

Church Administration

In the last issue I mentioned the policy on sending in divorce-and-remarriage cases. I would like to elaborate a little on that subject.

We are keeping current with the cases coming in, and the backlog that once existed has been cleared away with the exception of a handful that are very complex or incomplete due to continuing changes in the status of the individuals. Now that the turnaround time is so short, it is imperative that the cases not come to us *prematurely*. We must be sure that a proper amount of time has passed to allow people to repent, reconsider, reconcile or whatever else they may do. Rather than hold each case here for a period of time before considering it, it is better that the local minister explain the need for a *six-month waiting period*

While we want to serve the brethren with prompt decisions, we do not want to give a false impression that getting out of a marriage is as easy as falling off a log. Sad to say, we sometimes see in these cases an element of *impatience* to get a decision before any factors come along to cloud the issue.

After reading hundreds of these cases, we have found it obvious that two people who cannot live in peace also cannot tell the same story as to what was wrong in the marriage. We are often faced with having to determine the true facts by the process of elimination. Thus it is helpful to observe the fruits of both parties over a period of time to see whether their actions back up their words.

Some cases are straightforward and the decision is obvious. But there is much to be gained by waiting six months from the time of separation to finalize such a decision. Surely no *real* Christian is going to look for another mate within that period of time. In fact, those who have had an unsuccessful marriage usually need a substantial period of time to stabilize emotionally. They need to review their spiritual priorities before even *beginning* to consider developing a new relationship.

Once in a while there is a case in which wisdom would dictate that a member file divorce papers due to circumstances involving child custody, financial protection, personal safety, etc. Before doing this a member may want to know whether or not the marriage is bound. But that is *not* the immediate question. Either they can live together or they cannot. If they cannot, then the question of bound or free will have to be dealt with later.

We do not want to put ourselves into the position of making decisions on the validity of marriages in which the parties themselves don't know whether they are going to be reconciled.

I should mention that we are seeing more and more divorce cases in which both mates are in the Church. Many of them were married by God's ministers. Yet the marriage has failed and both parties want out of it while staying in the Church. This puts a heavy burden on the ministry to counsel both and try to help them see the importance of restoring the marriage.

Such a couple should be clearly warned that they are putting themselves in grave spiritual danger. But if they separate in *spite* of our best efforts, the ministry should not jump to conclusions about whether either party is "justified" in taking such action. And we *must not side with either person* based on our emotional involvement or personal prejudice.

For example, we might favor the husband because we have seen that his wife is not submissive. But we may not have seen that the husband is an alcoholic who makes totally unreasonable demands or abuses his wife. Some members have expressed concern that their minister has a reputation for *always* taking the husband's side, or *always* taking the wife's side. This can make it very difficult for members to open up to the minister. Work with *both* people and ask God for the discernment to know what the real attitudes are. Then judge by the fruits.

Remember that many people have dramatically different public and private personalities and we may not be able to comprehend what one or the other mate has endured in the privacy of the home. Are both parties truly converted? If they are, they should be able to grow toward reconciliation. But if either is not converted, we may have to take stronger action. Sometimes those of us studying a case without personal knowledge of the people--hence not emotionally involved--cannot understand why the minister did not remove one or both from fellowship.

Though we want to express real love and kindness in these counselings, we shouldn't be soft-headed. It is possible to do a disservice to members by not using sufficient disciplinary action to wake them up. Let's do our part, knowing that God will work out the solution as these individuals commit the problem into His hands and yield to His will.

I hope this review makes it easier to understand the reasons for the current policy. As mentioned previously, it should not directly affect the way we approach counseling with those who are having marital difficulties.

Mr. Tkach has asked the Council of Elders to consider certain procedural questions that arise in the administration of the divorce-and-remarriage doctrine. Some of us who work with this on a day-to-day basis are currently preparing a list of questions and examples for review. We will keep you updated on any developments.

Larry R. Salyer