

Institute for Christian Studies

FACULTY BULLETIN

Number 3

October, 1982

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The Institute for Christian Studies
1909 University Avenue
Austin, Texas 78705

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FOREWORD

In times of moral confusion, sensitive persons are tempted to denounce the perversity of their fellows. Some are tempted to nostalgia for bygone days; others, in despair, simply yield to hysteria. What the present unsettled age needs, however, is neither moralistic condemnation nor pious exhortation to the good. Rather, in the first instance, what is needed today is a clear vision of the good.

In many ways it was in a similar climate that the early Christian movement experienced rapid growth. Men like Justin, Tatian, and Tertullian indicate that the moral earnestness of Christians first commended Christianity to them. It may well be that in the present age that it will be the moral vision of Christian faith--and the faithful lives of individual Christians--that commend themselves to those whose lives are without meaning and direction. These essays are directed toward clarifying that vision and the situation which it illuminates.

A word of thanks is due to groups in Dallas, Houston and elsewhere who aided in the developing of the ideas here presented. Special thanks is also due to Mrs. Nancy Tindel, Faculty Secretary, for her invaluable aid in preparing these manuscripts.

Michael R. Weed, Editor

DIVORCE: A CULTURAL PROBLEM

By Tony Ash

I had been asked to speak at a retreat held by a Louisiana church. One of those attending had been my student several years before. She had married a man I had known fairly well because of our association in a campus organization. Then for some time they had been members at a church where I was preaching. I was shocked to learn that after several years of marriage and two children, they had divorced. I took this opportunity to spend some time with her. In our conversation she told me many things I could have guessed about being divorced, and opened my eyes to some other things I had not realized. Little did I know where this conversation would lead.

Ministry to Divorced Christians

Two other conversations followed in the next two weeks. Both were with persons whom I had known in school days, and who had experienced divorce. Thus, with three such experiences in as many weeks, I became sensitized as never before

to the trauma of a broken marriage.

A thought began to nag at me. “Why isn’t someone doing something to minister to these people?” Perhaps some kind of seminar or meeting which would be therapeutic in nature could be offered. A simple publication might be made available. As so often with such ideas, the inner voice continued to prompt: “Since no one else is doing it, what about you?” Finally, with the support and cooperation of the elders of the University church in Austin, Single Again was born. It is now having its sixth birthday. Its ministry is simple, consisting of a monthly paper (mailed free) and an annual seminar held in late August.

In the six years since then, I have had the opportunity of speaking to thousands of Christians who have experienced divorce, I have been engaged in countless personal conversations with both men and women whose marriages (and lives) have come unraveled. I have heard true stories that are as bizarre as the human mind can imagine. I have seen unrelenting pain, and confusion, and bitterness, and conflict, and selfishness. I have been moved to tears, have been frustrated, and have become extremely angry. Some of those with whom I have been in contact were former students or close friends. For some I had even performed the marriage ceremony. When I considered these people I found myself disturbed by a dim, but unrelenting, feeling of guilt. How had I failed as a teacher, as a preacher, as a counselor, as a friend? Had I done something different would the marriage have held together? I remembered that in a six-year ministry at one church I had probably preached fewer

than ten sermons on marriage and the family. What had happened?

What Has Happened?

These reflections led to a conclusion. I hadn't preached on such subjects because I felt they were not needed. Divorces in the church where I ministered were virtually non-existent. If they happened they were shameful, and were kept under cover. So it was in all the churches I knew anything about. After all, we were a people who considered divorce wrong. Our families stayed together. Why preach when there was no problem. Then, too, I lived in a community where there was a Christian school. This institution could advertise that students who met on the campus and then married, stayed together. Percentages could be given. This was even one of the selling points for Christian education. So, all in all, though we knew the divorce evil was raging without, we were safe behind the thick walls of scripture and faith. Whatever is going on out there, we are safe "in here."

The Walls Are Breached

Something has happened. The walls have been breached. In some places they seem to have almost been torn down. Today hardly a church can be found that has not felt the ravages of divorce. I have often heard people speak of anywhere from one to ten marriages in a given congregation at a particular time that are in deep trouble. These are not always the marginal members. Not infrequently they are Bible

class teachers, or deacon's families, and not even preacher's and elder's families are exempt. On several occasions I have listened to heartsick church leaders pour out their agony because of the divorce of a son or daughter. And we find that our Christian schools are no longer using the stable marriages of their graduates as selling points.

The point could be extended, but the need is so obvious that it is not necessary. The haunting question that all ask is "Why?" What has changed so much in the past 15 years?

I am not a Solomon to give answers, nor am I gifted with divine insight to offer an authoritative word from above. Neither am I a sociologist or psychologist, who can say, after a scientific study, what things are true. I have talked to many, many people who have experienced divorce, and been a careful observer of the scene. It is from that perspective that the following observations are offered.

Unquestionably the primary cause for the violation of the marriage covenant is sin--human rejection of God. That could provoke a number of essays. But it is not the line I wish to pursue here. I do not wish to diminish that, or any other aspect of the problem. But the thesis of this article is that we are presently caught amidst several high-powered social forces that have devastating effects on the marriage relationship.

Laying the blame on such forces produces a certain tension. It can be said that a Christian is a Christian, and will serve Christ regardless of the surroundings. We

are not to be conformed to this world (Rom. 12:1f.). It is hard to argue with this. But on the other hand we advise our young not to get into situations where temptation is too great to resist. And the Lord told us to pray “lead us not into temptation.” It is undeniable that certain cultural contexts make it easier to be good, and others make it easier to be wicked. This is not altered by the fact that different people may react to different cultural situations in different ways. The setting which harms one may strengthen another. But for us all there are places and forces which lead both through the wide gate and through the narrow.

Four Contributing Factors

There are four cultural factors that seem to me to have had a bearing on the problem of divorce. They are the “romantic ideal,” certain aspects of the woman’s movement, the so-called sexual revolution, and the changes in divorce laws. Let me discuss these in turn.

By the romantic ideal I mean the view that love is a high-powered, virtually irresistible, emotional experience. Each of us, if we have not experienced it, has seen it displayed, for it is the subject of countless films, T.V. programs, and novels. It is probably one of life’s most intense and unforgettable emotions. Because this experience is so attractive, and so commercially exploitable, we see it on every side. It has been with us for a long time, and has a powerful impact. It appeals to very powerful urges, both emotional and sexual. When this cultural current has flowed

into the stream with the other forces we will note, its impact is increased many fold.

The results of the romantic ideal are, first, to lead people into marriage for the wrong reasons, and, secondly, to lead people out of marriages for the wrong reasons. The myth has arisen that so long as people are “in love” that is all that is necessary for a good marriage. Hence marriage is contracted without any (or very little) attention to the important adjustment areas, such as finances, male and female roles, life goals, in-laws, etc. The smitten couple mistakenly assume that their romantic feelings will never die. When they do, or when they diminish, or when other realities impinge, they are ill-prepared for the task of serious marriage building.

In the second case married people, who have seen the zing disappear from their relationship assume, because they no longer have the feelings they once did, that they have lost the main reason for staying married. This problem is frequently complicated by the presence of another party, an “affair,” in which the unfaithful marriage partner finds the old romantic feelings rekindled. They assume it is only right to be with the person for whom they have this intense passion--so a divorce ensues. I have often heard people say of a broken marriage “I no longer had any feelings for my mate,” or, “I finally met the person I really love.” Because this attitude has been hallowed by our culture, they feel free to act on the basis of it. The “old-fashioned” idea of commitment in marriage is hardly considered.

As indicated, the romantic ideal has been with us for a long time. The second cultural force, the woman's movement, is, in its current form, comparatively recent. How carefully one must tread in discussing this matter. From a personal perspective, I find much in the woman's movement to admire. In fact, Christians ought to be concerned for equal pay for equal work, abolition of sexual harassment on the job, etc.

However, in some cases with which I have dealt some aspects of some interpretations of the woman's movement have been quite destructive. Selfishness is one of the most terrible destroyers of marriage, whether in husband or wife. The extreme independence which the movement encourages in some women can easily be linked with a selfishness and vindictiveness which can produce conflicts a marriage cannot survive. In the name of self-realization there is a sacrifice of the spirit of cooperation, even of submission (Eph. 5:22-33), which a Christian marriage needs. Thus the marriage is forfeit to the cause of the autonomous "New Woman."

One Christian man told me he knew his marriage was in trouble when his wife began reading the type of article, often found in popular magazines, which extolled the joy of being liberated from the shackles of the marriage bond. She began to dream of being free, and one day, was (or so she thought). Under the power of such a transcendent appeal, some women find wifery and motherhood onerous burdens, indeed. Since much in our culture sympathizes with them, they will, upon occasion, divorce to escape their "burden."

There is perhaps an irony in this. The liberated woman, who does not take marriage seriously, has in some cases, led to the liberated man. But I have seen cases where the wives of the liberated men wanted nothing other than to be conscientious housekeepers, wives and mothers, and who were devastated by their mate's departure.

We come, thirdly, to the sexual revolution. It has been upon us now since the mid sixties. In its grosser forms we see pornography with the X-rated movies, the adult bookshops, and the like. On most newsstands one finds a glut of magazines appealing with word and picture to the erotic impulses. The impact has crept into popular nighttime television and into many, many films. It would seem that a sexual encounter is now regarded by many as a thing no more serious than a good night kiss was once considered. Many of the younger people in our culture do not regard fornication (or adultery) as a moral issue at all. They have completely missed the cultural background that is familiar to everyone over 35--there may be a lot of illicit sex, but it is illicit. Wrong has been done, no matter how it be rationalized.

The commercial possibilities of sex are enormous, both as the main object of interest, or as a device to serve another end (advertising with sex). One must be a near hermit to escape its impact. To maintain sexual purity in this culture would seem to be a great deal more difficult than in other times. It wasn't easy to begin with, in any time.

How does this affect marriages? There may be several ways. I have seen it mostly in the light regard in which sexual morality is held by some married people. Again and again I hear about “affairs” as a cause in marriage breakups. In many social contexts (not least at places of work) flirtations are the order of the day. The air is constantly charged with sexual innuendo. Out of this context come liaisons, infidelities, romances, and, not infrequently, divorces. Why get terribly concerned about extramarital sex? It is done commonly. No one seems terribly upset by it. Or so some people reason. When men and women are “coupling” promiscuously, this exerts a cultural pressure even on Christians, who have been known to succumb, with tragic consequences.

Finally, we come to the matter of divorce laws. In 48 states the law allows no-fault divorce. Perhaps we remember the dramas of 30 years ago, in which the threat of divorce met the response. “I’ll fight you. I won’t give you a divorce.” Those days are gone now. They presumed that in a divorce there was fault, and that it had to be proved. Today no such presumption is made. That means that any one can divorce their mate at any time, for any reason, and there is absolutely nothing the party who wants to remain married can do to stop the proceedings. There may be some dispute regarding financial settlements, child custody, etc., but the divorce will go through.

I had thought that Christian marriages were held together by Christian faith. But I am discovering that many marriages in the church (were they Christian?) have

been held together by social pressure, or law. Now that these barriers have been removed, the marriages are not staying together. Divorce is easy to get. That in itself creates a problem for the troubled marriage. In addition this ease of divorce has increased the number of divorces. That lends a subtle social pressure. Whereas once divorce was done hesitantly because so few people did it, and so many frowned on it, today there is always social “approval “ to be found because so many other couples have done the same thing. We reason that no one is going to be shocked by what has become a commonplace. In some minds this social pressure can be twisted into outright approval. Or, at least, “if I am wrong, so are a lot of other people, and the boat can’t be that uncomfortable if so many people are in it.” Look across the Bible belt, at small towns in Arkansas, Georgia, Alabama (and not just in the Bible belt). Once a divorce in town was a topic of gossip, and there was a large measure of disapproval and disgrace. See how that has changed. So many in town are now divorced or divorcing. The social stigma that would once have stopped the divorce is now no longer operative. Imagine the problem in large metropolitan areas, where divorce is even more common, and where the process can be undertaken with virtual anonymity.

Christians and Culture

The first three cultural forces, the romantic ideal, aspects of the woman’s movement, and the sexual revolution, are not matters of law. Though we may not

all agree on how influential they are, can anyone argue they have not left their impact? How might they be counteracted? Certainly Christian people, who have different perspectives must, in a culture where free speech is valued, make their point of view known. This must be done vigorously, repeatedly, and intelligently. We cannot compel people to believe as we do. But we can make our case so that most people know what it is, and appreciate the reasons for which we believe as we do. If we do not make an appreciable impact on the “world,” at least we can influence the church. But if culture does have some effect on changing behavior, then the more we become a part of the culture, saying what we need to say, the more we might hope that the culture we have influenced will influence other people in the right way.

The fourth pressure, no-fault divorce, is a legal matter. Some argue that the law simply reflects what is done in the society. This is partly true, but the issue is more complex. Laws reflect culture but also change culture (what about laws against racial discrimination). People tell us we cannot legislate morals. But is that not overly simple? How can law escape having an impact on our morals? Both directly and indirectly, laws do, in fact, legislate morals. So, on what basis do we make a decision? There is no doubt that divorce is a terrible evil in our midst. Were we convinced that current divorce laws were a major contributing factor, ought we not labor to see that change be made, for the good of society? But what changes would genuinely effect good? The problems are indeed complex.

Where Do We Go From Here?

In its history the church has often been compelled to take an anti-cultural stance. Because American society is presumed by some to be dependent on something like Christian values, we may be reluctant to do so in our culture today. But when it comes to the question of the eroding home, the time has come to take a stand, no matter how unpopular it may seem. Even if our society misunderstands, ignores, or scoffs, we must be willing to be distinctively Christian.

There are other things the church can do. Where possible without compromise of basic religious convictions, churches can take the lead in the community in uniting all who are concerned about the importance of the home. If society hears a united voice from the churches, the impact of what is said will be increased. Such a stance is consistent with our long-time plea for unity.

Other steps can be taken within churches. Since the solution is one that must be long term, centering on those who are now children and adolescents, there must be a long-range program. Congregations should implement total programs (Bible school, pulpit, church bulletins, special features, etc.) which will constantly keep Christian perspective on the home before the members. They might include the following:

- (1) A continuous program of education from the earliest grades through the teen years in what marriage should be. Especially important would be youth programs in preparation for marriage.

(2) A program of premarital counseling. (Should a minister even perform a ceremony for a couple who are unwilling to accept such counseling?)

(3) Continuing emphasis through classes and preaching on strengthening marriages. This will be for those already married, to improve the quality of their relationship.

(4) Making available resources (classes, books, films, etc.) on handling crises that arise in marriage. This could include such matters as dealing with pressure, sexual adjustment, financial management, learning to communicate, etc. If the church cannot provide these resources, they can make referrals to those who can.

(5) Postmarital counseling.

(6) A sensitivity on the part of church leaders in spotting troubled marriages so there can be ministry before it is too late. (This is not an easy thing to do, but I am convinced it can be done by those who work hard at establishing loving rapport with their people.)

I would make one more observation. Many of us are facing a situation we have not faced before. Today a person may divorce a mate when there is no hint of infidelity. This leaves the “victim” alone, wanting to be married, but under the stigma of “divorced.” Can this abandoned person (who cannot charge the other with unchastity), remarry? How should the church deal with this problem? It is one that must be faced, for it is becoming increasingly common.

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