

'Physician, Heal Thyself'

1. When Marriage Fails

BY THE EDITOR

After making a few soundings I realized that it would be extremely difficult to find a minister who had been divorced who was willing to write this article. I decided, therefore, that the only way forward was to ask for anonymous accounts and comments, which I would then work into an article.

The issue is highly emotive. Being forced by my request to look back on past experiences, some ministers were acutely aware of the difficulty of presenting 'objective fact', even if such exists. Further, the minister is not alone: the former wife or husband is still living. I was impressed by the concern that was expressed that the accounts which I was given were inevitably one-sided, and even, as one minister put it, 'may be untruthful'. They were aware that their former spouses would certainly have seen things very differently. Moreover, for some ministers the divorce led to a break in their ministry and they have had to make a fresh start. To look back and to write publicly about the past would have implications for their present work.

I have deliberately tried to refrain from making judgments, and I hope that this article is not too remote from reality. Readers must give their own answers to the difficult questions that it raises.

What is quite clear is that every divorce is different – as every marriage is. The causes of breakdown are varied, and it is impossible to set out even the 'main' ones, but it does not take much imagination to see ways in which the call to the ministry or priesthood easily leads to strains within the marriage.

The pressures of the work on the minister may lead to psychological problems which affect the marriage. The minister may become over-committed to church work and the husband or wife may feel neglected, or, perhaps even worse, may feel that the children are not being given the love and attention they should have. This may occur even when the church sees them as an 'ideal' ministerial family, all helping with the activities within the church. Indeed, being described as a 'wonderful team' may itself be a burden. The minister may work so hard that he or she suffers from what is now popularly termed 'burn-out' – exhaustion which may be spiritual as well as physical and mental. When faith collapses marriage may collapse as well. This may only become apparent when some crisis arises, even such an apparently small difficulty as moving to a new church or a new type of Christian work within the church. Where the minister's spouse is in full-time

work and plans a career for himself or herself, moving may be fraught with extra problems, and many ministers must wonder whether they have a right to expect their spouse to be unemployed or find a job well below their qualifications simply to remain with him or her. Some spouses remain 'for a time' where they are, and this itself can lead to an awareness that the marriage was far from the ideal that they had supposed.

Over-commitment to work is not limited to ministers, however, and many lay people suffer equally from the demands of their employers and colleagues, and have to move for the sake of their job. What may be different in the case of ministers is that the pressure is less direct, and therefore more intense, and because it is linked with their faith can be more destructive. It is difficult to reject what one believes is an immediate and personal 'call' from God, without a sense of sinfulness.

There is a further aspect in this. While for the lay person the option of changing their job is open, even in times of unemployment and despite financial and other pressures, for a minister to 'leave the ministry' is often seen by members of the congregation both as 'failure' and as a denial of the faith that he or she has been preaching.

Then there are the different roles that the wife or husband have to play. Times are changing, but there are still churches where the minister's wife (always this way round!) is expected to be an 'unpaid curate', and even when she maintains her own career, she and the children cannot be an 'ordinary family', but are always a 'public institution'. The strains may be intense. Joanna Trollope's *The Rector's Wife* has an old-fashioned air, even though it was published as late as 1991, but the way that the wife has a vocation to her husband while the husband has a vocation to the church are deftly explored. Cramped by the expectations of the parish (which, unhappily, her husband shares), Anna Bouverie finds she is unable to be herself. When she takes a job this is interpreted as rebellion and failing to support her husband. Joanna Trollope also portrays very vividly how a relatively small incident can precipitate the final breakdown of the marriage. Private life is difficult to maintain when the vicarage or manse is open to everyone.

Expressed in another way, other people often expect the minister to be there 'for them', and make demands which inevitably lead to neglect of the family. Or, from another angle, Christmas and Easter may be 'holidays' for the church members, but the minister is exhausted at the very time when the children are at home and the family should be alone together. A minister who has remained very happily married, happened to say to me once that when he had arranged a (very rare) complete day off with his family, his wife asked him, 'Is today really for us?' Fortunately ministers are now becoming aware of this and are preserving a day a week for the family which nothing apart from absolutely pressing and unavoidable emergencies is allowed to take away or eat into.

Guilt can be destructive. Many ministers know that they are not being good husbands and fathers, but can see no way to remove this guilt without incurring an equal guilt by failing to fulfil their divine vocation. Such double guilt is not a happy basis for personal relationships.

Most congregations assume, when a clergy marriage breaks up, that the minister has 'gone off with another woman'. I suspect that this is rarely the case. Of course ministers have many opportunities of meeting with persons of the opposite sex in situations of some intimacy, and sexual attraction is a strong instinct, but most ministers are on their guard. This does not mean that ministers are never guilty of adultery with members of their congregations (and probably some spouses also, though group pressures and expectancies may make this less common), and when it happens there is inevitable distress. But more harming to ministers is the assumption that this is what lies behind the separation, even when there is no 'other woman' or 'other man', so that there is less understanding of the real nature of the situation. My correspondents had remarried, but stated emphatically that their second spouses played no part in the break-up of their first marriage. False criticism harms the minister's effective work as much as true, perhaps more so.

One of my correspondents has pointed out that the 'sexual group dynamics' within the church are forceful. 'Our language of "family", "brothers and sisters", "loving one another", and "Father" ... all have sexual undertones.' He added: 'The church plays with fire in the language it uses and the relationships it expects ... the expectation of being people (ministers, wives, children) whose lives are shared at a deep level leads to problems of boundaries, jealousy and misunderstandings'.

On the occasions when the minister has entered into a sexual relationship with another person within the congregation the effect can be devastating. Some church members will demand that the couple leave immediately. Many will hold that a minister should be faithful to his marriage vows, even if church members can treat them rather more lightly. Some make attempts to retrieve the marriage. There is likely to be a division within the church as members side with one or other of the two. Although I believe some ministers who were divorced and remarried continued within their local church, or simply moved to another parish, a continuing sense of the sinfulness of adultery, almost as the greatest sin (perhaps because it is more immediately obvious than the more deadly sins of covetousness or greed), is likely to condemn severely the ministers who have been unfaithful to their marriage partners.

Mostly divorced ministers, even those who did not commit adultery and whose marriages were dissolved by mutual consent and entirely amicably, have not been welcome in their former churches. When marriage breaks up and divorce proceedings are begun is a time when the leaders in the church need to exercise quiet compassion.

The reaction of the minister's spouse may be decisive in avoiding damage to the church – and both minister and church will be grateful for their understanding and tact.

There is another aspect of divorce, which, although it also has parallels among lay men and women, takes on exaggerated importance when a minister is concerned: a growing lack of understanding between husband and wife. It has two forms.

On the one hand there are those who marry young, full of the certainty that their partner is the only person for them. Talk of marriages 'being made in heaven' now sounds quaint, but the traditional Christian emphasis on life-long monogamy, and biblical teaching about married couples being one person remains fairly firm and adds to this romantic view. But people change over the years, and it may dawn on the couple that they have not become one: indeed, their interests differ widely; they have grown apart and have become strangers to each other. While there is no suggestion of infidelity, each partner may discover that someone else shares their interests more completely or is more stimulating. The same demands of society for self-fulfilment press in on the minister as on other people, and it is the exceptional minister and spouse who are prepared to maintain an outward form of marriage in these circumstances, simply to maintain vows which they made in the past. Vows are out of fashion today.

The other type of stress on the marriage arises when people feel a call to the ministry and are accepted for ordination by their church when they are older. The spouse may be nominally supportive, but discovers that the minister is no longer the person he or she married, or that the roles they are expected to fulfil are not those they prepared for when they entered into the marriage. The minister equally may have exaggerated ideas of the significance of ordination and the ministerial vocation and be disappointed that his or her spouse does not see things in this way, even though they agreed to their partner offering for ordination. All this becomes a matter of greater stress than when a lay person takes on a new job, because of the divine element that lies behind it. 'I have been called by God' can be harshly demanding.

I have considered some of the causes of divorce at some length because, as we shall see later, my correspondents felt that the church leaders did not appreciate their position and made little effort to try to understand how they felt. The question has to be raised, however, whether these are sufficient reasons for ministers to break the vows they made in the marriage service. All couples married in church, of course, make these vows, and in theory ministers are no different from lay persons. It is here that we see church pressures impinging on the minister and his or her spouse. It is expected that the minister will be a 'model Christian' and will maintain a 'Christian' marriage. This is manifestly unjust, but to consider it further would lead us into a discussion of the

meaning of ordination and the grace of priesthood. It is a subject which deserves greater attention than is commonly given to it. We are ready with theological accounts of ordination, but are less ready to tease out the practical implications of the doctrines we formulate.

One feature of ministerial divorce which may differ from that among the laity is the provision of a home for the wife or husband if the minister is living in a vicarage or manse, and has not had a large stipend. Church rules differ among the denominations, and most ministers who face divorce appear to show great concern that their spouse should have somewhere to live. Often a flat or house is purchased from savings or in some other way. What might have proved a serious difficulty may be less urgent, therefore, than would be supposed.

As I have hinted earlier, quite often ministers who have been divorced express disappointment about the reaction of the leaders of their church. One correspondent says that he received almost no help at all: 'The church institutional found it impossible to cope with spiritual collapse and preferred to see it as simply a broken marriage and a failed ministry'. In one instance a member of the ministerial hierarchy broke a confidence, which is shocking and sad, and was certainly unhelpful. Some leading church officials appear simply to have made no response and hoped that the problem would go away. One appeared to the minister to listen sympathetically, but then lapsed into silence for a long time, later offering criticism rather than trying to understand the situation.

It was suggested to me that in fact the 'official' church *does* care, but finds it easier to deal with 'respectable' problems. If someone is ill we send a card. If a minister's father dies we write a letter. But 'we have no public, community way of being alongside someone experiencing divorce'. Perhaps, he surmised, to send a letter to someone being divorced would be 'too threatening to normality', and imply that all marriages are open to failure, even our own.

I wonder whether behind this lies the feeling that the minister should represent the 'official' Christian line that marriage is for life: 'for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health', and that when a minister's marriage breaks down it is a signal that Christianity itself is falling apart and therefore will lead to loss of faith among members of the congregation. Being a representative of Christianity can be intensely burdensome to the minister, and equally it can be burdensome to members of the congregation, who may well hold unrealistic and distorted ideas about the significance of 'Christian' marriage. Divorce of non-Christian couples is to be expected; divorce of church members is regrettable and may be criticized, but it can be assimilated; divorce involving the minister is on a different plane altogether.

What is the future of the divorced minister to be? One correspondent felt that he could no longer go on

preaching and exercising a pastoral ministry, and solved the problem by taking on a different kind of work within the church. Another found that, happily for him, he was invited to move into such work. On the other hand many ministers continue in the pastoral ministry, though often they move to a different church, commonly in a different part of the country.

There is another aspect of this, however, which deserves to be considered more fully. One of my correspondents wrote so sensitively about this that I base the following comments on his letter. He was on his own for five years before he remarried, although he looked after one of his children. During this time he felt himself on the 'outside' of the life of the church, even though he was active in church affairs. I quote his own words: 'I became aware that the church is composed of (at least) two groups: those who are "normal" – the married heterosexuals, those who suffer universal events – death, common illnesses – , and the other group, who by their existence threaten the normality – the single, the single parent, the homosexual, the divorced. I became terribly aware of the separation, loneliness, and otherness of those people, for I was one of them. Furthermore I felt I was privileged to bear that "otherness" . . . and in some sense represented them, albeit unknown by them. They live and move within the church, but there is a gulf between their life and experience, which the "normal" cannot, perhaps dare not, cross.' He found company and consolation with those going through similar experiences, and added: 'If I were to regret anything about my remarriage (and I do not, for it has brought great joy and a new daughter and stepdaughter), it is that I have "crossed over" and am now on the normal side again. Now (or rather, then) the church can send its congratulations, because remarriage is understandable. In one sense marrying again ended a period of loneliness. It may be overdramatic to say that I look back on the five years of outsidership as a nightmare which on waking recedes in reality, but leaves behind it wavemarks on the shore of one's being. I can no longer experience the affinity with those who are still outside, but I know they are there and I can move across the gulf, whilst those who have never been there know neither that there is otherness nor that the gulf is deep and terrible.'

He ended his letter (and with this I end this article): 'I conduct few weddings these days, but I do some. Of course the words are hard to say and the promises difficult to witness. But I have come to understand our Lord not as physician (for he did not say the words which title your series), but as the one who is ill (sick) with us. Whether I am textually correct or not, I read "bears our sicknesses" not as one who carried them outside him in a haversack, but is himself a leper. The fit run away: other lepers may embrace him. Perhaps we shall never be cured, but the gospel I have now learnt is that God carries our failures and brokenness with us as part of our being which we cannot reject nor disown.'