

Background

In spring 2016 a number of practical questions came up during our elder nomination process, most of which we were able to answer and address with adequate clarity. However, there was one particular question that we felt required more time and discussion than we were able to give it at the time. That specific question was: *are divorced or remarried people permitted to serve as elders?*

We agreed to give more time to discern this question more adequately and thoroughly by scheduling a meeting in summer with a resource person from our conference (Dr. Walter Unger)¹. Our goal was to get a better understanding of:

- a) The biblical & theological issues
- b) The denominational position/resolutions on this issue and related issues
- c) The next step(s), or process, that should be followed to adequately address this issue (and others—e.g. physician assisted suicide?) as a board and congregation.

What Our Board of Elders Did

After our August 30, 2016 meeting with Wally Unger we decided to work through the issue of Divorce & Remarriage as elders first, and then with our congregation. “Why this issue?” and “Why now?” were two key questions raised and our twofold rationale is:

- a) We have qualified potential leaders who have experienced divorce and remarriage. The question has been asked, “Are all ministry positions potentially open to them or not?” We need clarity on how we as a Board of Elders, as a church and as a conference understand & answer this question.
- b) In the women’s abuse support group, the question of what God’s Word says about divorce & remarriage has been a very pressing and practical issue. What does the Bible teach? The responses from Bible teachers and preachers are often mixed. Some say the Bible gives no grounds for divorce or remarriage. Some suggest that the Bible allows for divorce under some circumstances but not remarriage. Others say that if a divorce is justified, so is the possibility of remarriage. People in abusive situations, and those supporting them, need our help understanding & applying the Bible on this topic.

As elders and leaders we wanted to be in a position to provide clear biblical and practical guidance on issues related to divorce & remarriage. Therefore we worked at studying the scriptures, discussing our MB Conference resources & resolutions, as well working through the book Remarriage After Divorce in Today’s Church: Three Views. By December 2016 we felt ready to guide the congregation through a study of this issue in the New Year.

At our February 19, 2017 ABM we officially introduced this issue to the congregation and invited your participation through online reading resources² and two Sunday evening presentation and discussion forums on April 2 & 9, 2017 which Pastor David Esau led. The first session was a walk through summary and discussion of the Remarriage After Divorce in Today’s Church: 3 Views book. The combination of instruction and round table study and interaction was well received and helped people engage with the biblical texts and issues. There was a lot of common ground among the participants and collective agreement with the summary proposal (see next page) that was put forward for discussion and discernment and finally approved at our congregation’s June 4, 2017 Annual General Meeting.

¹ Dr. Walter Unger is President Emeritus of Columbia Bible College in Abbotsford and chaired the Board of Faith & Life in the years when the conference resolutions were formulated and approved.

² <https://www.erbf.com/events/discerning-issues-divorce-remarriage>

Q1 – What are the range of positions on D&R (and for what reasons)?

- 1) **No Remarriage After Divorce** (because remarriage = adultery)
 - Supported by almost all biblical texts^{Mk10:11-12; Lk16:18} & early church interpreters
 - Supported by Jesus' view of marriage as an unbreakable covenant (in God's eyes^{p.27})
 - Supported by Jesus' rejection of all divorce & remarriage options in his day
 - Supported by Jesus' permitting separation but not legal divorce & remarriage
- 2) **Remarriage For Two Explicit Biblical Reasons** (adultery^{Mt.5:32} or abandonment^{1Cor.7:15})
 - Supported by two clear biblical texts & the majority of evangelical interpreters today (& the Reformers)
 - Supported by scriptural examples of marriage as a breakable covenant (Ezek. 16^{8,59})
 - Supported by scriptural distinctions between valid & invalid divorce (e.g. Ex. 21¹⁰⁻¹¹; Dt. 24¹⁻⁴)
 - Supported by first century assumptions linking valid divorce with valid remarriage
- 3) **Remarriage For Explicit & Implicit Biblical Reasons** (adultery, abandonment, abuse)
 - Supported by Jesus' main point to his target audience of marriage breakers
 - Supported by Jesus' concern for, and defense of, the victims of adultery
 - Supported by Paul's interpretation and application of Jesus' words to a new situation
 - Supported by the need to apply all Jesus' principles, & exceptions, to situations like abuse

Q2 – What position(s) on D&R would we recommend and why?**We recommend the third view—which is in line with our conference documents and resolutions.³**

*We recognize and affirm that God's plan for marriage (Mt. 19⁴⁻⁵; Gen. 1²⁷; 2²⁴) & singleness (e.g. Jesus) is healthy relationships and that divorce was never in God's perfect plan for human flourishing (Mt. 19⁸). We also believe that marriage is not simply a social contract but a sacred covenant, yet it can be broken by sinful actions, such as marital unfaithfulness and abuse, which in turn can lead to divorce (Ex. 21¹⁰⁻¹¹; Jer. 3⁸; Hos. 2²). All efforts should be made to bring reconciliation wherever possible.**

Where unrepentant sinful attitudes & actions persist (Mt. 18¹⁷), separation and even divorce may be a means of stopping bad situations from becoming even worse (e.g. 1 Cor. 7¹⁵; Ex. 21¹⁰⁻¹¹; Dt. 24¹⁻⁴)

Aim to focus on developing healthy relationships & deterring unhealthy attitudes & actions.

Q3 – In the light of our scriptural view of D&R, how should we respond to the following:

- 1) Divorced & Remarried people nominated for church leadership
 - Divorce does not automatically exclude someone from leadership. When there is genuine repentance for sin(s) that led to and resulted in divorce, the repentant sinner will find forgiveness. As a church we have responsibility to help facilitate forgiveness and restoration to full fellowship and service in a variety of ministries.*
 - When a ministry leader's marriage ends in divorce clearly because of desertion or unfaithfulness of the spouse, entry or re-entry into leadership ministry may be considered.*
 - Help individuals to discern their emotional and spiritual readiness for leadership ministry*
- 2) People in difficult or destructive or broken marriages trying to decide what to do
 - Use the above position summaries & key biblical texts to guide them through an understanding of our position & guidelines and the theology behind it.
 - Support them through prayer, instruction, encouragement, mentoring and counselling as required.
 - Help them connect with congregational and community resources and resource people.

³ See "[Article 11](#)" in [Confession of Faith: Commentary and Pastoral Application](#) and "[When Marriages Fail](#)" pamphlet.

* See our Canadian Conference of MB Churches [Gathering 2004 BFL statement](#) for more details.

Encourage healthy relationships through marriage mentoring and marriage enrichment options.