

MARRIAGE, DIVORCE, AND REMARRIAGE
A Position Paper by the Elders for First Evangelical Church
(Session Approved 10/10/11)

The elder community of First Evangelical Church, conscientious of our role as spiritual overseers to assist our church members in forming and maintaining biblical convictions on a variety of subjects, took time in 2010-2011 to study the subject of marriage for the purpose of drafting a position paper. We attempted to account for everything the Bible says about marriage utilizing books, studies, and other evangelical churches' position papers in formulating our own position paper on marriage.

Our Session has generated three policy statements, in 1978, 1989, and 1999, addressing marriage, divorce, and remarriage. In this paper we seek to clarify and harmonize the rationale within our policy statements. Entering this project as an elder community, we recognized differences among ourselves pertaining to policy rationales, particularly on the so-called biblical "exception clauses" appealed to within evangelicalism to justify divorce and the wisdom of remarriage following divorce. But we hold more of our core convictions about marriage in common, and the year of study behind this paper proceeded in the spirit of the axiom, "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."

This position paper is offered to our church both in hope and prayer: in hope that it substantively summarizes key evangelical convictions about marriage and in prayer for all who read it to practice faithful marriage.

We present our conclusions in three headings: **Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage**

Marriage

Marriage, a human relationship ordained and instituted by God, is a covenant union before God (Mal. 2:14) between one man and one woman for their lifetime together (Gen. 2:20-25). The most intimate of all human relationships, marriage illustrates in physical form God's union with His people, an analogy carried over from the Old to the New Testament (Isa. 54:5; Jer. 3:20; Ezek. 16; Hosea 2:14-23; Eph. 5:23-24). Furthermore, it is our conviction that the unity-in-time of human marriage depicts God's unity within Himself in eternity. Accordingly, marriage should be honored, celebrated, and protected; it should be regarded as the most sacred and binding of all human commitments (Prov. 5:18-19; Mal. 2:15; Mark 10:6-9; Heb. 13:4; 1 Peter 3:7).

When God created Adam and Eve (Gen. 1:26-27), He told them to “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth...” (1:28). They became “one flesh” before God (Gen. 2:24), a unity sealed via their sexual union. Scripture teaches that the one-flesh union of marriage constitutes an intellectual, emotional, and spiritual unity in addition to the physical union. “So they are no longer two, but one” (Matt. 19:5-6). When the husband and wife become one flesh, their God-created individualities are not lost but enriched by each other.

It is in marriage only that a man and a woman legitimately become united as one flesh. Apart from marriage, sexual union is illegitimate and contrary to God’s purposes for His people (1 Cor. 6:16-20)—and this illegitimacy applies to non-Christians as well, for marriage is God’s design and oversight. For Christians, however, a husband and wife’s sexual union seals the covenant a marrying man and woman enter into before God (Mal. 2:14; 1 Cor. 7:1-5).

Thus, in Christian marriage vows, the man and woman solemnly swear fidelity to one another for life, depicting the covenant Christ has unconditionally made with His bride, the church (Eph. 5:31-32). The covenant is made by vow and sealed (consummated) by sexual union. God’s standard is chastity before marriage and fidelity afterwards. Note how Paul often warned against “sexual immorality” in contexts of marital fidelity (1 Cor. 6:13; 7:2ff; Eph. 5:3, 22-33).

As was true for the original couple Adam and Eve (Gen. 4:1-2), the one-flesh union of marriage also creates a new family unit which we regard as the fundamental unit of society: husband, wife, and children. We believe the purpose of marriage as designed by God includes, but is not limited to, propagation of children, “bringing them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4; cf. Deut. 6:7).

Christian marriage is a union of two believers professing faith alone in Jesus Christ alone by grace alone (1 Cor. 7:39, 2 Cor. 6:14-15). Therefore marriage at its best exists first and foremost to glorify God. As human beings individually reflect the “image and likeness” of God (Gen. 1:26), a man and woman in marriage also display His glory complementarily, not as copies of each other. In this sense marriage, as a kind of first-fruits of created order, glorifies God as creator. But marriage also glorifies God as redeemer; to the degree that Christians live out their commitment to Christ with integrity (Eph. 5:1-2) they reflect to one another, to their children, and to the church and the world around them the gospel of God’s redeeming love.

In addition to this intrinsic good of Christian marriage, we believe there are further “goods” of Christian marriage: the mutual help and companionship husbands and wives give each other; the emotional fulfillment and physical pleasure provided by marital

intimacy; the spurring to mutual maturity as husbands and wives challenge each other's spiritual growth; the securing of children in their parents' devotion and commitment to each other; the adoption of children; and the contribution a faithful marriage in Christ makes to the stability of society by providing a needed corrective to cultural drift and error in (including current redefinitions of) marriage.

Finally, we believe the relationship between husband and wife in Christian marriage is uniquely informed by the triune relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Godhead is equal in nature and essence, in power and glory, yet the triune Persons differentiate among themselves by role and function. Ephesians 5:21 states that Christians "submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." This mutual submission in marriage means that Christian husbands and wives must respect and honor one another, acknowledge one another's gifts, and mobilize one another's strengths to each other's edification.

But following on with Paul's line of thought through Ephesians 5:22-33 (cf. 1 Cor. 11:1-16; 1 Peter 3:1-7), the wife's core role in Christian marriage is submission and the husband's is sacrifice. In submitting to her husband the wife pictures how the church trusts Christ, who is never a domineering tyrant of His bride. In sacrificing for his wife the husband pictures how Christ loves His bride the church, caring and nurturing and giving the best of Himself to her. If marriage is patterned this way on Jesus, husbands and wives will together seek the Spirit's guidance in decisions affecting their family, together train their children in the ways of faith, and together demonstrate a home in which *shalom*, the peace of God, reigns in witness to the grace of God over their life together.

Divorce

Just as the emergence of sin despoiled Eden, requiring the subsequent banishment of Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:23-24), God's design for marriage is despoiled by sin. Divorce is an evidence of this despoilment in both Christian and non-Christian marriages. We believe that the prevalence of divorce does not nullify God's good design and purposes for marriage. Divorce has taken a withering toll on Western culture as we know it, and the evangelical church's complicity in and frequency of divorce has sinfully demeaned what God intended to be hallowed by His people.

As Paul indicated in Second Timothy 3:2-4, an increasingly amoral society lives for itself and thus accepts the unacceptable as normative. It is our belief that God never intended divorce to be normative, especially among His people. The pervasiveness of divorce both in the wider culture and the evangelical church is the rupture of a union God created

to last a lifetime. Divorce leaves all parties involved damaged in concentric circles of pain: the divorcing husband and wife are damaged, the children of the marriage are damaged, the extended families are damaged, the friends and associates of the family are damaged, and society is damaged. Divorce in the evangelical church particularly renders God's good will and reputation marred.

As elders of First Evangelical Church, we want to sound a clarion call for conformity to God's high and best design for marriage as advanced in our **Marriage** section above. We recognize that divorce causes lasting pain and deep regret. We desire to see displayed even in the most troubled marriages God's redeeming love in compassion, forgiveness, and restoration. We strive to encourage a culture of lifelong devotion and joy in marriage as normative for the church. We endeavor to communicate and approximate this in our teaching and examples.

Because God's original design for marriage was for permanence, as we have shown above, God says He hates divorce (Mal. 2:16). It should not be surprising that God uses such stern language in conveying His contempt for the mistreatment of marriage, for God hates that which hurts His reputation and His people, even how we hurt ourselves (Prov. 6:16-19). When God dealt directly with those who compromised the marriage covenant in the days of Malachi, He made clear that divorce affects one's spiritual life and communion with God, that it is a treachery toward one's spouse and the breaking of a covenant (Mal. 2:14-16).

When Jesus responded to the Pharisees' interrogation on marital permanency (Matt. 19:1-12 and Mark 10:1-12), He directed them back to the divine ideal in Genesis 2, adding, "What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate" (Mark 10:9). The Pharisees had appealed to the Mosaic "certificate of divorce" (Deut. 24:1-4; the legal process of marriage nullification in those times) to justify their practices of divorce. But Jesus answered "from the beginning it was not so" (Matt. 19:8), and emphasized that Moses permitted divorce "because of your hardness of heart" (19:8). Even in cases of sexual infidelity in a marriage, God's will is the restoration of the marriage through repentance and forgiveness (cf. Hosea 3:1). Sexual infidelity does not mandate divorce. *Nothing mandates divorce*; it is elected by one or both parties in a marriage due to someone's "hardness of heart."

God has determined that marriage according to His design is for life. But Bible readers do encounter divorce in Scripture. Isaiah and Jeremiah used the language to refer to God temporarily "divorcing" Israel (Isa. 50:1; Jer. 3:8; However, note contextually that this was a discipline tactic of God's on covenant disobedient people, not righteous permission to divorce. God still referenced Himself as Israel's faithful "husband," Isa. 54:5, and see

Hosea 3). The world is a fallen place due to sin's presence in all Earth's inhabitants, including those in Christ. This means that in many arenas of living, including our relationships, we don't always approximate God's designs. We emphatically agree that the Bible never advocates divorce, but does Scripture ever allow for divorce? Godly men have wrestled with this question for centuries. At issue is whether certain so-called "exception clauses" in Scripture, specifically pertaining to adultery and the abandonment of an unbelieving spouse, ever make divorce allowable. (Whether remarriage after "allowable" divorce is then permissible is another matter; see the **Remarriage** section below.)

As a matter of church policy, the Session of First Evangelical Church has historically recognized that adultery and abandonment are both biblically recognized violations of marital oneness and unique threats to marital permanence. "Sexual immorality" translates *porneia* from Greek, an umbrella term that delineates various kinds of sexual misconduct. Jesus' references to "sexual immorality" in Matthew 5:31-32 and 19:3-9 are rendered with *porneia*, and Jesus cited the adulterous activity of sexual immorality as a contribution to (not a mandate for) divorce. *Porneia* betrays the integrity of "one flesh."

We have also recognized the abandonment of an unbelieving spouse to be a biblically addressed violation of the marital covenant (1 Cor. 7:12-16). According to First Evan's 1978 policy on marriage, divorce, and remarriage, "Exactly what is meant by 'leaving' and 'not under bondage' [in the 1 Cor. 7 passage] is not easy to interpret.... Our feeling is that desertion...frees the believer from the marriage bond." Again, neither abandonment nor adultery mandate divorce. But as an elder community we all recognize adultery and abandonment contribute to divorce, with some among us regarding adultery and abandonment as biblically allowable reasons for divorce if reconciliation fails (more on this in the **Remarriage** section below).

Our Session has consistently advocated through its official policy statements on marriage, divorce, and remarriage (1978, 1989, 1999) that couples are to do everything possible to make their marriages work. Furthermore, the Session has made clear that if a divorce has taken place, couples should exhaust every effort to be reconciled (1 Cor. 7:10-11). Our Session continues to maintain this position, as stated in both our 1989 and 1999 policy statements: "*We will never counsel anyone to initiate or willingly contribute to a divorce, nor will we consider or treat anyone's marriage as terminal. Our counsel will focus on offering support, encouragement, godly and loving counsel, and otherwise helping the marital partners fulfill their biblical obligations to their marital partner.*"

As elders we believe that through the work of God's grace even the most egregious offenses can be overcome and the most troubled marriages restored. Christ calls us as

His followers to forgive our offenses against one another no matter how serious the sin (Eph. 4:32). In situations where a couple in our church proceeds to divorce, we will seek to keep the lines of communication open and exhibit love to both the fractured husband and wife (Gal. 6:1). However, the church is authorized by Scripture to apply the practices of church discipline, under the oversight of the Session, when appropriate for the good of the church body. As First Evan's elder community, we determine to use all the means provided us by God, through His power and grace, to promote the health and restoration of our church families (Matt. 18:15-17). Divorce is neither the way nor means for God's people to experience His blessing for themselves in marriage.

Remarriage

This paper has established in its **Marriage** and **Divorce** sections that the marriage covenant, according to God's design and purposes for a man and woman in marriage, requires permanent mutual fidelity for a lifetime. "Let marriage be held in honor among all," as the writer to the Hebrews says (Heb. 13:4). But Scripture also recognizes that marriage will not be held in honor by all—and by "all" the writer to the Hebrews meant, contextually, the church.

We have established that divorce is a reality in the evangelical church. As elders we are troubled by society's high divorce rates, the commonness of cohabitation, and reinterpretations of marriage in our time. But in this paper we speak specifically to the evangelical church's stewardship of marriage since God has focused our oversight to it.

The reality of divorce in the evangelical church, which inherently dishonors God's design for and sanctity of Christian marriage, is because of the reality of sin in the evangelical church. That Scripture recognizes the reality of marriage broken by divorce, even in the church, is not to say divorce is ever endorsed by God for His people. We have already shown in this paper how God says plainly that He hates divorce among His people. We have already shown that when Jesus was questioned in Matthew 19 (and Mark 10) on why the Mosaic Law permitted divorce for the people of God, He stated the permission was granted due to "hardness of heart."

Therefore, we assert that when a couple believes that divorce is their only solution or last resort for their troubled marriage, it is a tragedy of one or both parties in the marriage persisting in unrepentant hardness of heart. Our church's leaders are to be proactive in staving off marital failures in First Evan's families. We want to encourage healthy, vibrant, and lasting marriages within our church. As part of this we are responsible to see that every saint is equipped with what he or she needs to know and do in order to live committedly and worshipfully to God with one's husband or wife (Rom. 12:1-2).

When we have to respond to a marriage dismantling we will exhaust every redemptive avenue in counseling and supporting troubled couples, seeking the reconciliation of their relationship. Our efforts in this will not always succeed. Nevertheless, as overseers of the church it is our considered conviction that we should not recommend or counsel the divorce of any couple. In some circumstances a defined season of separation may be warranted for a spouse's protection or restoration. But our desire always is for the mending of such marriages.

We have already shown in this paper that adultery (sexual immorality) and abandonment (the desertion of an unbelieving spouse) are both biblically recognized violations of marital oneness and threats to marital permanence. Among the evangelical views on the permissibility of divorce, we recognize among ourselves those who hold the view that adultery and/or abandonment constitute "grounds for" divorce. But let us emphasize that this is not to say the intrusion of either on a marriage necessitates divorce. *The eldership of First Evan does not hold the view that in recognizing adultery and/or abandonment as contributions to divorce the Scriptures are recommending divorce as a response to those realities.* In other words, divorce *does not have to happen* when one is victimized by adultery or abandonment. When divorce happens it is because one or both parties in a wounded marriage persist in unrepentant hardness of heart.

Marriages can and do recover from adultery and other abuses of the marriage covenant. As each of us can attest in our own marriages, a successful marriage requires forgiveness, forbearance, and mutual honoring. Marriage requires perennial work and intentional attentiveness between spouses in all seasons of their life together if marriage is to achieve and advance the unity God desires for it.

The question inevitably comes, however, whether such is possible for a remarriage following divorce? More to the point, the question we now consider in this paper is whether a divorced Christian is biblically permitted to remarry.

We recognize that Christians who desire remarriage after a divorce in which they were the one abandoned or cheated upon often feel justified in their desires: *I did not want the betrayal/abuse/abandonment but it happened, and yet I still want to be married.* We will consider the question of remarriage from this perspective.

On whether a Christian is free to remarry after the death of his/her spouse there is complete agreement within our elder community: Scripture permits remarriage after death of spouse (1 Cor. 7:6-9, 39). A widow or widower is free from their previous marital covenant and can thus choose a new spouse if they desire to remarry, but must

remarry “in the Lord.” Beyond Paul’s specification of “in the Lord,” the Scriptures do not directly address whether a widow or widower can remarry a divorced person who is “in the Lord.”

Jesus states plainly that “adultery” is committed when remarriage of one or more divorced individuals occurs:

	Action 1	Action 2	Result
Lk 16:18	Everyone who divorces his wife	And marries another	Commits adultery
Lk 16:18	A woman is divorced from her husband	He who marries her	Commits adultery
Mt 5:27-30	Everyone who looks at woman with lustful intent		Has already committed adultery with her in his heart
Mt 5:31-32	Except on the ground of sexual immorality	Everyone who divorces his wife	Makes her commit adultery (upon remarriage)
Mt 5:31-32	If a woman is divorced	Whoever marries her	Commits adultery
Mk 10:11	Whoever divorces his wife	And marries another	Commits adultery against her
Mk 10:12	And if she divorces her husband	And marries another	She commits adultery
Mt 19:9	Except for sexual immorality, whoever divorces his wife	And marries another	Commits adultery
1Cr 6:15-16	He who is joined to a prostitute	Becomes one body with her	The two will become one flesh
1Cr 7:15	But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so	In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved	God has called you (us) to peace

The elder community of First Evan does not consider it biblically legitimate for the adulterating or abandoning spouse to remarry. In that case, we are in complete agreement that sin is following after sin. This is unworthy of the people of God.

However, regarding the matter of remarriage after divorce, our elder community holds two primary views:

1. Some in our elder community find in the Matthew 19:9 exception clause, as well as the “not bound” in Paul’s reference to marital abandonment in First Corinthians 7:15, an exemption from the charge of adultery if the one who marries again has been victimized by adultery or abandonment and divorced for those reasons.
2. Some in our elder community locate Matthew’s exception clause within a specific context of the Jewish betrothal period and therefore do not see it pertaining to the already married. Likewise, those who hold this view also tend to see First Corinthians 7 “militating against” (1989 policy words) the permissibility of remarriage except in case of death of spouse, because Paul’s overriding point in First Corinthians 7 is that “each one should remain in the condition in which he was called” (v. 20; cf. vv. 8, 10-15, 17-18, 24, 26-28, 40).

(Some in our elder community would also cite physical or sexual abuse of spouse as an allowance for divorce, recognizing however that this is not a scriptural ground; the texts in focus do not directly address abusiveness in marriage).

Three chapters before First Corinthians 7, Paul invokes a principle leaders and laity alike do well to heed: “learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another” (1 Cor. 4:6). It is important for us as elders to invoke this principle of not going beyond what’s written in considering the question of Christians’ remarriage after divorce for two main reasons.

First, Scripture does not give a *comprehensive, absolute answer to the question of remarriage after divorce.* To the best of our abilities we’ve taken the whole counsel of God into consideration on this question. If a Scripture text existed that explicitly and directly forbid remarriage after divorce, without qualification, the question of remarriage after divorce would of course be moot. But lacking such a text there are differing views on this matter within evangelical orthodoxy and within our own elder community. Our 1989 policy states it this way: “We recognize that a biblical argument can be made for the permissibility of remarriage by a believer after the desertion of an unbelieving spouse based on Paul’s assertion that the believer is ‘not under bondage’ (1 Cor. 7:15). However, we believe the whole tenor of 1 Cor. 7 militates against remarriage in such a case (1 Cor. 7:8, 11, 27, 32, 37).” Our 1999 policy says, “Although it is clear that God’s ideal is always one husband for one wife in a lifelong relationship, we recognize that biblical arguments can be made for remarriage when God’s ideal has been compromised by sin in the previous marriage.”

Second, convictions and grace are not incompatible in forming our beliefs and drawing lines of convictions about these matters. Although these matters are of vital importance, we do not deem the question of remarriage after divorce to be an essential matter of orthodoxy in the church. If we believed this was a matter of essential orthodoxy we would not and could not tolerate differences of opinion among ourselves on how best to understand the biblical information we have to go on. Our unity depends on uniformity of interpretation on essential matters of evangelical orthodoxy.

Conclusion

As the elder community of First Evan, we “are writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (1 John 2:1). While sharing many common convictions among ourselves on marriage and divorce, on the question of remarriage after divorce we pledge to love each other and trust our Session members to work through questions of remarriage legitimacy when presented to them, according to the parameters conveyed in this paper, and “in the light of Scripture” (1999 policy).

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps. 119:105). As overseers of God’s church, we utilize His Word to serve His people as “above reproach” (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6) in all things. We’re called to be “examples to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:3; cf. Heb. 13:7). It is our ardent desire to give a good account of ourselves to the One who paid for the church with His own blood (Acts 20:28; Heb. 13:17). God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble (1 Pet. 5:5). *As an elder community we clothe ourselves in humility toward one another when and where we differ, recognizing that our individual conclusions in biblically debatable matters may or may not have God’s approval.*

In the spirit of Romans 14, we have proceeded with each other conscientiously rather than judgmentally, not asking anyone to approve what is for his conscience unapproved. This is more than “agreeing to disagree,” it is the practice of love in unified community. In the end it is not our consensus of conviction that is most important in this or any biblical consideration. What is most important is that we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous, for only He was without sin and perfect in understanding, not us. We search the Scriptures but also submit ourselves to the Scriptures searching us (Ps. 139:23-24). Grace and peace to all who read and consider these matters after us in our common faith.