

LUTHERAN CHURCH IN SINGAPORE (LCS)

A Statement from the Lutheran Theological Perspective

The LCS Policy for Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage

Introduction

The Lutheran Confessions, in the Book of Concord (1580), does not directly address marriage and divorce as separate articles or in great detail. However, its teachings on these topics can be inferred from its larger discussions of the Ten Commandments and the doctrine of vocation.

Key Points on Marriage:

1. **Marriage as a Divine Institution:** Marriage is viewed as a divinely instituted relationship. This is reflected in the Lutheran understanding of the Sixth Commandment, "You shall not commit adultery," which calls for fidelity and honor in marriage. The Large Catechism, written by Martin Luther and included in the Book of Concord, discusses marriage as a vocation ordained by God for the mutual benefit of husband and wife, and for procreation.
2. **Marriage as a Vocation:** Marriage is seen as part of one's vocation or calling from God. Luther speaks about the sanctity of marriage as a God-given state of life, which is to be respected and upheld. Husbands and wives are called to love and serve each other in their God-given roles.

Key Points on Divorce:

1. **Divorce as Contrary to God's Design:** Although the Book of Concord does not have a specific section on divorce, the general stance of Lutheran theology at the time was that divorce was not ideal because it goes against the intended lifelong union of marriage. However, it was acknowledged that divorce might be necessary in cases of adultery or other severe circumstances. This aligns with Jesus' teaching in the Gospels (e.g., Matthew 19:9) where divorce is permitted in cases of marital unfaithfulness.
2. **Forgiveness and Reconciliation:** The Book of Concord emphasizes repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation in all areas of life, including marriage. For couples who experience difficulties, the church encourages reconciliation if possible. If reconciliation is not possible, Lutherans have historically allowed for divorce under certain conditions, always emphasizing that God's grace and forgiveness are available to those who repent.

Overall, the Book of Concord reflects the Lutheran view of marriage as a sacred vocation, with divorce allowed in certain cases of sin or hardship, but always with a call to forgiveness and seeking God's will.

The view of LCS in regard to Marriage

- 1. Marriage is a social institution created by God, the Creator of mankind. [Martin Luther speaks of it as an estate]. Marriage belongs to the temporal secular order, therefore the Singapore society through custom and legislation pronounces when a marriage is lawfully constituted or dissolved. LCS members should abide by these legislations unless they are deemed to contradict the plain teachings of Scriptures (see Augsburg Confession Article 16; Apology Article 23)**

When two persons marry, they enter into an estate whose structure God Himself has instituted and established. Estate refers to a particular area of life in which the marital existence must be carried on. This is a social institution, as it pertains the social domestic dimension of a Christian's life in contrast to the political (government & civil) and ecclesiastical (priesthood of believer) dimensions. It is also a social institution as it involves all human beings not just Christians (Genesis 2:24). The marriage of non-Christians are no less valid than marriage of Christians. However it is not just a social contract for which the solidarity and permanence depends on mutual interests being carried out, and can be dissolved if they are not. In marriage there is a divine joining together which requires lifelong commitment. Also it is to be noted that by saying temporal secular order, we are not saying it is Godless, the secular world is also God's world, God's "first creation." However it is distinct and different from God's "new" creation in Christ. Anyway there is no marriage in heaven so it is temporal (Matthew 22:30).

- 2. We believe God's activity in the world is two-fold – God's left hand work (care) and God's right hand work (redemption).**

The caring work God assigns to all mankind (Genesis 1:28). The redeeming work is an assignment to Christians only (2 Corinthians 5:18). By caring for the fallen world, God keeps it from falling apart, so that life of our world can be preserved, and so that fairness, justice and retribution happen in human interaction.

- 3. Marriage rightly belongs to the left hand rule of God by which He cares for and preserves creation.**

All people everywhere are called to this task of care and preservation as well. Martin Luther in his comments on the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:31-32) has this note - "What is the proper procedure for us nowadays in matters of marriage and divorce? I have said that this should be left to the lawyers and made subject to the secular government"¹

¹ Luther's Work Vol 21 – p93

4. **The divine intentions for marriage are:**
 - a. **The union of one man and one woman to become one flesh (Genesis 2:24)**
 - b. **The procreation of children, and to care for their upbringing within the framework of a family (Genesis 1:28).** However infertility is not a ground for divorce.
 - c. **To protect the individual from indulging in unlawful sexual relationships outside the context of a marriage relationship (1 Corinthians 7:2-3)**

The view of LCS in regard to Divorce and Remarriage (“Law”)

1. **Divorce is contrary to God’s will, that husband and wife are to live together in marriage until they are separated by death. Repentance and confession are important if this occurs. (Matthew 19:6)**

The marital union is described in the Scriptures as a oneness of two persons, created not merely by human choice but also by divine institution. Therefore, those who enter marriage are bound together not only in a horizontal relationship with each other by their pledge of faithfulness, but also by a mutual pledge to God their Creator to remain faithful (Malachi 2:15) . The Law of God, uncovers sins and guards against immorality, reveals what is unclean in the heart of man (Matthew 15:17-20). While the Law gives a diagnosis of the outward problem, the root of the divorce problem is a spiritual one, a lack of faith in God. Repentance therefore is necessary for restoration.

2. **Failure of a marriage does not necessitate divorce. The exception clauses for divorces cited in scriptures does not constitute prescriptions whereby a marriage may be terminated. Every effort should be made towards reconciliation.**

The exception clauses are not legislating grounds for divorce. They are merely mitigating the accompanying evils and precluding abuse of divorce.

3. **Since marriage belongs to the left hand rule of God, scriptures in many places indicated that divorce and remarriage were *allowed*, consistent with God’s left hand rule of preserving society from further degeneration due to “hardness of heart” and greater evil.**

Of the Scriptures relating to divorce and marriage, the major texts are found in Deuteronomy 24:1-4; Matthew 5:32, 19:3-12; 1 Corinthians 7:12-16, the exegetical summaries of these and others are attached in Appendix.

The Ministry of the Gospel to the Divorced and Remarried (“Gospel”)

- 1. The LCS in its Gospel ministry operates under the right hand rule of God in mercy and forgiveness. The divorced and/or remarried needs God’s mercy and forgiveness, just as much as all of us sinners do (John 8:1-11). They should not be stigmatized as being greater sinners.**
- 2. The LCS therefore is to faithfully proclaim the Gospel promise of forgiveness of sins and Christ’s work of redemption to bring them back under God’s ownership and mercy, even in the face of sufferings, pains, broken relationships and disruptions to normal lives.**

Pastoral Guidelines:

1. If a spouse commits adultery (marital unfaithfulness), which breaks the union of marriage, the aggrieved party who endures such unfaithfulness has the right, though not the command, to obtain a legal divorce and remarry. (Matthew 5:32; Matthew 19:9)
2. When a spouse who has been willfully abandoned by the partner who refuses to be reconciled, he/she may seek a legal divorce and remarry. (1 Corinthians 7:12-16)
3. Other grounds given by a spouse seeking a divorce need be carefully considered case by case. Divorce should NOT be condoned or encouraged in principle, it can only be the last resort under extreme circumstances where disallowing it is obviously a greater evil, and when all efforts to towards reconciliation, counseling and mediation have been exhausted. Spiritual discernment, prayer and seeking God’s wisdom should be part of the decision making process by the Pastor and Church Council.
4. Divorce for sinful reasons, and remarriage involving such persons, are contrary to God’s will. The Pastor and Church Council should confront such persons involved in such situations with the seriousness of their sinful actions and behaviours. Appropriate church discipline may apply. However, the Pastor should announce God’s forgiveness where genuine repentance is evident.
5. Clergy Divorce: The Co-workers of LCS are called to the public Gospel Ministry and should therefore be exemplary of the Gospel at work (1 Timothy 3:2). Moral failure of a pastor is thus not just a private matter but of pertains to the public office which he holds and is accountable. The divorce of a pastor must be taken with utmost seriousness. A pastor who has been divorced, except for marital unfaithfulness or abandonment by the spouse, should not remain as Co-worker of LCS. However after a long period showing fruits of repentance and exemplary conduct by the grace of God, may be reinstated to the pastoral office.

6. Repeated divorce and remarriage: If a member is divorced and remarrying more than once, the pastor/church council should express strong concern and disapproval (as it may be a sign of immorality), unless there are exceptional circumstances.

Notes: We are indebted to the following persons for their invaluable input and assistance in the preparation process of this statement.

- Dr. Roland Chia, Lecturer, Trinity Theological College for his seminar presentation to LCS Co-workers on “Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage: An Exegetical and Theological Enquiry” on 2nd November 2000.
- Dr. Chris Dippaner, Lecturer, Trinity Theological College for his seminar presentation to LCS Co-workers on “Divorce and Remarriage: Some Exegetical Remarks” on 2nd April 2003.
- Dr. Edward Henry Schroeder, Lutheran Theologian and retired Seminary Professor for his input, notes and advice on drafting this statement from a Lutheran Law and Gospel perspective in 2004.
- Dr. Mark Chan, Senior Vice-President and Resident-Theologian at Eagles Communications for leading a colloquium on Divorce and Remarriage: Biblical & Pastoral Perspectives for Singapore church pastors and leaders on 29th July 2004.

Bibliography:

1. Craigie, P.C. The Book of Deuteronomy (NICOT). William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co: Grand Rapids, Michigan. 1976. pp 304-306
2. Hagner, Donald A. Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 14-28. Word Books. 1976. pp 542-551
3. Instone-Brewer, David. Divorce and Remarriage – The Social and Literary Context. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan. 2002.
3. Pelikan, Jaroslav, Editor. Luther’s Works Vol 21 – The Sermon On The Mount (Sermons) and The Magnificat. Concordia Publishing House: Saint Louis, Missouri. 1956 pp 92-98.
4. Sprinkle, Joe. M. Old Testament Perspectives on Divorce and Remarriage in TRINJ 22 NS (2001). pp 529-235.
5. Tappert, Theodore G, Editor. The Book of Concord. Fortress Press: Philadelphia. 1959.
6. Weibling, James M. Reconciling Matthew and Mark on Divorce in TRINJ 22 NS (2001) pp 219-235
7. Wong, Eric K.C. The Deradicalization of Jesus’ Ethical Sayings in 1 Corinthians in New Test. Stud 48 pp 181-194

APPENDIX

Summary exegesis and hermeneutics

There are four main views among Christians regarding marriage and divorce:

1. No divorce, no remarriage
2. Divorce, but no remarriage
3. Divorce and remarriage for adultery and desertion
4. Divorce and remarriage under ~~a variety of~~ severe-circumstances caused by “hardness of heart” and when it becomes obviously inhumane not to allow to do so.

It is recognized that each of these views has its Christian proponents with their own exegesis and hermeneutic of relevant texts of scriptures. Each view may also have sub variants too. Our position is in accord with view no 4.

The following Scriptures are indicative that divorce was allowed for humane reasons as God is a God of justice, righteousness and compassion who cares for the oppressed and under-privileged. “He will rescue the poor when they cry to him; he will help the oppressed, who have no one to defend them. He feels pity for the weak and the needy, and he will rescue them. He will redeem them from oppression and violence, for their lives are precious to him.”

Psalms 72:12-14 NLT

The teaching in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 24:1-4)

In Deuteronomy 24:1-4, we understand it as saying that man’s “hardness of heart” (his rebellious will in conflict with the divine will and intent for marriage, c.f. Jeremiah 4:4) made it necessary for Moses, not to condone divorce as such, but rather to regulate it and avoid comparatively greater evils and degenerations that may take place in that community. The “indecency” (Hebrew *erwat dabar*) cited by the Jews for divorce refers to a broad range of issues such as sexual sins e.g. incest, shameful or repulsive acts, anything offensive, infertility and others. The certificate of divorce issued essentially gives the right for the woman to remarry. The essential formula in the bill of divorce is “Lo, thou art free to marry any man” Mishnah Gittin 9:3 (a Jewish legal passage).

The teaching of Jesus (Mark 10:1-2; Matthew 19:1-12)

The Hillel-Shammai (Jewish Rabbinic Schools) Debate is recognized as an important backdrop for Jesus’ discussion here. The Shammai School says that:

“A man may not divorce his wife unless he has found unchastity in her”. The Hillel School on the other hand allows a man to divorce his wife for trivial reasons, e.g. even if she spoiled a dish for him. The Pharisee’s question : “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” - makes sense with this background in mind, since they are actually asking what is Jesus’ opinion in this debate.

In Mark 10:1-12, Jesus taught that anyone who divorces the spouse is going against God’s will and is sinning.

However, the presence of the exception clauses “except for marital unfaithfulness (NIV), porneia(Greek)” in Jesus’ teachings in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 has generated much discussions. How do we reconcile or explain the differences between Mark and Matthew’s account? Firstly, the exception clause in Mathew are to be treated as genuine exception taught by Jesus, as manuscript support for the clause are overwhelming, although some scholars treated them as interpretative gloss, cultural adaptations etc by Matthew. Mark writing earlier, simply assumes his readers already knew the background – that Jesus does not support the Hillel position. In essence in Matthew’s account, Jesus is speaking against the Hillel interpretation of “indecency” in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 which is resulting in “any cause” kind of divorce. Jesus is supportive of the Shammai interpretation, and is actually restricting the causes for divorce promoted by the Hillel school and not condoning it as such. “*Porneia*” captures a wide range of meanings for sexual misconducts in general outside of marriage which includes adultery. Such sexual misconducts outside of marriage destroy the marital union.

The teaching of Apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 7:12-16)

This is with regards to a Christian in mixed marriages in 1 Corinthians 7:12-16, where the marriage probably took place before one of them became a Christian. We understand it as referring to the case where the spouse is an unbeliever- and if the unbeliever refuses to continue the marriage and departs, the believing spouse may no longer be bound in that marriage, since the unbelieving party has already decided not to maintain the union. The Christian may remarry because of desertion.

Other Old Testament Texts:

Genesis 21:12-14

God ~~directs~~ asked Abraham to “send off” that is to divorce his slave wife Hagar who previously he had sexual union with. (“sent her off” NIV, Hebrew “*shalach*” cf. Deuteronomy 22:19,29; 24:1-3) The ground is probably humanitarian here, a choosing between two evils.

Exodus 21:10-11

This concerns slave-wife, if a man takes a second wife and unable or unwilling to support her, he is to divorce her (let her “ go free” NIV, Hebrew “*yatsa*”). The

concern here is obviously humanitarian. The man is not able or willing to provide food, clothing and marital love. There is material and emotional neglect.

Deuteronomy 21:10-14

This concerns marrying a captive woman after a war, if later the man is not pleased with her, she cannot be sold as a slave, he ~~must~~ **is to** divorce her (“let her go” NIV, Hebrew “*shalach*”). Here again is a humanitarian concern. **The same Hebrew “*shalach*” was also for “sends” NIV in used in Deuteronomy 24:1 “If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house,”**

Ezra chapters 9-10

Ezra convinced many Jews who married foreign wives to divorce them. **Ezra 10:19 “They pledged themselves to put away their wives, and their guilt offering was a ram of the flock for their guilt.”** The “indecency” (Deuteronomy 24:1) here is probably taken as idolatry, breaking of covenant faithfulness to Yahweh.

Hosea 2:2

God alluded to divorce language in His plea to Israel to repent. **Hosea 2:2 “Plead with your mother, plead—for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband—that she put away her whoring from her face, and her adultery from between her breasts;**

Malachi 2:10-16

“God hates divorce”—this is understood in the context that it is speaking against the cavalier putting aside of Jewish wives by the men to take on foreign wives which was happening during that time.

See also Appendix for more scholarship on various OT texts regarding divorce.