Proposal to Revise the Relational Commitments

Bethlehem Baptist Church Quarterly Strategy Meeting
April 28, 2019
Pastor Jason preached several sermons Fall 2018 related to marriage, divorce, and remarriage. At the October 2018 Strategy Meeting and December 2018 Annual Meeting, the elders presented a motion to make changes to the Commitment to Preserving Marriages section of the Relational Commitments. After extended discussion, the members voted to table that motion.

After additional reflection and deliberations over the course of several meetings, the elders voted on April 9 to present a new motion to revise the Commitment to Preserving Marriages section of the Relational Commitments.
Context

• We believe that this proposal accomplishes the following:
  1. It makes this section of the Relational Commitments more functional and accessible as a governing document and as a shepherding document.
  2. It revises and streamlines the guidelines regarding divorce and remarriage from 9 to 6 guidelines. It eliminates redundancy, improves clarity and readability, and conforms this section to the style and length of the other relational commitments (from 1,600 words to ~1,100 words).
We believe that this proposal accomplishes the following:

3. It also addresses specific concerns and questions that members raised about the previous proposal:
   • Provides additional explanation about Guideline 3 (covenant-breaking sexual immorality and abandonment);
   • Leaves unchanged the guideline restricting persons remarried after divorce from serving in elder and deacon roles;
   • Eliminates the guideline focused on Deuteronomy 24 that many felt was unclear, unnecessary, or biblically unwarranted;
   • Clarifies or eliminates ambiguous uses of the word *reconcile*;
   • Refers more explicitly to marriage as a *covenant*;
   • States more accurately the positions of BBC elders.
Context

• We are presenting this proposed revision to the Relational Commitments today, and the congregation will vote on this at the July QSM (following the procedure outlined in the BBC By-Laws, Article IX).

• A red-lined version of the proposal that details the precise wording changes is available on Bethlehem’s website.

• The elders are also planning additional Q&As on divorce and remarriage at each campus.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Essential Guideline (Current)</th>
<th>Change in Proposed Revision</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Only believers should marry</td>
<td>Unchanged</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Remarriage after spouse’s death</td>
<td>Unchanged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Biblical grounds for divorce</td>
<td>Revised and shortened</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Remarriage of the innocent party in a divorce</td>
<td>Combined #4–5 into new #4; shortened</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Remarriage of the innocent party in a divorce</td>
<td>Combined #4–5 into new #4; shortened</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Guidance for the aggrieving party in a divorce</td>
<td>Became #5; shortened</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>If either party has remarried, reconciliation with the first spouse is not permitted</td>
<td>Deleted</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Divorced/remarried persons are ineligible for leadership</td>
<td>Unchanged</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Addresses pre-conversion marriage and divorce</td>
<td>Deleted</td>
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Commitment to Preserving Marriages

Note: Revised wording is in red type

_They are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate_ (Matt. 19:6).

God designed marriage to reflect the beauty and permanence of Christ’s loving relationship with His bride, the church (Eph. 5:22-33; Rev. 19:7). Therefore, He established marriage to be a life-long, exclusive _covenant_ relationship between one man and one woman (Gen. 2:24; Mal. 2:14; Matt. 19:4-6). God also designed it to provide mutual companionship through life’s joys and difficulties, to create stability for raising and nurturing children, and to give strength and cohesiveness to society in general.
Commitment to Preserving Marriages Cont.

In our society, marriages fail under a wide range of circumstances. Many people have gone through a divorce before having a relationship with Christ and have found repentance and forgiveness in coming to Christ. Others have experienced divorce through no desire or decision of their own. Still others, even after professing faith in Christ, may have divorced because of their own wrongful choices, but have since repented and received the forgiveness offered through our Lord Jesus. Whatever the circumstances, we welcome everyone to Bethlehem—single, married, and divorced.
Commitment to Preserving Marriages Cont.

Because our church recognizes both the divine origin of marriage and the devastating effects of divorce, we are deeply committed to preserving marriages and preventing divorce. Toward this end, we devote regular teaching and significant ministry resources to strengthening marriages and families. We require and provide premarital counseling to help couples enter into marriage advisedly, and be well-prepared for its many challenges.
Commitment to Preserving Marriages Cont.

We also encourage couples to nurture their marriages by participating in our small group ministry where they can grow together in their love for God and for one another (Heb. 10:24-25). As relationships deepen within these groups, we expect husbands to spur each other on in loving and cherishing their wives, and wives to encourage one another in respecting and loving their husbands (Eph. 5:33).

Our leaders are committed to helping individuals and couples receive biblical counsel and support when they face marital difficulties. We will discourage couples from using divorce as a way to run away from issues that instead can be resolved through Spirit-guided counseling, repentance, forgiveness, and ongoing discipleship.
Commitment to Preserving Marriages Cont.

The leaders of Bethlehem historically have held different positions concerning what the Bible teaches concerning the legitimate grounds for divorce and remarriage. For example, some elders believe that Christians should not initiate divorce under any circumstances but may accept it if the unbeliving partner leaves. Others believe that Scripture permits (though does not mandate) divorce under limited circumstances but forbids remarriage as long as the other spouse is living, no matter what the circumstances of the divorce were. The majority of elders believe that Scripture permits (though does not mandate) divorce and remarriage under limited circumstances. Those holding this position believe that divorce truly ends the marriage and the aggrieved spouse is free to remarry in the Lord. While the church’s leaders and members have different convictions on how to interpret and apply what the Bible teaches regarding divorce and remarriage, we are united in our commitment to upholding a high view of the marriage covenant.
Commitment to Preserving Marriages Cont.

As members of Bethlehem Baptist Church, we agree to live by the following guidelines concerning marriage and divorce.

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 breaks the marriage covenant by committing sexual immorality or abandoning the other spouse (Matt. 19:9; 1 Cor. 7:11, 15; Exod. 21:10–11). Covenant-breaking sexual immorality here refers to adultery or other serious sinful sexual acts, which dishonor God and one’s spouse (1 Cor 6:9, 13). Covenant-breaking abandonment here refers to deserting, actively harming, or endangering one’s spouse.
Commitment to Preserving Marriages Cont.

4. The aggrieved partner in a biblically permissible divorce should guard against bitterness and be willing to forgive the offending spouse (Eph. 4:31–32). The aggrieved spouse may pursue restoration of the broken marriage if the offending spouse proves to be repentant and if neither party has remarried. The aggrieved party in a biblically permissible divorce may remarry a believer (1 Cor. 7:15).

5. The spouse who has broken the marriage covenant by committing sexual immorality or abandoning his or her spouse or who has divorced without biblical grounds should repent and be reconciled to God and, if possible, to his or her spouse (1 Cor. 7:11; 1 John 1:9).

6. Persons remarried after divorce will forego positions of official leadership at Bethlehem called elder/pastor and deacon (1 Tim. 3:2, 12).
Commitment to Preserving Marriages Cont.

While the Bible may permit divorce under the limited circumstances described above, it does not require divorce but holds out hope that God may restore broken marriages. We believe that even when human marriages fail as an earthly symbol of the union of Christ and his church, the heavenly reality of Christ’s unbreakable covenant-keeping love for his people endures. We believe that God patiently bears with our sins, repeatedly calls us to repentance, and freely forgives us when we turn back to Him (Ps. 103:8-12; Isa. 55:7).
Commitment to Preserving Marriages Cont.

When divorce seems inevitable, an offended spouse can imitate God’s love by offering a straying spouse these same evidences of grace (Eph. 5:1-2). This may involve patiently bearing neglect or lovingly confronting serious sin (Col. 3:12-14; Gal. 6:1). In some situations, love may require asking the church to initiate formal discipline to rescue a spouse and a marriage from the devastating effects of unrepentant sin (Matt. 18:12-20).
Commitment to Preserving Marriages Cont.

Just as church leaders are involved in beginning a marriage, they should be involved when it is threatened with seeming dissolution. Therefore, when a member of Bethlehem is considering divorce, he or she should bring the situation to the elders and cooperate with them as they determine whether biblical grounds exist for the separation, and as they endeavor to promote repentance and reconciliation, and pursue redemptive discipline, if appropriate.

Separated spouses who are moving toward divorce, but are still legally married, should refrain from dating or any other activity that is inconsistent with being married.
Commitment to Preserving Marriages Cont.

We rejoice that divorce never diminishes God’s free offer of love, grace, and forgiveness. He cherishes and loves every person who has been unwillingly divorced, as does our church. God also graciously extends His love to those who have wrongly left their marriages. That love moves Him (and us) to call them to repentance, to encourage and aid reconciliation when possible, and to gladly restore those who have done what the Scripture requires to rebuild broken relationships.
Questions