

Marriage and Divorce

Marriage is a divine institution (Matt. 19:4, 5), not merely a social convenience. God's original appointment was the uniting of one man and one woman as one flesh. Monogamy and marital fidelity, therefore, constitute the Biblical standard (I Tim. 3:2; Exod. 20:14). The sacredness of the marriage bond is clear, not only from its divine institution, but from the fact that Scripture uses it to portray the union of Christ and His church (Eph. 5:25; Rev. 19:7). Therefore, the Free Presbyterian Church opposes all the philosophies and pressures of this age that tend to weaken or destroy the sanctity and permanence of marriage. Jesus said, "Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (Matt. 19:6).

PERMANENCE OF MARRIAGE

Marriages between all legitimate partners are legally binding before God. This is true of the marriages of believers and of unbelievers alike. If a person becomes a Christian after his marriage, he ought not to regard his unsaved spouse as anything less than his true and legitimate marriage partner. His love and fidelity to her should not be diminished by his profession of faith but rather strengthened. Though there may be difficulties arising from an unsaved partner's antagonism or indifference to the gospel and its standards of holiness, the Word of God is clear that the believing partner must seek to maintain the marriage and by godly living endeavor to be a testimony to the other (I Cor. 7:12-14; I Pet. 3:1, 2).

MIXED MARRIAGES

Christians wishing to enter into marriage are admonished that it must be "in the Lord" (I Cor. 7:39; 11:11). This is the only stipulation the Bible lays down. While there may be circumstances that compel a minister or session to advise against a given marriage on other grounds, this is the only one that occupies a doctrinal position in the church.

Though it is wrong for a believer to marry an unbeliever, such a marriage, once entered upon, is legally binding. In the light of all this, the Free Presbyterian Church will conduct marriage services for couples where both parties are saved, or where both parties are unsaved, using the opportunity to seek to point them to Christ. What it will not do is wittingly to join a believer and an unbeliever in marriage.

SINS THAT BETRAY THE MARRIAGE BOND

Under the Mosaic law the penalty for breaking the marriage bond by adultery, sodomy, bestiality, or other gross uncleanness was death (Lev. 20:10, 13, 15). In such cases the Lord granted the most final of divorce settlements: execution. It appears, however, that the Jews did not invoke the full rigor of the law upon these marital crimes, but rather sought a bill of divorce that ended the marriage without calling for the death of the offending party (Deut. 24:1; Matt. 19:8). They also sought to extend the grounds upon which they could obtain a divorce beyond what Moses had enacted (Matt. 19:3). The Mosaic standard was that divorce could be obtained only because of "uncleanness" in a spouse (Deut. 24:1), that is, gross sexual impurity. The Lord Jesus Christ reiterated this, teaching that divorce on any other ground than "fornication" (the Greek word gives us the English word pornography) is invalid (Matt. 5:32; 19:9). He bluntly terms any remarriage under such circumstances "adultery."

PAUL'S TEACHING

Paul addresses the issue of marriage breakdowns from a somewhat different perspective to deal with the problem encountered by Christians whose heathen spouses deserted them (I Cor. 7:12-16). He recognizes that where a wife is unjustly deserted, she is free (v. 15). He therefore appears to include desertion within Christ's definition of fornication, making it a just ground for divorce and remarriage. Where there is no such ground, he emphatically states that couples should not divorce or separate, and if they do they must not remarry (I Cor. 7:10-11).

REMARRIAGE

While reconciliation is better than divorce, the remarriage of justly divorced people is recognized in both the Old Testament and the New (Deut. 24; Matt. 5:32; 19:9; I Cor. 7:15). It would appear, however, that though divorced people were admitted into the New Testament church, they could not hold the office of elder or deacon. This may be deduced from I Timothy 3:2-5, 12.

With all this in view, the Free Presbyterian Church takes a strong pro-marriage position. It tries to understand the hurt of those who have suffered the betrayal of their marriage union. It also seeks to minister the gospel of grace to those whose sin has marred their own and others' lives. The Lord

Jesus stated, "All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men" (Matt. 12:31). We try not to lose sight of that in dealing with the tragic causes and consequences of broken marriages.

DIVORCED PEOPLE IN THE CHURCH

The elders of each Free Presbyterian church may receive divorced people into membership if they are convinced that their present lifestyle is not condemned by Scripture. When received into membership, these brethren and sisters are welcome to participate fully in the life and fellowship of the church and to use their gifts and abilities to advance its ministry. However, no divorced person or one married to a divorced person may be elected to the office of deacon or elder. In addition, no Free Presbyterian church may be used for a marriage service involving a divorced person, nor may any Free Presbyterian minister officiate at such a marriage. This is not to question the legitimacy or propriety of the remarriage of justly divorced people. It is simply a confession that often elders have only partial or very confused evidence relating to the cause of a divorce. If we make a mistake in recognizing a remarriage and allow the parties into membership, we can rectify it. If we have actually solemnized the marriage, we cannot. We know that good men and churches differ from us on this matter, but we believe that, on balance, it is more expedient not to conduct marriage services involving divorced parties.

As stated, however, we do sincerely seek to minister in love to divorced people. The tragedy of divorce is too great to be ignored. It has been our experience that under the Christ-centered preaching in Free Presbyterian churches, and amid the warmth of Christian fellowship, many a divorced person has come to know the power of the gospel to bring peace and freedom from the feelings of rejection, guilt, shame, and remorse that all too often haunt those who have suffered a divorce.