

Divorce, Remarriage, and the Brethren in Christ

By Andy Saylor*

In the second half of last century, laws in the United States and elsewhere became much less restrictive about allowing divorce. Some church denominations also relaxed their positions. I began wondering whether interpretation of the seemingly straightforward words of Jesus about divorce and remarriage had perhaps been somewhat loosened, while passages in the epistles about some other issues were being interpreted as rather strictly binding. I became curious what the journey had been for the Brethren in Christ specifically on the issue of divorce and remarriage, and where we are now, and that is what I will attempt to review here.

After World War II, the frequency of divorce in the United States escalated. However, the 1946 edition of the *Brethren in Christ Constitution, Doctrine, By-Laws, and Rituals of the Brethren in Christ Church*, which was the predecessor to the *Manual of Doctrine and Government* (MDG), maintained a firm position on divorce and remarriage in Article XV (Marriage):

The marriage vow when once taken can never be disannulled, but is binding on both parties “as long as both shall live.” God’s Word clearly declares the unity and permanency of the marriage bond. “Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder” (Gen 2:24; Matt 19:1-9; I Cor. 7:39). While the Scripture recognizes that separation may sometimes be justifiable (Matt. 5:32; I Cor. 7:11, 15), such separation does

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not nullify the marriage vow, nor open the way for remarriage (I Cor. 7:11). We believe that divorce and remarriage while the former companion lives, constitutes adultery, both on the part of the divorcee and of the one whom he or she marries (Matt. 5:32; Luke 19:9; 16:18). The civil divorce laws which in their increasing laxity afford an easy means for release from the marriage contract are in direct contradiction with the teachings of Scripture and are subversive of God's plan and purpose in the marriage relation.¹

In 1951, the Committee on Indoctrination submitted several questions to General Conference to ascertain "the basic position of the church on the question of divorce and remarriage." The General Conference affirmed that if a couple divorces, and either remarries, that second marriage is not valid "in God's sight" and the couple is "living in and practicing adultery." The Conference also affirmed that under "extreme conditions" separation from one's spouse is acceptable, but the spouse who separated must remain unmarried.²

The Committee also proposed that in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, Jesus says that "fornication" (or "sexual immorality" as the NIV translates it) creates an exception that allows divorce and remarriage. However, the Committee evidently "amended" this proposal by taking the position that Jesus was talking about pre-marital—not post-marital—sexual infidelity, and that the unfaithful person's "humble acknowledgement" to the spouse would in most cases "lead to forgiveness and reconciliation." The Committee assured Conference that this "interpretation of our Lord's teaching will not, as some suggest, 'open the flood gate' for divorce and remarriage." With that clarification and assurance, it too was adopted.³

¹ *Constitution, Doctrine, By-Laws and Rituals of the Brethren in Christ Church: Including Amendments up to General Conference of 1946* (E. V. Publishing House, 1946), 34-35.

² *Minutes of the General Conference of the Brethren in Christ Church, 1951*, 44-47, hereafter cited as *General Conference Minutes*.

³ *General Conference Minutes, 1951*, 44-47.

Eight years later, in 1959, General Conference approved the deletion of this segment of Article XV of the MDG:

We believe that divorce and remarriage while the former companion lives, constitutes adultery, both on the part of the divorcee and of the one whom he or she marries. (Matt. 5:32; Luke 19:9; 16:18). The civil divorce laws which in their increasing laxity afford an easy means for release from the marriage contract are in direct contradiction with the teachings of Scripture and are subversive of God's plan and purpose in the marriage relation.⁴

The issue of divorce came to General Conference most years during this time, but there was not always action taken. Often the issue was deferred for further study. The Committee—now known as the Committee on Divorce—continued its work, despite some apprehension about the perennial General Conference discussions. For example, Bishop Charlie B. Byers wrote to the other members of the Committee: “I do hope, that by all means, it will not come to the Conference of 1961. I would stall off for time. I most sincerely and seriously hope that it will not be thrown into the hands of a committee that does not know all of the far reaching implications or that may not be sufficiently cautious of far reaching effects. I would continue the study and stall off for time.”⁵

The subject nonetheless did come to General Conference in 1961. A “pronouncement from the Board of Bishops against the social evil of divorce and remarriage” was presented, including this:

The Bible teaches and the social dilemmas of society illustrate that divorce is contrary to God's primeval will. While the Bible gives cautious guidance for separation of the marriage relation, divorce is never compatible with the will of God for man. The Bible stands against remarriage while the former

⁴ *Manual of Doctrine and Government of the Brethren in Christ Church* (Evangel Press, 1959), 25.

⁵ Charlie B. Byers to Committee on Divorce, “Pursuant to the action by the Committee on Divorce on January 23, 1961. Meeting at Messiah Home, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania,” in Brethren in Christ Historical Library and Archives, Mechanicsburg, PA, 6.

partner lives. . . . Divorce and remarriage, we believe to be the greatest menace to our western civilization. . . . Its results are more devastating to our society and our posterity than the dropping of bombs on our major cities.⁶

General Conference approved the recommendation that “we aggressively emphasize the Biblical position of a monogamous marriage to be dissolved only by death,” and that BOA “be authorized to continue its study and report to the General Conference of 1962.”⁷

On March 8, 1962, John E. Zercher, then serving as manager of Evangel Press and later editor of the *Evangelical Visitor*, wrote to the Committee on Divorce. Writing about married couples where at least one of them has a “living former partner,” and who therefore “have not in the past lived according to God’s plan,” Zercher said:

When it comes to the matter of repentance and turning from it, we find ourselves in difficulty for we would look for a forsaking of that which is wrong and turning from it, and making restitution if possible. . . . How then, do we understand repentance and its concomitant aspect of sorrow and forsaking. I wonder whether we might not ask ourselves for what would this couple be sorry? Sorry for the present home which they have founded and which in many cases would be a relatively happy home, and certainly if they are now both Christians, and continue to maintain a Christian home, will become an increasingly happy home? . . . Are we to ask them each to be sorry that their paths have crossed and to attempt to roll back the canvas of their lives to that point where they are no longer in each others life and affection?. . . This is certainly not an attempt to justify the second home, but simply to face up to the fact. . . . I am quite aware that this position is much more liberal than many if not most of our pastors would take, but I have a deep conviction that this is the spirit of Christian forgiveness

⁶ *General Conference Minutes*, 1961, 66.

⁷ *General Conference Minutes*, 1961, 67.

and of the new life which is in Christ. I am further persuaded that unless we are willing to take a position very similar to this that we may as well face the fact that we are going to be able to do very little for a large segment of our community.⁸

Proposals were presented at the 1963 General Conference that associate membership could be offered to “persons involved in divorce and remarriage,” and that pastors would not be permitted “to perform a marriage ceremony involving a person who has a former living spouse.” These proposals did not get the necessary two-thirds approval in 1963, but were approved in 1965.⁹

In 1972, the Board of Administration (BOA) asked the Conference to authorize “a denomination-wide study of Biblical, theological, and practical considerations in concern to discover the word of the Holy Spirit in these times,” which it did. The board introduced that request with this seemingly innocuous but ultimately highly significant statement, to which we will return later:

Clearly, the point at issue is not whether the Brethren in Christ favor, approve, or condone divorce and remarriage; rather, the issue is how the church shall minister redemptively to persons who are party to remarriage.¹⁰

In 1974, a full-fledged “Position Paper on the Church’s Ministry to the Divorced and Remarried” was presented. Ten “guiding principles” were listed, which General Conference adopted.

1. The will of God, which is for one man and one woman to be united in a marriage relationship for life, is recognized and affirmed.
2. The failure of persons to live in accordance with God’s will in regards to marriage is sin. The biblical term for marital unfaithfulness is adultery.

⁸ John E. Zercher to Committee on Divorce, “Divorce, Remarriage, and Church Relationship,” in Brethren in Christ Historical Library and Archives, Mechanicsburg, PA, 2-3.

⁹ *General Conference Minutes*, 1963, 38-40; *General Conference Minutes*, 1965, 35-37.

¹⁰ *General Conference Minutes*, 1972, 71.

3. The sin of adultery is not beyond the reach of God's forgiveness.
4. Repentance in the case of this sin, as in all sins, is a necessary condition for forgiveness.
5. The Scriptures give no instruction that the expression of repentance will necessarily call for the breakup of the present home and marriage.
6. It becomes the responsibility of the church, both denomination and congregation, to discern the implications of repentance and to call for such evidence, as the situation dictates, as the basis of acceptance into the fellowship.
7. Assured of the validity of the repentance by the person or persons concerned, membership may be offered to those who meet the requirements of membership and desire the privileges and accept the responsibilities.
8. The privilege of membership does not imply that all offices in the church are, therefore, open to all members. As the Scriptures indicate, a person's marital history and present home life is a legitimate and indeed a necessary consideration in the choice of leaders in the church.
9. The acceptance into the fellowship of the church of those with a history of marital irregularities is not a denial of God's will nor of the seriousness of the sin of adultery. It is rather a recognition of man's failure and sin, and the affirmation of God's forgiving grace and the good news that Christ came into the world to save sinners.
10. The recognition of God's grace of forgiveness should not open the way for presumptuous sin on the part of anyone, especially Christians. The hard sayings in the New Testament, suggesting a limit to God's grace, should be a warning against any presumption on His grace.¹¹

¹¹ *General Conference Minutes*, 1974, 26.

The board also recommended allowing someone who was a “partner in a marriage which involved one or more living former spouses” to be a member but not a pastor or deacon. This was approved by a two-thirds vote in 1974, but not on the requisite second reading in 1976 (starting in 1974, General Conferences became biannual rather than annual).¹² Instead, in 1978 an amendment to the MDG was approved (and approved on second reading in 1980) that added this statement to the qualifications for deacons and ministers:

As a testimony to the importance of the home, special attention should be given to the qualifications of wholesome marital and family relationships, including commitment to the lifelong bond of marriage.¹³

In 1982, the following paragraph—which was initially proposed in 1978 but not approved then—was approved to be added to the MDG. This is another item to which we will return.

Pastors should be alert to evidences of undue stress developing in marriage relationships and seek to develop a supportive ministry to home(s) so effected. Should a marriage breakdown occur the pastor and church board shall endeavor to effect reconciliation through a restorative ministry. In the event of divorce (or divorce and remarriage) involving a member of the church, in a situation requiring discipline there shall be evidence of repentance.¹⁴

With the continual back and forth (and I have not listed all of them), the Ministerial Credentials Board (MCB) was understandably perplexed. The meeting of the MCB on July 8, 1982 began with consideration of three options for handling credentialing of pastors in divorce or remarriage situations.

Option #1: Divorce and Remarriage is a forgivable sin; as a Board we are not judging moral issues, we are dealing with doctrinal positions. We could say that Divorce and Remarriage

¹² *General Conference Minutes*, 1974, 7-28; *General Conference Minutes*, 1976, 28.

¹³ *General Conference Minutes*, 1978, 84-85; *General Conference Minutes*, 1980, 23.

¹⁴ *General Conference Minutes*, 1982, 25.

is not the problem[;] we are credentialing on the basis of doctrinal issues.

Option #2: We could throw the ball back into the Bishops' court. We could say we provide a "License-Under-Care" credential but go no further. Telling the Bishops that this is your man. We will give the doctrinal approval but not personal approval.

Option #3: We will not touch Divorce and Remarriage Cases.¹⁵

Extensive discussion followed.

At the MCB's June 29, 1984 meeting, the perplexity had not abated. One member "pointed out that BOB [Board of Bishops] interprets the 1976 General Conference action as opening the way for divorced and remarried persons to be ministers in the BIC church. This is a matter of interpretation." Another member observed "that each year we have an increased number of divorced and remarried persons to examine, in our increased liberality." MCB decided not to submit its report about divorce and remarriage to the 1984 General Conference but rather wait "until after the BMD and BOB work through an acceptable position jointly."¹⁶

The BMD and BOB joint position was presented at the 1986 General Conference. BMD reported that "at every meeting we have discussed divorce and remarriage as it applies to ministers. . . . The BMD/BOB, in joint session, agreed that any person in the Brethren in Christ Church who is divorced and remarried during the time he/she is holding ministerial credentials shall be disciplined with a one-year suspension of credentials before reinstatement is considered. Individual circumstances will be considered in determination of resolution of the case."¹⁷

¹⁵ Minutes, Ministerial Credentials Board, July 8, 1982, in Brethren in Christ Historical Library and Archives, Mechanicsburg, PA, 1.

¹⁶ Minutes, Ministerial Credentials Board, 1984 General Conference, Messiah College, June 29, 1984, in Brethren in Christ Historical Library and Archives, Mechanicsburg, PA, 1-2.

¹⁷ *General Conference Minutes*, 1986, 137.

The August 1986 edition of the *Evangelical Visitor* provided reporting about that General Conference:

Some of the most heated debate came on Wednesday morning and afternoon after the heat and humidity of previous days had been swept away from the area by showers. The debate touched the question of moral qualifications of pastors and was initiated by [the statement above]. . . . During the ensuing discussion, Luke Keefer Jr., regretting that the issue of divorce and remarriage was again being debated on the floor of conference, said that the policy was not one more step in permissiveness, but rather an implementation of the actions of four prior Conferences. The boards were merely trying to call people to accountability by establishing a workable policy. The report passed, but because of intense concern, subsequent action committed the issue of utilization of divorced and remarried pastors to the Board of Administration for further study.¹⁸

And so we arrive at the 1988 General Conference, the culmination of decades of discussion and debate. The BOA presented a report. It lauded the 1974 position paper, and in particular, concluded:

Three basic principles are foundational in this position paper:

1. The church must aggressively proclaim the sanctity of marriage.
2. Divorce and remarriage, like any sin, are outside God's will and purpose for people.
3. For divorce and remarriage, as for any other sin, forgiveness and healing, through repentance, are part of God's plan for redemption.¹⁹

The BOA reiterated its 1986 General Conference statement about ministers and responded to that Conference's request for further study:

¹⁸ Helen Johns, "Evangelism and Missions Major Themes of General Conference 1986," *Evangelical Visitor*, August 1986, 8-9.

¹⁹ *General Conference Minutes*, 1988, 37.

The 1986 report was intended to highlight the fact that we believe discipline is one part of an essential process in repentance and forgiveness. Further, the statement is an attempt to set minimum, not maximum, guidelines for an approach which is both responsible and redemptive. Also, it provides the kind of flexibility which reflects the traditional mindset of the denomination. Finally, the 1986 statement adequately represents our present position on this matter.

In response to the directive of General Conference 1986 that the Board of Administration (BOA) “study the Brethren in Christ interpretation of the utilization of divorced and remarried ministers,” the BOA wishes to report that:

1. BOA has taken the assignment seriously by reviewing the actions endorsed by General Conference of 1974 and following, dialoguing with individuals who have expressed particular concern, and facilitating discussions in group settings.
2. We affirm our commitment to the authority and inspiration of Scripture which upholds both the sanctity of marriage and the privilege of redemption for all sinners.
3. Our General Conference statements of 1974, 1978, 1980 and 1984 provide a consistent endorsement of the aforementioned principle as it relates to the matter of divorce and remarriage.
4. The Brethren in Christ Church’s mindset encourages openness to the Bible and to one another. This means that we permit the Holy Spirit to deal with us, both as individuals and as a corporate body.
5. More aggressive teaching on the beauty, sanctity and permanence of marriage is necessary for the church to combat the evil influence of our society.²⁰

There followed decades of little or no official activity. But in 2014, in the context of extensive recommendations from General

²⁰ *General Conference Minutes*, 1988, 39.

Conference Board (GCB) (formerly Board of Administration) for updating the Congregational Polity section of the Manual of Doctrine of Government, the following paragraph was entirely deleted:

Pastors should be alert to evidence of undue stress developing in marriage relationships and seek to develop a supportive ministry to homes so effected. Should a marriage breakdown occur, the pastor and church board shall endeavor to effect reconciliation through a restorative ministry. In the event of divorce (or divorce and remarriage) involving a member of the church, in a situation requiring discipline, there shall be evidence of repentance.²¹

This paragraph, to which I said we would return, was originally proposed in 1978 and adopted in 1982. My question: Are not those first two sentences in particular ones that we wish the church were emphasizing publicly, not deleting?

In the May 1984 *Evangelical Visitor*, Harvey Sider, the bishop of the Canadian Conference (and later moderator of the Brethren in Christ Church), looked back a decade and described the 1974 position paper as “a beautiful example of a biblical position which is both pastoral and prophetic. In this document, we uphold the sanctity of marriage and cry out against the sin of divorce, but at the same time we reach out in ministry and accept those who have been divorced and remarried. To do both is to model and to be faithful to Jesus Christ, who repudiated all sin—but accepted all sinners.”²²

The paragraph deleted from the MDG in 2014 (after thirty years) was evidently an attempt “to do both” as Harvey Sider put it, and to minister to “persons who are party to remarriage.”

That is where the 1972 introduction, to which I also said we would return, is perhaps relevant: “Clearly, the point at issue is not

²¹ *Brethren in Christ U. S. General Assembly Minutes [formerly General Conference Minutes]*, 2014, accessed April 16, 2026, <https://bicus.org/about/leadership/general-assembly/2014/> 49. General Conference is now known as General Assembly. Minutes from 2014 to the present are available on the Brethren in Christ U.S. website, <https://bicus.org/about/leadership/general-assembly/>.

²² Harvey Sider, “The Minister: Pastor and Prophet,” *Evangelical Visitor*, May 1984, 9.

whether the Brethren in Christ favor, approve, or condone divorce and remarriage...” Was it not a point at issue? Was not the goal “to do both”? Did ministering redemptively so become the focus that an imbalance was created, to the extent that “whether the Brethren in Christ favor, approve, or condone divorce and remarriage” was left by the wayside, ignored, perhaps assumed?

In any event, let us now see what we can determine about the current Brethren in Christ position.

The current Brethren in Christ position

“What We Believe About Marriage” is a position statement available on the denomination’s website. Its origin was described in a presentation at the 2006 General Conference:

[I]n June of 2005 [GCB] convened a Consultation on Marriage, which brought together 50 participants from across North America including church leaders, bishops, scholars, pastors, lay persons, and others, along with the two bishops from Zambia and Zimbabwe. Their task was to explore, reinforce and articulate concepts shared by the Brethren in Christ regarding the sanctity of marriage.²³

The statement, in the form as it now exists on the denominational website, was presented and adopted at the 2008 General Conference.²⁴ It mentions divorce several times but does not mention remarriage. Here are relevant excerpts:

The Biblical story makes clear and human experience confirms that patterns of unhealthy attitudes and unloving behaviors can lead to marital breakdown. Given the high value God places on marriage, divorce—with the pain it brings—grieves God’s heart. Yet God responds with grace, healing, and the offer of new life; and calls the community of faith to partner with him in this process.

²³ *General Conference Minutes*, 2006, 106.

²⁴ *General Conference Minutes*, 2008, 62-68.

When there is marital distress and breakdown, the faithful church is called to speak the truth in love. Its message following the pain of divorce will include words of assurance and hope with the prospect of rebuilding one's life.

Throughout the process of marital recovery, the church in its role will seek to extend grace in various ways. It will provide opportunities and space for those who grieve their loss. It will walk with those who find themselves in broken relationships brought about by divorce. It will give special attention to the needs of the children of wounded marriages.²⁵

The Brethren in Christ position statement on "Singleness" includes this:

When singleness results from being divorced or widowed, one may choose to remain single.

For the formerly married, finding the proper degree of independence can also be difficult because it is compounded by the need to establish a new identity. The hurt and pain associated with death or divorce make it easy to cling to others.²⁶

"This I Believe" is a questionnaire intended for prospective pastors and other people pursuing various roles in the Brethren in Christ, to provide "a basic sense of your theological understandings and your compatibility with the Brethren in Christ."

The instructions say, "please choose one or two statements which most nearly characterize your current position. Feel free to add brief clarifying comments in the space provided. The multiple choice questions are required to submit the questionnaire. Clarifying comments are not required." Here is the section about divorce.

I believe divorce is only acceptable to God if there is adultery, abuse, or abandonment.

²⁵ "What We Believe About Marriage: A Brethren in Christ Approach," Brethren in Christ U. S., accessed April 16, 2026, <https://bicus.org/about/beliefs/positions/marriage/>.

²⁶ "Singleness," Brethren in Christ U. S. accessed April 13, 2026, <https://bicus.org/about/beliefs/positions/singleness/>.

I believe divorce is acceptable to God if the marriage has failed and there is no hope of true reconciliation.

I believe divorce can be a healthy choice when it serves the best interests of everyone.

I believe divorce is never acceptable to God.

I believe divorce is only acceptable to God if there is adultery.

I believe divorce is not God's best, but it does happen a lot and we need to show people grace regardless of their reasons.

I do not know what I believe about divorce.

I have given my description in the box below.²⁷

In the current *Manual of Doctrine and Government*, the only reference to divorce or remarriage is in "Article 2, The Christian and Home Life" in the "Statements of Christian Life and Practice" section, which has been in the MDG for many years:

Marriage is ordained by God as a lifelong union between husband and wife. The Church bears responsibility to assist in building Christ-like relationships within the marriage. The Church is called to minister to persons involved in adultery, divorce, and remarriage. When marriage vows are broken, the essential processes of repentance, forgiveness, discipline, reconciliation and restoration, inasmuch as possible, will need to be a part of personal and congregational life.²⁸

Earlier, I expressed disappointment that the following was deleted from the MDG in 2014:

Pastors should be alert to evidence of undue stress developing in marriage relationships and seek to develop a supportive ministry to homes so effected. Should a marriage breakdown occur, the pastor and church board shall endeavor to effect reconciliation through a restorative ministry. In the event of

²⁷ "This I Believe," Brethren in Christ U. S., accessed December 15, 2025, <https://bicus.org/training/forms/this-i-believe/>.

²⁸ *Brethren in Christ Manual of Doctrine and Government*, accessed April 26, 2026, <https://bicus.org/about/beliefs/manual-of-doctrine-and-government/>, 9-20

divorce (or divorce and remarriage) involving a member of the church, in a situation requiring discipline, there shall be evidence of repentance.

The deleted paragraph may seem to be unnecessary, because it was redundant considering the paragraph that was retained. Perhaps I am straining at a gnat here, but bear with me for a moment. The deleted paragraph placed responsibility on the pastor and church board. The retained paragraph says “the Church” is responsible to build marital relationships and minister. And in the retained paragraph, “[W]hen marriage vows are broken,” not even “the Church” is given responsibility. The responsibility is not placed anywhere. We are just told that “repentance, forgiveness, discipline, reconciliation and restoration” are “to be a part of personal and congregational life.” In other words, the responsibility is so amorphous that it is effectively placed nowhere, on no one. This is a grammatical construction sometimes referred to as “hiding the agent.”

Perhaps this parsing seems too much, but it seems to me to be commensurate with the vagueness in the current public Brethren in Christ statements. Should there not be passion, urgency, and expression of deep concern about the fragility of marriage today, about the importance God places on marriage, and acknowledgement that divorce (while sometimes necessary) is deeply undesirable? Was it decided that these are things that need not be clearly and directly and prominently emphasized? My concern is that the paucity of sentiments of this kind may inadvertently be sending a message about the relative indifference about divorce. If the culture relentlessly teaches that marriages are disposable, should not the Church relentlessly teach that they are not?²⁹ “If the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle?” (1 Cor. 14:8).

²⁹ See Jay McDermond, “No Deposit, No Return,” *Evangelical Visitor*, May 10, 1981, 2 (on the danger of treating marriage and people generally as disposable).

Conclusion

Divorce and remarriage are something Jesus spoke to directly. There are various interpretations of what he said and why he said it. Should we not have a position statement or “Accents & Issues” paper about this?

We have position statements about marriage, the Bible, and women in ministry leadership. There are Accents & Issues statements about abortion, assurance of the believer, baptism and belonging, Christians and war, fraternal orders, gambling and lotteries, God’s call to holy living, human sexuality, renewal, salvation, sanctification, simple lifestyle, singleness, and violence. We have a statement endorsed by Leadership Council entitled, “What We Believe About Homosexuality—Guidance for Churches.”³⁰

I found two Brethren in Christ sermons on divorce on the internet. Here are brief excerpts, both interpreting Matthew 5:31-32.³¹

Sermon 1: While on the surface it might seem that it could cover all kinds of things—maybe somebody isn’t faithful in helping around the home, somebody not faithful in providing, keeping food on the table . . . it might look like it’s open to interpretation. But it really isn’t. Jesus is talking about “sexual immorality.” . . . Jesus deems sexual immorality as so broken, so devastating to the love that one should have for his or her spouse, that he allows this as the one reason that would make divorce legitimate.

Sermon 2: So on the surface this seems pretty clear: Divorce isn’t an acceptable option, except for sexual immorality. But wait a second . . . Jesus wasn’t trying to give us a complete doctrine on divorce. In fact, divorce wasn’t even the main topic. . . . He’s just using it as an illustration! And so divorce was just an

³⁰ “Positions,” Brethren in Christ U. S., accessed April 30, 2026, <https://bicus.org/about/beliefs/positions/>.

³¹ <https://share.google/Eh2gi868wFpD3B3zU> (2019), accessed April 30, 2026 (first sermon); https://thechurchco-production.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/sites/1128/2025/03/MESSAGE-Sermon-on-the-Mount-Part-10-3_23_25.pdf (2025), accessed April 30, 2026 (second sermon).

illustration for our calling to a greater righteousness. . . . And so knowing the context really helps us to see that Jesus wasn't simply saying: *This is the only reason EVER that he would allow for divorce.*

As you can see, ironically, they have diametrically opposed ideas of what the scripture is saying "on the surface" and how it should actually be interpreted. To be fair, they both give further context and explanation. But this dichotomy is illustrative of the apparent lack of clarity and communication in the Brethren in Christ about this subject.

It is understandable that pastors are reluctant to preach on this topic at all. John Yeatts, professor emeritus at Messiah University and pastor emeritus at the Grantham Church, for example, has shared with me that he was hesitant to preach about divorce and remarriage. When he did, he became aware of the substantial number of persons in the congregation looking back at him who were divorced or remarried. To his relief, two people who afterward expressed the most appreciation for the sermon had been through a divorce. Perhaps, he thought, they understood deeply the pain of divorce and appreciated the truth spoken in love.

I recently asked another long-serving Brethren in Christ pastor, "Do you as a pastor receive any general direction about how to handle divorce and remarriage? Like, is there a pastor's manual that addresses it?" His response was, "The answer is very short. Absolutely nothing. Now, my bishop is and always has been available for counsel." It seems fairly obvious that creation and promulgation of a position statement could be useful.

For a long time, the Church excluded many people from genuine, full-fledged participation because of divorce and remarriage. Having an understanding of the process by which the position on divorce and remarriage changed, despite many years of a different approach, might be useful when we are in situations where other passages of Scripture are causing many people to be excluded from genuine, full-fledged participation in the Church.

The Ethiopian eunuch asked Philip, "What can stand in the way

of my being baptized?” Is this not the question we ought always to be asking about how we are doing church? What is standing in the way of someone coming to Christ and genuine, full-fledged participation in the body? And should we not be continually re-asking that, in case we have had it wrong, or to be sure we are not holding onto a position simply because we’ve always held it? As George Santayana once said, “Fanaticism consists in redoubling your effort when you have forgotten your aim.”³²

Over the decades, the Brethren in Christ asked and re-asked that question—whether we had it wrong—about how we were treating people who were divorced or remarried. Change happened. Perhaps the process was not theologically spelled out. But on the other hand, perhaps the process was an example of something that was said in the 1988 General Conference report:

*The Brethren in Christ Church’s mindset encourages openness to the Bible and to one another. This means that we permit the Holy Spirit to deal with us, both as individuals and as a corporate body.*³³

³² George Santayana, *The Life of Reason, or the Phases of Human Progress* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1920), 13.

³³ *General Conference Minutes*, 1988, 38 (emphasis added).