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Grace and Truth: A Divorce Theology For Missionary Organizations

Pennie Lynn Kemp

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Grace and Truth: A Divorce Theology
For Missionary Organizations

by

Pennie Lynn Kemp

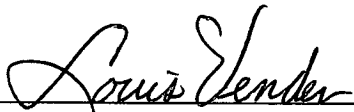
A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Clinical Ministry


June 2002

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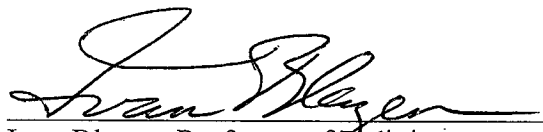
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Each person whose signature appears below certifies that this thesis is in his/her opinion adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree Master of Arts.


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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Grace and Truth: A Divorce Theology For Missionary Organizations

by

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Master of Arts, Graduate Program in Clinical Ministry
Loma Linda University, June 2002
Dr. Louis Venden, Chairperson

Throughout church history, divorce has been a very sensitive subject, and with the divorce rate of the general population at almost fifty-percent, some controversy is inevitable. The issue becomes even more complex as more Christians, including church leaders and pastors, experience divorce. In light of this increase in the incidence of divorce, missionary organizations will inevitably encounter more divorced men and women who apply for service. The challenge for these agencies is to encompass a biblically based divorce theology that recognizes the seriousness of divorce on one hand while not appearing to submit to cultural influence on the other. This paper suggests that truth and grace are factors to consider in developing a divorce theology and a subsequent divorce policy.

The most frequently cited, and the most controversial Old and New Testament verses are examined, specifically, Genesis 2:24, Deuteronomy 24:1-4, Matthew 5:31-32 and 19:3-12, and 1 Corinthians 7:10-15. The intriguing part about the analysis of these texts is that scholars arrive at different conclusions even though the study is based on the identical text:

Additionally, the divorce policies of fourteen missionary organizations are presented so the reader can compare the recommendations with actual practices. There is a spectrum of policies that are identified that range from rejection of divorced applicants to acceptance of applicants whatever the circumstances of their divorce. Most of the organizations fall somewhere between these two extremes.

Many times the divorced applicant is asked too many probing questions regarding the past, and there is not enough inquiry into the status of their present character and heart. The emphasis in the study is placed on God's grace and forgiveness that enables a divorced applicant to move on to new beginnings.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

About the Author

Divorce was an unfathomable possibility in June 1982 when I married my high school sweetheart. Almost fifteen years later, divorce was a reality, and I was thrown into one of the most tumultuous times of my life. However, the brokenness I experienced has resulted in strength and growth that has facilitated the writing of this thesis.

Statement of the Problem

Just prior to my divorce, I enrolled in a program that would enable me to work as a chaplain. I did not anticipate my divorce would affect my attempt to change careers, but about halfway through the program I encountered my first obstacle. Up to this point in my life, I was unaware of the diversity of divorce theologies among Christian organizations. My denominational background was Lutheran and for the past five years I had been attending an evangelical church.

The first incident of rejection came from a Christian organization that provides chaplains to the workplace. When I inquired about employment, I was informed that the board of directors of this particular organization had followed a policy prohibiting any divorced person from employment. I was shocked, hurt, and angry, yet I naively continued my coursework assuming my divorce would not taint my future. I was wrong. The issue resurfaced when I sought the required licensure from my church. This particular denomination has adopted a very conservative policy regarding divorce, and I was informed I would not be eligible for endorsement under any circumstances because my divorce did not fit within its interpretation of biblically established divorce

exceptions. These experiences provided the motivation to explore the divorce issue in more detail.

As I researched the subject, I remembered an incident from when I worked at a worldwide missionary organization a few years earlier. During my employment, one of my co-workers was required to resign from his staff position that was financially funded by supporters of his ministry because he and his wife were divorcing. Even though he remained employed with the agency, he no longer held a position financially subsidized by supporters. Therefore, this led me to wonder about whether I would be accepted into the mission field in spite of my divorce.

A search of the literature regarding the subject of divorce and missions revealed little about the divorce theology of missionary organizations. Most of the published research has been done by denominations facing the divorce dilemma. The information I unearthed directly addressing divorce policies of missionary organizations was miniscule and almost twenty years old. Subsequently, I decided to conduct a survey of the divorce policies of fourteen missionary organizations. The results are contained in Chapter 6.

I was somewhat surprised and dismayed to find that in some cases divorce was used as a means of screening out applicants. Furthermore, in almost all cases a divorced applicant is closely scrutinized before acceptance. I entered my research with the goal of understanding the basis for these policies and to find a way to substantiate the verdict handed to me, but I emerged with a totally different outlook. As a result, I feel compelled to identify factors missionary agencies miss when interviewing divorced applicants.

I believe the primary issue is that missionary organizations, like most Christian organizations, do not want to give the impression they are succumbing to the morals of

the outside world by accepting divorced applicants without careful scrutiny. They strive to adhere to biblical standards, but the reality is that the meaning of Scripture can be and is interpreted in different ways. The challenge for missionary organizations is to establish a biblically based divorce theology that embraces God's grace toward the divorced without losing sight of the seriousness of divorce.

Therefore, my hope is that this paper will motivate missionary organizations to reexamine their divorce theologies and policies in the light of the centrality of God's grace and love without negating the truth that is reflected in Scripture. I also pray this information might bring comfort to those divorced applicants who have lived through the pain of divorce and yearn for a new beginning.

Arguments

A literary search has revealed little information about the factors to consider in formulating a divorce theology for missionary organizations, yet there is a plethora of information about the subject of divorce and the various interpretations of Scripture by scholars. Many missionary organizations have based their current policy on some of these interpretations. For example, some of the organizations will only accept an applicant if the divorce occurred prior to conversion (based upon 1 Corinthians 7:10-16), if adultery took place (Matthew 5:31-32 and 19:3-12), and if the believer was abandoned by a nonbeliever (1 Corinthians 7:10-16). For these organizations, divorce does not automatically preclude acceptance of an applicant, but the person must undergo special scrutiny. The spectrum of divorce policies ranges from non-acceptance of any divorced applicants to acceptance of applicants whatever the circumstances of the divorce. Actually, the majority of the organizations fall somewhere in between these two

extremes. Interestingly, two organizations I contacted refused to disclose their policy because, as one person said, "This issue is a hot potato."

The main issue of this thesis centers on how the scriptural themes of truth and grace can both be integral components in the spectrum of divorce theologies.

Recognizing and identifying an agency's present location on the truth-grace continuum is important because it establishes a baseline. The challenge for an organization is to make a decision to reexamine its current divorce theologies in light of the issues discussed in this paper.

Organizations feel that the divorced applicant needs to be accountable for the divorce. This is true, but excessive questioning is unnecessary. Sometimes an applicant that is newly divorced has not had adequate time to heal. But a person who has been divorced for a considerable period of time does not want to relive a chapter of life that has been closed. Therefore, I recommend that at least one year elapse after a legal divorce before a divorcee be allowed to apply for missionary service. During this period the individual could benefit from professional help on both a personal and group level. Furthermore, the fact of multiple divorces may indicate that the person involved has not taken adequate time to reflect and to heal before remarriage. In such cases, an additional period of time before acceptance of his or her application is warranted. Not everyone is suited for mission work, but just because a person has a divorce in his or her background need not disqualify him or her from a missionary endeavor that God may be calling him or her to do.

Some people argue that divorce adversely affects the leadership capability of an individual and that a leader should be held to higher standards than the laity. However,

there are numerous examples of divorced men and woman who are effective leaders. A noteworthy example is Dr. Charles Stanley. Dr. Stanley, a world-renowned evangelical preacher and pastor of the First Baptist Church in Atlanta Georgia, recently divorced his wife of more than forty years. This divorce created quite a debate in the Christian world over whether Dr. Stanley should maintain his leadership position within the church and his ministry. The final verdict came from his home congregation where they decided to keep him as pastor and leader of their church (Bird, 1995, p. 82). In their opinion, divorce has not damaged Dr. Stanley's ability to lead or preach God's word.

In summary, both truth and grace are essential and inseparable building blocks needed for a solid divorce theology. The challenge is to avoid excluding one element at the expense of the other. The truth of grace can be the catalyst that will guide an organization toward an effective divorce theology which will benefit the divorced applicant and will enable the organization as a whole to meet its kingdom mission in the world.

Methodology

I conducted a literary search of journals and books for information about missionary organizations and divorce. I also completed a review of the writings of some of the leading exegetical scholars on the biblical passages addressing divorce. These include John Murray, William Heth, Craig Blomberg, J. Carl Laney, Thomas Edgar, Larry Richards, and Joe Sprinkle. I also obtained a copy of the divorce policies of fourteen missionary organizations.

This paper is structured as follows. First, I summarize the most significant scriptural interpretations about divorce and follow with a critique of each interpretation. I

then summarize the policies I have received and present my recommendations to missionary organizations for formulating a divorce theology which will more fully integrate grace and truth.

Scope and Limitations

A study of the subject of divorce often involves remarriage as well because of the close relationship between the two. Nevertheless, the scope of this paper will be limited to divorce. However, I believe remarriage is another important area for missionary organizations to address in their divorce policies.

A word search in a Bible concordance reveals numerous references to the word divorce. I will examine the most frequently cited and controversial of these. The most important verses involved are Genesis 2:24, Deuteronomy 24:1-4, Matthew 5:31-32, Matthew 19:3-12, and 1 Corinthians 7:10-15.

As a whole, this paper is largely subjective in nature. It portrays my story and reflects my struggle with the subject matter. My goal is to aid missionary organizations in developing a clearer and broader understanding of the plight of the divorced applicant.

Assumptions

I have identified the following assumptions in order for the reader to further understand the objective of this paper: (1) My beliefs are guided by 2 Timothy 16-17 (NIV) which says, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." (2) Scripture, though written long ago, is relevant today. (3) One should not categorically say that the marriage bond cannot be severed or that

divorce itself is necessarily a sin. Divorce is often the product of prior sinful actions. (4)
The individual divorce texts need to be viewed in light of Scripture as a whole.

Significance of the Study

Throughout church history, divorce has been a very sensitive and heated issue, and with the divorce rate of the general population increasing, controversy is inevitable. The issue becomes even more complex as more and more Christians, including church leaders and pastors, experience divorce. A survey conducted by Hartford Seminary reports one-quarter of female and one-fifth of male clergy are divorced (Bird, 1995, p. 82). In light of this increase in the incidence of divorce, churches and missionary organizations will inevitably encounter more divorced men and women who apply for missionary service. As a result, more time and energy will be spent on reviewing and interviewing to determine whether the candidate qualifies for service.

Unfortunately, divorce is all too often looked upon as an unpardonable sin. The result is that divorced applicants receive unreasonable scrutiny. Recently I was talking with a friend who is actively involved in the missionary ministry of the church I attend. I was expressing my frustration about how organizations say they are open to accepting the divorced, and yet they scrutinize divorced applicants so much more closely than others. His response was, "Well, don't you think some scrutiny is necessary?" My answer was and is that some scrutiny is acceptable, but deep probing into a person's past is not appropriate and can become hurtful.

Of even greater importance is a reexamination of divorce theologies which do not sufficiently stress grace. Richard Morgan (1985) states, "A theology of divorce is desperately needed for divorced persons in the church who still have to combat the view

that divorce is an unforgivable sin” (p. 4). This also applies to missionary organizations. Consequently, it is time for missionary organizations to first reexamine their existing divorce theology, and this will hopefully lead to a revised divorce policy.

CHAPTER 2

OLD TESTAMENT PASSAGES

Deuteronomy 24 and Genesis 2

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 (NIV):

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, and if she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the Lord. Do not bring sin upon the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance.

Genesis 2:24 (NIV):

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 and Genesis 2:24 appear to be the most frequently cited Old Testament verses pertaining to divorce. An examination of these texts is pertinent since they are central to Jesus' discussion with the Pharisees in Matthew 19 and Mark 10. My examination will focus primarily on the meaning of the term something indecent in Deuteronomy 24:1 and on the subject of the permanency of the marriage bond in Genesis 2:24.

Joe Sprinkle (1997) identifies syntax as one of the major exegetical difficulties in Deuteronomy 24:1, especially in the King James Version. This translation gives the impression divorce was required and sanctioned by God if a husband found some indecency in his wife's behavior. However, Sprinkle (1997) states that this understanding of the text has been changing. Most scholars today view Deuteronomy

24:1-4 as one single law rather than two separate ones as in the King James Version (p. 529-530). Furthermore, most experts concur with Sprinkle that Deuteronomy 24:1-4 indicates God does not command divorce but allows for it. Just because a husband finds a wife displeasing does not automatically call for him to divorce her. John Murray (1975) says, "There is no evidence to show that divorce was approved or morally legitimated. Permission, sufferance, toleration was granted" (p. 8). Also, most agree Scripture indicates that divorce was not part of God's original intent but was the result of man's fall into sin. G. Edwin Bontrager (1978) concludes divorce was such a serious issue that God felt it necessary to dictate rules in the Old Testament to regulate its use (p. 23).

According to Stanley Ellisen (1979), the reason Deuteronomy required a written certificate of divorce was to protect the wife from an irrational and hasty decision by the husband. The fact that he was prohibited from ever remarrying her might cause him to reconsider his decision (p. 49). Others have disagreed and suggest the bill of divorce provided tangible evidence the woman was free to remarry and served to protect the woman from unfounded presuppositions and imputations by the husband after the marriage had ended (Murray, 1975, p. 8). J. Carl Laney also believes the divorce involved forfeiting the wife's dowry and possibly a divorce payment, so this may have hindered any decision on the part of the husband to divorce (House, 1990, p. 24). However, no one knows the basis for this cultural practice in spite of all the speculation concerning the purpose and origin of the divorce document. Most scholars agree that the scriptural regulations pertaining to divorce were needed to regulate an already existing cultural practice. Again, it should be noted the husband had an option to overlook

whatever offense had occurred and remain married to his wife. In any case, just because God addressed the issue of divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 does not mean he required or sanctioned its practice.

In Deuteronomy 24:1-4, a man justified divorce when a woman became displeasing to him. In Hebrew, this meant he had found a nakedness of a thing or unseemly thing (Murray, 1975, p. 9). The meaning of this phrase and its implications were debated in Jesus' time, and there is still no precise understanding as to what the term means. It is important to note that divorce was an option, not a requirement, if a husband found some kind of indecency in his wife. Staying in the marriage was a viable alternative. John Murray (1975), who has done extensive research on the subject, states:

The Hebrew word for indecent means some indecency or impropriety of behavior. While falling short of illicit sexual intercourse it may well be that the indecency consisted in some kind of shameful conduct connected with sex life. Or it may have been some other kind of impropriety worthy of censure on the part of the husband. (p. 12)

Some scholars claim the indecency means adultery, but the Pentateuch prescribed death for adultery (Murray, 1975, p. 10). It is important to reemphasize that the phrase nakedness of a thing has not been specifically defined. Most Bible experts agree with Murray that the term means there has been some kind of improper behavior or what is unseemly, unbecoming (Sprinkle, 1997, p. 531). I found that most scholars tend to treat lightly the fact that the man could actually overlook the indecency. The important fact is that when marriage was in jeopardy, there were options other than divorce. It does not mean that divorce was nonexistent or unallowable. The phrase becomes especially important when considering the Matthean divorce texts.

The purpose of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 is to prohibit remarriage after divorce. These verses describe a situation in which a woman's first husband divorces her, she marries a second man, and is divorced or widowed from him. Then the law in Deuteronomy 24:4 states that upon death or divorce from the second husband, she is forbidden to return to the first husband. Some interpret this to mean divorce does not sever the marital bond, and the intervening marriage is adulterous. Since the wife has been defiled due to this adulterous relationship, she is forbidden from remarrying her first husband (Murray, 1975, p. 14).

Conversely, many people believe divorce can sever the marriage bond. For instance, Sprinkle (1997) says:

A marriage can be dissolved, shown in the fact that return to a first husband after an intervening marriage was not allowed since the old marriage was dead. This is opposite to the idea the woman can not return to the first spouse because the bond was never broken and she has been defiled. God commanded the Israelites never to return to a first marriage if a second one occurred in between. Marriages can become irreconcilably dissolved. (p. 532)

Dwight Hervey Small (1986) declares, "The point of the passage is the first husband can not take her again to be his wife. To say that the couple is still married in God's sight although divorced makes nonsense of this passage" (p. 51).

As to the debate over whether the marriage bond can be severed, most scholars cite Genesis 2:24. Genesis 2:24 says: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" (NIV). The scholars who advocate the no divorce theology often cite this text to support the view that marriage is divinely designed to be a permanent, lifelong relationship, especially since this Old Testament text is mentioned by Jesus.

In considering Genesis 2:24, mention is often made of certain elements or components of a covenant relationship: those of leaving and cleaving as well as sexual unity. Scholars hold that all three elements are needed for a covenant relationship. Heth supports this by saying:

A man and woman become married when they pledge their loyalty to one another (covenant) and consummate their marriage. The biblical picture of marriage appears to indicate that both elements--covenant and consummation--are necessary to form a genuine marriage. One without the other is insufficient. (House, 1990, p. 77)

In many cases, the concept of marriage as a covenant has been used to support the view that marriage is an irrevocable bond. Laney refers to a covenant as a pact between two people made before witnesses (House, 1990, p. 18). He says, "Marriage involves a vow or promise which makes the obligation binding. Marriage is built on a promise made before God, friends, and family" (House, 1990, p. 21). William Heth believes the terms leave and cleave in Genesis 2:24 represent covenant terminology similar to the covenant God made with Israel. He states:

The love, commitment and loyalty that are part and parcel of the marriage covenant can no doubt be violated by human sin. Yet the terms forsake and cleave should tell us that the essence of the marriage covenant is commitment to the covenant partner whatever it may cost us personally. (House, 1990, p. 76)

On the other hand, Thomas Edgar says:

There is nothing in Genesis 2:24 that states marriage is permanent. In fact Christ's statement, referring to Genesis 2:24, "What God has joined together let not man separate" (Mat 19:6) implies just the opposite of permanence, that it can be broken. If marriage were permanent due to God's action, then the same God can decree when it can be dissolved. (House, 1990, p. 137)

Sprinkle (1997) expounds on this by considering the work of Roger Beckwith, who examines the characteristics of a marriage covenant. According to Beckwith, a covenant is a contract between two parties, and a marriage covenant in Old Testament times would involve certain responsibilities. These include marital love, sex, living as one household, faithfulness to the spouse, the husband providing for the wife, obedience to the husband, and raising children. However, Beckwith also concedes the covenant can be broken when, just like a breach of contract, one or both the parties fail to live up to their obligations. Sprinkle (1997) states:

So, for instance, malicious cruelty (against the love obligation), flat refusal to grant sexual privileges (against the love and one-flesh principle), abandonment (against the one-household principle) adultery or even spiteful flirtation (against the faithfulness principle), lack of support for the woman (against the obligation of the husband to support her), and open and sustained defiance against the husband's leadership (against the male-leadership principle) would all be legitimate grounds for divorce in OT times. (p. 546)

Sprinkle (1997) adds, "The term, 'something indecent' in Deuteronomy 24 could be figurative for any wifely offense against the essence of the marriage covenant defined above" (p. 546).

According to Carl Laney, leaving refers to letting go of the family of origin and establishing a separate entity or identity (House, 1990, p. 76). Sprinkle (1997) adds, "The leaving is not physical--culturally in Israel it was usually the wife who left her parents behind, not the husband--but psychological, consisting of transferring to his wife his first loyalty" (p. 543). Regarding cleaving, Laney states, "A word study of the word cleave suggests that marriage involves a partnership commitment to which the husband and wife must be loyal. It is like being superglued together in an inseparable bond" (House, 1990, p. 18-19).

Another ingredient is sexual union or becoming one flesh. This relates to the physical or sexual dimension of marriage. Some people believe this one flesh relationship deals only with the sexual relations of the couple. However, Laney believes that becoming one flesh does not in and of itself make a marriage. The leaving and cleaving must also be included (House, 1990, p. 19). In general, most scholars agree the marital relationship encompasses far more than sexuality. According to Dwight Hervey Small (1986, p.24), the marriage covenant embraces the two persons in the totality of their existence, and when this unity ceases to exist the covenant is broken and the relationship severed. The brokenness can be generated from a variety of sources such as lack of communication, isolation, and physical and emotional abuse. Once this occurs, the marriage may exist outwardly, but inwardly it is splintered and perhaps spiritually dead with or without the formality of a divorce document.

Analysis

The main area of consideration in formulating a divorce theology for missionary organizations is the issue of the permanence of the marriage bond as specified in Genesis 2:24. However, Deuteronomy 24:1-4 is important as a background to Jesus' teaching on divorce.

I believe the divorce document symbolizes the ending of a marriage, but the marriage could have been nullified years earlier due to the actions and/or attitudes of the individuals involved. William Heth states:

The certificate of divorce was part of the ancient Near Eastern legal practice. It had legal consequences in that period of the history of marriage, but its use in the Old Testament tells us nothing of its "power" to dissolve a marriage. (House, 1990, p. 87)

Outwardly the leaving, cleaving, and sexual unity seem to be present, but the heart and soul lack commitment. Blomberg (1990) says, "Marriage is seen as two-fold: a commitment of one's fundamental allegiance and an interpersonal relationship culminating in sexual intimacy" (p. 167). However, marriage does not have a metaphysical status which cannot be destroyed; it is rather a moral commitment which should be honored.

Scholars emphasize these elements as being part of the unbreakable bond or covenant that superglues couples together. However, I believe that like the branches of a tree that snap under too much stress, the covenant between a husband and wife can crumble under certain circumstances. Blomberg (1990) states, "Much has been written about the Hebrew and Greek words for 'cleave,' likening them to glue and its effects, but the word by itself cannot settle any debates regarding the dissolubility or indissolubility of marriage in God's eyes" (p. 167).

When I married, I believed in the sanctity of marriage and the covenant nature of the marital bond before God and witnesses, but based upon my study of these verses, I believe the marriage covenant can be broken, and may even be absent from the start of a marriage. Concurrently, Blomberg (1990) says, "Transferring one's fundamental loyalties from parents to spouse does not suggest a state that renders marriages indissoluble, but a volitional commitment which should remain permanent, yet which can be rescinded" (p. 168).

In summary, the major point for missionary organizations to consider when examining Deuteronomy 24:1-4 and Genesis 2:24 is to keep in mind the words of Les Woodson (1979) who says, "While marriages are made in heaven by God, they are lived

out on earth by man. And man has never yet been able to achieve the standard of the Holy” (p. 15). Divorce was a common practice in the Old Testament, and it is prevalent in today’s world. God allowed divorce as a concession toward sinful man although divorce was not a mandate or a command. Even though marriage is still viewed as an irrevocable covenant relationship by some, the reality remains that covenants can and are being broken either overtly or covertly.

CHAPTER 3

NEW TESTAMENT PASSAGES

Matthew 5 and 19, Mark 10, and 1 Corinthians 7

Matthew 5:31-32 (NIV):

It has been said, "Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce." But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.

Matthew 19:3-12 (NIV):

Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let man not separate."

"Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"

Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."

Mark 10:2-12 (NIV):

Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" "What did Moses command you?" he replied. They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away."

"It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law," Jesus replied. "But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let man not separate." When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. He answered, "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery."

The divorce theology of many missionary organizations is rooted in how these verses are interpreted. Therefore, a review of the leading exegetical viewpoints is warranted. The primary point of contention among scholars focuses on the meaning of the exception clause. There is also a question as to why Matthew 5 and 19 mention an exception while Mark 10 and Luke 16 do not. Debate regarding interpretations of verses is not new. In Jesus' time, the Pharisees debated the meaning of Deuteronomy 24.

Some scholars see behind the debate in Matthew 19:3-12 and Mark 10:2-12 that the Pharisees were divided in their views as to the reasons which permitted divorce. The school of Hillel interpreted the displeasing thing of Deuteronomy 24 to mean that a man was permitted to divorce his wife for any reason. On the other hand, the more conservative school of Shammai allowed divorce only for the act of adultery.

The setting of Matthew 19 and Mark 10 places Jesus late in his ministry on his way to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem. The Pharisees, with murderous intent, plotted to kill Jesus as he passed through the territory of Herod Antipas, who had married his niece and thus, according to Jewish law, was guilty of incest. They plotted to trick Jesus. As Craig Blomberg (1990) states, "John the Baptist's reaction to Herodias' divorce and remarriage got him executed, and Jesus' own previous teaching on the topic may have suggested to some that he was abrogating the Law of Moses (Matt 5:31-32)" (p. 164).

It seemed Jesus was in a no-win situation. With his response to the Pharisees question (Matthew 19:3) he skirted the issue:

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let man not separate.

He avoided the trap by not addressing Deuteronomy 24:1-4, but by emphasizing the original intent of marriage as stated in Genesis 2:24. From his response, it was clear that God's original plan was for a life long union between a husband and wife. However, Jesus also conceded that God permitted divorce because of sin, specifically, hardness of the heart.

Some scholars such as J. Carl Laney believe Jesus' response gives evidence for the permanent, unbreakable nature of the marriage covenant (House, 1997, p. 34), especially since Jesus refers to Genesis 2:24, "What God has joined together, let man not separate." Others such as Larry Richards believe Jesus is exposing the Pharisees' over dependence on the law to define their own righteousness (House, 1990, p. 145).

On the other hand, Blomberg (1990) says, "What Jesus is rather saying is that because all marriages are divinely made unions, they ought not be dissolved" (p. 169). However, Jesus does not say they cannot be dissolved by sinful actions. Additionally, Blomberg (1990) states, "Jesus acknowledged the divine ideal while explaining the permission granted in Deuteronomy 24 despite it" (p. 166).

To summarize, in both Matthew 19 and Mark 10 Jesus' response to the Pharisees' question leads them to Genesis and God's original intent for marriage. This response challenged the permission granted for divorce described in Deuteronomy 24.

At this point there is a divergence between Matthew 19:9 and 5:22, on the one hand, and Mark 10:11-12, on the other, for Mark presents no exception clause. How a missionary organization views this exception clause in Matthew has been pivotal in forming a divorce theology because it has provided grounds for accepting or rejecting a

divorced applicant. Unfortunately, this method may well deprive organizations of some of the best individuals God could use in reaping the benefits of a successful ministry.

Interpretations and theories abound regarding the absence or presence of the words except for marital unfaithfulness. Some interpreters maintain that this clause, while absent in Mark, could be assumed as implicit in the text. Others contend Jesus never uttered the words, but that Matthew added the clause under divine inspiration. Still another alternative is that Jesus spoke the words recorded by Matthew, allowing for an exception. In addition, another problem arises over the actual meaning of the phrase marital unfaithfulness (*porneia* in Greek). The meaning one chooses for these words impacts the formation of one's divorce theology.

I will explore some of the proposed meanings of the exception clause, specifically the term *porneia*, followed by an examination of each of the theories regarding the clause's presence or absence in Scripture.

What is the meaning of *porneia*?

Jesus' response in Matthew 19 states, "I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery," generates a variety of interpretations. What is the actual meaning of *porneia*, which is sometimes translated as marital unfaithfulness?

One definition of *porneia* refers to unlawful sexual activity including prostitution, unchastity, and fornication. A more popular meaning, and one many individuals and Christian organizations have chosen, equates *porneia* with adultery. While this definition is the most popular today, there is disagreement as to the applicability of this definition in

the original biblical setting. Some scholars such as J. Carl Laney argue Jesus could not have meant adultery since this would indicate he agreed with the Shammai, something contrary to his usual pattern (House, 1990, p. 34). Thomas Edgar disagrees and states, "Jesus is teaching God's view on divorce; if Shammai agrees, he agrees with God's view. There is no inherent reason that Shammai could not be accurate in his interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1-4" (House, 1990, p. 171). Another interpretation of *porneia* pertains to sexual unfaithfulness during the betrothal or engagement period and not to marriage itself. However, many argue this viewpoint is incongruent with the setting in which the Pharisees are inquiring specifically about marriage, not engagement (House, 1990, p. 35). Finally, some support the view that *porneia* refers to marriage between close relatives. Against this, it is argued that incestuous marriages were few in Jesus' time and would have been quietly annulled. As a result, there would be no reason for Jesus to address the issue.

Why an Exception in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9?

The basic question remains as to why Matthew records Jesus as allowing a concession for divorce in the case of marital unfaithfulness while Mark does not. Also, there are linguistic differences between the two accounts cited in Matthew. Matthew 5 describes the case where a husband causes his wife to commit adultery if divorced for reasons other than *porneia*, whereas Matthew 19 indicates that the man commits adultery if he divorces his wife and remarries for any reasons other than *porneia*.

Some scholars claim the words "except for marital unfaithfulness," found only in Matthew, were not Jesus' actual words, but were added by Matthew or possibly at a later

date by a scribe (Woodson, 1979, p. 17). Emil Brunner is quoted by Bontrager (1978) as saying:

The phrase, "saving for the cause of fornication," was not uttered by Jesus himself but that it is an interpolation by the early church, which had already misunderstood the sayings of Jesus in a legalistic way, and therefore needed such a corrective. (p. 37)

Moreover, Richard Detweiler, a leader in the Mennonite Church says, "There remains the point that Jesus would not have contradicted what He says absolutely in Mark and Luke by making an exception in Matthew, therefore, the exception clause cannot be genuine" (Bontrager, 1978, p. 45). Sprinkle (1997) agrees Jesus did not allow for an exception, but he adds, "His words, if taken literally, would disallow any and all divorce and remarriage. But Matthew provided inspired commentary on Jesus' words by the gloss 'except for immorality (*porneia*)' " (p. 547).

Conversely, many scholars support the authenticity of the clause. For instance, Stanley Ellisen (1979) argues the grounds for challenging the authenticity of the clause are subjective and do not acknowledge the evidence presented by early Greek manuscripts. He also believes it is characteristic of Matthew to give detailed accounts as evidenced by the Sermon on the Mount and the Olivet Discourse, over and against the accounts by Mark and Luke. He says, "Whereas Mark and Luke give summary accounts of Jesus' teaching on the subject, Matthew gives a detailed account, noting also the specific question asked and the more specific answer given by Jesus" (p. 50). Edgar believes the exception clause is implied in Mark and Luke. He says:

Matthew explicitly states that, not only on a previous occasion (Mt 5:31-32), but in this very conversation, which is also described in Mark 10:2-12, Jesus specifically stated the exception. Unless Matthew 19:9 is inaccurate, in the

conversation recorded in Mark 10:2-12 Jesus did state the exception and it is to be implied in Mark. (House, 1990, p. 166)

Duane Warden (1997) refers to another theory presented by David Hill. Hill states:

A man was compelled by Jewish law to divorce an adulterous wife. In order to be creditable, Jesus needed to acknowledge the possibility of a man's putting away his wife in such an instance. Matthew makes explicit what Mark and Luke felt no need to mention." (p. 147-148)

Given the authenticity of these words as ascribed to Jesus or added by Matthew through divine inspiration, what was their meaning in the cultural context of the New Testament, and how can they apply to our present cultural setting?

One of the primary tasks involved with exegesis of a biblical passage is to understand the historical and cultural setting of the text before attempting to bridge the meaning to today's culture (Fee & Stuart, 1993, p. 22). Women in the Jewish world had no rights, and, as I have previously mentioned, when given a certificate of divorce had few options. Many interpret Jesus' words in Matthew 5 and 19 regarding the exception clause as freeing the man from the moral responsibility of causing his wife to become an adulteress or of committing adultery himself. As William Heth states:

The "except for marital unfaithfulness" clause does not need to mean any more than the fact that divorcing an unchaste wife would not make her an adulteress, for she has made herself an adulteress, adultery being the most common type of sexual offense covered by the term *porneia*. (House, 1990, p. 93)

Craig Blomberg (1990) suggests another interpretation. He says, "Divorce itself, except when it is for sexual sin, is metaphorical adultery--faithlessness to the person to whom one promised permanent, loyalty, with lust after another lifestyle and/or set of commitments" (p. 174-175). The basis of his argument is that adultery in the Old

Testament was primarily spiritual adultery. Since there are such a variety of theories regarding the application of the exception clause in Jesus' time, there are obvious challenges in trying to bridge the gap between the past and the present pertinence of the clause.

As in the past, if a partner in today's culture commits adultery, divorce is seen as a viable alternative, although not recommended or required. However, even though marriage is not based exclusively on sexual unity, adultery, in the Christian world, can and is used to allow for divorce since it can be justified through biblically acceptable principles. The troubling aspect about this view is that it can be misconstrued and misused. William Heth quotes Levertoff and Goudge as saying:

This view makes adultery, or the pretence of having committed it, the one way to get rid of a marriage which has become distasteful, and so it puts a premium on adultery. If marriage is to be dissoluble at all, it should be also dissoluble upon other grounds than this. (House, 1990, p. 100)

In other words, the definition of marital unfaithfulness needs to be reexamined in light of other factors, including emotional and physical abuse, prevalent in today's society. William Heth cites a 1985 article from a 1985 Journal of Psychology and Theology entitled "The Place of Wife Battering in Considering Divorce," stating:

The author seeks to justify grounds for divorce in the cases of wife battering by showing that the detrimental effects of wife battering on the interpersonal elements necessary for full marital intimacy (trust, security and freedom) are more pervasive than those brought on by adultery. (House, 1990, p. 100)

Some people might disagree with this approach because it challenges the generally accepted interpretation that sexual infidelity is the only valid basis for divorce. While this interpretation is consistent with Scripture, it does not lend itself to a broader

application of the text for situations encountered in the twenty-first century. Regarding this point Bontrager (1978) states the following:

If all the questions about divorce and remarriage today could fit into this Pharisees' question, which was set tightly in the matrix of the first century and reflected on the Mosaic law as mutually understood by Christ and the Pharisees in this historical context, then our modern-day puzzles could be easily solved. Although addressing Himself to a question on this subject then, Jesus did not, in this situation, bring to us today answers to all the questions persons in our churches are raising. Jesus and the Pharisees were content to stay within the ethical context of the law. (p. 38-39)

Why no exception in Mark 10:11-12?

Why did only Matthew mention an exception? Some people speculate that just because Mark and Luke did not mention an exception, this does not mean they ignored it. For instance, Bontrager (1978) states, "The reason why Mark and Luke omitted the exception clause in their writings could be that no Jew, Roman, or Greek ever doubted that adultery constituted grounds for divorce" (p. 42). Along the same line, others such as Laney believe Mark omitted the exception because it did not apply to the Gentile receivers of the letter. He says, "They clearly understood that the exception would relate only to the Jews living under the Mosaic regulations of Leviticus 18:6-18" (incest) (House, 1990, p. 39). Edgar objects to such rationale and thinks Matthew and Mark were recounting the same series of events and were not tailoring their own view to a specific audience. He states, "The recipients of their respective Gospels, written years after Calvary, have no bearing on the meaning, significance or even the fact of Jesus' statement of the exception which was made prior to Calvary" (House, 1990, p. 167).

In summary, there are a variety of interpretations regarding the meaning of the exception clause and why Matthew contains it but Mark does not. All of the conclusions

are based upon and supported by in-depth analysis of the biblical text. Consequently, how a missionary organization interprets the divorce texts shapes its divorce theology and thus its divorce policy. However, if an organization is serious about formulating a comprehensive divorce policy, then it is vital to consider many viewpoints regarding the subject, including a serious look at the issue from the eyes of the applicant. It is my goal to accomplish this task in the next section.

Analysis of Matthew and Mark

My analysis of Matthew and Mark focuses primarily on the various interpretations of the exception clause and how organizations use this information in evaluating applicants. All too often this clause is used to categorize applicants based upon whether marital unfaithfulness, usually interpreted in the present context as adultery, was committed.

Using adultery as a measuring stick can be somewhat precarious and arbitrary since the application of the words marital unfaithfulness could connote different meanings in today's world than those of Jesus' time. As a result, applying the various interpretations remains a point of contention with scholars. In other words, in most cases divorce is acceptable if one or both of the parties commits physical adultery, but this view fails to recognize that, as I will attempt to show, there are many forms of adultery present today. While scholars such as Dwight Small (1986) believe Jesus' response to the question presented to him was an appropriate answer in light of the situation at hand, it does not address all possible scenarios that could be encountered in the modern world. The problem lies in bridging the gap between the past and the present. As previously

mentioned, many people view the marriage bond or covenant as consisting of leaving, cleaving, and sexual unity as specified in Genesis 2:24. A breach of any one of these elements breaks the covenant. Joe Sprinkle (1997), upon a further review of the New Testament, thinks that only two of the three components are involved (sexual immorality and abandonment). As a result, he concludes, "If the covenant principle is behind these applications, we might be justified in concluding that the two examples in the NT are not intended to be exhaustive but that other grounds are likewise applicable under the new covenant" (p. 547). The issue lies with setting the parameters of what constitutes other grounds. For example, computer technology today lends itself to sexual temptation that was not available twenty years ago. Would looking at pornographic material on the internet be considered adultery, or must adultery be manifested by physical intercourse? Furthermore, heartfelt commitment might be lacking from the very inception of the marriage even though outward actions might seem otherwise. I concur with Morgan's (1985) definition of adultery as "relational failure" (p. 64). This definition is not so narrow as to define adultery as strictly a physical act. It means that both people no longer care about each other and are alienated from one another. People who define adultery as strictly sexual in nature tend to feel uncomfortable with the gray areas and tend to want concrete answers. Regarding this issue, William Heth quotes P.P. Levertoff and H.L. Goudge as follows:

The view that adultery dissolves the marriage bond not only degrades the conception of marriage by making its physical side the dominant consideration; it involves two absurdities. First, a man may cease to be married and yet be unaware of the fact. Secondly, it makes adultery, or the pretence of having committed it, the one way to get rid of a marriage which has become distasteful, and so it puts a premium on adultery. If marriage is to be dissoluble at all, it should be also dissoluble upon other grounds than this, as sensible opponents of

the Christian law recognize. The suffering which an unhappy marriage involves is not in the least confined to that caused by unfaithfulness. (House, 1979, p. 100)

Christian organizations are sometimes apprehensive about this view since this approach might give the impression that God's word is not being taken seriously. They argue adultery, defined as sexual sin, is biblically based. Joe Sprinkle (1997) responds to this type of mindset:

I have heard of women who were hoping and praying that their husbands would commit adultery so that they would have Biblical grounds for divorce. But in the OT divorce is allowed for "indecencies" (Deut 24:1), which appears to be a broad term for a whole variety of offenses against the marriage covenant. When the notion of marriage as a covenant is applied it becomes clear that any behavior that violates the essence of the marriage covenant could serve as grounds for divorce: wife abuse, flat refusal of conjugal rights, lack of support of the wife financially, and so forth. (p. 549)

The real challenge is in determining the boundaries for what is acceptable and unacceptable, especially in light of many abusive situations in today's world. Some people agree with W.M. Foley who says:

This difficulty was met by many of the Fathers by showing, on good scriptural authority, that idolatry, covetousness, unnatural offences, etc., might rightly be classed under the heading of spiritual adultery. There are offences which make married life so intolerable that there can be no restoration of affection, that where the tie of affection has been absolutely destroyed, the real vinculum has been ruptured, and that therefore, such offences may rightly be put in the same category as conjugal infidelity in the strict sense of the word. (Bontrager, 1978, p. 47)

Similarly, Robert Wise views adultery along the lines of what happens emotionally to a person. Adultery could consist of simply seeking an intimate relationship with someone else. He states, "These may not be sexual relationships, but people will find a place where they can be affirmed and heard in the depth of their being. When a spouse destroys that, it develops elsewhere" (Hardin, 1983, p. 116).

Robert F. Sinks, a Methodist pastor, has shed some light on this issue by examining the ethical implications of a theology of divorce. Sinks (1977) makes a distinction between code morality and situation ethics in formulating a divorce theology.

He states:

Code morality finds its behavioral imperatives in the developed codification of laws and mandates. Christian situation ethics, while accepting such laws and rules as important, refuses to affirm them as absolute and binding for all occasions. The only absolute is the Great Commandment of Jesus (Matt. 22:37-40). (p. 377)

In other words, adherence to the letter of the law is not the best course of action if it violates the commandment to love God and neighbor. Situationists contend love must always take precedence over law and point to Jesus' life as an example of how he always sought to honor the Great Commandment in the circumstances he found himself.

Sinks (1977) declares:

If a divorce theology based on code morality is embraced in conjunction with a literal acceptance of Jesus' recorded words on divorce and remarriage, then the Christian stance is clear and uncomplicated. Divorce is not to be allowed (or is to be accepted only on the condition of unchastity), and remarriage is to be forbidden as long as one's former mate is living. (p. 377)

Conversely, a divorce theology based upon a situationist approach, while not obliterating Jesus' words regarding divorce, takes into consideration times where divorce might be the better option. Sinks (1977) further states, "The situationist recognizes that divorce, painful as it is, may well be the least harmful option in some situations, and thus it may fulfill the Great Commandment" (p. 378). While I believe a situationist approach does not answer all the questions regarding divorce arising from a study of the biblical text and the application to today's world, Sinks brings up some valid points about love and the heart.

My interpretation of the exception clause, or lack thereof, is based upon an examination of the heart of Jesus' life and teachings contained in Matthew 5 and 19, and Mark 10. I believe Jesus made absolutely sure his teachings would engage the minds of his listeners so they would realize and remember that living in obedience to God extends far beyond behavior and attempting to fulfill the law through outward actions. As Dallas Willard (1998) states, "For all their necessity, goodness, and beauty, laws that deal only with actions, such as the Ten Commandments, simply cannot reach the human heart, the source of actions" (p. 155). However, he also acknowledges while laws are not the source of rightness, they are the course of rightness (Willard, 1998).

Larry Richards points out that when Jesus says he has come to fulfill the law, it means he is teaching his listeners the law's true intent and meaning (House, 1990). In other words, what the Pharisees thought regarding fulfillment of the law and what Jesus had in mind were completely different. As a result, in Matthew 5 Jesus teaches how to live within the kingdom of God and shows what fulfillment of the law would look like in daily living (Willard, 1998). Concerning Matthew 5:20-48, Dallas Willard (1998) says:

The passages are a sequence of contrasts between the older teaching about what the good person would do-for example, not murder-and Jesus' picture of the kingdom heart. That heart would live with full tenderness toward everyone it deals with. (p. 136-137)

Consequently, in Matthew 5, Jesus is describing progressive stages toward a life of agape love. For instance, Jesus starts by examining murder and anger, and moves to adultery and divorce. Regarding murder and anger, Larry Richards states, "God's concern is not only for the act of murder but also for the anger which motivates the act" (House, 1990, p. 232). Next in the progression is adultery and divorce. Dallas Willard

(1998) appropriately asks, "How many divorces would occur, and in how many cases the question of divorce would never even have arisen, if anger, contempt, and obsessive fantasized desire were eliminated" (p. 172)? So Jesus' teaching is grounded in developing character and a heart attitude of love. Righteousness is not obtained through outward actions as the Pharisees believed. Accordingly, Larry Richards says, "While law can deal with acts of sin, no legislation can address a person's hidden motives and desires" (House, 1990, p. 235).

With this thought in mind and heart, I present my divorce theology based upon an analysis of Matthew 5:31-32, 19:3-12, and Mark 10:2-12. The context of Matthew 19 and Mark 10 reveals that the surrounding verses deal with attitudes of the heart. Prior to Matthew 19, Jesus describes the actions and heart attitude of a selfish servant. Next he addresses divorce, and then, in spite of protests from his disciples, allows little children into his presence and blesses them. In so doing, Jesus teaches how the kingdom is available to those possessing heart attitudes like innocent children--those not yet tainted by sin which results in a hard heart. Likewise, Mark 10, a parallel of Matthew 19, is buttressed with verses dealing with the heart. Consequently, a transformed heart results in changed behavior.

Furthermore, to make his stories memorable, Jesus teaches through the use of hyperbole. For example, Matthew 5:27-30 (NIV) (just prior to the divorce verses) reads:

You have heard that it was said, "Do not commit adultery." But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for the whole body to go to hell.

Jesus is not teaching a person who sins to cut off his/her hand or gouge out an eye because performing those actions will not change the behavior of sin or adultery. Only a change in heart or character can truly facilitate change. Dallas Willard (1998) states:

If you dismember your body to the point where you could never murder or even look hatefully at another, never commit adultery or even look to lust, your heart could still be full of anger, contempt, and obsessive desire for what is wrong, no matter how thoroughly stifled or suppressed it may be. (p. 167-168)

Jesus addresses divorce in a similar fashion. I am not sure whether the exception clause contains the actual words uttered by Jesus or was added by Matthew under divine inspiration. In either case, it serves a meaningful purpose.

My view of Matthew 5:32 is that adultery is not merely an act, but it has to do with the condition of the heart. If a person's heart response toward his or her partner contains such elements as anger, contempt, or lust toward others, all of which are forms of unfaithfulness, then he or she is committing adultery. However, though Scripture allows divorce, it does not command or intend it. Therefore, divorce would not be necessary if there is a shift in the condition of the heart. The key is to transform the inner life by "becoming the kind of person from whom good behaviors naturally flow" (Willard, 1998, p. 142-143).

Similarly, I offer a possible paraphrase of Matthew 19:8-9 as follows, Jesus says, "Your hearts are hard. This is not the way it was intended to be. Get your hearts right. Even if your wife has committed adultery, you do not have to divorce her! Marital unfaithfulness could be grounds for forgiveness, not divorce!" Furthermore, in light of a more literal translation of the text, I believe the exception clause depicts an extension of God's grace and love. The highest standard is love, but we are works in progress and

God has made concessions in the case of marital unfaithfulness. As stated previously, the danger is in trying to quantify marital unfaithfulness. I tend to agree with Joe Sprinkle (1997) who states:

Jesus' statement is not to be read as a legal maxim to cover every situation but as a highly colorful condemnation of the extremely loose attitude to divorce among Jesus' opponents. This easygoing practice of divorce for any and every reason was in heart attitude the moral equivalent of adultery. Without giving full weight to OT teaching, readers of the NT treatment of divorce are too quick to absolutize the words of Jesus, which in my view are no more to be taken literally than his command to gouge out your eye if it causes you to sin. Those for example who say that divorce is absolutely forbidden and that marriage is absolutely indissoluble in God's eyes must explain away the OT data where God's law clearly permits divorce (and the implied possibility of remarriage) under some circumstances and even commands it in others). (p. 547-549)

Similarly, some scholars such as John Nolland (1995) suggest Jesus' teachings are not literal directives for everyday life, but his statements are to be considered as moral vision statements. Nolland states:

In my judgment, the exception clause represents the attempt by some particular group of Christians to provide a practically implementable form of this aspect of the moral vision of Jesus. They were concerned to have something which could be practically implemented and effectively regulated in their particular setting...such rules for life are never exactly the same thing as the original moral vision they are seeking to reflect. (p. 24-25)

In summary, I believe Jesus' teachings, in the wider context of Matthew, emphasize love and inner transformation more than condemnation and stagnation. Granted, divorce is not the ideal, but God allowed divorce for marital unfaithfulness to demonstrate his love and grace. There is hope for the divorced, and as one person said to me in the depths of my despair, "There is a place in the kingdom for the divorced, even you, Pennie!"

Another important biblical passage that has influenced the formation of divorce theologies is 1 Corinthians 7.

Analysis of 1 Corinthians 7

To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.

To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.

The primary application most missionary organizations are interested in regarding these verses is whether the divorce was due to abandonment by a non-believer or believer. Usually abandonment by the former as a basis for divorce is tolerated more often than the latter. I will briefly examine the issue in the following paragraphs.

In order to study the believer/unbeliever dilemma, it is important to understand the setting in which it occurred. According to Bontrager (1978), the situation occurred when a non-believing Corinthian became a Christian. In many cases, the unbelieving spouse left the marriage because of his/her partner's newfound faith in Christ. Apparently the Corinthians were seeking advice from Paul on how to handle the situation.

Consistent with other divorce texts, interpretations vary about Paul's intent in 1 Corinthians 7, especially as to the application of these verses to today's world.

Scholars such as Carl Laney believe 1 Corinthians 7 supports a no divorce policy. He contends God has commanded a man and woman to stay together, and if divorce

happens to occur, the man or woman is to remain single. Laney states, "A married person should not divorce a spouse. But if this command is disobeyed, then there are but two options for the divorced or separated believer--to remain single or be reconciled." He also argues the believing spouse is not to divorce the unbeliever at all since he/she is the primary source of the other person's salvation (House, 1990, p. 42-43). Another facet of this issue is whether the believer is no longer bound by the marriage bond if the nonbeliever leaves the believer. Some scholars consider this another God-ordained exception for divorce. William Heth states, "Paul's statement that the believer is 'not bound' in such cases has the same function that the exception clause does in Matthew 19:9: it relieves the innocent party of the guilt of violating Christ's command not to divorce" (House, 1990, p. 112).

In summary, 1 Corinthians 7:10-15 has been interpreted in many ways. Some argue abandonment by an unbelieving spouse justifies termination of the marriage covenant, while others stipulate that the marital bond remains intact.

Unfortunately, it appears that some missionary organizations use the issue of abandonment by a believer or non-believer as a tool for screening out applicants. Unfortunately, this practice could cause an organization to mistakenly turn down an applicant who could greatly contribute to the organization's mission. Again, I believe the condition of the heart is central in interpreting 1 Corinthians 7.

My main concern deals with imperfect people attempting to identify a nonbeliever or believer. Only God knows the condition of the heart, and even though outwardly a person professes to be a believer, the inner condition of the heart could be entirely different. We will never know the number of instances in which people have been swept

up by the emotion of an alter call, but have not taken the next step toward inner transformation of the heart. When Paul wrote the letter to the Corinthians, it was easier to identify believers and nonbelievers by their words and actions. In today's society, identifying a believer from a nonbeliever is more complicated because words and deeds become intertwined. Believers and unbelievers stand side by side in all realms of our life including church, work, stores, freeways, family, and social gatherings, and it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the weeds from the wheat. This is why one day God will harvest the crop. There are many instances when professing believers have divorced, but divorce alone does not reflect the inner condition of the person and should not be used as a basis for eliminating an applicant from the missionary field.

I found the most pertinent piece of this Scripture was the phrase, "God has called us to live in peace" (1 Corinthians 7:15). We are to live not only with external peace in our relationship with our spouse or former spouse; we are to seek inner peace regarding the relationship through help from the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, Dwight Hervey Small states, "There is a higher principle than that of merely trying to retain a marriage contract and living together; that higher principle is a relationship of peace" (Bontrager, 1978, p. 60).

To briefly summarize, as with the exception clause in Matthew, most scholars accept abandonment by a nonbeliever as another viable exception for divorce. However, one must be careful in defining the terms believer or unbeliever.

CHAPTER 4

WARNING SIGNALS AND STOP SIGNS

At work, I recently observed a class entitled “Controlling the Frustrations of Caregiving” that was taught to caregivers tending to family members with brain impairing conditions such as Alzheimer’s Disease, Stroke, Parkinson’s Disease, etc. I found many of the principles taught to the caregivers apply to all of us and are transferable to every-day situations. The instructor’s primary goal centered on teaching awareness of unhealthy cognitive habits because thinking affects actions. Awareness of the mind–body connection is vital since stress manifests itself through physical maladies such as shortness of breath, body tension, headaches, fatigue, etc. The class instructor called these “Warning Signals and Stop Signs” because they indicate something is wrong and the person needs to stop and reexamine his or her thinking.

This technique can apply to examining one’s divorce theology. I have identified three major “Warning Signals and Stop Signs” that individuals and organizations need to be aware of in considering their divorce theology: They are (1) Assumptions and Worldview, (2) Categorizing and Labeling, (3) Exclusion and Elimination. Increased awareness of these “Warning Signals and Stop Signs” is vital. They warn us of a danger zone and the need to stop and rethink our situation before proceeding.

Assumptions and Worldview

The intriguing part about my study of the various interpretations of the biblical divorce passages was that scholars could arrive at a different conclusion and still justify his or her position based upon an interpretation of the very same Scripture! The whole spectrum of theologies from no divorce and remarriage to divorce for adultery with remarriage were all backed by in depth analysis and exegesis. At first I was

overwhelmed, frustrated, and confused by this discovery because I wanted concrete answers, but I soon realized people understand the same text differently because they interpret the Scripture from the angle of their particular worldview. Worldview consists of all the factors that make a person who he or she is today. This includes culture, experience, family, education, religion, etc. Almost all the scholars I read acknowledged a need for a biblical based foundation for a divorce theology, but only a few recognized or acknowledged how their own assumptions and worldview affected their interpretation. I am in no way advocating postmodern thought or a relativistic view of Scripture. Instead, I am advocating that more sensitivity be shown to this issue when applications from divorced applicants are received for review. Each person involved sees the situation through different glasses. The issue centers on acknowledging and recognizing these differences. Listed below are quotes from various scholars who address the issue of assumptions and worldview. While I agree with some of the comments, not all fit with my worldview. Carl Laney says:

While personal experience and feelings have a significant role in determining who we are and what we think, these factors cannot be the ultimate basis for providing pastoral counsel to those facing divorce. It is on Scripture, not experience, that a biblical theology of divorce and remarriage must be grounded. (House, 1990, p. 16)

William Heth states, "Scripture is a revelation of God's character and will and should never be conformed to our personal preferences" (House, 1990, p. 56). Thomas Edgar states:

Although I agree with Laney that that our view of divorce and remarriage must be based on Scripture, the various differing views claim to be based on Scripture. There must be in some of these views either wrong interpretation or misplaced emphasis, or both. Any adequate analysis of Scripture on this subject must be based on all the passages. All the passages must be allowed to speak and must

speaking in harmony with all the others. To interpret some as if the others did not exist, and to then use the resulting interpretation as the basis to deny the explicit statements (exceptions) of those not originally taken into consideration is not really basing one's view on Scripture. It is instead a selection of passages which, taken by themselves, seem to fit the interpreter's presuppositions and then using these to get rid of those passages containing specific statements contrary to the interpreter's presuppositions. (House, 1990, p. 62)

Larry Richards states:

The church does not speak with one voice on interpreting New Testament passages on divorce and remarriage. It is possible to examine the data and reach Heth's conclusions. But it is also possible for Christians to examine the same data and reach very different conclusions indeed. (House, 1990, p. 144)

Biblical scholars are quick to point out the importance of having a Bible-based divorce theology, yet find it easy to criticize other biblically-based interpretations which do not cohere with their own theology. For instance, Laney considered Larry Richard's divorce theology creative since his thinking fell outside the accepted parameters or paradigms of his peers (House, 1990, p. 250). In general, people with a worldview that advocates the sanctity of marriage and the permanent marriage bond tend to favor Mark's recording of Jesus' words as more credible than Matthew's. Conversely, people who feel adultery obliterates the marriage bond find truth in Matthew's account. Admittedly, these thoughts and beliefs for the most part remain camouflaged, which is precisely why I advocate awareness of one's assumptions and worldviews.

Some people object that any recognition of personal experience undermines scriptural authority and justifies actions solely on feelings or experiences. A divorce theology grounded in God's word is essential. However, there can be gray areas between the written word and experience, and in many cases experience effects a person's divorce theology. Harold Ivan Smith deems this "daddy's daughter syndrome." He says, "It

doesn't matter what your theology of divorce is, it will change if your daughter gets divorced. It's not as strong with 'daddy's son' for some reason." Smith tells a story of one man:

For thirty years of ministry I had Matthew 19 down to a T, and then my daughter got divorced. I sat in my study for days and cried, remembering what I'd said to hundreds of people over the years. Those faces kept coming back to me, and I couldn't help thinking, My God, what will I do if somebody says all those things to my daughter? (Boyer, 1983, p. 118)

This does not mean divorce is not to be taken seriously by the Christian world. This example demonstrates one of the reasons why people arrive at different divorce theologies even though the conclusions are based upon the same Bible. This approach usually generates opposition because it appears as if Christians are succumbing to cultural values. As Hardin Boyer (1983) states, "If the church doesn't take a stringent view on the sacredness and holiness of marriage--well, we certainly won't get any help from the world" (p. 119). My thoughts can be summarized by a quote from Haddon Robinson (1992), who observes, "What we are determines how we read, and how we read determines how we act. What we bring to the text sometimes determines how we interpret the text" (p. 29-30).

Categorizing and Labeling

Many of the missionary organizations base the application of their divorce theology on the grounds of whether a person fits into a particular category or label. The following is a list of the terms I most frequently encountered.

1. Believer/Unbeliever – As stated previously, this term is usually used to exclude an applicant if both husband and wife were believers at the time of divorce. Divorce by an unbeliever is usually considered abandonment, and is

therefore nearly equivalent to the exception clause as an accepted reason for divorce. The danger lies in labeling a person as an unbeliever or believer.

Outward declarations do not necessarily reflect the inner heart.

2. Adultery/Faithfulness – Application of the exception clause where the physical act of adultery has occurred and contributed to the demise of the marriage usually does not exclude an applicant. The problem again lies with the interpretation of the exception clause and what constitutes adultery. Again, a spouse can outwardly appear faithful and true, yet have a lustful heart.

3. Innocent/Guilty – Missionary organizations are more apt to accept a divorced applicant if the person can be identified as the victim. This is a misnomer because in many divorces, both parties are at fault and contributed to the erosion of the marriage. I agree with Larry Richards, who says, “In many Christian communities, if your marriage fails, you are marked forever and dismissed to a lifetime of loneliness--unless of course, by some legalistic twist or turn you can be pronounced the ‘innocent party’ ” (House, 1990, p. 236-237).

4. Biblical/Relative – I agree with the statement that a policy needs to be grounded in God’s word and not in the relativistic attitude where divorce is justified because it feels good. The problem and danger lies with possessing an attitude that an organization’s policy is biblically based without recognizing the assumptions lying behind this view. Sometimes just reexamining these factors can lead to a broader view of the reality of divorce.

Exclusion and Elimination

It is not uncommon for a missionary organization to exclude an applicant automatically based upon the presence of certain conditions. In my considered judgment, the presence of one or several of these factors is not indicative of the applicant's ability to contribute to the organization's goals. The major exclusions include, but are not limited to the following: a twice-divorced person; those divorced since conversion on grounds other than adultery or desertion; remarried persons, specifically those divorced and/or remarried since conversion; and divorced persons for whom there remains a chance of reconciliation.

The fact a person is divorced more than once is not an accurate indicator of his ability to perform in the missionary field. Some people equate marital failure with inability to lead. They speculate that if a person cannot control his or her personal life, then that person will not be able to provide effective leadership in the missionary field. I caution against this type of thinking because it could lead to unfairly categorizing and labeling a divorced person as lacking in leadership and spiritual maturity. In fact, divorce can lead to incredible personal and spiritual growth that can enhance the person's service and ministry to other people.

I cannot emphasize enough how attempting to fit an applicant into certain accepted standards based upon merely subjective presuppositions and interpretations can be a disservice to both parties and the kingdom. Furthermore, examining the possibility of reconciliation may not be meaningful and really has nothing to do with the person's ability to minister to others. While personal turmoil of any kind can affect a person's overall attitude and ability to perform, usually a divorced person's mind is centered on

healing and moving on rather than on reconciliation. As Harold Ivan Smith, a divorced former pastor, remarks:

As much as I love Jane, there had to be a time I let go of her. She had made her choice, she continued to make choices, and I had to go a different route. There's still love in my heart for her, but it's on the back burner. There comes a time when you let go and move on. (Boyer, 1983, p. 120)

Divorced people should be thoughtfully considered on a much broader base than just their past marital situation or experience. They should not be subjected to a process of an intensive review of the past, which serves little more than to remind them of wounds that may have taken years to heal.

CHAPTER 5

CONSTRUCTION ZONE

My job requires a lot of driving, so there are many instances where I will run into roadblocks due to construction. Usually the brake lights of the cars ahead of me indicate I will probably be in one place for awhile. However, these moments have facilitated some of the most thought-provoking and creative moments of my life. Similarly, I propose that when an organization encounters the warning signs and stop signs listed in Chapter 4, it should take time to rethink and reconstruct its divorce theology. Like the bulldozers and cement trucks that facilitate more efficient construction, I suggest that agencies use the following tools to reevaluate their divorce theology: Grace and Truth, Forgiveness and New Beginnings, Heart and Character, and Questions and Answers.

Grace and Truth

I propose a divorce theology anchored in God's word, which emphasizes the truth of God's grace in his redemption of man through the death and resurrection of Christ. This does not negate the law, but enhances it.

There are a variety of biblically-based opinions about what truth and grace entail. Those who highlight truth emphasize the sinful nature of divorce, and that it is not to be condoned. Otherwise, acceptance might give the impression that they are endorsing sin (Brown, 1982). For example, in an interview with Hardin Boyer regarding this issue, Robert Wise states, "We do not want to accommodate Scripture to the culture" (Boyer, 1983, p.118). Scholars such as William Heth further defend this stance by saying, "When people ask me 'Where does God's grace enter the picture?' I reply, 'Does God give grace for Christians to sin?' " (House, 1990, p. 115). I take exception to this comment because

it gives the impression people intentionally make the decision to divorce without any guidance from God. Consequently, people who choose to emphasize truth have a tendency to treat the Bible as a legal document or a technical book.

Conversely, those who choose to center on grace argue against condemnation.

Sandra Brown (1982) states:

Even though both partners make mistakes which prevent intended commitments from being fulfilled and forgiveness from being a reality between them, their marital failure or remarriage neither disqualifies them from the human race nor calls for them to be rejected for being sinful. (p. 193-194)

Additionally, people who favor grace usually point to how Jesus treated people with grace and forgiveness. Later in his interview with Boyer, Wise states:

Divorce is a very, very undesirable thing. But once it has happened, I find that the scriptural response is one of grace. In the case of divorce, God's grace can still come to me, and that's the bottom line of Jesus' ministry. (Boyer, 1983, p. 116)

Furthermore, those arguing for the importance of grace believe the interpretation of Scripture must involve the spirit. For example, Boyer (1983) explains, "The Pharisees interpreted the letter of the law, but there was no spirit, no heart behind it. Christ said that not only shall you not murder--technically--but you must not have a spirit of hate in your heart" (p. 113). The Bible is not meant to be a rule book, yet all too often it is used as a tool to criticize or condemn. Bontrager (1978) states, "The whole gospel message points out the emptiness and inadequacy of a strict adherence to the law, but instead, Christ challenged men and women, with humble readiness, to receive God's grace" (p. 121). I concur with Dallas Willard (2002) who says, "You cannot separate spirit from

law, though you must separate spirit and law from legalism--righteousness in terms of actions" (p. 214).

In summary, there is a tension between truth and grace in constructing a divorce theology. However, the spirit of Scripture leads me to believe that the truth of God's grace far outweighs the burden of divorce and frees a divorced individual to move forward into forgiveness and new beginnings.

Forgiveness and New Beginnings

For a long time after my divorce, I did not want to forgive or even consider starting my life anew. The pain was too great, too deep. However, God has given us the gift of a new sunrise at the beginning of each day with new promises, and a sunset at the end of the day with renewed hopes and dreams. With time I learned to forgive, and I chose to move on. There is no doubt divorce is part of my life story, but I have closed that chapter and a new beginning is under construction. Therefore, I find it imperative for missionary organizations to embrace an attitude of forgiveness in building a divorce theology.

Unfortunately, many Christians believe divorce involves a different kind of sin. Regarding divorce due to adultery, Hardin Boyer (1983) says, "Adultery is a particular and different kind of sin. God forgives, yes, but still there are consequences" (p. 116). I agree sin has consequences, however, it appears that divorce, to some Christians, remains an unpardonable act, something the divorced person needs to be reminded of again and again. This is exhibited by some missionary organizations through the questions the applicant is required to answer regarding the divorce. One person specifically said, "Questions need to be asked" (Boyer, 1983, p. 222). Truthfully, the last thing I want to

be reminded of is my divorce. I have moved on with my life and I am looking forward to the future, not the past. Why then is the divorce so important to organizations? Many organizations feel it is their duty to explore all the circumstances surrounding the divorce so they can determine if it was a biblical divorce (refer to the “Warning Signals and Stop Sign” section). For some reason, people like Robert Morris believe divorced applicants will have to be treated differently (Morris, 1984, p. 220). I have forgiven and been forgiven by God. I am moving on, so why is the Christian community, which is composed of forgiven sinners, so hesitant to forgive divorce? Woodson (1979) states:

Often the church finds it difficult to let such persons “begin again.” Their past is continually held against them. And this is especially true if the person happens to be divorced. At times it almost appears that the church can forgive and forget any sexual laxity before marriage, but a divorced person will never be permitted to live a normal life again. (p. 29)

Furthermore, Bontrager (1978) has a valid point when he states, “Possibly in the past the church has had its priorities misarranged in preaching forgiveness for all the sins that cause the death of the marriage but failing to preach forgiveness for the death itself” (p. 165). I heartily agree. I was crushed when my husband talked about divorce, and it has not been an easy road to travel. However, I have been strengthened, humbled, and forgiven.

God’s forgiveness of the divorced applicant needs to be embraced. Forgiveness was the heart of Jesus’ ministry and life on earth, an example his disciples are to follow. For example, Jesus gave the Samaritan woman the gift of new life and forgiveness (John 4:1-26) as well as hope. He did not hold her past sins against her or chastise her for having more than one husband. Robert Wise states, “With the woman caught in adultery Jesus obviously stepped over one of the laws of Moses in that case. The woman was

totally wrong; nothing about the situation tempers what she did. Yet Jesus responds with grace and forgiveness” (Boyer, 1983, p. 113).

Scripture is filled with numerous examples of God’s acts of forgiveness. I believe God’s basic character is love. Therefore, his love far outweighs his condemnation. King David loved God, and while his sin with Bathsheba reaped consequences that brought David to repentance, God forgave. Woodson (1979) adds:

God did not reckon David’s sin with Bathsheba as damning guilt, but freely forgave him. He so fully forgave that he gave Bathsheba another son (Solomon) and bestowed a love upon him which gave him the name Jedidiah, which means beloved of the lord (2 Samuel 12:24,25). Furthermore, God put Bathsheba in the genealogy of Christ (Matthew 1:6) and called David a man ‘after his own heart’ ” (1 Samuel 13:14). (p. 26)

The content of Romans 8 is fitting in this setting. Sprinkled throughout this wonderful passage are words of hope and reassurance that we are forgiven. There is no condemnation for those who believe and who are children of God. Simply remembering the first and last verses has been so reassuring that God has forgiven me and extended his open arms in love to me, yes, even in spite of my divorce! Robert Buxbaum (1995) states, “Divorce is simply one among many symbols of our brokenness as persons, families, and communities. There are no big or little sins; all sin requires the forgiveness of God” (p. 186). Since God’s forgiveness supercedes the condemnation of the law and allows for a person to start new, the Christian community needs to support a person’s attempts to start fresh again. Woodson (1979) supports this by stating:

There is no reason for followers of Jesus Christ to make people feel afraid and insecure. Yet that is what we do when the church continually leaves the impression that there is something about divorce which stigmatizes a person and makes it impossible for him ever to live a normal life again. (p. 49)

Other meaningful verses for me are Colossians 3:13-14 and 2 Corinthians 5:17-19.

Colossians 3:13-14 (NIV):

Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

2 Corinthians 5:17-19 (NIV):

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

These passages are a reminder of God's forgiveness and allowance of new beginnings for all of us, including the divorced. We have died and are God's new creations. This means our hearts and minds are renewed, and we function within the realm of the kingdom of God. We have the power to view the world in a different light and to function as new creatures. This should include acceptance of the divorced. As Woodson (1979) states, "God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16) but he loves the divorced person" (p. 30)! Furthermore, just because an applicant has divorce in his/her background does not indicate the condition of his/her heart and character. This is another factor to consider in the construction of a divorce theology.

Heart and Character

As stated previously, the teachings of Jesus center on the condition of the heart and mind. If we are disciples of Christ, we are to look to him as our teacher and helper, and a missionary organization ought to seriously consider heart and character issues. In other words, divorce in a person's past is not necessarily an indication of present

character flaws or hard heartedness. In fact, many times the brokenness of divorce results in character transformation and renewed hearts, leading to hearts ready, willing, and prepared to face the challenges of missionary work. I agree wholeheartedly with Woodson (1979), who states, "Jesus was always more interested in what a person could become than in what he had been" (p. 28).

Furthermore, a heart rightly directed will reflect the glory of God and result in a virtuous life, a harvest abundant with the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). Ironically, divorce carries a certain stigma, a wrong that needs to be continually observed and worried about, while other outward actions indicating a heart gone astray seem to be almost ignored. It is a paradoxical situation for agencies to condemn a divorced applicant, yet overlook or be unaware of the flawed character traits and hard hearts within their own ranks. For example, I have witnessed unethical business practices of people who are either directly employed or contracted as advisors by a missionary organization, but who outwardly appear upright and righteous. I am not implying this is the norm, but it is intended to point out a prominent double standard. Similarly, questions need to be asked about leaders of Christian organizations who construct a facade that hide personal challenges with pornography, alcoholism, licentiousness, etc.

In summary, heart issues are vital components in structuring a divorce theology. Divorce need not disqualify a person from effective missionary service. However, most organizations, in spite of considering grace and truth, forgiveness and new beginnings, and heart and character, want to make special inquiry of divorced applicants and the past.

Questions and Answers

One of my primary goals is to promote a divorce theology constructed and anchored in the truth of grace. Unfortunately, I have discovered that even the most grace-oriented missionary organizations feel they must ask numerous questions of their divorced applicants. I believe this attitude is an unfortunate outcome of the pressure from within the higher echelons of an agency to resist giving the impression of surrendering to cultural divorce trends. For example, Paul Toms states:

We need to move slowly. One of the great advantages of all of these questions is that it forces the candidates to clearly review their own sense of call to some phase of ministry. It requires him or her to decide whether or not it is worth all the trouble to press ahead toward acceptance. There are indeed barriers. The acceptance of a policy will not immediately make it easy, nor necessarily effective, for a divorced person to advance in certain areas of missionary activity. It will not be easy nor ideal for a divorced person to step immediately into the missionary activity. (Morris, 1984, p. 222-223)

I find this a sad commentary on the way organizations utilize questions as a tool to screen out applicants instead of an instrument to screen in applicants dedicated to God. Many experts on this subject declare that a questionnaire is a quantifiable method to determine the eligibility of a divorced applicant. For example, Robert Morris (1984) has designed a questionnaire he believes will pave the way toward standardizing the processing of divorced applicants. He says, "Negative answers to individual questions would not constitute a bar to consideration but, cumulatively, negative answers to certain questions will preclude membership in the mission" (p. 219). Morris does not recognize that the person writing and/or reviewing the questions will have a different worldview than the applicant. Regrettably, the majority of the responses I received from missionary organizations cling to the belief that the more information the better. I disagree. I

propose that questions regarding the divorce be direct and simple. There are four questions that will reveal more about a person than forty or four hundred questions. They are:

1. What is your divorce theology?
2. What lessons did you learn from your divorce?
3. What is your life in Christ like now?
4. Is there anything in your present circumstances that would make it difficult for you to give full service in the missionary field?

The answers to these four short questions will reveal much about the present condition of the applicant's heart and character and whether he or she is ready for missionary service or needs more time for healing and putting his or her life in order. Furthermore, I recommend that at least one year of healing from the divorce needs to elapse prior to accepting an application from a divorced applicant. This gives time for the person to mend the wounds and to regroup after such a life-changing event. There is no need for an inquisition about major details of the divorce, and no need to discuss the specifics with other people such as family, friends, and clergy. The applicant's present state of mind and soul are the most pertinent. As stated previously, the marriage and divorce are in the past; what lies ahead is the road where God is leading.

Concluding this section, I propose a divorce theology under construction is one which needs to consider the truth of God's grace, forgiveness and new beginnings, heart and character, and questions and answers. I challenge missionary organizations to venture into territory outside an existing paradigm that unfairly categorizes divorced applicants as tainted.

CHAPTER 6

EXISTING POLICIES

In this chapter I cite the divorce policies of fourteen different missionary organizations. The difference between my recommendations in Chapter 5 and the reality of current practice as represented in these policies will be evident. It appears that, for the most part, divorced applicants are scrutinized more closely than those individuals who are single or married. It is my hope that this presentation of actual policies will encourage some organizations to reexamine their own theology of divorce.

I contacted twenty missionary organizations and received fourteen responses with two agencies, Wycliffe Associates and Adventist Frontier Mission, declining to disclose their divorce policies. The policies are grouped in a truth to grace continuum with truth having to do with following the letter of the law and grace dealing more with the spirit of the law. The following is a list of the agencies from whom I received policies. Upon request, I have not linked the agency name with its policy.

CAM International
Worldwide Evangelization for Christ (WEC)
Liebenzell Mission USA
Anglican Frontier Missions
International Teams
Mission to Unreached Peoples (MUP)
Greater Europe Mission (GEM)
Campus Crusade for Christ
World Team
Mission Aviation Fellowship
UFM International
AMF International
Gospel Missionary Union (GMU)
Turkish World Outreach

All of the organizations consider divorce as a serious issue that needs to be addressed by the applicant and the organization. Some organizations seem to favor more

of an quantitative approach and base their decisions upon the applicants answer to numerous questions regarding the divorce, while other agencies are more open to seeking out the applicant's current condition in heart and spirit. I acknowledge that in some cases culture could play a factor in an organization's policy, but this issue needs to be closely examined to ensure culture is not being used as a means of avoiding a controversial issue. Furthermore, I believe that although many of the organizations I contacted have tried to approach the divorce issue openly and fairly, there is still apprehension amongst the majority of organizations toward accepting a divorced applicant. I am hopeful that organizations will review their current standards in light of the information presented in this paper.

I have reprinted these policies as I received them and without corrections or changes.

Divorce Policy Spectrum

Organization A

Divorce is a serious issue with the Hispanic people in general, but especially with believers in Central America. They just do not want to see their leaders in a divorced state. So, for the sake of their social mores and culture, we do not accept divorced people for the foreign field.

Organization B

We do have a policy of not accepting divorced applicants. We understand the divorce issue is looked on in different ways by good Bible scholars today. However, after checking with our missionary leaders and national pastors on the various fields where we work, plus taking other factors into consideration, our Board of Directors adopted our present policy. We in no way want to imply that someone cannot be used of the Lord, but as a foreign mission, we feel this is the practice we should follow at the present time. Our policy manual states: "The screening process may be so thorough that there will be those who are not accepted."

Organization C

I do not want to go into details about the policy, but the words "not usually" are important. I have attached a copy of the form we use to begin evaluation of a divorced candidate for missionary service.

Questionnaire For Applicants Who Have Been Divorced

Date and duration of previous marriage.

Reason for the divorce.

Who initiated the divorce?

What was the spiritual condition of each party at the time of the divorce?

What part has the divorce had in your personal spiritual history?

Are you required to make alimony payments to your former mate? If yes, what amount?

Are children involved in the divorce? If yes, please answer the following questions:

What are their ages?

Who has custody of them?

If you do not have custody, are child support payments required of you? If yes, what amount?

If you do not have custody, do you have visiting rights?

If you have remarried, how long has this union been in effect?

If you have remarried, what is the quality of your present marital relationship?

We would like to have a personal interview with you and your spouse, if possible.

We would like to ask your pastor and your church board to give us a report addressing your present life as a single adult, or your present marital relationship, and a statement that your divorce (and remarriage) would not be detrimental to your service.

Organization D

It is interesting that you have asked this question because we have been re-evaluating this over the last year. Enclosed is a copy of our policy regarding accepting divorced people into our mission. As you can see we take quite a strong stand with only rare exceptions. Those exceptions would be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

The Board of Directors desires the highest standards, and thus seeks candidates who do not have a divorce in their background. However, because of human frailty and sin, dissolution by man of the marriage relationship is a reality which the Bible recognizes. Because we desire to follow Biblical standards for spiritual leadership in the church and our agency, the implications of divorce may prevent a person from serving as a missionary with our agency.

However, in rare cases, if the candidate director believes that a person may qualify for service, the case will be evaluated by the General Director and one or more associate directors with a view to a possible recommendation to the Board of Directors for appointment.

Organization E

We affirm the organization's commitment to the sanctity of marriage. We believe Scripture does not advocate or commend divorce. However, when a divorced person who meets all other requirements applies to join the organization, the sending base

receiving the application must seek God's mind in each individual case. Such applicants can be accepted for a field, only with the consent of that field.

The agency is prepared to consider for acceptance people in the following categories:

Those who were divorced before conversion whether remarried or not;

Those who were divorced before conversion and have since remarried a Christian partner, or may wish to do so in the future;

Those who have been divorced as Christians, because of the partner's adultery.

Remarriage could only be contemplated if the former partner dies or has already remarried;

Those who have been permanently deserted by a non-Christian or unconverted partner because of their faith (1 Corinthians 7:15:15-16). Remarriage could only be contemplated if the former partner dies or has already remarried.

It must be understood that the marital status of the individual may be taken into consideration should leadership be considered in the future.

Our agency would not consider:

A separated partner of a marriage;

A divorced person for whom there remains some hope of reconciliation;

A person divorced as a Christian for reasons other than marital infidelity or desertion by an unbelieving partner;

A person divorced more than once.

Organization F

Our practice has been to accept applications from people who've gone through divorce. However, candidates must know that we will examine the causes and circumstances of the divorce closely. What we want to avoid is the person who shows willingness to accept our culture's view of divorce over the Biblical view, who views their divorce as inevitable – "just one of those things," or who accepts "irreconcilable differences" as reason for divorce, or who minimizes Biblical teaching, or their own role in the divorce.

Without going into all of the relevant Scriptures, our overall approach has been: That there are Biblically allowable reasons for divorce.

That outside of these, that divorce is a sin and should be dealt with as any other sin.

Repentance, grace healing, restoration over a prudent period of time.

Although it is no better or worse than any other sin or situation people find themselves in, it does involve complicating factors that may affect the wisdom of sending a person overseas. E.g., child care, problems with maintaining interpersonal relationships, emotional healing, financial obligations, acceptability in certain cultures, visitation rights for children, etc.

We should talk with those who know the details of the divorce and the process that led up to it. Especially their pastor at the time of the divorce, as well as their current pastor, close friends, and any other counselors. Why does the candidate say the divorce occurred? What do the others say? How did the candidate respond to the problems in the marriage, and when divorce was proposed? Who filed for the divorce? Was

reconciliation attempted sincerely? What fault did they have in the divorce? Is their view of what happened and why realistic – or simplistic, over-spiritualized, or blaming? How have they grown or changed as a result of the divorce? Has needed healing taken place or are they still caring emotional/relational “baggage” that could impair their ability to succeed in cross-cultural ministry, and or their relationships with missions team members or nationals? If they are re-married, is the new relationship health and happy, or do we see the past problems/patterns recurring? Are there relational, or financial obligations to ex-spouse and any children which would be neglected if they went overseas (or even, are they possibly actively fleeing such obligations?).

Candidates also need to be assured that we do accept divorced candidates who pass review – we need to hold out hope to them since many have been unceremoniously rejected by other organizations and even their church just because they’re divorced. Some contacts have come to believe that their divorce was “the unforgivable sin” at least as far as churches and missions agencies are concerned. They have been treated as “damaged goods” regarding suitability for any positions of ministry or service. It must be understood that our position represents our opinion/interpretation of Scripture and not everyone will accept it, but that does not make it any less valid.

Depending on where the candidate would be serving overseas, they need to be made aware that the fact that they’re divorced could make it extremely difficult to relate to the local church because of strict views on divorce held by the national churches in some countries. They would not be seen as appropriate missionaries or leaders by the national church in some countries/cultures.

We should probably not consider at all anyone who’s been divorced more than once.

Areas the screener should be careful about:

Although circumstances do occur where one party did everything “right” and the fault lies almost entirely on the other person, that is relatively rare. We need to try to determine what contributing role, if any, the applicant played in the divorce and whether those relating skills problems (if they exist) could be a problem in other relationships if they get to the field.

Related to (1), even if the other party was almost entirely at fault in the divorce, we need to know if the applicant’s interpersonal relationship skills (or lacks in them) were contributing factors. If so, have they grown sufficiently in those areas? We have seen some problems with this in some previously divorced missionaries – they bring “baggage” with them to the field which can impact their relationships with other missionaries. Some past problems have related to: relating to members of the opposite sex in certain situations e/g, when dealing with conflicts (to use the psychological term, “transference” – or is it “projection?”) either conflict avoidance or a tendency to find themselves in conflict often; lack of self-esteem/self-confidence, etc.

Perhaps the candidate chose their previous spouse unwisely. If so, does this have implications for their probable success on the field? Does this tell us anything about their judgment, how they deal with loneliness, tough decisions, interpersonal problems, conflict, their knowledge and obedience to the Word, etc?

If the past spouse was Christian at the time of the divorce, one partner will sometimes volunteer to “take the rap” for the failure of the marriage publicly. It usually seems to be the husband, and/or sometimes, but not always, the “weaker” Christian. Sometimes this is an unspoken agreement between the separating couple, but sometimes it is the result of mutual, conscious agreement. One partner will claim to have had an affair even when they didn’t or will simply leave the other so that they can claim “abandonment”. They often do this quite intentionally in order for the other party to be able to claim that the divorce was for Biblically allowable reasons, and that they’re therefore “off the hook” in the eyes of the church.

If this happened, simply accepting the given reason for the divorce can mask the true, underlying reasons for the failure of the relationship, and the real, underlying reasons might have serious implications for their probability of success overseas. It can be hard for the screener to check whether this is what happened in such cases. We have to ask a lot of questions of the pastor, references and applicant. Sometimes simply asking the applicant directly whether or not this is what actually happened brings an honest response – but if their response doesn’t tell the whole story that the screener has discovered elsewhere, then their previous lack of honesty tells us something about their suitability in itself.

This brings up an important issue for the screener, which is the need to refuse to accept any “reason” for the divorce which is actually an end result, not really a reason. For example a person who says that their divorce occurred because their spouse abandoned them is giving the end result. The real question is why the spouse left. What led up to that? What were the dynamics of the relationship that produced that result? Etc.

Organization G

Even though God completely forgives the sinner who repents and He restores the broken lives of victims, often the results of past experiences continue to affect a person in significant ways. The continuing results of a past divorce need to be taken into account when a person applies for membership to our organization. Therefore, when considering a divorced applicant, the Mission will carefully assess the circumstances and continuing consequences of the divorce (1 Co 6:9-11).

An ongoing pattern of infidelity, fornication, sexual perversion or willful abandonment constitutes a scripturally legitimate reason for the dissolution of the marriage bond and severance of the relationship (Mt 5:32; 19:9; 1Co 7:15).

In light of the biblical teaching on divorce and remarriage and its implications for leadership within the Body of Christ, we will carefully review the applicant’s divorce history to determine the circumstances surrounding the dissolution of his or her marriage. Only when it is confirmed that the divorce and remarriage when applicable was warranted on biblical grounds will the application process continue.

The following factors exclude an applicant from acceptance for service:

A clear lack of grace and forgiveness on the part of the divorced applicant or

A history of multiple divorces after conversion.

The cumulative effect of unfavorable answers to the following questions would preclude the acceptance of a divorced applicant into membership:

Is the applicant generally perceived as being the “innocent” party?

Has there been sufficient time since the divorce to allow for assessing and processing its impact?

Do circumstances indicate there is no reasonable possibility of reconciliation with the former mate?

Is the applicant free from church discipline?

Is the applicant free from ongoing child custody complications?

Is the applicant free from continuing financial liabilities related to the divorce which may restrict his or her mobility?

If remarried, is there evidence of continuing stability and growth in the current marriage?

If remarried, are relationships among member of the new family healthy and growing?

Would the applicant’s divorce and remarriage where applicable be acceptable to the national church?

Would the applicant’s divorce and remarriage where applicable be acceptable to the national culture?

Is the previous spouse available for comment? Are friends related to the previous marriage available for comment? If so, is the applicant willing to discuss their comments?

Does the applicant’s attitude toward the previous marriage suggest a sense of the tragedy of divorce?

Is there a reason to believe the applicant is seeking to be involved with us in order to compensate or amend for the failed marriage and divorce?

If the applicant has changed churches since the divorce is there evidence that the change was due to having been denied a leadership role in the previous church?

Is the applicant firmly committed to the principle of marriage for life?

Is the spiritual and emotional condition of children from the previous marriage likely to complicate the present marriage or ministry with our organization?

Organization H

In the processing of Candidates, the Board does not regard divorce as a categorical disqualification for membership on biblical grounds, but unusual care must be exercised in each case, and the decision is subject to review by the Board. In addition, the Board does not regard divorce or legal separation of an active Career Staff couple as categorical grounds for termination of membership in the Fellowship. In all instances, the Board will make the final determination, always mindful of the Biblical balance between grace and law, truth and mercy. This policy will be applied on a case-by-case basis and only after a careful review of the circumstances. In all cases two assumptions are inherent: in the Biblical sense, divorce and legal separation are synonymous; and, any action taken is based on the marital status and does not reflect on the inherent worth of the person involved.

The Candidate must be willing to provide the Personnel Committee of the Board the following information.

the factors that contributed to the divorce/legal separation

the current relationship to the former mate

the current marital status

the former mate's current marital status

the history of spiritual and emotional growth since the divorce/legal separation

With this information, and prayerful discernment, the board will review the individual case, taking into consideration the following:

if the divorce/legal separation occurred before conversion by either party

evidence of adultery on the part of either party

evidence of abuse on the part of either party

evidence of abandonment on the part of either party

failure on the part of either party to seek counseling, remediation, intervention and/or restoration of the broken relationship.

Organization I

People who have been divorced will be considered on a case-by-case basis by the Human Resources department and the leadership of the Mission. There are two areas we evaluate with a divorced person. One has to do with the circumstances of the divorce itself and where the person is spiritually and emotionally at the time they are applying. The second area has to do with areas of service that are open/closed to them as a person who is divorced. We have to be sensitive to the peoples with whom and to whom we minister. In many areas of Europe, the evangelical church puts boundaries around what a person who has been divorced can do in ministry, regardless of the reason for the divorce. We try to be sensitive and honoring of those limits, even if we may not always agree with them.

Organization J

The Body of Christ is divided on the issue of divorce. Our organization takes a median position that divorce may be a disqualifier depending on the circumstances, but need not be. The main issues are: circumstances surrounding, and recentness of the divorce; the applicant's reputation; and the applicant's present convictions regarding marriage and divorce. Bottom Line: Two years of consistent Christian living must elapse between the final decree of the divorce and applying to our staff.

Organization K

At this time our organization has not addressed this issue and therefore has not formed a policy regarding the accepting of divorced men and women on staff in the capacity of performing missionary work in the field.

Organization L

Currently we do not have a written divorce policy. We approach this issue on a case by case basis. We consult the commending church of the missionary and require approval

from them and may require a specified amount of time at home before we would send someone to the field.

Organization M

Our organization works in partnership with the sending church. We look at divorce on a case by case basis. Usually the sending church determines eligibility.

Organization N

In response to your inquiry, we do not have a written policy on divorced individuals serving in ministry. Basically, our concern is more with the current state of a person's walk with the Lord than what He has saved them from. Once issues from the past have been dealt with, forgiveness sought, and restitution made, a believer should not have the past held against them, in my opinion. God forgives and restores; we would as well. This does not mean that there are no consequences to sin. Neither does it mean that we have a low view of marriage, or that divorce is a desirable option. The Scripture is clear that God hates divorce, and allows it because of the hardness (read, sinfulness) of man's heart. Divorce is a symptom of our fallenness. We have had divorced persons serving on our missionary staff for 20 years. In each case, the person was divorced before coming to faith.

We hold the institution of marriage in high esteem and continue to pray for the families who serve with us. Divorced persons, like others wounded by significant sin, need to deal with the past. Having done so, they are not disqualified from service, and may have increased ability to minister to other sin hurting relationships. Often divorced people are the most insistent that divorce was not the answer to their problems.

Please understand that we are not for lowered standards. The qualifications for missionary service are to be very high; "above reproach" is an apt description. But our focus is more on the present character and testimony of candidates than on what God has saved them from when considering applicants for missionary service.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Based on study of the divorce passages, I have developed the following observations and recommendations regarding formulating a divorce theology and subsequent divorce policies. (1) The similarity among divorce theologies I studied was that they were biblically based. The primary difference is that interpretations of the same Scripture vary, all of which are founded upon detailed exegesis and hermeneutics. It is important for organizations to be open to the possibility that other interpretations could be just as valid as their own conclusions regarding the Scripture. (2) Divorce is allowed under certain circumstances in both the Old and New Testaments. Definitions vary as to what these instances are. Most agencies acknowledge adultery and abandonment as biblically-based exceptions for divorce while others are more cautious at recognizing any exceptions. The point is to avoid using Scripture in a legalistic manner. In other words, it is easy to lose sight of the message behind the words and to judge without proper understanding. (3) The divorce verses in the Old and New Testaments, as with all Scripture, need to be studied within the larger context of God's redemptive love. The very hardness of heart that contributes to divorce can impinge on the way divorce is viewed. Awareness of one's biases and worldview can mediate the differences in divorce theologies. (4) God's grace extends to divorced individuals. Sometimes divorce is viewed as an unpardonable sin in which the specific details need to be addressed over and over again. However, God's grace makes new beginnings possible. These new beginnings might include missionary work.

When I first encountered the rejection from my faith community, I was very hurt and angry. One Sunday, the associate pastor's message dealt with grace. Specifically, he changed the "Got Milk" slogan seen on billboards and television to: "Got Grace? Give Grace!" Afterward I sent written note to the pastor asking him for more details about extending grace to divorced people. Even though this man and I have spent many hours discussing this subject, his response to my message was thought-provoking and is worth sharing. He said:

Concerning the grace and divorce issue in this particular denomination, I'm not sure I have too much to say that hasn't already been said. Grace is indeed a pervasive command of Scripture and the atmosphere in which the church should live--but the same can be said of a commitment to scriptural authority, and the same for righteousness, and the same for several other biblical values as well. What often happens is that we feel a tension between two of our commitments--we know we must be committed to both, but how we can be committed to both at the same time in the same situation is a challenge that we have to sort out. We must uphold the commitments of righteousness and the teachings of Scripture. At the same time, we must practice grace. Different denominations sort it out different ways. This particular denomination has chosen to take a very strong stand on the issue of marriage/divorce and ordination. They do that because of how they understand the teaching of Scripture. They feel constrained in this regard. They did not write an unforgiving attitude into their bylaws; they wrote their understanding of Scripture on this particular point into their bylaws. That is an understanding that you may very well disagree with (or I may disagree with), but this may be an area in which you need to extend to them the grace to have an honest interpretation of Scripture that you completely disagree with. It happens again and again: grace would ask us to give room to one another to have such disagreements (R. Langer, personal communication, 28 June 2001).

Even though this correspondence pertains to a particular denomination, it could just as easily apply to a missionary organization. It is important for organizations and individual applicants to extend grace to those who might not necessarily agree with their divorce theology.

A divorce theology needs first to be biblically based. However, the truth of grace enables openness toward diverse theologies without compromising its biblical foundation.

Lastly, divorce is a serious issue. An effective divorce theology is one that understands the gravity of divorce while at the same time balancing the fine line between truth and grace. As Morgan (1985) states, "Jesus always advocated love, not law, as the guideline for human behavior; we must seek to interpret the spirit of his teaching, not be bound by its letters. Christ's ideal of lifelong marriage must not become a millstone for all who fail" (p. 50).

In conclusion, I believe the present state of a person's heart and character is a far better qualifier for divorced applicants than attempting to quantify eligibility through extensive questioning about the divorce. Love and grace extended toward a divorced individual exemplifies God's love to that person and to the world which lacks just such qualities.

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