



This paper seeks to lay out Christ Community’s pastoral position on divorce and remarriage, both to express what we believe to be a Biblical view of marriage and to guide our members. This paper will establish: (a) the sacred nature of the marriage covenant; (b) the Christian priority of preserving marriage; and (c) the Biblical grounds for divorce and remarriage.

### **(1) Marriage Instituted by God**

Marriage belongs to God in both idea and design. Genesis 2:24 states, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”<sup>1</sup> Created in the image of God, Adam and Eve were brought together in a one-flesh, lifelong (Mark 10:9) marital bond that would serve to propagate humanity (Genesis 2:27-28). God’s ideal and design for marriage remains: one man and one woman united in a one-flesh relationship for life.

### **2) God Hates Divorce**

Scripture tells us that “God hates divorce” (Malachi 2:16). Divorce is never spoken of positively in the Bible. When asked about the permissibility of divorce, Jesus maintains God’s original design (Matthew 19:4-6). As followers of Christ, we view divorce as tragic, destructive, and contrary to God’s design. We must labor to create a culture in the church where divorce is understood to be a last resort only after all reconciling avenues have been pursued.

### **(3) Exceptions Because of Sin**

Because mankind is sinful and the consequences of sin are destructive, God makes allowances. After Genesis 2, further instruction of marriage is detailed in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Under the Mosaic Law a man was given permission to divorce his wife on grounds of “indecency.” The Hebrew word for “indecency” possibly connotes some form of immodest sexual exposure, but not necessarily amounting to adultery.

While we cannot be certain as to the exact meaning of *indecency* in this passage, Jesus is clear when explaining this provision in Deuteronomy that “*Because of your hardness of heart* Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so” (Matt 19:8; italics added). Jesus continues, “And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, *except for sexual immorality*, and marries another, commits adultery” (Matthew 19:9; italics added).

The apostle Paul tells us there is one other situation where God permits divorce: “But if the *unbelieving partner separates*, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace” (1 Corinthians 7:15; italics added). If one’s unbelieving partner leaves his/her spouse with no intention of returning, he or she has broken the marital bond. As

---

<sup>1</sup> All quotations are from the English Standard Version. © Crossway



a result, just like in the case of adultery, such a person is free to seek either reconciliation or divorce. Similarly, we would argue that abuse functions as a form of desertion. A spouse may impose upon another such intolerable conditions that he/she is forced to leave the home. This forced abandonment has the same effect as the abusive spouse deserting his/her marriage.

#### **(4) Divorce and Remarriage in Perspective**

While God supplies allowances for divorce and remarriage in the case of sexual immorality (adultery) and desertion/abuse, it is clear that that our Loving Father's original purpose and design for marriage are upheld by Jesus and His Apostles. While these exceptions can be grounds for divorce, God's ideal is still unity in marriage for life. Christians can and have walked through marital infidelity and brokenness with much prayer, counseling, healing, and forgiveness. God repairs broken hearts and lives and can bring wonderful restoration to marriages experiencing all manner of brokenness. All decisions involving divorce and / or remarriage have lasting consequences and should be taken soberly with truth from the Scriptures and from listening to trusted pastoral counsel.

#### **Summary: When are Divorce and Remarriage Biblically Allowed?**

The pastors of Christ Community believe that divorce or remarriage are *possible* for a believer in the case that (1) their spouse has committed adultery, (2) their unbelieving spouse has deserted them, and / or (3) that their spouse has "deserted" them through habitual, unrepentant abuse. In recognizing these allowances, we hold to the Biblical design of marriage as one man and one woman united in a one-flesh relationship for life.



**Appendix Section 1 - Principles**

It is important to develop the Scriptural foundations that inform our practice, how we counsel members, and how we shepherd people towards godliness in this area. God's design for marriage is clear. But what about when, through the sinful actions and behaviors of human beings, a marital bond is destroyed such that a divorce ensues? Can a divorced person remarry? If so, when, and under what conditions? This position paper addresses these questions. Furthermore, additional principles are stated below to help communicate the stance of Christ Community Church.

(1) Christians must hold the sacredness of the marriage bond highly. It is vital, in a discussion of marriage and related topics, to go back to the foundations of marriage laid down by God in Scripture starting in Genesis 1. Without understanding and embracing God's design for this institution, our decisions stem from human understanding rather than divine revelation.

(2) When walking through the decision of whether or not to remarry, the priority of sanctification is a vital component. Sin does not put us in the category of "sinner" forever. Through a process of confession, repentance, Biblical counseling, prayer, pursuing holiness, walking in sexual abstinence, and recovering God's design, Christians can walk in a holy path leading to moral uprightness, redemption, and greater Christlikeness (Romans 8:29; Ephesians 4:1, 23-24; 5:1) which can be expressed in a marriage along Biblical lines.

(3) What clearly cannot be condoned is divorce *in order to* remarry. It is possible to see in Jesus' statement in Matthew 19 "divorces and marries another" as happening in close proximity of time. That is, a person may leave his or her marital partner already with the idea of pursuing a different person. In this case, the root of adultery has already sprouted, and the person is seeking an "out" from his or her current marital situation and seeking satisfaction in a mate outside of that marriage. This is clearly wrong and the work of the Devil to destroy marriage and legitimize adultery.

(4) There are very real consequences of divorce even when the best possible process is followed after it is clear the marriage has collapsed. Some of these consequences include the loss of a pure conscience and of one's virginity, great emotional pain, relational breaches and awkwardness, sexually transmitted diseases, fear of an angered ex-spouse, etc. Divorce is not desirable, it is to be avoided through fervent attempts at reconciliation, and it is always tragic.

(5) Those inside and outside the Church must conclude that the Church places a very high standard on marriage. If remarriage is permitted, it must not be seen as divorce and remarriage being okay and normal. It must be seen instead that a clear process of prayer, counseling, obedience, sanctification, and the pursuit of holiness is occurring. Our posture must be full of both grace and truth.



(6) There are situations where a marriage partner is not being “abandoned” in a traditional sense but where they are being actively harmed and / or endangered in a marital relationship. For example, abusive individuals seek to maintain a marriage of “mastery” or domination, and the abuser is unwilling to have marriage according to the Biblical design. To stay in a marriage with an abuser not committed to change or transformation – demonstrated over a long time - is to allow for the continuation of sin and is not healthy or advisable. In this case, a separation ultimately leading to divorce is potentially considerable under Biblical grounds.

*What Does Jesus Have to Say About This?*

The Lord has not left us to question what He would say about this topic of divorce. Jesus is brought into a discussion of this very topic by the religious leaders of His day. In Matthew 19, we hear how the Pharisees came up to test Jesus by asking if it is lawful to divorce “for any cause” (v. 3). Although their motivations are disingenuous, Jesus’ reply is not. First, He takes His listeners back to the original Genesis account (Genesis 2:24) in verses 4-6. He then concludes by saying, “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”

Behind the scenes of this conversation is a difference of opinion between two major Jewish schools of thought on the subject: (1) that of Shammai and (2) that of Hillel. Shammai, holding a more conservative (i.e., less permissive) view, interpreted Deuteronomy 24 as referring to immodesty or immorality, i.e., sexual sin.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, Hillel was far more permissive, stating that the man had a right – even the obligation - to divorce his wife for anything displeasing him.<sup>3</sup> The disciples seemed to have been conditioned more by the thought of Hillel, as they are shocked (v. 10) when they hear Jesus’ reply, going to extremes in their response and concluding “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.”

Jesus adds an important caveat when asked by the Pharisees, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” (v. 7). Jesus says two important things in reply: (1) People divorce because of a hardness of heart. God acknowledges that fact; although His design and ideal do not change, He makes a concession in recognition of man’s sinfulness. (2) the “exception clause.”<sup>4</sup> In Matthew 19:9, we read “Whoever divorces his wife, *except for sexual immorality*, and marries another, commits adultery.”

While some may dispute whether this is Jesus’ final statement on the matter<sup>5</sup>, for those that hold to the divine authority and inerrancy of Scripture, Jesus clearly states the condition when divorce is allowed (note: not required). The exception is “sexual immorality,” translating the Greek word *porneia*. It is important to note that Matthew 5:31-32, in the context of the

---

<sup>2</sup> Köstenberger, *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 224.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>5</sup> This disagreement stems from a parallel passage in Mark 10:1-12 which does not contain the exception clause. In Mark, Jesus just relates the statements from Matthew about anyone divorcing and remarriage as committing adultery. Luke 16:18 is similar: “Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.”



Sermon on the Mount, gives the same “exception” of sexual immorality, and also adds as well that “whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery” (v. 32b).<sup>6</sup>

So what does *porneia* mean in this context? While there is debate on the topic, Köstenberger argues that the word must mean a general term for sexual sin.<sup>7</sup> Some would understand *porneia* to be a reference to some type of sexual sin *prior* to marriage that would have made marriage unlawful under Jewish law.

It is also important to note that while Jesus *permitted* divorce, He didn’t require it in the case of *porneia*. It is also significant that Jesus recognized the moral agency of both man and woman, countercultural in an age when women had much reduced legal authority and standing and were considered by rabbis to be on a lower moral frame than men.

### So What Does the Apostle Paul Have to Say About This?

The apostle Paul adds critical details in Romans 7:1-4 and 1 Corinthians 7:10-16, 39, discussing divorce and remarriage outside of a Jewish context, in the diverse religious environment of Rome and the sexualized pagan environment of Corinth.

In Romans 7:1-4, Paul states that death frees a married person from the bonds of marriage, and they can (at least legally) marry another. It is important to note that this section of Scripture is not a discussion of marriage per se. Rather, Paul is using the analogy of human marriage to talk about the fundamental breach Christ’s atoning death made so that we can truly and legitimately belong to Him free of guilt and not be under the Law’s penalty.

1 Corinthians 7:10-11 states “To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.” Taken in isolation, this would seem to support a “no divorce, no remarriage” stance, at least in the sense of a Christian should not institute or obtain a divorce, although the stipulation “if she does” gives instruction on what to do if the person has separated.

However, verses 12 -16 state that (1) a believing brother should not divorce an unbelieving wife; (2) a believing woman should not divorce an unbelieving man willing to live with her; and (3) a believing partner is “not enslaved” if their “unbelieving partner separates” (v. 15). Arguments may abound about what “not enslaved” means, but there is a clear indication of separation from a spouse being granted if that unbelieving person does not wish to live with the believing spouse. Verse 39 directly addresses the topic of remarriage in the event of death, where Paul says “if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.”

---

<sup>6</sup> This statement convicts not just the one divorced and remarrying as an adulterer, but also the one who marries that person.

<sup>7</sup> Köstenberger, 231.



### **Appendix Section 2: Scripture Reference in Deuteronomy**

Deuteronomy 24:1-4: “If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, <sup>2</sup> and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, <sup>3</sup> and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, <sup>4</sup> then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the Lord. Do not bring sin upon the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance.”

### **Appendix 3: Considerations with Regards to Church Leaders**

#### *Are Staff / Elders Held to a Different (Higher) Standard than Lay People?*

In the Mosaic Law, we find more stringent requirements for the marriage of priests with regard to who priests could marry. So a question could be asked, “Are pastors in the Church held to a different (higher) standard than “lay” people? Are there special requirements for pastors that apply? Two Old Testament texts bear on this question: Leviticus 21 (specifically verse 7) and Ezekiel 44:15-31 (specifically v. 22).

Leviticus 21:7 states that a priest could not marry a prostitute, a defiled woman, or a divorced woman. Ezekiel 44:22 adds “They shall not marry a widow or a divorced woman, but only virgins of the offspring of the house of Israel, or a widow who is the widow of a priest.” Thus, the Ezekiel text does not mention prostitutes but says priests could not marry a widow unless a widow of a priest, nor any divorced woman, thus no woman who had been married before unless it was the widow of a priest.

The New Testament contains no specific command about marriage requirements specifically for elders or pastors. However, it is important to observe the Leviticus and Ezekiel texts occur in the context of talking about the need for priests to maintain the highest standards of *holiness*. The book of Leviticus can even be referred to as a book about holiness. The book of Ezekiel condemns the unholiness of the people of Judah, specifically with regard to the things of the temple. The New Testament is quite clear that pastors / elders are to be worthy of imitation, “being examples to the flock” as 1 Peter 5:3 says. Hebrews 13:7 states, “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and *imitate their faith.*”

On a practical level, people learn by examples and modeling behaviors seen in others. If a church body wants to understand and appreciate a holy example of marriage, then their pastors need to model that holiness. The call of pastors and elders in the area of marriage is to set the bar high, so that all can see the holiness of Christ modeled in their midst.

Does this necessarily entail they are not allowed to marry a divorced woman or remarry? The Bible does not contain any such prohibition. As with many topics, we should proceed with discernment, prayer, and the wisdom that comes from specific knowledge of the situation. The

Biblical ideal is clearly one man and one woman joined together in holy marriage for life, with divorce being detestable to the Lord. An elder is called to be “a man of one woman” / “the husband of one wife” (1 Timothy 3:2). The Lord tells the people through Malachi: “So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth.”

The Christian life is not fundamentally about prohibition, but this does not mean we do not pursue a lifestyle of holy integrity in all things. Christian leaders are called to a higher standard by Scripture in order to serve in those roles, as evidenced in the instructions of Paul in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

Given these realities, it is the position of CCC that a divorced and remarried believer can serve as a staff or lay pastor / elder, with such situations treated with careful deliberation so that the Scriptural requirement of “a man of one woman” applies to the one seeking the position. Marital infidelity and divorce are unacceptable as active shepherding leaders in the Church and would render one disqualified for pastoral leadership.

#### **Appendix 4: Resources**

- *When Sinners Say I Do*, by Dave Harvey.
- *The Meaning of Marriage*, by Tim Keller.
- *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, by Andreas Köstenberger.