

## Is there life after divorce? - March 1984

It was the final night of the convention. The crowds were ecstatic with their praise and joy and were taking a long time to leave the auditorium. As I left the platform I saw a middle-aged woman standing near the front as though wanting to speak with me yet a little timid to do so. Walking over to her I asked, "Can I help you?" "I'm not really sure", she replied. "I don't know if I've a right to come and speak to you - I've been divorced." She said the words in much the same way as a leper, 2000 years ago, would have cried out, "I'm a leper, ringing his bell and warning people to keep their distance. I could see the pain of inner hurt in her eyes. She was bleeding in her soul. I knew I couldn't ignore her and must take time to talk with her. The compassion of Jesus was reaching out to heal her broken life.

### **A Situation to be Faced.**

At one time the words "I've been divorced" would have had a totally different effect upon me. It used to ring all the alarm bells in my theology. My legalistic mind would have quickly overwhelmed any heart-feeling of compassion. Now, after 24 years of ministry, much of it in pastoral situations, my theological position regarding divorce has been tested and challenged. The last ten years have seen what was a trickle of divorcees coming into our churches turn into a fast-flowing river. We are regularly confronted now with the human tragedy and hurt produced by a broken home and marriage. All this has had a deep effect upon me as a pastor, causing me to feel more of the compassion of Jesus for those involved. I was advised by some not to write on such a subject as it is still too controversial. Undoubtedly many will read what I write with mixed feelings. Since their doctrinal position is opposed to divorce or remarriage on any grounds they have not formulated a counselling approach for those who have experienced this deep tragedy. Others will wonder how a happily married father of four can write about divorce when he has never experienced it. But does a doctor have to experience sickness in order to treat those who have it? After several years of detailed counselling involvement in these issues, I feel close enough to the hurts and pains of such people to be able to address the situation from the Word of God. Often it is those outside the immediate pain who can help put things into perspective.

### **Help For The Wounded**

So whatever, your feelings as you approach this article, let me at least state my aims. This is not meant to be a study of the theological implications of divorce in the Word of God. Nor is it an attempt to provide a doctrinal position for your church. I'm writing for those of you who are experiencing the trauma and emotions that follow divorce. I write in the hope that what I say will reassure you. I want you to see that the purpose of God, like his love, is eternal and still open for you. I want you to be provoked by what I write to start on the road back to wholeness.

### **Emotional Shock Waves**

For years divorce had been a matter of statistics, ones that horrified you as much as anyone else. Never

did you dream that those statistics would one day include you, and you are still numbed by the shock of it. Probably in the early months you felt drained, empty, living in a mental stupor. Day after day the feelings of failure, hurt and anger all kept crashing into each other. At first you couldn't bear to be by yourself; you wanted to be as active as possible. Then you began to withdraw into your private world of hurt and pain.

Some believe divorce to be emotionally harder on the woman than on the man. My experience is that, emotionally, men and women are the same they face the same feelings. It is no easier for a man to rebuild life after divorce than it is for a woman. Both experience the same emotional shock waves that persist for months after the legal proceedings have come to an end. Mentally, you had probably thought of every means of enabling you to survive the actual divorce proceedings, but the chances are you were ill-prepared for the emotional shocks that followed.

## **Starting Again**

Eventually you face yourself and say, 'I must start again', only to find just how difficult this can be. You begin to wonder whether everybody and everything is conspiring against you. There are the memories, the old photograph albums, the children, the friends, the places — all of which keep reminding you of your former married life. Often, the terms of divorce necessitate contact between you and your former spouse, either over the children or maintenance and support. Then there are all the practical problems of finding a place to live and funding for yourself as well as the fears about your prospects for the future. When confronted by all these factors, your 'macho man' image begins to wear thin and you find it impossible to hide your insecurities. Or, as a newly 'liberated' woman, you find that the world is far from quick to move over and make way for your creative ideas or embarkation on a new career. It's a hard and often cold world outside of home and marriage.

## **But How?**

In addition to all this there's the inner guilt that produces depression and condemnation in the mind. As a Christian, you're not sure whether this is God's judgment or the devil's efforts to destroy you. Let me say here that if the conviction is of God it will always carry the hope of forgiveness and restoration. If the guilt you're feeling brings a condemnation without hope of cleansing, forgiveness and restoration, then it is not of God. With all this confronting you it isn't easy to break free of the past, yet you realise that, unless you do so, life will never open itself to you. You know that your past is the enemy of your present and that you must free yourself from it. The big question is how. There may be many who can analyse your feelings and share with you the hurts and pains, but what you need now is to know how to find wholeness.

## **Steps to Wholeness**

For months you'll feel very much like the little child riding on a train you've gone into a dark tunnel and wonder if you'll ever see the light of day again. Happily we can say, 'Yes, it is an experience that will pass. Tragic, hurtful,

painful — but passing. Now let's consider some of the ways in which, in my counselling experience, people have rediscovered wholeness following divorce.

### **1. Settle The Guilt Issue**

Many in the Christian community will misunderstand your position, now that you're divorced. But your greatest struggle will not be with them or their theology but with the inner guilt that you're experiencing. It's important to remember that whatever measure of wrong there has been on your part, God's mercy, love and acceptance remain unchanged! There is a way to have a heart right with God again. There is a way to freedom from guilt. It is simply this: 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness' (1 Jn 1:9). If your heart is convinced of guilt, it can be equally convinced of cleansing from that guilt. Just as you once came to Christ for salvation, repenting of your many former sins, come to him afresh now and rediscover his help in time of need. The present issue is not what place you will have in the church or what ministry may or may not now be open to you. The greatest issue for you is peace with God and with yourself. Jesus said, 'Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest' (Mt 11:28). When Jesus met the woman at the well and spoke to her about the waters of life he was already aware that she had five broken marriages and was living with a man who was not her husband. But far from engaging her in theological argument about the rights or wrongs of divorce, Jesus assured her of his love and desire to see the thirsting of her heart met. He is no different in his attitude to you today!

### **2. Deal With Wrong Attitudes**

Deal with all negative attitudes of bitterness and resentment towards the persons you've been hurt by in the past. It's as we learn to forgive that we discover forgiveness. As we release others from our heart, so we find our own hearts released. Bitterness only hurts ourselves. Nobody was more wronged than Jesus, yet when he hung on the cross he said, 'Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.'

### **3. Learn To Love Yourself Again**

God loves you. He has never ever stopped loving you. He never ever will stop loving you! The trauma of divorce often means suffering from your own self-rejection. How many times have you said, 'If only I had...shown more affection; gone out more with him or her, not been so difficult, been more communicative, shown more interest, etc. etc.'....? Part of the necessary inner healing is your refusal to allow all the "if only I had's" to so overwhelm you that you live thereafter rejected by yourself. Of course there are many things that need changing in you. That's true not only of you as a divorced person but of all of us. But you must learn to love yourself if it's an essential part of the whole process of healing.

Think, then, of the things you did do that expressed your affection or your interest. Think of the times you were long-suffering and tender, when you showed wisdom, when you maintained a right attitude when wrongly accused or rejected by others. Don't throw out the baby with the bath water. You were undoubtedly wrong in

some things but you were not all wrong. Where you did make mistakes, commit yourself to change and grow in those areas.

#### **4. Determine Not To Settle For Emptiness**

Fear and rejection will always paint a lack-lustre view of the future. They condition the mind to settle for living a dull life. Give way to them and you'll be afraid to form relationships for fear people will discover 'I've been divorced'. You'll be afraid to venture into new relationships for fear of new hurt. You must refuse to be imprisoned by such attitudes. There are creative abilities inside you as yet untapped. There are things you have always wanted to do but never ever attempted. Now is an opportune moment to begin. Renew interest in everything you are doing in life, whether it's choosing a vacation or simply doing your job. Don't view work merely as a means of getting a pay cheque to keep you going for another week. Instead, explore betterment in your career. Plan places you would like to see. Reach out to the kind of people with whom you would like to share some of these explorations and adventures. After divorce, money has a habit of running away more than ever, so you might say to yourself, "It's all very well Bryn writing like that but I don't have the means, the money, to do these things". Well, try to become more creative with what you do have — in your kitchen, for example. It's surprising what you can make out of what appears so little. Take a careful look at your home as to its appearance. Consider how you can redecorate it with articles that express your newfound commitment to rebuilding your life. You will learn in this way not only how to cope but how to live again. This is an opportunity for you to milk your sorrows of all their hidden blessings.

#### **5. Refuse To Be Ruled By Memory**

You'll grow old quickly if you rock yourself back and forth in the chair recalling the past. Memories of happy times will depress you; memory of failure will destroy you. The past is the enemy of both present and future. Now that you've rediscovered the cleansing and forgiveness of Christ, remember again what he has planned for you. You have a future! It's time to adopt the attitude of Paul when he said, 'I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus' (Phil 3:12-14). Refuse to carry your past into your future. Refuse to be ruled by memory. Fill your mind with the Word of God and press into his promises.

#### **6. Evaluate Your Friends**

Most divorced people seem to feel that former friends won't want anything more to do with them. Don't assume that. You may well be surprised, as you contact some, to find that they are more than ready and willing to renew their friendship. Equally don't assume that all will take this line. Some will reject you, disagreeing with what you have done. Some will side with your former partner. Others will see you as a threat to their own happy marriage. Any such rejection must be kept in perspective. It is important for you to realise that their problem is with 'divorce' not with you as a person. This will enable you to adopt the right attitude to them, even in their rejection of you. The roots of bitterness and resentment towards others need not spring up in your heart.

## **7. Don't Indulge In A 'Pity Party'**

Birthdays, Christmas, Easter, Summer— all such seasons tend to rekindle memories. Everything seems to conspire to bring new stress. The tendency at such times is to withdraw into your shell to hold a 'pity party' — every thought is 'Poor me!' Or you launch yourself into a whirl of activity and extrovert behaviour in an effort to escape being alone with your thoughts. There's no need for all this, for 'God is our refuge and strength, an Ever present help in trouble'(Ps46: 1). When things seem to be pressing you from every side, discover the reality of God's promise: 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor 12:9). Be like the psalmist at such times and say to yourself 'Why are you downcast o my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God' (Ps43:5). Remember, God doesn't hold you off at a distance because you've been divorced! 'Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need' (Heb 4:16).

## **8. Reach Out To Others**

Now that you're free of guilt, bitterness, past memory and pity partying, it's time for the new you to reach out for new relationships. Do so with faith for a different future! At first obviously, you'll be timid in relationship, fearful lest it be misunderstood. Yes, you'll still make mistakes in life— who doesn't? It is not the dubious privilege of the divorced only! Though you may sometimes fail and disappoint people, don't allow your mind to exaggerate your failures. And don't take every rebuff from circumstances or people as a signal for a return of the hurt of past relationships. It's wise to avoid any relationship becoming so intense that you feel pressured towards marriage again. Before ever such a step is seriously contemplated you need to seek counsel from your pastor. Remember, never go into another marriage in the hope that you will thus find healing from the past. Only people who are whole should move into another marriage you want to share a home, not a hospital. Statistics show that the divorce rate for 'second time' marriages is greater than for first time marriages. Having said this, the only way to wholeness as a person is in the context of life shared with other people. Let your divorce, then, no longer be a stumbling block but a stepping stone to a new place both of fellowship with God and of friendship with people.

## **9. Find The Right Church**

Finding a place of real fellowship in the church is vital to your ongoing spiritual life. Don't be afraid to seek an interview with a pastor and share very openly that you're divorced. You'll quickly detect what is the attitude towards you. If it's one of compassion and acceptance you could well feel comfortable in such a church. It can be a beautiful environment for the rediscovery of the grace and blessing of serving God.

If the response is cold and reflects a fixed doctrinal position that can't accommodate divorced persons, then quietly leave without resentment and seek a spiritual home where a new you can rebuild life in fellowship with God's people. That way you'll prove that life can truly be enjoyed— even after a divorce!