

Divorce: One Minister's Journey

Jerry Buckner, Campus Minister
University of Maryland

It never occurred to me that I would some day experience a divorce. Divorce was an abstraction. It might happen in Hollywood, but not in Nashville. It might happen to the worldly or ungodly, but not to a campus minister. It might happen to somebody else, but it would never happen to me.

It would not happen to me because I married within the will of God. (Or at least that's what I thought.) We were close to the BSU ideal. We met in BSU and dated in BSU. We did youth revivals together. I would preach, she would play the piano, Mr. and Miss BSU. Oh, we did stop dating when I went to Seminary, but three years later I took a BSU job, and she accepted a graduate fellowship at the same University. Neither of us knew the other would be there. We thought such circumstances must surely be the work of God.

Never mind that there were danger signs all over the place. Friction, jealousy, competitiveness were all there, but who sees such things when you are "in love"? You see, outwardly we married for all the right reasons. Divorce never crossed our minds. When problems arose, they did not seem important. Doesn't everyone have problems? Feelings of vague uneasiness about our relationship made no impression on us. All of us tend to see only what we want to see and believe only what we want to believe. This sort of innocent self-deception sometimes protects us from reality and the opportunity to deal constructively with that reality. It is often too late when events finally force us to face what we have avoided. So it was with me. I am now a divorced minister.

What has happened can never be undone. I have been asked to share with you my journey from the divorce to now. This isn't easy. It means having to relive what I would rather forget, but never will. It means telling about the divorce from only one side and knowing that other sides will not be heard. With this disclaimer, I now share my experience with you.

Negative emotions overwhelm my memory of the divorce experience, guilt, pain and loneliness. A recent dream I had typifies my feelings. In this dream I was flying a helicopter. I was tumbling wildly in the air. I fought long and hard to get it under control. It was a terrific struggle, but I won. As I gained control, I became aware that the next step was to land the thing. I looked down and the whole world was covered with fog. Panic set in and I woke up. That's what it is like for a minister to divorce. You fight a life and death struggle for survival, and just when you think you are about to win you see the fog and know the struggle will go on. There is no place to land; no place where it will all be over.

The journey from divorce to the present is divided into two parts. The first is the struggle; dealing with the divorce itself. The second part deals with the reactions to the divorce. The fight to stay in the ministry was as much a battle as the divorce itself. Following the struggle came the fog. You survive the divorce and then start the battle to stay in a church vocation. Where do you go and what do you do?

Divorce was hard on me because I took my marriage seriously. I had always tried to keep my priorities right. If faced with a conflict between work and family, I had more times than not, let work suffer. I liked being married. I enjoyed home and hearth. To lose these was very painful. There are many kinds of pain associated with a divorce. There is the pain of loss. You lose that which is high on your value scale; not only your family, but all the self worth you receive from being a father and a husband. There is the pain of rejection. It had been painful as a student to be turned down when I asked for a date. But to be rejected after 14 years of marriage was painful to the point of being destructive of my self image. This was not rejection because she didn't know me, but rejection because she did know me. And that hurt. It hurt because I couldn't rationalize it away. Failure is always painful. And no matter how I try to see it otherwise, in the end it left me with an acute sense that I had failed in a God-ordained task. And that was not easy to live with.

But there is another kind of pain that came with my divorce. Its one that is still with me. The greatest pain of all, that of hurting other people. I believe that divorce is wrong for this very reason. So many people get hurt. Not just the man and woman involved, but it spreads in ever-widening concentric circles. You start with two, move to children and parents, then on to friends, and end up by weakening the very fabric of society.

The two most traumatic events of the divorce were telling our

children and telling my parents. The children were hurt because they were young and could not understand. Two people they love and depend on are separating. They don't know what to do or what is going to happen to them. They were frightened and confused. And you know it is because of you. Parents are hurt by what is happening to you. But more than that, they hurt for you. You share your pain, and it causes them pain. That in turn increases your hurt. A vicious cycle starts in motion. You ask yourself, "What kind of a person are you to be hurting innocent people?" Young children and aging parents. They surely deserve something better than this. My parents were proud of me. I was the college educated son. I was the "minister". How do you brag about a son who is divorced?

Divorce forces you to make choices about the children. They can't live with both of you. You can't bear to let them go, but it is not possible to keep them. Choosing sides may be a great way to start a ball game in the park, but it is a damnable way to treat children. But I did it. And I hated myself. Our son stayed with me, and our daughter stayed with her mother. You rationalize and defend the decisions you make, then spend the rest of your life feeling guilty.

Guilt is divorce's middle name. It greets you with open arms every step of the way. Children are the touchstone of guilt. No matter what else you do, you have to live with and deal with the guilt.

I had to live with such realities as my broken vows, and the people I had hurt. These are not the kinds of realities that make you feel good about yourself. These are not guilt feelings, they are real guilt. The gospel does deal with guilt. Without forgiveness I would be a basket case. Ironically, the church and religious people also add to your guilt. They usually don't mean to, but they do.

Being a minister employed by a Baptist institution brought its own problems. Employers are also on that list of people you hurt. For me the bad thing was that here I had to face another choice. I could fold my tent and silently steal away. That's what many either wanted me to do or thought I should do. But I could also stay, and in staying I put a lot of people on the spot. My situation became a problem to them. It was only a problem to them, but for me it was life and death. I was fighting for my own survival. Marriage and career are two of any persons most important relationships. I could stand losing one, but not both. So I stayed, and I fought. Eventually I won, at least in the sense of holding on to my job. But the price of winning was to hurt people who just happened

on the scene at the time of my divorce. They got drawn into my problems and I caused them anguish. It was them or me, and I deliberately chose them. And when it was over, victory left a bad taste. But I know I would do it over again if faced with the same choice.

Healing comes slowly. It came to me mostly through friends. Gene Bolin, Norman Bowman, Denise Jones, Sue Jones and a host of church members became my ministers. They comforted me and supported me. They kept me company when I was lonely. They became "church" to me in a very real way. But they did more. They would not let me live in the pool of self pity I kept creating. They loved me enough to comfort me. But more than that they loved me enough to confront me. They held me accountable in a loving way. And that is true love.

As I began to recover I began to deal with the fog. Shall I stay single? Not if I can help it. That means you start dating. This is adolescence revisited. I kept expecting to break out in pimples. So at 40 I start dating again. It was all so strange. You may be divorced, but you feel married. That gives your old friend guilt a new handle. You want to find someone you like, but when you experience any kind of attraction you get fearful and run. I took care of that by first being attracted to women that I knew I could never marry. One too young, another too far away. That made both of them safe.

In the dating process you must at some point deal with your own sexuality. I had heard about the rules changing, but it was still a shock to discover it for myself. I was so dumb that the first time I was invited to "her" apartment I retained my morals by not understanding and therefore not responding. The next time, with a different female, I understood and ran. I ran because I had to face my own sexuality. I discovered that my lofty standards were an ideal that would break down if I found myself in the "right", or should I say "wrong" situation. Facing my own sexuality and relating it to my professed ethic was a major struggle. I didn't want to believe about myself what I discovered. I didn't want to be what I was. I wanted to be clean, pure, and above it all. Instead it was a struggle with my own dark side.

Dating ultimately led to marriage. Judy was a widow with two daughters. We didn't date long. We both knew the right kind of questions to ask. One good thing I can claim is that I learned something from my first marriage. Someone said, "If your second marriage is a success, the first marriage wasn't a total failure." My second marriage is a success. I know what a bad marriage is, and

I know what a good marriage is. I can't say enough good things about Judy and our marriage.

The other area of struggle was a vocation. At the time of the divorce I traveled a lot on the job. After the divorce I had custody of our 10 year old son. So I started looking for a different kind of job. The problem here was that my credentials would help me with Baptists, but my divorce was a problem. When I got away from Baptists, to those who were not bothered by divorce, my credentials were no good. I found myself on the horns of a classical dilemma. I shall be forever grateful to Doug Manning and the folks of First Baptist Church of Hereford, Texas. They took me in when no one else would have me.

My three years as Associate Pastor there was a time of healing for me. It was there I met and married Judy. The people were loving and supportive. But I didn't quite fit. They needed gifts that I could not give. I didn't really want to be an Associate Pastor, Minister of Miscellaneous, all my life. So my stay there was temporary. It gave me the opportunity to assess and evaluate my life. It was a break in the fog; not a permanent situation.

So I returned to campus ministry. I came after seeking other opportunities and finding the doors shut because of the divorce. Here it has not been a particular problem. I go about the business of trying to minister to students as any other campus minister. The students in BSU are aware of my past. Sometimes we talk about it. When we discuss marriage and family I sometimes share with them some of my experiences. I do so in the hope that they can benefit from my mistakes.

So today I am outwardly secure and inwardly insecure. I worry about things that don't bother others. Last month a nearby associate passed a motion of censure for two divorced pastors in our area. When I heard about that vote I went into depression. Do they know about me? Am I next? Will I become an issue? My friends tell me I'm paranoid. Maybe I am. But such things still haunt me.

I consider the fact that I divorced and stayed in the professional ministry a small miracle. I have a great deal for which to be thankful. I have the kind of marriage that I always dreamed of having. I have a position in campus ministry. My task now is to be the best minister that I can possibly be. I have to fight the tendency not to be dominated by all the closed doors I have experienced. I must not let the divorce become an excuse for less than my best where I am. I must continually actualize God's grace and forgiveness.

I live with unanswered questions. Did I do the right thing in staying in the ministry? Was I selfish in hurting others that I might survive? Should I quit now and move on to a non-church job? How responsible am I for the problem the divorce has been to my children? These kinds of questions won't go away. Seven years is a long time. If I still have the questions now, does that mean I will always have them?

Through it all I have cursed God and loved God. My faith is that God has loved and not cursed me. I believe that even now my faith is stronger than it has ever been. Sometimes when I get discouraged and depressed, I ask God for help and am greeted with a thunderous silence. He simply won't do things, my way. Then I remember that Abraham went out not knowing where he was going, and I become Abraham. I am impatient with God and want him to clear all the fog away. But yet it remains and I go on.