

DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE STUDY COMMISSION—REPORT

Introduction

Throughout the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, various committees, commissions, and councils have studied the topic of marriage and the issues of divorce and remarriage in a continuing effort to clarify the Church's understanding of God's will and to provide instruction for church members and direction for those who minister to them. The current commission, with members from throughout the world field, continues the endeavor of studying the issues of marriage, divorce, and remarriage and offering guidance to the Church.

Over the course of three meetings—Hoddesdon, England, September 14 to 16, 1997; Montemorelos, Mexico, January 25 to 29, 1998; Cohutta Springs, Georgia, May 30 to June 3, 1998—the General Conference Divorce and Remarriage Study Commission has given attention to biblical, theological, and historical studies, and to the writings of Ellen G White, current situational reports from world regions, and research reports. The Commission presented an interim report to the General Conference and division officers on September 25, 1998. During its fourth meeting on April 4 to 6, 1999, the Commission prepared this report taking into consideration the comments of the meeting of General Conference and Division Officers (GCDO) at Iguassu Falls, Brazil, on September 25, 1998.

This report consists of the following sections:

- Biblical Principles Regarding Marriage
- Biblical Principles Regarding Divorce and Remarriage
- Role of the Church in Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage
- Recommendations

Biblical Principles Regarding Marriage

1. God's Original Plan for Marriage

a. **The Origin of Marriage.** Marriage is divinely instituted. God Himself performed the first marriage on the sixth day of creation when He brought together Adam and Eve as husband and wife (Gen 2:18-25). In declaring their marital union God said, "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh" (Gen 2:24). God intended this marriage to be the pattern for all future marriage relationships. Christ endorsed the original concept of marriage (Matt 19:3-6). Thus marriage was blessed by God as the closest human relationship.

b. **The Covenant of Marriage.** Marriage is a covenant which husband and wife make with each other and with God. In marriage the couple pledge their love, loyalty, and devotion to each other as long as they are both alive (Prov 2:17; Mal 2:14). The marriage covenant is built upon love (Eph 5:28, 29; Titus 2:4). Such love enables husband and wife to accept each other unconditionally, to share in each other's pain and failures, to rejoice in each other's victories and accomplishments. Paul describes the kind of love which is necessary for the marriage covenant to succeed: "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres" (1 Cor 13:4-7, NIV).

c. **The Permanence of Marriage.** Marriage is a life-long commitment of both partners to each other (Mark 10:2-9; Rom 7:2). Paul indicates that the commitment which Christ has for the church

is a model of the relationship between husband and wife (Eph 5:31, 32). God intended this relationship to be as permanent as Christ's relationship with the church.

d. *The Priority of Marriage.* Paul recognized the husband-wife relationship as the primary relationship in the family (Eph 5:22-33). Marriage takes precedence over all other human relationships, even those between the spouses and their parents (Gen 2:24). No other human relationship should interfere in an inappropriate way with the marriage relationship.

e. *Sexual Intimacy in Marriage.* Sexual intimacy within marriage is a sacred gift from God to the human family. It is an integral part of marriage, reserved for marriage only (Gen 2:24; Prov 5:15-20). Such intimacy, designed to be shared exclusively between husband and wife, promotes ever-increasing closeness, happiness, and security, and provides for the perpetuation of the human race. In addition to being monogamous, marriage, as instituted by God, is a heterosexual relationship (Matt 19:4, 5).

f. *Spiritual Compatibility in Marriage.* Spiritual compatibility is vital if marriage is to be fully in harmony with God's plan (Amos 3:3; 2 Cor 6:14). God desires that, through their union, husband and wife experience His love, exalt His name, and witness to His power. Throughout Scripture, marriage is used as a figure of the relationship between God and His people (Isa 54:5-7; Hos 2:19, 20; Eph 5:25-28; Rev 21:2).

g. *Marriage as Partnership.* As partners in marriage, husband and wife bear equal responsibility for the success of the marriage (Gen 1:26-28). While their responsibilities may differ, neither is more important than the other and neither is to dominate the other. Their relationship is one of mutuality and companionship (Gen 2:18). As husband and wife mutually submit to one another (Eph 5:21), they seek to encourage and build each other up in love (1 Thess 5:11). Commenting on this partnership, Ellen G White wrote: "Eve was created from a rib taken from the side of Adam, signifying that she was not to control him as the head, nor to be trampled under his feet as an inferior, but to stand by his side as an equal, to be loved and protected by him" (PP 46).

2. The Effects of the Fall on Marriage

The entrance of sin adversely affected marriage. When Adam and Eve sinned, they lost the oneness which they had known with God and with one another (Gen 3:6-24). Their relationship became marked with guilt, shame, blame, and pain. As a part of the curse of sin, rulership was given to the husband (Gen 3:16; see also PP 58, 59). Wherever sin reigns, its sad effects on marriage include alienation, desertion, unfaithfulness, neglect, abuse, violence, separation, divorce, domination of one partner by the other, and sexual perversion. Non-monogamous marriages are also an expression of the effects of sin on the institution of marriage. Such marriages, although practiced in Old Testament times, were not in harmony with the divine design. God's plan for marriage requires His people to transcend the mores of popular culture which are in conflict with the biblical view.

3. Restoration and Healing

a. *Divine Ideal to be Restored in Christ.* In redeeming the world from sin and its consequences, God also seeks to restore marriage to its original ideal. This is envisioned for the lives of those who have been born again into the kingdom of Christ, those whose hearts are being sanctified by the Holy Spirit and who have as their primary purpose in life the exaltation of the Lord Jesus Christ (see also 1 Peter 3:7; MB 64).

b. *Oneness and Equality Restored in Christ.* The gospel emphasizes the love and submission of husband and wife to one another (1 Cor 7:3, 4; Eph 5:21). The model for the husband's leadership is the self-sacrificial love and service that Christ gives to the church (Eph 5:24, 25). Peter enjoins husbands to respect their wives and treat them with consideration (1 Peter 3:7),

while Paul instructs wives to respect their husbands (Eph 5:23). Commenting on Eph 5:22-28, Ellen G White says, "Neither husband nor wife is to make a plea for rulership. . . . The husband is to cherish his wife as Christ cherishes the church. And the wife is to respect and love her husband. Both are to cultivate a spirit of kindness, being determined never to grieve or injure the other" (7T 47). In Christ, oneness, equality, and mutuality in marriage are to be restored.

c. Grace Available for All. God seeks to restore to wholeness and reconcile to Himself all who have failed to attain the divine standard (2 Cor 5:19). This includes those who have experienced broken marriage relationships.

d The Role of the Church. Moses in the Old Testament and Paul in the New Testament dealt with the problems caused by broken marriages (Deut 24:1-5, 1 Cor 7:10-16). Both, while recognizing the ideal, attempted to work constructively and redemptively with those who had fallen short of the divine standard. Similarly, the church today is called to uphold God's ideal for marriage and, at the same time, to be a reconciling, forgiving, healing community, showing understanding and compassion when brokenness occurs.

Biblical Principles Regarding Divorce and Remarriage

The Seventh-day Adventist Church's treatment of divorce and remarriage must be divinely guided. In addition to directives and specific examples, the Bible provides broad principles that enable the Church to be faithful to the divine intent and gracious in caring for its members who experience divorce.

1. Divorce is contrary to God's original purpose in creating marriage (Matt 19:3-8; Mark 10:2-9), but the Bible is not silent about it. Because divorce occurred as part of the fallen human experience, biblical legislation was given to limit the damage it caused (Deut 24:1-4). The Bible consistently seeks to elevate marriage and to discourage divorce by describing the joys of married love and faithfulness (Prov 5:18-20; Song of Sol 2:16; 4:9-5:1), by referring to the marriage-like relationship of God with His people (Isa 54:5; Jer 3:1), by focusing on the possibilities of forgiveness and marital renewal (Jer 3:1; Hos 3:1-3; 11:8, 9), and by indicating God's hatred of divorce and the misery it causes (Mal 2:15, 16; Hos 2; 3). Jesus restored the creation view of marriage as a lifelong covenant between a man and a woman (Matt 19:4-6; Mark 10:6-9). Much biblical instruction affirms marriage and seeks to correct problems which tend to weaken or destroy the marriage covenant (Eph 5:21-33; Heb 13:4; 1 Peter 3:7).

2. The covenant of marriage rests on principles of love, loyalty, exclusiveness, trust, and support upheld by both partners in obedience to God (Gen 2:24; Matt 19:6; 1 Corinthians 13; Eph 5:21-29; 1 Thess 4:1-7). When these principles are violated, the essence of the marriage covenant is endangered. Scripture acknowledges that tragic circumstances can destroy the marriage covenant. Jesus taught that the marriage covenant may be irreparably broken through sexual immorality (Matt 5:32; 19:9), which includes a range of improper sexual behaviors. Paul indicated that death brings the marriage covenant to an end (Rom 7:2, 3), as does desertion by an unbelieving partner no longer willing to be married (1 Cor 7:15). The above do not exhaust the destructive factors that may lead to brokenness and divorce.

3. God's Word condemns violence in personal relationships (Gen 6:11, 13; Ps 11:5; Isa 58:4, 5; Rom 13:10; Gal 5:19-21). It is the spirit of Christ to love and accept, to seek to affirm and build others up, rather than to abuse or demean them (Rom 12:10; 14:19; Eph 4:26; 5:28, 29; Col 3:8-14; 1 Thess 5:11). There is no room among Christ's followers for tyrannical control and the abuse of power or authority (Matt 20:25-28; Eph 6:4). Violence in the setting of marriage and family is especially abhorrent, destroying the marriage covenant (Mal 2:14-16; see also AH 343).

4. When a couple's marriage is in danger of breaking down, every effort should be made by the partners and those in the church or family who minister to them to bring about their reconciliation

in harmony with divine principles for restoring wounded relationships (Hos 3:1-3; 1 Cor 7:10, 11; 13:4-7; Gal 6:1).

5. For the brokenness of divorce, divine grace is the only remedy. When marriage fails, despite efforts toward reconciliation, former partners should be encouraged to examine their experience and to embrace the mercy and compassion of God. God is willing to comfort those who have been wounded. God also accepts the repentance of individuals who commit the most destructive sins, even those that carry with them irremediable consequences (2 Samuel 11, 12; Ps 34:18; 86:5; Joel 2:12, 13; John 8:2-11; 1 John 1:9).

6. Church members are called to forgive and accept those who have failed as God has forgiven them (Isa 54:5-8; Matt 6:14, 15; Eph 4:32). The Bible urges patience, compassion, and forgiveness in the Christian care of those who have erred (Matt 18:10-20; Gal 6:1, 2).

7. Implicit in God's forgiving grace and healing is the possibility of a new beginning (Ps 34:22; Jer 3:22; 31:17; Mark 5:1-20; John 8:11; 2 Cor 5:17; 1 John 1:9; see also 2SM 339, 340).

8. Marriage is an important part of the social fabric of the community of believers and involves responsibilities of the couple to the church and of the church to the couple. In their marriage, the couple bears witness to their Adventist faith and accepts the moral authority of the church (1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4). The church, as the body of Christ in which His Spirit dwells, is called upon to affirm, bless, nurture, preserve, and uphold marriage. The church has the responsibility to provide guidance and the authority to apply the principles of God's Word in difficult and complex cases of divorce and remarriage (Matt 16:19; 18:18; John 20:22, 23; 1 Cor 5:3-5; 6:1-6). Further, through the exercise of redemptive discipline and pastoral care and nurture, the church has the obligation to help erring members return to discipleship (Matt 18:15-20; Gal 6:1; Heb 12:7-12).

Role of the Church in Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage

Because marriage is part of the fabric of the community of believers, the Seventh-day Adventist Church upholds, affirms, and supports this primary human relationship. It recognizes the challenges that characterize marriage in our age and is committed to biblical principles in its ministry to families. The local church is primarily responsible for administering the policies and standards of the Seventh-day Adventist Church with reference to marriage, divorce and remarriage. When the church ministers to marriages and families, it should manifest its belief in biblical principles in the following practical ways.

1. **Facilitating Marital Growth** The church provides a variety of ministries to help couples prepare for and experience marriage. The Sabbath School, worship services, various church activities at every age level, and the Seventh-day Adventist school system afford opportunities for education regarding marriage and family living.

a. **Premarital Guidance.** All couples who seek the services of a Seventh-day Adventist minister to conduct their wedding are provided with premarital guidance. Effective premarital guidance is a process involving at least 12 hours of interaction between the pastor/ counselor and the couple. Together they explore a broad range of relational issues in which the pastor/counselor assumes the role of coach. If, during this process, issues arise that create concern, the couple may be encouraged to postpone their wedding or reconsider their decision to marry. If the pastor is uncomfortable with their decision to marry, the pastor may choose not to officiate at the wedding.

b. **Marriage Education and Enrichment.** The church helps couples grow together, enjoy marriage and achieve God's design for marriage. Marriage education and enrichment facilitate growth by providing opportunities for couples to develop intimacy and the

skills to resolve differences and handle crises.

c. Counseling Referral. The church cares for couples in need by encouraging them to use support resources. The church cultivates appropriate spiritual gifts that provide support and healing. It also identifies professional resources in the community and makes referrals as needed.

d. Enrichment for Pastoral Couples. The church encourages pastors to devote time to their families, creates opportunities for enrichment of pastoral marriages, provides for anonymous counseling as needed, and offers in-service programs to enable them to develop skills for ministry to families.

2. Encouraging Marital Reconciliation

The church encourages individuals in marital crisis to resolve differences and build healthy marriages. It provides appropriate spiritual nurture and support. When violence and abuse are involved, special care is taken to protect the vulnerable, stop the abuse, and hold the abuser accountable for the abuse. In some cases of abuse and violence, reconciliation may not be possible.

3. Ministering After Marital Breakdown

Despite their own efforts and the pro-active ministry of the Church, some couples fail to sustain their marital relationship. Such breakdown calls for God's grace to be demonstrated by the church. It fosters a healing ministry which provides divorce recovery for adults and children, referrals for abusers and for victims of abuse and violence, and assistance with everyday needs.

4. Ministering to Remarried Couples

The church provides specialized premarital guidance for individuals considering remarriage. It also offers marriage enrichment experiences adapted to the unique issues confronting remarried couples and parent education designed for families with children joined together through remarriage.

5. Maintaining Church Integrity and Discipline

In carrying out its responsibility to reflect to the world the justice and grace of God, the church cares for the well-being of its members and thereby protects its reputation. The behavior of each member affects the entire community. Likewise, the demeanor of the church affects each member. As a worshiping and witnessing body, the church has a responsibility to teach and apply the principles of the Word of God. Thus, it builds up and supports; it comforts, teaches, and corrects. With respect to the individual, the church understands the ultimate purpose of discipline to be the restoration of the person to faithful discipleship and fellowship within the church. Discipline is also an opportunity for the church to reaffirm and demonstrate its commitment to biblical standards.

a. When Divorce Occurs. In order to protect its members when divorce occurs, the church guards the reputation and privacy of the spouses and all those impacted directly by the divorce. It reaches out to those going through the divorce process, encouraging them to remain within the fellowship of the community of faith. The church also makes the security and welfare of children a priority. It encourages the parents to put their children's needs above their own interests and desires. It holds parents accountable for their responsibilities to their children, including financial obligations. Divorced individuals are encouraged to take sufficient time, usually a period of years, to address the reasons for the failure of their marriage, to accept responsibility for their part in the breakdown of the marriage, to work through the process of healing and forgiveness, and to experience a sense of closure.

In order to protect the community of faith when divorce occurs, the church endeavors to minimize divisive and disruptive behavior often associated with divorce. In the interest of pastoral care, the church may decide that those in divorce recovery will not function in leadership roles. If, in the

judgment of the church, individuals demonstrate no repentance, make little or no effort to support their families, bring the church into disrepute, or otherwise refuse to accept the above guidelines, the congregation may regretfully discipline them. Such discipline may include a period of removal from church office, censure, or disfellowshipping.

b. Considerations Regarding Remarriage. Before individuals become involved in another serious relationship, they should be encouraged to complete the above recovery process. If remarriage is contemplated, the local church offers counsel. It supports their decision when it is in harmony with biblical principles. Those whose remarriage is out of harmony with biblical principles are subject to church discipline.

Recommendations

The following recommendations arise out of the biblical principles section of the report of the General Conference Divorce and Remarriage Study Commission. (They represent a practical response to very real situations in the lives of many members and challenges facing congregations.)

Bringing together the related Scriptural passages and principles undergirding a Christian response to divorce and remarriage is not a simple task. More study is needed. However, the urgency of the circumstances call for the Church's best response at this time. Based on the study by the Divorce and Remarriage Study Commission of the Bible and the writings of Ellen G White, it was

RECOMMENDED,

1. To retitle the *Church Manual* chapter "Divorce and Remarriage" to read "Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage," and to include the biblical principles regarding marriage.
2. To include in the *Church Manual* guidelines for local church ministry which support couples prior to marriage, in marriage, when marital breakdown occurs, and in remarriage.
3. To reflect in the *Church Manual* reference to divorce and remarriage, that the dual purpose of church discipline is to redeem and correct. Appropriate discipline is not punitive.
4. To give emphasis in the *Church Manual* to the use of redemptive language in matters relating to divorce and remarriage. Because in many cases it is not possible to readily or accurately determine what or whose behavior is responsible for the marital breakdown, redemptive language is more appropriate than language which judges, condemns, or labels individuals as "guilty and innocent parties." These terms often create obstacles that prevent individuals from resolving the differences between themselves and with the community of faith. Redemptive language does not preclude holding individuals and couples to accountability and disciplining those whose behavior clearly violates the marriage covenant and destroys the marital relationship.
5. To precisely rewrite the second sentence of the *Church Manual*, section 8, page 183 to avoid any inference of the concept of perpetual adultery for which the Commission found no biblical or Ellen G White support.
6. To use the term "church discipline" as the more inclusive term in all references in Chapter 15 of the *Church Manual* which prescribe "disfellowshipping." The term "church discipline" allows for the possibility of disfellowshipping, censure, and/or a period of removal from office.
7. To replace the phrase "the guilty party" (*Church Manual*, "Our Position," page 182, number 2., end of second paragraph) with "all involved," i.e., "The church is urged to relate lovingly and redemptively toward all involved."

8. To add a paragraph as a second paragraph for *Church Manual*, "Our Position," page 182, number 3., to the effect that pastors and church leaders handling sensitive information should exercise discretion in its disclosure.

9. To add the following sentence as a second sentence for *Church Manual*, "Our Position," page 183, number 8.: "Hence, the options available to the repentant may be severely limited. His/Her plea for readmittance to regular church membership shall be considered after appropriate counsel involving the local pastor, the church board, and, if necessary, such committees as may have been set up by the local conference for these purposes."

10. To replace the *Church Manual*, "Our Position," pages 182, 183, number 4. with the following paragraph: "The spouse whose acknowledged act of unfaithfulness to the marriage vow led to the breakdown of the marriage shall be subject to church discipline. The local church shall determine the nature of the discipline and shall explain to the individual the reason and purpose of the discipline. At the discretion of the local church, that discipline may be for a stated period of time. During the time when the individual is under discipline the church, as an instrument of God's mission, shall make every effort to maintain caring and spiritually nurturing contact with the individual."

11. To include sexual abuse in the Church's understanding of *porneia* (*Church Manual*, page 182, number 2. on "fornication" and "sexual irregularities"). (See "Biblical Principles Regarding Divorce and Remarriage," number 2.)

12. To consider physical violence within marriage as unfaithfulness to the marriage vow. (See "Biblical Principles Regarding Divorce and Remarriage," number 3.)

13. To recognize abandonment of a marriage partner as unfaithfulness to the marriage vow. (See "Biblical Principles Regarding Divorce and Remarriage," number 2.)