

“Husband of One Wife”:

Theses on Clergy Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage

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Holy Marriage

1. The Holy Scriptures teach that marriage was instituted by God Himself in the creation of Adam and Eve (Gen. 1:26-28; 2:18-24).
2. Jesus Christ affirmed the original design of marriage as the lifelong union of one man and one woman (Mt. 19:4-6; Mk 10:6-9).
3. St Paul revealed that a “mystery” lies hidden under the earthly institution of marriage, for which reason it is called “holy”: the husband is a “type” of Christ and the wife is a “type” of the Church; thus, as husbands love their wives and sacrifice themselves for them they proclaim the Gospel, and as wives are subordinate to their husbands in the fear of the Lord they express the Church’s trust in Christ as her Saviour (Eph. 5:21-33).
4. That the Church is the Bride of Christ, the Bridegroom, is a universal and unalterable image in the New Testament (Mt. 9:15; Jn 3:29; Rev. 19:7-9; 21:2, 9; 22:17), just as the people Israel as God’s Bride was a core expression of their covenantal relationship in the Old Testament (Psalm 45; Is. 54:5-6; 61:10; Jer. 2:2; Hos. 1:2; 2:19-20).
5. Because of the hardness of men’s hearts, since the sinful nature sometimes leads to the irreconcilable breakdown of the marriage relationship, Moses provided for a “certificate of divorce” to be issued (Deut. 24:1-4; Mt. 5:31; 19:7-8; Mk 10:3-5).
6. Jesus declared, nevertheless, that divorce and remarriage is contrary to God’s institution, identifying it with the sin of adultery (Mt. 5:32; 19:9; Mk 10:11-12; Lk. 16:18), a violation of the Sixth Commandment (Ex. 20:14; Deut. 5:18); Paul repeats and affirms this prohibition (I Cor. 7:10-13).
7. At the same time, Jesus acknowledged that *porneia* “sexual immorality” (of which adultery is a subset), which is a fundamental violation of the marriage relationship, might legitimately lead to divorce (Mt. 5:32; 19:9; cf. I Cor. 6:16); in this case, divorce is not tantamount to adultery because the “guilty party” has already adulterated the marriage.
8. While all divorce is sinful, it does not constitute an unforgiveable sin; where a penitent heart is accompanied by trust in the merits of Jesus Christ, the divorced person may be absolved and restored to the communion of the holy Church (Mt. 18:18-20; Jn 20:22-23; II Cor. 2:5-11; Gal. 6:1).
9. Neither the Old nor New Testaments explicitly affirms the right of a divorced person, whether innocent of adultery or guilty, to remarry; historically, the Christian Church has maintained that remarriage before the death of the former spouse is a mark of impenitence, as it excludes the possibility of reconciliation.
10. Since the time of the Reformation, some (Protestant) Christian churches have affirmed the right of the “innocent party” (i.e. the one who did not commit adultery) to remarry, as, for example, the Lutheran Church (Tr 78).

11. Not until the latter half of the 20th century did any Christian church grant that the “guilty party” (i.e. one who has committed adultery) might, even after repentance and absolution, remarry and remain in the fellowship of the church; Christians remain divided over whether such remarriage is compatible with repentance, though it is widely practised.

The Office of the Holy Ministry

12. The office of the ministry was instituted by Jesus Christ Himself when He called the twelve apostles (Mt. 10:1-4; Mk 3:13-19; Lk. 6:12-16) and subsequently extended their mission to the close of the age (Mt. 28:16-20; Lk. 24:44-49; Jn 20:19-23), for which reason it is called “holy”.
13. Just as the apostle, “the sent one”, was to be received and heard as the One who sent him (Mt. 10:40-42; Lk. 10:16), so also the men who have been ordained into the apostolic office of the holy ministry continue to represent Christ in their preaching, teaching, and administering the sacraments (Ap 7:28, 47).
14. Although the minister is necessarily a sinner like his flock, always clinging to the grace of God with humble penitence and a firm faith in Christ’s forgiveness (Rom. 7:14-25; I Tim. 1:15-16), he is nevertheless to “hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience” (I Tim. 3:9; cf. Acts 24:16; II Tim. 1:3).
15. The office of the holy ministry is a distinct vocation in the Church, for which reason Holy Scripture lays down clear and necessary qualifications to be met by anyone who desires this office (I Tim. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:5-9); while some of these qualifications are simply what is expected of any Christian, they express additionally the unique requirements of one who would hold public office in the Church.
16. In addition to having the requisite skills (e.g. “apt to teach”), the pastor is to be “above reproach” (I Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:6, 9); he is required to uphold a high standard of behaviour in conformity to God’s Law, since his hearers are to imitate his deeds as well as listen to his words (I Cor. 4:16; 11:1; I Thess. 1:6; Heb. 13:7; I Pet. 5:3), and his moral failure can never be a purely private matter (II Cor. 6:3; I Tim. 3:7; 4:11-16; II Tim. 2:20-26; 4:10-11; Tit. 2:7-8).
17. In St Paul’s teaching on the qualifications for the pastoral office, marriage and family life hold a prominent and distinctive place (I Tim. 3:2, 4-5, 12; Tit. 1:6).
18. Since the minister stands in the stead of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Bridegroom, the minister’s relationship to the Church, Christ’s Bride, is like that of a husband to a wife; the minister is to love and sacrifice himself for his church, while the church members are to be subordinate to him as to Christ Himself (Heb. 13:17).
19. While the minister is not literally the Bridegroom, in his office he acts as “friend of the bridegroom (best man)” (II Cor. 11:2; Jn 3:29) or wedding attendant (Mt. 25:1-13) in leading the Bride to Christ.
20. The minister must be “husband of one wife” (I Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:6) because Christ is husband of one wife; in his faithful marriage the minister proclaims the Gospel to his flock by disclosing the mystery of marriage in both words and deeds.
21. Though God’s people have been unfaithful to God, “committing adultery” with other gods and wandering from Him (Hosea 1-4; Ezekiel 23; Jeremiah 3), God Himself is never unfaithful

(Deut. 7:9; I Cor. 1:9; II Tim. 2:13); the minister who represents Christ is correspondingly obligated to portray the faithfulness of God (Mt. 24:45; I Cor. 4:2; II Cor. 1:18; Col. 1:7).

22. The apostolic mandate that a minister must be “husband of one wife” (I Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:6) expresses this iconic faithfulness in the crucible of marriage and family (even as the OT priests were forbidden to marry a divorced woman, “for the priest is holy to his God”; Lev. 21:7, 14);
 - a. by holding up faithful marriage as a norm, this phrase excludes polygamists, homosexuals, and habitual fornicators from holding the holy office of the ministry;
 - b. it does not mean that a minister *must* be married (i.e. that a single man is excluded);
 - c. it does not exclude from office a minister whose wife has been taken home by the Lord through death (i.e. a widower);
 - d. it does not prohibit a widowed minister from remarrying (though some early church fathers considered this unwise); and
 - e. it does not merely mean that a minister be faithful to his current wife, though *unfaithfulness* to one’s wife certainly disqualifies a man from holding the office.
23. The minister whose earthly marriage comes to an end through divorce is no longer “husband of one wife” and therefore no longer fulfils the qualifications laid down by St Paul for the holy office; Paul adds no qualifiers about innocence or guilt in divorce, but simply requires the minister’s marriage to be intact so that he is “above reproach”.
24. The minister who causes or suffers the destruction of his marriage through divorce has an obligation to lay down his office voluntarily for the good of the church; failing this, his ecclesiastical supervisor must remove him from office.
25. While the church may contemplate the possibility that this apostolic mandate is not violated when a minister has been abandoned by his wife (cf. I Cor. 7:15), remarriage is by definition contrary to it; the man who remarries not only closes the door on reconciliation with his God-given wife, but also disrupts the iconic nature of his marriage as a proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who is devoted to one Bride alone.
26. While a divorced or divorced-and-remarried man does not possess the qualifications laid down by Holy Scripture for holding the vocation of an apostolic minister, his place in the Body of Christ as a child of the Heavenly Father is a different matter.
27. The minister’s ecclesiastical supervisor has a God-given responsibility to provide pastoral care to him during times of marital breakdown, leading him by the wise application of Law and Gospel to remain within or return to the Lord’s flock.
28. Disqualification from office is not the same thing as excommunication; as with any Christian, the former minister who is penitent may be kept in or restored to the communion of the Church through holy absolution.
29. As Lutheran Church–Canada seeks to be faithful to the teaching of Holy Scripture in these matters, she will treat her ministers and congregations already harmed by clergy divorce and remarriage with the love and concern that arises from the Gospel; the church’s own repentance will lead her to seek forgiveness for past failures and to be patient with all members of the body, even while humbly and penitently working to amend her ways.