



Wells Branch Community Church
A Biblical Position on Marriage and Divorce

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Introduction

The human experience of life as designed by God from the beginning is fundamentally based on relationships. While primarily created to be in relationship with the Godhead, humanity was also created to experience that God-Man relationship in the context of human community. It was inherent to the human condition, before the fall of man due to sin, that “it [was] not good for man to be alone.” (Gen. 2:18). The response of God to this condition was to create a partner for the man in order that they may experience life together. The image of God is both fully seen in the man and the woman individually, but also together in the experience of their relationship to each other. Thus, the Bible presents the state of a human being, either unmarried or married, to be an extremely important in defining the experience of life.

Unfortunately, the experience of life in marriage itself fell victim to the consequences of the fall (Gen 3). The picture of God’s love, unity, and provision in marriage became marred. The challenge to the Church now is to understand how to best obey the Word of God in navigating the complexities of unmarriedness, marriage, divorce and remarriage. The aim of any Christ follower is to obey God’s commands (I Sam. 15:22, Hos. 6:6, Jn. 14:15). While scripture does in fact address each of these topics, it does not provide exact instructions for every particular circumstance that may arise.

The aim of this document is to provide guidance to the local church in how to understand both the explicit commands of God’s word concerning these topics and the interpretation of God’s heart when it comes to more nuanced circumstances.

It is clear that God delights in marriage as an institution he created to provide for his special creation of man (Gen 2:18-25, Mark 10:9). Marriage was created for one man and one woman for life (Gen 2:18-25, Mark 10:9, I Cor 7:2-5, Rom 1:26-27). God hates divorce as it contradicts his created design, but makes provision for it under very strict and serious circumstances, always in response to the sinfulness of humanity. Both Old and New Testaments of scripture present a theology of marriage that is unified in both its message and its seriousness concerning these things. The church, therefore, must work to faithfully encourage, support, strengthen and defend the God-ordained experience of marriage.

As a church, in understanding God's design for marriage, we believe:

1. That God's design for humanity included marriage from the very beginning. (Gen 2:18-25)
2. That design was intended to be one man and one woman for life. (Gen. 2:18-25, Mark 10:9, I Cor 7:2-5, Rom 1:26-27).
3. God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16)
4. Marriage is God-ordained, that is, it is God that brings a man and a woman together in marriage¹ (Matthew 19:4-6)
5. Because it is ordained by God, man is commanded not to separate² or dissolve a marriage (Matthew 19:4-6)
6. Because of the hardness of man's heart (Matt 19:8), divorce has been an unfortunate reality of the human experience after the fall. Under certain extreme and specific circumstances, scripture does allow for divorce.
7. For those who are in Christ, remarriage outside of a legitimate divorce or death of a spouse is not an available option.
8. Unmarriedness is defined by scripture as a blessing and provision from the Lord. (I Cor 7:8,28,32)

Wells Branch Community Church is committed to encouraging, supporting, strengthening and defending the God-ordained institution of marriage as defined by God's Word. As a church WBCC is also committed to shepherding those who are experiencing the pain of divorce in whatever part of the process a member of the church may be in. As a church, WBCC is also committed to shepherding those who may be seeking a course of action that is contrary to God's Word and God's heart towards repentance and restoration.

¹ Contrast against "civil union" which a state or government institutes and recognizes. While a government may choose to use the word "marriage" to refer to "civil union," the definitions may, and do, vary significantly. When it comes to the spiritual responsibility of the church to its members, WBCC will only understand "marriage" as recognized by God's word.

² See Divorce: Desertion Based on Allegiance to Christ

Unmarriedness - The Biblical Perspective

While marriage is certainly presented in scripture as God's provision and blessing to humanity, it is the reality of created design that the original state of every human being is unmarried.³ Such a state does not mean the individual who is unmarried is in some way incomplete.

In addition to the original state of every human being, unmarriedness is also the final state of every human being in resurrection. Marriage is not a requirement for the perfection of personhood, since in the resurrection Jesus tells us that the institution of marriage will no longer exist (Matt 22:30). Jesus taught this to his disciples:

Thus Jesus himself taught that unmarriedness was something "given" and that to remain unmarried could be "better" than being married⁴. Furthermore, Jesus highlights that such individuals who voluntarily remain unmarried do so "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven." Paul also commends unmarriedness to those in the church who are currently unmarried, calling it a "gift" in I Cor 7:6-8. Therefore we can conclude that the state of unmarriedness is a gift from God, not to be despised or diminished, having real value alongside the gift of marriage.

This paradigm is absolutely essential in understanding God's heart for those who may not have a desire to be married, or, because of certain circumstances, may not be free to be married. Such individuals should be encouraged to see their unmarriedness as a gift from God, supplied by God, and spurred on to leverage their unique ability to focus towards building the kingdom (I Cor 7:32-35). God's grace is sufficient for them and their unmarriedness should not be despised.

³ Unmarried refers to any individual who is not married. The word "single" or "singleness" should be avoided since culturally an individual who is engaged to be married or even simply involved in a casual romantic relationship may deny their singleness. However, scripture does not distinguish between various degrees of relationship. Instead, scripture essentially understands an individual's state in reference to marriage as simply either married or unmarried.

⁴ The disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." But he said to them, "Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it." Matthew 19:10-11

Marriage - The Biblical Perspective

Common Grace

Marriage is an institution created by God for the provision of humanity so that they might experience the life designed for them as image-bearers of God (Gen 2). Marriage is not a Christian ordinance, since it was not instituted or commanded by Jesus during his ministry on Earth. Instead, it is to be understood as a common dispensation of God's grace to all humanity (Matt 5:45). Therefore, the church encourages and supports monogamous, heterosexual marriage, provided it does not violate the created order (Gen 2:18-25) or the scriptural command to refrain from being unequally yoked (2 Cor 6:14)

Picture of Covenantal Love

Marriage in its intended state was both a provision of God for humanity to experience God's design for both man and woman, and it served as a picture in and of itself of the covenantal love God has for humanity. While marriage is a dispensation of common grace to all humanity (Gen 2), Paul describes the relationship between husbands and wives as a picture of the relationship between Christ and the Church (Eph 5:22-33). Therefore, the church is called to support, encourage, strengthen and defend marriage, not just for the sake of the husband and wife, but for the witness of the church to the rest of the world.

Homosexuality

Marriage is to be understood as the joining together of a man and woman in covenantal relationship both through vows and through the physical joining of their bodies in sexual intercourse. Scripture is clear that homosexuality is a violation of this created design (Rom 1:26-28, I Cor 6:9, Lev 18:22) and therefore should be understood as sin. This sin is not of unique grievousness, however, and the church is charged by scripture to love and welcome everyone regardless of their sexual orientation (Luke 10:25-37). The church does not recognize a homosexual relationship to be a marriage according to scripture. Currently, the United States government has chosen to recognize the legal status of homosexual couples as "married." However, the church, and the rest of this position paper, will only refer to such unions as "civil unions." Such civil unions are not under the blessing or the spiritual protection of the church.

Should a homosexual individual seek to dissolve their civil union based on their desire to repent of sin, the church has no scriptural grounds to deny them or to discourage them from that civil right.

Polygamy

Polygamy, like homosexuality, is clearly a violation of God's created design for a single man and a single woman to be joined in marriage. God's sufficient provision for the man was a single woman. God's sufficient provision for the woman was a single man. Biblically, polygamy, though prevalent in the Old Testament, is presented as the source of great trouble and curse. The first instance of polygamy was in the case of Lamech (Gen 4:19-24) where God contrasts

the idolatry of Lamech's sinful heart against the hope of a savior in the birth of Seth (Gen 4:25-26). Furthermore, God commanded of the future king of Israel not to multiply wives (Deut 17:17) as such practices inevitably resulted in idolatry. Therefore, while there is no explicit command in scripture against polygamy, the practice is clearly a violation of God's design and is not practiced by the church. Polygamy is currently illegal in Texas. If a polygamist, who is not a Christian becomes a Christian, we would call the polygamist to do whatever is necessary to submit to the law (Romans 13:1-7).

Equally Yoked

Scripture commands that individuals not be "unequally yoked" (2 Cor 6:14). Thus, a Christian should not marry or seek to marry a person who is not a Christian. One's devotion to Christ is always to be the highest priority, even above choosing a spouse (Matt 6:33), trusting that seeking first God's kingdom will ultimately result in the greatest good, not only for the world, but also for the individual. An unbelieving person may marry another unbelieving individual as marriage itself is God's common grace provision for all humanity. A Christian, should they be called to marriage, should seek to marry a Christian. In the case of two Christians, even such a marriage is not without reason for concern. Paul warns in I Corinthians 7 that even believers who are married may find themselves distracted by the concerns of pleasing their spouse. While such a marriage (that is, a marriage between two spouses of varying spiritual maturity, or marriages that result in distraction for one or both spouses) may be difficult, unfortunate and unadvisable, Paul does not explicitly condemn such unions. Paul's warning was specifically to Christians being unequally yoked to unbelievers (2 Cor 6:14-15).

Divorce - The Biblical Perspective

Legitimate

Jesus taught the created intent of humanity was for husbands and wives to remain married (Matt 19, cf. Mark 10). Biblically supported marriage as a God-created institution should be encouraged and defended by the church. The possibility of ministry, growth, discipleship and blessing that comes from a God-honoring marriage should be nurtured and protected by the church. Jesus identifies the marriage union as one actively ordained by God and the separation of husband and wife through divorce as being an act of man (I Cor 7:15). Jesus responds to criticisms levied by the Pharisees by interpreting the provision for divorce as a concession to the hardness of the people's hearts and clarifies that marriage was intended to be a lifelong institution.

Sexual Immorality

Jesus himself identifies sexual immorality as the singular legitimate cause of divorce (Matthew 19:9). Here "sexual immorality" (gr. πορνεία) carries with it the meaning of a number of sexual violations including fornication, adultery, homosexuality, bestiality and incest, all of which desecrate the marriage covenant. Jesus does not use the word μοιχεύω (translated "adultery") as the only impetus of divorce. Jesus' teaching on the legitimate cause of divorce should not be interpreted as adultery through extra-marital sexual intercourse only, but does imply the physical act of sexual intercourse outside of the covenantal boundaries of marriage. Wells Branch Community Church maintains the position that while lustful thinking and/or consumption of pornographic materials are indeed sin that is sexual in nature, the concession Jesus makes have sexual intercourse outside of the marriage covenant in view.⁵

In such cases, the offended party is permitted to seek divorce, though not required. Restoration and reconciliation is still possible through the power of the Holy Spirit, and should be always be sought. The offending party, however is not free to seek divorce (or remarry), since scripture does not afford them that right.

⁵ Μοιχεύω and πορνεία are indeed distinct and should not be understood to be merely stylistic variants. Hebrews 13:4, for example lists the two together: "Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous." Paul uses the word πορνεία to refer to the sin committed by a member of the Corinthian church having sexual relations with his father's wife (it is unclear if this was an act of incest, or if it was simply sexual intercourse with a different woman his father married.) In this case, the πορνεία or sexual immorality that was committed was not the man himself committing adultery against his wife (it is unclear if the man was married or not, and Paul does not specify as it is apparently irrelevant to the situation). Therefore, it is clear in Jesus' use of the word πορνεία that more than just a married individual having an extra-marital affair is in view.

With this in mind, it does seem evident that both πορνεία and Μοιχεύω have to do specifically with sexual behaviour, not just lustful thinking, since the Hebrews text mentions both relating to the marriage bed. Some may argue, however, that Jesus expanded the idea of what constitutes adultery to include lust without activity (Matt 5:27-28).

Desertion Based on Allegiance to Christ (I Cor 7:12-16)

Sexual Immorality is the only circumstance in which Jesus offers a legitimate reason for divorce. We can understand this to apply to any kind of marriage. Any divorce outside of this reason (and a very special exception concerning an unequally yoked marriage) should be considered illegitimate and sinful.

Paul adds a second provision for divorce for the believer in I Corinthians 7:15. In the case of a marriage between a Christian and an unbeliever, Paul encourages the believer to remain married as long as it is up to them. However, should their unbelieving spouse choose to communicate their desire to separate through divorce⁶, the believer is free to accept their spouse's desire for a divorce. In this case, the Christian is not guilty of any wrong and is free to remarry. Should an unbeliever seek to separate physically, but still communicates that they still desire to remain married, the believer should remain married. Should an unbeliever separate physically and refuse to communicate one way or the other, the believing spouse should continue to seek peace with their spouse until they (that is, the unbelieving spouse) communicate their decision (to either divorce or reconcile) or else commit adultery and free the believer to seek and initiate divorce.

Illegitimate

"Irreconcilable differences" or "loss of love" are never grounds for legitimate divorce according to scripture. While difficult to remain married when being in an unamicable relationship, the correct course of action is to seek peace and restoration of the relationship.

The incapacitation of a spouse due to mental or physical disability does not open the door to divorce. A loss of mental or physical faculties does not constitute "death" and should not be treated as such. (Ps. 139:16, 2 Sam 9)

⁶ The word for "separate" used by Paul in I Cor 7:15 is the Greek word χωρίζω. Unfortunately, the English word "separate" has many meanings and can be vague in exactly what kind of separation Paul is speaking of. On the one hand, "separate" could mean "dissolve the marriage, as in divorce," (see definition 2a of χωρίζω in BDAG) or "to depart through distance or physical space" (see definition 1 of χωρίζω in BDAG). BDAG references I Cor 7:15 in reference to definition 2a: Paul is referring not to physical abandonment, but to the unbeliever's desire to abandon the believing spouse through divorce. This would appear to be supported by χωρίζω being used by Jesus in Matthew 19:6, where he says "So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate (χωρίζω)." (note: BDAG chooses to understand χωρίζω here to mean "to depart through distance or physical space." However, since the joining that Jesus is referring to here is not simply physical, but in marriage, it is difficult to defend that Jesus is referring to simply a physical separation.)

However, because Paul's admonition to the believer is to remain married "if he consents to live with her," there is an argument to be made that a permanent, voluntary departure by an unbelieving spouse, is tantamount to communicating that the unbelieving spouse no longer consents to living with the believer, therefore is effectually asking for divorce. In any case, Paul never encourages the believer to initiate a divorce, but to consent to the desire of the unbelieving spouse should he or she desire divorce.

Involuntary separation such as imprisonment does not constitute a communication from an unbeliever as a refusal of consent to live with their believing spouse.

Abuse

Abuse of a spouse, emotionally, physically, verbally, or through neglect and abandonment, is a particularly heinous violation of the institution of marriage as it directly perverts and obscures the sacrificial, covenantal love of God that marriage was to represent. Unfortunately, how abuse is to be treated in the context of marriage and divorce is not specifically addressed in scripture. The singular act of abuse perpetrated by one spouse against another is an act of sin against God's commandment to love one another (Jn 13:34, Mark 12:30-31, et al) and more specifically, for husbands and wives to have a special, sacrificial love for one another (Eph 5:22-33).

A singular act of abuse, however, is not given as grounds for divorce by scripture, and therefore should not be the impetus for divorce. Any individual who has an illegitimate divorce based on a singular act of abuse is also not eligible for remarriage since their spouse has neither died nor committed adultery.

However, an unrepentant spouse who repeatedly abuses their spouse demonstrates to the church that they are apostate and may have denied the faith. (I Tim 5:8, James 2:14-26, Matt 18: 15-17, I Cor 5:5, Gal 6:7). The elders of the church may interpret this repeated and flagrant sin as a demonstration of a spouse's unregenerate state (that is, the elders understand that despite the individual's words claiming to be a Christian, the abusive spouse demonstrates clearly that they have not trusted in Christ for the forgiveness of sin and they are not indwelt by the Holy Spirit).

The elders may recommend that the victim of abuse separate from their abusive spouse for the sake of the victim's safety until their spouse is prepared to seek reconciliation and restoration. They would remain married officially, and the victim would be encouraged to devote himself/herself to prayer for the sake of their abusive spouse during that time of separation (I Cor 7:5). The victim is not free to seek divorce during this time and is still under their original marriage vows, since scripture never encourages a believer to initiate a divorce with their unbelieving spouse; they are, in fact, encouraged by remain married (I Cor 7:12-16). If the abusive spouse seeks divorce, the elders would recognize that the victim is free to accept that divorce from their abusive spouse as a believer is free to accept divorce from an unbeliever. Scripture encourages the believing spouse to remain married as long as it is up to them as their faithfulness and example is in some way a divine work of grace in the life of the unbeliever. (I Cor 7:12-16) If during their time of separation the abusive spouse commits adultery, the victim is free to initiate a legitimate divorce (Matt 19:9).

In the case of a spouse who abuses their children, repeatedly and unrepentantly, the advocating spouse may choose to separate from their abusive spouse in order to protect their children. The same conditions apply as the spouse who is the direct victim of abuse.

Remarriage - The Biblical Perspective

Legitimate

Remarriage is not addressed in great detail by scripture, and does not always appear as either a restriction or a freedom after teaching on divorce. However, the intent of God's design of marriage, along with what we understand of the restrictions and permissions placed on divorce (that is, in the way scripture describes individuals in certain circumstances to be "free" of any obligation to a previous marriage) affords some measure of clarity to when remarriage is permissible.

Death of a Spouse (1 Cor 7:39, Rom 7:2-3)

Even in the case of illegitimate divorce, the death of a spouse releases the surviving spouse from the marital vows. While there continues to be the need for repentance and restoration for any sinfulness that led to or came out of the divorce prior the death of the spouse, the surviving spouse is now free to remarry.

Sexual Immorality by a Spouse

In the case of sexual immorality, the victim is both free to seek divorce and remarry. By joining himself/herself with another, the offending spouse annul their previous marriage (1 Cor 6:16). Thus, the victim is free to remarry.

Divorce by an Unbelieving Spouse

In the case of divorce by an unbelieving spouse, the believer is free to marry. Paul urges those who are currently married to unbelievers to remain married (1 Cor 7:12-13), but concludes that it is permissible for the believer to give their unbelieving spouse a divorce should they seek it. Paul then generally encourages the believer to remain as he or she is, that is unmarried, but does not prohibit them from remarrying.

Pre-Conversion Divorce

In the case of an individual who was an unbeliever when they divorced their spouse, scripture does not directly address whether they are free to remarry once they become a Christian. However, scripture does declare that individual to be a new creation (2 Cor 5:17), and thereby free to live in accordance to God's commandments in scripture as it pertains to unmarriedness, marriage, divorce and remarriage. Again, Paul recommends such individuals remain as they are (1 Cor 7:12-13), but scripture seems to suggest that they are free to remarry.

In the Case of an Illegitimate Divorce

In the case of an individual who illegitimately divorces his or her spouse, the individual is not free to remarry until the other spouse either dies, remarries, or pursues a sexual relationship

with another partner. Once no possibility of reconciliation is available to the individual, either by death or because of their former spouse's legitimate new marriage, they are then free to remarry.

Illegitimate

The incapacitation of a spouse due to mental or physical disability does not open the door to divorce or remarriage. A loss of mental or physical faculties does not constitute "death" and should not be treated as such. (Ps. 139:16, 2 Sam 9)

When a man or woman illegitimately divorces a spouse, the only two options available to the individual are to be restored to their spouse, or else remain in unmarriedness. A lack of willingness or even inability to seek restoration by either party is not a biblically supported defense for remarriage. The person who remarries first commits adultery according to Matthew 19:9. However, Luke 16:18 expands this definition of adulterous remarriage as anyone who remarries outside of scripturally explicit circumstances. God views any remarriage outside of these circumstances because God never recognized the validity of the divorce in the first place (Matt 5:32, Mark 10:11). Because in the eyes of God, the two are still married, any remarriage is an act of adultery.

Act versus State of Adultery

The grievous nature of adultery in the act of illegitimate remarriage should not be understated. The consequences of that sin are very real. However, WBCC does not recognize the individual who remarries illegitimately as being in a state of adultery, that is, the individual does not continue to sin by remaining married to their new spouse. The new marriage is recognized by God by its covental vow, and both individuals should remain faithful to that vow.

The church does not in any way encourage divorce in order to be restored to a former marriage. Sinning against God in an attempt to undo a past sin is not in line with God's will, and cannot be blessed.

Ministry and Service in the Church for the Divorced/Remarried

General Service

A believer who has divorced, or divorced and remarried where permitted by scripture is welcomed and encouraged to serve in ministry at Wells Branch Community Church.

A believer who has divorced, or divorced and remarried illegitimately is permitted to serve in ministry at Wells Branch Community Church, but should make aware of their circumstances to the ministry leader before serving. Understanding that this may not always be possible, any believer who has divorced, or divorced and remarried illegitimately should be aware that they will receive encouragement towards repentance, reconciliation, and possibly restoration from their ministry leaders.

Membership

A believer who has divorced, or divorced and remarried where permitted by scripture may enter into covenantal membership with Wells Branch Community Church provided they fulfill all other requirements as outlined by the WBCC Principles and Practices.

A believer who has divorced, or divorced and remarried illegitimately is permitted to enter into covenantal membership with Wells Branch Community Church at the recommendation of the elders. The elders must determine if the individual could enter into membership in good standing, examining if the individual is still in sin.

The membership process, both in becoming a member and maintaining membership in good standing, requires the church to ask if the individual is in any ongoing, unrepentant sin. If that sin involves illegitimate divorce or remarriage, the elders are compelled to regard that sin as any other ongoing, unrepentant sin. The elders may ask the individual seeking or maintaining membership with the church to affirm the position of the church on matters of marriage, divorce and remarriage outlined in this document.

Leadership

While membership and general service is open to any believer (though with some caveats), leadership requirements as outlined by scripture do emphasize a higher standard than typical membership or service.

Pastoral Ministry

Because scripture does not offer a description or requirements of “Pastors” as the modern American church understands the term, it is not possible to directly permit or restrict an individual explicitly based on their divorce or remarriage. However, because “Pastors” in the modern sense fulfill the commission given to deacons and elders (depending on the ministry philosophy of the particular church), it is the position of Wells Branch Community Church to judge all pastors both present and future according to the requirements presented for elders and deacons found in I Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

Deacons and Elders

The requirements of overseers (Elder) and deacons in Paul’s letters to Timothy (I Tim 3) and Titus (Titus 1) generally require that such leaders be married to a single woman (I Tim 3:2) and manage his household well (I Tim 3:4). While there are multiple interpretations of “husband to one wife,” Paul instructs Timothy of widows eligible of care by the church to be “wife of one husband” in I Tim 5:9. Because it was not a meaningful practice for a woman to have multiple husbands at once, we can understand both 3:2 and 5:9 to be referring to being faithfully married to a single spouse. However, Paul does not restrict leadership from those who were married again due to the legitimate circumstances listed above. That is, I Timothy 3 does not seem to exclude a Christian man whose first wife had died, and had chosen to remarry. Nor does it appear to restrict against those who legitimately divorced their spouses on the grounds of sexual immorality. Since such restrictions do not exist, nor are they explicitly allowed, it is the position of Wells Branch Community Church to judge any elder or deacon candidate according to the legitimacy of and faithfulness to their current state (married or unmarried).

Divorce Intervention and Church Discipline

Divorce in any form is contrary to God's design for marriage (Mark 10:9), but because of the sinful nature of humanity, the church is called to engage with the reality of divorce with both grace and truth. God has given the church the authority (Matt 16:19, Heb 13:17) and the responsibility of shepherding those involved in the divorce process either through reconciliation, separation⁷, or discipline. The role of the elders of Wells Branch Community Church in divorce intervention and church discipline can be outlined as follows:

1. The elders of the church will always follow what is prescribed by Jesus in Matthew 18:15-20 as the model for church discipline, always with the goal of holiness and restoration in view. Genuine and earnest repentance leads to a restoration to community and fellowship with the local body of believers in the church.
2. In the case of alleged abuse, the role of the elders is to counsel separation for the safety of the abused and to report abuse to the proper authorities.
3. In the case of a church member's divorce filing under legitimate circumstances, the role of the elders is to always counsel reconciliation, but to consider the divorce valid and support the parties in the healing process.
4. In the case of a church member's divorce filing under illegitimate circumstances, the role of the elders is to pursue the initiator of the divorce for the purpose of repentance and restoration. If the initial invitation to repentance is refused, church discipline is initiated following Matthew 18:15-20. In the case of only one spouse pursuing illegitimate divorce, the elders would initiate church discipline on that spouse. If the spouse follows through with the divorce, or if the elders discern by the Holy Spirit an unrepentant heart, the individual may be removed and treated as an unbeliever (Matt. 18:17). The divorce is then considered abandonment by an unbeliever.
5. In the case of a church member's plan to remarry under legitimate circumstances, the role of the elders is to counsel, advise, and support the remarriage in the same way the church approaches any marriage.
6. In the case of a church member's (members') plan to remarry under illegitimate circumstances, the role of the elders is to pursue the church member for the purpose of

⁷ It is important to note that "separation" in this case, is not necessarily a legal separation. There is no "legal separation" of married individuals in the state of Texas, therefore the courts will not recognize a parent's right to things like custody or financial support. It is possible to draft a legal agreement that is enforceable through the civil courts, but both parties would have to sign the agreement. In the case of abuse, it is possible to obtain restraining orders in order to protect victims of abuse.

repentance and restoration. This involves first, the cessation of the illegitimate pursuit of marriage and second, restoration to either the original marriage or singleness.

7. In the case of any individual who is not a church member seeking divorce or separation, legitimate or illegitimate, the role of the elders is to direct the individual to the Biblical view of marriage, divorce, and remarriage found in this position paper. While the truth of God is universal to all individuals, the responsibility of church discipline rests in the membership of the local body of believers.

Repentance

The elders understand that some people are not able to overcome the hardness of heart in their marriage and persist in breaking fellowship with their spouse to the point of divorce. This is devastating for the person's walk with God and the church as a whole. Although divorce is the result of sin, and God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16), it is not the unforgivable sin. The elders have sought for a solution for someone who through the hardness of heart described in Matthew 19:1-9 might repent.

1 Cor 7:10-11 spells out the way of repentance for those who are divorced. Paul wrote, "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."

The elders will always counsel to reconcile the marriage. If the husband/wife decides to get divorced against that counsel, they must acknowledge their sin and repent by remaining unmarried, or remarry their spouse. The elders will initiate Matthew 18 church discipline in the case of an individual pursuing a new marriage (i.e., dating, engagement, etc.).