

MILLERSBURG GBC POSITION ON MARRIAGE, DIVORCE & REMARRIAGE

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

This statement on divorce and remarriage is the product of much study and discussion by the Elder board of Millersburg Grace Brethren Church (MGBC). It should be read as the official statement of MGBC. While there are aspects of this statement that some elders do not hold as personal convictions, we all assent to this statement being the church guide for membership and discipline.

Diversity of viewpoints in MGBC and the Evangelical Church

Among the membership of MGBC complete agreement does not exist concerning the biblical guidelines for marriage and divorce. This lack of agreement is a reflection in the evangelical church worldwide.

Devout evangelical Biblical scholars disagree. John Murray has written a standard work on the topic titled "Divorce", (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1961). In this book he defends the view that divorce and remarriage are Biblically permitted when a partner is adulterous or when a partner deserts willfully and irremediably.

On the other side William Heth and Gordon Wenham have written a book titled "Jesus and Divorce" (Waynesboro, Paternoster Press, 2002). They defend the position that while divorce may at times be unavoidable, remarriage is not permitted while the partner is still living. There are many books on both sides.

This contemporary lack of agreement among evangelical Christians reflects differing historical positions taken over the centuries. For example, all but one of the early church fathers in the first five centuries of the church agreed that remarriage following divorce for any reason is adulterous. The marriage bond was seen to unite both parties until the death of one of them. However, during the Protestant Reformation, the Reformers allowed for divorce and remarriage in the case of adultery and abandonment of an unbelieving spouse.

This ambiguity and confusion exists today, even within our own Grace Brethren Fellowship. GBC pastors are divided, taking either Murray or Wenham & Heth's position on the issue.

If we are to be a Biblical church (a church with mutual accountability and proper discipline) the question that must be faced is; what convictions concerning divorce and remarriage can we agree upon as a church to make the foundation of our accountability and discipline? The purpose of this document is to lay out our position and convictions in the light of Scriptural evidence.

No elder should be asked to act in a manner inconsistent with his beliefs. (Romans 14). Therefore each elder will teach, counsel and perform weddings according to his personal conviction within the parameters of this statement. But when it comes to church membership and church discipline we must find a level of expectation for marital relations that we can agree no member of MGBC may violate while remaining a member in good standing.

Is Divorce or Remarriage the Unforgivable Sin?

When divorce is discussed in this way, it is common for someone to ask whether divorce is the unforgivable sin. The answer is found in the following texts.

"Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (Hebrews 9:22).

"(Jesus said) this is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28).

"Every one who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (Acts 10:43).

"All sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin" (Mark 3:28f.).

"Let the wicked man forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon" (Isaiah 55:7).

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

From these wonderful promises we learn that forgiveness for sins is available on the basis of the shed blood of Jesus. Forgiveness is available for all sins, without exception. Forgiveness is received freely through trusting Christ. And trusting Christ involves confessing sin as sin and turning away from it to embrace the ways of God with joy.

The only unforgivable sin is the sin that we refuse to confess and forsake. We commit unforgivable sin when we cleave to a sin so long and so tenaciously that we can no longer confess it as sin and turn from it. The blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Matthew 12:31f) is the resistance of his convicting work to the point where he withdraws, leaving the sinner in helpless hardness of heart.

Neither divorce nor remarriage are in themselves the unforgivable sins any more than murder, stealing, lying or coveting. "All sins will be forgiven the sons of men." God is faithful and just to forgive—he will honor the worth of his Son's sacrifice for all who confess their sin and bank their hope on the saving work of Christ.

Forgiveness is NOT unconditional. It is conditional. This does not mean it can be earned. It means forgiveness is given to those who truly trust Christ. Trust is not an act by which anything can be earned. It calls attention to the worth of God's grace, not the worth of our action. But trust is not mere intellectual assent to Biblical facts. It involves hearty affirmation of the will of Christ. Therefore trusting Christ involves confessing sin as sin and taking up arms against it.

Therefore the ultimate form of church discipline (excommunication) is never a simple response to past sin. It is always a response to sin that a person continues to affirm or practice. No past sin that is renounced, confessed and forsaken is a ground of church discipline.

Therefore marital sin is in the same category as lying and killing and stealing when it comes to church discipline and church membership. If someone has committed such sins, the issue is not whether they be forgiven? Rather it is an issue of repentance. Do they renounce it? And do they do what they can to make it right?

If a person in the church was known to affirm lying, killing or stealing as appropriate behavior for a Christian, that person would be liable to the discipline of the church. Not because they have lied, killed or stolen in the past and cannot be forgiven, but because they go on affirming NOW that sin is not sin.

Or if a person was openly planning to lie, kill or steal with a view to receiving (cheap!) forgiveness afterward, that person too would be liable to church discipline.

In all these ways illegitimate divorce and remarriage are NOT in a class by themselves. They are not the unforgivable sin. When it comes to church discipline and church membership, they should be treated the same way other public sins are treated.

What makes divorce and remarriage seem to be a special matter of concern in the church is that very seldom does someone affirm the rightness of lying, killing, and stealing. But people often affirm the rightness of divorce and remarriage.

In other words what usually causes the conflict is not whether divorce and remarriage are unforgivable sins, but whether they are sins at all —to be confessed (from the past) and to be avoided (in the future).

If a person has stolen things in his past and wants to join the church, no one would say that we are treating stealing as the unforgivable sin if we insist that this person confess his sin and begin to make amends to those he defrauded. A sin is not unforgivable, but it must be confessed as sin, renounced as an option, and its effects made right (as far as possible).

So it is with illegitimate divorce or remarriage. It should not keep anyone out of the church nor put anyone out of the church any more than a past life of robbery. But there must be a heartfelt confession of the sin committed and a renouncing of it and an affirming of what is right, just as with all other sins of the past.

Any person who becomes a member of MGBC is making a commitment to hold common convictions about what is right and wrong in behavior as well as in doctrine. Without this shared conviction the possibility of holding each other accountable is gone.

The purpose of this document is to clearly state our current understanding of the issues surrounding divorce and remarriage based on Scripture. When is remarriage considered a sin requiring repentance and in what cases does Scripture permit remarriage after divorce? This document provides guidance for these matters.

Overview

Marriage represents the highest level of human commitment to another person and represents the relationship of Christ to the church (Eph. 5). It must be treated and supported with the utmost care and respect. The active breaking of the marriage covenant receives the sharpest condemnation from God (Mal. 2:10-16). The Lord has given us all the resources necessary for a couple to fulfill His expectations in their marriage.

Nobody uses these resources perfectly, but violating the marriage covenant has severe consequences.

Whenever divorce is threatened or even has already happened, Scripture dictates that we seek reconciliation by all reasonable means. When a divorce does occur, the normal procedure is to be reconciled or to remain single (I Cor. 7:10-12).

Jesus said that men should not separate, (through their own laws and wishes), what God has joined together (Mat. 19:6). We seek to maintain our commitment to the sacred nature of marriage and to our confidence that people led by the Holy Spirit can reconcile and heal their

marriages and make them work again.

However, we also believe that God, who instituted marriage, has provided guidelines for the process of divorce. His desire is for every married couple to faithfully uphold their marriage covenant until parted by death.

If there are certain offenses against that covenant which are viewed by God as violations so severe that He declares freedom for a divorce to occur; only God has the authority to declare such freedom. God shows us through Scripture those situations where a violation of the marriage covenant may permit divorce. Where He has not given freedom, we must be careful not to separate, through our own laws and wishes, what God has joined together.

It is beyond the scope of this policy to address specifically every possible divorce or remarriage situation. We recognize that there may be individual cases in which we cannot make an absolute, clear determination based on Scripture. In those cases, we must be careful not to impose artificial or personal standards on an individual.

It should also be carefully noted that this policy is intended only to answer the question of whether an individual can divorce or remarry without violating God's commands. In other words, this policy deals with whether the individual is Biblically free to divorce or remarry. The additional question of whether it is wise for him/her to do so, given the circumstances, level of maturity, attitudes, etc., must be decided in light of Biblical guidelines.

We furthermore recognize that any policy is vulnerable to abuse, deceit, or manipulation by those who simply wish to justify their own actions regardless of what God says. Since this policy will be applied by fallible people, some will be able to bypass the guidelines it is meant to protect. In such a case, we rest on the assurance that, while an individual may badly fool us, that person does not escape the knowledge or discipline of God (Heb. 4:13).

In the course of this policy, the adjectives "Biblical" and "unbiblical" are applied to the subject of divorce. Calling a divorce Biblical does not imply that either party is free of sin or guilt. It also does not grant freedom to remarry in all situations. The term simply means that the divorce in question fits the model in Scripture in which God has granted freedom to divorce.

It is our prayer that this policy will be useful in guiding people to obedience to the Lord and in maintaining our commitment to marriage and the truth as a church. May God grant us all wisdom and courage to be faithful to the marvelous covenant of marriage that He has given.

MILLERSBURG GBC POLICY ON MARRIAGE, DIVORCE & REMARRIAGE

I. MARRIAGE

A. What is necessary to constitute a Biblical marriage?

1. What are the Biblical requirements for marriage?

All marriages are recognized by God but the following three points are necessary for a Biblical marriage according to Genesis 223-25):

- (a) Marriage is between a man and a woman as defined by God in Genesis 2:24-25 and re-affirmed by Jesus in Matthew 19:4-6. Homosexual relations are forbidden (Romans 26-27, I Timothy 1:10).
- (b) Leaving the former position of guardianship by parents
- (c) Cleaving or uniting together in a new commitment to a spouse
- (d) Exchanging marital rights sexually

2. What are the legal requirements for the marriage?

The marriage must conform to governmental regulations unless those regulations violate God's law. In addition to the Scriptural guidelines, there are the following legal implications for marriage:

- (a) Mutual consent between a man and a woman who meet legal requirements and are not already married.
- (b) Legal acceptance and conformity to legal requirements as the couple recognized is being married.
- (c) Exchange of marital rights as the couple assumes the role of husband and wife as pledged. This would include sexual relations and legal obligations.

3. Must both partners be Christians?

No. God has commanded believers not to marry outside the faith (II Cor. 6:14-16). However, a marriage between a believer and an unbeliever or between two unbelievers is still recognized by God as a marriage. A believer who marries an unbeliever violates God's command. Two unbelievers will not understand the spiritual implications of marriage, but they are not unequally yoked.

4. Must the union be consummated?

Yes, where there is expectation of consummation as part of the marriage. In marriage, the man's body belongs to his wife and the woman's body belongs to her husband, so that abstinence from sexual relations should only be by mutual agreement (I Cor. 7:3-5). However, failure or inability to consummate a marriage does not automatically in itself negate a marriage. There may be cases in which a marriage is formed without expectation of consummation, such as in the case of physical disabilities. In these cases, consummation is not necessary to make the union a recognized marriage.

Ohio law allows for an annulment on the grounds of fraud in the case where the marriage is never consummated because of the refusal of one of the partners. Biblically, this refusal would be a violation of the covenant the two have made before God, and we believe an annulment is permissible.

B. What is the Scriptural picture behind the marriage bond?

- a) It pictures Christ and the Church (Eph. 5)
- b) It pictures God's plan (Gen. 2:24)
- c) It pictures purity (Heb. 13:4)
- d) It pictures the unity of the God-head (Gen. 2)
- e) It pictures God and Israel (Hosea)

C. Does sexual intercourse alone constitute marriage?

No. According to Genesis 2:24, the "one flesh" relationship occurs when two people are bound together spiritually, physically, and emotionally in an exclusive commitment to one another witnessed and formed by God (Malachi 2:15). With this union comes the rights and responsibilities that God assigns to a husband and wife. The Bible clearly defines marriage as more than a sexual union. However, sexual intimacy is certainly more than just a physical exchange, for a non-covenantal bond can develop between two people who are not married. However, the bond itself is not marriage, and when it is developed outside the context of leaving and cleaving, it can enslave a person in a sinful relationship (1 Cor. 6:16). Sexual intimacy that pleases God occurs within the context of the marriage covenant.

II. DIVORCE

A. Are there any biblical grounds for divorce?

It is clear from Scripture that God hates divorce (Mal. 2:16). It violates God's intention for marriage. (Gen. 2:24). Yet, Moses permitted a certificate of divorce for "some indecency". The New Testament, however, places restrictions on this Biblical permission.

1. Adultery?

Yes. Some elders interpret the word "porneia" in Matt 19:9 to mean adultery. Adultery is any form of sexual intimacy on the part of a married person with another outside of a marriage. The adultery that Jesus mentions is the physical act of sexual involvement. If an adulterous spouse is repentant, the other partner is obligated to forgive and seek reconciliation, but forgiveness does not guarantee reconciliation. Jesus does not require or even recommend divorce as a response to adultery, but He does allow it. He does not specify the frequency or circumstances of the offense.

No. Some elders believe the word "porneia" in Matthew 19:9 refers to a unique instance of sexual unfaithfulness during the Jewish betrothal period. This was the apparent case with Mary and Joseph. When Joseph found Mary to be with child during their betrothal period (Matthew 1:18-19) he sought to "divorce her quietly". A betrothal relationship, even though not yet consummated, required a divorce. Some elders believe Matthew made this "except for porneia" notation to clarify that Joseph's proposed divorce was a "just" act, in light of Jesus calling all divorce sin (Mark 10:5-9). This unique exception is no longer applicable to today.

2. Desertion?

Yes. in the case of a believer being deserted by an unbelieving spouse. This allowance is only granted in cases where the person comes to faith after being married, because a believer is forbidden to marry an unbeliever (II Cor. 6:14-16). In the case of two believers, the deserted spouse is commanded to reconcile or to remain single (I Cor. 7:10-11). Desertion is evident when the unbelieving spouse shows an unwillingness to maintain the marital relationship by initiating and pursuing divorce or by abandoning the believing spouse. Please note this allowance is only granted for divorce. Possible allowance for remarriage is covered in Section III, Point 2.

3. Health conditions including catastrophic illness?

No. Such occurrences are tragic, but the marriage covenant is a commitment to faithfulness

regardless of a spouse's ability to function mentally or physically.

4. Physical, emotional, verbal, sexual abuse?

No. However, the Bible does not require a person to simply endure the abuse. Steps should be taken to seek protection including intervention by legal and criminal authorities as needed.

5. Unbelief?

No. A believer must remain with the willing unbelieving partner (I. Cor. 7:13).

6. Other?

We find no other occasions when God permits a person to seek a divorce.

B. Is the standard the same for unbelievers?

Yes. God's moral law is universal and binding upon all people (Rom. 1:18-20). God's standards of marriage are part of His moral law. Certainly, God forgives sin when a person becomes a new creation in Christ through reconciliation (II Cor. 5:16-19), and He also forgives the sins of a believer who repents and confesses (I John 1:9). Forgiveness means that God's judgment no longer hangs over a person for his sin. God's wrath against the sinner is satisfied by the blood of Christ. However, the consequences of sin, such as broken relationships or physical and emotional scars, may remain throughout life.

C. What about legal separation?

In Ohio, this is called "Action for Separate Maintenance" or "Alimony Only Action." This does not legally terminate a marriage, but it does allow for division of liabilities and resources as well as provision of financial support. Although usually a legal separation is sought by mutual agreement, it can be initiated by one partner even if it is contested by the other. The action can continue indefinitely and never requires the couple to follow through with divorce proceedings. Most legal separations do end in divorce, however.

A legal separation should not be pursued casually since it tends to further divide partners and inhibit Biblical reconciliation. However, it does provide an alternative to divorce or dissolution with the benefit of legal protection while a couple continues to work on Biblical solutions to their problems.

D. What about dissolution?

A dissolution is simply a divorce by mutual agreement without any assignment of fault but it still is a legal termination of the marriage. Therefore, the same Biblical principles which govern divorce would be applied to dissolution. In the case of a Christian who has Biblical grounds for divorce, a dissolution may avoid some of the hostility of a divorce trial. Considerations such as children or the willingness of both partners to settle fairly may make dissolution a preferable option in such a case. However, it is not emotionally easy or painless, for a marriage is still ending. A Christian who does not have biblical grounds for divorce should not agree to a dissolution.

E. What about annulment?

Legally, annulment means that the state declares that no valid marriage actually took place because a state requirement for a valid marriage has been violated. Currently, Ohio law allows annulment for one of six reasons.

- (a) Being under the legal age of marriage.
- (b) Having another spouse at the time of the marriage (bigamy).
- (c) Mental incompetency.
- (d) The consent of either party was obtained by fraud.
- (e) The consent of either party was obtained by force.

(f) The marriage of the parties was never consummated.

Biblically, a marriage should not be in violation of the legal requirements of the state (Rom. 13:1-2). Therefore, an annulment is binding on a Christian, and a Christian may seek an annulment if one of the above conditions exists. In saying this, we realize that the annulment law, like any, can be abused by a partner who is simply looking for an acceptable way to end a marriage. We must act in obedience to God with the information and evidence we have available. Ultimately, a person's motives and honesty are judged by the Lord (Heb. 4:12-13).

F. Should a Christian counter-file?

People are sometimes told that counter-filing is necessary to protect their interests in a divorce initiated by their partner. This is not true. A simple response to the initial filing, even one that denies the charges and refuses the request for divorce, can include a request for things such as legal and financial protection, support, counseling, or child custody. It is not wise for a person to give no response to a divorce filing because the court then treats the case as an uncontested divorce. The marriage will be legally terminated and the party who did not respond will have no say in division of property, child custody, etc. Counter-filing amounts to asking for a divorce, and so should not be pursued. A Christian may respond to a divorce filing without seeking to end the marriage.

III. Remarriage

A. Are there possible Biblical grounds for remarriage?

Yes. Some elders believe that divorce does in fact end a marriage. The Bible does not say that the former spouses are still married after the legal action of divorce. However, responsibilities to the former marriage covenant do still exist Biblically, except in cases where God has given freedom (Matt. 19:9; I Cor. 7:10-11). Only in certain cases is a Christian free to pursue a marriage to a new partner in the Lord.

No. Some elders believe the Bible may give reasons for a marriage ending but that covenant marriage, a oneness union created by God (Malachi 2:15), is indissoluble by humanity. The legal action of divorce does not break what God has joined together. The covenant only ends with the death of the spouse (I. Cor. 7:39-40).

1. Adultery?

Yes. Some elders believe the spouse who was sinned against may be free to remarry (Matt. 19:9.) The spouse who committed the adultery is not free to remarry unless the former spouse dies (1 Cor. 7:39-40).

No. Some elders believe adultery does not end the covenant in the eyes of God (Deut. 24:1-4). If either spouse remarries, adultery is committed (Luke 16:18). Only when a spouse dies is the person free to remarry (1 Cor. 7:39-40).

2. Desertion?

Yes. Some elders believe in the case of a believer being deserted by an unbelieving spouse, the believer is "not under bondage" to remain single (I Cor. 7:15). The person is free to pursue a new marriage. Desertion is evident when the unbelieving spouse shows an unwillingness to maintain the marital relationship by initiating and pursuing divorce or by abandoning the believing spouse.

No. Some elders believe that the phrase "not under bondage" refers to the bondage of guilt over the marriage ending, not the bondage to remain single. Paul is telling the abandoned Christian not to suffer under undo guilt or shame because the marriage ended. This does not give the person the freedom to marry another. They must reconcile with their former spouse or remain single.

3. Remarriage of former spouse?

Yes. Some elders believe if a person was part of an unbiblical divorce or if a person is the guilty party in a Biblical divorce which involves a Christian, then the remarriage of the former spouse does not give freedom to remarry. Matthew 19:9 clearly says that remarriage after an unbiblical divorce is an act of adultery. The only exception would be a person who was divorced unbiblically against the person's will. In that case, the former spouse's remarriage would constitute an act of adultery against the marriage covenant.

No. Some elders believe the re-marriage of either spouse is always adulterous (Mark 10:11-12) and that adultery never breaks the marriage covenant made with their former spouse and God. The divorced person must remain single until the death of their former spouse (1 Cor. 7:39-40).

4. Other?

We find no other occasions when God permits a person to seek remarriage.

IV. Other Issues

A. Can a divorced or remarried person be restored to the position of elder or deacon?

No. Person's remarried after a divorce will forgo positions of official leadership at MGBC, specifically the offices of elder and deacon (I Timothy 3:2, 12).

B. What about a Christian who unbiblically divorces or remarries while attending another church, then begins attending MGBC?

It is not our practice to question anyone about possible areas of sin when that individual begins attending MGBC. These issues would be addressed at the point the individual begins to seek ministry involvement, membership, or where the need for counsel arises whether by the individual's request or by the church responding to observed or reported issues.

C. Because this document allows a pastor to have differing positions on divorce and re-marriage, what happens if a person qualifies for re-marriage and desires to do so at MGBC?

The person may have their wedding/reception at MGBC. If the person approaches the pastor to perform the wedding, but the pastor cannot in good conscience do so, the person must find another pastor to perform the wedding. The name of that pastor must be submitted for approval to the elder board at least three months before the wedding.