

## **CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE**

### **A Statement Formulated by the Spiritual Council of Immanuel Leidy's Church**

- I. One of the forms for use in the marriage ceremony states that "marriage was instituted by God from the beginning of time". We feel that is truly the case. Humans did not invent marriage—rather God gave it to us. While recognizing that God does call some persons to live a single life and that such a calling is a gift from God, nonetheless most persons are called to the married estate. Getting married is one of the most important decisions a person can make. It is a decision that will have immense impact on many lives with regard to both short-term and long-term consequences. We would like to offer some guidelines to help those who are considering marriage.
  
- II. Before establishing a firm date for your wedding you will want to make certain that all the persons who will be involved and the facilities you want to use are available for your proposed wedding date. The availability of the pastor, organist, wedding attendants, reception site, photographer, etc., cannot be taken for granted. We would recommend that you first contact the pastor to ensure that he and the church facility are available for the date and time you have in mind. Once you know the church is available, then you should contact the organist to get the date on the organist's schedule. If the reception is to be held at the church, then those arrangements are made when you speak with the pastor. Many times, however, receptions are held someplace other than the church. In those instances you may well want to have several options in mind unless you are planning a wedding a year or two in advance. Many facilities are booked far in advance—especially for the summer months when most weddings take place. Sometimes the winter months prove to be more convenient for scheduling reception sites. The same is true with regard to photographers. It is usually best to have more than one in mind. With both reception sites and photographers it can sometimes make a difference if you are willing to be flexible concerning the time of day when their services will be needed; i.e., morning, afternoon, or evening. Florists are not quite so difficult to schedule, but they should be contacted well in advance of the wedding also. Until all these arrangements are firmly in place, it is really premature to send out wedding announcements or invitations.

III. Despite the fact that everyone knows about marriage, there is more to a good marriage than simply deciding to be married. In fact, given the divorce rate in America, it would seem that many couples either should have reconsidered their decision to be married or have been better prepared for the various types of stress and strain that are inherent to marriage. That is one reason we require all couples married in this local church to go through premarital counseling with one of the pastors. While that is no guarantee that every marriage we perform will be blissful, it does provide a fitting framework to make some preparations for what lies ahead. The old adage is accurate: "Forewarned is fore-armed!" Ordinarily three or four premarital counseling sessions are scheduled. They will cover areas such as a biblical theology of marriage, expectations, communication skills, finances, sexuality/family planning, families of the wedding couple, planning the ceremony, etc. When you contact the pastor concerning getting married, these sessions can be scheduled. We recognize that extraordinary situations do occur, such as when one or both individuals getting married live beyond a reasonable commuting distance. In such situations special arrangements will be made so that despite the circumstances premarital counseling may still take place.

IV. The issue of qualifications for marriage is perhaps the most sensitive of all issues surrounding Christian marriage. At the outset we need to recognize that in our society the legal authorization for marriage comes from the state. The qualifications of the state are not especially rigorous, requiring only that one be 18 years of age, not currently married to someone else, and that one does not have any precluding health problems. Any number of public officials are authorized to conduct marriages—mayors, judges, justices of the peace, captains of ships, etc. The state does not require the sharing of vows or other statements of how those being married intend to conduct themselves once married. It is simply a legal agreement of a man and a woman to live together.

The state also authorizes local churches to perform marriages through the offices of their pastoral staff and other authorized officials of the church. Thus the churches are empowered to solemnize those marriages they find to be in keeping with their respective standards. Different churches have established different standards. At one extreme there are

churches that will marry anyone, while at the other extreme are churches that are exceedingly rigorous in the standards they establish for marriages. We feel that weddings taking place in or under the authority of this local church should be in conformity with biblical standards. Marriage is overseen by the state, but *Christian marriage* is a privilege above and beyond state-sanctioned marriage. The privilege of Christian marriage is extended to those who are believers in God, who desire to have their marriage blessed by God, and who seek a godly foundation and setting for their marriage. Consequently, we want to speak very clearly on our understanding of Christian marriage and the standards we seek to uphold.

We understand Scripture to teach that a Christian should not marry someone outside the faith (1 Corinthians 7:39; 2 Corinthians 6:14). Those who come to the church to be married should be Christians. Ordinarily one person of the couple desiring Christian marriage will be a member in good standing of this local church. If it happens that both persons are not members of this local congregation such a marriage may take place only by a special authorization given by the Spiritual Council in consultation with the pastor.

The age in which we live is marked by moral turbulence. It is a time when...

Christian marriage and family are openly undermined and attacked,  
Christian morality is publicly mocked,  
Faithful marriages are portrayed as restrictive,  
Stable relationships are described as dull, and  
Life-long commitments are rejected as foolish.

We believe as Christians we are called to challenge the world and its shattered standards. Indeed, our lives should be a testimony of God's purity, faithfulness, and blessing given to those who seek His strength in time of need. The area of sexual relationship is especially crucial. While there is no question but that Scripture declares our sexuality to be a wonderful gift from God and to be enjoyed fully; nonetheless, it is to be enjoyed within the bonds of marriage and the life-long commitment of a man and a woman to one another (Genesis 2:23-25, Matthew 19:3-9). There is no allowance for fornication (pre-marital sexual activity, including living together) or adultery (extra-marital sexual activity)

(1 Corinthians 6:9, 10; Romans 13:13; Galatians 5:19-21). These are sin in the eyes of God and our only option as Christians is to confess them as such and repent (turn away) from them. Often times people try to justify such actions by pointing out that they *do* love each other and *are* planning to marry. Yet from a biblical point of view they are living in direct disobedience to God's declared will which means that, in some measure, God's blessing will be withheld. Our desire is that each couple who is married in this local church should enjoy the full blessing of the Lord. Thus, we expect that during their time of preparation for marriage they will remain chaste—i.e. sexually inactive. If this presents a problem for anyone, the pastor will be glad to counsel with the couple, pray with them for strength to repent, and the grace to stay in the place of the Lord's blessing. If couples have been living together and would find it financially impossible to separate, we will provide housing from a home within our congregation for one of the persons until the time of the wedding. Our desire is to be faithful to the charge God has given to us as spiritual leaders while doing all we can to encourage those for whom we are responsible to conduct themselves in a godly fashion and experience all of God's blessing.

With regard to divorce we see no instance in the New Testament where divorce is commanded. Indeed, there are only two instances where it is permitted. Jesus, in Matthew 19:3-9, teaches that divorce is *allowed* (not required) for a person if his or her mate has been involved in an adulterous relationship. Again in 1 Corinthians 7:12-16 it is taught that if two unbelievers are married and later one of them becomes a Christian and then the unbelieving partner wishes to desert or divorce the believing spouse, it should be allowed to happen. Again, the issue is one of permission not of requirement. In no other instance does the New Testament make any allowances for divorce.

Nonetheless, even among Christians divorce has become increasingly commonplace. Being a Christian does not exclude one from the pressures and exigencies of everyday life or from temptations common to all humans. Christians do sin and the divorces found in the Christian community illustrate that fact. The difficult question concerns how to respond to divorced Christians who desire Christian marriage and whose divorces do not fall within the "permitted" situations described above. *We* cannot change God's standards! However, we must insist that repentance and forgiveness also be included within God's standards.

Our feeling is that forgiveness that is not solidly linked with a preceding repentance is more often human rationalization rather than genuine forgiveness from God. Yes, Christians who have been divorced in contradiction to God's standards may be forgiven and remarry. No, such remarriages are not automatic, but must be preceded by genuine repentance and forgiveness. Consequently, all such situations will be considered on an individual basis by the Spiritual Council in consultation with the pastor. Our goal is to be faithful to God's justice (standards) and to God's mercy (forgiveness). It should go without saying that the pastoral staff of Leidy's Church is ready and willing to meet with and counsel persons in regard to any kind of marital questions or difficulties. Where sin has been yielded to and the fruit of sin wreaked its havoc, we desire to see repentance, forgiveness, and restoration. Divorce is not the unpardonable sin, though sin is necessarily involved. Even as God restored the Israelites so many times after they had gone astray, He also can restore those damaged by the sins involved in a divorce. Our duty as the Spiritual Council is to exercise discernment with regard to each particular situation—is there genuine repentance, is there no hope for reconciliation, what *is* the mind of God about this particular situation? We want to be faithful to God and to the ministry among His people with which He has entrusted us.

- V. There is much more that can be said about Christian marriage and its related issues. We have tried to address some of the very practical and necessary concerns which we think it profitable for all to consider. Perhaps this document will help all of us better appreciate and understand the complexity of matters concerning Christian marriage and something of the responsibilities entrusted to the leaders in each local church. We on the Spiritual Council welcome any questions or suggestions you might have for us in all these matters. We believe that as all of us seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ fully and faithfully, that Christian marriages will be increasingly the source of blessing and restoration that God intended when He established the institution of marriage.

One last reminder needs to be made concerning the availability of counseling help. The pastoral staff of Leidy's Church can provide valuable help to persons experiencing marital difficulties, to those who may be seeking rejuvenation of their marriage, or to those who have questions about entering into a marital relationship. You can be sure they will listen

closely to your concerns and respond with compassion, truth, and biblical help. We encourage you to make use of their services without any hesitation. That is one of the reasons we have pastors.

Spiritual Council  
Immanuel Leidy's Church

Rev. 2002