

*Ministerial Letter*

18 July 1969

By Roderick C Meredith

Dear Fellow Ministers:

This is a special letter of instruction regarding the handling of divorce and remarriage cases. I hope all of you will read it very carefully and follow these instructions in handling these cases.

Appeal to them to be open-minded and candid about any pertinent information or intimate details of their past marriages. Let them know that you have gone into intimate details of dozens of cases and that you are not going to be shocked at all. They should not hold back anything about any pertinent romantic or sex relationships before marriage. Tell them—if these factors apply—that you are God's minister and are married, have children and know about sex. Also, that you are bound as God's minister not to divulge any of it to anyone, and that, in fact, you forget most details anyway as you go through more and more cases.

There are ten basic questions that you should ask and write up for review by your District Superintendent in regard to the previous marriages. Go through each question in detail, and be sure your write-up is thorough. Get specific answers, not general ones. Use the first names of the people involved throughout the write-up to avoid confusion, and be sure to go through each case chronologically. Keep in mind that the ministry is not a detective agency. It is the responsibility of the people to get the facts, not the ministry. We can only base our decision on the facts that they present. The basic questions to ask are as follows:

1. Has either party been married before? How many times? If so, go through each marriage in chronological order covering the following points to finally determine their present status. Remember to ask about any "common-law" situations or "arrangements" while the man was overseas in the service, etc.
2. When did the original couple become acquainted? (Approximate date and their ages.) Ask the family background, religion, etc., of their parents.
3. How long and what type of courtship did they have? Did they have formal dates? Was petting involved? Fornication?
4. Did they discuss home, family, children?
5. What were the ages when both parties married? Were their ages legal?
6. Did the parents grant permission for the marriage? If not, did they try to annul it? Did they follow through on annulment or acquiesce?
7. What kind of wedding was it? (Justice of the Peace or church?) What were the circumstances of the wedding—elopement, shotgun wedding, church, etc.
8. What were the attitudes of each party involved before and at the marriage? Did they really intend to be husband and wife? If not, why did they marry? Ask and pull it out of them. This is a key factor. You may need to keep going back asking about their intentions in marriage over and over throughout the entire discussion. Ask about it in different ways, but get this point thoroughly established if possible!

9. What fruits of point #4 above were evident? Did they buy furniture and dishes, rent an apartment, set up housekeeping, or live with her parents, etc.? Did he properly support her or at least try to be a husband in this regard? Did they make a home and perform the duties of a husband and wife? Did he provide for the home? Did she cook, sew and keep house? Did they have normal sex relations?

10. Was there previous fornication with anyone else or fraud of any kind involved?

We must judge the spirit of fraud as well—lesbian or homosexual, absolute alcoholic, dope addict, demonism, etc. These are matters affecting the character and being of the individual, The question is, "Did God bind the marriage, or is either party the victim of a fraud?" Once the fraud is discovered, they must separate or else God will then bind the marriage if they continue to live together with the knowledge of the fraud. If the couple has lived together for a number of years and fraud is discovered later, and if the man then puts her away for that reason, the marriage is not binding. If he forgives her or "tolerates" the fraud and continues to live with her, God then binds the marriage.

Tell the people that what they told us is the basis of our decision. If they have not told us the truth, then they are sternly accountable to God Himself as were Ananias and Sapphira!

When all the facts bearing upon the case have been written up, do NOT inform the individuals of your decision based upon those facts unless the former marriage was clearly binding and you are SURE the case is cut and dried. In this instance, they may make their decision to separate sexually (though you should not "tell" or command them to do anything!) But do not advise one or the other to move out until the decision has been confirmed by your District Superintendent. In cases where the former marriage does not appear to be binding, or where there is some doubt in your mind as to whether or not it was binding, do not give them the decision until it has the final approval of your District Superintendent. Give them the benefit of the doubt until the decision is final.

So that everyone will now have a complete, thorough and uniform approach to divorce and remarriage cases, I will give you vital guidelines that all of you should now be following. We here on the Headquarters' "team" have spent dozens of hours working out and reviewing these guidelines. So SAVE this special letter and use it regularly in handling D & R cases!

First of all, before you tell people they are bound to a previous mate according to God's Word, you had better be sure that they are. You can be sure, of course, only after the whole case has been written up in detail and submitted, first of all, to your District Superintendent for approval of the decision. The minister in charge should be handling these cases and making the decisions, not Local Elders.

Do NOT tell the people before the decision is made that you think their present marriage is "probably" valid or "probably" not valid in God's sight! Just tell them that you cannot advise them on their situation until you have the full details about the previous marriages and also check with your District Superintendent. Giving people false hopes can make an eventual separation even more difficult than it would be normally, or make the individuals involved bitter against God's Church and you personally if the case doesn't come out the way you indicated that it would.

Don't go into the case unless you have time to go into it thoroughly. Begin by asking them whether they have counseled with anyone else—a Catholic priest, etc., or one of our ministers—in regard to the validity of their marriage. Then ask if they have read our booklet on Divorce and Remarriage. If they haven't, you may advise them to write for it

and postpone further discussion until they have read and studied the booklet. If they have read the booklet, ask them if they agree with the Bible teaching on divorce and remarriage. Find out if they are willing to go along with the decision reached and separate, if necessary, in order to obey God. If they won't, there is no need to pursue the case further.

**Explain that we don't tell people to separate**, but if they come to us wanting to become a member of God's Church, we merely tell them what God requires of them before He will put

them in His Church. It is just a matter of whether they are willing to obey God, and if they are, God will put them in His Church.

If one of the mates is not interested in the Church, just explain to him or her that just as any club has its own membership rules, God has set down certain requirements that must be met before a person can become a member of the Church of God. It is our responsibility as His ministers to explain these requirements, **but what the individual does about it is his own private and personal business.**

Try every means to induce the unconverted mate to talk freely and give the necessary information about any previous marriages. If the converted or interested wife does see fit to separate or threatens to separate sexually until a decision is reached, this is often a powerful means to induce the man to co-operate and be willing to sit down and discuss the case.

If an antagonistic mate simply will not divulge information on previous marriages, try to find out the basic details from the converted mate—or other relatives or friends—and you may be able to be sure from that. We cannot assume that the present marriage is not bound without adequate facts. It is up to them. If the unconverted mate is not willing to discuss it, what the other does is up to the individual. We will tell neither what to do—though if the weight of the evidence indicates, the converted mate probably should separate until the decision is made.

If they are willing to abide by the decision reached and if they want a decision made based on God's Word, let them know that this is a very serious issue and may be a turning point in their lives which could affect their eternal salvation. Warn them that they may be tempted to twist the facts, gloss over certain facts and even lie about certain aspects of their previous marriages. Remind them of what happened to Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 in explaining God's attitude toward those who lie to His ministers. Ask them if they have already made up their minds about whether their past marriages were binding. If they have, there is no point in pursuing the matter further.

Do NOT send the information you have written up directly to Headquarters! Send the information—along with the decision you reached if you were able to reach one—to your District Superintendent, and be sure to keep a copy for your local files. He will then either approve or disagree with the decision. Or on those which you were not able to decide, he will, if possible, make the decision and forward the case write-up and the decision to Headquarters for our records. The District Superintendent need NOT keep a giant file on all case write ups—just those for the churches he personally pastors.

We will make the decision only on those that the District Superintendents refer to us to decide. In these cases, we will then send both the local minister and the District Superintendent a copy of our decision.

If the final decision was that they are not bound to their present mate, tell them verbally, in person, that according to CHRIST'S TEACHINGS THEY ARE NOT BOUND AND THAT

NOW THEY NEED TO DECIDE WHAT TO DO IF THEY WISH TO OBEY God. But once a case like this has been fully gone into and decided, the people must NOT be allowed to attend if they insist on living in adultery!

Do not, under ANY circumstance, put the decision in writing! It could be used against us in court, as occurred in one case that all of you are familiar with.

When one of the mates is not being called, emphasize again that we are not telling them to separate, but that we are only telling them what God's Word says, and be especially discreet

when the mate is antagonistic. If a woman decides to separate against the wishes of her unconverted "husband," we cannot help her to make the separation in any way. After she has made the decision to obey God and has separated, we will then help her in whatever way we can—again, using discretion, of course.

If they both agree to the separation, we should offer help and advice in carrying out their decision. They should separate geographically—at least a state away in most instances, and in every case should be in different Church areas.

Only in very rare circumstances—perhaps when one or both are senile and when one or the other is crippled or severely disabled—might a brother-sister relationship be approved. In no case, however, should you hold out this hope until this arrangement has been approved by Headquarters! We have found that brother-sister relationships just do not work—even though they might, and I say might, be able to remain sexually separate. They are still living in a husband-wife relationship in their minds. Only in very unusual and extreme circumstances would this arrangement be approved. We have learned some hard lessons on this through the years!

We have enclosed a list of the ten questions with this letter on a separate piece of paper so that you can carry it with you on D & R counselings. This will help you include all the important information in writing up the cases. You can just write the number of each question and take notes on each answer in order to write it up in complete, thorough form later. You should then go over the completed write-up with the individuals involved to get last-minute clarifications and to verify that the information is accurate since the decision may hinge on certain vital facts, and their accuracy is very important.

Take time to do a thorough job on these, fellows, and be sure your write-ups are easily legible (preferably typed) and in order according to the ten points we are giving you. We all know how these decisions affect people's lives, so let's all prayerfully do our best as God's representatives.

Your brother in Christ,

Roderick C. Meredith

P. S. We will later send you a couple of sample copies of different types of cases because of the importance of writing these up correctly.

P. P. S. Remember! From now on send your D & R write-ups ONLY to your District Superintendent. He will confirm or reject your decision, decide those in question, and he will forward the case write-ups to us. Also, he will ask Headquarters to decide those crucial cases even he is not sure of—hopefully, very few! So study, keep and USE this letter as a basic "manual" on handling D & R cases from now on!

[emphasis added]