See Footnote 4**).

These categories, as outlined in Exodus 21:10-11, reflect the marriage vows found in 1st and 2nd century Jewish marriage certificates. These became the basis for Roman and Greek divorce law. Paul alludes to this principle in Ephesians 5:28-29 when he writes of a husband feeding and caring for his wife as he would his own body. Paul's comments in 1 Corinthians 7 on the importance of conjugal love (v3-5), and pleasing your partner (v.33-34) also appear to be founded on Exodus 21:10-11. This teaching provides the Biblical basis of divorce on the grounds of abandonment. That is to say, if one partner leaves the marriage, then the abandoned partner is clearly being neglected. "David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church* (Paternoster Press 2003), Ch. 3, 6, 11." & "David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible* (Eerdmans 2002) Ch. 1, 5, 7 & 8."

⁸ Jeremiah 2:1; 2:20-26; 3:1-8; Isaiah 50:1; Hosea 2:2. The prophets frequently used the image of the marriage covenant to describe God's relationship with His people.

⁹ In considering the validity of a divorce, care must be taken to determine the real grounds of the divorce to see if they comply with the biblical standards rather than relying on the grounds cited by the civil authorities in divorce documents. A "*no-fault divorce*" citing "*irreconcilable differences*" is common practice for a civil divorce. However, the actual cause of the divorce may have been on biblical grounds, e.g. desertion, sexual immorality, etc.

¹⁰ Such biblical guidelines include sexual immorality, abandonment, or severe physical abuse.

most cases, both parties contribute in some way to the breakdown of a marriage. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that any person considering remarriage, commit to appropriate counselling before remarrying.¹¹

Any divorce that falls outside of the Biblical guidelines, and occurred after conversion, is to be regarded as unbiblical (“*without cause*”) and a sinful act.¹² As such, remarriage in these circumstances adds to the sin by placing one in an adulterous relationship (Matthew 19:9; Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18; Matthew 5:32).¹³ Nevertheless, it is recognised that divorce biblical or unbiblical, is not an unforgivable sin. Since divorce ends the marriage for both parties,¹⁴ the Scripture indicates that the person who created the grounds for the divorce, or the person who has been divorced invalidly, is also free to remarry under certain circumstances (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).¹⁵ The remarriage of this person will only be considered if:

- a) The previous spouse does not want reconciliation or has remarried. Where the previous spouse has remarried, nothing should be done to undermine that marriage (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).
- b) There is recognition that the covenant nature of marriage was diminished by their sin, and was inadequately valued and protected.
- c) There is evidence of genuine repentance for his or her sinful actions that have caused the marriage covenant to be broken. They commit to go through a process that includes repentance, counselling, and restoration before considering remarriage.

SECTION C Performing Marriage Ceremonies

- a) Ministers of the Movement are free to perform marriage ceremonies for the person who was divorced on biblically accepted grounds as outlined by this policy document.
- b) Ministers of the Movement may perform marriage ceremonies for other divorced parties if the following applies:
 - i. The previous spouse does not want reconciliation or has remarried.
 - ii. There is evidence of genuine repentance and the appropriate demonstration of this.
 - iii. They have gone through a process that includes repentance, counselling, and restoration.

¹¹ Any person who has been divorced should be counselled about any sins in their own lives that may have contributed in some way to the breakdown of the marriage. They may also need counselling about incorrect attitudes that they may have developed about marriage because of their experience “Jay Adams, *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible* (Zondervan 1980), Ch. 15.”

¹² Paul is addressing Christians who wanted to divorce spiritually incompatible spouses, i.e. non-Christian spouses. Offering his own judgment, he contends that such spiritual incompatibility does not provide adequate grounds for a divorce (1 Corinthians 7:12–14). In addition, by referring to the command of “**the Lord**” (1 Corinthians 7:10, 11), he implies Jesus’ prohibition of “*any cause*” divorces (Matthew 19:1-9).

¹³ There may be certain circumstances when an unbiblical divorce has taken place that remarriage may be considered. Each case must be examined on its individual merits. For example, a person who was invalidly divorced before conversion may remarry because the divorce was entered into in ignorance of clear biblical teaching. Care should be taken, in dealing with this matter, that the significance of pre-conversion vows is not diminished.

¹⁴ In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul says the parties are not bound after divorce, although there are implications for the person who created the grounds for the divorce. The only compulsory words in a 1st century Jewish divorce certificate were “*You are free to marry any Jewish man you wish*” which assumes the right to remarry after a biblical divorce. The passages in Exodus, Deuteronomy, and (See Footnote 14). “David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church* (Paternoster Press 2003), Ch. 9.”

¹⁵ In Deuteronomy 24:1-4 the example is given of a man who gives his wife a certificate of divorce because of her sin. Jesus, in His debate with the Pharisees, makes it clear that the sin involved is that of sexual immorality (Matthew 19:1-9 – See Footnote 4). The wife therefore is the guilty party. However, the certificate of divorce specifically allowed her to remarry as seen from this passage. (See Footnote 13) “David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church* (Paternoster Press 2003), Ch. 9.

- c) Ministers of the Movement are required to consult with their State Executive or their appointees on complicated divorce/remarriage situations demanding a decision.
- d) Ministers of the Movement are not required to perform any marriages where their conscience prevents them from doing so.
- e) We recommend Ministers of the Movement counsel applicants for marriage with scriptural guidelines for marriage prior to the performing the ceremony. They should not perform ceremonies for persons who, in the minister's opinion, approach marriage carelessly without proper forethought and wisdom.
- f) A Christian should not marry someone who is not a Christian; they should not marry because of being unequally yoked (2 Corinthians 6:14). When Paul writes about Christian widows remarrying, he makes it clear that they should only marry a Christian. Clearly, this Biblical standard applies to all Christians who seek to marry (1 Corinthians 7:39).

SECTION D Church Government

To uphold the integrity and example of church government, as well as other key leadership positions, great care must be exercised in considering any person divorced and/or remarried for such positions. Each case should be viewed on its merit, particularly where there are any legal or moral responsibilities to their former spouse or family.

SECTION E The Ministry

The National Executive, or its appointee, shall consider all applications for a ministerial credential according to the standard credential requirements and procedures. Such candidates who have a remarriage component to their application will also be assessed, without prejudice, in accordance with the following guidelines.

The National Executive or its appointee:

- a) Will examine the background to the divorce. They will take into account such issues as pre or post conversion status at the time of divorce; attempts and attitudes towards reconciliation; fulfilment of responsibilities; and the possible presence of any current improper attitudes towards the divorce or their previous spouse.
- b) May require a candidate for ministry, or a credentialed Minister to provide that information required to assist the National Executive in determining whether a divorce was unbiblical. A candidate or credentialed Minister must not refuse any such request. The National Executive, or its appointee, will maintain confidentiality and privacy at all times.
- c) Christian persons divorced and remarried on unbiblical grounds, or married to a divorced person who has been divorced on unbiblical grounds after his or her conversion, may not enter or remain in the ministry. However, the National Executive may consider exceptional circumstances in this regard.
- d) May require a list of additional reputable referees who are familiar with the applicant's previous circumstances, and who will be able to attest to the divorce background. The National Executive, or its appointee, would then be free to contact and interview these referees.
- e) Must be convinced that the applicant's beliefs and attitudes towards marriage and divorce are in accordance with Movement's policy.
- f) Must be convinced that the current marriage is stable and healthy.

- g) Must be assured there are no legal, financial, or social complications from the previous marriage that have not been adequately addressed by the applicant.
- h) Recognise that ministers who divorce on biblical grounds, who are not a major contributor to the breakdown of the marriage, and who have not remarried, may remain in the ministry. A review of their credential will be necessary at the point of remarriage.
- i) All the conditions outlined in this policy statement regarding marriage and divorce shall apply to the applicant's spouse.
- j) The circumstances of cases where a marriage has been annulled should be carefully examined by the National Executive or its appointee, to determine suitability for ministry.
- k) Generally, a candidate for ministry should not have been divorced and remarried more than once after conversion. However, the National Executive may consider exceptional circumstances when issuing a credential.

SECTION F Pastoral Care Recommendations¹⁶

- a) All couples seeking to get married should attend a recognised pre-marriage course.
- b) The couple should understand that marriage vows are extremely important and must not be taken lightly. Whilst couples may wish to write their own vows, these must not omit the Biblical vows of “*faithfulness, love, keep, cherish, nurture*” or their equivalents.
- c) When a marriage is in crisis, the role of a minister is to encourage the couple to do all in their power to restore the marriage. A minister should rarely, if ever, advocate divorce, even if there are clear grounds for it. The only exception would be when a person is endangered by remaining in the marriage relationship. Even in this circumstance, the minister should initially recommend professional counselling and separation, and not divorce.
- d) When a divorced person seeks to be remarried, the responsibility to accurately report the cause of their divorce must rest with them and not with the minister (Ephesians 4:20-25; Acts 5:3, 9). Before considering the remarriage of a divorced person, the following questions should be asked:
 - i. Have you sought forgiveness not only from God, but also from your former spouse, children, relatives, and others involved?
 - ii. Have you made every effort (where possible) to reconcile?
 - iii. Have you made every effort to right all wrongs (so far as is possible) regarding:
 - Voluntary repayment of any unfairly obtained monies, rights, property, etc. in a divorce settlement?
 - Are you assuming obligations for child-support, etc?
- e) All formerly divorced persons should be counselled before remarriage about any attitudes, behaviours, and sins that may have contributed to the failure of the marriage. They should be counselled about any wrong ideas or attitudes about marriage and/or marriage partners that may have developed during their previous marriage and divorce proceedings.
- f) Where a minister is asked to conduct a wedding ceremony that involves marrying a couple who were previously engaged in an adulterous affair resulting in divorce, it is recommended that ministers do not knowingly perform the wedding ceremony. Conducting such a ceremony

¹⁶ Reference: The following are drawn extensively from “David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible* (Eerdmans 2002 USA), Ch. 11.” & “Jay Adams, *Marriage, Divorce and Re-Marriage in the Bible*, (Zondervan 1980 USA).Ch. 15.”

would appear to condone their sin of adultery. Consideration may be given if the adulterous affair occurred pre-conversion and/or if there are children resulting from the relationship.

- g) Most divorced people experience guilt about the broken vows from a previous marriage. It is therefore strongly recommended that in all cases of remarriage the minister should lead the couple through a service of *“repentance for broken vows”* (1 John 1:7-9; James 5:16). This does not diminish the uniqueness of marriage vows or the seriousness of breaking them, but it does emphasise that all sins are serious and all sins are forgivable.¹⁷ The service would be short, private, and may include significant people the couple want present (children, parents, etc).¹⁸
- h) The divorce of a church leader is a serious matter (1 Timothy 3:4). In dealing with such situations, it should be remembered that the sin of divorce lies in the breaking of marriage vows, not in the divorce itself, and the person might be innocent in this regard.

Bibliography

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¹⁷ “David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church* (Eerdmanns 2002), Pg. 126.”

¹⁸ “David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible* (Eerdmanns 2002), Pg. 313.” *“Heavenly Father, who has cared for me from my birth, and who has loved me unconditionally, I come to you in confession. I confess that I have made promises to You and to others that I have not kept. I have promised to pray for, promised to love, and promised to care for others, and I have not kept these promises, as I should. Please forgive me for my sin, give comfort to those whom I have let down, and hurt. Please give me strength for the future, to be able to keep the promises I make. Amen.”*

Jay E. Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible*. (Zondervan 1980 USA).

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Recommended Reading

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