

20th General Assembly, 1992, Appendix 0, p. 513

DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

19-16, p. 63, Recommendation 7:

“In light of the current focus on sexuality and the public confusion generated through the recent controversy on that subject within the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), a distinctly different denomination, strongly reaffirms its commitment to the Bible's teaching on sex and marriage.

“The PCA reaffirms that sex is a gift from God which should be expressed only in marriage between a man and a woman. Therefore all sexual intercourse outside marriage, including homosexuality and lesbianism, is contrary to God's Word (the Bible), and is sin. We acknowledge that the Bible declares that those who continuously and unrepentantly sin shall not inherit the kingdom of God, and we sorrow for their plight.* Yet we also joyfully acknowledge that God in the gospel of Jesus Christ forgives repentant sinners and welcomes such forgiven, cleansed and changed sinners into the Church of Jesus Christ.”

*(1 Corinthians 6:9-11)

**REPORT OF THE AD-INTERIM COMMITTEE ON
DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE
TO THE TWENTIETH GENERAL ASSEMBLY**

INTRODUCTION

Due to the need for guidance regarding pastoral care of persons affected by divorce or severe marital crisis, the 16th General Assembly appointed the Ad Interim Committee to prepare a report which would include, but not be limited to, the following:

- a) A re-examination of biblical teaching concerning grounds for divorce and remarriage. The committee shall ask whether the Westminster Confession Chapter 24.6 is more lax or more restrictive than Scripture, and shall suggest any revisions to that article of the Confession it deems appropriate. In particular, the committee shall address the question, whether a Christian may have other legitimate grounds for divorce, besides desertion by an unbelieving spouse, or adultery (for example, inveterate physical abuse, marital rape or other sexual abuse, attempted murder, or equally serious violations of the marriage covenant).
- b) Recommend guidelines and resources for pastoral care and counsel of couples with marital difficulties, persons considering divorce or

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remarriage after divorce, divorced persons, and children and other family members affected by divorce.” (1988 General Assembly, Overture #12)

This report represents the findings of the Committee. Having considered carefully the request of the General Assembly, the Committee divided its research into three parts. First, it was asked to consider whether the Confession is more lax or more restrictive than Scripture, and whether any revisions to the Confession would be appropriate at this time. Chapter 1, Historical Perspective on Divorce and Remarriage focuses on the conclusions reached by the Westminster Divines and the diversity of views present in that day. Most of the issues debated today were debated then with a broad range of answers, and the writings of the Puritan and Continental Divines provide an interesting parallel to today's breadth of views in the PCA.

Second, the Committee was asked to consider whether there could be other legitimate grounds for divorce besides “desertion by an unbelieving spouse” or “adultery,” namely, such harmful actions as inveterate physical abuse, attempted murder, etc. Chapter 2, Scriptural Perspective on Divorce and Remarriage, seeks to address this issue by reexamining those passages of Scripture that deal with divorce and remarriage. In the past, countless such studies have been made. There are no new scriptures to which we may appeal for answers. Whatever answers there are in Scripture will be based on those passages already studied by so many, and especially on the interpretation of two major passages, Matthew 19:9 with its “exception clause,” and I Corinthians 7:10-15 with its details regarding “desertion.” This is the heart of the debate. Can the “sexual immorality” (*porneia*) of Matthew 19:9 be understood to include a variety of forms of sexual sin, or must it be limited only to one sexual offense? Can “desertion” of I Corinthians 7 be understood to include such harmful actions as physical abuse and attempted murder, or must it be limited only to an unbelieving spouse leaving the house of a believer?

Actually, the Committee was not totally pleased with the wording of the request “whether a Christian may have other legitimate grounds for divorce..,” as though the task of the committee would be to find if there were other legal ways out of a marriage. It is better to view Matthew 19:9 not as providing a ground for divorce but rather an exception to the principle of the permanence of marriage. Also, as the report will show the “desertion” of I Corinthians 7 was not a ground for divorce, but rather an actual incidence of divorce. Considerable thought has been given to the meaning of “sexual immorality” and “desertion,” and the findings of the Committee need to be pondered carefully in the light of the entire chapter on Scripture.

Third, the Committee was asked to provide guidelines and resources for the PCA in its pastoral care and counsel of all parties affected by marital difficulties, divorce, or remarriage. Ruling and teaching elders will find this third chapter very helpful as they seek to minister to people in these situations, and as they establish policy and procedures for the churches. Many excellent insights and suggestions are given to help in this most difficult pastoral task.

The Committee appreciates that pastors and sessions will adopt, modify, or ignore the guidelines and resources as the case may be. In the Church, there are

significant differences of opinion regarding approaches to pastoral counseling. The Committee will not recommend that the General Assembly adopt these guidelines, only that they be made available for consideration. In this regard, let no one mistake the attention we pay both to historical data and pastoral guidelines in chapters one and three. We understand that Holy Scripture is, as our Confession says, “the supreme authority” in this as in all matters of faith and practice. Our Confession, as a subordinate standard, is a faithful effort to reproduce the Scripture's teaching.

In the process of preparing this report, the Committee received numerous suggestions for improving the report. The Committee considered every suggestion, whether it was from a presbytery, a session, or a particular elder. All were considered, and some significant changes have been made as a result.

The format of the report is a basic one. The initial Outline serves as a summary of the content of the report, and as an aid in finding the Committee's statements on specific issues. Please be careful to read the Committee's specific statements in the context of the whole report. Then three chapters follow dealing with the three parts of the report. Finally, in the Conclusion, a summary of our findings is stated, and it is followed by a series of specific recommendations to the General Assembly. We have sought to make the report readable and usable for all members of the PCA, and trust that it will bring glory to God.

Committee Members

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**THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY'S REPORT ON
DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE**

OUTLINE

CHAPTER I

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

- I. The Westminster Confession on Divorce and Remarriage
- II. The Witness of the Early Church
- III. The Original Intent of the Confession
- IV. The Views of Three Prominent Puritan Divines
 - A. William Perkins (1558-1602)
 - B. William Gouge (1575-1653)
 - C. William Ames (1576-1633)
- V. The Conclusion of the Westminster Divines
- VI. The Views of Two Prominent Continental Divines
 - A. Theodore Beza (1519-1605)
 - B. Samuel Maresius (1599-1673)
- VII. Conclusion

CHAPTER 2

SCRIPTURAL PERSPECTIVE ON DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

- I. Issues Concerning Divorce and Remarriage
 - A. What our denominational heritage has said about marriage
 - B. What our denominational heritage has said about divorce and remarriage
 - C. What views may be found today within the evangelical-reformed community regarding divorce and remarriage
 1. No divorce, no remarriage
 2. Strictly limited grounds for divorce, and for remarriage
 3. Broader ground for divorce, and for remarriage
 - D. Are we to understand that Scripture indeed allows for divorce?
 1. Divorce was permitted in Scripture
 2. Divorce dissolved a marriage in Scripture
 - E. Does the evidence that divorce ends marriage mean that God looks favorably at divorce? Malachi 2:13-16
- II. Consideration of Major Scripture Passages
 - A. Deuteronomy 24:1-4
 1. Is Moses giving a command to divorce?
 2. What does the phrase "some indecency" mean?
 3. Modern interpreters differ

4. Proceeding to the New Testament passages
- B. Matthew 5:31-32
 1. The rabbinic perversion of Deuteronomy 24
 2. Jesus' correction of the rabbinic perversion
 3. Interpretations influenced by the context of Matthew 5, the Sermon on the Mount
- C. Luke 16:17-18
- D. Matthew 19:3-9 [Mark 10:2-11]
 1. The context of Matthew 19:3-8
 2. Divorce and remarriage in Matthew 19:9
 3. The exception clause of Matthew 19:9
 - a. The authenticity of Jesus' words
 - b. The scope of the exception clause
 - c. The meaning of *porneia*
 - d. Is *porneia* ever used with an even broader meaning?
 - e. What are the current interpretations of *porneia*?
View #1: *porneia* refers to sexual unfaithfulness before Marriage
View #2: *porneia* refers to unfaithfulness in marriage, not restricted to sexual sin
View #3: *porneia* refers to sexual unfaithfulness in marriage
 - f. Guidelines for applying the meaning of *porneia*
- E. I Corinthians 7:10-15
 1. Instruction to spouses both of whom are believers, verses 10-11
 2. Important insights into verses 10-11
 3. Instruction to a spouse married to an unbeliever, verses 12-15
 4. Applying Paul's instruction about desertion today
 5. Some concluding thoughts about remarriage, I Corinthians 7:39

CHAPTER 3

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE ON DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

- I. Prevention of Marital Problems
 - A. Statement of prevention rationale
 - B. Guidelines for prevention
 - C. Suggested outline for pre-marital counseling
 - D. Resources
- II. Pastoral Care and Counsel of Couples with Marital Difficulties
 - A. Understanding the couple
 - B. Guidelines for marital counseling
 - C. Practical considerations
 - D. Resources
- III. Discipline As It Pertains to Couples Considering Divorce
 - A. Guidelines for discipline issues

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1. The local church's responsibility to become involved
 2. How does the local church become involved?
 3. What if both spouses will talk with an elder?
 4. What if one spouse refuses to talk with an elder?
 - a. For the spouse who will talk with an elder
 - b. For the spouse who will not talk with an elder
 5. What if the elders pursue formal discipline?
- B. Resources
- IV. Pastoral Care and Counsel of Those Seeking Remarriage
- A. Understanding the person seeking remarriage
 - B. Guidelines for remarriage
 - C. Concerns of those in the congregation who have been divorced
 - D. Practical considerations for ministering to those contemplating remarriage
 - E. Resources
- V. Pastoral Care and Counsel of the Children of Divorced Parents
- A. Understanding the child of divorced parents
 - B. Practical considerations for ministering to those contemplating remarriage when children are involved
 - C. Resources
 - D. Addendum: "Ceremony for Recognition of Children at Remarriage"
- VI. The Church's Ministry to the Separated and Divorced
- A. Understanding the separated and divorced
 - B. Guidelines for ministry
 - C. Resources

APPENDICES

- I. "The Westminster Divines on Divorce for Physical Abuse"
- II. "Divorce Reconsidered"

CONCLUSION

- I. A Summary of the Findings of the Committee
- II. Recommendations to the 20th General Assembly of the PCA