

DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS (DSTO)

VOLUME 1

H. ETHICAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES

Marriage, divorce and re-marriage

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I. MARRIAGE

1. God, the Creator of humankind, instituted marriage. It is part of the created social order. So society, through custom or legislation, decides when a man and a woman are in fact married (Gen 1:27,28; 2:18–24; Matt 19:3–9; Augsburg Confession 16 and 28; Apology 23.9).
2. Marriage is the union of a man and a woman. This union excludes all other people. It is publicly and voluntarily entered into for the whole of life (Matt 19:6; 1 Cor 7:39).
3. The purpose of marriage is
 - to unite one man and one woman (that is, husband and wife) so that they become 'one flesh'. In this relationship the one person is the complement of the other (Matt 19:5)
 - to produce children and to care for their upbringing within the framework of a family (Eph 6:1–4)
 - to provide an appropriate place and context for a man and a woman to have sexual relations (1 Cor 7:2,3).

II. DIVORCE

1. Divorce is against the will of God. God wants husband and wife to live together in marriage until they are separated by death (Matt 19:9; Mark 10:11; Luke 16:18; 1 Cor 7:10,11; Apology 23.23,63,71; Large Catechism I.306; Formula of Concord, Epitome 12.19; Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration 12.24).

2. The pattern for the kingdom is: 'What God has joined together, let no one separate' (Matt 19:6). Our Lord, in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, does not teach that failure in marriage must be followed by divorce. This is so even in the case of infidelity. The 'except clauses' in these passages do not provide a legal prescription or justification for terminating one marriage and beginning another. They do not say that divorce becomes a necessity in the circumstances described by our Lord. They simply indicate that in these circumstances divorce becomes a possibility.
3. Unity and harmony in marriage are maintained through love, forgiveness, and peace. When forgiveness is treated with contempt and the person to whom it is offered continues to live in unchastity and/or wilful separation (1 Cor 7:15), then a marriage break may become a necessity.
4. Therefore, although there are no biblical grounds on which divorce may be insisted on, there are situations in which divorce may be inevitable. This happens, as Jesus pointed out, because of the hardness of the human heart (Matt 19:8).

III. RE-MARRIAGE

1. First Corinthians 7:15 and the 'except clauses' in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 do not recommend divorce, nor do they give automatic approval to the re-marriage of divorced persons.
2. A marriage failure may result in separation or even in divorce, but this does not necessarily mean that the marriage cannot be re-established. Reconciliation is not ruled out by legal decree. Responsible persons will make every effort to lead the parties concerned to repentance, reconciliation, and the possible re-establishment of the marriage union (1 Cor 7:10,11; John 8:3–11).
3. A pastor may marry a divorced person or persons provided that
 - the situation has been thoroughly worked through in the light of the church's teaching on marriage and divorce, and
 - the pastor can officiate with a good conscience. In this connection, pastoral concerns such as those listed in section IV B below should be taken into consideration.

IV. PASTORAL CONCERNS

A. When a marriage fails

1. Pastoral counselling does not aim at simply saving the marriage or preventing divorce. The central goal is to help an estranged husband and wife to be reconciled, to live before God as Christians who accept one another, confess their sins to one another, forgive each other, and love one another *for Christ's sake*.
Note: the situation is here limited to Christians. Special problems may arise from inter-faith and non-faith marriages.
2. If reconciliation is to take place, the couple must be helped to identify the actual causes of their estrangement and mutual animosity.
3. When a marriage relationship goes bad the fault usually lies with both the husband and the wife ('Let the one who is without sin be the first to throw a stone'; compare John 8:7). One party may be less or more guilty than the other; one party may separate (1 Cor 7:15). Whatever the facts of the case may seem to be, the degree of guilt of each person is known only to God. Both parties need to be led to repentance, forgiveness, and renewal. They need God's forgiveness and each other's forgiveness.

4. The New Testament supplies no formal procedure for dealing with particular situations. It simply reveals God's will for marriage. It shows that sin causes human beings to fall short of God's ideal for marriage. It reveals that the rhythm of life in the kingdom is repentance and forgiveness. These are produced by the Holy Spirit as God's word, functioning appropriately as law and gospel, is proclaimed, heard, and accepted.
5. The New Testament also shows that people, in the hardness of their hearts, often do not respond to God's word, they do not forgive, and do not love their neighbour. Thus God's will is not done. So the basic structure of the pastoral approach to the mending of broken marriages is not the following of legalistic procedures, but the realistic and theologically-appropriate working through of situations.
6. The pastoral counsellor's role is to gain the confidence and trust of the couple and to provide them with an open, supportive environment. The counsellor wants to help the couple gain deeper insights into their problems, and develop abilities and resources to resolve, at least to a workable degree, the problems that are frustrating the marriage relationship.
7. As a counsellor, the pastor will bear in mind that it takes many elements to build a marriage, and that all these elements must be adequately inter-related to form a totality: for example, love, the emotions, sex, parenthood, economic concerns, trust, common faith.
8. The pastoral counsellor will have the skills and many of the goals which a competent secular counsellor has. But the pastor brings an 'extra', namely, the word of God. This word functions in two ways. On the one hand, the word of God exposes the problem in an entirely new light, showing that it involves not only the relationship of person to person, but also the relationship of person and persons to God. In this way that word from God is one of judgment and condemnation. On the other hand, the pastor brings God's word of pardon to the penitent, power to the powerless, confidence to the faltering, hope to the hopeless. This dynamic word enables even the frustrated marriage partner to say with Paul: 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me' (Phil 4:13).
9. Overall, it is important that the pastor and the couple distinguish between an inability to work towards the God-intended purpose of marriage, and an unwillingness to do so.
10. In marriage counselling, as in all counselling, the pastor will not hesitate to use the resources of the church. For example:
 - the ministry of word and sacraments
 - corporate worship and prayer
 - Christian couples who have experienced marriage problems and with God's help solved them
 - Christian couples who are happily married.

At first the unhappy couple may be discouraged by the contrast between their relationship and that of a happily-married couple. But the social support of a good Christian couple can develop into a friendship which is especially beneficial at such a time as this.

B. When a divorced person wants to marry

Matters which will concern the pastor include:

1. The attitude of the divorced person to their former spouse and to the possibility of reconciliation and the re-establishment of the former marriage.
2. The attitude of the divorced person to God's will for marriage.
3. Has the divorced person shown repentance for their part in the failure of the previous marriage?
4. The extent to which the divorced person has fulfilled their Christian and legal responsibilities to the children of the former marriage.
5. Has the divorced person considered remaining unmarried?
6. The divorced person's efforts to remove and correct those factors which contributed to the divorce.
7. The willingness of the divorced person to build, with God's help, a new marriage on Christian foundations.
8. The extent to which these concerns are understood and accepted by the prospective partner.