

DRY BONES



If your pastor gets a divorce

Continue to love and minister to him

By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM



In the last few years at least two dozen well-known ministers—many of them my personal friends—have gone through divorce.

Some have stayed with their churches, or per-

haps moved to other churches. Others have taken on an itinerant, traveling ministry so they will not have to listen to the muted echoes of the past.

Some have gone into secular work. A few have turned their backs on God.

All are sad cases.

The Episcopal priest who pointed me toward the Holy Spirit left his wife and married another woman. Now they are divorced also. When I share my testimony I am reluctant to mention his name, even though I love him dearly.

That hurts.

One of the nation's best-known evangelists said he had to choose between his wife and the ministry. It did not seem to occur to him that his wife was his ministry. He, too, has remarried and has published a record defending his position.

The man whose books stirred the slumbering chords of a dead church and gave us all a taste of new wine divorced his wife of many years. Now I sit and look at his books which meant so much to me and wonder: is his teaching valid? Can it be trusted if this is the result?

I think of the director of the family relations department of one of the nation's largest denominations who divorced his wife and married a younger woman. I still correspond with his former wife. She prays daily for her ex-husband.

The pastor of a large church in Atlanta recently stepped before his congregation and told them, in tears, that his wife had left him for another man.

And when the ministerial home of the president's pastor in Washington, D.C., fell to pieces in front of the national media, it seemed no one was immune.

The conflict and horror of divorce are far removed from my life today. My home is happy. It's difficult, in fact, to remember that just a few years ago my own home

was a seething volcano of strife and jealousy—ready to explode.

How easy it is for me to judge—coldly and harshly—some of my fellow ministers who have not come through their battles as well as I—who capitulated and sought divorce.

It's not my intent to analyze the reasons behind these divorces. However, there are some kingdom principles which pastors need to remember when evaluating their relationships with their divorced peers—and when leading their sheep in relating to wounded shepherds.

First, few people recognize the extreme pressures brought against the families of those in public ministry. A recent Knight-Ridder survey shows one out of 25 clergy marriages ends in divorce. Not bad, considering that almost one out of two ordinary marriages winds up that way.

But when a shepherd falls, the entire community knows—as they seem to know about everything else which goes on in the parsonage.

The biggest contributing factor: involvement with a person of the opposite sex. A Methodist survey found that nine of every ten clergy divorces involved infidelity—and that in nearly every case the minister, rather than his (or her) spouse, was the offender.

Pastors need to remember (for they are often the hardest critics of brother pastors) that the shepherd is "on the point" in spiritual warfare. Satan knows that if he can strike the shepherd the sheep will scatter. If he can shoot down a chief, the warriors will fall into confusion.

So, every satanic gun is trained on the minister. If he does not fall through immorality, he often falls by judging others who are immoral.

When a soldier is shot down in battle we bring him home, pay his hospital bills, decorate him with medals, give him honor and restore him to service after he has a chance to heal—physically, mentally and emotionally.

But let some shepherd, lured from the safety of his fold by a tempting siren who claims she needs ministry, get lost in a maze of emotions and do crazy things—and we cast him out of the kingdom.

A friend of mine laments: The army of the Lord is the only one which shoots its wounded.

Why, we need to ask, is a confessed murderer more welcome in our pulpits than

a divorced shepherd?

Second, we have no clear scriptural guidelines on this matter. Even the finest Bible scholars argue the points of divorce, remarriage and the place of the fallen minister. In fact, it was one of the burning issues when the scribes broached the subject with Jesus. And, it is a subject modern Pharisees still love to debate.

Jesus never intended for man to use the Scriptures as a hammer and chisel to chip out a set of rules by which we can imprison one another. When Jesus discussed divorce it was not to major on the exceptions, but to drive home the purpose of God in establishing the permanency of the home.

What sadness there must be in heaven when God hears His shepherds—those He has left in charge of the sheep—using the Scriptures as rocks to stone one another, rather than stones to build the Church of God.

Third, a distinction must be made between those who divorce, those who divorce and later remarry, and those who divorce in order to remarry.

Divorce is the result of sin. It is the public admission of failure. Remarriage, however, is a different situation, for it closes the door on reconciliation.

And divorce in order to remarry is specifically condemned in the Scriptures and may be the line a man crosses whereby he disqualifies himself for public ministry.

Fourth, more is required of those ordained to public ministry than ordinary men and women. Perhaps this is why shepherds are so hard on other shepherds who fall.

The question is asked: "Does God judge His pastors with a different standard than He does those who follow?"

The answer is yes. James says: "My brothers, not many of you should become teachers, for you may be certain that we who teach shall ourselves be judged with greater strictness" (James 3:1 *NEB*).

I confess I do not know the absolutes of that standard, or whether the standard is the same for all men. I suspect it is not. I suspect God judges each man, each woman, differently. I also suspect His standard of justice, or His standard of mercy, is unlike anything we comprehend in our feeble understanding of the Word.

At the same time, a man does not have to become a shepherd. He chooses to do

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so. And in so choosing he closes the door, forever, on the right to have his own way—even in marriage. By entering the ministry he disqualifies himself to be judged as a sheep.

Paul asks Timothy: "If a man does not know how to control his own family, how can he look after a congregation of God's people?" (1 Timothy 3:5 *NEB*).

It is a valid question, one which every responsible shepherd needs to answer. Perhaps it holds the answer as to why we must not relax the standards of personal and domestic fidelity—and divine order in the home.

Yet when sin enters the ministry—and the minister—and batters him down into the dirt, we often find it easier to cover the wounded man with leaves and pretend the situation never existed, than to deal with it openly and in love.

We don't like our prophets to raise their skirts and reveal feet of clay. It's easier for us to see only their smiling faces in the pulpit or listen to their teaching tapes. And, to ignore their personal lives. But even though we have responsibilities to each other, and cannot ignore each other's frailties, we must learn to recognize—without condemning.

And that is most difficult when we all have some of the same tendencies in ourselves.

It is tragic, but sheep often minister to wounded shepherds, licking their wounds and snuggling close to provide warmth, far better than other shepherds—who debate the degrees of wrongness rather than providing healing to shepherds who need it.

The question is not divorce. It is not even divorce and remarriage. The question is repentance. Has the shepherd repented? Or is he arrogant and stubborn, declaring his rightness in the situation? Finding fault with those who fail to understand? Quoting Scripture to back up his fallen position?

Repentance clears the deck for forgiveness and restoration. Arrogance disqualifies a man, whether he is divorced or not.

Fifth, every pastor who sees another pastor fall should remind himself, "There but for the grace of God, go I." It is easy to forget how things were, or to overlook how they might have been in your own life except for the mercy of God.

In examining what Augustine calls the *felix culpa*, which loosely translated means the happy sin, an interesting question is raised. Does God allow certain men to commit sin (or "fall into sin" if you are looking for a more passive phrase to ease your guilt) in order to stimulate the crisis experiences necessary to bring us to maturity?

Does God allow a man to sin? Even more radical, does God order a sinful situation for the purpose of increasing the shaking and hastening maturity? Although my theology does not make room for this, it sure seems like it. And if so, it is

certainly reason for the rest of us to give thanks that God has spared us from such harsh chastisement.

Shepherds are on the point, and as a result they are often the first to step on the land mines, or to stumble into the snare of the enemy. In the process, new men are raised up; and old ones stagger, much wiser and more compassionate, to the rear lines for bandages and crutches, in order to take new places in the army and fulfill the purpose of God.

I remember sitting in the kitchen of one of America's most famous television ministers, listening in shocked silence as he treated his wife in an almost subhuman way. Later that night he appeared on TV talking about his happy home. It is happy for him, I thought. Hell for her.

But despite their battles, this pastor and his wife stuck it out. They may have come close to killing each other, but they never considered divorce as a valid option. As a result they have now emerged in splendid unity.

"What about 'biblical reasons' for divorce," we ask. "Does that not clear the innocent party?"

Not always. The husband or wife who chooses to divorce because the mate has committed fornication was probably looking for a legalistic reason out of marriage anyway.

Fornication is never a reason for divorce—merely an excuse. When a man and woman become "one in Christ," nothing—not even fornication—can separate them.

Granted, there are times when divorce is the only way out. And until I have walked in another man's shoes, I must withhold judgment on him.

In my determination not to lower my own standards, I must never lower the standard on the head of the fallen brother to crush him under the law. The standard has only one purpose—to give a goal for restoration. It is not a reason for rejection.

Finally, in searching the guidelines in how to relate to divorced pastors, other shepherds need to apply the principles of Matthew 18.

Unfortunately, there is something in most of us that enjoys a juicy story—especially if it is about a well-known person.

Yet we seldom enjoy hearing gossip about our mothers, our fathers, or our own children. Being a member of the family makes a difference.

Are we not commanded to love fellow pastors—as members of one family?

Several months ago I entered a covenant with a group of Christian leaders. We promised not to talk about each other until we had first talked to the accused party. This has been difficult. But the principle is sound and I have endeavored to stick to it.

Then last year, I heard that a man whom I deeply love and respect had left his wife

and moved into an apartment. His church was falling apart. His sheep scattering.

So I phoned him. Was it so? Yes! And I caught the brokenness of his heart. He needed not only my counsel; he needed my love.

Until I called him, I had been flooded with opinions. I had wanted to cry out: "Look what you are doing to the kingdom." But as we talked, I softened.

He had done wrong. But I would leave that in God's hands. And as to the kingdom? Well, it has weathered bigger things than this.

It survived the adultery and murder contract put out by King David.

It continued after John Wesley's wife stood in her husband's meetings and shouted, "Don't believe my husband. He is a hypocrite and a fraud."

The kingdom needs no defense. But kingdom pastors need the prayers of other kingdom pastors—especially when they fall.

Thus, I have concluded it is not my job to condemn. I shall leave that to the legalists and those too insecure to love.

It is my task to bind the wounds of the fallen, to give sight to blind eyes, to open the prison doors of self-condemnation and, through prayer, pluck back my brothers and sisters from the snare of the enemy, as brands plucked from the burning.

True, a man's effectiveness as pastor is badly damaged when his failures explode into public view. It is hard to believe a man who says Christ can solve all your problems, and then confesses with his life that his problem is too big for Jesus.

It is hard to follow a man who says "take up the cross," but who cannot bear his own cross.

Who among all God's pastors is qualified to cast the first stone? A man's ministry, like a man's servant, is the Master's business.

And, it has been my personal experience that the justice of God is quick and sure. The Holy Spirit still lays a sharp ax at the root of every tree which dares stand and proclaim itself as a leader in the spiritual forest.

Does God remove His anointing when a man of God sins, or fails in marriage? Is it not possible that in the prison cells of condemnation and failure there stand once-shorn Samsons, their hair growing, praying that God will give them just one more chance to stand and glorify His name?

God forbid that I, by anything I say, should stand in the way of God's restoration.

The question is not divorce, or even morality. The question is whether there is a call from God on a man's life.

Because if a man has the call of a shepherd, the sheep will hear his voice, and follow.

Even if he walks with a limp 