

July 6, 1973

Dear Sister ---:

Loving Greetings

I have just now (noon on July 6) received your letter dated June 29, and postmarked in Saskatoon July 2.

I will try to answer your questions frankly, I have no desire to hide or "hedge" anything, but as you yourself say, certain things cause some to "flair up," and it is not right for us to unnecessarily agitate them, especially on matters that are not first principles, and matters that, unhappily, have already become very sore and inflamed with some.

I have no desire to discuss the divorce matter, or to press any aspects of it. I believe there is far more profitable work to be done. I feel it is already ballooned far, far out of proportion, and that this ballooning of it is in a fair way to accomplishing the destruction of the unity of our fellowship.

I have no objection to answering any questions which are sincerely put, for the purpose of information and not for controversy. But I am very anxious not to add fuel to this present unjustified fire, or to upset others without accomplishing anything. Often silence is best.

I have strong views about many things brethren and sisters do, or fail to do, but I have no intention or desire to mention them. I believe all our endeavors to improve ourselves and to help others must proceed on a broad front of generally raising the standards and understandings among us, and not harp on specific items which can so easily become crotchets entirely out of proportion to their importance.

Question 1: "If anyone asked you if they were free to marry after being divorced, what would you answer?"

Answer: So far no one ever has asked me. I pray they never will. I do not know exactly what or how I would answer. I would seek to be guided at the time, and to answer in a way that would strengthen and promote ecclesial harmony, and not weakness and division. Few need advice in how to be weak, or take the weak course.

I would tell them that if it were I myself, I certainly would not do it. I am very fearful of advising anyone what to do or what not to do in relation to marriage. My own personal view is to follow Paul's advice, and beyond that I do not feel qualified to speak. If I feel (as I do) it is wiser not to get married the first time, then I would certainly feel it is wiser not to get married the second time, after (for whatever reason) having made a failure of the first. People who fail in a first marriage are much more likely to fail in a second. No marital problem is ever entirely one-sided.

Unquestionably the safest course (theoretically) is not to remarry. It is safest because (1) there is no danger of it being sin, regardless of which side of this question is right, and (2) by such a course one does not give offence to other brethren. This last point (offence) is a very, very big point, and should

stop any sincere brother or sister from doing anything (not just divorce and remarriage) that troubles, saddens or weakens others.

BUT - it is clear from the tenor of Paul's remarks in 1 Cor 7 (as verses 5,9, etc.) that we are dealing with very deep forces that only God understands. I would feel I was very much out of my depth advising anyone either way on anything to do with marriage. God alone knows the flesh, and He has mercifully made certain provisions for it, and we must follow His way very closely, and not our own natural emotions or prejudices. Here is where bre Thomas and Roberts excelled.

If we encourage anyone to do something in will trouble the Brotherhood, we incur a very great responsibility. On the other hand, if we forbid, or ever strongly pressure anyone not to do something that God has, in His complete understanding of human nature, made merciful provision for, then we are equally responsible -- possibly responsible for driving people out of the Truth and out of the race for life altogether. I speak with real cases in mind. It is a very serious responsibility either way to tell others what they may do in this matter.

Question 2: "Would you try to discourage them doing this, or would you say, I believe Christ sanctioned it?"

Answer: I believe this is pretty well covered in answer to #1. To me, one of the greatest evils of this current divorce agitation is that it has forced into prominence the Exceptive Clause which should be kept very much in the background. All the prominence and emphasis should be on the basic principle and command: One partner for life: any tampering with this is a deadly sin. If all who came into the Truth really had the Truth, this would never be a problem, and we would never have to even think of the Exceptive Clause. It's like arguing so much about the fire extinguisher that all people can think about is starting fires.

Human nature being what it is, then any prominence given to God's merciful (and wise) provision in dealing with a sin will with shallow minds lessen the recognition of the deadliness of that sin, and lessen their ability to resist it.

In direct answer to #2, I would try to discourage anyone doing anything that would trouble and divide sincere brethren and sisters, but I would at the same time be very careful and fearful about damming up powerful forces in others that I know very little about. It is so easy and pleasing in our ignorance to make utterly impractical rules for others, as though in our "holiness" we knew better than God. Let us concentrate upon ourselves, where it is so needed.

Question 3: "Can a divorce be obtained in this (Canada) or your country (US) without going to law?"

Answer: This question clearly means going to law against, not just "going to law" as when getting married. With this clear, the answer is Yes, as concerns many states of the US (including, I now believe, Michigan). Increasingly so. More and more states are adopting "no fault" divorce laws in which (as I understand it) there is no accusation, no charging with sin, no suing at law, no going to law against -- any more than there is in getting married in the first place.

I do not have any specific information, but this appears to be a very rapidly developing trend, And in the light of this, it should be noted (as having a large bearing on this whole question), that what in the world is called "marriage" today is merely legalized, temporary, terminable fornication. If a couple, when "married," do not regard it as for life, but merely for mutual convenience to be terminated at will, then it is fornication, whatever the world may call it. They are never, in any true sense, married at all.

Divorce in the US appears to be quite quickly moving in the direction of the conditions it was in in Christ's day under Roman law - a purely personal affair no more regulated than marriage was regulated.

Truly there are certain regulations, and forms to be gone through, just as there are with marriage. For instance, with marriage, the authorities have rules as to residency, medical examination, age, consanguinity, etc. Conforming with all this is "going to law," but it is not "going to law against." Such seems to increasingly be the case with divorce.

Actually, governmental prohibition and regulation of divorce is a hangover from Papal Catholic rule of the "Christian" world. In one way it has been a very helpful shield for us against the problem, but in another way it has greatly complicated and obscured it, and prevented us from facing the real issues of the matter. When the trend (to looser legal divorce) started, I greatly feared it, fearing it would strip away our outer line of defense against the divorce evil, but more and more I feel it is the hand of God making us face the deeper issues involved, which is much healthier and safer.

Question 4: "Did bro Aris Edwards' friends and relatives in Texas tell him he was free to marry again, and thus encourage him to do so?"

Answer: I do not know. I have heard many, many rumors, concerning this and concerning other things and other people. Many of them I know personally, or have found by inquiry, to be untrue. I myself have absolutely no evidence that anyone so encouraged him. Certainly no one with any sense or scriptural understanding would encourage him to marry out of the Truth.

It is my sincere impression that the responsible brethren in Texas have a much better and sounder and encouraging view of this whole matter than would appear from the many rumors and reports that are unfortunately (and unscripturally) spread. Woe to those who sow discord among brethren! How little the seriousness of this sin of discord is comprehended by some who are so zealous in other directions! We tend to spread reports (confirmed or unconfirmed, true or untrue) which we think will help our "righteous" cause. The doctrine that the ends justify the means is far more common among us than we realize.

Question 5: "You say you are not pushing the Exceptive Clause view. Do you mean you would try to discourage this practice?"

Answer: As I said in my letter to bro Ed Truelove (enclosed), I cannot foresee any case in which I would believe a brother or sister would be justified **in themselves initiating** the use of the Exceptive Clause to get a divorce. Forgiveness and reconciliation is always the preeminent principle and anything that would create a barrier to this (as long as it is possible) is wrong. But we are constantly experiencing new twists and complications to the actual circumstances that arise, and I am

increasingly reluctant to dogmatize. Very recently, I heard unbelievable details (from the point of view of unexpected weirdness) of a case (not in our fellowship), and I was asked for an opinion of what could and should be done. I was at a loss to advise (hearing only one side), but the new twists certainly opened my eyes to the danger of dogmatizing in advance about what to advise in specific cases.

I believe the main purpose of the Exceptive Clause is that we may know who we may accept (and who may remarry), and what we must require, after the problem has been caused by sin. I could never see the logic or scripturalness of accepting back into fellowship remarried divorcees until I realized that bre T and R were right about the Ex Cl. Read the quotes from bro Roberts very carefully. He never openly justifies a brother or sister initiating the getting of a divorce. But he does say that a divorce where adultery is involved is recognized by God as terminating the marriage, and that there can be remarriage.

Question 6: "Because you said you support bro Roberts, does this mean that you want us to permit, or insist on us permitting, a person to remarry?"

Answer: No. I insist on nothing. I "want" nothing, as far as others are concerned. Let each ecclesia handle its own cases. Leave Richard's cases to Richard's responsibility. Only the local people know all the details, or at least, they know more than others -- no one knows all. I have never pressed any aspect of the matter. I have frankly been afraid of it. I have tried to avoid it. I have no rules to impose upon others, on pain of disfellowship. It should not be agitated. We got along for 125 years without its bring agitated. Bro Roberts from time to time gave his advice as he was asked. What the local brethren did with the advice we are not told. It was quite clearly left to them to do the best they could before God with those sad problems.

Seeing the confusion and concern of many, being faced with this constant unhealthy agitation, I must in honesty and for what I consider to be the benefit of the Brotherhood, point out that to my mind the Ex Cl solves the problem and gives a satisfying and consistent picture and tells us who we can accept, and what condition God now sees them to be in maritally. But I have no axe to grind. If the subject could be completely dropped, and each left to his own views, and each ecclesia left to handle its own cases (and make its own rules, if it wishes, tho I think this unwise), then I should be very happy indeed.

Question 7: "Is Texas all that matters to you, and the rest of us do not really matter?"

Answer: I am deeply saddened by this question. I do not believe I have by word or action, given grounds for this thought. I am deeply concerned for all, but if brethren insist on agitating something, and separating themselves because of it, what can I do but watch in sorrow? Because I cannot do anything to persuade or stop them, does that mean I am not concerned? Because I do not enter into their agitation, does that mean I am not concerned? In 1953, those who left did not want to listen. To say anything just angered them. I found this out very quickly. These things are all in God's hands. He is infinitely more powerful than I am. He could change everything in a moment. Many things we find we have to leave to Him, just getting on as best we can with the work in hand, hoping to put back together the pieces when the breakers down have done their work and run their course.

I have attended the Hye Gathering since 1950. I feel an obligation to support it. I would feel guilty if I did not. To some extent this has necessarily limited my activities in other directions, because working for my living and working on the Berean (an obligation I did not seek but tried to avoid) are both time and energy consuming. We each of us are only one weak, frail, mortal creature, with the normal disability of the flesh which inevitably increases with age, and we can each only do so much. We much each before God do what seems most urgent and pressing, and I believe we should all try to leave the judgment of others in this respect to God, not drawing unfavorable conclusions.

Concerning bro Harry Sommerville's beliefs. It is my belief that he did agree with what bro Roberts wrote. I sent him (at his request) a copy of these quotations at least (I feel sure) 30 or so years ago. It was my impression at that time that he agreed with them, and desired them to show to others. (I myself at that time was not able to accept them, but I was wrestling with them.) I had some very amicable correspondence with him on the matter, but neither of us forced our views. It was a matter of discussion and seeking truth.

It is difficult to say with assurance what anyone of us have believed on this matter in detail at any particular time, as most of us have varied, developed, learned, reconsidered, etc.

But it is my sincere recollection (not in any way deceitful) that generally speaking bro Harry agreed with bro Roberts. I believe part of the confusion as to what bro Harry believed is due to the Suing at Law issue (which till recently was an essential, and apparently permanent, inseparable part of divorce in all communities Christadelphians normally dwell in. I believe also that this is part of the confusion over what bro Roberts believed.

Enclosed is a copy of a letter I have been able to find from bro Harry thanking me for sending him the quotations on divorce from bro Roberts. Remember, we were not agreed, but amicably seeking agreement. Note this letter is from 1954. However, I feel sure my original correspondence and supplying him with a list along this line was some years earlier. For instance, I have a copy of a letter from bro Harry to bro Banta dated August 3, 1947, wherein he approvingly quotes the Nov and Dec, 1891 divorce statements by bro Roberts, including the words, "Christ recognized no divorce as lawful save for the cause of fornication. This severs the bond."

The Suing at Law issue was always the big issue between Bereans and Central as concerning divorce. This must always be remembered in reading anything that Berean brethren have written on divorce. Note this is the key aspect of bro Harry's 1954 letter.

I do not believe in the light of this evidence that my saying bro Sommerville accepted, approved and believed bro Robert's extracted statements on divorce can be spoken of as "deceitful." I believe, as you suggest, that if we are to try to avoid the use of extreme and unkind words, it would be much better to say "mistaken" rather than "deceitful." I note that it is not your word, but you mention it as used by others.

Of one thing I am positive: bro Harry would never have supported any new requirement of fellowship that condemns bro Thomas and Roberts as not having basic, necessary First Principle truth on this matter. Nor would he ever have supported adding to the Statement of Faith new teachings contrary to the teachings of bre Thomas and Roberts. He was far too well balanced and too thankfully

appreciative of their vast labors for the Truth and the Brotherhood, for that.

Using the term 'terror', etc. You are quite right on this. I will try within the limits of human Frailty to avoid this. We all want to express our points as forcibly as possible, but it is so easy to overemphasize. We must constantly remind ourselves that we are trying to persuade and heal, and should not be trying to expose or confront.

However, I do not think you will find in anything I have ever written, where I have called any brother "deceitful" or anything else that reflects upon honesty, sincerity or motive.

Question 8: Bro Nick: what does he mean: believe Ex Cls; not believe in Divorce?

Answer: I cannot speak for bro Nick. None of us is entirely clear in all we say or write. But speaking for myself, I could say I believe in the Ex Cl, but I do not believe in divorce, and if I said it, I would mean this:

1. I believe the Ex Cl simply as it is stated, and as bre Thomas and Roberts took it. I believe it provides for solving problems arising from whoredom (porneia) or unscriptural divorce (which amounts to the same thing). As I have mentioned, I cannot (with my limited knowledge and imagination) foresee a case where I would consider a brother or sister wise or right in initiating divorce proceedings (whether or not suing at law was involved), because of the forgiveness aspect, but I would not rule out the possibility of some (to me) unknown circumstances that would justify it.

2. But I do not believe in divorce. I believe it is an "evil," as the Restatement says. I believe cutting off your arm is an evil. It can never be anything else but an evil. Every effort should be made to heal it. But if it is hopelessly corrupt, and corrupting the rest of the body, there may be no other alternative.

It is only in this light that I can see the possibility of anyone using the Ex Cl (provided no laws of God are broken -- as Suing at Law).

If someone said to me: "My partner is utterly corrupt in whoredom, and determined to continue in it. I must put her (or him) away, and I am so constituted as to come under the description of Paul in 1 Cor 7:5,9, etc. I must choose either corruption or remarriage." If they said this I would find it difficult to condemn them.

My own private thought would be that if they sought strength from God in constant prayer, they would be given the ability to endure any condition they found themselves in. This would be my private inner view, but in the light of what Paul says, and not being able to judge how others are constituted, I could not force this view upon them as a matter of First Principle, and therefore of fellowship. I would leave the judgment to God. God has made provision. I believe (with Paul) that they would be "happier" if they did not feel they had to use it, but it is very easy to get "holier" than God in our regulations upon our fellowservants.

And if they added the fact that they had several young children that needed a mother (or father), I would not see in this of itself any proof of their right to remarry, but I would be impressed by the fact that what bre Thomas and Roberts understood to be God's way and provision in such a case would have the merit of bringing possible good out of evil, and creating a normal family relationship with

hope for the future. Compare this with the dangerous, unnatural condition the new theories create.

"Hedging." I have no desire to hedge, but this whole question is a matter which I do not believe should be forced to great prominence and as a fellowship issue, it is a matter in which no one has all the answers, or can envision all the possibilities. Therefore what some may consider "hedging" is simply the wisdom of realizing that one can not know everything and could not feel they should take a rockbound position or express all their (present) mind on every theoretical possibility. It is quite possible to charge one with "hedging" if they are reluctant to get into the controversy, and with "pushing" their vices if they do get into it. This way they cannot win either way.

Boston-Worcester clause 4: This is an impossible, unscriptural, unChristadelphian theory. We have never worked on this basis in the past. Please excuse the blunt language. I would not so describe it if it had not been laid down as a new First Principle of the Statement of Faith that we must accept to be in fellowship with Boston.

Even the Clapham group can see the fallacy and danger of this new regulation. It is a meaningless, purposeless, ritualistic, lifelong restriction upon OTHERS simply for events that occurred in their past life of common animal darkness and ignorance.

If a person had lived a past of complete moral corruption, Boston would let them marry after immersion. But if they had been just a little better than that -- if they had at any time gone through any kind of a "marriage" form -- then they are bound to enforced celibacy for life. And not, be it noted, because of their former corruption in the world, but because of the one approach to decentness that they made to legalize their corruption.

Consider the great bulk of the "marriages" in the world today -- openly entered as temporary arrangements to be terminated at will by the new "no fault" divorce. Can we call these marriages? Are they not just legalized animal corruption? What is the difference, in God's sight, between them and ordinary open fornication? Yet Boston would allow the latter to remarry, but the former could not, because they had been through some sort of a legal form.

This is the dangerous folly brethren get themselves into when they get the idea that they have new light and deeper understanding than Bre Thomas and Roberts. I fully agree that this is a "real trouble spot" -- a very, very dangerous new theory. May God give the Brotherhood wisdom not to tamper with the sound foundations of the past, and bring us all to shipwreck.

Question 9: "Is this just an agreement, or doctrines to be believed?"

Answer: Very clearly, according to Boston's contention, this new stand is a "doctrine to be believed" on pain of disfellowship from what they consider to be the Body of Christ. This is quite obvious, for (1) they have added it to their Statement of Faith, and (2) they have separated themselves from the Berean fellowship because of it.

If it were just Boston's own agreement to regulate the Boston ecclesia, it would still be wrong and dangerous, but it would not be as serious for the rest of the Body. Different ecclesias have taken different stands on this matter in the past, and others have respected their right to make their own

rules for themselves.

I have no desire to "make John give in." Let us just drop the whole thing and get on with the real, healthy work of the Truth. No one needs to "give in." No one made John give in when he came back to us from Central. He was received very freely and hospitably.

No one made Richard give in when they came back. We were very anxious and happy to have them, and welcomed them joyfully.

Let John believe according to his own conscience, and let him leave others alone on the subject so that they can do the same. And let each ecclesia face its own cases in prayer, and let other ecclesias leave the decision and responsibility to them.

I could never accept as binding upon me a repudiation of the Exceptive Clause, or Boston's Clause 4. But neither do I wish to force or enforce anything as binding upon others. Let us have patience and forbearance, and let us pray to be guided to eventual unity of mind in the matter. Certainly there is a true answer, as far as we are required to have one. Then let us just make it a matter of prayer till it comes. let us not keep agitating one another about it.

We have come a long way in this direction. We have all been learning. Let us allow time and quiet communication and prayer to take us the rest of the way, in mutual love and forbearance.

On the Exceptive Clause, I have this recently from bro Walter Livermore, who now rejects it. What he says coincides with my own personal memory:

"At that time (1923-24) all Bereans hereabouts believed the "exception" in Matt. 5:32 & 19:9 permitted divorce for a partner's adultery. All the above except myself adhered to that belief."

Among the "above" to whom he refers are bro William Smallwood of Toronto, and bro George Pyne Sr of London, who represented their ecclesias in considering the case in Detroit that was then under investigation.

I mention this simply to show that the Exceptive Clause is not the terrible heresy some take it to be, and that ALL Bereans in this part of the ecclesial world at least (Ontario and Michigan and New York) accepted it 50 years ago.

You may show this letter to anyone you wish. I will send more copies if you wish them. I do not plan to show it to anyone except Jean and Fred, who will not mention it to anyone else, unless you indicate that you have no objection to its being shown to others.

With much love in the Truth to all in Richard, and continued prayers that in the mercy of God you will be guided into the paths of unity and peace.

Sincerely, your brother,

Rene