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## **Ministering to Children of Divorce: Helping Children of Divorce**

**Patrick J. Casey**

Local churches, pastors, and individual Christians must ask themselves some important questions concerning this growing group of people in our communities and churches. Do they have special needs? Do they and their families face distinct problems in our local churches? Who is responsible to meet their needs? How can their needs be met?

### **The Needs of Children of Divorce**

Children of divorce are like other children in many ways. They like the same clothes, eat the same foods, play the same games, and have the same interests as other young people their age. Just because, through no choice of their own, they have experienced divorce and are living in a single-parent home does not make them peculiar or strange. However, all children of divorce have special needs. Some of their needs relate to their divorce experience while others correspond to living in a single-parent home.

Those who objectively evaluate the experience and effects of divorce readily recognize the special needs of children who are involved. It is important, however, that people do not pigeon-hole these children into some psychological category. There is no typical child of divorce. Each young person has individual needs that differ because of personality and family situation. The variety of factors that influence how a young person is affected by divorce have already been discussed.<sup>1</sup>

Specific needs of individual children can be determined by a caring adult who is willing to take a personal interest. Parents and other adults who desire to help -- pastors, neighbors, relatives, teachers, Sunday school teachers, friends -- must begin by

understanding divorce from the perspective of a child. They must be able to identify specific problems. Children will need assistance dealing with causes and not just symptoms. Before one can be a comforter, he must understand those in need of his comfort.

Children of divorce long for the assurance that someone else understands them: They feel that no one cares and no one comprehends their pain and sorrow. Too often the custodial parent is unable or unwilling to listen to their burdens. Other adults are needed to fill this void. Those who help should not become a "substitute parent" but can be one who listens and encourages. A man whose parents divorced when he was twelve had a caring Sunday school teacher show concern and later led him to Christ. A teenage girl facing the divorce of her unsaved parents experienced the love and guidance of a godly Christian woman. She later went to Bible college and became the wife of a pastor. These people who experienced divorce as children greatly benefited from adults who were willing to minister to their needs.

Children who have faced divorce need caring adults who are willing to commit themselves to long-term relationships. It takes time to earn the trust and respect necessary for hurting children to open up. Superficial interest by well-intending adults will provide little help for these hurting young people. They should not be forced to bear broken promises from someone who befriends them and then gets too busy. Adults unwilling to give both time and commitment should not get involved with helping children of divorce.

Although these children may benefit from advice and direction, they desperately need to feel loved. Parental separation leaves children feeling unwanted and rejected. In their eyes, they have been abandoned by one parent and overlooked by the other. All children need to be loved but the divorce experience intensifies that need. They crave complete acceptance and unconditional love from their parents as well as other adults. Too often their need to feel loved is not met.

These children hunger for a sense of security. Divorce leaves them unsure of their parents' love and skeptical of what will happen tomorrow. Those children who have lost their house, neighbors, and friends are especially insecure. They need to feel they are wanted and have a place where they fit in.

A child's home environment is the key to his adjustment to divorce. Unfortunately, the fallout of divorce leaves most families in turmoil and confusion. Hostility between parents, weekend visitation,

limited finances, and many other variables come into play. These children desperately need a home where life is not unsettled.

Divorce produces a world of emotional chaos. Most children need help sorting out their anger, bitterness, loneliness, fear, and deep sadness. In order to correct wrong responses, children must identify those responses, understand the emotions involved, and learn to make positive responses in place of negative ones. Without the help of others, some children spend a lifetime struggling with battered emotions.

It is not unusual for children from broken homes to struggle with a damaged self-esteem. They often live in homes where their feelings of worth and importance have been greatly diminished. To properly adjust, these feelings will have to be reversed. Children of divorce need to be encouraged by family and friends. They need someone to help them understand their own value and importance in light of how God values them.

Children of divorce are amazingly sensitive to one of their most serious needs -- the strengthening of their single parent. They are looking for someone to help their parent adjust to the problems and pressures that divorce brings. When a group of children from broken homes were asked how their church could better meet their needs, the most frequent response was surprising. They wanted the church to help their single parents by comforting them, supporting them, accepting them, and integrating them into the church.<sup>2</sup>

After divorce, custodial parents must stabilize their own lives so they can effectively lead their family. If the parent is stumbling, his children will also falter. Moms and dads will need help understanding what their children have gone through and how to help them adjust.

A great tragedy of divorce is the absence of an adult role-model for children. A single parent cannot be both parents to a child. The single mom soon recognizes she is unable to be a dad to her son. Single fathers feel similar inadequacies with their daughters. The need for an adult role model is especially significant for a boy whose father has left and a girl without a mother at home.

The greatest need of children of divorce is most often overlooked. More than anything else, they need God's assistance. True believers must pray for God to work on behalf of these young people. Unfortunately, the few people who help children from broken homes are usually unbelievers. As such, they cannot address spiritual needs with biblical guidance. Human solutions apart from God's help will, at best, only bring temporary results. Many children struggle through

the divorce experience unaware of God's concern. They know nothing of God's power to heal their wounds and give their life purpose and direction.

Young people need to know who God is and the great compassion, protection and forgiveness He provides. The task of sharing God's love with these children will not always be easy. In their eyes, if God loved them He would not have allowed their parents to get divorced. There are even greater problems with children whose parents claim to know Christ yet still divorced. Fortunately, the power of the Word of God, the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and the impact of loving Christians can produce the permanent solutions that God desires.

### **The Obligation to Help Children of Divorce**

In the midst of all the sadness, heartbreak, and confusion of divorce -- where does the local church fit in? There are a growing number of divorced families in both our communities and our churches. These homes have special needs. Are individual believers responsible to meet those needs? The Bible provides principles and commands that answer these questions.

Scriptures reveal God's great compassion for families that lack one parent. Describing God, the prophet Hosea proclaims, "For in Thee the fatherless finds mercy."<sup>3</sup> The psalmist declares that the Lord is "a father of the fatherless" (Psalm 68:5) and He "supports the fatherless and the widow" (Psalm 146:9). When Hagar and Ishmael were forsaken by Abraham, God did not abandon them. Elohim heard Ishmael's cry in the wilderness and provided the child with water. Genesis 21:20 explains that "God was with the lad." Both Moses and Samuel, though not a part of a traditional family setting, enjoyed the special blessing of God.

Old Testament believers were expected to imitate God's unique concern for special families (Deuteronomy 10:18-19). They were to meet the spiritual needs of the fatherless and widows by including them in the annual feasts (Deuteronomy 16:10-14). God's people were expected to help fatherless homes by leaving the left-overs of the harvest and giving financial gifts (Deuteronomy 24:19-21; 26:12-13). The responsibility toward helping uncommon home situations is also emphasized in the New Testament. In God's eyes, true religion is demonstrated by a practical concern for families with a missing parent or missing mate (James 1:27).

Christians cannot ignore their obligation to minister to children of divorce and their families. Old Testament believers were required to "love their neighbors" (Lev. 19:18) and New Testament saints also share this duty (Matthew 19:19; 22:39; Galatians 5:14). Christians should not have to be reminded that divorced families within their communities and churches are the "neighbors" God expects them to love. Of all people, God's children should be reaching out to those who are suffering the cruel consequences of divorce.

New Testament believers share the heightened responsibility to love other Christians -- including those who have experienced divorce. Loving fellow believers should not have to be taught (I Thessalonians 4:9). Yet, God provides numerous commands in Scripture that remind Christians of this important obligation (John 13:34; I Peter 1:22; I John 4:7). Jesus stressed that loving fellow believers would be an identifying trademark of His followers (John 13:35). God's Word is clear -- the person who refuses to love a believer does not know God (I John 4:8). Believers who close their hearts to a fellow Christian in need do not have the love of God abiding in them (I John 3:17).

Christians have developed numerous excuses for not loving people who have experienced divorce but the Word of God does not allow that option. Some involved with divorce are innocent victims while others are initiators -- yet all must be loved. The Bible clearly teaches that God intends marriage to be a life-long commitment. God's Word equally emphasizes that Christians are to love their neighbors -- especially fellow believers.

Local churches, pastors, and individual Christians must recognize their obligation and opportunities to minister to children of divorce and their single parents. This growing segment of society is obviously part of the mission field described in the Great Commission. God desires for them to be discipled into obedient, victorious, God-honoring believers. Only Christ can fully comfort their pain, heal their wounds, and restructure their lives. Christians are obligated to show them God's love and provide them with God's answers.

Pastors should not neglect their obligation to minister to the children and parents of broken homes. Every undershepherd will one day give an account of how he cared for God's flock (Hebrews 13:17). While ministering to people in the community and within the church, he will no doubt come in contact with broken families. He is responsible to understand their needs. His goal must be to disciple them for Christ.

The apostle Paul gave the following challenge to every believer, "While we have opportunity, let us do good to all men and especially to those who are of the household of God" (Galatians 6:10). Children of divorce, whether members of a local church or neighbors in the community, need to experience the love of God's people.

### **The Practice of Helping Children of Divorce**

Christians must recognize the needs of children of divorce and understand their responsibility to meet those needs. Yet, ministering to others is not an exercise of the mind. Genuine ministry always involves individual people sharing their lives with other people.

For Christians to help children of divorce they must identify specific ways to do so. This will necessitate understanding what these children have experienced, becoming aware of their needs, identifying obstacles that must be overcome and determining specific ways to meet needs. Help must be provided for both children and their single parents.

#### **Preliminary Problems Must Be Identified**

Children from broken homes often face problems within local churches and with individual Christians. In the past, members as well as pastors have frequently overlooked the needs of divorced families. Divorce is viewed by many believers as a violation of God's most sacred bond and they refuse to be associated with it in any way. For many years, Christians have treated people from broken homes with disdain. Those involved with divorce -- even innocent victims -- were more often shunned than helped by Christians.

Today divorce has become part of our culture. Even a growing number of believers have experienced divorce -- some as children, others as adults. Nonetheless, some Christians and local churches continue to ignore their obligation to help these families. This occurs for a variety of reasons. Some fear that loving divorced Christians would suggest that divorce is acceptable. Yet, such thinking is unbiblical. In their zeal for retaining the sanctity of the home, some Christians refuse to reach out to those who are victims of a broken home.

There are Christian couples who consider divorced adults a threat to their marriage. They deliberately avoid socializing with broken families out of fear that a divorced parent might draw their mate

away from them. Such concern is understandable. Christians must and can protect their marriages. Yet, they cannot neglect their obligation to minister to fellow believers in need. Following Biblical principles can provide the necessary precautions when ministering to other adults.

Many born again believers, realizing that divorce is contrary to what God desires, feel awkward toward these families. They are unsure how to socialize with a single parent and his or her children. One divorced mother shares her experience,

I've found church to be the most depressing place I know. I feel more alone there than I do at home . . . . People seem uncomfortable around me, afraid they'll say the wrong thing. The wrong thing is to say nothing at all to people who are hurting. Is it that people don't care?'

The custodial parent is the key to helping children of divorce. However, the divorced parent who attends a gospel preaching local church is seldom provided the fellowship and resources needed to properly deal with the emotional pain of divorce and the challenges of single parenting. For obvious reasons, most Bible-believing churches are couple-orientated in their preaching, teaching and social activities. Unfortunately, single parents often feel left out.

The problems that children of divorce and their parents face in our churches can involve more than being overlooked. Families are looked down upon and talked about. They bear the pain of insensitive criticism. One Christian divorcee explains:

I've had two Christians tell me that I'm paying the consequences of my sin and that I'm not living in the center of God's will. When I asked them for a shoulder to lean on, this is what I got. I'm already aware of this and would have preferred a little compassion to their well-meaning cliches.'

Too often church members are quick to assign blame but slow to provide help.

Christian parents who want to protect their children from bad influences can sinfully overreact to something they do not understand. Some children are not allowed to play with other children simply because they come from a broken home. Innocent children are avoided and shunned instead of encouraged and helped.

## **Practical Training Must Be Provided**

Pastors have been commissioned to preach and teach the whole counsel of God. They must provide instruction concerning the permanence of marriage as well as the compassion of believers toward others. An honest pastor will inform his people as to the different views regarding divorce and explain and defend what he believes. Yet, whatever position a pastor holds, it is essential that he teach his people their responsibility to love those who have experienced divorce -- especially single-parent families with their many needs.

It is the pastor's responsibility to equip church members for ministering to children of divorce and their families. Any serious local church effort to help must begin with the awareness of needs. The pastor must educate himself as well as his people concerning children of divorce. He must be acquainted with pertinent books and articles on the subject. The best way to understand real needs is to ask divorced parents and their children what their needs are and how they can be better met.

Instruction should include exposing unbiblical attitudes and challenging Christians to accept Biblical responsibilities. People must be prepared to meet needs and avoid problems. Adult Sunday school could be a vehicle to help people understand what the Bible says about divorce and how Christians should relate to divorced families. Christians must understand that showing Christian love toward families of divorce does not mean you encourage divorce. It is important that deacons, Sunday School teachers, and others who work with children receive practical instruction concerning how they can help.

Adults will benefit from special training on how to avoid the dangers of reaching out to broken homes. Effectively ministering to children of divorce will necessitate helping their parents. Pastors cannot allow church members to be naive about unhealthy and immoral relationships that can develop between single parents and those trying to help. The danger, though real and serious, does not eliminate the obligation to help. It only creates a greater responsibility to be prepared to avoid such tragedies. Divorced women, like widows, should not be refused help by godly men in the church because they are not "safely married." The pastor must share with his flock how he and his wife avoid unbiblical relationships with adults of the opposite sex and teach his people how to do the same.

When helping a divorced single mother the pastor and other men should be open from the very beginning. They must explain to her the biblical precautions they take with *all* women whether divorced, never married, or married. A pastor can counsel a single mother in his office or bring his wife when he visits in the home. When men come over to fix the car or a leaky faucet they can bring their own children and wives along or work in groups of two or more. Women can minister to women and men to men in Bible studies and friendly phone calls. Spiritual preparation and sensible precaution will allow Christians to meet the needs of divorced families in a God-honoring way.

Pastors should not assume that church members will think of specific ways to reach out to divorced families. Training must include recommendations of how people can meet needs. Specific suggestions will be mentioned later under the discussion of ministering to children and their single parents.

### **Personal Involvement Must Be Encouraged**

Pastors should provide more than instruction -- church members must be commissioned for active duty. Deacons should be assigned single-parent families to check on. Sunday school teachers and other group leaders will need to be challenged to build personal relationships with the children involved in their ministries. The goal is reaching out to young people and their families. Talking about needs is not enough. One single parent shares her experience, "The pastor's been talking a lot about single-parent families lately, about broken homes. I don't really see much change. It's one thing to preach about it; it's another thing to do something about it."<sup>6</sup>

Challenging the congregation from the pulpit is a beginning. However, individual members should be personally asked to get involved. Those who head up different ministries should know the children they are ministering to and make sure that young people with special needs are not overlooked. The adult Sunday school teacher and the Youth Group leader can be encouraged to think of projects or activities that might benefit divorced families with one parent.

Quality person-to-person interaction is the most important component of any effort to effectively help children of divorce. Parents as well as other adults who are trying to help must understand this principle. These children will only benefit from

people who show genuine concern. Taking a few moments each Sunday to specially greet a child before or after church can be a great encouragement. Regular visits to the home and one-on-one outings will build a trusting relationship with a child. Sharing and communicating are the building blocks of quality relationships. Children of divorce need people who will share their lives with them.

When reaching out to children of divorce, concerned adults must practice the art of good listening. One does not need a graduate degree in child psychology to provide an attentive ear. Harold I. Smith shares some practical tips on how to listen.

1. Listen with your eyes as well as your ears.
2. Listen to what is said and to what is not said.
3. Beware of your body language which conveys you are not really interested.
4. Concentrate on the one who is speaking.
5. Summarize by saying, "This is what I hear you saying. Am I right?"

Understanding and acceptance "form the foundation on which all the other elements of successful ministry to [single-parent families] are built."<sup>8</sup> These vital ingredients of the healing process can be provided by caring Christians. Churches and individual believers must demonstrate understanding, provide acceptance, and give needed direction to children of divorce.

God's people can be greatly used by Him in meeting the spiritual needs of broken families. The fervent prayer of a righteous believer can do much to help a child in a divorced home. Christians must petition God's powerful hand to do a mighty work. Local church ministries that use the Word of God will help children understand God's compassion, forgiveness, and protection. These victims of divorce should not have to ask for spiritual help. Pastors, church workers, and concerned adults must reach out with biblical counsel.

Those who minister to children of divorce must keep in mind this principle -- in order to reach the grieving child spiritually, one must first quiet his grief.<sup>9</sup> A young person who is emotionally preoccupied with his problems will be unable to consume the spiritual food he so desperately needs. Sensitive Christians will deal with both the emotional and spiritual needs of children of divorce because the two are interrelated.

When listening to a child, the Christian adult must be careful not to minimize a child's feelings. Those who help should not quickly dismiss such statements as "Dad doesn't love me" or "I hate my home."

Rather than interrupting the healing process by preventing the child from experiencing his feelings, ask the child to help you understand why he feels the way he does. Regardless of how irrational his perceptions may seem, assist the child in experiencing, exploring, and evaluating his own feelings.<sup>10</sup>

Biblical counsel can guide children to deal with their feelings properly. Single divorced parents seldom help their children in this area so caring Christians must make themselves available.

Emotions should not be suppressed but rather expressed in proper ways. Children burdened with great sadness must be allowed to verbalize their feelings. They must know that feeling sad is not wrong but living a life of sadness is contrary to what God wants for them. A caring adult can help them identify why they feel sad. With proper counsel they can learn to establish biblical thinking habits.

Those who are angry must be encouraged to talk about their anger. Knowing that someone understands why they are angry will help children be willing to deal with their anger properly. A caring adult can help children recognize the reasons for their anger. Although it will take great time and effort, children can be shown how to properly handle feelings of rage. Parents and teachers will help by lovingly setting firm limits on hostile and disruptive behavior.

Most local churches have ministries that can and should minister to children of divorce. Sunday school, Junior Church, youth activities, Vacation Bible School, camp and children's clubs provide special opportunities to reach out to these children. Adult leaders who show personal concern will have a great impact on the lives of children who participate in these programs. As local churches strive to disciple young people, the special needs of children of divorce must not be overlooked.

The local church can give children a sense of security. Church should be a place where they know that people love them. Young people feel secure by having a place where they belong and feel accepted. When ministering to children of broken homes, Christians must remember that caring people, not programs, provide security.

Children of divorce need more than a pat-on-the-back to patch their wounds. Self-esteem is regained by making a child succeed and helping him deal with his failures. Children should be praised for their effort as well as completing tasks. They can be recognized for special talents, abilities, or areas of interest. Praise that is genuine and specific can have a great impact on a child.

There is much that can be done to help boys and girls who lack appropriate role models because a parent is absent. Children will benefit from meaningful interaction with adults of the same sex. A young adult could become a "big brother" or "big sister" to a divorced child by scheduling regular time together. Christian men could open their lives and families to fatherless boys by taking them fishing or inviting them to play ball with their own sons. A young girl living with her dad would be greatly encouraged by a woman teaching her to sew and cook. Families within the church can "adopt" a single-parent family by including them in outings and holiday meals. A variety of individuals can be involved but all must be committed to building long-term relationships.

A godly adult can provide much needed guidance and direction for a child who is working through the pain of divorce. Some rules should be followed by those who wish to help these children.

1. Commit yourself to building quality long-term relationships. You must be willing to earn their trust.
2. Always explain to the parent what you are doing with his child. For any special outings, the parent should be asked permission and informed where his child is going and when you will return.
3. Be a good listener. Children do not always need advice.
4. Allow children to express their feelings but don't let them talk badly about other people.
5. Don't try to be a therapist but lovingly help them deal with their emotions.
6. Praise them for right behavior -- especially right attitudes.
7. Be a godly example -- children will be watching you.
8. Do not usurp parental authority or criticize the parent in front of the child. Remember, the parent is responsible for setting home rules and standards.
9. Make God a vital part of your relationship. Ask for God's help and pray with the child. Encourage spiritual growth through memory verses, Bible study and talking about the Lord.

## **Custodial Parents Must Not Be Overlooked**

As stated earlier, helping the parent is the key to helping the child. The quality of parenting after divorce plays a major role in the adjustment of children. Unfortunately, these parents face many obstacles that hinder good parenting. Those who seriously desire to help children of divorce cannot neglect the needs of their single parent at home.

There is much that both local churches and individual believers can do to help. Abandoning parents to deal with the problems of divorce and single-parenting by themselves is unbiblical and unkind. No one enjoys sharing the pain of others but Christians are called to a life of burden bearing (Galatians 6:2). Pastors need to help but other Christians can play important roles. These parents have special needs that must be considered -- spiritual needs, domestic needs, sexual needs, emotional needs, and social needs.

**Spiritual Needs.** Divorced parents need a growing personal relationship with Christ. Apart from this they will face their battles without the power and comfort that God alone can supply. Christian friends and pastors must encourage spiritual growth but also recognize obstacles that commonly hinder such growth. At a time when pressures are intense and emotions are strained these moms and dads face a myriad of spiritual battles. Many become bitter towards God because they feel that He too has abandoned them.

Divorced parents who are without Christ need a Christian neighbor or friend to show them God's love and share with them God's plan of salvation. Crisis often provides occasion to share the gospel. God's people should be sensitive to those opportunities. Unsaved divorcees need salvation but they will not listen to well-intentioned Christians who preach at them while overlooking their pain. Believers earn the right to be heard when they demonstrate their faith through tangible acts of genuine concern.

The thought of a Christian home being destroyed by divorce is heartwrenching but unfortunately it is a reality for some. Although God does not desire divorce, Christians who are involved with divorce are not to be forsaken by other believers. Without the help of Christians these parents will become spiritual casualties. When a husband leaves a Christian mother, believers should be there with encouragement and help. Those rebounding from divorce will need

help understanding and applying the healing principles of God's Word.

Personal Bible study as well as preaching, teaching, fellowship and opportunities for service provided in a local church are all essential ingredients to spiritual growth. Unfortunately, the divorced parent often faces many deterrents to maintaining a close relationship with God. The emotional confusion of divorce as well as new demands upon their schedules often leave these Christians uninterested and unable to spend quality time in the Word. Once they get the children to the sitters, go to work, pick up the children, fix dinner, do the wash, clean the house and put the children to bed, little time and energy are left.

For the single parent, one hectic day overflows into another with many essentials left undone. Personal Bible reading too often remains on the "do next" list. If the parent finds time to read the Word, physical exhaustion and emotional burdens hinder him from digesting the needed spiritual food. The result is a worn-out Christian who faces terrible battles without the power of God.

When divorced parents come to church for spiritual strength they usually receive little help. Many feel they do not fit in -- they can't identify with the single's class and they feel awkward without a mate in the couples' class. Too often they are treated as if they have spiritual leprosy by people who are afraid to reach out. Contrary to God's desire and by no choice of their own they face their spiritual battles alone.

The church and individual Christians can play an influential role in helping divorced parents grow spiritually. God designed the local church to be a vital life-line for all New Testament believers. The local assembly provides teaching and training, corporate worship, prayer, evangelism, fellowship, breaking of bread and important outlets for serving Christ. Church members can make single parents feel welcome by inviting them to sit with them in services or at activities. These people must be encouraged to get involved in their local church ministries. The pastor should not allow their service to be limited beyond the boundaries set by Scripture. There is no such thing as a second-class Christian and these divorced parents must not be treated as such.

Pastors should play an important part in meeting the spiritual needs of single parents within their congregations. One Christian mother received no pastoral calls or visits when her husband deserted the family.<sup>11</sup> Pastors neglect their position when they abandon

members during times of tragedy. Shepherds are to help injured sheep, not avoid them.

Single parents in the local church need to be spiritually fed from the pulpit. Pastors must evaluate their preaching to insure that these believers are not being slighted. The illustrations and applications of Bible messages should be sensitive to the world of the single-parent. For parents without partners, Mother's Day and Father's Day sermons that focus on married parents alone are seldom edifying and often discouraging. When preaching on the roles of parents the pastor should be sympathetic to the needs of those living in broken homes. A wise pastor will provide biblical preaching on the home without alienating the parent without a spouse.

The teaching ministry of a local church must equip single-parent Christians for God-honoring living. They desperately need the fellowship and instruction of an edifying Sunday school class. It is easy to feel uncomfortable in a class whose social focus is always geared for couples. Both teacher and class members can help by anticipating uneasy situations and making changes before a single parent feels awkward or overlooked. Specific acts of Christian love go a long way to help these people feel they fit in -- offering a ride to an activity or inviting a single-parent to sit with you in class.

The pastor is commissioned by God to equip single parents in his congregation for successful Christian living (Eph. 4:11-16). To do so, he must address the unique problems these adults face raising children without a spouse. Most single parents are totally unprepared for the challenging task before them. If their pastor and Christian friends do not help them with their spiritual needs, who will?

The Christian who is parenting alone will greatly appreciate special instruction for that enormous responsibility. They need biblical training that relates to the challenges they face. Their needs can be addressed in a variety of ways. One-to-one Bible studies provide rich opportunities for spiritual growth. A Christian woman can volunteer to meet once a week for prayer or Bible study with a divorced mom. The pastor must provide training and materials for members who are willing to help.

The local church that realizes the need to provide specially tailored instruction for single-parents will face some difficult choices. In larger churches, workshops and Sunday school classes for parents without partners can provide practical spiritual training that addresses the special challenges they face. However, separate programs for single-parents has advantages and disadvantages. Such activities can

unintentionally become matchmaking events among lonely singles. Nonetheless, to avoid helping these Christians with their special needs is also dangerous. Unless they are growing in God's Word and shown how to deal with day-to-day challenges biblically, they will fail the demanding tests of single parenting. If they falter, the local church that refused to equip them will share the blame.

The spiritual maturity needed for quality parenting and successful Christian living is not developed overnight. Believers must realize that victorious Christian living offers no short-cuts. God proves Himself faithful to those who are faithful. With the help of a loving pastor and caring Christians, a single-parent can be encouraged to live a God-honoring life.

**Emotional Needs.** Following divorce, custodial parents face a variety of emotional battles. They struggle with understanding their grief, practicing forgiveness, abandoning bitterness, accepting change, and diffusing anger. Until these emotional areas are properly dealt with, the parent remains unable to effectively help his family. Children of emotionally burdened parents cannot expect much support or stability.

When two people end a relationship in which they have invested time, trust, physical intimacies, and dreams, the result is emotional chaos. The pain from breaking such a relationship is intense and inescapable. One marriage counselor said, "Before a divorced parent can start the healing process in his child he must first begin to heal the hurts he himself has suffered through divorce."<sup>12</sup>

Christians who are willing to develop quality relationships with single parents are an invaluable resource of strength and encouragement. Parents without partners need friends who will be there -- to listen, to encourage and to correct wrong thinking. Believers must practice what Harold I. Smith calls "the significant ministry of presence."<sup>13</sup> He explains, "It is not the grandiose that makes the difference in a single parent's day. Sometimes, a note or a telephone call, a word of encouragement from *you* can make the difference."<sup>14</sup>

Divorce often produces damaging responses that jeopardize the welfare of both parent and child. Virginia Watts identifies the need to deal with these emotions.

Anger, depression, fear, and other emotions are like red lights signaling us that something is wrong. We need to heed these signals

by stopping to see why we are angry, depressed, or fearful and discover what happens when we allow these emotions to dominate our lives.<sup>15</sup>

The fallout of divorce usually leaves single parents emotionally incapacitated. Christian friends need to help them objectively identify the causes of their wrong responses so they can make the necessary changes.

Feelings of resentment, bitterness, and anger commonly plague victims of divorce. If not removed, they bring life-long misery to the one who refuses to surrender them. These emotions have immense destructive power. They produce deep animosity between former mates. Children are caught in the crossfire of demeaning comments between mom and dad. Their homelife is always in the war zone.

People who have been deeply hurt have an amazing ability to cling to their bitterness. Parents must be shown that this response is unbiblical and always self-destructive. A life controlled by resentment is contrary to the commands of Scripture (Romans 12:17-21) and the example of Christ (I Peter 2:21-23). Clinging to bitterness disrupts the healing process that God intends for those wounded by divorce.

Victory over bitterness demands both determination and dependence upon God. Pastors and friends can help the divorcee understand why he must change and how he can change. To be freed from resentment, one must eliminate the need for it. As difficult as it might be to practice, biblical forgiveness is the only way to eradicate the self-destructive attitudes of bitterness. Most victims of divorce will not come to this conclusion on their own, so Christian friends must lovingly encourage them in this area. God commands forgiveness to protect us from our own anger. Thus, biblical forgiveness is not dependent upon the repentant attitude of the offender. Forgiveness can be commanded because it involves an act of the will not the emotions. A person chooses to forgive by surrendering his "right" to hurt back -- a right he does not have to begin with.

When people face the dramatic eradication of the marriage bond through divorce they commonly experience grief. Grieving over loss is not abnormal but it can be extremely dangerous if not understood and worked out in a reasonable amount of time. Prolonged grief can result in self-pity which may lead to depression -- a feeling of hopelessness, overwhelming sadness and apathy. There is a time for

tears and these people need others to catch their tears. However, self-pity must be identified and dealt with.

Victory over depression is available to a Christian if he will identify the sin of self-pity and avail himself to the spiritual resources God offers through obedience to the Word and cooperation with the Holy Spirit. The saying, "Do right and you will feel right" has practical significance for the depressed person. When a Christian purposes to obey and serve God even if he does not feel like it, God can help him overcome despondency. This will involve focusing on and striving to fulfill God-given responsibilities.

**Domestic Needs.** Divorce and single parenting bring a variety of complex challenges to family living. Child-rearing which once involved two adults must now be carried on by one. The burdens upon single-parents are great. One divorced father explains:

To have a career, to have a home that's well-kept, and to raise children the way you want to raise them cannot be done in 24-hour days. You either have to devote yourselves to one or the other, or do them all less well than you could if you devoted yourself to one.<sup>16</sup>

Good parenting is necessary for children to properly adjust to divorce. Yet, how can a divorced parent be strengthened to succeed at this overwhelming task? Pastors can help them understand the effects of divorce upon children so they can identify and deal with the real needs of their children. Good literature and instruction concerning parenting, discipline, and family communication can be very beneficial.

The parent without a partner can be given guidelines for single-parenting. Some are listed below.

1. Be growing in Christ -- share your burdens with Him, stay in the Word, and strive to obey Him.
2. Find strength in other Christians -- be willing to ask someone to pray with you, to seek advice.
3. Teach your children about God in everyday situations -- normal conversations, night time stories, meal time, prayers, Christian friends and church.
4. Pray for your children every day and ask others to do the same.

5. Do not force children to play the role of the departed parent. Children need responsibilities but jobs must be appropriate for the age and maturity of the child.
6. Be honest. Children might not be able to comprehend everything but speak honestly in terms they can understand.
7. Praise children for good effort as well as completing tasks. Be specific in your praise.
8. Make your children successful by giving them things they can succeed in.
9. Make spending time together a priority. Plan for special time with your children on a regular basis. It need not be long or expensive.
10. Never criticize your ex-spouse in front of your children.
11. Do not make children undercover agents.
12. If at all possible, maintain the stability of the home environment -- same school, same church, same house.
13. View your children objectively. Ask a trusted family friend to share their opinion of your children's needs.
14. Tell and show your children you love them.

Single parents need to know that with God's help they can be good moms and dads. A simple compliment on their parenting can be a great boost. The adult or teenager who periodically watches the kids can allow a parent some time alone to recharge her emotional batteries. Such help will not be refused and does wonders for the family life of children of divorce.

Those rebounding from divorce are often overwhelmed by the weight of unfamiliar duties in day-to-day living. Single mothers worry about what to do when the furnace does not work or the car fails to start. They cannot afford to pay a professional but are not capable of fixing it themselves. Single fathers, in addition to working, must prepare meals, shop for food and clothes, clean house, and sometimes nurture little children. Women are often burdened with making big decisions or challenging a salesman who does not keep an agreement. These are real problems that do not go away.

Single-parent families encounter a variety of domestic challenges. Individual Christians must recognize needs and think of creative ways to meet them. Some general areas to keep in mind are suggested below.

1. Emergencies: Friends can offer to help in specific emergencies -- when a car stalls, when a child becomes sick at school, when

- a water pipe breaks at home. Make sure the single-parent knows your phone number and when you are usually home.
2. **General home-maintenance and repairs:** Deacons and close friends can discern needs and offer individual help or schedule a work day. Adult or teenage Sunday School classes can also get involved -- seeding a lawn or painting windows. Men can set specific times for car maintenance. A female friend helping a single mom weed the garden can provide a wonderful time of fellowship as well as lighten the work load.
  3. **Major purchases and decisions:** Friends can offer their presence. A woman who has never purchased a car or lawn mower will appreciate someone going with her. Parents without partners should be encouraged to talk to friends before making big decisions. They need not carry these burdens alone.
  4. **Finances:** Some women may lack experience in balancing a check book, buying car insurance, or paying bills. A business-minded church member can provide needed instruction. A church can supply funds for camp, Christian Day School or unexpected bills.
  5. **Practical instruction:** A mother might be unfamiliar with the location of the breaker box or water shutoff valve. A dad would benefit from knowing how to wash different types of clothing and how to prepare balanced meals. Friends should ask if they can help.
  6. **Role-models:** Single parents will appreciate a Christian man or woman providing a positive role model for their son or daughter. Men can take boys without dads to the father-son breakfast and women can invite girls to the mother-daughter banquet.
  7. **Personal time alone:** Friends can offer to watch the children while the parent shops for personal items or goes for a walk.
  8. **An advocate:** Single-mothers may be treated unfairly by a salesman or a service garage. A phone call or a visit to the store by a man from the church can sometimes help rectify the situation.

Acts of kindness soothe the troubled soul. Single parents need more than promises or offers to help. God has commanded His children, "Let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth" (I John 3:18). There is much that local churches and individual believers can do to help. It will demand more than saying, "Call us if you need anything." Christian love does not wait to be requested.

The opportunities for meaningful ministry are there. Believers must take the initiative to help those in need.

**Social Needs.** If Christians are to help divorced parents spiritually, they cannot ignore them socially. Unfortunately, people who have been rejected by a mate often find themselves abandoned by Christians. Sometimes they are deliberately avoided while other times just overlooked.

Pastors and church members must understand that the single parent desperately needs fellowship. Christians should know this but few act as if they do. For parents without partners to maintain their own spiritual stability and develop a strong home environment they must develop healthy relationships with other Christian adults.

God designed each of us as a social being. As seen in His commands for Christians to love one another (John 13:34) and not to forsake their local assembly (Hebrews 10:24-25), God never intended His children to be isolated from other believers. God desires that individual believers function within the local church as interdependent parts of a unified body. Each member is an important component of the local body and needs those individuals who form the other parts. Like a physical body, God expects individual members of the local assembly to support one another. Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 teaches that two are needed so one can help when the other has fallen. To the shame of the many Bible preaching churches, the divorced parent often has no one to help him up.

Maintaining meaningful relationships with other Christians provides a needed outlet for a single parent's battered emotions. Verbalizing their feelings with a trusted friend allows them to see things more concretely. Caring Christians need not always give advice. Listening often provides the greatest help. When it is time to talk, a trusted friend can help a divorced parent be objective about his real needs and the needs of his children.

God-honoring relationships with other Christians are necessary for a single-parent's spiritual and emotional stability. God uses believers to build up other believers. When a believer is isolated, God's work will be limited in his life. Christian friends can provide a balanced perspective of life that a person cannot attain on his own. Feeling accepted and belonging to a local body of believers gives the parent without a partner identity and security -- he knows that he fits in God's program. To be denied this acceptance is contrary to Scripture (Romans 15:7) and will arrest needed spiritual growth.

**Sexual Needs.** Formerly married adults will need help adjusting to singleness. They are expected to properly handle their sexuality and build positive relationships but most are unprepared for this difficult challenge. Sexual desires once satisfied within the bond of marriage do not disappear when a mate leaves. One woman who had been recently divorced after twenty years of marriage asked a Christian counselor, "How long could you go without sex after having it regularly for years?"<sup>17</sup> Combined with the loneliness that accompanies divorce, these parents face great temptation for physical intimacy.

The sexual challenges that single parents encounter are real and must be addressed with biblical answers. The Bible is clear -- sexual intimacies, though formerly enjoyed, are now forbidden for the single-parent. Yet, the world they live in bombards them with sexual stimuli. Divorced women need more instruction than being told that "God is their husband."<sup>18</sup> A simple list of sexual restrictions will be of little benefit to those who were formerly married. They need practical instruction to help them have victory over sexual temptation.

Curtis C. Mitchell, in his article "Tactics Against Temptation," explains that power and strategy are two essential factors in battle.<sup>19</sup> Without God's power and a biblical plan, the single adult will have difficulty attaining victory over sexual temptation. Divorced men and women must understand that passive faith or mere recognition of Christ's promises will not guarantee success over temptation. Christians must obediently cooperate with the Holy Spirit. Like Joseph facing Potiphar's wife, single parents must take sexual sin seriously and do their part to avoid it.

These parents may need personal Bible training to insure they understand temptation. James 1:13-16 identifies the process of temptation -- exposure (an appetite is stimulated), contemplation (a person focuses on satisfying that appetite) and action (desire is united with activity resulting in sin). Christians must learn to short-circuit this process. The single parent who is serious about victory will scrutinize what he allows his mind to feed on. Those unwilling to purify their thought-life can only expect failure. Books and helpful literature are available that discuss a biblical approach to dealing with sexual temptation as well as building right relationships with other adults. The pastor cannot forsake his obligation to help single parents deal with these problems.

## **Summary**

Broken homes have become a painful part of American culture. As a result, millions of children have been forced to bear the heavy burdens that parental separation brings. This study has examined the need to minister to the young victims of divorce.

The first section, "Understanding Children of Divorce," considered the statistics of divorce, the experience of divorce, the effects of divorce, and the response of children to divorce. Over one million children a year encounter the separation of their parents. The number of young people who live in single-parent homes as a result of divorce continues to multiply. This epidemic has invaded every community throughout America. Most of the children involved end up in a home where the mother functions as both parents.

The divorce experience is not a point-in-time courtroom event. Children are exposed to emotional turmoil prior to, during, and following divorce proceedings. A variety of factors make the post-divorce environment troublesome -- diminished parenting, relocation (loss of home, friends, neighborhood), strained parental relationships, lower living standard, loss of a sex role-model, conflicts of loyalty. Divorce is a traumatic experience second only to death.

In the past, family counselors have suggested that the wounds of divorce are minor and temporary. Today, research and the personal testimony of those from broken homes indicate that divorce has negative effects that can last a life-time. Scars from divorce are not easily avoided. The collapse of the family structure affects a child's understanding of commitment and love. It often creates a confusing web of disconnected relationships within the family. Single parents have limited time and emotional resources to help their children. Young people are left to sort out their pain and sorrow alone.

Children respond to divorce in many ways. Although each child is unique and each home is different, some responses are predictable for specific age groups. Young people from broken homes fight separation anxiety, feelings of rejection, fear, anger, grief, depression and self-blame. The majority of children strongly desire for their parents to reunite. In spite of the many serious problems these children must deal with, they are not condemned to a life of misery. With the help of God and the love of God's people, these children can learn to deal with their problems and live productive lives for God.

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The second section of this study, "Helping Children of Divorce," addressed practical areas related to meeting the needs of these young people and their families. Three main areas were considered -- the needs of children of divorce, the obligation to help children of divorce, and the practice of helping children of divorce.

Before Christians can help, they must view divorce from the perspective of a child. Meeting genuine needs necessitates knowing individual children and the unique situation they face. These young people long for understanding, acceptance, security and long-term relationships. A stable home and the healing of the single parent must be a high priority. Children will need assistance sorting out their battered emotions. Feelings of bitterness, anger and fear must be understood and properly dealt with. Their greatest need is to know God and develop a growing relationship with Him.

For Christians to effectively minister to people, they must be convinced of their biblical obligation to do so. Both the Old Testament and New Testament provide commands and principles that require believers to minister to children of divorce and their families. Demonstrating biblical love toward neighbors and fellow Christians is the fundamental trademark of the true follower of Christ. Although Christians provide multiple reasons for not ministering to divorced families, the Word of God allows no such option. Pastors, local churches and individual believers share the responsibility to minister to broken families within their church and community.

Christians must understand the needs of children of divorce and their biblical obligations to meet those needs. However, believers are to be doers of the Word and not hearers only. Ministry is not a mental exercise. Christians must put into practice what the Scriptures command them to do.

Believers need to actively minister to individuals and families affected by divorce. Preliminary problems must be identified and overcome. Children from broken homes often face difficulties within local churches and with individual Christians. Some believers feel that getting involved will condone divorce. Others fear that helping single parents might threaten their own marriage. The couple-orientated preaching, teaching, and adult activities of many churches often ostracize the single parent. Divorced families are overlooked and sometimes shunned.

For Christians to effectively help children of divorce, practical training will be necessary. Pastors must educate themselves and equip church members for this special area of ministry. Instruction

should help believers identify unbiblical attitudes and prejudices, become aware of the needs of divorced families and understand their Scriptural responsibility to love others. Christian adults can be trained to avoid wrong relationships with single parents while ministering to their broken families.

Believers can be encouraged to get involved in a variety of ways. Children need godly role-models who are willing to develop long-term relationships that are bathed in prayer. God must be allowed to play an integral part in these relationships. Adults who share their lives can have a great impact on a young person. Children need good listeners who are sensitive to their emotional as well as spiritual needs. Concerned adults who do not usurp parental authority can play an influential role in helping children from broken homes.

The quality of parenting that follows divorce greatly affects the adjustment of children. Young people recognize the importance of others helping their single parent. A key to assisting children is insuring that custodial parents are not overlooked. These parents have many needs that should be addressed -- spiritual, domestic, sexual, emotional and social needs.

God desires for single parents to have fellowship with other Christians. They need to be active members of a local "body" of believers. Those who are unsaved must experience the loving care of Christians and hear God's wonderful plan of salvation. Pastors and local churches can do much to meet the spiritual needs of single parents. Meaningful relationships with caring Christian adults will make a big difference.

The divorced mother or father faces many emotional battles. They struggle with grief, anger, bitterness, forgiveness, and accepting change. The emotional pain of divorce runs deep and must be properly healed to avoid incapacitating wounds. Divorced adults need biblical counsel to deal with their feelings properly.

Parents without a mate face many challenges as they adapt to new responsibilities. Christians can help in the domestic realm. They can offer practical assistance in the following areas -- emergencies, home maintenance, major decisions, finances, practical instruction, sex role-models, providing the parent with personal time alone, and acting as an advocate. These moms and dads will benefit from practical instruction on how to be a good parent.

The sexual challenges that single parents encounter need to be addressed by pastors. Adjusting to their singleness and dealing with sexual temptation are dramatic demands upon single parents. They

will need guidance to properly handle their sexuality and build positive relationships within the guidelines of Scripture. Failure to properly deal with this area of life often results in immorality that damages both the parent and children.

Broken homes are a painful part of our society that Christians cannot ignore. Believers must be willing to help the young victims involved. To effectively complete their biblical obligations, Christians must both understand and minister to children of divorce.

If fundamental local churches, pastors and individual Christians are going to minister to children of divorce and their single parents, they must examine themselves in light of Scripture. They will never become more effective until they identify areas that need to change. Christians must biblically evaluate what they are presently doing and what they should be doing.

When a church member is physically injured, his pastor visits him in the hospital and church members bring a meal for the family at home. When a believer is forced to bear the pain and problems of raising children in a divorced home, local churches seldom do anything. Too often, both children and parent are slighted by those who have real answers for their needs. It was Christ who emphasized that man's highest responsibility involves loving God and loving one's neighbor. Christians reveal their allegiance to Christ by expressing love toward fellow believers. Local churches and individual Christians must bear that mark of discipleship in their love for children of divorce and their single parents.

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup>See Patrick J. Casey, "Ministering to Children of Divorce: Understanding Children of Divorce," *Calvary Baptist Theological Journal* (Spring 1991) 43-60.

<sup>2</sup>Melody Kadlec, "Children of Divorce and the Church," *Christian Education Journal*, (Winter 1988) 76

<sup>3</sup>Hosea 14:3. Note that all Scripture quotations are from the *NASB* unless otherwise identified.

<sup>4</sup>"Some Praise, Some Pain," *Moody Monthly* (October 1987) 16

<sup>5</sup>Ibid, 17

<sup>6</sup>Lambert, "Coming Up Short," 17

<sup>7</sup>Harold Ivan Smith, "10 Ways You Can Help a Single Parent" *Today's Christian Woman* (Winter 1981/82) 57

- <sup>8</sup> Bobbie Reed "The Gospel and America's New Poor: Single Parents" *Ministries Today* (Sept/Oct 1986) 43
- <sup>9</sup> Karen Schoenhals, "Do You See The Grief?" *Evangelizing Today's Child* (May/June, 1987) 14
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid, 15
- <sup>11</sup> "Some Praise, Some Pain" 19
- <sup>12</sup> Hart, *Children and Divorce*, 37
- <sup>13</sup> Smith, "10 Ways You Can Help a Single Parent" 57
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid
- <sup>15</sup> Virginia Watts, *The Single Parent* (Old Tappan: Fleming H. Revell, 1976) 62
- <sup>16</sup> Lambert, "Coming Up Short," 17
- <sup>17</sup> Randy Christian, "Key Questions in Remarital Counseling" *Leadership* (Spring Quarter, 1988) 65
- <sup>18</sup> Isaiah 54:5, "For your husband is your Maker," is sometimes used to encourage widows or divorced women by suggesting that God is their "husband." Some women find this concept to be very frustrating. It is important that those who counsel women give advice that is consistent with the intended meaning of Scripture. God can meet the needs of a woman without a husband but Isaiah 54:5 does not suggest that God fills the role of an absent husband.
- <sup>19</sup> Curtis C. Mitchell, "Tactics Against Temptation" *Moody Monthly* (June 1969) 32