



## CONSERVATIVE CONGREGATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONFERENCE

### **POLICY AND GUIDELINES FOR THE CREDENTIALS COMMITTEE REGARDING MINISTERS WHO ARE DIVORCED**

#### **I. STATEMENT OF THE ISSUE**

The presence of divorce in American life today together with the increasing incidence of divorce among the clergy confronts our Conference, and particularly our Credentials Committee, with the issue of ministers who have been divorced being granted admission and continued standing in the Conference. It is necessary, therefore, to set forth policy guidelines for the consideration of divorce situations.

#### **A. SANCTITY OF MARRIAGE**

It is an accepted fact in our Conference that the Scriptures are the standard by which guidelines should be determined. In this light the sanctity of marriage cannot be overemphasized. When asked His view on divorce, Jesus replied, "Haven't you read that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female' and said, 'For this reason a man will... be united to his wife and the two will become one flesh?' So they are no longer two but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate." (Matthew 19:4, Genesis 2:24)

God instituted marriage. It is not subject to the changing norms of society. God designed marriage to be a permanent union of a man and woman by which they are made one. God did not allow for divorce in his design. Marriage is a total commitment of two people to one another for life. It is a covenant of companionship.

In the light of Proverbs 2:17 and Malachi 2:14, marriage is a covenant relationship before God, and the breaking of a covenant of whatever kind is wrong. Sin is involved in every divorce. According to Malachi 2:16 God hates divorce. That is not to say that God hates people who are divorced, nor is it to say that everyone who is divorced is guilty of the sin that resulted in divorce. Some people are divorced by their mates against their will and in spite of their efforts toward preservation of the marriage. This raises the question whether divorce per se disqualifies a minister from continued standing in or acceptance into membership in the Conference.

#### **B. SANCTITY OF THE MINISTRY**

Even though it might be allowed that divorce in itself may not eliminate a man from the ministry, it must be remembered that, in the light of Scripture the sanctity of the office of the ministry and the example of the minister cannot be overemphasized. Paul wrote to Timothy, "If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work. A bishop then must be blameless..." (I Timothy 3:1-2). The sacred nature of the office is emphasized by Paul when he says in I Corinthians 4:1, "Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and the stewards of the mysteries of God." To Titus he wrote, "A bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God; not selfwilled, not soon angry, not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but a lover of hospitality, a lover of good men, sober, just, holy, temperate, holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught..." (Titus 1:7-9). In other words, the life of a minister must be exemplary in every way because of the high office which he represents, "in all things showing himself a pattern of good works." (Titus 2:7)

Peter admonishes ministers to “feed the flock... taking oversight thereof ... not ... as lords over God’s heritage, but being examples to the flock.” (I Peter 5:2,3), and Paul reminds ministers that “we are ambassadors for Christ,” standing in Christ’s stead. Because of the sanctity and high calling of the ministry, therefore, and because it places the minister before the Church and the world as a pattern of what Christian living should be, the divorce of a minister is an extremely serious matter. Even though the minister himself may be innocent of wrongdoing, his divorce can have disastrous and far reaching effects on his congregation and his future ministry.

## **II. UNITY WITH DIVERSITY IN THE INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE**

At this point we must recognize that, within the unity of our Conference, there is diversity. We are united in our conviction that the Bible is God’s Word and our ultimate authority, but there are areas of Biblical interpretation where our understanding differs. For example, we all accept the sovereignty of God but we have differences of understanding how God’s sovereignty relates to man’s freedom and responsibility. Likewise we unite in expecting the return of our Lord but we differ as to the sequence of events associated with His sure return. The same can be said regarding the charismatic gifts and the place of women in the ministry. In the same manner we agree on the evil of divorce but we do not all understand the teaching of Jesus and other Scriptures on divorce in exactly the same way.

### **A. UNEQUIVOCAL DISQUALIFICATION**

There are members of our Conference who are strong in their conviction that any minister who is divorced for whatever reason is thereby disqualified to serve in the ministry and should not have standing as a minister of the Conference nor be pastor of a church. Paul’s words, “The overseer (minister) must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife..” (I Timothy 3:2), are understood as requiring the disqualification of a divorced minister. The situation is compounded if the minister has married the second time. The teaching of Jesus in Luke 16:18, Matthew 5:31,32 and Matthew 19:1-9 is taken by some to mean that, while divorce is wrong, an exception is allowed in the case of fornication, but the exception does not leave the innocent party free to serve in the ministry or to remarry.

### **B. FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION**

Some members of the Conference, however, hold other considerations, which they believe are also valid in the light of the Bible. For example, there is the principle of God’s forgiveness and restoration. What shall we say of the man who was divorced before his conversion to Christ when he was made a new creature in Christ? If he had been guilty of sexual sin before becoming a Christian he would not thereby be ineligible for a call from God to the ministry. Paul was guilty of murder and blasphemy before his conversion but God forgave him and made him a minister. There are men who have been saved out of a life of immorality and debauchery who have become able ministers of the Gospel. Is the breaking of the marriage covenant a greater sin than pre-marital promiscuity? When God forgives sin He casts them behind His back (Isaiah 38:17). He casts them into the depths of the sea (Micah 7:19). He remembers them no more (Jeremiah 31:34), and He removes them as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12). God forgives the sins we confess and cleanses us from all unrighteousness (I John 1:9). Some members of our Conference would say, “Yes, God does forgive and forget, but the divorced minister still should not serve in the public office of the ministry.” Other members of the Conference would say, “When God forgives the truly penitent sinner; whatever the sin, he wipes the slate clean. Should we continue to call the man unclean and unworthy of service if God has pardoned him and made him clean? Is there any reason why God’s assurances of forgiveness should apply to every other sin except divorce? Divorce is not the unpardonable sin.”

### **C. RELEASE FROM THE MARRIAGE COVENANT**

Consider also the case of the minister who has not been guilty of disruption of his marriage by unchristian attitudes and conduct which have driven his wife to seek divorce, and who has made every effort toward reconciliation and the saving of his marriage. If his wife persists in "putting him away" by divorce, he is in no way guilty of violating God's law. If both he and his wife are Christians, he should remain unmarried and continue to seek reconciliation according to I Corinthians 7:11. If he fails to do so, his eligibility to continue in the ministry is severely damaged if not destroyed.

If, however, the wife has proven herself to be an unbeliever in the above situation, according to I Corinthians 7:15 the minister "is not bound," and if he is not bound, he is free. He has been released from the marriage covenant. There is a parallel to this in Romans 7:2,3 where Paul declares that a woman is "bound to her husband as long as he is alive... But if he dies, she is released from the law and is not an adulteress though she marries another man." In Romans 7 the death of the husband terminates the marriage and in I Corinthians 7 the willful departure of the unbeliever terminates the marriage. The sense of I Corinthians 7 appears to be that a person who has sincerely sought to preserve a marriage but has been divorced contrary to his will and effort toward reconciliation is a free person. In such a case it is a valid conclusion of some that a minister should not be penalized and prevented from serving in the ministry solely because he has been divorced. Some ministers in such cases have continued to enjoy the blessing of God on their ministry.

### **D. LAWFUL - BUT NOT EXPEDIENT**

Having said all this, we need to recognize that the traumatic experience of going through a divorce and the possible attitudes of a minister's present and future congregations may quite possibly make it very difficult, if not actually impossible, to carry on an effective ministry. The minister, the congregation and the Credentials Committee will do well to consider that while, in the view of many members of our Conference, it may be lawful for a divorced minister to continue to serve in the ministry, it might not be expedient. He might better devote his talents, training and experience to some service for the Lord other than the pulpit and pastoral ministry, such as writing, counseling or administration.

## **III. CONFERENCE RESPONSIBILITY**

In the light of the above considerations, we must keep in mind that the Conference does not speak for the local church or for the individual minister or member of the Conference.

### **A. DETERMINATION BY THE LOCAL CONGREGATION**

Every church determines for itself what its practice shall be regarding divorce. Every church has complete freedom and responsibility to make sure that the minister it calls to lead the congregation shall be in harmony with its own standards regarding divorce. In making referrals to churches seeking ministers, the Conference office shall always provide the full resume and record of a minister including his marital status. Churches may differ in their views of divorce, but we are bound together in our Conference by our common commitment to the heart essentials of our Christian faith as stated in our Articles of Faith.

### **B. ACCEPTANCE OF THE VARIOUS BIBLICAL INTERPRETATIONS**

The views of our ministers vary in some areas other than the cardinal truths set forth in our constitution. In those areas where we differ the conscience of the individual minister is not compromised by the position expressed by the Conference in such areas as eschatology, the charismatic movement, women's part in the ministry, divorce, or any other area. On the other hand, the Conference and the Credentials Committee must recognize that born-again Bible-believing, evangelical Christians and ministers within the Conference will have differing convictions which they derive from their understanding of Scripture.

We must make allowance for such varying convictions and make a place for the brother whose views differ from our own as long as he does not deny the fundamental truths of the Bible. We must also be careful not to impose the convictions of any one man, church or segment of the Conference on any minister, church or the Conference as a whole. In Christian love we must accept one another and respect the privacy of everyone's conscience before God.

### **C. OBLIGATION OF THE CREDENTIALS COMMITTEE**

Finally, let it be said that the Credentials Committee is under obligation to exercise extreme care in considering the divorce of a minister of the Conference or one who is applying for membership. The Committee's actions must proceed prayerfully with compassion toward the individual and with due regard to the high standards of the ministry set forth in Scripture.

All who experience divorce shall enter a period of review. Unrepentant persons causing the dissolution of their marriage will be dismissed from ministerial membership in a manner consistent with the CCCC constitution and by-laws. Other ministers shall have their credentialed status suspended for a period of review, the length of which is determined by the Credentials Committee. I Timothy 5:22 gives caution regarding the hasty laying on of hands, a principle which should not only apply to the novice or those who newly apply for CCCC standing, but also to those who experience divorce while pursuing an active ministry within our fellowship. In taking this approach, we recognize that Conference actions do not bind a local church in its decision to continue a pastoral relationship with a divorced minister.

After this review period, the Credentials Committee will, upon request, examine or re-examine the general trends of ministerial personal fitness as outlined in I Timothy 3:1-7. Personal references from those who know the individual's current home situation will be sought. If the individual is "well thought of by outsiders" then his credentials would be returned as a positive endorsement. It is believed that such a vouching process would prove to be both a source of encouragement for the individual and a source of confidence for churches that may consider this individual as a prospective candidate for pastoral office.