




WILLINGDON
CHURCH



Marriage, Separation, Divorce and Remarriage



Willingdon Church Position Papers



Marriage, Separation, Divorce and Remarriage

Willingdon Church Elders
(Reaffirmed February 15, 2012)

A. CONCERNING MARRIAGE

God's perfect blueprint for marriage is expressed in both the New and Old Testaments. In the very beginning God said, "Therefore a man shall leave his mother and father and be joined to his wife and they shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). Jesus quotes these same words and then adds, "Therefore what God has joined together, let no man separate" (Matthew 19:5-6; Mark 10:7-9). These verses speak of permanence, unity, and intimacy which the Apostle compares to the relationship that exists between Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:22-23).

POSITION: MARRIAGE REPRESENTS THE UNION OF A MAN AND WOMAN FOR LIFE.

A Christian marriage is one of God's most powerful illustrations of Christ's love and faithfulness to His own. Marriage should therefore not be entered into lightly, but reverently under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and with the help of spiritual counsel from those mature in the Christian faith. The following specific directives are given to us regarding marriage:

1. If an individual is able to remain single, the apostle Paul states, "it is good for them to remain even as I am, because

He who is unmarried cares for the things that belong to the Lord—how he may please the Lord, while the married person has responsibility to please his spouse" (1 Corinthians 7:8, 32-33).

2. Sexual intimacy was given by God for enjoyment in the context of a marriage union. Husband and wife are not to deny each other sexually what is both natural and a part of God's design for marriage. All sexual intimacy outside the marriage relationship, whether that be with members of the opposite or the same sex, is sin and considered as sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 7:1-5; Hebrews 13:4). For further information on lesbian or homosexual relationships, please see the Mennonite Brethren Faith and Life pamphlet entitled "Homosexuality: A Compassionate Yet Firm Response" available through the church office or Information Desk.
3. Christians are not to be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. "For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness, and what communion has light with darkness?" (2 Corinthians 6:14-18).
4. Marriage is a public declaration by a man and a woman, committing themselves to share the joys and trials

of life together until death parts them. The marriage ceremony therefore represents both a spiritual and a legal agreement which recognizes a specific act whereby “the two become one flesh” (Matthew 19:6; Romans 7:2; 1 Corinthians 7:39, 40).

Couples planning to be united in marriage at Willingdon Church are required to attend the Marriage Preparation Classes, which are designed to assist couples in their preparation for this important step. The final commitment by a pastor to officiate at a wedding will be made after the first two counselling sessions.

B. CONCERNING SEPARATION

We encourage spouses to seek early counsel and prayer for unresolved issues within their marriage. We believe that every effort should be made to make the marriage as workable as possible (1 Peter 3:1-7), so that separation need not occur. If it does, the Bible states that spouses are to remain unmarried or else be reconciled (1 Corinthians 7:10-11). This indicates that separation would be time-framed and purposeful.

POSITION: WE ACCEPT THAT SEPARATION BECOMES NECESSARY AT TIMES AND ONLY ADVISED IF THERE IS A RISK OF PERSONAL SAFETY FOR EITHER SPOUSE OR THEIR CHILDREN.

This includes cases of physical or sexual abuse of spouses or their children and where threat of such exists. Cases where separation is being contemplated or has occurred will be referred to the

elders for assessment and counsel based on the following values and principles:

1. the sanctity and permanence of marriage
2. intervention for the unprotected, oppressed, and those needing refuge
3. justice and fairness
4. the prevention of violence
5. security and safety
6. the sanctity of life

C. CONCERNING DIVORCE

POSITION: ANY POSITION WE TAKE ON DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE MUST TAKE A HIGH VIEW OF MARRIAGE WITH REGARD TO ITS UNITY IN PERMANENCE AND THE PICTURE IT PROVIDES TO ALL PEOPLE OF CHRIST'S COVENANT RELATIONSHIP TO THE CHURCH.

We believe and teach that marriage unites a man and woman for life. However, we also realize that due to our sinful nature and the influence of a godless society, some marriages are broken. We believe that such a disruption is always the result of sin and disobedience. However, when the person, or persons involved recognize their failure and repent of their sin, they receive forgiveness and are accepted by the Lord as members of His body. Should such a person seek to become a member of the Mennonite Brethren Church, the church is willing to receive that person as a member and provide nurture and fellowship. Such nurture and fellowship would include encouragement and support in seeking to achieve reconciliation with the estranged partner.

1) Biblical Grounds for Divorce

God never intended divorce but under certain prescribed conditions He allowed it. We understand Scripture to recognize specific situations where divorce is a legitimate option.

a. An immoral and unrepentant partner

When one's spouse is guilty of sexual immorality and is unwilling to repent and live faithfully with the marriage partner, Jesus indicates that there is the option of divorce. This provision does not imply that a divorce should be considered after an isolated case of unfaithfulness, but only where there is indication that the unfaithful partner refuses to repent and change his/her behaviour. As in other situations, every effort should first be made to bring restoration and healing to the marriage relationship. The help of a qualified counsellor can provide objectivity and wisdom in such a situation (Matthew 5:32, 19:9).

POSITION: IF, AFTER A PERIOD OF TIME AND EVERY EFFORT AT RECONCILIATION HAS FAILED, THE CHURCH WILL ACCEPT AND SUPPORT A DECISION TO REMAIN MARRIED OR A DECISION TO SEEK TO DIVORCE THE IMMORAL AND UNREPENTANT PARTNER.

b. Desertion by an unbeliever

When one partner in a marriage relationship is an unbeliever and willfully and permanently deserts the believing partner, the Scripture in 1 Corinthians 7:12-15 provides some specific counsel: "But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has

a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, let him not send her away. And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, let her not send her husband away. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy. Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace."

The key phrase in this passage is found in verse 15, "the brother or sister is not under bondage in such cases..." Again, it should be stated that the believer should make every effort to make the marriage as workable as possible (1 Peter 3:1-7), and not give cause for the unbelieving partner to leave the marriage. If, however, he or she chooses to leave the marriage, the Christian is not under obligation to plead, beg, bargain, or to force the non-Christian partner to remain married. Rather... "let him/her leave."

POSITION: WHERE A BELIEVER HAS MADE EVERY EFFORT TO MAKE THE MARRIAGE AS WORKABLE AS POSSIBLE, THEN WILLFUL DESERTION BY THE UNBELIEVING SPOUSE IS LEGITIMATE GROUNDS FOR DIVORCE.

We would always counsel toward reconciliation where possible, however, when grounds for divorce are biblical, the possibility of reconciliation no longer seems present, and the church has spent much time in prayer and counsel with the couple or individual involved, then we as a church must recognize and accept the choice of divorce.

D. CONCERNING REMARRIAGE

Where reconciliation is not possible and a believer wishes to remarry, such a person should seek the counsel of the Elders of the church. Where there is not the grace to live alone or as a single parent, and where there is agreement by the Elders of the church, a remarriage may take place. The church will seek to provide guidance and support of the persons involved.

1) Remarriage of the Divorced Person

a. From Jesus' teaching – Matthew 5:31-32

We understand scripture to teach that divorce is permitted on the grounds of ongoing immorality. If divorce is enacted on any other ground, marriage to, or by the divorcee is considered adultery. If ongoing immorality has been the basis for the divorce, then remarriage would not be considered committing adultery. In other words, biblically legitimized divorce allows for remarriage. (See C.1)

POSITION: REMARRIAGE IS PERMISSIBLE WHEN A MARRIAGE HAS BEEN DISSOLVED BY DIVORCE BECAUSE OF ONGOING IMMORALITY.

b. From Paul's teaching – 1 Corinthians 7

In verses 6-9 Paul addresses the unmarried and the widows. He says it is good for them to stay single, but he clearly opens the door for marriage to them. (See also verses 27-28)

POSITION: REMARRIAGE IS PERMISSIBLE WHEN A MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE OCCURRED PRIOR TO SALVATION.

When the marriage and divorce occurred prior to salvation, we recognize the grace of God in providing full forgiveness for every sin. "Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold all things have become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17). (See also 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, Psalms 103:10-12)

2) Remarriage of the Deserted Person

In 1 Corinthians 7:12-16, the Apostle Paul gives some specific advice to those who are married:

a. To the Christian Couple – vs. 10-11

- Do not divorce
- If you divorce, remain single or be reconciled

b. To a Christian married to a non-Christian – vs. 12-14

- Stay together
- If the unbeliever divorces, let him/her leave

The believer is not under bondage (legal obligation, see Romans 7:2) and so remarriage is open to the person (vs. 15, 27, 28).

POSITION: WHERE A MARRIAGE IS DISSOLVED BY REASON OF "DESERTION" (SEE C.1.b) BY THE UNBELIEVING PARTNER, THE PRIVILEGE OF REMARRIAGE IS OPEN TO THE BELIEVER.

It is obvious that most cases pertaining to separation, divorce and remarriage are surrounded with unique difficulties and circumstances. Therefore each situation must be considered individually. Requests regarding these situations will be referred to the Elders for assessment and counsel.

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