

## A PASTORAL APPROACH TO DIVORCE

### *Torn*

For years she had fought for her marriage, but in the end, she lost the battle. It ended in divorce. Her relationship was broken, she had not been able to fix it. But was her relationship with God now also broken and unfixable? In a letter she wrote the following: *you cannot say that if you work hard enough and pray long enough, every marriage can be saved, mended. It is also not so that every sick person gets better. Life is broken. That brokenness is sin, that which causes God grief. You may think that God grieves because we do something wrong. I think that he grieves because of us, for us. When a marriage does break, that becomes so tangible, a grieving process. Not only for the man and wife and children, but also for the family and intimate friends... even after a divorce the connections remain. Because there are children, there is care for each other, and a shared life. Dissolving a marriage does not mean that you drop each other, do not look after each other. I have never set God aside. I kept on praying until the decision had been taken and have not stopped now. Now, too, He is indispensable.*

If you have been listening carefully, you will have noticed that something is missing in this story, someone. The congregation, the community. All sorts of relations can be torn, also in the congregation of Christ. What does this mean for the divorced persons involved? And what role can pastoral counsellors fulfil?

### *Fait accompli..?*

One out of three marriages ends in divorce. Which means about 35,000 divorces a year. (And that is without mentioning unmarried couples and their children). Among Christians, this percentage is about 30% less... but it is increasing together with the rest, unfortunately. When Jesus was on earth, divorce and repudiation were the order of the day. And many a person thought they had settled the matter well, with a divorce letter and all. But Jesus said: *What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.* He maintains the high standard for marriage. And for all clarity: I join my Saviour in saying this and in no way wish to adjust the standard set by Him. I will do all that is possible to honour the marriage by means of prevention. By giving assistance in saving and mending a relationship. But now we are speaking of what Christian attitude to adopt when it happens in spite of this. What is not allowed, what is not the standard, what is not God's intention, does happen. What then? What, then, is a Christian approach?

Often you hear: we were presented with a fait accompli. It had been going on for quite some time. If only we had been involved sooner. Now it is too late. It is now useless to try to repair it. It is a sinking ship. In practice, the pastoral counsellor often retreats once the matter is in the hands of lawyers and divorce mediators. What, then, can be done, seeing as it has already gone to court? What is left to save? A great deal! You are not a divorced man or divorcée foremost. Before all, you have been called to be a Christian.

### *Community of the safe*

Most Christian marriages were confirmed in the midst of the congregation, asking God's blessing for the marriage, uttering the wedding vows before God with not only family and friends as witnesses, but also fellow-Christians. Being a witness points to co-responsibility for each other: unity. If the congregation was involved in the marriage preparation (catechism) and the marriage service itself, does that end when things go wrong? It is not only the relationship that is torn, there is a tear in the congregation as well. It cannot be true that when it fails, divorced people are ignored or even pushed out of the church. So that they are more or less forced to choose another congregation, or leave? The purpose of church discipline is to pull someone back, involve them, being involved with them.

"A church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints" as Luther said. The community of saints are people who acknowledge that they need their Saviour, day after day. They are not holy in themselves but need to be sanctified continually. Christ has provided that bond with Him and each other as a community of the *safe*. Unfortunately it occurs that divorced partners and their children (!) do not feel that they are in a safe place. They feel watched, talked about, gossiped about. They feel branded. Or they start to feel more and more lonely or isolated. That does not even have to be deliberate. It could be just embarrassment or ignorance.

The purpose is to form a *secure safety net*, to catch people when they fall or fault. This is only possible if you have been working at the network. Whoever invests in relations, will benefit when times get rough. Carry each other's burdens, is what is said after the admonition to confront someone when they slip up. And at the same time, everyone is responsible for his or her own burden.

The image of the body of Christ is familiar: the eye, the ear, the foot... they all need each other. And if one member suffers, all suffer together. But the part about our *less honourable body members* is often neglected (1 Corinthians 12:22-25). The unpresentable or less honourable body members are the ones we tend to cover up. These are vulnerable parts and should actually be treated with greater honour. They should be given extra care. That is also true of the *less honourable* church members. Members you may be ashamed of, must be treated with even greater care. Those people who make you think: we mustn't have those in our midst - more a burden than a joy. These people, in particular, need a caring approach. People you are inclined to reject as troublesome: invest in them especially so that the body does not lose its cohesion.

Is that not the world upside down? Indeed it is! Paul seems to find people in need of comfort, more important than the comforters (the pastoral carers). He does not position the helpers up in front, but those in need of help. *The people in need of care and love and attention [TLC: tender loving care] are, would you believe it, the most important!* They appear to be the weakest, the least necessary. But they are the most vulnerable and precious.

### *Pastoral approach*

Every man to his trade. Every one has his own terrain in relations with the divorced person. In order to have an overview across the whole terrain, much expertise is needed. You need the expertise of the social worker, the psychologist, the legal mediator, the lawyer, the financial expert etc. What, then, is the specific pastoral approach?

A pastoral approach begins with a personal approach. You show your interest in the other's *life story* (listening, always listening). Investing in people. You do not start with someone's behaviour, but first pay attention to the person (consider Jesus' association with Zacchaeus). Do not start with the question of whose fault it is. But seek them out in their distress and trouble. The pastoral aspect is that you look for the connection with God. The marriage may not be saved, the relationship with God can be. The pastor aims to lead the person, in his/her situation of divorce, to God. You are a care giver for the spiritual well being of the person involved.

By asking questions like: Is God still present in your life? How have you managed up till now? How have you lived with God? How was your relationship with Him and what has changed? What is your attitude now, in this broken situation? Where does God play a part?

How to continue in the encounter with God? Working at the relationship with the Lord, right through it all. Because, before all, God has a relationship with the Christian, before he or she has a relationship with Him (son of Abraham...!).

If you follow Christ, you never set out to avoid people. See how the great Pastor does this without fault. He looks people up in the broken situations in which they find themselves. He brings truth to light. He names the guilt and does not disguise the facts. But it occurs in a loving way, mending and healing. He did not wait until someone's perception of sin was deep enough, before giving His love. The love of Christ is what drives us. This can only be done in prayer for yourself as a guide, but especially for and with the other during the counselling. Vital! Essential, indispensable.

But is it possible to counsel the divorced while rejecting divorce in your heart? If you yourself have no sympathy whatsoever for the divorce, are you able to care for the other? Be open and honest toward yourself and the other, don't ply hide and seek with your own feelings. Express your difficulty with the situation. The person being counselled is usually extra sensitive to the honesty and authenticity of others. Your difficulty can also be a result of your own ignorance. A pastoral helper admitted that she had only recently discovered that divorce is not the same as adultery. That was an eye-opener for her. Like the text in Malachi saying that God hates divorce, while it is evident that it is about sending your wife away, about repudiation. Never condone what the other does wrong, but also never leave the other out in the cold. When Jesus says: 'let him be to you as a Gentile

and a tax collector', that, too, does not mean that you should turn your back on them, but that you should look them up and try to make them change their ways. In particular: 'encourage the fainthearted, help the weak' (1 Thess. 5:12-14).

### *Reserve judgement*

'Who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?' the Lord asks when they try to involve Him in a conflict. It is the question whether you should pass judgment in broken situations. Do not start by laying down the standard and admonishing. The other already knows this. The church's task is not, in the first place, to judge. And especially not to condemn. Seeking connections. Whoever chooses sides, makes it impossible for himself to associate with the other party. *Being in contact does not have to mean that you choose sides.* Express this, even if only out of self-protection: I am not taking sides. Do not rely on the story of one party. Do not join in the accusations back and forth. Each has their own story and side of the life story. Must you constantly hear both sides then? At the start, perhaps, but usually it is wise to allocate a different counsellor to each partner. Mutual consultation is important here (pastoral team), so that there is no taking sides and you maintain a reserved attitude in the assessment.

That is not the same as simply calling out: 'it takes two to make a quarrel'. That is not always true. You can do people an injustice that way. Yet, a guiltless divorce, is also an impossibility. I would rather choose the following expression, once presented to me: *marriage is a mystery, and divorce even so.*

That is an urgent call to exercise restraint, and a recognition of the complicated jumble of a relationship. Who will disentangle it? Do not try to unravel that. To speak with Heidelberg Catechism 43: 'nor join in condemning anyone without a hearing'. It is never good to form a quick judgement, but here all the more. That is valid even if it is not only a question of divorce but of adultery too. Even then, there should be no pointing of fingers to begin with. In the course of time you can develop a better sense of what the situation really is. In fact, only God knows the deepest causes. To Him befalls the first and last judgement. Moreover, the responsibility is, and remains, firstly with the divorced person who decided upon a divorce, or was forced to consent.

You hear some poignant stories. Someone had a letter from the church council delivered into their post box on the evening before the Lords Supper...!? Without a discussion ever having taken place. For safety or sanctity... the purpose of suspending someone from the Lord's Supper is to create some space so that judgement may be postponed. But this can also feel like a painful rejection, when the divorced particularly needs help and comfort in a miserable situation. Before judgements can be passed, an *attitude* must first be crystallised out. How does someone stand regarding his divorce? What has taken place? How much is unknown, that only surfaces afterwards (neglect, intimidation, addiction, behaviour crossing boundaries, abuse etc. etc.)? We often do not know the half of

it. And perhaps never will. Therefore, reservation is a first requirement. That requires time and displays wisdom.

*Give them a wide berth?*

No, seek the other where he or she is, and do not avoid them. This intense association may be expected of a pastoral counsellor. Especially because, in practice, people ask how you are doing but seldom take the trouble to listen further. Also because there is often embarrassment about situations like this and the divorced are often no longer invited: if I invite him, I will have to invite her too... etc. And couples stay away. People who don't visit you, but do gossip about you. This can make people feel very lonely. And in the diaconate we claim that nobody in the congregation may remain lonely or without comfort.

Explore the situation well and attempt to fathom the need. Usually, there is strong need for support and security. So that everything does not have to be accounted for all the time. For that only makes people shy. No piercing glances and pointing fingers, but a hand on the shoulder. Try to prevent the family from becoming isolated. By looking for unexpected connections and allowing people to function in their original context: by allowing them the time to pick this up whenever they are ready. Those that appear to be strong are forced to give up, while the weak, who trust in God, receive new energy.

*Mourning process.*

Most ex-spouses will recognize this: I am in a mourning process. But it is a special process. When in mourning, memories of the good times can really help. That can be possible in a broken marriage, but does not usually come to the fore at the start. In addition, when losing a partner to death, you know that God has taken him or her, that is not so with a divorce. Bystanders make all the difference. Widows and widowers receive sympathy and comfort, but divorced people much less so. How many sympathy cards did you receive when you lost your husband or wife..? And how many when you divorced? 'I would a thousand times rather be a widower than divorced,' he cried out, after his second marriage failed.

There are never winners after a divorce, only losers. It is an accumulation of loss. And that leads to an intensive mourning process. Loss of partner, loss of living surroundings, in-laws, people visiting. Loss of struggle. Loss of relationships, the network of relationships disintegrates. Loss of face (why didn't you involve us sooner?) Loss of expectations. Loss of promises made to God. Loss of status. Loss of income. Loss of self-worth. And all these losses can easily lead to emotional problems, comparable to a mourning process, a process of disengagement. All that plays a role in mourning, can also surface here. A mix of emotions emerges: deep hurt, pain, aggression, fear, anger, guilt, despair, rage, why-questions. Feelings of fatigue, failure, estrangement, personal rejection, dismissal. Feelings of loneliness, nobody waiting for you, nobody to hear your story, nobody to share with. *Raw wounds of mourning that need to be soothed.*

### *Loss into gain*

A good pastor is aware that there is always spiritual gain to be achieved from every situation, however rotten. Not denying the loss, but acknowledging it. Only then can the loss situation be placed before the lord and can you share your loss with Him. What broke our Saviour then really hits home, how deep the wounds that were afflicted. What has this done in your relationship with the Lord? Are you disappointed in God? Because He did not bless your fight to save your marriage? Do you feel denied, because all your struggles have been for nothing? Seemingly strong people can become very vulnerable before God. In the end a broken relationship can also break pride and be the door to repairing and strengthening the relationship with God. In the vulnerability, room for God can develop and dependence on God. *To cry out your grief before God the Father, who comforts like a mother.* Acknowledging the need for salvation, after years of managing things yourself. Regaining your identity, freed from the burden of years.

It can go in two directions. When someone cannot take their loss, they do not acknowledge their guilt, and will avoid God in a hardening of the heart. But it can also be a movement towards God, making a new connection, that was not there before. Thanks be to God, it will not be the first time that a divorced person has become strengthened in faith, hope and love. Was all that, then, necessary to come to a relationship with God? We may not turn the statement around. But God can use a broken situation to test you and steel your faith or repair it. God is able to turn a situation of loss into gain.

But that does not mean that I condone evil. Not in any way. Man may not separate what God has joined together. Jesus takes the sinner and the sin seriously. But God can also use evil to do good. Just like Joseph's brothers hearing that God has turned the evil around to good, in the end. What is of great importance is that guilt is expressed. A guiltless divorce does not exist. You both have been unable to save your marriage and have failed to meet God's high standard. That can cause a feeling of powerlessness. Although the one may have more on their account than the other. However, questioning each other's guilt and fighting over the size of it is a road that leads to disaster. Important is the attitude to your own contribution to the whole. Also in a situation of adultery, look at yourself too. Do you walk away from that, or are you prepared to acknowledge your shortcomings. How do you deal with your own feelings of guilt? Are you afraid that God will abandon you? Or do you ignore them and keep on craving the other's appreciation? Do you long to be washed clean by Christ or are you constantly trying to cover up your own tracks?

Here the pastorate can play a significant role. By learning to distinguish the feelings of guilt: rightful and wrong feelings of guilt. Where the guilt lies and where the shame. Unwillingness and incapability often lie along the same line. And especially this: passing on forgiveness in Christ's name. Amidst the shattered

pieces. Or do you think there is only forgiveness on the condition that we are prepared to try again? There is forgiveness, always has been. I also think it is good to explore the possibilities of admitting and expressing guilt after some time has passed. So that they can let it go and forgive. However painful it may be. Because forgiving, that is taking up the suffering.

*The promise of faithfulness remains*

You only wed once... I said to a young couple. 'I hope so' said the young woman. The wedding promise of faithfulness is a powerful one; a promise that you cannot easily set aside. Even if the marriage does not work! You cannot revoke that promise. It never stops, not even when you separate. God has attached two people to each other, and the adhesive remains will always be visible. That is the effect of: what God has joined together, let no man tear asunder. That is even a fact of nature or creation. Bonds remain. You have had many years together. These can not just be erased. Also, there are not only black pages. You have shared many good things. Your ex remains your *ex-spouse*. Especially when you have mutual children, the bonds continue: you are dealing with the father or mother of your children.

In the lines of this promise, lies the obligation to take care of the ex-spouse. You may address each other on that point, especially as Christians. A congregation is also witness by reminding ex-spouses of their wedding - and baptism vows. Even when you cannot humanly expect people to remain faithful, they still have the obligation to care for each other. Still valid, even when the relationship is broken: live sensibly together and honour each other, care for and protect each other. Easier said than done in a broken situation. But the charge remains - with God's help.

*Have a care for the children!*

And Jesus laid His hands upon the little children and blessed them. We should take note that He does this right after his statements on divorce. That can be no coincidence. Apparently, the children touch His heart, also bearing in mind the broken situations. That children suffer from the broken situation and are often the victims, needs no discussion. The consequences are enormous. The worst being the loss of never seeing your parents together any more... children are sucked into a conflict of loyalties, they lose the ability to take things for granted. Am I a mistake? Children can become estranged from themselves. Seeing a relationship fail: I'm not getting myself into that!

Here, too, you may address the parents regarding their still valid promise, their baptism promise to care for the child. Are the children the victims of their parents' feelings, of their guilt and revenge? You can feel how torn they are, but are powerless to heal their pain. Are ex-spouses taking it out on their children? How do you prevent children taking sides? The divorced person needs help and support to do that.

The Baptism promise stands, even when partners go their separate ways. Let the children know: 'We are separating, but as parents we will still take care of you'. Continuing and mutual responsibility for the children. Not fighting out conflicts around the children and especially not while trampling over them. *How do we take care that our children suffer as little psychological damage as possible?*

- By not taking children out of their safe environment.
- Having a well-functioning parent living in the home.
- Having as few as possible confrontations with the parental conflicts.

Develop a youth pastorate especially for children of divorced parents. Possibilities have been researched that could be further developed (undertaking activities with groups of fellow-sufferers). I started this years ago, after a child of divorced parents cried out: and what is the church doing for me? All the attention goes to my parents, and us? Not every child is happy to receive psychological or spiritual aid. If you were to ask them: no thanks. Respect the boundaries as well. But once they have crossed the barrier, a conversation is easily started. As long as the church community concerns itself with them and sees them, shows interest and are involved. A connected church that leaves its children in broken situations out in the cold? That is an impossible possibility. There is still a lot to be done here.

#### *Reconciliation?*

Miracles do happen. There are examples of restoration and of reconciliation. Ex-spouses who find each other again after some years have passed. Even after another partner has come into the picture. It is in that line that I continue to speak of ex-spouses to maintain the Biblical line of faithfulness. *Not to demand the impossible of people, but not to rule out the impossible that God can do either.* Sometimes a time apart, putting a little distance between you, can be literally and figuratively beneficial. Yet, the relationship can be so broken that it cannot be mended in this life. At the least, Christians can meet each other as ex-spouses to express themselves and respect and value each other. That is why I am still an advocate of a 'separation by bed and board'. The advantage of this is that the marriage remains valid while goods can be divided, child care and alimony arranged. Separate, except for the bond of marriage.

#### *New relationships*

Second relationships... are extremely vulnerable. Especially because not all is as it seems on face value. Shortcomings and gaps are filled up. Has there been enough reflection and consideration? The pitfall of starting another relationship too soon is real. And the more often the bond with another has been torn loose, the less adhesion! The more difficult it is to maintain the connection. These are words spoken out of life experience. To be honest, I do not read in the Scriptures that everyone has a right to happiness. In the manner of: if your first marriage fails, and it has come to a divorce, then try something else. Seek reconciliation or



remain alone - that is the tenor of the Scriptures<sup>1</sup>. Exceptions prove the rule, and the own responsibility plays an important role here. Because no situation is alike, I do not wish to remark on this by making statements in general. Here, too, it is of the utmost importance that the Shepherd Himself be allowed to speak (in a case of adultery the road would appear to be open). Try to prevent being hard on the other and soft on yourself. Also in this, let the 7-fold fruit of the Holy Spirit speak: But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. No law has anything against that.

### *Pastoral and passable*

Marriage is a mystery, God's invention, a magnificent mystery. But divorce even so. *A pastoral approach requires prayer so that love grows through understanding and sensitivity, so that you may be able to discern what is best* (Phil 1:9-10). The Shepherd involves all sorts of people to go out to meet the broken and hurt of his flock. Let it be a pastoral team, diverse in corroboration, in the style of our Saviour and of His Kingdom. People who can give advice and to whom one can go for advice. You can always move on with the Shepherd. There is always a passable route, following Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> *'With regard to divorce on unlawful grounds Scripture maintains the clear rule that the road to a new marriage is closed (1 Cor. 7:10,11). (Synod GKV Zuidhorn)*

*'it is fitting with the style of God's kingdom to remain unmarried after a divorce. On the one hand this means, that also in situations where a divorce was initiated by adultery or by repudiation due to faith, remaining unmarried is to be preferred. On the other hand, we must not rule out the fact that, in practice, other and new situations may arise, in which a divorce is not only deemed reasonable and inevitable, but that the church may also resign itself to a second marriage'. (Acta art. 42, grounds 3, cursive mine).*