

Proposed Revisions to the Relational Commitments

Bethlehem Baptist Church
All-Church Quarterly Strategy Meeting
April 28, 2019

Note: This document shows the **currently proposed revisions** to the Relational Commitments by combining the initial recommendations of the elders (October 2018) and the revisions to those recommendations (April 2019). Use this key to follow the timeline of changes ...

1. Changes recommended in October 2018:
shown in red text or ~~black strikethrough~~
2. New adjustments recommended in April 2019:
shown in blue text or ~~black strikethrough~~ with yellow highlights

COMMITMENT TO PRESERVING MARRIAGES

They are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate (Matthew 19:6).

God designed marriage to reflect the beauty and permanence of Christ's loving relationship with His bride, the church (Ephesians 5:22–33; Revelation 19:7). Therefore, He established marriage to be a life-long, exclusive **covenant** relationship between one man and one woman (**Genesis 2:24, Malachi 2:14, Matthew 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.

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 **and sought reconciliation where possible**. 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 **and sought reconciliation where possible**. Whatever the circumstances, we welcome everyone to Bethlehem—single, married, and divorced.

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 ~~will~~ devote ~~a significant portion of our preaching and~~ ~~regular~~ teaching ~~and significant~~ ministry ~~resources~~ to strengthening marriages and families. We require and provide ~~serious~~ premarital counseling to help couples enter into marriage advisedly, and be well-prepared for its many challenges.

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 (Hebrews 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 (Ephesians 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.

Diversity of Viewpoints on Divorce and Remarriage at Bethlehem

The leaders of Bethlehem ~~historically have held different positions concerning what the Bible teaches concerning~~ ~~are not entirely of one mind on the legitimate grounds for divorce and remarriage.~~ For example, some of us ~~elders see believe that Christians should not initiate divorce under any circumstances but may accept it if the unbelieving partner leaves.~~ ~~the Scripture forbids~~ ~~ding remarriage after divorce as long as both spouses are living.~~ ~~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. ~~We believe Jesus calls us in this way to the radical display of the unbreakable covenant commitment between Him and His church.~~ ~~Others of us~~ ~~Other~~ ~~The majority of elders believe that the Scriptures permits (though does not mandate) divorce and remarriage~~ under the limited circumstances, ~~as explained below (see Guideline #3),~~ of unrepentant adultery or decisive abandonment or protracted life endangerment. ~~In these cases w~~ ~~Those holding this position believe that divorce truly ends the marriage truly ends and the reconciliation-desiring, 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.~~

Statement of Guidelines for Mutual Accountability

~~In view of these differences among us~~ ~~As members of Bethlehem Baptist Church,~~ we agree to live by the following guidelines concerning ~~the nurturing of marriages and the exercise of redemptive church discipline wherever needed~~ ~~marriage and divorce.~~

1. A believer and unbeliever should not marry (1 Corinthians 7:39; 2 Corinthians 6:14–15).
2. Since death breaks the marriage bond (Romans 7:2–3; 1 Corinthians 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** decisively and physically deserts the relationship; commits repeated, unrepentant adultery; or is guilty of protracted, unrepentant life-endangerment (Matthew 19:9; 1 Corinthians 7:11, 15; Exodus 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 Corinthians 6:9, 13).** **Covenant-breaking abandonment here refers to deserting, actively harming, or endangering one's spouse.**

We do not believe that divorce must be the last word. Even after long periods of separation and alienation, reconciliation can happen, as when the people of God return to the Lord after periods of waywardness (Hosea 2:14–23).

We want to emphasize that the phrase “divorce may be permitted” holds out the possibility that inquiry may reveal that the deserted partner engaged in a wrong behavior that drove the other away, so that a change is called for at home rather than divorce. And we want to stress that forgiveness and reconciliation between sinning spouses is preferable to separation or divorce even where adultery has occurred. This is implied in Matthew 18:21–22, “Then Peter came up and said to him, ‘Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?’ 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 a divorced spouse may be viewed as severing the former marriage so that the unmarried spouse whose behavior 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 behaviors and attitudes.

Recognizing the honest and devout differences of conviction in the church, those of us with more limiting standards for remarriage consent at this point not to make them normative for the whole body. Others of us, who regard this fourth statement as fully biblical, respect those among us with a more limiting interpretation and do not require or expect them to act in any way against their consciences in attending, supporting, or performing enactments of marriage they regard as contrary to Scripture.

All of us urge every member who contemplates remarriage to struggle in prayer and study with all the relevant Scriptures, with the aim of glorifying God through full obedience to His Word, and consider fairly the arguments against remarriage and those for it.

Moreover, we want to affirm the goodness and beauty of a life of singleness in God's service both before marriage and after divorce or death. It is commended in 1 Corinthians 7:7, 11, 32–35, and elevated by the examples of Jesus and Paul and hundreds of great single saints.

4. 5. After serious efforts have been made toward reconciliation, ~~†~~The aggrieved partner **in a biblically permissible divorce should guard against bitterness and be willing to forgive the offending spouse** (Ephesians 4:31–32). The aggrieved spouse may **reconcile with** **pursue restoration of the broken marriage the offending spouse if that the offending spouse proves to be repentant and if neither party has remarried.** The aggrieved party **in a biblically permissible divorce may is free to remarry a believer (1 Corinthians 7:15).** ~~but should consider that once they do so, they may no longer reconcile with the offending party (Deuteronomy 24:1–4).~~ referred to in Guideline #3 may, together with the leadership of the

church, come to regard the marriage 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. (See Guideline #7):

5. 6. The ~~aggrieved partners referred to in Guideline #3~~ spouse who has broken the marriage covenant by committing sexual immorality or abandoning ~~the other his or her~~ spouse or who has divorced without biblical grounds (who were guilty of abandonment, adultery, or life-endangerment) should repent and be reconciled to God and, if possible, to ~~their his or her~~ 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):

~~6. 7. If a second marriage ends in death or divorce, the widow or widower in this case is not permitted to return to the first spouse in marriage (Deuteronomy 24:1-4):~~

~~6. Persons remarried after divorce will forgo positions of official leadership at Bethlehem called elder/pastor and deacon (1 Timothy 3:2, 12).~~ 8. Persons remarried after divorce will forego positions of official leadership at Bethlehem called elder/pastor and deacon (1 Tim.3:2, 12):

9. 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:

Even ~~While the Bible may permits~~ though divorce is permissible under the limited circumstances described above, ~~we want to emphasize that it is~~ it does not required divorce but holds out hope that God may restore broken marriages. It is not the best testimony to ~~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~~ the covenant-keeping love of Christ and His church 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 (Psalm 103:8-12; Isaiah 55:7).

When divorce seems inevitable, an offended spouse can imitate God's love by offering a straying spouse these same evidences of grace (Ephesians 5:1-2). This may involve patiently bearing neglect or lovingly confronting serious sin (Colossians 3:12-14; Galatians 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 (Matthew 18:12-20).

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 ~~is expected to should~~ bring the situation to ~~our 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.

~~We are always interested in helping divorced people restore their previous marriage if that is possible and appropriate. We will support a decision to pursue a second marriage to a different person only when we have determined that it is warranted according to the guidelines mentioned above, and that every reasonable effort has been made to seek and grant forgiveness of the sins that contributed to a previous divorce.~~

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.