

## MINISTERING TO THE DIVORCED IN THE CHURCH

By  
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Statistics concerning divorce alarm anyone whose conscience is tuned in to the state of domestic life in America. Without citing extensive statistics, the point is illustrated in the following:

Such changes in attitudes toward family life have made families more fragile. This is reflected most obviously in the dramatic increase in divorce in recent years. If the present divorce rate persists, within another generation roughly half of all marriages will be ended by divorce. Nearly half of all children can now be expected to live some portion of their childhood years in a single-parent family (Grolier's).

Pastors, counselors, and all who are otherwise involved in the local church, ministering to people, know first hand the problems divorce causes; the heartache it brings to each life it touches.

Divorce needs the attention of local church pastors and people. It is a problem. It is real. It isn't going to go away by itself. If it were to do so, our churches are filled with people already affected by it. They need understanding of how God now views them, and how to respond to what God says about them, as well as for how to cope with, or solve, divorce-related problems. The following is a plan to help in these three areas, from the standpoint of planning a local church ministry to meet these needs.

### I. The Problem Of Divorce: Theologically.

The structured outline and discussion that follows is not to imply that theology is outside the real world in which one lives. But Paul provides the basic methodology of first establishing the theology of an issue, as in Ephesians, chapters one through three, and then making practical application of the doctrine, as in chapters four through six.

The argument is simple. Considering that varied views are held theologically, one must conclude that whatever the theological position adopted, divorce produces difficulties in the lives of the participants, victims, and in the life and ministry of the local church. The church, in turn, must effectively minister to them.

Years of discussions with, and research into the writings of, varied preachers, pastors, theologians and Christian counselors, have well established one fact: The positions held on the subject of marriage, divorce, and remarriage, differ from one another as the snow flakes in a winter storm. Views range from encouraging divorce as a solution to problems of modern domestic life, to absolute rejection of any who participate in it. The first seeks to minister to the persons involved without establishing Biblical approval or disapproval for the act. The latter shuts out such from the church and from any hope of God's favor. One would hope these extremes are rare, and indeed, experience would demonstrate them to be. But they do exist.

But no act can be without Biblical evaluation. Everything one does is either right or wrong, by Biblical standards. While ten preachers teaching on the subject of divorce may give ten different views on the subject (or, as this writer often says, for emphasis through absurdity, "Ten preachers will hold eleven different views"), nevertheless, one must develop a theological position on the subject. This writer has established

a position from a literal method of interpretation, and dispensational approach to the Scriptures. While one may consider his theology settled, yet, one must be open to further enlightenment; ever engaged in a continual search for weaknesses in the position, and to strengthen what is verifiably correct. The variance among so many excellent Bible students concerning marriage, divorce, and remarriage has to instill a reticence toward dogmatic declarations in these matters. It would be a great ministry for someone to do such a quality study of the subject that theological waters, so long muddied by all the tramping around of biased and unprincipled would-be-theologians, along with many who are honestly seeking the truth, would at last be cleared up. But the problem runs deeply. The subject is one that teems with dogmatists unwilling, for whatever their reasons, to give the slightest consideration that he/she may be wrong on some point.

But, the thesis stands. One must establish a theological position to govern one's response to each encountered divorce situation, both for remedial responses, and preventative measures. No action occurs apart from the influence of one's beliefs.

Surely, there is a minimum position that could be established. It must be obvious that divorce was never a part of God's original plan for man's domestic life. If granted, then the next logical step is to conclude that divorce, as contrary to God's will, is not good for the human family. Then, it follows that divorce causes problems in our churches among those participants of divorce, and those lives they touch. Hence, the church, with this basic theology established, needs a plan for ministering to people with real problems.

#### A. Realistically.

Divorce is destructive. The effects reach beyond the two who are immediately involved, into the lives of children, parents, kinfolk, the work place, social relationships, the church, future replacement partners and all these same elements in all their spheres of influence. Our whole national well being is hurt. Souls may be lost for all eternity as the effectiveness of a local church may be lessened, adversely affecting its soul winning efforts.

If divorce is freely permitted and no distinction is made between the ideal—those building a solid home base, and the biblically unacceptable--those who dump a mate at the least provocation and select another, the Church would be inundated with a destructive force. Our youth would view an exemplary pattern that could produce attitudes and practices generating much instability in their future attempt at establishing a home. Both the security and emotional stability of other church families would be threatened, as spouses may fear, in such a loose social setting, that their own mate may be the next replacement for someone's departed bedfellow. The ministries of the local church will suffer, as less-than-the-best choices of role models are placed in leadership positions.

The other extreme, then, is to absolutely debar any divorced persons from the church membership; to treat them as the epitome of the defiled. Never called upon for public prayer, barred from teaching positions and the deaconship, they are relegated to paying their tithe and warming a pew, if they are allowed in membership.

Doubtless, fundamental churches fall somewhere within these limits, with few going fully to either described extreme. (Many do recognize some Biblical restrictions placed upon those men who claim the calling of Pastor, with more than one wife. But the interpretation of I Timothy 3:2, is varied.)

Wherever a local church chooses to stand on the issue, divorces

create difficulties in local church ministry. The pastor and church leaders must deal with boys growing to maturity without a father image, masculine discipline and leadership, or missing the soft hugs and sympathy of a caring mom; girls developing without a mother's feminine touch and girl talk, or without the masculine leadership regarded as so vital for the successful choosing of the daughter's future mate, and establishing of a stable home.

Then, there is the single-again man in the church. Two widows and three divorcees are after him, for whatever reason, be it financial security, sex, a father for their children, or simply a cure for their loneliness.

Or, there is the recently dumped wife who connives her way into a leadership position in the youth department to cull out a young pup for herself. Or, pity the poor husband who doesn't discern the reason why a divorced man has suddenly chosen him for friendship, and is showing up so regularly at his front door. Mourn for the passionate pastor who falls prey to misdirected sympathy for a devastated divorcee, penniless and homeless, and takes her under his roof—just until she can get things sorted out, you understand.

Add to these the situations where courtship develops between one or more divorced persons, and the relationship is honorable, principled, and pleasant—if not theologically, at least in the eyes of the beholders. Enter the matter of marriage and the pastor gets squeezed between the pressure of those who oppose his performing of the ceremony, and those who would be offended by his refusal.

Divorce is real, and it is devastating to the domestic life of America. But it is also potentially a wrecking crew set on bringing a local church down to shambles. The church must minister to prevent divorce from breaking up church families. The church must also minister to those already victimized thereby. While there would be some overlapping of the two endeavors, the following is a plan for dealing with the latter group.

## II. The Ministry to the Divorced.

While the church has several areas in which ministries can be correlated to accomplish a common goal. The goal must first be defined and established. In three parts, the goal is: To bring the parties involved in divorce to see what God says about what they have done (no help can be effectively rendered until the sin question—indeed, if the adopted theology declares sin extant—is settled, i.e. identified, acknowledged, and remedied); to set forth a plan for future victorious living within the setting of their domestic choices; to continually assist them in securing and maintaining the victory.

### A. From the Pulpit.

There is a lot of emphasis in our day on counseling, as a prime ministry to those whose homes and lives are wrecked by divorce. Experience would suggest some value to such a ministry. However, God has established the prime method, in the local church, for conveying His will to His people. It is the ministry of the pastor, exercising his minimum gifts of preaching, pastoring and teaching (with no order of importance being implied by the listing order). Every pastor has the gift of teaching. An effective pulpit ministry includes exposition of the Scriptures. Expository preaching certainly must be ranked as the preferred method for the pastor. On the pastor's part, an effective pulpit ministry will greatly reduce the need of personal counseling.

A question posed by this author, to a guest lecturer in seminary module, concerned what biblical gift covers the ministry of

counseling. It was apparent to this writer, and to at least one other student who commented on it, that the lecturer had either not looked for one previously, or had perhaps looked, but not been able to settle the matter in his own mind.

The spiritual gifts are listed in Romans 12, and I Corinthians 12. Many could be of great service in a counseling session. But, there is no gift of counseling listed. In Ephesians 4:11, gifts are listed, recognized as God's gifts to the local church for carrying out its ministry. There is no gift of counseling named.

Counseling (meaning nothing more than personal conversation with any individual, to aid them concerning matters of morals, spirituality, and /or decisions) may involve the gifts of teaching, helps, mercy, wisdom, discerning of spirits, or some other one listed in the above references. But, since there is no gift of counseling listed, one cannot have a direct calling from God, to such a ministry.

Only as counseling might be viewed as one method of directing people into the will of God, just as Sunday school is one method of exercising the gift of teaching, could one properly engage in counseling in the local church setting. But it is then only a method, a device, used to carry out some spiritual gift, which would be operative toward the particular need being confronted. It is not a Holy Spirit ordained ministry, requiring a calling, designed to become the chief method of dealing with people-problems. It is not a ministry within its own rights, to which a man is called, to be exalted as the panacea for the problems of our church people and ministries.

The God ordained, Holy Spirit gifted ministry, is the preaching of God's Word—the pulpit ministry. When it is in order (and according to the three basis gifts, that means the exposition of scripture by a God called pastor), from the pastor's side of the issue, lives will be changed and problems solved.

There is, however, another side: The hearts of the hearers. This writer's experience demonstrates that many, perhaps most, folks who come for personal counseling, do not want solutions. They want support for what they have already decided to do. It is, then, not a matter of method, but of the subject's willingness to hear and obey God.

When a church member truly seeks God's will, a sound and effective expository ministry from the pulpit will provide the guidance they need. If they don't want to do God's will, no amount of preaching or counseling concerning the will of God will help them. But God has also chosen preaching to provide the impetus to move them to submit to the will of God. Once submission has occurred, there can easily be the need of personal conversation to clarify and make specific application. But the teaching (i.e. exposition of Bible truth) and exhortation (i.e. efforts to move to action) will already have done the majority of the work needed. The pulpit is the place where God will accomplish the bulk of the task.

Therefore, the pastor would do well to purpose to do much exposition in the areas of: The Lordship of Christ, trusting God to produce obedient hearts; the sanctity of marriage (for an antidote to modern day philosophy of the Women's Liberation Movement, etc.), and the order of the home (to provide instruction as to how to build a home God's way).

This author's experience and observation convinces him that women working outside the home is one of the most devastating forces at work today, to destroy our homes. To say the least, it is disturbing to

hear attitudes being expressed in my current academic setting, down playing the part this factor has in breaking up homes today. Both biblically and experientially, there is abundant evidence for this. John McArthur describes it both in biblical exposition, and philosophical exposure:

The word "workers at home" one word in the Greek, "oikourgos" from two root words, "ergon" which means "work" and "oikos" which means "house." It's simply the sphere of a woman's life is her home—that's her domain. It doesn't mean she has to be there 24 hours a day and can never leave. I am not saying that, because you don't want to lock her up with Soap Operas either, but what it does mean is that is the sphere of her life; that is her domain. It is not that she is simply to be home, but that the home is her sphere. The woman in Proverbs 31 left home when she needed to buy a field, she left home to prepare that field, she left home and went afar to find things that would help the family. The woman did what she needed to do, but the focus of everything was the home, and that's where she poured her life. She got up early and she went to bed late for the sake of the home. She is to be a home-keeper" that's the sphere of her responsibility, that's her place of employment, that's where she should pour her life.

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For a mother to get a job outside the home and send the children to some kind of "Day-care" place is to shirk her God-given responsibility. It also is a failure to understand that her husband is to be the provider, as Ephesians 5 makes it very clear. Even if you wanted to work outside the home to pay for your children to go to a Christian school you made a big mistake. Better that you should stay in the home and raise your own children to be godly than to pass it on to somebody else.

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What grieves me is this massive onslaught that says "We have got to stamp out this whole idea of women staying at home." If you don't think that is it, listen to the agenda: Vivian Gornick (sp.), feminist author, University of Illinois, "Being a housewife is an illegitimate profession. The choice to serve and be protected and plan towards being a family maker is a choice that shouldn't be. The heart of radical feminism is to change that" (MacArthur).

A strong pulpit ministry, faithfully declaring God's Word without fearing the wrath of, or favoring the status of, men, conducted in the power of the Holy Spirit, is, to those either touched or devastated by savage divorce, the heart of the ministry they so greatly need. The need is equally great among those threatened by divorce, touched by it, or victims thereof.

Paul said to Timothy, "Preach (Greek. "to herald" [2784 Strong's]) the word...reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long suffering and doctrine" (II Timothy 4:2 KJV). Much work needs to be done from the pulpit concerning the damage feminist philosophies have done to our homes.

#### B. In the Sunday School.

(Have you) heard the old story about the two men who met on the street. One said to the other, "Have you heard about Harry? He embezzled the company out of half a million dollars." The other man said, "That's terrible; I never did trust Harry." The first man said, "Not only that, he left town and he took Tom's wife with him." The other man said, "That's awful; Harry has always been a ne'er-do-

well." The first man said, "Not only that, he stole a car to make his getaway." The other man said, "That's scandalous; I always did think Harry had a bad streak in him." The first man said, "Not only that, they think he was drunk when he pulled out of town. The other man said, "Harry's no good. But what really bothers me is, who's going to teach his Sunday School Class this week?" (Biblical Illustrator).

One would trust this does not illustrate any kind of a general attitude prevailing toward the ministry of the Sunday School. It is an exceedingly valuable ministry—the best method we've found for a local church to carry out her commission to teach. As the pastor has the gift of teaching, so do many church members, without the pastoral gift. The Sunday School provides a great place for the exercising of that gift. According to the Encyclopedia of 7,700 Illustrations, the Sunday school, originating in 1780, was the idea of Robert Raikes. Though resisted by many churches, it was furthered by the forming of the American Sunday School Union, May 13, 1817, with the effective influence of men such as Francis Scott Key and Stephen Paxton, the latter, according to his own testimony, organizing Sunday schools instructing more than 50,000 boys and girls (1393,4).

This latter fact, however, suggests a problem. Is Sunday school viewed as just for kids? The absence of many adult church members from the classes, and lack of faithfulness in attendance of others, as compared with their frequency in the Sunday morning preaching service, may well give credence to the suspicion. Consequently, any plans for using the Sunday school in ministering within the scope of the present thesis, may have to begin with a plan to increase the attendance of non-participants. Yet, the execution of a plan to specialized ministry to those touched by divorce, may itself generate increased attendance.

Plans include:

1. Beginning a class especially for the single-again folk. Or, classes, as male and female may be separated. However, keeping the sexes together will be more profitable, in a class taught by a husband and wife team, with the husband as the public teacher of the combined class. The wife would provide the feminine touch for the female members, and periodically teach the ladies in a separate classroom setting.

The teaching team would ideally be a couple with previous experience in ministering to divorced people in some specific way. Or, they themselves may be divorced and remarried people. Of course, other qualifications would have to be in place, as appropriate to their situation.

Curricula would be obtained from various sources, as publishing houses or ministries specializing in the field, or developed within the church, searching and rightly dividing the Scriptures for information and exhortation concerning particular needs of the students.

Video taped seminars would be shown in class to supplement Bible exposition.

Guest teachers would be utilized occasionally, ranging from a one-time class setting to a multi-Sunday series of classes, to provide needed instruction.

Sunday School Class social events would be scheduled regularly, providing the needed fellowship for people who can easily feel left

out. Parents of singles may be opposed to the company of single-again church members, fearing too serious a friendship may develop—indeed, it will, in many cases. Who wants their maturing teen daughter to get involved in marriage with a more mature, “experienced,” older man, with one or more children? The rightness or wrongness of the parent’s attitude is not up for discussion here. Such attitudes are reality.

Then, of course, such social events will certainly lead to one or more matching-up of two divorcees. The theology of the pastor, and resulting attitude of the church, will, as previously stated, determine the degree of acceptability for all of this.

2. Teachers would be trained to recognize the needs of their adolescent students caught up in divorce and/or second family situations, and how to effectively minister to them. Children are distressed when their parents divorce. Children under the age of 5 may react with rage and grief, as if their parents were divorcing them. Older children grasp the situation better but sometimes tend to blame themselves. Adolescents are likely to be angry at their parents and to feel socially embarrassed by the breakup. Even grown children may be upset and angry, although they are able to adjust more quickly because they are less dependent on the marriage. Many children, whatever their age, seem to emerge from the experience without permanent ill effects if the parents adjust reasonably well. Some studies indicate that “children of divorcees are more likely than others, to receive poor grades, or become delinquent...” (Grolier’s).

Of course, you can’t separate children of divorced families into classes apart from the “normal” kids. Teachers must be trained to get into homes to learn the circumstances in which their students live, instructed in the Word how to minister effectively to individual needs, and be motivated to do it.

“Olivia Newton-John recently was asked why she hadn’t gotten married earlier, and she shared how when she was ten years old, her parents went through a devastating divorce. She said, ‘You know, it’s hard to believe a relationship can last when you’ve never seen one’” (Biblical Illustrator. 1666).

An effective Sunday school teacher can do much to help our children through the difficulties of a divorce environment.

### C. In the Social Realm.

This pastor has submitted to this fact of life: People are going to get divorced; they are going to marry again. The ministry of the Word will stop some from doing wrongly, but some...most... are still going to do it. He is convinced that we live in the same state in which Moses ministered: “...Because of the hardness of your hearts (Moses) suffered you to put away your wives...” (Matthew 19:8).

For this author’s ministry, marriage, involving divorce, will not be performed by himself, nor within the walls of the local church (building) where he serves. But those who so re-marry will be welcome in the fellowship, and may, in due time, be used in the service of the Lord. Of course, one would be naive to think there are many couples would accept such a Pastoral stance. But that is the plan that will be worked, whatever degree of success, or failure, may follow. The plan must always be principled, and not merely achievement oriented. One may perceive violation of biblical principle here, depending upon one’s doctrine. But the force of Moses’ statement, quoted above, renders reality less than ideal, as is often the case.

Former pastorates held by this author, as has always been the case, were in churches with many mixed-marriage families. They have had former spouses (sometimes multiple), his kids, her kids, and their kids. Many of them have been, and are presently, among the most faithful and spiritual workers in the church. In this pastor's pulpit ministry, expository messages pertaining to the subject at hand were always prefaced by a statement to the effect, that the sermon is not condemnatory toward those already in their second marriage. Rather, it is to warn singles and currently wedded folk of the dangers of divorce, etc. That attitude somewhat carries over to the social realm. They (according to established theology in this author's ministry) have erred. But it is done. Divorce may be reversed, but seldom is (remarriage may not be). It is done, so why ostracize them? Social events are to strengthen existing homes, as they are, and not to punish or condemn those who have wrecked theirs. It is a good opportunity to aid the movement of the divorced and remarried into the mainstream of church fellowship; to promote acceptability of them among some who may tend to scorn and spurn them.

Mindful of the dangers, whether real or perceived, listed above, these folk must be brought into the full fellowship of, the enjoyment of, and the service alongside the whole church. Social activities can help in this matter. In the activity, responsibilities would be given to these folk, called on to pray, serve food, organize a fun time—activities that would get them in the forefront—even holding the event at their own home.

#### D. Special Ministries

Special ministries have already been planned within the framework of existing ministries. In addition, a video/audio section of the church library would include materials especially instructive and helpful to divorced folk, and those involved in second marriages.

Ministers specializing in the field would be enlisted, semi-annually or annually, to hold a preaching conference or seminar on the subject. These would not be the mainstay ministry, but supplementary to the previously stated pastor's pulpit ministry.

#### E. In Leadership

By this is meant the example set by church leaders.

First, the pastor will endeavor to set the example for his people of a godly man, building a principled home, ruling his house well: Demonstrating Biblical love and fidelity to one woman for life, to his people. Public praise of wife and children (legitimate, not braggadocios, with no public criticism of them), common courtesies (of the kind that are no longer so common) toward the wife, loving discipline of the children, abstaining from any other-than-handshake touching of church ladies, conversation that is pure and upright, and the demonstration of a loving couple that are faithful, loving toward each other, and are glad it is so—these are some things that can provide effective leadership. A good example set by pastor and wife can go a long way toward instilling in church families the desire to, and hope that they can, make their marriage last and be successful. Even those in second marriages need this example to help them make their current one the last one.

Sadly, the above can also provoke some restless wife to begin eyeing the pastor in a covetous, even lustful, manner. He becomes in her sight the fulfillment of all wherein she perceives her husband to be failing. Her mental and emotional involvement can turn to efforts to motivate the desired to physically replace the undesired.



Those in leadership positions in the church need to follow the pastor's example, bringing order in their own homes, to reinforce the example before the people.

Conclusion:

It is well understood that divorce is real, and it is a problem. It is not assumed that the plan set forth will solve all the problems divorce and remarriage may induce in a local church. One would trust the plan, assuming conformity to Biblical principles, would be blessed of God to make a difference, positively, for some divorced and/or in-their-second-marriage church members.

The challenge may well be in effectively executing the plan.

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