

# **Atascadero Bible Church Marriage Policy**

*Atascadero Bible Church is committed to helping couples build Christ-centered marriages that will last a lifetime.*

***Our Elders have written the ABC Marriage Policy as a guideline for what we believe to be a Christ honoring marriage, according to God's Word. Couples who have questions or comments about the policy are welcome to meet with a pastor for further discussion. Couples who wish to have an ABC pastor or elder officiate their wedding, or who wish to use our building for their wedding ceremony, must abide by our marriage policies.***

It is the desire of Atascadero Bible Church that your marriage be all that God intends for you. Since God designed the marriage relationship, He knows best how to build a marriage that will last a lifetime.

As we read His Word, we are able to discern basic principles which must be understood and applied if we hope to experience joy and fulfillment in marriage. Ignoring these principles will result in frustration and possible failure in the marriage relationship.

Because we are committed to building healthy marriages that can go the distance, we want to present the following guidelines. Our purpose is not to condemn or reject anyone, but to comply with God's principles for marriage. At ABC we value the permanence of marriage. It is our desire that your marriage models the Biblical relationship between Jesus Christ and His bride, the Church; a covenant relationship characterized by joy, intimacy and permanence.

- 1. We recommend a minimum of six months of marital preparation.** This allows plenty of time for the "2-B-1" program. This program is required for all couples who desire to be married by one of the pastors or elders at Atascadero Bible Church or who wish to use the ABC facilities for their ceremony and/or reception.
- 2. A minimum of a one-year dating/courting relationship is recommended before marriage.** Even though some people have the skills and maturity to build a committed relationship sooner than others, there really are no shortcuts to building intimacy, trust and communication.
- 3. Divorced persons may be considered for marriage at Atascadero Bible Church** provided they meet one of these biblical criteria:
  - a. The former spouse is now deceased (Romans 7:2, 1 Corinthians 7:39)
  - b. The divorce occurred because of sexual unfaithfulness by the former spouse (Matt 19:3-9)
  - c. Desertion by an unbelieving spouse (1 Corinthians 7:15)
  - d. The former spouse initiated divorce and has remarried (Romans 7:3)

If none of the above criteria apply to your situation, a meeting with a pastor may be arranged to consider your individual case. We acknowledge that other extenuating circumstances often relate to divorce.

Additionally, remarriages after divorce of a spouse will be performed only after one year has passed from the time the divorce is finalized. A divorce recovery program must be completed either at Atascadero Bible Church or another church. We believe a new relationship should not be pursued until the potential of a healthy reconciliation has been exhausted and significant healing has taken place. (For further explanation of a biblical view of divorce and remarriage, see the attached belief statement, *What the Bible Teaches About Divorce and Remarriage* by ABC's board of elders, below.)

4. **Remarriage following the death of a spouse should occur after one year from the spouse's death.**
5. **Atascadero Bible Church Pastors and elders will not marry couples and ABC's facilities cannot be used if the couple is "unequally yoked" spiritually.** Both people must have surrendered their lives to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and be committed to establishing a Christian home.
6. **The couple must remain celibate (ie. refrain from sexual activity and contact) from this time forward and not live together at any time between now and the wedding.** The pastor or elder will not perform the ceremony if the couple is currently living together. This is in accordance with Scripture and is a protection for you against divorce, as research has found that couples who live together have a higher divorce rate than those who do not. The couple, along with their Accountability Partners must agree to and sign the Purity Covenant prior to beginning any premarital programs associated with ABC.
7. **No other elder or Pastor on the Atascadero Bible Church staff will marry a couple if another elder or pastor of the church has refused to perform the ceremony, based on spiritual reasons.**
8. **In accordance with Biblical teaching and ABC's Statement of Faith, marriages performed at Atascadero Bible Church will only be between one man and one woman.** This church recognizes marriage as exclusively the legal union of one man and one woman in which such union is a lifetime commitment. Gen. 2:18-24; Matt. 19: 3-9; Mk. 10: 6-8; I Cor. 7:2
9. **These guidelines are not meant to be an exhaustive list.** At times individual circumstances will require a decision by ABC pastoral staff and/or elders. Decisions regarding marriages performed at Atascadero Bible Church and/or by pastors of Atascadero Bible Church are governed by these guidelines as well as those outlined in the church's constitution. In addition, couples agree to postpone plans should the elder or pastor in consult with the mentor couple believe additional time and/or counsel is required.

*In conclusion, these guidelines have been created based upon Atascadero Bible Church's belief in God's plan for marriage, and are meant to encourage, protect, and strengthen the couple's commitment to Christ. Due to the nature of interpersonal relationships and individual levels of maturity, there may be some exceptions to these guidelines, as determined on an individual basis by the Pastor of Children and Family Ministries, in conjunction with the Elders of Atascadero Bible Church.*

# ***What the Bible Teaches About Divorce and Remarriage***

*A position paper by the Elders of Atascadero Bible Church*

Jesus once told the religious leaders of Israel about God's ideal plan for marriage: "So, then, they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let not man separate" (Matt. 19:6 NKJV). Divorce is not a deliberate part of God's plan from the beginning. In fact, God says He hates divorce (Malachi 2:16).

Divorce has crept into human marriage relationships, however, and today has become rampant. Approximately one out of every two marriages in America will be broken by divorce, and the rate is increasing. To those who believe in Jesus Christ, this is a disconcerting state of affairs. It is also a state of affairs that demands a clear understanding of what the Bible teaches about divorce and especially remarriage.

The purpose of this paper is to explain in a concise way what God says in the Bible about divorce and remarriage. Certainly every case involving a divorce and/or remarriage must be considered individually, but the principles explained herein should provide a biblical framework to evaluate each individual case.

This explanation operates on the following assumptions:

1. While God loves all people and wants the best for them, including those who are divorced, the fact remains that God hates divorce. When God created man, divorce was not within His plan. "What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." Matt. 19:6 In Scripture, divorce is "permitted" but not endorsed. "Because of your hardness of heart, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it has not been this way." Matt. 19:8 Believers should share God's attitude toward divorce and should view it as a violation of God's purpose for marriage.
2. A Christian is obligated to be obedient to God's Word. From the moment of salvation, the believer is responsible to uphold what God revealed about marriage and divorce. A sign of saving faith is obedience to what Christ has revealed about marriage and divorce. A believer has the responsibility to restore his past marriage if his former partner is willing to do so. The believer should remain in the married state in which he was called to Christ. 1 Cor. 7:20, 27 If he was converted while married, he is not to divorce.
3. The Bible is the Word of God, inerrant, infallible, and authoritatively binding in every age and culture on earth.
4. The Bible is to be interpreted literally unless the context clearly indicates that it should be taken otherwise.
5. More specifically related to the issue of divorce and remarriage, it is assumed that whenever God grants permission for a legitimate divorce, He also grants permission for a legitimate remarriage. If God did not desire to grant permission to remarry, He could prescribe permanent separation only (1 Corinthians 7:11). Therefore, since in some cases God does permit divorce, it is assumed that wherever He does, He also permits remarriage.

## I. MARRIAGE BETWEEN TWO BELIEVERS

The general principle for a marriage between two actively professing Christians is stated by Paul in his first letter to the church at Corinth: *A wife is not to depart from her husband. But if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife* (1 Corinthians 7:10, 11 NKJV). The principles here are very clear:

1. No divorce is permitted to a Christian couple.
2. Separation is allowed in severe circumstances (e.g. physical cruelty or abuse, life threats, etc.) but never divorce or remarriage.

The only exception to this principle is found in Matthew 5:32. "Whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced (i.e. for any reason other than sexual immorality) commits adultery" (NKJV).

Since sexual relations form a bond of oneness between two people (1 Corinthians 6:16), sexual sin on the part of one marriage partner is grounds for divorce. The Greek word translated "sexual immorality" (*pornea*) is a general term and would include adultery, homosexuality or any type of sexual perversion. It should be noted that Jesus does not *insist* upon divorce in such cases nor command it -- nor even encourage it. Considering the Scriptures as a whole, it would seem that divorce should be a last resort, reserved only for cases of repeated and/or flagrant sexual violations. Short of this, forgiveness and reconciliation are to be sought after and the marriage preserved. If a divorce is obtained because of sexual immorality, remarriage is permitted.

## II. MARRIAGE BETWEEN A BELIEVER AND AN UNBELIEVER

The Bible speaks directly to this kind of situation in 1 Corinthians 7:12-16: "But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to dwell with him, let him not divorce her. And the woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to dwell with her, let her not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy. But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace. "For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?"

The principles here are also very clear:

1. If the unbelieving partner desires to preserve the marriage, the believing partner has no freedom to divorce him/her.
2. If the unbelieving partner chooses to leave and sue for divorce, the believing partner is to let him/her depart. In such cases the believing partner is free to remarry, but "only in the Lord". (1 Corinthians 7:39)

## III. VARIOUS DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE SITUATIONS

A. BELIEVER INITIATED DIVORCE W/ NON-BELIEVER Unbiblical except in case of:

- 1) Immorality (lifestyle of sexual activity- adultery, homosexuality, incest, etc.) *Matt. 19:9, Matt. 5:32, 1 Cor. 5:1* and/or

2) Abandonment - *1 Cor. 7:15* The believer is free to initiate a divorce, but not required to do so.

B. NON-BELIEVER LEAVES BELIEVING SPOUSE Believing spouse is to pursue reconciliation until there is no possibility of reconciliation. That believing spouse is free to, but not obligated to, file for divorce. Remarriage after divorce is final is fine. There should be prayer for reconciliation and no dating during time of separation. *1 Cor. 7:15*

C. BELIEVING SPOUSE DIVORCES BELIEVER Unbiblical except in case of immorality (lifestyle of sexual activity- adultery, homosexuality, incest, etc.) *Matt. 19:9, Matt. 5:32, 1 Cor. 5:1* Believing spouse is to seek counsel from church for reconciliation. \*See NOTE below regarding Church Discipline.

D. NON-BELIEVER DIVORCES BELIEVER Believing spouse is to pursue reconciliation until there is no possibility of reconciliation. That believing spouse is free to remarry after divorce is final. There should be prayer for reconciliation and no dating during time of separation. *1 Cor. 7:15*

E. UNBIBLICAL REMARRIAGE OF TWO BELIEVERS According to the teachings of Jesus, anyone who divorces on non-biblical grounds and remarries commits adultery. Jesus also warns against anyone considering marriage to a divorced person. *Matt. 5:32* If the divorce was not on biblical grounds, the person who marries the divorced person is considered an adulterer. *Mark 10:11-12, Matt. 5:32* Though forgiven in God's eyes when sincere repentance is exhibited by the partners according to the guidelines of repentance (if given) by the church, ABC leadership is responsible to the greater well-being of the flock of Atascadero Bible Church, and will not welcome that remarriage back into fellowship at ABC.

F. BELIEVER DIVORCES PRIOR TO SALVATION, THEN REMARRIES When a person gets divorced on unbiblical grounds prior to coming to Christ and remarries, he/she is acting according to their own sinful nature prior to their transformation when accepting Christ. They are not following Christ and Scripture. Their sin is forgiven and their current marriage accepted by the Church. The new believer is still obligated to respond to his previous marriage obligations both financially and spiritually:

- 1) financially to pay child support and/or alimony as per court declarations, and
- 2) to seek to "be at peace with all men", being the initiator of the Biblical peace process that God desires between all people.

G. BELIEVER DESIRES TO REMARRY THOUGH DIVORCED UNBIBLICALLY. If your spouse, who divorced you, remarries, that would constitute adultery on their part, and the marriage bond would be broken at that point. You would then be free to remarry. If the spouse who initiated the divorce does not remarry, he/she is still seen as married although separated and is to be pursued by prayer and appropriate Biblical behavior for the restoration of the marriage.

H. Believer Divorces While a Non-Believer. In the case of a person who has just accepted Christ as his/her Savior, that person becomes a "new creature" in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). This does not mean that God immediately erases all painful memories, bad habits or underlying causes of past marital problems, but that He begins the process of transforming the believer through the Holy Spirit and the Word of God. Nor does this mean that the new believer is automatically freed from nature that general principles cannot be formulated for them. However, there are a few special cases that tend to reoccur regularly, and these are considered below:

1. If the new believer is presently separated from his/her spouse, he/she must seek genuine reconciliation with the estranged partner (1 Corinthians 7:11). If the partner refuses, and seeks and receives a divorce, the believer is free to remarry in the Lord according to 1 Corinthians 7:15.

2. If the new believer is presently divorced, he/she must seek genuine reconciliation with the divorced partner (1 Corinthians 7:11). If the partner refuses, the believer is free to remarry in the Lord according to 1 Corinthians 7:15.
3. If the new believer is presently divorced and his/her former spouse has since remarried, the marriage bond has been broken and the new believer is free to remarry in the Lord. To have the remarried partner obtain a second divorce to reconcile with the new believer would be a violation of the Scriptures (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).
4. If the new believer's former spouse has remarried and is now divorced again, the new believer is not allowed to take the former spouse back (Deuteronomy 24:1-4) but is allowed to remarry in the Lord.
5. If the new believer is presently remarried, but his/her original divorce was not biblical, he/she should not dissolve the present marriage to seek reconciliation with the former partner. To do so would be a violation of the Scriptures (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). The new believer should confess his/her sin, receive God's forgiveness, and make his/her present marriage honoring to God.

I. BELIEVER DIVORCES UNBIBLICALLY, AND REMARRIES *A believer who remarries after a non-biblical divorce commits adultery.* Mark 10:11-12; Matt. 5:32 and is subject to the steps of church discipline as outlined in Matthew 18:15-17 and as illustrated in I Cor. 5:1-13. \* See NOTE below regarding Church Discipline.

**\*Note:** Believers who pursue divorce on a non-biblical basis or remarry after a non-biblical divorce, thus committing adultery, are subject to church discipline because they openly reject the Word of God. *Matt. 18:15-20*

#### **IV. SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Every situation does not fit neatly into these categories. There are a number of varied situations that can and do arise. Many are of such a unique nature that general principles cannot be formulated for them. However, there are a few special cases that tend to reoccur regularly, and these are considered below:

A. When any divorce is obtained on non-biblical grounds, and one of the parties remarries, that person has committed adultery since God never recognized the divorce as legitimate (Matt. 5:32; Mark 10:11). Since the remarried partner has "committed adultery," the marriage bond is now broken and the remaining partner is free to remarry.

B. It is assumed that the grace of God becomes operative in any attempt to reconcile a marriage. Two people who repent and confess their sin, and seek God's power and strength, can once again experience the joy of a healthy marriage relationship. A true sign of repentance and salvation will be a sincere desire to restore a former marriage whenever possible.

C. If the innocent party in a legitimate, biblical divorce is seeking remarriage, it is preferable that he/she waits until a spouse who is unwilling to reconcile has remarried. The purpose of such a wait is so as not to preclude any possibility of reconciliation. However, this is not to be a hard and fast rule, but will depend upon a number of factors that must be evaluated by each person in such a situation (e.g., purity of life and thought, time, children needing a father/ mother, etc.).

## **V. DIVORCE AND SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP**

The church has a responsibility to uphold the biblical ideal of marriage, especially as exemplified by its leadership. In cases where there has been a divorce in a person's past, the church has an obligation to restrict, for a period of time, the person's involvement in leadership until it is proven that the person's lifestyle and/or present marriage exemplifies godliness, pure devotion and sacrificial love.

On the other hand, divorce is no greater sin than any other, and must not be placed in a unique category that is not in keeping with the Scriptures. 1 Timothy 3:2, 12 does not prohibit previously married men from serving as elders and deacons. Such an interpretation would bar widowers from such service as well as divorced men, and this would be a clear contradiction of the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 7:39: Romans 7:1-3). Where there has been repentance, confession and forgiveness from God, a believer's qualifications for leadership must be evaluated on the qualities, which currently characterize his/her life. The Bible does not see divorce as a sin that is to follow a person all his/her life or permanently disqualify him/her for all spiritual service.