

WHAT GOD
HAS JOINED
Together

*The PCA Papers on
Divorce and Remarriage*





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which refer to the Trinity, content original to CDM publications will capitalize
those elements for clarity of reference.

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FOREWORD

Marriage is a gift God gave to the world, revealing to all the deep and abiding love He has for His people (Eph. 5:22-32). Hence, “Marriage is of a public nature. The welfare of civil society, the happiness of families, and the credit of Christianity, are deeply interested in it” (*Book of Church Order* 59-6). Nevertheless, because of mankind’s hardness of heart, God allowed men and women to violate His creation design and obtain a divorce (Matt. 19:3-9). Though this allowance was tied to specific circumstances, mankind’s corruption leads to seeking various ways “unduly to put asunder those whom God has joined together in marriage” (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, Ch. 24.6).

In the 1970s, leaders in the PCA struggled with applying the qualifications listed in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 to elder and deacon candidates who had been divorced. A number of judicial cases were presented to the Assembly, along with objections to actions and the records of a variety of Presbyteries. In 1977, North Georgia Presbytery asked the Assembly to appoint a committee to “investigate the practice of divorce and remarriage both within and without the PCA, to the end that specific conditions of divorce be incorporated in the *Book of Church Order*” (*Minutes of the 5th General Assembly* 1977, 32). Also, the Constitutional Documents Committee highlighted some difficulties in interpreting and applying 1 Timothy 3:2, particularly with regard to the question of divorce (*M5GA* 1977, 188). The Assembly responded by referring the issue to a committee formed to study the question of marriage and divorce among Church officers (*M5GA* 1977, 14, 67).

In 1978, the Sixth General Assembly postponed the report of the Ad Interim Theological Committee on Divorce to the following year (*M6GA* 1978, 109), but written majority and minority reports were submitted (*M6GA* 1978, 286). At the Seventh General Assembly in 1979, the Committee presented its report and recommendations on the narrow issue of qualifications for officer nominees. The majority report was adopted by the Assembly (*M7GA* 1979, 108).

Philadelphia Presbytery petitioned the Sixteenth General

Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) in 1988, to appoint an ad interim committee to study issues related to divorce and remarriage. The goal of this study was to provide godly help to sessions, pastors, and church members to facilitate “pastoral care of persons affected by divorce or by severe marital crises” (*M16GA* 1988, 41). The Assembly agreed, and the Moderator appointed eight people to serve.

The Ad Interim Committee presented a preliminary report to the Eighteenth General Assembly in 1990. The report called for a “biblical-theological approach to the issue of divorce and remarriage” to provide the context for an “exegetical-lexical” approach (*M18GA* 1990, 142). The Commissioners adopted a recommendation calling on “individuals, sessions, and presbyteries” to read the report, as well as an attached paper on the *Westminster Standards*, and forward questions or comments to the Committee (143).

In 1991 at the Nineteenth General Assembly in Birmingham, Alabama, the Ad Interim Committee presented its report. Before commissioners acted on the recommendations, the Assembly approved a procedural motion to send the report to the presbyteries. This delay would allow presbyteries to respond with comments the Committee could consider for report to the Twentieth General Assembly (*M19GA* 1991, 63).

After finishing its work, the Committee presented its report to the Twentieth General Assembly in 1992. The Assembly received the report and adopted nine conclusions about divorce and remarriage based on the study of Scripture and the *Westminster Standards*. The Assembly also defeated a recommendation for a proposed revision of WCF 24.6, as it failed to achieve the necessary three-fourths majority (392 affirmative [58%], 283 negative [42%]) (*M20GA* 1992, 60). Since this action in 1992, the Committee’s work has fulfilled its purpose to provide biblical guidance to Christians eager to care for those affected by divorce or marital crisis.

These reports from the PCA General Assemblies are presented in their entirety, albeit with formatting and stylistic amendments. The language reflects the authors and the historical

context in which they wrote. These documents are trustworthy efforts by godly men and women to explain and apply the Word of God to issues facing the PCA at a particular time and in a particular context. As actions and deliverances of the General Assembly, members of the denomination should give them “due and serious consideration” (BCO 14-7). However, each pastoral case is unique, and members and elders must examine every circumstance in the light of God’s Word. The Supreme Judge by which all issues are determined and all opinions confirmed can only be the Holy Spirit speaking through Scripture (WCF 1.10). As God’s people submit to the sanctifying work of His Spirit through the Word, Christian marriages will achieve their true purpose: a beautiful testimony to the unending love of a gracious God to a wayward people through the perfect Lamb, who longs to reveal fully His lovely bride (Rev. 19:6-9).

Dr. Stephen T. Estock

Coordinator

PCA Committee on Discipleship Ministries (CDM)

January 2021

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**Editor’s Note: This publication contains resource lists and references that were part of the original documents presented to the PCA General Assembly. These lists are reprinted here with minor editorial changes or corrections. Many of these resources are no longer available and/or out of print, and the contact information is no longer accurate. Also, for a variety of reasons, many PCA elders would no longer recommend some of the authors or ministries listed. In this reprint, CDM decided to maintain the historical integrity of the papers as they were presented to the General Assembly. It would be improper for CDM to make substantive changes without authorization by the General Assembly.*

1

ON THE CONSTITUTIONAL STATUS OF STUDY COMMITTEE REPORTS

The Book of Church Order states:

14-7 Actions of the General Assembly pursuant to the provision of *BCO* 14-6 such as deliverances, resolutions, overtures, and judicial decisions are to be given due and serious consideration by the Church and its lower courts when deliberating matters related to such action.

A Study Committee report is a “deliverance” of an Assembly (*BCO* 14-7), i.e., the opinion of the majority of the commissioners on a specific subject (*in theis*) at a particular point in time. Study Committee reports are not amendments to the constitution. According to *BCO* 14-7, church courts are to give deliverances of the General Assembly “due and serious consideration when deliberating matters related to such action.”

The PCA does not have the “authoritative-interpretation-of-the-constitution” process of other denominations that is tantamount to changing the constitution. Binding changes to the PCA constitution (*The Book of Church Order and the Westminster Confession of Faith, Larger Catechism, or Shorter Catechism*) may only be made by following the process for amending the constitution specified in *BCO* 26-2; 26-3 requiring the action of a General Assembly, the Presbyteries, and a subsequent General Assembly by the required majorities.

It is helpful to bear in mind that the General Assembly, consistent with the advice of *Robert's Rules of Order*, does not adopt an entire study committee report. That is, the General Assembly does not adopt every word of a study committee report; it only adopts the recommendations of a report as finally acted on by the Assembly.

An ordained PCA officer (Teaching Elder, Ruling Elder, or Deacon) may be held to account for views that are “out of accord” with, or “hostile to the system” of, doctrine set forth in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, *Larger Catechism*, or *Shorter Catechism*, or “striking at the vitals of religion” (see BCO 29-1). One may disagree with portions of a study committee report and not necessarily be properly subject to judicial process, however.

From time to time the General Assembly forms study committees of specially qualified persons whose reports are for the information, study, guidance, and advice of Presbyteries, Sessions, ordained officers, church members, or other interested persons.

Dr. L. Roy Taylor

Stated Clerk Emeritus

General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA)

2

REPORT OF THE AD INTERIM THEOLOGICAL COMMITTEE ON DIVORCE

*Submitted to the 6th General Assembly (1978)
but postponed until the 7th General Assembly.*

Presented to and approved by the 7th General Assembly (1979)¹

The task given to the Ad Interim Theological Committee on Divorce was two-fold:

- 1) To review and re-study Part II of the Constitutional Documents Committee Report entitled “Interpretation of 1 Timothy 3:2, ‘the husband of one wife,’” and report to the Sixth General Assembly;
- 2) To consider and make recommendation concerning Overture 12 from North Georgia Presbytery to the Fifth General Assembly:

“WHEREAS, God’s Word enjoins His people to recognize the legitimacy of divorce on the grounds of adultery, or desertion by an unbelieving partner only;

¹ The contents of these reports are found in the Minutes of the 7th General Assembly (1979), pp. 57-59 and 106-110.

“WHEREAS, our civil authorities have taken it upon themselves to recognize other than Scriptural grounds for divorce;

“THEREFORE, be it resolved that the General Assembly appoint a committee to further investigate the practice of divorce and remarriage both within and without the PCA, to the end that specific conditions of divorce be incorporated in the *Book of Church Order*, as may be most conformable to the Word of God.”

The Committee held its first meeting by way of telephone conference call on November 14, 1977. Teaching Elder Settle was elected Chairman and Teaching Elder Stanway was elected Secretary. Operating procedures were established, bibliographical resources shared, and sub-committees appointed and charged with specific duties relative to the task assigned to the Committee.

A second meeting was convened on January 27, 1978, in Atlanta, Georgia. The Rev. Morton Smith and the Rev. Charles Dunahoo reviewed the actions of the General Assembly and of the Constitutional Documents Committee which has prepared the original report (no. 1, above).

After a thorough discussion of the subject under consideration, the Committee adopted the following statement and recommendations for presentation to the Sixth General Assembly:

I. The Interpretation of Paul’s Qualification for Church Officers, “The Husband of One Wife” (1 Tim. 3:2 and 12; Titus 1:6)

Paul’s qualification that an elder or deacon must be “the husband of one wife” has been interpreted mainly in four ways.

1. Some have held that any twice-married man is thereby disqualified for church office, and some devout

scholars have translated Paul's words to read, "married only once." Nowhere in the Bible, however, is the remarriage of a widow or widower as such treated as a reflection upon the person's moral character. Consequently, this interpretation does not seem valid.

2. A second interpretation is that an elder must not be a polygamist or that he must not have more than one living wife or more than one woman living who had been his wife. Although scholars have differed in their judgment of the extent to which polygamy posed a problem for the church in Paul's day, the interpretation of Paul's words as excluding a polygamist from church office appears to be a valid one.
3. Some interpret Paul's qualifications as directed against the divorce evil, which seems to have been rather common, and have understood Paul's words as disqualifying for church office a man who had divorced and remarried, or at least a man who had divorced on other than Scriptural grounds and remarried.
4. Still another interpretation is that a man called to office in the church must be a man of unquestioned moral integrity, a man who is free from any taint of sexual promiscuity or laxity, and who is strictly faithful to his one wife.

Each of the latter three of these views has certain merit as an interpretation of Paul's words, "the husband of one wife," both in the light of the immediate context (with its emphasis on the officer's being above reproach and his managing his own family well) and in the larger context of the whole Scripture. Paul's concern seems to involve this much at the very least, that the man chosen to be a church officer (whether elder or deacon) must be a man whose marital and family relationships are above reproach, and whose personal example gives no encouragement to lax morality.

II. Recommendations

The Committee accordingly recommends:

1. That the General Assembly reaffirm its commitment to the biblical position as summarized in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter XXIV, regarding the integrity of marriage according to the Divine ideal as being for life.
2. That the General Assembly affirm that the integrity of marriage is founded upon God's Word, which declares that marriage is founded upon God's Word, which declares that marriage is God's institution and should be God-centered, not man-centered. Both husband and wife are the Lord's servants and submit one to the other in terms of the Lord's purposes. They are, together, the Lord's creatures, called to serve Him, with one, the husband, exercising loving headship in that calling.
3. That the General Assembly declare that the biblical ideal for church office is exemplary conduct to the highest degree possible with regard to all of the qualifications set forth by the apostle Paul in 1 Timothy and Titus 1.
4. That the General Assembly affirm the Bible teaches that divorce is permissible in the case of sexual immorality (Deut. 24:1-4; Matt. 19:9) or willful desertion of a believer by an unbeliever (1 Cor. 7:15). The innocent party is therefore free to remarry, since he is no longer "under bondage," once properly divorced. (See *Westminster Confession of Faith*, XXIV-5). Anyone who is divorced in accord with biblical principles, whether remaining single or having remarried, may serve as a church officer.

5. That the General Assembly urge church courts to exercise special care in the cases of divorced/ remarried persons who are considered for ordination, that where there has been divorce and remarriage on other than scriptural grounds, guilt must be acknowledged and repentance for sin expressed.
6. That the General Assembly remind the church that in order to be considered for church office the parties concerned in such cases must have been rehabilitated sufficiently in the confidence and respect of other Christians as to be able to fulfill in an exemplary way the requirements of church office with regard to marital and family relationships. The General Assembly reminds the church and its courts that even when such care is exercised as is urged in this and the foregoing recommendation, there may be circumstances in which it would be inadvisable, even though technically permissible, for divorced/ remarried persons to serve as church officers.
7. That the General Assembly exhort sessions and presbyteries to follow scriptural guidelines carefully in dealing with present or prospective church officers who have been divorced.
8. That the General Assembly answer Overture 12 from the Presbytery of North Georgia to the Fifth General Assembly, with regard to divorce and remarriage, by reference to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter XXIV.

Teaching Elder James Campbell and Ruling Elder John Thompson are submitting a minority report so that the General Assembly will have opportunity to discuss a concept other than that espoused by the Committee as a whole.

Respectfully submitted,

Ruling Elders

Kenneth Ryskamp

Steve Fox

Henry Dekker

John Thompson

Stokes Robertson

Advisory Members

Morton H. Smith

Charles H. Dunahoo

Teaching Elders

William J. Stanway

Charles Young

James Campbell

Richard Knodel

Paul Settle, Chairman

The report of the Committee was adopted by a vote of 418 to 108.

MINORITY REPORT AD INTERIM THEOLOGICAL COMMITTEE ON DIVORCE²

Change I, 4 of the Committee's statement to read as follows:

Each of the latter three of these views has certain merit as an interpretation of Paul's words, "the husband of one wife," however, Paul, in the context of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1:5-9, is giving clear guidelines for the selection of officers in the Church, the household of God. In order to protect the Church which is the pillar and support of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15), Paul states most clearly that men who exercise leadership must have proven their ability to manage their own households (1 Tim. 3:4, 12; Titus 1:6) before they can care for God's household (1 Tim. 3:15). Thus, one who has difficulty managing a small family, which ends in divorce on other than biblical grounds, has demonstrated a character weakness and character taint which is a warning to the Church that he is one unfit to manage the larger family, the Church of the Living God. Such a man may certainly know God's forgiveness upon repentance and have a secure place in the Church, but he has forfeited his opportunity to serve as an officer because he would then be the husband of more than one wife.

In order to protect the Church, Paul directs (1 Tim. 3:10) that potential leadership be tested by the Church and those prove their worthiness to hold the offices of the Church. One who is divorced on other than biblical grounds, would cast doubt on his ability to provide leadership within the Church in family counseling situations.

Paul is concerned that the leadership of the Church be above reproach (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6) and not open to a charge of a bad reputation by those outside the Church (1 Tim. 3:7). Any church leader who had experienced mishandling of his own family and divorce on other than biblical grounds, would open the Church to

² The Minority Report was presented to the Assembly as a substitute motion to replace the Committee report and recommendations. The substitute motion failed, and the Committee report and recommendations were adopted.

ridicule and contempt by those outside.

Change the Committee's recommendations to read as follows:

II. Recommendations

- A. That the recommendations of the Ad Interim Theological Committee, numbers 1 through 4 be adopted as stated;
- B. That recommendations 5 and 6 be deleted;
- C. That recommendation 7 be amended to read as follows:
 - 5. That the General Assembly exhort sessions and presbyteries to follow scriptural guidelines carefully in dealing with present or prospective church officers who have been divorced. That no man be considered for church office who has been divorced on other than biblical grounds in order that the church and its leadership may be above reproach by both those outside and inside the Church.
- D. That recommendation 8 be numbered 6.

Respectfully submitted

Reverend Jim Campbell

Mr. John G. Thompson