

Churches Wise to Reject Divorced Pastors, Study Finds

Recently we noted the announcement of a pastoral vacancy for an evangelical church in the Midwest; the announcement indicated that the church "will not consider a pastor who has been divorced." Although most people would agree that the logic of this position is unassailable from the standpoint of evangelical Christianity, some may still need to be persuaded. That is the purpose of this article.

It is widely established that persons who have been divorced are incapable of performing pastoral functions within the congregation. They are unable to correctly interpret the Scriptures in preaching and teaching, to lead in prayer, to counsel parishioners in Christian living, or to set an example of family life. For many years the mechanism of this deficiency in intelligence and virtue was not well understood, but in 1974 Applegarth and Weiller traced it to a virus now commonly known as DIV (*Deficientia intelligentii et virtuorum*).

Initially, DIV was thought to be communicated through contact with a sexual partner other than one's spouse, or first spouse. However, Nagel in 1982 demonstrated that DIV is not communicated through subsequent sexual contact in the event of the *death* of a first spouse, and not even through sexual contact with a non-spousal partner where the incident does not result in divorce. In some cases, persons who had engaged in these behaviors ultimately proved fully capable of exercising pastoral responsibilities.

Attention therefore focused on the divorce process itself as the mechanism for the transmission of DIV. A breakthrough came in 1989 when Samuelson demonstrated that judges who preside over divorce proceedings are almost universally carriers of DIV, and that the virus is communicated to divorcees through the *divorce papers*. Samuelson proposed a prophylactic measure, the wearing of special gloves (*condomi digitalii*) when handling the legal documents. This measure has had some limited success with lay people; it has, however, proved totally ineffective in retarding the spread of DIV to ministers, for reasons that are not yet completely understood.

Considering the present state of research in this field, churches are well advised to avoid calling a pastor who has been divorced. The church referred to above wisely stipulated it would not consider as pastor one who had been *divorced*; there was no question of *divorce followed by remarriage*, since it appears it is the legal process of divorce itself and not subsequent or accompanying sexual behavior which renders an individual incapable of successful pastoral functioning.

The DIV virus affects brain activity, and operates upon neurological pathways in such a way that the individual is unable to understand or to effectively communicate the meaning of scriptural passages, although the interpretation of other documents, such as secular books or correspondence, is not affected. In some cases, in response to DIV stimulation, a cranial secretion creates a wall of highly nonpermeable tissue which is known to hinder prayer activity. Of special concern is the vital field of marital counseling, where close contact between pastor and counselees is known to increase the chances of divorce between these counselees. DIV-affected persons have proven unable to motivate such counselees to remain married and work out their difficulties. It is uncertain, however, whether this is due to the communication of the DIV virus across the counseling desk, or to the affected pastoral counselor's personal enthusiasm for the divorce process and its concomitant satisfactions.

Some ministers who were divorced prior to making a commitment to serve Christ (or, to use the common evangelical terminology, before being "saved") have asserted that when they became Christians they became a "new creation" and the decisions of their former life no longer stand against them. This position is based on an inaccurate translation of 2 Corinthians 5:17, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation." The Greek word *tis* used here does not mean "anyone," as commonly rendered, but rather "anyone not divorced." This is clear from usage elsewhere in the New Testament and in the patristic writings. In speaking of the full availability of salvation, the apostolic writers did not intend to include persons whose former marriages have been dissolved.

Some divorced pastors have claimed full privileges within the Christian community on the basis of Peter's words on the day of Pentecost, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2:21). But the Greek verb *sothesetai* (future indicative passive of *sozo*) does not mean "be saved from sin in general," but only "be saved from all sin except divorce." This usage is clear in the writings of the early fathers of the church, especially V Clement 10 and the *Heterologion* of Simeon Stylites. It is unfortunate that inadequate renderings of Scripture have perpetuated the notion that persons who have been divorced can enjoy anything other than second- or third-class status within the Christian community. It is impossible to reconcile the continued employment of persons with DIV in ministry

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with the clear witness of Scripture and the most ancient church tradition.

The DIV virus is unique in several respects. First, no similar virus has been proposed for violators of divine commandments in other spheres of activity. To confine our examples to biblical tradition, one thinks of King David and the apostle Paul. Both were guilty of murder, causing the death of innocent people, yet neither seems to have been seriously incapacitated in exercising spiritual leadership within their respective biblical communities, whether through their administrative functions or through their writings.

Second, DIV demonstrably has an especially pathological effect upon persons who have undertaken vows of ordination. However, while some televangelists have proclaimed that DIV is God's judgment upon those who, having responded to the call of God to the ministry, then experience the dissolution of their marriages, we reject this notion. That divorce is the "unforgivable sin" clearly mentioned in Scripture (Luke 12:63) and that ministerial divorcees tend to become DIV-infected are probably unrelated phenomena.

In summary, the findings of recent DIV-related clinical studies as well as the examination of biblical precepts make it clear that pastoral search committees, to safeguard the health and welfare of their congregations, must adopt the position of the church referred to above. No candidates who have undergone the divorce process should be considered for the pastorate. As stated at the beginning of this article, the logic of this position is clearly unassailable.