

Divorce, Remarriage and Church Discipline

by Marvin Moore

In matters of divorce and remarriage, and particularly remarriage, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has followed the lead of other conservative bodies and placed the entire responsibility on the church to determine what are the grounds for divorce and remarriage, and when they have been met. An entire chapter in the *Church Manual* outlines the policy in great detail. The member who disagrees with the church's interpretation of the Bible or of the facts in his case cannot act on his personal convictions without risking at least the threat of discipline.

One of the chief problems that confronts those who formulate church policy is where to draw the line between the individual member's responsibility to interpret the Bible for himself in matters of conduct, and the responsibility of the church as a body to establish standards of conduct. Nowhere has this been more difficult for Seventh-day Adventists than in matters of divorce and remarriage.

Historically, the church has attempted to

enforce the New Testament instruction on divorce and remarriage to the letter. This is in harmony with Biblical principles of discipline. Many church members, particularly those from a conservative background, believe that this is the only policy on divorce and remarriage that the church could devise that would be in harmony with the Bible. However, as in other matters, the church would be in harmony with the Bible if it were to place greater responsibility on its members. In not doing so, the church overlooks two problems: its historic policy creates a serious ethical problem of its own and fails to consider a variety of interpretations of the inspired evidence on divorce and remarriage.

First, because the church takes to itself the full responsibility for determining what constitutes Biblical grounds and when the conditions have been met, church leaders must require definite proof of unfaithfulness before the innocent party can be cleared for remarriage. And because conservative members tend to keep a watchful eye on lowering of the standards, leaders must be prepared to publicly defend their approval for remarriage. The result is that sins of the most personal nature, that ought to be kept in the smallest possible circle, are spread before the entire church.

Pastors and church administrators may

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wish they could keep secret what they know, and most probably try. But when accused of lowering the standard, in order to protect themselves they must at least say, "This marriage is in harmony with church policy." The implications of this statement are obvious. Inevitably, a shadow is cast on the reputation of the offending party. His sin becomes a matter of public record even if the details do not.

The innocent party is required to accuse another Christian of wrongdoing in order to justify his own right doing. He must damage someone else's reputation to protect his own, and this is not right. Some have hired private detectives to spy on their former mates in order to obtain the absolute proof that the church requires. Such acts are ethically questionable, but the alternative to the church member is discipline or a life of celibacy.

Second, the historic church policy is based on a particular interpretation of the inspired evidence regarding divorce and remarriage. However, sincere Christians do interpret the inspired evidence differently. Some believe those who remarry on grounds other than adultery are living in sin. Others disagree. Some believe I Corinthians 7:15 ("but if the unbelieving depart, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases") grants desertion as grounds for remarriage. Others disagree. Some believe that "violation of the marriage bed" includes the refusal of conjugal rights.¹ Others believe it means only an extramarital affair. Differences exist on other points as well.

The 1976 Annual Council action on divorce and remarriage recognizes that the decision whether to divorce must be left with the individual: "The decision whether to divorce must, in any case, be the individual's personal responsibility and not be that of a third party. . . . When alienation has advanced too far for reconciliation, separation by mutual consent or by legal enactment may be necessary, or the partners may decide on divorce."² There is no condemnation implied, or threat of discipline, against those who feel compelled to make this difficult decision.

I believe it would be consistent with the Bible evidence on discipline for the church to

recognize that the decision whether to remarry is also at least somewhat a personal one "and not that of a third party." I suggest three points for implementing this recognition.

First the church should state officially, either in the *Church Manual* or in an Annual Council policy action, that while the church holds to a particular view, it recognizes the right of its members to hold other scriptural interpretations and to act on them in the context of proper counsel.

Second, the conference committees on divorce and remarriage, as established by the Annual Council, could consider the requests for remarriage presented by those whose proposed remarriages are in question. If reasonably based on inspired evidence, the convictions of church members could be respected even though they differed from the official view. In such circumstances, prayerful counseling could be as much a function of the committee as decision making.

Third, the church should not attempt to control its members' lives forever. If a member errs to the extent that the church cannot see its way clear to approve his remarriage, how long shall the church dictate the terms to such an individual? If he follows counsel and remains loyal to the church, shall it still tell him 50 years later, because of his actions half a century before, that he will be disfellowshipped if he remarries in his old age? How about 25 years later? Or five years later?

Regardless of how bad a situation may be, a time comes when the church's obligation to maintain its standards and its reputation has run its course, and the individual's right to live his life before God as he sees best should be restored. Some object to a time period after which remarriage is allowed. They argue that what is sin today is sin five or 50 years later. This argument is true, but it is not the point. The point is that there comes a time when the individual should have the freedom to make his own decisions and to act on his convictions with God, not the church, as the judge.

Interestingly, a recent issue of *Liberty* car-

ried an article on abortion with an editor's introduction, a portion of which read, "Whether abortion is right or wrong is not a question *Liberty* seeks to answer. Its editors have opinions, as does the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which take a 'respect for life' position, but leave the implementation of that ambiguity to the Scripture-enlightened conscience of its members."³ If we were to poll the leadership of our General Conference and North American union conferences on the question of abortion, I suspect we would find that a majority hold the view that abortion is a violation of the sixth commandment except under unusual circumstances. Yet, the church leaves the implementation of this important matter to the Scripture-enlightened consciences of its members. The church makes no effort to prescribe behavior in this area or to discipline those whose practice differs from the generally accepted view. It seems reasonable for the church to follow a similar policy regarding remarriage.

Some may object that this proposal would lower the church's standards. I see no reason why we need to state a lower standard. The doctrine of discipline is the issue here, not the doctrine of marriage. We can keep the same standard. Yet, the responsibility for determining how to reach the standard should be shifted partly to the individual; it should not be entirely a church decision as to what are the Bible conditions for remarriage and when they have been met.

Some may fear that adopting such a proposal would create a rush on the divorce

courts. I doubt it. Most people are not looking for an excuse to break up their homes, and those who are often behave so irresponsibly that they would be subject to church discipline, anyway. Even now, those who choose to remarry without the traditional Bible grounds generally can do so without loss of membership if they choose the "right" pastor and the "right" local church. Unfortunately, this present inconsistency undermines church authority.

The church should uphold a high marriage standard. Divorce and remarriage have far-reaching social consequences, and they cannot be treated the same way we treat differences of opinion on tithing or Sabbathkeeping. The church must discipline under certain circumstances, and policies must be formulated that provide for these circumstances. However, marriage is also very personal, and nobody can truly understand or decide everything about another person's personal problems and how he relates to Bible principles. Therefore, the church needs to provide a greater balance between its responsibility and that of its members to interpret what the Bible means in domestic matters.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Ellen White, *The Adventist Home* (Nashville: Southern Publishing, 1952), p. 341.
2. *Review and Herald*, Feb. 17, 1977, p. 16.
3. *Liberty*, Sept., Oct. 1978, p. 10.