

# Missionary Singles Issues: Single Again

Can individuals who are married become single again? The answer to this question has varied over the years. If they can become single again, this increases the number of singles in the population as a whole.

## The Bible on Divorce

Both Testaments have passages on divorce. In the Old Testament Deuteronomy 24:1-4 notes that a man who wants to divorce his wife can write her a certificate of divorce, give it to her, and send her away. Then both he and she may remarry. For all practical purposes, they are single again with the only restriction being that if she marries another man and is divorced again, her first husband cannot remarry her.

The New Testament has several passages elaborating on this for Christians.

- Jesus elaborated on it in the Sermon on the Mount where he said that the only acceptable reason for divorce was marital unfaithfulness (Matthew 5:31-32).
- Later some Pharisees asked him to elaborate further, and Jesus said that the only reason God had allowed them to divorce was because of their hard hearts; however, it was not supposed to be done, and the only acceptable reason was unfaithfulness (Matthew 19:1-12).
- Still later Paul, a single missionary writing to a church he had planted, said that God's command was that Christian husbands and wives must not divorce (1 Corinthians 7:10-14).

Thus divorce which was relatively easy for male Jews in the Old Testament became

much more restricted for Christians in the New Testament. This prohibition of divorce changed little in Christianity during most of the next 2000 years.

## Roman Catholic Church

In the Roman Catholic Church, which spread Christianity around the world through its single missionaries (nuns and priests) for centuries, marriage became a sacrament of the church. As such, divorce did not occur. In its place the church developed annulment, a procedure through which a marriage is declared null and void for a variety of reasons. The reasons given today are given in the Code of Canon Law, primarily canons 1083-1107.

Thus for more than 1500 years Christians technically did not divorce. Annulment did not break up a marriage; it declared that the "marriage" was invalid from the beginning; that there never was a real marriage to begin with. Since there was no marriage, there could be no divorce.

Of course, during these years the church, not the state, regulated marriages, so that the annulment was of no consequence relative to secular, civil law.

## Early Protestants through the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

From the time of the Reformation through the 19<sup>th</sup> century marriage and divorce became more the responsibility of the government and less that of the church. Of course, clergy still officiated at weddings, but people had to get a license from the state.

During the early years of Protestantism we have few reliable statistics, but divorce gradually became more and more acceptable. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century the USA federal government began estimating and

collecting data on marriage and divorce rates, and the U. S. Census Bureau began publishing them annually in the *Statistical Abstract of the United States*. The following statistics are from various editions of this publication.

In 1867, the first year the statistics were published; for every divorce there were 32 marriages. If we look at this ratio every quarter of a century, we can see the steady rise in divorces. Little had changed by 1875 when there were 30 marriages for every divorce, but by 1900, there were only 13 marriages for every divorce, about half as many as 25 years earlier.

## Changes in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

First, the divorce trend begun in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century continued through much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

- 1875: 1 divorce for every 30 marriages
- 1900: 1 divorce for every 13 marriages
- 1925: 1 divorce for every 7 marriages
- 1950: 1 divorce for every 4 marriages
- 1975: 1 divorce for every 2 marriages
- 2000: 1 divorce for every 2 marriages

Second, the meanings of "marital status" changed. Logically, a person is either married or unmarried (single). However, at the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century "singles" were commonly divided into three categories. Questions about marital status questions usually had four alternatives:

- Married (currently have spouse)
- Single (have never married)
- Divorced (was married, now divorced but not remarried)
- Widowed or Widower (was married but spouse deceased)

As time went on other categories of singles became rather common and confusion reigned as the census bureau tried to decide

what to do. In the 1970s it coined the term "POSSLQ" (Persons of the Opposite Sex Sharing Living Quarters). As the practice of unmarried people living together grew rapidly, that term was gradually dropped in favor of "cohabitated."

Third, before 1970, divorce was possible only if one of the partners could be shown at fault. For example, one spouse had to maintain that the other spouse was guilty of adultery, abandonment, a felony, or other such act. California's no-fault divorce law went into effect in 1970, and divorces were granted if both spouses wanted to divorce or if one spouse said they had "irreconcilable differences." Many other states followed in passing similar laws.

During that time "singleness" was not a reclaimable state. If you had married and for some reason were no longer married, you were never categorized as single again.

## Today in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

More than a decade into this century we can begin to see what is happening in it.

First, it appears that the divorce trend in the USA has continued to level off because the 2009 data (most recent available) is still 1 divorce for every 2 marriages. However, about 2000 the Census Bureau began not reporting divorce statistics for all states. A footnote to tables since 2000 says "Divorce figures exclude data for California, Georgia, Hawaii, Indiana, Louisiana, and Minnesota. Populations for divorce rates also exclude these states."

Second, "single" today usually means that the person is not married to anyone at that particular time. However, the U. S. Census Bureau seldom uses the word "single." Everyone is either married or

unmarried; however, the unmarried are divided into never married, widowed, and divorced.

Third, no-fault divorce laws have now been passed by all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The final state to pass such a law was New York, and the law passed there in 2010.

### Implications

The major implication is that the number of singles has increased dramatically as a result of changes in divorce rate and the definition of “single” during the past two centuries.

First, there were 2,077,000 marriages in 2009, so that means there were probably more than a million divorces. Since each divorce produces two new singles, there were more than two million singles added to the population that year. And this happens every year. (Reminder: This data does NOT imply that half of all first marriages end in divorce. About 40% of the people married each year have already been married and divorced at least once, and the more times people have been divorced, the more likely they are to divorce again.)

Second, the increasing number of divorces relative to marriages clearly shows that our invention of adolescence and discarding of arranged marriages has not led to lasting happiness and long marriages. In fact, the opposite has happened. The divorce rate increased rather than decreased during the same years that adolescence was being invented.

Third, people who have been divorced or lost a spouse through death are now called “single” again. This does not actually increase the number of singles, but it does increase the number of people who are classified as singles, a technical point, but the number of these singles is steadily increasing. In fact, in

England and Wales in 2007, for the first time ever, the number of single (never married), divorced, and widowed persons combined was larger than the number of married individuals. This has not yet occurred in the USA, but if current trends continue, soon there will be more single adults than married adults in the States.

Fourth, now that all states have no-fault divorce laws, the number of divorces may further increase. However, we may never know whether they do or not. After publishing the number of marriages and divorces for more than a century in the *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, the Census Department now lists only the number of marriages and says that the number of divorces is NA (not available). Beginning in 1998 California and various other states (Colorado Indiana, Louisiana, Hawaii, etc.) did not supply the number of divorces. It is interesting that the state with the largest population and the first to pass a no-fault divorce law does not give the annual number of divorces.

Finally, now that no-fault divorce laws apply to everyone in the USA, we are basically back to where people were thousands of years ago when Moses wrote, “When the woman a man marries becomes displeasing to him because he finds something wrong with her, let him write her a certificate of divorce, give it to her, and send her out of his house” (Deuteronomy 24:1). The major difference now is that a woman may do the same thing to the man she has married.

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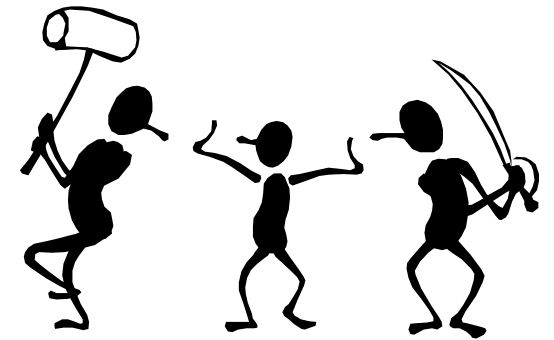
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