



# Church Policy Statement on Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage.

## Introduction

This is a policy statement of Somerset West Baptist Church regarding beliefs concerning marriage, divorce and remarriage.

## What We Believe About Marriage

We believe that God has sanctioned marriage between a man and a woman, therefore we believe in heterosexual relationships between a natural man and a natural woman within the confines of lawful matrimony (constitution clause 4.1.12). This idea is supported by the account of creation in Genesis chapters 1 and 2. Genesis 1:26-28 provides that God created man in His own image, both male and female. The passage implies that a unity of one man and one woman is in some way necessary to fully represent the image of God in mankind.

Genesis chapter 2 provides a more detailed account in which God created the first man, Adam, and decided that it was not good for him to be alone. (Genesis 2:18). God indicated that He would make "a suitable helper for him." God brought all of the animals to Adam, but none of them was a suitable helper for him, so God then created Eve, the first woman, from part of Adam himself. God did not create a second man to be Adam's helpmate, or an assortment of multiple women, but rather one woman. Together they were man and wife and had "no shame" or sin in their union with each other (Genesis 2:15-25).

Jesus Christ reaffirmed the teaching of the Old Testament when He said, as recorded in Matthew 19:4-6, "Haven't you read, he replied, that at the beginning the creator made them male and female and said for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate."

The Apostle Paul states in Ephesians 5:22-32 that marriage is not merely a human institution, but is a special divine metaphor that is supposed to illustrate the union of Christ and the church. For this reason also, only a union between a man and a woman can be a proper marriage because a union between two men, two women, or one man and multiple women or any collection of people could not properly illustrate the relationship between Christ and His church.

## What we believe about divorce and remarriage

We recognize that God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16). However, we also recognize this in the sense that in as much as God hates divorce that He does not hate us. We believe God hates divorce because of the effects it has on us. The painful effects of divorce are often many years in coming and many years in adjusting to. The upheaval it brings to one's life are immense. There is often a sense of failure and guilt that plague the soul. There can be a sense of loneliness that is overwhelming. There can be a sense of a shattered future, which can be all consuming. Courtroom disputes only compound the personal agony.

Added to this is the distress that it causes to children. Parents are left to hope that the trauma of divorce will not ruin their children's own marriages one day. Custody battles and maintenance disputes only deepen the pain children have to face. Over and above this are the awkward visitation rights that can lengthen the trauma over many years.

Jesus, while being an exceptionally caring person, was also very firm when it came to his teaching on divorce. In Mark 10:9 he says, "What God has joined together, let man not separate". The great task before the church then is how do we love biblically in the face of divorce and remarriage? This is a task that is both mixed with tears of compassion and a desire to be obedient to the teaching of Scripture. This alone will glorify Christ and ensure the church remains healthy and effective.

Divorce and remarriage is not an unforgiveable sin. Just like murder, stealing, lying or coveting, "every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven" (Matthew 12:31). God is faithful to forgive all who confess their sin and place their hope on the saving work of Jesus Christ.

The issue is not whether marital sin can be forgiven since it falls into the same category of sins like lying, or killing, or stealing. Instead the issue is whether the persons concerned will admit that what they did is a sin? And are they willing to do what they can to make it right?

What makes divorce and remarriage unique is that it's very rare to find someone affirming the rightness of lying, or killing, or stealing. However, people seem prone to affirming the rightness of divorce and remarriage.

The decisive issue at SWBC is what can we agree on from the Scriptures on what is right and wrong when it comes to divorce and remarriage. Is there biblical support that makes divorce and remarriage legitimate? And if so, under what circumstances?

### The Guidelines

1. A believer and unbeliever should not marry (1 Cor. 7:39; 2 Cor. 6:14-15).
2. Since death breaks the marriage bond (Rom. 7:2-3; 1 Cor. 7:39), remarriage is permissible without sin for a believing widow or widower, if the marriage is with another believer.
3. Divorce may be permitted when a spouse deserts the relationship, commits adultery, or is dangerously abusive (1 Cor. 7:15; Matthew 19:9; 1 Cor. 7:11).

"Divorce" in this statement should not suggest a final and permanent end to the relationship if the spouses are both alive and not remarried. Reconciliation can still happen, even after long periods of separation. However, divorce is permitted in certain cases, and that leaves the abandoned, or abused spouse free to remarry.

We want to emphasize that the expression "may be permitted" means that it may be possible, after some inquiry, that it is revealed that the abandoned partner engaged in inappropriate behaviour that drove the other away, which means a change is required at home rather than a divorce.

Additionally we want to emphasize that forgiveness and reconciliation between spouses, even where adultery has occurred, is the preferred option to separation or divorce. We see this implied in Matthew 18:21-22, "Then Peter came and said to Jesus, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?' Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.'" (See Luke 17:3-4)

4. The remarriage of the aggrieved, divorced spouse may be viewed as severing the former marriage so that the unmarried spouse whose behaviour did not biblically justify being divorced, may be free to remarry a believer (Matthew 19:9), if he or she has confessed all known sin in the divorce, and has made significant progress in overcoming any destructive behaviours and attitudes.

We recognize that there will be differences of opinion among us on this as believers regarding remarriage. As elders we regard this fourth statement as biblical, respecting those who differ in opinion and do not expect anyone to act against their conscience in attending, supporting or performing weddings they regard as contrary to their interpretation of Scripture.

We encourage every member to wrestle in prayer and biblical study in their thinking through the issue of remarriage, with the aim of wanting to be obedient to God's Word. We encourage members to weigh carefully the arguments both for and against it.

Further, we want to uphold the goodness and blessings of a life of singleness in service to God, whether before or after marriage. We see this commended in 1 Corinthians 7:7,11,32-35, and confirmed by the examples of Jesus and Paul and many of the great single saints.

5. After serious efforts have been made toward reconciliation the aggrieved partners referred to in guideline #3 may, together with the leadership of the church, come to regard their marriages as irreparably broken. In such cases remarriage may be a legitimate step, if taken with serious reckoning that this cuts off all possibility of a reconciliation that God may yet be willing to produce.

This fifth guideline is the hardest allowance for us to make as elders. While both spouses are alive and unmarried reconciliation is still possible. It's difficult to condone a step that decisively discontinues what God meant to be permanent (1 Corinthians 7:10-11).

We believe that 1 Corinthians 7:15 ("If the unbelieving partner desires to separate, let it be so, in such a case the brother or sister is not bound.") gives freedom to a Christian to remarry if abandoned. We also believe that denying remarriage puts an undeserved strain on the divorced person who may not believe he or she has the gift of celibacy (1 Corinthians 7:7).

However we all agree as elders that every effort should be made at reconciliation, including the possible intervention of the church, before any spouse is forced into singleness or is free to remarry.

6. The aggrieving partners referred to in #3 (who were guilty of abandonment, adultery or abuse) should repent and be reconciled to God and to their spouses (1 Corinthians 7:11; 1 John 1:9). If it is too late because their spouses have remarried, then they should remain single because they left their first marriage without Biblical warrant (Matthew 19:9; Luke 16:18; 1 Corinthians 7:11).
  
7. The amount of time that has passed and the change in standing from unbeliever to believer does not alter the application of the guidelines for divorce and remarriage (See Matthew 19:4-6) which highlights the fact that enduring marriages are part of God's plan for all his human creation, not just his redeemed people.)

In closing, we would like to encourage any person who is thinking of getting married, divorced or remarried to recognize that there are eternal consequences for their decisions and should therefore seek counsel from the pastors and/or elders of SWBC before any decision is taken.

### **Recommended Resources**

Timothy Keller	'The Meaning of Marriage'
Matt Chandler	'The Mingling of Souls: God's design for love, marriage, sex, and redemption'
Francis & Lisa Chan	'You and Me Forever: Marriage in Light of Eternity'
John Mark Comer	'Loveology: God. Love. Marriage. Sex. And the Never-Ending Story of Male and Female'
Frank Retief	Divorce
Spiros Zodhaites	What about Divorce?
William A Heth & Gordan J Wenham	Jesus and Divorce