

# The Divorced Christian

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A veteran mission administrator says his agency receives at least one application a week from Christians who have been divorced! He says some apply because they find no ministry position in the church or its institutions at home. It can be even more difficult to get into a mission agency. If you are one of the divorced Christians who has discovered this, tentmaking may be a good option for you.

As you know, even two decades ago divorce was rare in evangelical circles. It still is much less frequent among Christians than in society at large. In the U.S. in 1996, one in three marriages ended in divorce, but among regular church attenders, only one in 1005! But that is a great increase, and church and mission leaders are struggling with its complexities.

You probably never expected your marriage to break up and you also consider divorce a option of last resort. Some people say you forfeited God's perfect will and must now be content with his permissive will—a second, less ideal plan. I hope you already know that is untrue. God is not responsible for your choices, but he knew in advance what they would be and that your marriage would fail. His perfect plan for you from then on had already taken into account your new reality. But his perfect plan for you does not dispel the practical obstacles.

We will consider 4 subjects:

- 1) How mission agencies are dealing with divorce.
- 2) How a few religions and cultures view divorce.
- 3) Why tentmaking may be a good option.
- 4) Considerations and recommendations in view of biblical, cultural and religious factors.

## Mission agencies and divorce

More than a decade ago, conservative OMF, AIM and AWM were among the mission agencies already considering the question of divorced applicants, according to Robert Morris (EMQ, 7/1984, pp. 214 ff.). But even if mission leaders are open to divorced members, most of their U.S. donor churches are not, and their overseas churches are even more conservative.

Ultimately, what matters is Scripture. The most relevant passages are Gen.1:26-28, Deut.24:14, Matt. 5:31, 32, 19:112, Mk.10:112, Lk.16:18, 1 Cor.7:135, Lev. 21: 14. But difficult exegesis has produced divergent views. These three are most prevalent.

Most evangelical scholars, churches and members (including divorced ones), agree on the following points: 1) Marriage is ordained by God as a lifelong monogamous union of male and female. 2) Singleness is not ideal, but is honorable, as shown by Jesus' example, and God calls some Christians to it for the sake of his kingdom (Mt.19:10ff, 1 Cor.7:26-35). 3) The Scriptures forbid Christians to divorce. 4) Divorce was permitted in Israel to control its practice, because the people rejected God's standards. 5) Divorce in Israel was instituted by man but regulated by God. 6) The intention was not to condone divorce, not even for adultery. The only exception—the demand of an unsaved spouse (1 Cor.7: 15). 7) Divorce is forgivable like every other sin. 8) Christians who divorce contrary to Christ's command (Mt. 19: 19) are to remain unmarried or seek reconciliation (1 Cor.7:10, 11), even if the partner is not a believer.

Less strict groups say that: 1) A spouse's extramarital sexual sin is an acceptable reason for divorce. 2) Any who divorce for other reasons commit adultery and cause others to do so. 3) Any who divorce by biblical concessions, or whose divorced spouse dies, are free to remarry. 4) Divorce stems from sin, but is not itself necessarily sinful when practiced according to God's regulations (Mt. 19:89).

More conservative groups say that: 1) Jesus and Paul maintain strict prohibition against divorce under all circumstances. 2) Those who divorce commit adultery and cause others to do so. 3) Those who divorce for any reason may not remarry. 4) Divorce is always less than God's will and therefore sinful, even where Mosaic law conceded it. (Mt. 19:8).

Most agencies believe missionary candidates must pass the standards set for church elders and deacons in the pastoral epistles (1 Tim. 3, Titus 1). Priests could not marry divorced women (Lev.21:14).

We do not like double standards, but it is God who has set more stringent requirements for leaders. They are role models for members, and they formally represent the church to society.

Mission leaders do not want to exclude a Christian whom God may be calling and yet they do not want to encourage divorce by providing divorced role models. Some agencies adopt policies that are biblical in both form and content, and then make exceptions on a case-by-case basis.

Morris recommends a two-part plan. The first part lists an agency's absolute exclusions. These may or may not include the following: Twice-divorced persons, those for whom reconciliation is still possible, those divorced since conversion on grounds other than adultery or desertion, remarried divorced persons, etc.

The second lists criteria for evaluation of an applicant. A negative answer does not bar the applicant, but cumulative negative answers may. 1) Is the applicant free of financial responsibilities? 2) Is the applicant free of child custody obligations? (I know a mission that accepted a divorced woman with her daughter.) 3) Has church discipline been applied? 4) Was the spouse a nonbeliever? 5) Did the divorce take place before conversion? 6) Have all avenues of reconciliation been explored? 7) Is there evidence of present stability in relationships? 8) Are national colleagues in the target country willing to accept the candidate? 9) Is the applicant the "innocent" or the "offended" party? 10) Have three or more years passed since divorce? 11) Did the divorce meet scriptural standards? 12) Does applicant wish short-term service only? 13) Is applicant willing for a non-church ministry? (Teaching, nursing, agriculture, etc.)

Even when a mission agency wants to accept a divorced applicant, it must consider 1) its supporting churches at home, 2) its mission churches abroad, 3) the culture of the target country and 4) the wellbeing of the applicant.

Service abroad is not holier than at home, but it is usually harder. Stable marriage is important for cross-cultural adjustment and survival. The stresses and strains of living abroad are not conducive to healing survivors of broken marriages.

### Divorce in diverse cultures

The cultural problem raises additional questions. Is it better to go where divorce is accepted? Mongolia has a high rate of divorce. But the little Muslim island country of Maldives has the highest rate in the world! But, is that not exactly the kind of place where we should be stricter about our Christian role models to counteract the promiscuity? Only a strong new pattern in the church can change a society.

The dominant religion in an area influences its views on divorce. All countries have broken marriages and abandoned spouses and children. We all dislike divorce, but must favor divorce laws, as even Moses realized.

High rates of divorce occur where marriage is too easy, or there is inadequate counseling. Arranged marriages often work out well, because the two families objectively consider points of affinity conducive to good marriages—equal social and economic status, family background and compatibility, personality, etc. The partners, who may not have met, often fall in love. Family pressures help keep the marriage together.

#### Roman Catholic cultures

Most Latin countries now allow civil marriages though the Catholic church considers only religious marriages valid, and does not grant divorces. If civil divorce is possible, there can be no remarriage in the church without a formal Catholic annulment of the first. The appeal to Rome can be long and costly, and is therefore available mainly to the rich or famous. The former marriage may be annulled on trumped up charges, even if it lasted for decades and produced children! Most requests come from the U.S.

Many Catholics never marry. In the two-thirds world their church makes a wedding too expensive. When two people live together awhile and produce children, it is viewed as a common law marriage. (Evangelicals require them to marry before baptism.)

Common law marriages are often based on physical attraction and are rarely properly glued together, so they easily come apart. Where divorce is not permitted, wives and children suffer. The man, already unfaithful, just moves in with another woman (and maybe two or three after that!), leaving a trail of children. Abandoned wives may have no option but prostitution.

In the Andean countries, very young men start common-law families, then come alone to the city for education. Once established in their careers, they formally marry a city girl from their new upper middle class, abandoning the first family. Some discreetly maintain both. (An American woman who married a Peruvian student in the U.S., found on arrival in Peru that her husband was dividing his time between her and his other family. She could not leave because she and her children were legally her husband's property.)

In Brazil, many men expect to retain their mistresses, so they choose a wife, not primarily for companionship, but for public presentability and motherhood. The Christian students I worked with aimed for higher standards and for faithfulness in marriage. But the older men in the churches taunted the young men for not visiting prostitutes!

Our students, mostly converted out of non-evangelical backgrounds, were greatly impressed by the marriages of our staff and speaker couples at student conferences, and by their godly parenting. It was something most had never seen. It is hard to overemphasize the value and power of this kind of marriage modeling.

#### Islamic cultures

Marriages are usually arranged by families—although the son or daughter may have a veto privilege. A Muslim man may have up to four wives if he can afford them and treat them equally. A first wife may even welcome a second one to share household chores. Islam allows only the man to initiate divorce, and he can dismiss his wife with a simple paper.

But in the Middle Eastern Arab countries the man has to pay a substantial dowry to the wife's family. This is the wife's financial security in case of divorce. But young women in the United Arab Emirates, about 5% of whom are university educated, are asking \$20,000 to \$25,000! So the men marry foreign guest workers.

They can marry a Filipina for only \$1000. The rulers fear the Arab blood of its sparse population is being diluted. The Arab women will lower their fees if the government passes fair divorce laws.

Muslims from Africa are flooding into France, where they already outnumber Protestants. A man with very modest earnings may have two or three wives and twenty children, living in a two-bedroom apartment! The wives work and contribute to family support. But there is enormous friction among the wives. Then the man makes visits to Africa (on his wives' earnings), to see a fourth wife! That is the maximum Islam allows. More than one gives a man great social and economic stature! In Africa it is possible only for the very wealthy. This problem may be unique to France because most European countries forbid polygamy.

### Hindu cultures

Marriages are usually arranged by families. But girl babies become a financial burden on the parents, so they are often abandoned or killed. Sonograms have made abortions common. The problem is that the bride's family must pay the dowry. Yet her family gains no economic benefit, because she lives with the groom's family, the virtual slave of the mother-in-law.

Hinduism makes no provision for broken marriages, but civil divorce is possible in India. Many men opt for an easier solution. Their families can get a second, bigger dowry, and even a third, if they can get rid of his wives. The husband and the mother-in-law force the wife "to commit suicide." She is set on fire or "jumps" out of a high rise window. The incidence of "accidental" deaths among young wives is out of all proportion to the population. They are murders.

In conclusion, Buddhists, Jews, and other religions also have different ways to marry and divorce. In all of these cultures, the Church must provide the highest possible standards for marriage and family. Divorce in the church is never ideal. But it is a much better solution than its alternatives elsewhere.

### Protestant cultures

Divorce is common in northern Europe. Ecumenical Protestant churches long ago lowered their standards. Divorce is too common in the U.S., but a 1995 study shows it is not as prevalent as the media indicate. But one in 1005 among Evangelicals, is too high a rate and troublesome.

George Ensworth, Jr., in *Christianity Today* (5/21/82), points out that when a spouse is widowed there is a funeral, with moral and spiritual support. But spouses go through the living death of divorce, with little help before, during or after this crisis. They may experience ostracism in church.

He points out that the failure of a Christian's marriage is also a failure of the church. Marriage is not only a civil contract before society, but a covenant before God. Getting married should be more difficult, with more counseling before and during marriage, and during divorce when it occurs.

Ensworth points out that divorce is rarely a sudden sin, but is the culmination of months and years of chronic sinning in a downward spiraling relationship. Christian spouses presume upon each other's dislike for divorce, but if one finds an irresistible new mate, this roadblock is easy to hurdle.

Plenty of unattached hunters prey on married spouses. But the sins that destroy marriage relationships are the same ones that destroy all other relationships—between parents and children, among siblings, friends, fellow students, colleagues at work, church members. The same sins plague relationships between church and mission leaders, and among missionaries.

Yet, pastors and teachers rarely provide help in the matter of godly conduct, interpersonal relationships, conflict resolution, etc. Most parents cannot teach their families adequately because their own relational skills are too weak. Their children's problems are partly due to the parents' problems with each other, with their families and with other people.

We need, not just teaching, but training, with a plan for evaluation and accountability, because of our propensity for self-deception (Jer. 17:9).

James 5:16 says we are to confess our sins to one another. It is easier to confess to God, than to someone we may have to face on Monday morning. Protestants rejected Catholic confession to priests, by discarding all interpersonal confession, disobeying God's command in James 5:16. To fill this enormous hole in our spiritual experience, many Christians, like many nonbelievers, seek therapy! (Often from non-believing therapists.)

An effective plan for implementing James 5:16 was taught to us in Brazil by Dr. Hans Burki of Switzerland. It is described in *Zweierschaft*, a German book he wrote 20 years ago.

Two Christians of the same sex form partnerships. Partners keep daily journals of failures and victories, problems and blessings, lessons learned, prayers answered, etc. They learn to share this data weekly with their partners, who can be trusted to keep their confidences, because they are also sharing intimate information. Spouses become partners to each other but also meet with another couple. The goal—growth in self-knowledge, godly conduct and interpersonal relationships.

Churches should give members more help in divorce. Olszewsky says churches must set the broken bones of divorce in repentance, and mend them in forgiveness. He says we need not only have "a Christian understanding of divorce, but an understanding of Christian divorce, one that leads into reconciliation rather than alienation. . . . God makes gracious provision for us to deal with the irremediable, destructive situations in every human relationship." As he makes provision for all our sins.

### Tentmaking—a good option

Most divorced Christians who apply to Global Opportunities seek tentmaking options as their first choice. Others apply because they have been turned down by mission agencies. Some are referred to Global Opportunities by mission agencies who reluctantly turn them down, but who hope we can help them find a tentmaking opening. Ministry in the context of a paid, secular job abroad can be an excellent option.

But in our screening process we must take into account the same concerns that mission agencies have, because tentmaking is not second class missionary work with lower standards. We must also consider theological and practical difficulties, because wherever you go, you must serve as part of the local, national churches and with the expatriate evangelicals inside and outside of the missionary community—most with conservative views.

Yet, whether divorced people should serve abroad depends ultimately on only one thing—whether God wants them to do that. Their effectiveness in ministry depends on whether it pleases God to give them spiritual authority. You have spiritual authority when people around you sense God speaking to them through you.

The advantages of tentmaking:

1. A secular position gives financial independence, so the applicant creates no support problem for a mission agency or for home churches.
2. A secular position provides organizational independence. You still must belong to a fellowship and accountability group—a team of tentmakers in the same host country, a local church, or then, an international church, if it is evangelical and encourages cross-cultural ministry. (Many are absorbed in activities for expatriates, with little interest in local people.)

You may want to become a field partner with a mission agency. The same agency that cannot accommodate you as a full member may be delighted to have you as a field partner. It could be a steppingstone into full membership, if that matters to you. You are easier to incorporate into the mission if you need no support and are not seeking church leadership.

3. A secular position provides a good context for low-key fishing evangelism. The Gospel must be seen as well as heard. The best evangelism occurs where outsiders can observe Christians' lives and hear their fitting words about God at appropriate moments. You must avoid saying so much in an initial conversation that you close doors to further opportunities. In spiritually hostile countries, you can fish out seekers, avoiding adversaries.

You focus on personal integrity, quality work and caring relationships. Then you put out verbal bait—a fitting word or sentence about God, tactfully introduced into secular conversation. You learn to drop spiritual bombshells in a casual, natural way, as though everyone would agree. All this is bait. The point is to induce people to ask the questions you long to answer.

Evangelism is easy and enjoyable when you are not invading people's privacy, but are answering questions they have asked because they want to know. Their questions also tell you the timing is good, and the person is not rushing for an appointment. Their questions also tell you what to say and how to pray. Seeker's questions reveal what they already understand of biblical truth, their misconceptions, felt needs, fears, obstacles to faith, etc. From among the indifferent or spiritually hostile people around you, you have fished out a seeker.

4. A secular position, even full-time, permits full-time spiritual ministry, because you integrate the two. Your ministry will also spill over into your free time and your home, through your hospitality. Your ministry will be even more full-time than that of supported missionaries!

5. A secular position may also help you contribute significantly to people's wellbeing. All teaching is enormously helpful to local people. Teaching English increases their earning ability. Business contributes to the economy and produces more jobs. All vocations help improve the quality of life in your host country. Your secular vocation is another way to glorify God and live out the Gospel, although it cannot replace evangelism. God says, "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you, because in its welfare is your welfare." Jer. 29:7.

6. A secular position gives your message credibility. People expect religious workers to say religious words. They get paid for it. But they listen harder when professionals who are not religious workers talk about God, knowing they must mean it.

7. A secular position helps you identify with the local people. You move naturally in vocational circles, in an area of your expertise, where you know the mentality and the jargon.

You make Christ known to a sector of society not easily reached by others. God wants every structure of society infiltrated with believers. This goes one step further than just learning the language and identifying with the culture of your new host country.

8. A secular position helps you to model Christian ministry for local church members, demonstrating that secular work is no excuse for not being deeply involved in ministry. God would not thank an engineer for becoming a pastor if he is to serve as an engineer. By giving liberally to the Lord's work, you demonstrate that your earnings are not your own. By hosting guests and home Bible studies you demonstrate that your home is not your own, and that hospitality is not optional for Christians.

9. A secular position gives you the joy of serving God in a needy culture at no cost to the church! Paul said, "Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel because I am obligated to do that. But I rejoice that I can make it free of charge!" 1 Cor. 9.

10. A secular position helps you model tentmaking as a ministry option for Christians at home or abroad. We need many more if we are to finish world evangelization.

11. A secular position helps you provide a role model for divorced Christians, at home and abroad, many of whom settle for less than their best.

Practical considerations:

The only thing that matters is whether God wants you to serve overseas. He can overrule obstacles for you. In my case he overruled health problems. Mission agencies would not have taken me, but secular employers did. God called me to tentmaking! He surprised me with a salaried, secular job abroad, and then gave me 21 years of excellent health and cross-cultural ministry!

1. But do not try to go if you have had more than one divorce. One GO applicant had three! Even secular employers balk. They look for stability in marriage and good personal relationships. Serve God faithfully at home.

2. Wait at least three years before going abroad. Many people go overseas to escape an embarrassing or difficult situation at home. Cultural pressures aggravate problems. Even secular employers are reluctant to send a recently divorced person abroad.

3. Do not go if you are hoping to remarry. You will be in a desert as far as potential mates are concerned. Many cultures allow no casual dating. Even greater restrictions curb Christian workers. The good will of local Christians and missionaries would vanish if you became involved with a missionary, a local Christian or nonbeliever. Look for a spouse at home.

4. A divorced woman must consider if she can live with the restrictions on her relationships—which will be even stricter than those for other single women. Most cultures still do not have a comfortable place for single women. They need to show care in their dress, living arrangements and conduct.

The situation is most extreme in Saudi Arabia. Most vocations are prohibited to women. They may not even do secretarial work in an office with men, nor drive a car. Saudi Arabia hires many foreigners on single status, for short terms. Spouses may be separated for a year or more. So the expatriate communities are moral cesspools. Women patients almost spit at Christian nurses in a Saudi hospital before they found out these young women were different from the rest.

5. A divorced man must consider if he is able to live in an even more restricted situation, because in almost any culture he will be morally suspect. This is true of all single men of marriageable age, but is worse for a divorced man. To avoid suspicion, even married missionaries rarely drive a woman anywhere unless his wife or child comes along.

## Recommendations

1. Tell people in your new host country about your divorce as soon as possible. Even if remarried, do not hide your marital history. We cannot overemphasize this. It is easy to tell people, because in most cultures they ask highly personal questions on first meeting. "How much do you earn? Why aren't you married? Why didn't you have children?" Say you are not proud of your failed marriage, but you are thankful for a loving, forgiving heavenly Father.

You model the fact that we not only are saved by grace, but we serve by grace. Jesus called Paul after he had been responsible for the murder of hundreds of Christians—which he could never forget and which made him treasure God's grace.

But if people learn to trust you spiritually and then discover the divorce, it can be a shattering, disillusioning experience. It could split a local church. But if they know from the start, they may not expect much from you at first, but their trust and respect will grow as they see God bless and use you.

2. You can provide a model for the permanently separated spouses in your new host country, for whom divorce was not possible. If they come to church at all, they are often marginalized there, as they are in society. If you are remarried, the two of you can provide a model for melded families. Your example can give hope.

3. You could plan a ministry for divorced and separated spouses and melded families, in your local church abroad. Help them establish a biblical policy and to provide care. Lead seminars. Extend the ministry to churches all over your new host country. Only a divorced Christian, or a divorced and remarried couple would have credibility to do this. Encourage them to get oppressive laws changed.

In conclusion, we need to ask the same questions mission agencies do, but we would like to help you find God's perfect place for you. He cares a great deal about how and where you serve him—even more than you do.

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