

WORLDWIDE CHURCH OF GOD

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Dear Ministers,

As many of you know, the Church has had to acknowledge and wrestle with the complexities of divorce and remarriage for decades. As societal attitudes toward commitment in marriage have deteriorated, some issues have grown even more complex. In addition, the Church's understanding of scriptural passages related to divorce and remarriage has changed over the years, resulting, at times, in certain changes in our position and policy regarding these subjects.

Over the past nearly two years, our doctrinal review team has, under my direction and supervision, carefully studied our administration of divorce and remarriage in light of the relevant biblical passages on the subject. The result of this study is the attached outline, which contains the official position of the Church on the subject of divorce and remarriage.

In an overall sense, the position set forth here is little different from what you have been familiar with or what you would expect. However, it has become clear that certain aspects of our position need a sound, scriptural rationale, and that other aspects need a responsible measure of loving Church discipline to ensure the emotional and spiritual well-being of divorced spouses, as well as members in congregations affected by divorce and remarriage.

In this outline, we have tried to set out for the ministry the Church's position and the scriptural rationale for it in what we feel is a clear and easy-to-understand manner. We realize that no presentation is flawless, but we believe the subject is laid out here in such a way as to make it as plain as possible in as few words as practical.

The outline begins by rehearsing the Church's high view of marriage, yet recognizing that human imperfection sometimes corrupts the ideal. Next, it moves to the biblical grounds for divorce and for remarriage, beginning with a clear definition of the Greek word *porneia*. Then, the outline focuses on the fact that after Jesus' earthly ministry, he inspired Paul to make judgments that took into account certain new situations facing the developing Church.

At this point, based on Paul's descriptions of ungodly conduct characteristic of unbelievers, we note that such conduct on a habitual basis by a member spouse would "constitute departure from the marriage." In other words, when a member spouse habitually conducts himself/herself *as an unbeliever*, the Church views the member as such, and considers the marriage bond dissolved if the couple legally divorces, based on 1 Corinthians 7:15.

The outline continues with the administration of the Church's policy, including instructions regarding discipline of the offending party(ies) in a member-member divorce and eligibility for remarriage. It concludes with a statement on annulment.

Please read the outline carefully. It will give you the basis for future decisions on eligibility for remarriage of divorced persons in the Church. If you have questions, please feel free to direct them to Church Administration.

With love, in Christ's service,

Joseph W. Tkach

DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

DIVORCE

- I. Marriage was divinely designed and instituted as a lifelong relationship (Genesis 2:24). The goal of marriage is a lifelong union within which two people, male and female, are committed to love one another and enrich one another's lives.
- II. The Church has a duty to teach and preach a high view of marriage, consistently emphasizing the biblical instruction for husbands and wives to remain faithful and committed to one another for life.
- III. When a problem that threatens the stability of a member's marriage comes to the attention of the Church, the Church has a responsibility to take positive steps, with gentleness, compassion and sensitivity, to provide counselling and to promote healing and reconciliation through repentance and forgiveness. Ideally, this will ultimately lead to the restoration of the marriage.
- IV. If a couple has separated, each partner must be willing to participate in marriage counselling if he or she is to remain in the fellowship of the Church.
- V. Reconciliation is always the Church's determined goal in counselling. The Church encourages confession and repentance on the part of the offending partner, and forgiveness on the part of the offended. Where professional counselling is in order, the Church strongly encourages its use.
- VI. It is recognized, however, that no matter how clearly and diligently the Church teaches the Christian ideals concerning marriage, some in the Church will fall short. Experience demonstrates that though they know God's will, some are weak in the faith and do not do what God wills.
- VII. When the Church finds, after conscientious effort through counselling to promote reconciliation, that reconciliation is not possible, the Church permits a member couple to divorce. The fact that biblical teaching guides the Church to permit divorce in such cases, however, does not mean that the Scriptures permit remarriage in all cases.

REMARRIAGE

I. If divorce occurs on the scriptural grounds listed below, remarriage is permitted:

- A. *Porneia**, which is moral debasement (Matthew 19:9; Galatians 5:19-21; 1 Corinthians 6:9).
- B. Habitual conduct like that of an unbeliever, such as the following:
 - 1. Addiction (Galatians 5:21).
 - 2. Abuse (Galatians 5:20-21).
 - 3. Desertion or failure to provide (1 Timothy 5:8).
 - 4. Spiritism (Galatians 5:20-21; Revelation 22:15).
 - 5. Habitual criminal conduct (1 Corinthians 6:9-10).
 - 6. Habitual immoral conduct (1 Corinthians 6:9-10; Revelation 22:15).

* Definition of *Porneia*: *Porneia* (from *pornē*, a harlot) means whoredom, harlotry or prostitution, and connotes moral debasement that is sexual in nature. In the context of Matthew 19:9, *porneia* may be committed in one act of adultery (see next sentence) or in a prolonged way of life. *Porneia*, in the exception clause of Matthew 19:9, is used instead of *moicheia* (adultery) because *porneia* entails an attitude of moral debasement in addition to the act of adultery.

BIG ENOUGH TO DESTROY MARRIAGE
WMA DEPARTS THE MARRIAGE

II. Summary of New Testament teaching:

In determining its administrative approach to the complex issues of divorce and remarriage encountered today, the Church summarizes the teaching of Jesus and Paul in the following four points. These points guide the Church in its administrative decisions regarding divorce and remarriage.

- A. Only *porneia* or habitual conduct like that of an unbeliever (such as addiction, abuse, desertion, spiritism, habitual criminal conduct, and habitual immoral conduct -- see Romans 8:5-6; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; Revelation 22:15; and Galatians 5:16-21) can, but do not have to, sever a marriage between believers.
- B. Believers who separate for reasons other than those given scripturally for divorce must either reconcile or remain unmarried (1 Corinthians 7:11).
- C. A believer may not divorce an unbeliever if the unbeliever is pleased to live in peace with him or her (1 Corinthians 7:12-13, 15).
- D. Only the unbeliever, in word or deed, can instigate divorce in a marriage between a believer and an unbeliever (1 Corinthians 7:15).

- III. Matthew 19:9 allows that a spouse's infidelity can dissolve the marital union. Paul, addressing a specific situation where nonbelieving spouses may have wanted to leave the Christian, also allows divorce and remarriage. The tenor of New Testament teaching, however, is that divorce is to be avoided.
- IV. Because human beings are sinners, it will not always be possible for divorce to be avoided. In some cases, hard-heartedness and fleshly-mindedness may so distort the marriage relationship that divorce is the only alternative. Hard-heartedness and fleshly-mindedness may be displayed in a variety of ways, including mental and physical abuse, sexual abuse, addictions, emotional and spiritual abandonment of the relationship, habitual immoral or criminal conduct, or involvement in spiritism.
- V. If a wife (or, in fewer cases, a husband) is being physically or sexually abused by the spouse, the Church counsel would be for her or him to get out of the situation. In such a case, the Church deems the abusive spouse to be, in effect, an unbeliever whose conduct demonstrates that he or she is not "pleased to dwell" with the believing spouse. If reconciliation and restoration of the marriage are subsequently impossible, divorce and remarriage is permitted.
- VI. The Gospels do not record Jesus explicitly stating that abuse, abandonment, addiction, spiritism, or habitual immoral or criminal conduct may dissolve a marriage between believers. This fact, however, does not demonstrate that Paul's description of ungodly behavior (that causes one to be ineligible for the kingdom of God) does not also constitute grounds for the dissolution of marriage.
- VII. The historic development of the New Testament shows that divorce was permitted for a reason other than the one given by Christ (1 Corinthians 7:15). Jesus' recorded statements on divorce and remarriage took place before the establishment of the Church. Jesus clearly reaffirmed the marriage ideal (Genesis 2:24), but he also allowed for divorce (Matthew 5:32; 19:9). Later, through the Holy Spirit, Jesus guided the decisions of the Church in the new circumstances it faced. He gave the Church spiritual understanding of the Old Testament and inspired the pertinent experiences and decisions of the Church to be recorded in the Scriptures.
- VIII. Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, addressed difficulties that arose uniquely within the Church setting. He made administrative decisions regarding the question of remarriage after the dissolution of a marriage between a believer and an unbeliever (1 Corinthians 7).

- IX. In his letter to Timothy, Paul addressed another question unique to the Church: A believer whose conduct places him or her in the category of an unbeliever. Paul concluded that a person who fails to provide for his or her family has “denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Timothy 5:8). From the principle described in this verse, the Church concludes that a spouse who fails consistently to observe this fundamental duty has become as an unbeliever (denied the faith), has demonstrated that he or she is not “pleased to dwell” with the believing spouse, and has, in effect, deserted the marriage.
- X. In his letter to the Galatians, for example, Paul addresses the conduct of those who are not led by the Spirit, and who will therefore not inherit the kingdom of God (Galatians 5:16-21). He describes such conduct as “the works of the flesh,” and warns believers against such behavior with the explicit statement that “those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” **The conduct Paul cites here and in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, and that John cites in Revelation 22:15, is not a matter of occasional acts of sin, but rather a matter of habitual patterns of conduct.**
- XI. In his letter to the Romans, Paul describes a fundamental difference between believers and unbelievers (Romans 8:5-8). Those who live according to the flesh (such as those described in Galatians 5:19-21; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; and Revelation 22:15), he writes, have their minds set on the flesh and not on the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, Paul writes. Furthermore, the mind set on the flesh is hostile to God and not subject to God.
- XII. The Church concludes that when a member’s habitual pattern of conduct matches that described by Paul in the following passages, the member is to be considered as an unbeliever and should be disfellowshipped from the Church, to be readmitted to fellowship only upon repentance.
- A. Galatians 5:19-21: (sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like).
 - B. 1 Corinthians 6:9-10: (the sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, homosexual offenders, thieves, greedy, drunkards, slanderers, and swindlers).
 - C. Revelation 22:15: (dogs [a term referring to all sorts of spiritually impure persons], those who practice magic arts connected with spiritism, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood).

- XIII. If a member spouse has become considered as an unbeliever for the reasons given by Paul as cited above, the Church considers the marriage bond dissolved if the couple legally divorces, based on 1 Corinthians 7:15. In the eyes of the Church, the conduct of the offending spouse constitutes departure from the marriage.
- XIV. Jesus' condemnation of merciless application of the letter of the law in Matthew 23:4 supports the freedom of the believing spouse to divorce and remarry in situations involving mental and physical abuse, sexual abuse, addiction, and emotional and spiritual abandonment of the relationship:

Matthew 23:4: "They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them."

ADMINISTRATION

- I. In cases of divorce resulting from the misconduct cited above:
- A. The offending party, or parties, will be disfellowshipped until there is evidence of repentance. In the case of a husband, evidence of repentance includes meeting all appropriate financial obligations to his former family.
 - B. Divorce is a spiritually and emotionally painful and destructive process that hurts and scars the couple involved, their families, and the congregation as a whole. The Church recognizes that to avoid further hurt and spiritual offense, time must pass for sufficient healing to occur before either party can be permitted to remarry.
 - C. To permit time for healing to take place in the families and in the congregation, and to discourage the practice of deliberately seeking divorce in order to marry again, the Church recommends that neither party remarry for at least two years from the date of the divorce. Although it is recognized that this time period is arbitrary, it is considered by the Church to be reasonable under the circumstances.
 - D. Circumstances may require a remarried couple not to attend the same congregation in which a former mate attends.
 - E. If a divorced member plans to enter into another marriage, the Church's goal will be to lead him or her to accept appropriate responsibility for the failure of the previous marriage, to confess any sin involved to God, and to enter another marriage only after extensive counselling.

- II. In cases of divorce resulting from reasons other than those cited above, that is, cases in which neither spouse is considered as an unbeliever and neither is disfellowshipped from the Church, and in cases where accusations and counter-accusations make it impossible to distinguish with certainty who is telling the truth:
- A. Neither former spouse is eligible to remarry (1 Corinthians 7:11). The Church is responsible to lead persons who divorce for reasons other than those stated to remain unmarried or to reconcile.
 - B. If a man or woman who is ineligible to remarry does so, or begins dating in a manner pursuant to marriage, he or she will be considered as an unbeliever and disfellowshipped from the Church. In such cases, because the ineligible party has become as an unbeliever, demonstrated through blatant disregard for the spiritual instruction of 1 Corinthians 7:11 to remain unmarried or to reconcile, the ineligible party's former spouse is free to remarry (1 Corinthians 7:15). In other words, because the offending spouse has, in effect, departed the faith, the believing spouse will be free to remarry. The offending spouse will not be permitted to fellowship with the Church for at least two years from the date of the remarriage, even if he or she is repentant before the two-year period expires. Although it is recognized that this time period is arbitrary, it is considered by the Church to be reasonable under the circumstances.
 - C. The fact that the above penalty must stand does not mean that the Church does not recognize the validity of the repentance of the guilty party.
 - D. Circumstances may require a remarried couple not to attend the same congregation in which a former mate attends.
- III. In all cases of legal divorce and remarriage, the newly contracted marriage is considered valid in the eyes of the Church, including those cases of remarriage in which the party was ineligible in the eyes of the Church to remarry. The Church views Jesus' words in Matthew 19:9, "commits adultery," to refer to the act of unscriptural remarriage itself, and not to imply a continuous state of adultery. In other words, repentance from the sin of unscriptural remarriage does not require dissolution of the newly contracted marriage. The principle given in Ephesians 4:28 shows that former sins are forgiven upon repentance.

- IV. There is scriptural basis (examples follow) for maintaining the integrity of the congregation through loving discipline: i.e., removing the offender from fellowship and requiring a healing period before permitting divorced members to remarry, in light of the fact that one or both have created confusion, pain, discord, contention and conflict by repudiating his or her marital vows and destroying faithful and harmonious family bonds and relationships.
- A. Ephesians 4:2-3: “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”
 - B. Romans 15:5-6: “May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”
 - C. 1 John 3:6, 24: “No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him. . . . Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.”
 - D. 1 Corinthians 5:11 “But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat.”
 - E. 1 Corinthians 15:33-34: “Do not be misled: ‘Bad company corrupts good character.’ Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God — I say this to your shame.”
- V. The Church must promote peace and harmony in marriage through its teaching, preaching, and counselling. It must also seek to encourage members to put forth godly effort in Christian love to restore, strengthen, and reconcile damaged relationships.
- VI. When sin becomes so pervasive as to destroy a marriage, the Church has a responsibility to use loving discipline to lead the individuals involved back to Christ, and to lead the congregation away from attitudes and behaviors that are contrary to the love we have learned in Christ.
- A. The offender, if known, is disfellowshipped to encourage repentance (1 Corinthians 5:11), and is readmitted to the fellowship of the Body upon repentance.

- B. Temporary prohibition from remarriage (the divorced members are not to remarry for two years), ensures sufficient time for personal growth, understanding of attitudes and behaviors that led to divorce, time to bring destructive habits and attitudes under control, and time for substantial counselling prior to any future marriage. Further, temporary prohibition from remarriage provides reasonable protection for the flock from the ungodly fruit of sin, and discourages other members from the spiritual trap of taking marital responsibilities and faithfulness lightly.

ANNULMENT

- I. The Church will consider a marriage voidable, in general terms, when either partner was not legally eligible to marry, if the marriage was not consummated, if sexual dysfunction is present from the early months of the marriage, if either party informs the Church in the earliest months of the marriage that he or she regrets his or her decision to marry or that he or she did not enter the relationship voluntarily, if fraud becomes evident, or if a legal annulment is obtained.
- II. In cases of annulment, it is as though the marriage never took place, and both parties are free to remarry.
- III. In some cases, a divorce may be the only legal avenue for dissolution of a marriage that the Church considers subject to annulment for spiritual reasons.