

THE EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON CHILDREN: EXPLANATION OF THE ONTOLOGICAL
CRISIS AND PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR CAREGIVING

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF DIVINITY

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MEQUON, WI

MARCH, 2013

Abstract

The objective of this paper is to inform the reader about the unique challenges that children of divorced parents face. This paper will focus on the evolution of marriage from the 17th century to present day and how this shift has led to a marital disaster in our culture. It will also examine the loss of self, experienced by the child and common external manifestations of this inner struggle. The goal of this paper is not to deal with the symptoms of the loss of self, but to examine the root cause. Understanding basic principles will help pastors give the care needed in the divorce situation. Lastly, the paper will provide insight and practical tips for the pastor to employ while seeking to give spiritual and social guidance to the young adults and children affected by divorce in their congregations. Because the pastor will not be the only person helping the child through this painful time, there also is advice in the body of this paper for the parents, family members, and friends looking for tools to help fill the support network of the child.

Introduction

There are many types of crises happening which affect millions of people. The escalating conflict in Israel has destroyed the peace. In many Third World nations people are starving. It's a crisis. For the most part, these crises occur far away from us. Most of us do not have to fear rocket attacks or starvation. There is, however, a crisis taking place all around us every day. Our society is going through a crisis that does not involve guns or food shortage. Our society is going through a crisis that affects millions of children in our nation. The crisis is divorce.

Divorce rates have been on the rise since the 1950s, steadily increasing to a level which could now be called a crisis state. Divorce affects all of us, even if your marriage, your parents' marriage, and the marriages of your close friends are still intact. The probability that you know a family, or are at least are mindful of a family, that has or is going through a divorce is incredibly high. Unlike the crisis of war or starvation, divorce happens to our neighbors and to people in our churches.

Millions of children are thrust into this crisis, against their will. The toll it takes on them can be devastating if not dealt with properly. The emotions stirred up, confusion and rage are things that must be handled with compassion and delicacy. Often times when people think of divorce this is all they think of: pain. Pain is there, yes but what causes that pain? What is the root cause of the pain and almost every other negative aspect which occurs in a divorce? The crisis in divorce is an ontological one. In philosophy ontology pertains to relationships and what it means to "be." Divorce, for children of all ages, not only young children, is a very real and very troubling ontological crisis. It is an ontological crisis because as Andrew Root states, "Divorce, therefore, should be seen as not just the split of a social unit, but the break of the community in which the child's identity rests. When the community that created a child dissolves, the child is left exposed not only psychologically and socially, but ontologically."¹

The child, whether or not he or she knows it consciously, questions their own existence, what it was, what it is now, and what it will be, all at once. As current pastors and future pastors who know children, it is important to understand the ontological nature of the situation. This paper seeks to inform the reader on the basis of research in the form of reading selected works from authors and conducting interviews about the ontological crisis taking place in children

¹ Root, Andrew. *The Children of Divorce: The Loss of Family as the Loss of being*. xvii.

affected by divorce. The paper will also discuss what pastors and other members of the child's support group can do to help in these situations.

The paper is divided into four major sections: 1) The change in the nature and structure of marriage beginning on page 1; 2) counseling review: tips, good ideas, and an exploration of the emotional effects of divorce beginning on page 5; 3) the ontological crisis in the children of divorce beginning on page 17; 4) what you can do as pastor, and what your church can do to help fill in the missing gaps in the child's support network, and the pastor as mentor beginning on page 26.

The epidemic of divorce in our society creates an ontological crisis in the children affected by divorce; the church is in an ideal position to confront the crisis and offer support.

Literature Review

Much has been written on the subject of divorce. Statistical reports can be found all over the internet. Much ink has been spilled with adults enduring divorces in mind as to what causes them, what to do during them, how to make sure a divorcee is not in jeopardy of financial disaster, and how to recover after the divorce. There is a world of material published in the counseling world about how to help all the members of the family, parents and children, who are affected by divorce. Children are also the subject of much written material, but the majority of these publications merely treat the outward displays, or symptoms of pain, without identifying the root cause.

David Thompson's book *Resources for Christian Counseling, Counseling and Divorce* identifies many complications raised by divorce in adults and children. It dealt thoroughly with many issues facing those in divorce from a Christian perspective. However, there were elements of Thompson's theology I did not agree with, namely, his advocacy of female pastors. Thompson made many practical points about how to counsel people in divorce situations. In many sections he told the pastor what to do, as well as what is going on the minds of many of the divorced people.

To counsel adult and child alike, it is beneficial to have a basic understanding of counseling principles, which are reviewed later in this paper. Many of these counseling principles are presented from a pastoral perspective in Archibald Hart and Gary Gulbranson's book, *Mastering Pastoral Counseling*. *Mastering Pastoral Counseling* was extremely helpful for gaining understanding to many aspects of pastoral counseling. It is written in clear, conversational style with many case studies to clearly illustrate the point in question. The authors assert in the introduction that wisdom will be the focus of this book. If one could master every point of instruction in this book, one would be a truly great counselor.

Mastering Pastoral Counseling treats the issues of ethics, confidentiality, referrals, family counseling, crisis management, short-term and long-term care, differences in counseling men and women, and how to maintain your own mental stability. I used many tips and points the authors made primarily in part three of my paper.

Anthony Ash wrote a brief booklet, *Dealing with Divorce*, addressed to those going through a divorce, not the counselor. Overall it had many healthy habits for the divorcee to follow and pitfalls to avoid. Ash's main point is: other people have gone through divorce and

come out on the other side as functional people. To many people, a statement like that will not be a great source of comfort. Overall, this pamphlet was marginally helpful.

It is true that there is a deeper cause of pain in the children of divorce from which the majority of the negative emotions and behaviors spring, this cause of pain will be dealt with in the body of this paper. It is also important to have a working knowledge of the behaviors of children going through divorce. Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Services, in their paper, *Effects of Divorce on Children*, efficiently and concisely divides children into various age groups and explains what parents and other caregivers can expect to see in the way of outward behaviors. This paper should be read by all people who work with families or children.

Andrew Root, in his book, *The Children of Divorce: The Loss of Family as The Loss of Being*, dealt primarily with the affects of divorce on children. He claims ontological uncertainty to be the source of true pain in the children of divorce. Root begins with a history of marriage itself, explaining our current social views on marriage. Root asserts that marriage went from being an arrangement of mutual benefit to a love-based relationship. Root posits that because 20th Century marriages are based on subjective feelings, it is far easier to break up a marriage than it was when the family unit was necessary for survival.

Root then explains his definition of an ontological crisis as a crisis in which the sense of being is called into question. Root uses many convincing arguments to support this claim. Root's statement, that the children of divorce experience ontological crisis is treated and explained thoroughly in the body of this paper.

The main down fall of this book is that root uses the theology of Karl Barth to reinforce his own arguments. Barth does not have a high view of Scripture; he warps it to his own ends. I did not use any of the sections pertaining to Karl Barth's theology in my paper.

Root provides a long list of suggestions churches can employ to reach out to the young people going through divorce in the later part of his book. I found those ideas to be very beneficial.

To help the children going through a divorce, a powerful strategy in care giving is to make sure the child's support network, meaning those people around the child and the child's environment, are as stable as possible. Filling the role of a parent recently made absentee in the wake of divorce will strengthen the child's support network. The father and son team of Howard and William Hendricks wrote a book called, *As Iron Sharpens Iron: Building Character in a*

Mentoring Relationship. This book provided many ways to identify and groom a beneficial mentoring relationship. Structurally, the book is divided into two parts. The first half is directed at younger men looking for a mentor. The second half is directed to those men seeking to be mentors. The second half also gives the pastor many helpful pieces of advice on how to identify the mentors in their congregation. While *Iron Sharpens Iron* has a “business like” feel, many of the ideas are simply practical and useful for establishing these crucial relationships. The Hendricks men stress the need for men of all ages have for mentors.

A helpful review of what marriage is as stated in the Bible, when God allows for a divorce, and what places in Scripture will be especially comforting in a divorce is provided in Prof. em. David Valleskey’s paper, *Dealing with Divorce in the Parish*. It examined many sections from the New Testament which speak about divorce and marriage. Valleskey dealt with the Greek in a very clear and accessible way. This paper would also be a great resource when a pastor is assigned a conference paper on the subject of marriage or divorce. I used Valleskey’s paper to gain deeper insight about what God says on the topic of marriage and divorce.

The Changing Bond of Marriage

Family serves as the first school. We learn to speak, walk, play, and interact with others. We learn how to live. We strongly identify ourselves as a member of “family” because family is what we know. Things like family traits, temperament, bone structure, and eye color help reinforce this concept of belonging to the family in the child’s mind. Customs like opening a gift on Christmas Eve before the rest on Christmas Day or singing a different song than “Happy Birthday” solidify in the child’s mind that he belongs to a unique family. These things are part of what makes a family, a family.

In 16th century and centuries prior, families were more likely to remain intact and untouched by divorce. At that time, marriage was primarily based on merger. Marriages were often arranged by parents, not because they thought their child would fall in love with the potential spouse, but because they wanted to secure fortune, land, and lineage.² The political advantages of marriage were immense. Stephanie Coontz says, “The system of marrying for political and economic advancement was practically universal across the globe for many millennia.”³ This practice of arranging marriages for political gain has been portrayed from the plays of Shakespeare to *Braveheart* with Mel Gibson. Alliances and relationships were formed or solidified by marriage.

The children produced in these marriages did not have the chance to enjoy the golden age of life when everything was done for them and their only task was to play happily. Once children were old enough they became part of the survival process of the family, helping and working alongside adults. Children were also seen by those outside the family as a seal of the marriage contract. Divorce was less likely to occur because the family unit needed to remain intact for everyone to survive. Fathers hunted, worked the fields and did other tasks requiring strength. Mothers performed countless tasks in and around the home: meal preparation, clothes making and mending, and child rearing. Children learned from either the father or the mother, depending on gender, gaining skills children today will not develop until they start looking for jobs. Families often included more than the nuclear family because people generally lived out life

² Root, 6.

³ Root, 6.

close to their birth places. This system opened the door for sexism and rigidity, but it also provided a stable, familiar, and sometimes jovial environment for children.⁴

When the way families provided for themselves began to change, the structure of the family changed with it. Root writes in respect to the changing family dynamic of the 18th century, “With the rise of a money-based economy, fewer people were dependent on parents and kin units to kick-start their married life. This also allowed for more choice; no longer were children completely dependent on their parents for economic needs.”⁵ With the rise of education families started later and had fewer children because large numbers of children were not needed for the family’s survival. Another change was that people were now beginning, more and more, to choose their own marriage partners. The marriage arrangement was still largely based on business advantage but the subjective aspect of emotion was starting to gain ground.

The Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries helped to put the focus of marriage on the individual, rather than the family, because the individual was becoming the priority. This pattern of choosing the marriage partner based on subjective feeling continued to increase into the 19th and 20th centuries, where it finally reached completion. Marriage became, and is now based on love, not mutual benefit. “The criteria of marriage transitioned from concrete operations to subjective feelings; marriage was now something chosen by the individual, not something constructed by kin units and village communities,” explains Root.⁶ This change was not inherently bad or foolish, it just was not as rock solid as it once was because people no longer needed the marriage to survive. Root explains further, “Earlier, marriage was held together by the steel of kin mergers and, later, the stone of a labor agreement; in this period marriage was held together by the tissue of love. While the love-based union was clearly softer and warmer, it lacked the strength and resilience of earlier structures.”⁷

As labor moved away from the home it became the woman’s job to make sure the home was a refuge from the troubles of the competitive work world and all this was done out of love for the husband. The “tissue of love”, as Root labels it, set up a more fragile foundation for the family unit. Again, because the family no longer needed to remain intact to survive, they could be destroyed just as easily. “It was not the love-based union that created divorce, but it was the

⁴ Root, 10.

⁵ Root, 11.

⁶ Root, 15.

⁷ Root, 16.

love-based union that democratized it.”⁸ Root claims this because whoever was at fault for the marriage, husband or wife, also chose to create it. He or she could choose to destroy it just as easily. Therefore, when the love died so did the marriage.

This ideology reached its peak when the individualism of the 1960s created a culture in which people could move about freely and do what pleased them; they only had to be responsible to themselves.⁹ It seems as though Root is taking too hard a stance on the individual doing what he or she pleases, but that is what modernism, and especially post-modernism is. “What is right to me is the only right,” claims the post-modern. Barbra Dafoe Whitehead comments, “Divorce had long been identified with legal freedoms, but in the last decades of the twentieth century it became associated with psychological liberation as well.”¹⁰ The “no-fault” divorce helped increase the frequency as well. All the while, the children of that time, and those of today, are subject to the whims of one, if not both parental units.

Briefly examining modern ideologies will show their effects on today’s families. The modern family is now mobile and easily portable. We grow up in one place, go to college in another, get a job in another place, and finally, settle down and get married in a different place. There is a change from relying on and adhering to tradition to the average American person being able to explore life on whatever path and by whatever means they choose. This “on my own” mindset does not come without its risks. Root states, “Modernity itself is a Pandora’s Box. It promises liberation from attention to the past by freeing individual selves to seek the future. But this future is not known; if blazing your trail can be freeing, it is always risky.”¹¹ Our society is based on trust. If you take your car to the mechanic, how do you know if he tightened all the necessary bolts and fastened all the lines correctly? When paying someone to fix your plumbing, how do you know they did the job in an efficient manner as possible? You do not know, you trust them.

As a result of the no-fault divorce, the family in the modern age is always at risk, of collapse. When trust breaks down, love follows and often times so does the marriage. The child of the modern family is left with no escape unlike the parents, who are able to move and change their environment. It is important to remember the change in the marriage bond. What was once

⁸ Root, 20.

⁹ Root, 20.

¹⁰ Root, 21.

¹¹ Root, 31.

an ironclad certainty based on mutual gain and the need to survive is now based on subjective feelings which are subject to rapid change.

The Ontological Crisis

The ontological crisis facing the children of divorce is made especially challenging by their lack of perspective and life experience. When a grown man goes through a midlife crisis, he goes through his own ontological fog, only he can take steps to correct the problem. The midlife crisis buys Just For Men: Touch of Grey, push the pedal to the medal and takes off down a scenic country road. The point is he has the power to change his environment and ability to reinvent himself while the child is powerless to do these things.

Even though it is irrational, there is the fear that the child in a divorce will dissolve the same way the parents' relationship dissolved.¹² This fear never has to be vocalized to be very real, very present, and very influential in the way the child now views his home environment and broader world. Because the relationship that made him no longer exists, he constantly fears his own future. That fear is ontological crisis and it affects short term emotions, longer term mood patterns, and outward behaviors.

This ontological instability creates powerful and unhealthy levels of anxiety in a child, leading him to ask unsettling questions. Will my parents forget about me? Will my parents start new families and not love me as much? When the child is going from the mom's house to the dad's and back again, he wonders, will I get lost in the shuffle? Even though it may not be articulated this clearly, if at all, he wonders if his relationship with his parents will stay the same.¹³ The answer is that he is already lost, groping about blindly in ontological darkness. He is there by choice, however, not his choice, but his parents' choice. In his new community he has a different background, different experience, and is bound to one parent at a time, instead of both, so his state of being is always changing.

We need to understand that divorce is more than a loss of social capital. This term is used by psychologists to give value to the child's emotional state as it relates to others in his social sphere. If social capital can be retained, the child has a better chance at healing in the wake of the divorce, avoiding delinquency and living a productive, even successful life. It has often been assumed that if the child is given enough social capital, which in this case means being sheltered from arguing parents or other forms of conflict, the child will escape the divorce without experiencing trauma. Root strongly disagrees:

¹² Root, 44.

¹³ Root, 45,46.

“But divorce is more than an issue of social capital or simple psychology (like self-esteem), for we are more than our place in the structures and knowledge of society. Even if young people preserve their social capital and understand why their parents split up and what the divorce means, it still leaves a mark that cannot be erased by retained social capital and correct knowledge.”¹⁴

Andrew Root went through a divorce himself, and turned out to be a successful man. Even though he retained his “social capital” during his parents’ divorce, the scars will always remain. This is true of all children of divorce.

It is true, however, that when the situation around a divorce is more stable the child in the situation, statistically, will be better off in the long run, but how does one define “better off?” Even if the divorce is as peaceful as could be hoped, and the parents part ways quietly, the realization that one of them is not coming home will, undoubtedly, leave deep scars. An interviewee reflects,

“To be honest, life has gotten easier financially since the time of the divorce, so it was perhaps a blessing in disguise. I feel like I've grown much stronger emotionally throughout the years, and that's helped my handle numerous and diverse problems since that time. However, the divorce has increased my skepticism of the male gender over the years, and especially has made it hard when considering a potential future husband.”

In the wake of a divorce, the whole world, for a time, is unsteady. This is the opposite of what is desired. Root informs:

“Ontological security is needed because it protects the human being from constantly having to confront the abyss of death that is present under the thin layer of social life and personal identity. Giddens states, “To be ontologically secure is to possess, on the level of the unconscious and practical consciousness, ‘answers’ to fundamental questions.” Therefore, ontological security is the ability to depend on the self and the social unit enough that we are not thrust at every turn into terror that death, destruction, or derangement may seize us... It is the ability to unconsciously feel oneself safe enough to be and to act in the world. Therefore, when divorce occurs and the ontological security that the family provided in the dependable (so dependable that its members share biology) social environment is lost, the protection of ontological security is shattered, and the child is left naked to face the existential abyss of non-being.”¹⁵

This quotation helps us understand what it means to be ontologically secure. It means being able to trust your family and others around you to provide you with answers to life’s questions and to keep you anchored and protected. When divorce strikes, it impacts children and older youth at

¹⁴ Root, 46.

¹⁵ Root, 48, 49.

the level of their lived world radically changing their social environment. A memory of an interviewee helps us understand how multiple aspects of the lived world are affected:

“I started getting used to not having my dad in the house afterwards, but I found myself becoming frequently irritated at how little he seemed to know about my life. He would show up to some of my volleyball games or poms/cheerleading games, but I remember having higher expectations than that. Around this time I started formulating the opinion that it just wasn't quite right driving to my dad's apartment from the house where we lived with my mom--or that it wasn't quite right that my dad had to schedule visits to come over and see us.”

Even more significantly, divorce completely rearranges the concept of their environment, and even more so, of “self”. The crisis is a loss of self. Staal says, “We lose our sense of continuity, the comfort of family as anchor, and in its place we are usually left with the disturbing fact that we can't even picture our parents as a couple, let alone believe they were ever in love.”¹⁶ I remember asking my mother the very same question not too long after my own parents divorce. It seemed to me like there were little, if any, signs of love toward the end of their marriage. Feeling just as insecure and confused as Stall, I asked my mother if they ever loved each other during their marriage. She said of course they did; there were happy times. It was comforting to know that at some point in my family's history, there was happiness. That knowledge went a long way in helping me make sense of my own existence.

The twentieth century mindset helped to not only create the divorce crisis our society is going through, but also the way those going through divorce deal with the situation and evaluate themselves. When our society moved away from the family unit doing most of the living in and around the home, and moved more toward a currency based economy when men started working in industrial settings away from the home our ideologies changed as well. Society gravitated away from larger kin units favoring the choices of the individual. This also means that the individual chose the life path for himself and his family. Traditions do have their place; they do not have to be adhered to with undying faithfulness, but they do provide a solid foundation and pattern for life. Not having a historical backdrop or some sort of general protocol when dealing with life's stressful situations helps to further cloud the sense of being. This is because, as Root states, “When tradition is operative it creates an environment of ontological security, so that even if a parent disappears or dies, the social environment remains stiffly or perfunctorily dependable,

¹⁶ Root, 52.

and anxiety will be mitigated in traditional operations.”¹⁷ With the backdrop of a time-tested and proven system, even the death of a parent, as painful as it is, will be easier to process. The kin or clan systems would help this process by providing many relatives to help with the day to day routine, filling in the gaps left by the departed nuclear family member. Ontological security is the gift that tradition gives to its participants.¹⁸ In the modern world, especially the United States, families are often separated by long drives or flights, making it vastly more difficult for family to insure day to day stability and fill the gaps of the now fragile support network.

Without tradition to rely on these gaps, although they are more like deep chasms, remain wide open, healing very slowly which gives the person or child more time than ever before to contemplate his or her being as it exists right now. Root explains:

“Of course, ontological security must be renegotiated in a detraditionalized late modernity. When tradition is replaced by late modernity, and space becomes more navigable, issues of ontology come into view. Ontology is most fundamentally about being in time and space. When tradition rules, being is rarely reflected upon, because space is static and time is backward-looking. But freed of tradition, space and time change, bringing, being (ontology) into view.”

Without tradition serving as a guide, or at least helping to provide stability after a divorce, the modern child does not know what to do. The modern child does not know how to handle the feelings and deep questions with which he is faced. Ideally, the child will vocalize these concerns to the existing support network of family, fellow church members, and friends to receive the comfort that yes, you will continue to exist and that yes, people will still love you and care for you in the future. This is not always the case. Many bury these emotions deep down where they linger for years, until they show again in the future. They can show up again as defensive patterns of living and social interaction. The child, now adult, does not want to go through another event of such pain and confusion. These buried emotions can also appear as feelings of aggression, angst, and rage, which sadly are directed to those around the child, now an adult.

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger spent his time pondering ontology. He decided that ontological security had to do with being, but more specifically being in the world. He posited that being was not enough to define one’s ontology, but that “to be” was “to be” in a specific time and place. Before Heidegger, Western Philosophy was convinced that being simply

¹⁷ Root, 56.

¹⁸ Root, 56.

meant a knowledge of one's own existence. Descartes' statement, "I think, therefore I am," sums up this school of thought. For Heidegger, being comes before knowing, instead of knowing determining existence.¹⁹ Heidegger believes that *dasein*, "being there" in German, is more fundamental than simply being able to cognitively reflect on one's being. Blattner helps explain Heidegger's point, "Heidegger believes that you have an experience of yourself that is more basic than your cognitive awareness that all your experiences are yours."²⁰ Being is to know that you are your own, not simply being aware that you are because you think you are.

Heidegger's second point is that *dasein* behaves in a manner fitting to one's own being, meaning that you are how you live in the world. This takes into account all the decisions we make based on our emotions and personal beliefs. How we are in the world, meaning what we do and how we do, is just as much a part of us as the fact that we are in the world. The things we do are then intimately united with our own world and our community. We learn how to function and live within the physical space of our world. We learn the rules of that world, the results of actions, and the standard protocol. Therefore, when a divorce occurs, what is often most painful to a child is the confusion associated with having to learn how to live and function in this new world. How that child lives in this world is now different and he must conform to a new set of rules and standards. He has new expectations to meet.

What makes the process of learning how to live in a new environment with a new set of rules challenging is that people are generally comfortable with the way things are, or were. They were familiar with how the old way functioned. Even if there is sadness or dysfunction in the family pre-divorce, the child is familiar with that environment, that system, and understands his or her unique role. By the grace of God, the child enjoys many aspects of that environment. Post divorce, the child must now think about who he or she will be in the world with a new framework. To children with immature minds, that is, not completely developed, this process is frightening and uncertain.

These three factors of being in a world, knowing how you live and function in that world, and caring about who you are in that world lead up to Heidegger's main point that *dasein* is based on how we live in and how we act, rather than what we know.²¹ This means that when divorce strikes a child, it affects the child more than can be perceived even if the child does not

¹⁹ Root, 58.

²⁰ Root, 58.

²¹ Root, 63.

show signs or have a desire to discuss these issues. Divorce strikes the child on the most practical level of their existence. Root quotes eighteen-year-old Martin, who says, “No matter what anybody says, divorce will always affect you more than most people realize. Divorce is one of those things that’ll affect you for better or for worse, even though I might not admit it fully to myself.”²²

God created humans as social people with social needs that need to be met by other humans. Even people considered to be independent by nature have a need for human social interaction. Therefore, it can be said that being, how we identify ourselves on the most basic levels, also means to “be with”. We identify ourselves in terms of who we know and what we have done in various social groups. In the family, we identify ourselves as the oldest or the youngest, the tallest or the smallest. At work, we identify ourselves by the products we assemble, the creative team we are a part of, or the periodical we helped publish. If you were to get fired from your job, you would no longer want to identify yourself with that job; it would be a source of some pain. This is even truer with the child going through a divorce. This pain is beyond words. Often times, children do not broadcast their family grief to others around them. When they do, when they explain to others what happened, they relive those painful moments over again.

The child trying to make sense of life post divorce often tries to figure out what caused the divorce itself the divorce itself. Root quotes a woman named Nichole to show that many people in divorce simply feel lost. Nichole says,

“That afternoon, after he left, she [her mother] sat us down on the couch and said he wasn’t coming back. I can’t even remember my reaction. I know I couldn’t understand what was happening. But I know exactly how I felt. Lost. Now everything I see I have to know the cause, so I can explain the effect. Since I can’t really understand why the divorce came about, I constantly struggle to make sense of my family.”²³

This feeling of being lost, trying to understand how you know fit into the world, how you now identify yourself in that world, and how that world functions can be harder to deal with than death.

Dealing with death can be an incredibly painful experience; it is also profoundly different than dealing with divorce. Death generally does not shake a person’s ontological security. Death

²² Root, 63. Root interviewed Martin.

²³ Root, 75.

may shake a young person's being, as he witnesses the monster of negation take his mother, for example. However, such a situation, though frightening, never throws one's own being into question.²⁴ If you are at the grave of your long deceased great-great-grandfather, you can be certain of a couple of things. First of all, you know that he is dead. Secondly, you know that you are here. This man was directly responsible for your being and simply because he is dead does not mean that you should question whether or not you ever should have been. Instead, you may contemplate your own death. Root helps explain the difference of death and divorce, "Death promises the eventual end of his being; divorce questions if he ever should have been at all."²⁵ Even if the death in question is one of a parent, barring suicide or extreme circumstance, the parent did not choose to die. With divorce, that path was chosen by one or both parents. From a child's perspective, there are always more steps that could have been taken to prevent the divorce from ever occurring. The memory of love is preserved in death, but in divorce the history is changed. Everything is suspect and love can be replaced with anger, hate, and confusion. David Thompson, a family counselor, advances Root's argument:

"Divorce, a painful parting, is not less traumatic than any of the other good-byes of our lives. In fact, some counselors would tell us divorce is even more wounding than death because of the sense of failure and rejection that we feel. Divorce takes its victims through the 'divorce process,' a series of emotional stages, similar to death and dying."²⁶

There are regrets in death. A person might wish more time was spent with their loved one. Maybe they wished they had said some things differently before the end, but death will happen no matter despite human effort to avoid it. Divorce can be preventable by taking action against it and taking steps to work on the marriage. Often times, these same feelings of guilt are thrust onto the child who feels responsible for the breaking of the marriage because he heard mom and dad fight about parenting. It's those feelings; feelings of remorse and misplaced guilt that can often times make divorce harder to deal with than death.

Divorce can be levels more complicated than the peaceful passing of an elderly family member, or even the sudden loss of a young family member and therefore, levels harder to process. Thompson lists six things that make divorce complicated:

"The complexity of divorce arises because at least six things are happening at once. They may come in a different order and with varying intensities, but there are at least six

²⁴ Root, 77.

²⁵ Root, 77.

²⁶ Thompson, David. Counseling and Divorce. 80.

different experiences of separation...I have called these six overlapping experiences (1) the emotional divorce, which centers around the problem of the deteriorating marriage; (2) the legal divorce, based on grounds; (3) the economic divorce, which deals with money and property; (4) the co-parental divorce, which deals with custody, single parent homes, and visitation; (5) the community divorce, surrounding the changes of friends and community that every divorce experiences; and (6) the psychic divorce, with the problem of regaining individual autonomy.”²⁷

These are issues that can take adults many long, painful months of litigation to manage. The adult experiencing a divorce has to deal with the ruin of marriage. The deterioration of what used to be the most cherished and most intimate relationship they had now is gone. The pain is intense. As if that pain is not hard enough to deal with by itself, there is the matter of settling financial affairs. The estate is being torn in half before the eyes of the divorcees. More difficult still is deciding the custody of children. Going from seeing a child every day to every other weekend and every other major holiday would be tremendously difficult. Thompson adds, “What part will each partner play in the upbringing and care of their children? Sadly enough, children become pawns to strike deep into the emotional territory of an ex-spouse. The reality is that children are not unfeeling pawns in this game.”²⁸

The emotions, the estate, and the children are divided; the place you live, your community is also divided. Bumping into an ex-girlfriend is strange enough, but bumping into your ex-wife in the produce section of the supermarket would be many steps higher up the awkward ladder. All these things remind the divorcee that he or she is divorced. They have to forge a new identity for themselves. Imagine what the children feel in the same situation. They watch mom and dad take apart their lives piece by piece. They are confused about why this is happening and scared about the process in general. All these stresses are happening simultaneously and can overwhelm the child. If adults have a difficult time with these events and stresses, children do too, only they have the added factor of extreme confusion. While all these things are going on, they are still trying to process that mom and dad do not love each other anymore.²⁹ Another difference is, again, that adults have the power to change their environment. Children do not.

²⁷ Thompson, 81.

²⁸ Thompson, 87.

²⁹ Thompson, 81.

Dealing with all of these things puts a strain on the child's life creating deep seeded anxiety. After the initial shock of divorce, the child begins to go through the stages of divorce which Virginia Satir, a family therapist explains:

“At first, there is a denial of the events that have taken place and a consequent feeling of wanting to isolate oneself from the whole situation. Then anger, wherein one blames someone else for one's predicament. The third level is bargaining; a kind of situation in which one wants to look at the ledger to see that things are equal. This is often manifesting over the custody of children and property settlements at the time of divorce. Then comes a period of depression, which is where much self hatred, self blame and feelings of failure are present. Finally, after all of this, one comes to the acceptance of the situation and on acceptance of the self.”³⁰

This process of healing can begin as soon as the initial shock of the divorce wanes, but it most likely will not occur until the divorce proceedings are final, which can be a drawn out process for all the reasons mentioned above. An indicator of the status of the divorce proceedings can be seen in the way the children behave. Thompson writes, “One of the indicators of how the divorce process is going will be reflected in the way children handle sadness, anger, aggression, and self-esteem. If there is a lot of aggressive acting out or depressive suicidal behavior, it is a good indicator that the divorce is slow in arriving at a resolution.”³¹

As stated above, the children are often times placed into split custody situations. What a stress that is. Now the child is forced to live between the worlds of the two parents. However, what often happens is that the child is the link between the two worlds with no means of escaping this role. The child has to learn two sets of rules. Instead of one bed time, there are now two. Mom now has a bed time and a pre bedtime ritual. Dad has one that may be similar, but in a different part of town, in a different house. These bedtime rituals illustrate how similar things are at either one of the parents' houses, but that they are also different. To the child, it is a different world. The children are the only links the parents have to one another. Dropping off or picking up children can be a stressful time for the parent and the child. The child may over hear one parent bad mouthing the other after a brief interaction. This puts the child in the awkward position of hearing something he should not have heard which can lead to mixed feelings about loyalty to either parent as a result. The child must learn how to function in two distinct worlds and two separate families, while striving to find meaning in each.

³⁰ Thompson, 82.

³¹ Thompson, 88.

Divorce throws children into new environments not by their own choosing, but by the choice of the parent, only increasing the level of ontological confusion. A blended family makes it very difficult for the child to adjust to the new surroundings. Jen Robinson, a woman Root interviewed, tells her story about step-family:

“During the first year of the new marriage, my mother encouraged me to treat my stepbrothers as if we had always been siblings, and asked me to treat my stepfather in a similar manner. She wanted us to be a real family, but was it real? What is family? At this distance I can both admire the energy my mother devoted to reconstructing a family and acknowledge that the process was at best uncomfortable for me. With, I suppose, typical teen angst, I felt I was being asked to participate in a lie. I didn’t see us as a family; I saw us as a bunch of strangers who lived together.”³²

This quote from Jen shows the struggles of what is like to be a child, or teenager in this case, in the modern state of family life. During her mother’s divorce she experienced the shattering of her old life. Everything she identified with, related to, and even the way she viewed and experienced the world was different. To further confuse the issue of her “being,” she was asked now to behave as though this was always her life. The request of her mother disturbed her view of self and stirred up a storm of ontological confusion. Root further explains:

“Stepfamily is so difficult because it is not only a new family, but it creates two new families – one related to the biological mother and another related to the biological father. When the biological obligatory bond is broken, and one world becomes two separate worlds, children are forced to form identity not through the solid place of shared being, but through choice. Children must be two selves in two different families, neither of which firmly hold them in biological correlation.”³³

This split of the child’s life forces the child to adapt to two completely separate family systems, further complicating who they are and to whom belong.

To further confuse matters, outward behaviors may not always accurately reflect true emotions. Andrew Root interviewed a man named Matt whose insights explain this point. Matt says of his siblings and himself in their new family, “[Our stepmother] wondered if we hated her. Really we just hated having two families where we’d had one before. We hated being two different people, where before we could just be our parents’ kids.”³⁴ Matt’s insight is very telling about the desires of children going through a divorce; they simply want the family to remain

³² Root, 41.

³³ Root, 42.

³⁴ Root, 42.

intact, as it was. It also gives us understanding to the level of difficulty children go through when forming a new identity.

Because of the stress involved in finding your identity in two completely different families, what was once a simple, harmless phrase now cuts like a knife. Teenagers can be more sensitive to these statements than younger children because they are more aware of their environment and social interactions and are also going through the hormonal upheaval of the teen years. For example Root quotes Marquardt who says:

“When I talked with all kinds of young adults it became clear that in many families, whether married or divorced, it is apparently not uncommon for mothers to cry out in exasperation, “You’re acting just like your father!” Yet while young people from intact families recall their mothers uttering these words, the comparison never had much sting – even when their mother’s frustration was clear – because these young people knew without question that their father was a full member of the family. They loved their fathers and almost all of them felt confident that their mothers loved their fathers too. How bad could it be, then, to be compared to him.”³⁵

When one of the strongest relationships the child used to very dearly identify with is broken, the relationship of his or her parents, the child no longer thinks of statements like this as a humorous. This display of exasperation is now a stinging whip striking the child across the face. The child may still have a very positive relationship with the father so this comment from the mother now makes the child feel like a second rate member of the family and causes the child to doubt the love of the mother. A child having a strong reaction to the above quotation shows how heavily the stress in the aftermath of divorce weighs on the child.

One of the hardest things for the child to make sense of, next to, who they are now and what the future holds, has to do with the divorce itself. It has to do with the child’s perception of events that are larger, the ramifications of which are too great for the child to comprehend. In the child’s mind, the parents are actually choosing to get a divorce. The two people who are the foundation for his view to the world, who are responsible for him being in the world are choosing to unmake the world as he knows it. Adults would understand that there were breakages of the marriage contract, of a sexual nature or desertion that made it possible to dissolve the marriage in accord with God’s will. Adults would also understand that sadly, people get divorced for horrible reasons that most definitely do not please the Lord. The child, depending on age, does not understand these reasons, and even if he is mindful of them still feels

³⁵ Root, 85.

that the parents are choosing to divorce. Ethan, whose parents were divorced when he was eleven recalls:

“I remember looking up at them, hearing the worlds, and then letting the news that they were getting divorced flood over me, like a tidal wave drowning out the idyllic life I had dreamed of for all of us. I remember protesting, struggling to fight it all back, imagining that I could change their minds and convince them they could try again and make it work. I remember my sister crying. I remember asking my parents to stay together, and being crushed at how stubborn they were, how determined to ruin our lives they seemed.”³⁶

Can you put yourself in the room with this family? This eleven year old boy was told that his parents were getting a divorce and hearing that is a shock to his system. He starts pulling out every argument he can, pleading, begging his parents to try and be in love with each other again, meanwhile his sister is crying. The tension in the room has exploded into near hysteria. But what crushed Ethan? What was the thing he absolutely could not believe in that moment? They chose this plan. To him they were stubborn people who were bent on ruining his life, not the ones who were supposed to be securing it and providing him with ontological security.

The child of divorce is left helpless, to be overtaken, at least for a time by the uncertainty of the future, the desires and control of both parents, now functioning independently. Even if the child knows that he belongs to God because of Jesus, is in God’s hand, and has heard it read and explained that all these things are not strong enough to separate him from the love of Christ, he will still be subject to ontological uncertainty. This is because divorce strikes at the very foundation of our being. Divorce is an ontological crisis.

³⁶ Root, 55. Root interviewed Ethan.

What the Pastoral Counselor Must Know and Practice

We have seen and come to understand what the ontological crisis of divorce is and how it affects the children of divorce. In this section of the paper, we will review some general counseling tips, highlighting those relevant to counseling children of divorce.

Patience

When divorce comes into your church life and into your office, be patient, listen attentively and do not be quick to assign guilt. Thompson cautions:

“Too often, however, the Christian community had approached such accidents with premature judgments and insensitive neglect of the hurting. Rather than quickly rescuing the injured from the wreck, the church has allowed the victims of suffer while is measures skid marks (“whose fault is this?”) and takes testimony from witnesses (“who’s head the latest rumors?”).”³⁷

Thompson claims that both husband and wife are victims; even tough times and circumstances will show guilt in one or both. Be patient in arriving at that verdict, make a careful investigation and do not give into spiritual neglect. Quite often it takes a long amount of time to make progress in counseling adults. We should think nothing different when counseling those children who are also victims of this situation.

Know Your People

Knowing who your people are will go a long way in knowing how best to serve them. Thompson says to this point, “We can’t creatively minister to those we don’t really know!”³⁸ How true that is. When you know the history of a person, what their strengths and struggles are, you will be in a position to give spiritual care more effectively. Observe during counseling sessions, during church functions and whenever you have the opportunity. Take a genuine interest in the life of the youth you are counseling.

Prayer

Use prayer intentionally. Pray for guidance before a session begins. Pray for the proper attitude, for guidance, insight, and the Holy Spirit’s help. Pray with the counselee(s) at the start

³⁷ Thompson, 14.

³⁸ Thompson, 113.

of the session. Prayer is a very powerful reminder to the counselee that God is present in the room; he is there with his love and grace. It is a reminder that Jesus and our heavenly Father are always present. It is not just the two or three people in the office. Pray at the close of the session and if the counselee(s) would like to pray for you, graciously accept this request. It can be a sign of spiritual growth.³⁹

Ethics and Proper Boundaries

It is necessary for a pastor to establish boundaries to encourage ethical behavior. Always have the appearance of propriety. The authors of *Mastering Pastoral Counseling* advise that a pastor should never counsel alone regardless of the gender of the counselee. If an unhealthy attachment begins to form from one of the counsees, deal with it immediately, with tact, yet be very frank. Anthony Ash writes to those being counseled, “Also remember that you are vulnerable. It is possible to develop an attachment to a counselor, which can lead to damaging intimacies. The counseling context can be enormously helpful, but it does have its dangers.”⁴⁰ Serious counseling should be done in the office at a set time for a predetermined amount of time.

Confidentiality

When put in a position with the potential to divulge information given in confidence, as a pastor, you have the wonderful option to simply say that was spoken to me in confidence. The authors of *Mastering Pastoral Counseling* tell about a man who was in line to be elected for an important office in the church council, but he had some rather serious personal issues. He had a Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde syndrome, acting one way in public, but quite another at home. The pastor knew about these issues, but decided to preserve the confidentiality he and this man had in order to preserve the long term trust of the congregation. After a while, a scandal occurred involving this man and he resigned from office. Sometimes there is no easy answer.⁴¹ There are times when confidentiality must be broken. Those three times are: 1) child abuse, 2) contemplation of suicide, and 3) contemplation of homicide, inform the person threatened and depending on your assessed level of seriousness, call the police.⁴²

³⁹ Hart, Archibald; Gulbranson, Gary; Smith, Jim. *Mastering Pastoral Counseling*. 16-22.

⁴⁰ Ash, Anthony. *Dealing with Divorce*, 6.

⁴¹ Hart, Gulbranson, Smith, MPC, 31.

⁴² Hart, Gulbranson, Smith, MPC, 36.

Consultations and Referrals

Whenever a problem is complicated or when you feel that it is beyond your training or expertise, refer the person to someone capable. Develop a relationship with a group of trusted professionals to whom you can make referrals.⁴³ Refer a counselee when you are uncomfortable with situation because you suspect a personality disorder or feel that the situation is out of your hands. Some issues are beyond the pastor's level of training. "But a pastor can also be sued for malpractice if he attempts to give counsel in an area where he has no expertise."⁴⁴

Crisis Situations

The pastor must learn to separate a problem from a crisis. The pastor will have to understand the urgency of the situation and have a solid base knowledge of the person claiming crisis. In a legitimate crisis situation, manage your own reaction. Do not let the crisis at hand become your crisis. Remember that crises are an opportunity for spiritual growth and strengthening relationships. When it is time to handle, or make your very best attempt, at handling a crisis, your first job is simply to be there. Do not pull out the pastoral bag of tools and attempt an immediate fix. Instead, listen attentively. Seek to discover the nature of the situation. Do damage control in a crisis. "I knew I wasn't going to save their marriage in one session, but I did need to contain the forest fire."⁴⁵ Make sure you know it is a real crisis. Take second hand information with a grain of salt before springing to action. It is very important to not sweep the pain of the situation under the rug, never to discuss it again. Take the pain on; let the people going through the crisis share their feelings, but then, comfort them with God's love.

Identifying and Understanding Behaviors in the Children of Divorce

The main goal of counseling is identifying and dealing with the root cause of the person's behavior. The same principle is applied to children. The ontological insecurity created by divorce will manifest itself in a variety of behaviors. The Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Service published a brief, yet thorough, paper in 1986 to identify and understand some of the behaviors

⁴³ Hart, Gulbranson, Smith, MPC, 62.

⁴⁴ Hart, Gulbranson, Smith, MPC, 37.

⁴⁵ Hart, Gulbranson, Smith, MPC, 75.

observed in the children of divorce. We will look at some of the more common behaviors below divided by age group.

Ages 0-3

- Children form fundamental and important attachment to their parents from birth to age 2, creating a feeling of trust. The child trusts that the parent will provide for his needs.
- Divorce is felt through stress of custodial parent, typically the mother. She may lack energy and enthusiasm to be actively involved with the child. The child may interpret this to mean the parent is rejecting him. If strain takes place during the ages 0-2 the child may not establish a critical bond of trust.
- The child may feel unattached and anxious because he has not learned how to communicate love.
- The child may have trouble developing relationships later due to trust issues.⁴⁶

Ages 3-5

- During these years, a child's conscience begins to develop. There is an emphasis on the child evaluating himself as good or bad.
- Children are generally egocentric.
- Gender identity begins to form. Boy and girls start to see themselves as different from one another. This can lead to problematic behavior in boys with reduced contact to male role models.
- Children hearing arguments from parents on the matter of parenting often see themselves as the cause of the argument and eventually the end of the marriage.
- The child sees the parent leaving the home as leaving him instead of the marriage. This can lead to feelings of abandonment by noncustodial parent.
- Boys often react through physical and verbal aggression.
- A child may develop low self-esteem.

⁴⁶ Points adapted from: Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Service. Effects of Divorce on Children. 1, 2.

- Spiritually, the child may associate the concept of God the Father with their earthly father, leading to the misconception that if the earthly father leaves, the heavenly Father might leave too.⁴⁷

Ages 6-8

- Children of this age, including those unaffected by divorce, are beginning to see themselves as independent from the family but still rely on them for support.
- Divorce means the collapse of the protective environment. The child may see the loss of one parent as the imminent loss of the other.
- Child attaches blame to himself and may make futile attempts to fix the parents' marriage. Failure in this endeavor can cause hopelessness toward the future.
- Due to these stresses, the child finds concentrating difficult and will begin to see himself as inferior to classmates, labeling himself as "dumb."⁴⁸

Ages 9-12

- The child's sense of reason is becoming more acute, leading to a partial understanding of the divorce.
- The child's strict sense of fairness and "team play" is being contradicted by the parents' divorce. They are not being fair to each other. They are not abiding by the rules.
- Therefore, one of the most prominent reactions is anger. This anger can be seen in many other aspects of the child's life outside the home.
- Resentment for parents may arise because if they really did love the child, they would solve their problems to keep the family together.⁴⁹

Ages 13-17

- Divorce exaggerates and blurs the developmental tasks of an adolescent.
- Some teens have the awareness to understand that divorce is their parents' problem and bolster their self-esteem through other relationships and activities.

⁴⁷ WLCFS, 2

⁴⁸ WLCFS, 3.

⁴⁹ WLCFS, 4, 5.

- Adolescents may perceive the departure of one parent as personal abandonment leading to exaggerated expectation of rejection in other relationships.
- Boys may feel a pressing need to prove they are a man and may identify with famous manly men. He may try to imitate behavior, walking around with a chip on his shoulder.
- Trying to act like an adult when they are not can set them up for depression in later years.⁵⁰

WLCFS asserts in this paper that the better the relationship is with the noncustodial parent, the better the adjustment process will be for the child. A strong relationship with the noncustodial parent will diminish feelings of abandonment by that parent. Whatever can be done to keep the child's support network intact will greatly benefit the child's ontological well being.

It is beneficial to have an understanding of some important counseling principles in order to understand how to handle the difficult situations of the pastoral ministry. Formal counseling can be very helpful to an individual going through something as traumatic as a divorce, but nothing makes changes in the hearts of people like the Word of God. When the Bible is absent from a counseling session, we tend to rely on man's wisdom alone. Let us utilize the power the Bible has to make changes in people.

Prof. em. David Valleskey in his paper, *Dealing with Divorce in the Parish*, reminds us of the definition of marriage, "Marriage = an unconditional, permanent commitment of one man and one woman to each other."⁵¹ It is engrained into our minds that marriage is a union that lasts a life time, only to be broken by death.⁵² When speaking to a child struggling with how a divorce can even happen to a Christian couple, it is necessary to explain that while God does not love divorce, in fact he hates it,⁵³ he does allow for it to happen under two conditions. Those conditions are: marital unfaithfulness and malicious desertion. Reading Matthew 19:3-9 can be helpful for children old enough to understand the principles being discussed in those verses. The Pharisees were trying again to trap Jesus in his words and came to him with the question, "Is it

⁵⁰ WLCFS, 4.

⁵¹ Valleskey, David. *Dealing with Divorce in the Parish*. 3.

⁵² Romans 7:2. NIV 1984. All subsequent citations of Bible verses will be from NIV 1984.

⁵³ Malachi 2:16

lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”⁵⁴ They misunderstood Deuteronomy 24:1-4, and came to the understanding that Moses required men to divorce their wives under certain conditions. They set up the false antithesis that Moses said, “Divorce,” and Jesus said, “Don’t divorce.”⁵⁵ Jesus reminds the Pharisees that God allowed divorce because the Children of Israel were sinful. In Matthew, Jesus explains when God allows divorce. Jesus says, “I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.”⁵⁶ Jesus is teaching them that God says divorce is permissible, not commanded, in the case of marital unfaithfulness.

The Holy Spirit, speaking through Paul, tells us the other reason. Paul in I Corinthians chapter 7 is teaching about marriage. In verse 15, Paul says, “But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believer is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.” Paul says this to teach the point that if one of the marriage partners leaves the marriage, then the bond of marriage is broken.

It is important to explain that these are the allowable conditions for divorce God provides. It is also important to explain that there is forgiveness for the parent responsible⁵⁷ for the divorce because there is no sin or sinner for whom Jesus did not die. This knowledge of forgiveness, for all people in the child’s family, will go a long way in making the ontological picture a secure one.

The Bible is the one place to find true comfort. Here are some places to keep in the front of your minds when speaking with a spiritually stressed child of divorce:

- **Psalm 10:17, 18:** *“You hear, O LORD, the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry, defending the fatherless and the oppressed, in order that man, who is of the earth, may terrify no more.”* This passage shows the loving God urging his children to come to him. It shows God hearing and acting on the cries from his children. The phrase “defending the fatherless” will be especially comforting to those whose fathers are mostly out of the picture as a result of the divorce.

⁵⁴ Matthew 19:3.

⁵⁵ Valleskey, 3.

⁵⁶ Matthew 19:7.

⁵⁷ I realize that in many cases of divorce the “guilty” party may not be very clear in the eyes of the child. What is clear is that a breach of God’s will has taken place. It is important to comfort the child with God’s grace and love for all the people in his or her family.

- **Romans 5:1-5:** *“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.”* This verse shows us how the trials of life affect God’s children. Our trials do not defeat us, but instead they make us stronger. God does that by leading us to turn to him in trouble, the only source of lasting strength. By God’s grace, our trials produce and strengthen our hope in God.

- **Romans chapter 8:** This well known chapter empowers the believer to go through life unafraid, because nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. Paul says in verse 18, *“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”* Heaven is infinitely greater than any hardship we will encounter on earth. That is a promise from God. There is no doubt we will be in heaven forever because of Jesus. Paul reminds that all things work for our good, that includes divorce, even though we may not see how for many years or in this lifetime.

- **Jeremiah 29:11:** *“For I know the plans I have for you declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you not to harm you, place you give you hope and a future.”* This passage from Jeremiah goes hand-in-hand with Romans chapter 8. You could explain some of the hardships Israel went through and was going through when God spoke these words.

- **I Corinthians 12:26:** *“If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part is honored with it.”* This comforting verse from I Corinthians reminds that we are not alone in the world as a believer. There is an entire body, with Christ as the head, meant to support us in times of need or trouble. It is also important to remind the child that Christ is the head of his body. He loves it and cares for it, he

died to save it. Because you are a part of the body, Christ is there to love and care for you.

The list of comforting passages is unending, but it is good to have some on the forefront of the brain, easily accessible, and ready to be explained to children going through the pain of divorce. God's word is power, and it will accomplish God's will. Trust in his grace.

What now? What can the church do to help?

The church is the church militant, not the church dormant. We have been given the job of taking the Good News to people all over the world. The church is active and is privileged to do God's will where and when he pleases. As soldiers in the church militant, we have been given these commands. As pastors, or future pastors, staff ministers, teachers, lay leaders, and family members, we are in a position to help equip God's people for works of service. One such place where the church can be of extreme help is the area of divorce. The church can help fill in the gaps of the child's now crumbling support network, ease ontological pain, and provide stability. The final section of this paper will mention specific ways and give guidelines for accomplishing this.

Young Telemachus was in need of a role model. His father, Odysseus, was off fighting in the Trojan War. Thankfully, a man named Mentor came in to fill the shoes Odysseus left empty. Mentor was not a school teacher. He was not the boy's father. He was a role model who helped show the boy what it meant to be man. By the time Odysseus came home, some twenty years later, his boy Telemachus was now Telemachus the man, thanks to the oversight of Mentor.

This story from Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad* introduced us to a man named Mentor. This is where we get the term mentor today. Mentor was invaluable to Telemachus and helped him to become a well rounded man. Mentors in our churches can help young men affected by divorce to find ontological security and be positive male role models. Many of the mentoring principles that will be discussed will work suitably mentoring females. Most of the mentoring issues being discussed will have a male perspective as I have a special place in my heart for boys without a positive male role model.

We need mentors in the church, plain and simple. There is tremendous power in the male relationship and it shows itself in the successes and stability of those men who have them, and the uncertainty and struggles of men who do not.

“Do we need that process today? More than ever! Too many men are trying to go it alone in terms of their marriage and family life, their personal life, their work, or their spiritual commitments. They are trying to scale mountains of Himalayan proportions solely on the strength of rugged independence.”⁵⁸

Men do not typically admit when they need help, if at all. As this quotation suggests, they would rather scale the huge challenges of life alone. This attitude begins in a man's pre-teen years when

⁵⁸ Hendricks, Howard; Hendricks, William. As Iron Sharpens Iron. 31.

he tries to show his independence. Where is the first place he will look to see how a man should act? His father. When divorce wrecks that arrangement, the young man is without a role model. The church is an ideal place to help fill that void with godly men. The benefits they can provide are incalculable. They can save young men from many of life's troubles as the Hendricks duo shows, "Psychologist Judith Wallerstein, reporting on a long-term study of the emotional effects of divorce, finds that 'almost half of the children of divorces enter adulthood as worried, angry, under-achieving, self-deprecating, and sometimes angry young men and women.'"⁵⁹ This statement underscores the importance of having a solid mentor in the lives of young men.

As a pastor, you know the young men in the church who need a mentor. As a pastor, you are aware of men who would be great to help that young man find stability. Target the potential mentors in your church and ask them if they are willing to serve in this way. Make it a point to educate your church's men on the importance and necessity of this role. In spite of the importance of being a mentor, you might still get some opposition and hear excuses:

- "Being a mentor is just another thing to do and worry about. I'm already busy enough." When you hear this excuse, challenge him to set that laziness aside and give it serious prayerful consideration. The benefits of being a mentor are great, not just for the young man, but also for the mentor.
- "I am not fit for the position – the expectations are too high." Rest assured, generally speaking, young men look up to older men because of their life experience, even if they don't admit it.⁶⁰ This is especially true when young people can tell you are genuinely interested in their well being.
- "I don't know how." You know how to be yourself and that is a great way to be a mentor.⁶¹
- "I don't have anything to offer." That is simply incorrect. The Hendricks men give a list of all the things you do have to offer. They are: life experience, practically speaking, wisdom; knowledge in a specific area of expertise; access to information, networks, people; money, that does not mean to say that you have to financially support the child, but simply buying lunch and having a conversation goes a long way. You can provide friendship. Sometimes all a young man needs is someone to

⁵⁹ Hendricks, 131.

⁶⁰ Hendricks, 135.

⁶¹ These excuses are based on Hendricks, 137.

relate to, someone who can say, “Yup, I’ve been there before, I know what you’re going through.”

During my freshman year of college, I grew weary of living in New Ulm and attending MLC. There was seldom a sunny day. The walk to the shower was unbearably long. All I seemed to do was Greek. Being a pastor no longer was appealing. When I came home for a break, my pastor called me up and told me we were going to dinner. All we did was talk. Our talk did not figure out a way to bring daylight to New Ulm nor did we magically shorten the Concord dorm. He did not use his connections to lessen my homework load. We simply talked about my concerns. After that dinner, I felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders, despite not finding a solution for any specific problem.

Another blessing of a mentor program is that one mentor can make changes in the lives of many people. When a young man has a positive, godly mentor, follows his example and by God’s grace, grows up to be a godly man himself, everyone who is in the young man’s life is benefited.

As mentioned above, the benefits of being a mentor do not belong only to the young man, but to the mentor himself. Why should a man be a mentor?

- Both men gain in the relationship. It can be very satisfying to have the opportunity to share life experience with a younger man.
- Revitalization. When you talk to your protégé, he can actually spur you on to finish your goals or help to make sure you are keeping up with devotions. The benefits are reciprocal in nature. Iron sharpens Iron.
- Sense of fulfillment. Many men seek to do something in their lives that has lasting value. Being a mentor is one of those things. It feels good to know you can be an example in someone’s life in a very direct way.
- When you serve as a mentor you not only serve the protégé, but your Lord. Being a mentor is a great way to imitate your Savior’s selfless service.⁶²

These are just a few blessings that will spring from being a mentor. Each case will be different, each relationship unique and each will be a special joy.

⁶² This sample list of blessings was based on Hendricks, 145-153.

But what does a mentor actually do? For the men you have identified as a potential mentors, one of the biggest obstacles toward their participation may simply be lack knowledge about what mentoring is. Some of what a mentor does is as follows:

- Is a source of information. The mentor has a wealth of life experience just waiting to be accessed by a young man. This can be anything from knowing how to fix a weed-whacker, to the intricacies of global finance. If the mentor is a family man, he has plenty of advice to offer.
- Provides wisdom. Linking to the previous point, the mentor can tell not only what he knows, but also how it is useful in life. The mentor knows the mistakes he made in his younger days and can caution against them. He can also relate what worked well for him in finding a job, going to school, and having a family.
- Promotes a specific skill. This can be all the common ground needed to begin a mentoring relationship.
- Coaches. This does not mean forcing a younger man into a strict workout regimen. It means being an encourager. The coach shows the player proper technique and the rules of the game. An important, yet often, frustrating aspect of coaching is correcting the technique and frequently repeating the rules. The mentor does the same thing. A coach wants to see his players succeed as does the mentor with his protégé.
- Is someone trusted a young man can turn to. It might be advice on dating, advice on school work, or being an outlet to turn to when peer pressure is too much. Simply being a trusted confidant does much to support and shape a young man.⁶³

The Hendricks men tell a story of a man in his late twenties, named Tom, and a younger man, in his early teens, named Richie. All it took to start their relationship was a basketball. Richie was walking by while Tom was working on his jump shot. For whatever reason, Tom asked Richie to play. This became the norm. A few times each week, Richie would stop by, play basketball and talk with Tom. After a few years, they stopped playing basketball, but continued to talk. Eventually Richie was asking Tom advice on life after high school. Striking up a mentor/protégé relationship can be, but will not always be, that easy.⁶⁴

⁶³ These points based on Hendricks, 157-161.

⁶⁴ Hendricks, 161.

There is no doubt that a young man who is going through, or has gone through a divorce, can benefit greatly from having a mentor. How does the pastor identify the potential mentor in his congregation? The pastor could ask these questions of the potential mentor, and of himself, to help identify a mentor.

- Are you a man of patience?
- What are your areas of expertise?
- Are your relationships generally healthy?
- Are you process-oriented? That is, are you capable of sticking with a person over time, while he develops?
- Is your character worth emulating? Would God approve of someone adopting your behaviors, attitudes, values, language, and mannerisms?
- Are you willing to make time for someone else?⁶⁵

These questions with their answers do not qualify or disqualify a person for mentorship, but help the pastor and the potential mentor to find a starting point in the decision process. When faced with these questions, the man you are asking to serve as mentor could feel intimidated. Assure him that simply taking the time to show he cares is the best thing he can do.

When does one end the mentor relationship? A formal ending to the relationship is far better than simply letting it die out. A good time to have a formal end of the relationship would be a graduation, the start of a new job in a new place, or with a marriage. The mentor should let the protégé know how he was blessed during their time together and that the door is always open for more conversation in the future.

Mentors should be encouraged not just because Telemachus turned out well in the *Iliad*. There is a biblical precedent for mentoring. Here are some prominent examples:

- **Jethro to Moses** (Exodus 18). Jethro teaches Moses the value of delegation.
- **Moses to Joshua and Caleb** (Deuteronomy 31-34; Numbers 13; Joshua 14:6-15). Moses prepared Joshua and Caleb to be the leaders of Israel. He bolstered their faith.
- **Samuel to Saul** (I Samuel 9-15). Even when Saul started rebelling against the Lord, Samuel shows patience, trying to lead Saul back to the Lord. This account shows us that a mentor can and should disagree with his protégé in some cases.

⁶⁵ These questions are based on Hendricks, 163.

- **David and Jonathan** (I Samuel 16 and 19). This is an outstanding example of peer mentoring.
- **Elijah to Elisha** (I Kings 19-21; II Kings 2-3). These men are a great example of the reciprocal nature of a mentoring relationship. Elisha learns from Elijah and Elijah is encouraged by Elisha.
- **Jehioada to Joash** (II Chronicles 24-25). The priest Jehioada helped seven year old Joash rule Israel according to the Lord.
- **Barnabas to Paul** (Acts 4:36, 37; 9:26-30; 11:22-30). Barnabas opened the way for Saul to have a positive and Gospel centered relationship with the Apostles and other Christians.
- **Barnabas and John Mark** (Acts 15:36-39; II Timothy 4:11). Barnabas was willing to part company with Paul in order to work with John Mark. He believed in John Mark. Later on Paul believed in John Mark too, saying, “He is useful to me in my ministry.”
- **Paul to Timothy** (Acts 16:1-3; Philippians 2:19-23; I&II Timothy). Paul and Barnabas preached to Timothy. Timothy even accompanied them on their journey. He became a pastor himself in Ephesus. Paul writes wonderful letters of instruction and encouragement to his young pastor friends.
- **Paul to Titus** (II Corinthians 7:6, 13-15; 8:17; Titus). Titus was a Greek-speaking Gentile who came to faith as a result of Paul’s preaching. Titus became a pastor on the island of Crete.
- **Jesus and the Disciples** (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John). In the Gospels, we see Jesus teach, spend time with, comfort, encourage, and even rebuke his disciples. The Disciples could not have had a better teacher.

This list is not exhaustive and is not meant to be. In these instances, God has shown us how valuable human interaction is for strengthening God’s people and they can also be used to encourage participation as a mentor.

There is a need for mentors. There are many men qualified for the task. The Bible gives us wonderful examples of mentorship in many different settings. How can a pastor establish a mentoring program in his church? Below are some strategies to get started:

- Set up places and times for men to interact with each other. Breakfasts, Bible studies, retreats, work projects, and recreational events are great ways for men to interact. Invite younger men to these events.
- Identify potential mentors and ask them if they are willing to serve in this way. Do not bluntly ask them, “Hey! Would you like to be a mentor?” Take your time in explaining the importance of being a mentor and why you think they would be a good mentor.
- Announce to the Board of Elders and Church Council that you would like to begin such a program. After this, speak to the targeted men individually, then, as a group.
- Explain what is expected. Keep expectations realistic. Some relationships will not take off. Some will be lukewarm, but some will be excellent.
- Name the program. Do not simply call it “Mentoring at St. Paul’s”.
- Get behind the project yourself. Be genuine about its potential benefits for the mentor and more so for the young men in need of a role model.
- As pastor, you are in a position to be a mentor to everyone because you are in the most visible position in the church. Be careful to always paint Christ in a positive light with godly living and sound doctrine.⁶⁶

Besides having a program in place to mentor the young people in your church who are affected by divorce, the church at large can do a great deal to make the church a welcoming and supportive place. Keep in mind that the church will not replace the family of the young person, nor should it seek to do so. Root says, “This new community cannot replace, and does not sublimate the family, but it provides the members of a broken family a place to be-with and be-for as they suffer through their ontological trauma.”⁶⁷ Being surrounded by people who show love to the child of divorce, simply because they belong to the Body of Believers, is a powerful thing to experience. Thompson says on the subject, “A church can really be a family that is just as close as our biological families.”⁶⁸ Thompson furthers Root’s statement without disagreeing. The church can be very close to the child and the family. The church is a powerful addition to the support network.

⁶⁶ Many of these strategies are based on Hendricks 231-235.

⁶⁷ Root, 122.

⁶⁸ Thompson, 115.

The church can meet needs for the child that the family unit used to meet. The church should do more than simply ask an uninterested question, as one interviewee stated, “Every once in awhile, church friends would ask how my dad was doing, but that didn’t really seem to be a step in the healing process.” The church can and should be doing more, but rest assured that to whatever degree the church accomplishes this goal will be of benefit to the child. The church serves as a mirror. It helps the child grow by seeing the church as a large family. The church provides a positive social environment for the child to see and be seen, that is, to interact and learn. The church has the ability to help balance autonomy and belonging. The congregation can become a place to speak and listen, a place for the child to thrive in some way on his own while still being a part of something larger than himself. The church provides routine, stability in the life of the child. This is key to developing and building ontological security after a divorce. The church can bracket out anxiety by acting in gladness. When there is a service opportunity at the church, the child sees the joy and happiness in the faces of the people performing the task. They help not because they are forced, but because they want to serve.⁶⁹

Lastly, the paper will present ways the church at large can reach out to the youth in the church. The church is to be a safe place; all ages are welcome and invited to find security in the church. An interviewee shows us how important pastoral involvement is during the healing process after a divorce:

“At the time, my associate pastor was teaching my confirmation class. He counseled me quite a bit about the Word and it’s direct application in the recent and upcoming events in my life. The entire divorce transition was so much easier with a male role model instilling me with the confidence and peace of the Lord.”

Listed below are ways the pastors, staff ministers, teachers, youth group leaders, parents, extended family, and friends can reach out to the children in their congregation, especially those suffering from divorce.

Pastors, Staff Ministers, Teachers, Youth Group Leaders

- Have a willingness to approach young people to communicate your understanding of the situation. It may seem invasive, but simply communicating the desire to have a conversation shows a high level of care. Acknowledging their difficulty builds trust.

⁶⁹ Root, 124-127.

- Help the children communicate their pain in a constructive way to their parents. Be sure to offer support to the parents as well.
- Do not over program. Not every moment of weekly youth night needs to be planned. Allow for space for kids to just sit and be. The possibility for spontaneous discussion is always open.
- Allow the kids to speak their minds.
- Be inviting and genuine, not just to the affected youth, but to all members of the suffering family. An interviewee stated, “I feel as though my church could have made my mom feel more welcome; I know she still feels a weird vibe when she goes to our hometown church, which should not be the case after ten years.” As a pastor, it is partly your responsibility to create a welcoming environment for everyone.
- Learn the stories of the young people in your congregation, not just those in trauma. Understand from where they are coming.
- Spend time in planning ways for other adults to engage and share their wisdom. Part of that process is informing adults of their place as role models.
- Encourage and equip young people to take ownership and responsibility for the youth group. Encourage the congregation to be supportive of young people and again in their natural role as mentors.
- Provide opportunity to pray as a group. Give the youth a time to pray for whatever is on their hearts.
- Recognize that weekly programs have power not in entertainment value, although helpful, but in the ability to produce a routine. This routine builds ontological security.
- Celebrate important milestones in the young people’s lives. Events like graduations, sports championships, and plays should all be recognized.
- Suffer together. Do not underestimate the power of sympathy.⁷⁰

Parents

⁷⁰ These points are based on Root, 127-129.

- Invite the child to convey disappointment, confusion, pain, and other emotions relating to the divorce. This will be difficult for the parent, but tremendously healthy in the long run.
- Do not interrupt your child when listening to him or her share feelings, even if they are misinformed. Try to understand the child's feelings and perceptions. Then enlighten the child.
- Parents should encourage their children to be involved with the church as they were before the divorce. There is strength in routine. Hold on to it. The church is a familiar place; let the child stay connected to it.
- Find ways to show the child there is still security and happiness in life.
- Be aware that routine as the child knew it died with the marriage. A new routine may be nice for you, but is strenuous for the child.
- Persist in telling your child that you recognize the hardships they are going through.⁷¹

Friends (Close friends, extended family, any part of the child's support network)

- Tell children stories of their parents when they were younger. Tell stories of the children when they were younger, of their birth and infancy. This seems strange, but it reinforces that they are real people who came from a real place. It helps to sooth ontological pain.
- Offer support to the child.
- Build a routine with the child. For example: at Christmas time, explain that decorating the tree was always a favorite thing of your mothers. Or, that your father loved to sit in this seat and draw what he saw in the back yard.
- Pray with them.
- Find ways to express how the young person brings joy to your life. There is great ontological power in laughing together.

Two years after my parents' divorce, my grandparents came to visit. Very early in the morning, my grandfather woke me up to tell me there was project we had to perform for my mom. After the job was complete, it was still mostly dark outside. My grandfather and I went to Bob Evan's

⁷¹ Root, 127-129.

for breakfast. He told me to order anything I wanted; it felt awesome. We talked a lot about the upcoming football season. He shared with me stories about what his life was like when he was my age. Simply spending time with him made me feel safe and secure. It made me feel like one of the guys. I did not find out until later that he had done the same thing with my two younger siblings. Simple things like one-on-one conversation over coffee and orange juice can have a profound effect.

The list concludes:

- Give the young person sentimental gifts that express your appreciation of him or her.⁷²

Another example of the support family members can give years after divorce is this giving of gifts. My little sister was nine years old when our parents were divorced. When she was nineteen, she had an organ recital at MLC. My grandparents went from Delaware to Minnesota to see her perform. After the recital, my grandfather handed her a dozen roses and said, “Sometimes boys have to give girls flowers. Great job!” The simple gesture of giving a girl flowers does not seem like much. However, my grandfather had driven thousands of miles to deliver the flowers. I could still hear the happiness in my sister’s voice when she called to tell me the story.

This long list of suggestions is not a list of mandates that a church must enact in order to successfully support its youth during this difficult time. They should be used as guidelines for friends, parents, and churches. These small steps can go a long way in securing the child’s sense of self. They can be a powerful means to still the ontological storm.

⁷² Root, 127-129.

Conclusion

There is a divorce crisis by which millions are affected. Even if the current rate of divorce declines in the future, there will always be families torn apart by divorce. The children of these families will continue to swim aimlessly in a sea of ontological uncertainty while simultaneously battling a myriad of intense emotions. There will always be a need to support these children with attention and gospel proclamation.

The pain of divorce is more than simple sadness or other visible manifestations of pain. The pain of divorce flows from the confusion of ontological uncertainty. The effects of this ontological crisis last longer than a few months to a few years after the divorce. Scars are left in the mind of the child of divorce for his or her entire life. This does not mean that the child who lives through divorce will be rendered an empty husk a person until they die because there are many steps parents, extended family members, pastors, and churches can take to support these children.

The church is in an ideal position to help the whole family through the divorce. In a few cases with my interviews, I learned that the church, pastors especially, only helped the family before, during, and for a short time after. This was essentially dropping the ball in the eyes of those I interviewed. I realize that this is not true in every case, but it is a pattern of dealing with divorce in many congregations. An interviewee shared thoughts on the way his pastor cared for him:

“I am and will remain grateful for the guidance I received during and after my parents’ divorce. The thing is that my pastor didn’t just read the Bible with me, he became a mentor and friend. He was someone I grew comfortable enough to joke around and have banter with. At that young of an age [12-17 years old] I thought it was really cool someone (not a relative) would go out of their way to make sure I was ok every single day.”

The effects of a divorce last a lifetime and are powerful formative influences in a child. The care the church gives to the families of divorce must be long term as well. This is especially true for the children of divorce. The church can and ought to act as an extension of their family, filling in the gaps of their support network, but for more than a year or two after the divorce. The care given by pastors and congregations will be long lasting because by God’s grace and with his help a pastor loves to give God’s comfort to God’s children of all ages.

There is tremendous comfort to be found in the Psalms where David refers to the Lord as his shield, his rock, and his fortress. That's who our God is. He is a mighty stronghold protecting us because he loves us. We belong in his protecting walls because we are washed with Jesus' blood and made holy. Neither the devil nor any external force is strong enough to breach the walls of our mighty fortress. As a pastor, or someone who is in a position to reach out with Gospel comfort, you open the eyes of the suffering to God's wonderful and all-surpassing comfort. You can and should direct them to similar places in the Word and tell them that God has not forgotten about them. Remind them that their heavenly Father is perfect. Earthly parents will disappoint us, but our Father in heaven will not.

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