

Position Statement On Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage

A summary of the position adopted by the
Pastors and Elders of
Providence Baptist Church

Adopted June, 2002

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Preamble

At Providence Baptist Church, the elders and pastors recognize that the Bible is the very word of the living God to us, His people. We understand the priority of knowing and obeying biblical truths. For this reason, Providence's elders and pastors are deeply committed to studying and teaching Scripture with diligence and authority.

This position statement on marriage, divorce, and remarriage presents the agreed upon position of the elders and pastors of Providence Baptist Church. We realize that there are differing interpretations of Scripture regarding divorce and remarriage among Christians equally committed to the authority of God's Word. While we have considered the most prevailing interpretations of Scripture in this area and have found positions of agreement, we realize that no one in leadership can be asked to act against his conscience (Romans 14). In developing and reviewing this document, we found that some of our leadership had a more conservative or restrictive position on what the Bible says regarding divorce and remarriage. However, we have agreed that the position stated herein represents a minimum standard from which we will not support a less restrictive position to be taken in our church.

The purpose of this position statement is to provide a guide to our congregation, staff, and leaders regarding the covenant of marriage. It is our prayer that marriages would be entered into with a commitment for life and would become enriched and fulfilled as husbands and wives embrace Christ and the commands of His Word. We also pray that divorce within the Providence congregation would cease and that the sanctity of marriage would capture the hearts of church members to the point that they would pray for and encourage one another to pursue healthy, growing marriage relationships.

Marriage

Marriage is a sacred relationship created by God for humanity (Malachi 2:14-16). It is the first institution designed by God. Marriage is to be a life-long, covenant relationship between one woman and one man (Malachi 2:14; Genesis 2:23-24). Marriage is so special that the two become "one flesh" in a spiritual, emotional, and physical relationship (Matthew 19:5; Mark 10:8). In marriage, God gives a wife to a husband and a husband to a wife; they are to receive one another as God's unique and personal provision to help meet their mutual needs. As iron sharpens iron, God uses marriage to "sharpen" a husband and wife into the image of Jesus Christ (Proverbs 27:17).

Marriage itself is a picture of the relationship between Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:21-33; Isaiah 54:5; Hosea 2:14-23; Jeremiah 3:20). Just as the Trinity reflects equal worth with differing roles, God created a man and a woman with equal worth but with differing roles and responsibilities in marriage. The marital relationship is the foundation of the family unit. Because of the significance and uniqueness of the marriage relationship, God commands that a believer should not marry an unbeliever (1 Corinthians 7:39; 2 Corinthians 6:14-15).

Thus, marriage is a sacred institution created by God for humanity that binds one man and one woman in a covenantal relationship for life, in which they are no longer two but are relationally one flesh.

Divorce

Divorce has always been defined as the ending of a marriage. God clearly hates divorce (Malachi 2:16). Divorce brings harm to every person involved; therefore, reconciliation or restoration of a marriage should be encouraged and divorce discouraged.

In recognition of man's sinfulness, God does permit divorce in certain situations, not because He wills it but because of the hardness of people's hearts (Deuteronomy 24:1-4; Matthew 19:3-9; 1 Corinthians 7:15). It is only permitted (never commanded) in cases of fornication or abandonment (1 Corinthians 7:11, 15; Matthew 19:9). Fornication covers a wide variety of sexual activity including adultery, homosexuality, bestiality, and incest (Matthew 5:32, 19:9; 1 Corinthians 5:1). Abandonment occurs when a non-believing spouse decides to leave the marriage relationship with a Christian (1 Corinthians 7:12-15).

A special case that is also covered under abandonment is that of persistent physical, sexual or emotional abuse of a spouse. God has provided protection for an abused spouse through the church, civil authority, godly counselors, prayer, and other practical measures. Reasonable steps should be taken to provide for protection of the abused spouse while promoting appropriate reconciliation and restoration. While such situations can be very emotional and difficult, Providence is committed to work with couples through its Pastors, Elders and with assistance of Christian counselors to help break cycles of unhealthy behavior that war against a marriage. Our goal is to promote biblical approaches to health and restoration in the marriage.

To the best of our ability as the body of Christ, we understand these to be the only reasons for divorce. Therefore, those who pursue divorce on unbiblical grounds (any not specified herein) should be confronted and counseled as they are subject to church discipline because they are willfully rejecting God's Word (Matthew 18:15-18). This procedure is described in Providence Baptist Church's statement on Church Discipline Guidelines.¹

While divorce may be the legal termination of a marriage, it is not a permanent end to that relationship while the other spouse is alive or not remarried. Restoration is preferable to separation or divorce in all situations, even when there are biblical grounds for divorce (Hosea

¹ A copy of Providence's Discipline Guidelines will be made available upon request.

2:14-23; Matthew 18:21-22; Luke 17:3-4). The only time restoration should not be sought is in the event of a remarriage by one or both partners. It would be biblically wrong to break up the new marriage (Deuteronomy 24:1-4; 1 Corinthians 7:10-11).

In an effort to promote reconciliation and healing of a marriage, Providence will seek to offer or recommend a process of mediation in situations where there are biblical grounds for separation or divorce and the couple chooses not to reconcile but to pursue a separation or divorce. Scripture admonishes Christians not to take their disputes before the civil authorities for judgment (1 Corinthians 6:1-8). Therefore, to enable the couple to honor God's commands, Providence encourages the use of a Christian mediation process. By offering such mediation, Providence prayerfully hopes to be a reconciling and restoring influence in the couple's marriage that they would likely not find if they pursued legal counsel to address their marital problems. Mediation offered through Providence Baptist Church will never have as its purpose assisting or enabling couples in their intention to divorce.

Remarriage

Marriage after widowhood is clearly permissible since death breaks the marriage bond (Romans 7:2-3). Remarriage is permissible without sin for a believing widow or widower if the marriage is with another believer (1 Corinthians 7:39).

As stated, there are biblical grounds by which God allows divorce. In such cases, the faithful partner (the one desiring to restore the marriage) has scriptural freedom to remarry. Remarriage is morally permissible but not commanded. Restoration and forgiveness are always preferable to beginning a new marriage, even if there were biblical grounds for divorce (Hosea 2:14-23; Matthew 18:21-22; Luke 17:3-4). Before a new marriage takes place, the faithful partner should have confessed all known sin in the divorce and made significant progress in overcoming any destructive behaviors and attitudes that might still persist from the first marriage. We urge all those considering remarriage after a divorce to commit significant time to prayer and the study of God's Word, along with seeking appropriate godly counsel before entering a new marriage.

When a divorce is obtained on unbiblical grounds, remarriage is considered adultery. The person who marries someone who has been divorced on unbiblical grounds also commits adultery (Matthew 19:9; Luke 16:18). It is adultery because God does not recognize the validity of an unbiblical divorce (Matthew 5:32; Mark 10:11-12). The unfaithful spouse (the one who has obtained an unbiblical divorce) should remain unmarried or repent, be reconciled to God, and restored to the faithful spouse (1 Corinthians 7:9-11, 32-35; 1 John 1:9). The faithful spouse should remain unmarried and be open to restoration unless the unfaithful spouse has remarried or has committed actions giving biblical grounds for divorce. God will give such people who are required to remain unmarried the ability to live a life of singleness (1 John 3:21-22, 5:3-5). Such restoration should not be sought if either spouse has remarried (Deuteronomy 24:1-2; Jeremiah 3:1; Matthew 19:9; Luke 16:18; 1 Corinthians 7:11). Those who pursue divorce on unbiblical grounds or remarriage without scriptural freedom to do so are subject to church discipline because they would be openly rejecting the Word of God.

Conclusion

Providence Baptist Church declares that the marriage commitment must be honored and upheld in our culture as God's sacred institution in which a man and a woman, together, can experience the truest sense of spiritual, emotional, and physical intimacy: two becoming one flesh. Marriage is the cornerstone of the family unit. The function of family flows from marriage with the purpose of glorifying and honoring God by forming the spiritual, emotional, physical, and economic foundation for individuals, the church, and any society. Therefore, Providence is committed to stand firm to protect and defend the sanctity of marriage through its teaching, training, encouragement, support, and counsel.

Application

- Guidance for Pastors and Church Leadership

No one in leadership can be asked to act against his conscience (Romans 14). Therefore, each pastor should teach, counsel, and perform marriages according to his personal conviction, with this statement providing a minimum standard. Based on the pastor's conscience and interpretation of God's Word, he may take a more conservative or restrictive position.

- Expectation of Church Members

This statement reflects the level of expectation for marital relations that no member may violate while remaining a member in good standing without anticipated intervention by the church. Furthermore, since God's plan for marriage includes all of humanity, the change from unbeliever to believer does not alter the application of these guidelines (Matthew 19:4-6). Providence reserves the right to examine all candidates for marriage to discern their compliance with this position statement.

- Expectations of Those Seeking Church Membership

Should it be discovered that a remarried couple, whose divorce and therefore remarriage was not permitted Biblically, is pursuing membership in Providence Baptist Church, the deacon or pastor should encourage both parties to seek God's forgiveness for their disobedience, if they have not already done so. Unwillingness to respond to this pastoral instruction would necessitate pastoral counseling and resolution before membership could be permitted. (See below: "Guidelines for Those Who Have Been Divorced for Unbiblical Reasons and Remarried)

- Holding Church Leadership Positions While Experiencing Marital Difficulty

While most marriages experience difficulty and conflict from time to time, it is the expectation that those with healthy marriages will work proactively to address the issues causing the problem. When such difficulty continues or escalates in divisive activity, it may be appropriate to ask church leaders to step down from their position and/or service to focus their attention and efforts on restoration and healing of the marriage relationship. This is not

viewed as a punitive measure but as an expectation of the church to uphold the strong value of marriage and family (Providence's eighth core value). In this context, church leadership positions include any position of responsibility or service where there is visibility, decision making, or responsibility for ministry such as a Pastor, Elder, Deacon, Sunday school teacher, inreach leader, small group leader, usher, parking ministry worker, children's worker, music ministry member, greeter, etc.

- **Guidance for Those Who Have Been Divorced for Unbiblical Reasons and Remarried**

The couple should acknowledge that the choice to divorce and the act of entering a second marriage was sin, confess it, and seek forgiveness. The couple should not attempt to restore the marriage with the first partner after entering a second union or live as single people thinking this would result in less sin because all their sexual relations are acts of adultery. The Bible does not give prescriptions for this particular case, but it does treat any marriage as having significant standing in God's eyes (Malachi 2:14-15). Promises were made and a union formed. It should not have been formed, but the union is to be sanctified to God. While not the ideal state, staying in a second marriage is God's will for a couple. After having confessed and repented of their sins, the couple's ongoing relations should not be looked on as adulterous. However, where appropriate, reasonable and responsible financial or other support resources should be provided by an unfaithful spouse to an unmarried spouse and children of the prior marriage.

There is no past divorce or remarriage that in itself brings church discipline. None of the divorced and remarried members of Providence Baptist Church will automatically come under discipline because their divorce or remarriage falls in a category this position statement declares to be unbiblical. An expression of genuine repentance for the sin involved is all that is needed to settle the matter and make a person a member in good standing.

*Note: A copy of the full position paper is available from Shepherding Ministries upon request.
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