

April - 1980 Marvin Dick

No. 8  
Box - 6  
Folder - IV

Response - Service of Divorced and Remarried Persons

In dealing with the question of church service for divorced and remarried persons there are two separate but related issues which intersect: (1) the question of accepting into full church membership divorced and remarried persons, and (2) the basis for selection of church leadership. The Mennonite Brethren church is struggling with both of these. Most of our churches have found it more necessary to deal with the first than with the second.

In regard to the first issue Marvin Hein suggests that as a church we practice forgiveness and acceptance toward those who are divorced and remarried. This, I take it, includes full membership in the church. Let me cross-examine this suggestion briefly.

(1) Does not the Bible uphold permanence in marriage as the ideal? There is no question that this is the intent of the teaching of the Old Testament, Jesus and Paul!

(2) Is there then any room for divorce? Because these texts themselves contain exception clauses (adultery and divorce by an unbelieving partner) there is the recognition of human frailty and sin which results in our not living up to the ideal. Because we are sinful, marriages do break down and divorce is the result.

(3) What is the relationship of a divorced person to God? Here the texts which speak regarding divorce are not as helpful, as other portions of the New Testament. A dominant theme in the New Testament is that forgiveness for sin is freely available to those who repent and turn from sin. The New Testament emphasizes that in Christ those who were afar off are brought near, barriers

CENTER FOR M. B. STUDIES IN CANADA  
77 HENDERSON HIGHWAY  
WINNIPEG, MANITOBA R2L 1L1

are broken down, the past is behind and a new life is ahead. Divorce, like any other sin can be forgiven and a divorced person is accepted without reservation by God.

(4) How shall the church respond to a divorced person? The church as the redemptive, forgiving community of Christ should accept divorced persons who are repentant and receive them into full membership. In this way we incarnate the gospel which teaches forgiveness.

(5) Will not such a practice compromise the church's ability to uphold marriage as permanent? The church must do two things simultaneously: to teach with vigor the Biblical ideal of permanence in marriage and to demonstrate the forgiving gospel of Christ by receiving into fellowship and membership those who have not lived up to this ideal. Granted, there will be a tension between them, but let it be a creative, life-giving tension. Faithfulness to the gospel of Jesus Christ demands that we do both.

The second issue is the basis for selection of church leadership. In my estimation the whole matter of leadership based upon gifts given by God and the relationship of this to the qualification passages in I Timothy 3:2-12 and Titus 1:6-9 is not adequately dealt with in Marvin Hein's paper. Again, let us ask several questions.

(1) What is the basis for leadership selection in the New Testament?

There are two strands of thought. One is that God has given gifts to the church (Romans 12, I Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4). These gifts are to be used in ministry that builds up the church. The implication is that the church must discern these gifts and affirm the leadership exercised by those who are using their gifts. But we also have texts (I Timothy 3:2-12 and Titus 1:6-9) which give certain qualifications for those who would exercise leadership in

the church. These texts emphasize behavioral and character factors. Thus we have two concerns, both important: the gifts that are present and the character and behavior of the one exercising the gifts which influences how the gifts will be used in the church.

(2) What is the relationship between the two? This question leads to other questions. If a person possesses a leadership gift but does not meet the qualifications suggested, what then becomes of the gift? Does this mean the person cannot serve? On the other hand, if a person meets the qualifications suggested, is that all that is needed? Why is nothing said in Titus and Timothy about gifts? And who is to judge if a person meets these qualifications?

(3) What was Paul's intent in giving these qualifications? It was Paul's concern that persons of sound character and integrity of behavior be selected as leaders in the churches so they can be trusted and respected. These qualifications are guidelines for discerning such people. That they be gifted for their task, though not stated, is assumed. In that same sense these qualifications can be useful to us today.

(4) How rigidly should these be applied? It is my position that they were not intended to be a checklist which required a 100% score to qualify. It appears to me that it would be difficult today to find a pastor in the Mennonite Brethren Church who would pass such a rigidly applied test. If the phrase "husband of one wife" were legalistically interpreted, single persons and widowers who have remarried would also be excluded from pastoral service. Obviously they were not intended as legalistic tests. In an age of grace such legalism is out of place.

(5) What is the issue being addressed here? The issue is selection of leaders with strong character, who are good, trustworthy people with orderly lives. Not meeting one of the suggested qualifications would not in itself mean the person

was of unfit character. That is, in fact, how we have interpreted this in the Mennonite Brethren Church. All of us know respected leaders whose children are not believers, who are not noted for their gentleness in dealing with others, or who are over-weight (lack of self control). These factors in themselves do not disqualify these persons from being leaders. Other positive traits of character lead us to respect and follow their leadership. The same approach should be followed in the matter of service of divorced and remarried persons. That one factor alone should not disqualify anyone. Let us have the honesty to challenge our practice of applying the qualifying test more rigidly in the case of divorced and remarried persons than in some of the other areas mentioned. (Let us keep in mind also, as Marvin Hein suggests, that there is lack of agreement among scholars that "husband of one wife" refers specifically to divorced persons.)

(6) What then should be the policy of the Mennonite Brethren Church toward service of divorced and remarried persons? A person should not be rejected solely because of divorce and remarriage. Each person's situation should be treated individually. The person's home congregation, the congregation calling the individual, or the mission agency should carefully discern both the gifts and the quality of Christian character in the individual. If a person <sup>has been</sup> divorced, his/her present attitude toward the divorce should be carefully explored to determine if there is a repentant spirit and a commitment to the permanence of the person's present marriage. These would become part of the basis upon which this discernment would be made. Some might in fact be rejected because of unresolved issues or defensive attitudes toward the situation of divorce.

(7) If a divorced person were accepted for service, would this person be capable of upholding with integrity the permanence of marriage? Many suspect

that such a person could not. My own experience is that divorced persons are often very effective in encouraging the permanence of marriage, for they are very aware of the pain of divorce and realize that divorce is an inadequate attempt to solve marital difficulties. I have observed young people to be strongly persuaded by such urging from divorced persons. Their experiences give them authenticity that is convincing. They have the same effect that a recovering alcoholic has in urging sobriety and helping others out of alcoholism.

(8) What of those who are divorced while serving in church ministry functions?

I would endorse the suggestions made by Marvin Hein that such a person voluntarily step aside for a period of time. This is necessary for the person to work through the situation created by divorce. After a period of time the person could again submit to a process of discernment to determine readiness for further service.

I concur that this is a difficult and problematic issue for us to face. But it is well for us to face it honestly and openly. This is the time for us to be courageous and bold in dealing with this matter in a compassionate, forgiving and reconciling spirit.

submitted by Mervin Dick  
April 1980

