

# VIEWS OF EVANGELICAL FAMILIES ON DIVORCE AND METHODS OF OVERCOMING CRISES DURING MARRIAGE

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**Abstract:** This study assesses the view of evangelical Christian families on divorce and settlement methods to preserve their marriage. The study was carried out in 2018, in the city of Chişinău, Republic of Moldova. The research method was qualitative, conducted through an interview guide. Results were collected using a semi-structured interview guide. For starters, it was the opinion of couples on divorce and how their perspective was formed. The frequency of crises in families and the methods by which they have been resolved in order to avoid serious consequences in the future has been evaluated. The opinion of evangelical families on the avoidance of divorce when confronted with this problem was evaluated. Data obtained are presented in the form of a narrative report.

**Keywords:** divorce, evangelical context, crises, solutions.

## Introduction

It is said that a marriage is born in Heaven, but the reality of the last decades shows more and more often that, “for various reasons, it tends to fall apart on Earth. Then it comes to divorce.” (Tomashevski, 2016).

In this paper, we set out to look at the family as a basic social unit; since a marriage is born in Heaven, we wanted to present the plan and the purpose of God concerning the family. Divorce comes after a marriage, which is why our wish was to understand what a family means before people understand what a divorce means.

In the first part of the paper, we defined the terms Evangelical family, divorce, and family crisis. This largely constitutes the theoretical framework.

“A family is the place where relationships define social interaction: friendships, visits, serving meals, training, working, and playing. God wanted us to be more intimate with family members than anyone else. Comparing God’s plan with modern realities, it is not hard to realize that we have moved away from the predetermined divine pattern. Parents have come to have to ‘plan’ a ‘family evening’ or, sometimes, ‘a family meeting’. As a social unit, the modern family is about to disintegrate.” (Coblentz, 1996, 9).

The term of divorce is detailed in the second part of the theoretical framework.

### ***Evangelical Family***

An evangelical family is a family that lives by the principles and Christian values exhibited in the *Bible* and that believes that God is the creator of the family. “The family is instituted for the Earth (in Heaven there will be no more marriages), but it is instituted from Heaven, it is governed from Heaven. In addition, for any home of faith, there is a pattern in Heaven: Christ and the Church.” (Socoteanu, 1991, 4)

The International Federation for the Promotion of Family Life has, among its principles, the following statement: “The family cell, which is vital for the development of society, has three essential elements: a man, as a person, husband and father; a woman, as a person, wife and mother; a child, present or potential, which must be respected as a person since conception.” (Trobisch, 2001, 188).

### ***Divorce***

Divorce is the subject that concerns us in this research. Divorce is a drama, a pain and no one passing through it cannot say that he/she has not suffered. “Divorce is second, in order of emotional impact, after the partner’s death.” (Minirth, in Ziglar, 2001, 56).

Divorce is like death, it brings tears, pain, suffering, hatred, betrayal and other different consequences.

Statistical data say that “almost 20 thousand couples in the Republic of Moldova were married in 2017 and, on the other hand, around 9 thousand couples divorced. Data of the Civil Status service shows that, as a rule, men

decide to start a family at the age of 28, and women at 26. The average duration of a marriage is up to six years. Usually, the age of men who choose to divorce is 32, and that of women, 30. Actually, one of two marriages ends in a divorce. Every divorce case needs to be dealt with separately, but when we see these figures, I tend to think that, for the years we live, it is a national disgrace.” (Blendarencu, 2018, 1)

If we are to look at statistics on the U.S., this is what is happening: “After World War II, the experiences of two successive generations stand in a strong contrast. In the 1950s, the country’s marriage rate was high and growing and the rate of divorce was relatively low and fixed. But, when the young generation grew up, in the early 1960s, the divorce rate began to rise and, between 1966 and 1976, the number of divorce cases doubled.” (Cherlin, 1981, 6-7).

A newer study shows that, “in the United States, one of two marriages ends with divorce. According to Cherlin’s high value of personal freedom, the strong emphasis on personal development provides dissatisfaction in marriage seeking reason for divorce.” (Apostolou, 2018, in Cherlin, 2009).

Other statistics found that, “The divorce rate has risen by more than 70% over the last 50 years, and the number of single parents has increased as fungi. For example, in 1948, only one in 14 children under six years was raised by a single parent. In 1973, the proportion was one in seven. Today, statistics show one in five. Data on divorces in 58 countries, regions and various cultures between 1947 and 1981 show that the seven most difficult years in a marriage are actually four, and most marriages ending in a divorce fall apart in the fourth year. This is tragic.” (Ziglar, 2001, 56).

The word “divorce” (from Latin *divortium* “separation”) suggests the cutting of trees or even of the head, implying the cutting of something that once was a living unit (Elwell, 2012, 345).

A divorce certificate does not pass without being noticed: it leaves behind a string of consequences among which a major impact on health.

### ***Family Crises: Factors Causing Divorce***

Too many people are getting married today with unrealistic expectations from the partner, with high standards, with selfish desires, with serious sins and, when they come to live day by day a family life, they risk to become more anxious, more disappointed; they communicate without transparency and many other reasons lead to crises in family life. “We should remember that marital dissensions are often symptomatic of something much deeper, like selfishness, lack of love, inability to forgive, anger, bitterness, communication issues, anxiety, sexual abuse, sin, and deliberate rejection of God’s will. Each of these

can be influenced by the conflict between the spouses.” (Săndulache, 2009, 613).

The lack of communication also leads to serious conflicts. Unforgiveness and unresolved conflicts help destroying the family. The birth of a disabled child (Gavrilă-Ardelean & Gavrilă-Ardelean, 2017, 6), the need for education for such a child with special needs (Gavrilă-Ardelean, 2008, 60) may constitute grounds for divorce especially for the spouse. The financial problems of a family may constitute grounds for divorce, especially for people from rural areas (Gavrilă-Ardelean & Gavrilă-Ardelean, 2013).

The crises that arise in the life of a family must be resolved in time, they should not be left deep in the heart and completely unforgiven.

“The family is about to be destroyed, and Christian families should have jumped out of the boat a long time ago. If we realize that the percentage of divorces between Christians is almost as high as the one between the ungodly, we know that we have been uncaring, indifferent.” (MacArthur, 2002, 62).

When, in a family, conflicts escalate, there are 3 options: divorce, resignation or rebuilding.”

Rebuilding seems to be the most effective method of resolving family crises, however few choose it because it seems to be the hardest way. White (2000, 62) said, “even if it’s hard, we don’t have to change the status of marriage but we can only change the attitude”.

### **Research Methodology**

We studied the literature on the rise of the divorce rate among evangelical families to assess this issue at the level of married families within the evangelical framework to observe, subjectively, the opinion on divorce and three methods of crisis resolution in the early years of marriage.

### **Research Goal and Objectives**

The *goal of the paper* is to assess the view of evangelical families on divorce and identify how the crises were resolved in the early years of marriage to avoid divorce.

*Research objectives* are:

*Determining the view of evangelical families on divorce.*

*Identify how the crises in the early years of marriage in evangelical families were resolved.*

### **Research Design**

Starting from the idea that qualitative research is the study of people in their natural environment, in everyday life. The research design being qualitative, we tried to study the opinion of the people of evangelical, complete

families, with 5+ years of marriage, to avoid the crisis period of the first years of adjustment. Qualitative research helped us discover our own views on divorce, opinions that cannot be adapted to every evangelical Christian.

We chose to emphasize the words, experiences and emotions of the people interviewed and not the amount of people to have statistical data.

Also, through the qualitative method, we had the opportunity to meet people face to face, and study their verbal and non-verbal communication (Iosim, 2019).

According to Labov and Fanshel (in Singly *et al.*, 1998, 158), “An interview is a speech event in which a person obtains information from a B person, information that was contained in the biography of B.” The term “biography” highlights the living character of the collected information. Interview survey is required in addressing specific problems. Interview tactics provide for the use of a more or less structured guide, the adoption of personal attitudes, the formulation of appropriate questions, etc.”

The Investigative research tool was the interview. To use questions with a higher degree of generalization, we use the semi-structured interview, “a talk with partially fixed rules” (Tutty *et al.*, 2005, 66).

“Qualitative research is exploratory and involves interviewing a limited number of people, with no statistically representative data for the studied population. Qualitative research studies in their depth motivations, emotions, perceptions, feelings that cause people to act in different ways.” (*Cercetarea calitativă*).

### ***Research Sample***

The qualitative research sample consisted in ten evangelical families from Chisinau, families with five years of marriage. In order to avoid certain unpleasant incidents, the researcher discussed with the interlocutors about data confidentiality, so participants can openly acknowledge their personal experiences. The researcher was patient, benevolent, nonauthoritarian, and she didn't give many tips (Singly *et al.*, 1998, 158). The researcher, the husband and his wife (plus a child if aged 0-3 years) interacted during the interview at the participating family's home.

### ***The Interview***

The researcher developed an interview guide based on the idea that it represents “an organized ensemble of functions, operators and indicators that structure the listening and intervention activity of the interviewer” (Singly *et al.*, 1998, 152). The interview guide included 8 questions. The indications on the methodology for the application of the semi-structured interview were complied with.

### ***The Procedures***

We chose audio recording because it “allows the researcher to be focused on the interlocutor and the conversation itself.” (Tutty *et al.*, 2005, 77). All interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative research results are presented in the form of a narrative report containing the main respondents’ ideas. The views of families are presented on the basis of the semi-structured interview guide. Research results are presented below in a structured and logical form.

#### *View of Evangelical Families on Divorce*

If we are to talk about the evangelical families’ view on divorce, all the families interviewed were of the opinion that there should be no divorce. During the research, we noticed how opinions differ from one family to another, with some people being more tolerant about divorce, while other families consider this practice evil.

*“In evangelical families, there must be God, not divorce. Every divorce situation in the Church must be treated individually; however, we believe that divorce is not a solution.”* (Family B., married 5 years)

*“Christianity and divorce are two parallel sides which, according to the Bible, should never intersect. Christians who end in divorce cannot call themselves Christians and, according to Malachi 2:16, God hates divorce. It is good to learn to forgive because, where many difficulties are encountered, God also gives much grace. Divorce is a temptation.”* (Family D., married 5 years)

*“If it’s to talk about Christian people, this topic shouldn’t even exist. Moreover, Christian partners should not admit such thoughts.”* (Family F., married 5 years).

In most of the answers, we noticed the tendency of people to separate Christianity and divorce as two different paths with different destinations. A Christian should not be complacent in such sins, not even at the level of thought. Divorce is not a solution: it is a problem leaving deep scars.

*“The beginning of marriage is important over the years and there can be no divorce in a family where partners have an individual relationship with God. And what God has tied, man must not divide even if he is one of the partners.”* (Family M., married 5 years)

#### *Crises in the Early Years of Marriage*

The beginning of marriage is very important for a happy relationship: if Christians come to the altar to begin marriage before God, they should never take Him out of their home, because if someone builds a house without God, it's in vain.

*“Once two people have become one – divorce is not an option/solution. You must weigh things well before marriage, and not after. Marriage is a covenant that we must honour with God's example. We're definitely not for divorce.”* (Family C., married 9 years)

*“Divorce is something contrary to the Bible, and the Word of God clearly lists a few situations when you can divorce. Divorce should be prevented; however, it is admissible only in a case of adultery. If the partners testified before God on their wedding day, then they must go together until death ‘do us part’.”* (Family P., married 8 years)

Listening to the views of evangelical families on divorce, we did not hear anyone be pro divorce, yet some families listed several situations in which divorce is admissible:

- Adultery;
- When a partner becomes a Christian and the other wants to divorce him;
- When things have been revealed that have been discovered after the wedding and one of the partners wants a divorce;
- In case of addiction (pornography, money, etc.).

Each family claimed that conflicts in marriage must be dealt with immediately, with a fair attitude because a small, insignificant conflict can turn into a divorce. Crises are not abstract, are not excluded from the happy home, they will appear and will help us if we will solve them wisely.

Evangelical families have hardly acknowledged that they have experienced difficult situations and many couples preferred to talk about crises in an indirect way; however, we do not believe that family with conflicts are unhappy. As for the crises faced by families in the early years of marriage and the methods for resolving them, we collected the following data:

*“We have not had many misunderstandings in family life because we always pray to God to form us, transform us to live a happy life, which is why, when we stand before a misunderstanding, we try to see it as an answer to prayer because if we pray for humility – God will give us situations in which we will increase humility. However, the most appropriate method we use to solve it is to separate ourselves for a little while, until we settle down and then we can come back to talk gently and calmly.”* (Family B., married 9 years)

*“In our years of marriage, we have not encountered serious crises that lead us to divorce because we have always had God in our hearts. If, at the beginning, our different characters brought conflicts, with time we changed thus reaching better understanding. Of course, we faced problems, that is*

*natural in every family, however it is good to solve it in time before it develops even more.” (Family D., married 5 years)*

Some of the families in the interview were delighted to remember the early years of marriage claiming the lack of conflicts in the family, yet meditating slightly on the question, they came with a convincing response because the crises that seemed immense in the early years now are no longer considered crises because they remained in the past, and they complement each other so perfectly that they cope more easily now.

*“In family life, many crises arise, especially in the early years of marriage. I believe that most common crises in young families are material, because they do not have their own home and are forced to rent an apartment, a house. When a child is born, only the spouse works and then the family collides with problems and material shortcomings. In our family, we had difficulties because we lived with parents the first six years. It is better for a young family to live separately and the best method of resolving conflicts is knowing one’s partner.” (Family G., married 14 years)*

*“The greatest problem we faced in the first years of marriage was finances. Living in rent, the wife was not employed and only the husband was the one who financially maintained the family. Other conflicts were caused by different characters, however, we tried to reach a common denominator until both were satisfied.” (Family P., married 8 years)*

An interesting observation was made during the research: most families faced a financial crisis in the early years of marriage. Is it really the lack of money or the incompetence to manage correctly? Families consider financial crisis a divorce factor, not just a source of family conflict.

*“The first years of marriage for us were beautiful yet complicated. With two totally different characters, the husband being extrovert and the wife introvert, we encountered difficulties in communication. When we didn’t reach a common denominator, we stopped talking, which is not correct, because accumulating two situations could lead to an explosion.” (Family F., married 5 years)*

*“A crisis at the beginning of our marriage was caused by our parents. For them, it was hard to reconcile with the thought that we were already a family, we were mature and we had separated from them. The conflicts arose between us and the parents, and for us it was hard to go through this period; so, to avoid division, the wife with her parents and the husband with his parents, we chose to be neutral.” (Family C., married 9 years)*

The young family faces conflicts because of different characters, lack of communication, high level of offense; however, the conflict can also lead to frequent involvement of parents in their children’s family life.



*“Humanly, we find techniques to solve our conflicts, but if there is no God to give us victory and wisdom, nothing works.” (Family M., married 5 years)*

*“Before solving a problem, it’s better to prevent getting into big conflicts with your partner; you need to be careful with your speech. When we’re in a conflict, we don’t say sharp words to avoid destroying the relationship. It’s easy to tear down what you’ve been building for years.” (Family T., married 25 years)*

*“The early years of marriage in the life of a family are considered years of crisis because their lives move to another level. Not everyone crosses this period well; this is why most divorce cases are recorded in the early years.” (Gumerov, 2018).*

Reflecting on data collected, we noted that the most common crises in the early years of marriage are financial. Another cause, frequently mentioned by families, was the different character of each partner leading to conflict. These two types of crises and many others made the relationship better.

Assessing the families’ views on character formation during marriage, we received various opinions.

*“Becoming a husband and, later, a father, I learned to be more responsible. I learned to care for those I love and, once married, I set new goals.” (Mister I., married 5 years)*

*“My character turned a lot after I got married and the needs, worries, challenges that stand in our face are just to form me further to become humbler; more patient, more forgiving.” (Mrs. E., married 5 years)*

*“Moments of crisis show weakness in the character of a person. In the aftermath of the new misunderstandings, we discovered where change is needed and, based on them, we began to shape our characters to complement each other.” (Family D., married 5 years)*

*“Conflicts have a quenching effect on our character. Of course, if we look back, we have now become more mature and learned how to approach one another in a conflict to avoid hurting.” (Family M., married 5 years).*

The main approach to conflict is from a constructive perspective. When you look at a conflict as a way of transforming, improving character, mutual knowledge, it only seems like a conflict. And if you choose to solve the conflict in a harmonious way, according to the respondents, you can keep the marriage and develop the relationship.

*“The needs and crises in the family made me humble and taught me to be simpler in my conduct.” (Mrs. M., married 5 years)*

*“We learned to communicate dissatisfaction wisely, avoiding to hurt the partner; but through proper communication to make changes.” (Family G., married 14 years)*

*“I learned to apologize and this is my greatest victory. It was easier for me to ask for forgiveness from strangers than from my own husband but, from the example of my own husband, I learned how important forgiveness is in family life.”* (Mrs. L., married 9 years)

*“Our characters shaped by developing communication skills that helped us solve the challenges of life.”* (Family F., married 5 years)

*“To preserve our marriage, we learned to give in.”* (Family T., married 25 years)

“The origin of the word ‘character’ was the mark or letter made in stone or metal by the engraver’s chisel; so, the character was not erased but sometimes remained over the ages. Character is carved inside man, it remains and directs his thoughts, tastes, desires, actions and whole human behaviour.” (Popovici, 1996, 4). Our characters can be improved and we can work on them for a better understanding in our home.

Christian people did not judge those who divorce but, on the contrary, state that God is the one who knows best the situation, that is why we only have to pray for those in this pain. All perceive divorce as a pain, but not all families can understand this pain very well because, among those interviewed, few are those who faced divorce directly.

All those who faced a divorce situation to some extent confess with grief that divorce is not a solution, it is a wound that leaves scars forever.

Divorce is an effect preceded by a cause. Some families get to divorce for different reasons. The lack of a healthy relationship with God was the most common factor. All the families interviewed said this, because a Christian without a relationship with God is only a Christian and then he goes for other values.

*“Self-love, worldly values, remoting from God are triggers of divorce in an evangelical family.”* (Family F., 5 years of marriage)

*“Lack of communication, absence of Agape love, selfishness, parents, money.”* (Mr. A., married 5 years)

*“When partners redeem other things and people more than God; another factor is the influence of the environment in which we live.”* (Mr. I., married 5 years)

*“The causes of divorce may be issues unresolved in time; lack of communication; money – their lack or abundance; lack of love; receiving without giving; lack of attention; often, these reasons arise because people start a marriage with unrealistic, selfish expectations.”* (Mrs. M., married 5 years)

*“A cause of divorce is adultery itself. Even though we think that there should be no such sins among Christians, however, such situations occur and often these things cannot be forgiven by the other partner, he/she feels betrayed and deceived.”* (Family P., married 8 years)

The causes of divorce listed by our participants were also found in literature:

- Sexual infidelity;
- Faulty communication;
- Constant stress;
- Incompetence for intimacy relationships (Berce, 2004, 43).

### **Limits of Qualitative Research**

In this paper, we could not present statistics and numerical data specific to the entire population of the Republic of Moldova because qualitative research focuses particularly on people's opinions, emotions and thoughts specific only to the investigated sample.

Being limited by space, we chose to present very interesting answers to the questions during the interview.

The information obtained cannot be generalized for all evangelical families because ten families are not representative.

### **Conclusions**

When God guides a Christian family, there is forgiveness, love, honesty, transparency, communication, understanding, and the crises that arise will strengthen the family relationship and will not lead it to divorce.

In some families, they negotiate the permissibility of divorce depending on situations, such as adultery; things that are disclosed by the other partner after the wedding; when one of the partners asks for divorce or when it comes to certain addictions arising along the way.

Family crises or conflicts should not be a divorce factor because, when family problems are dealt with in time and in a fair way, they will lead to the development of relationships and the strengthening of the couple. Each family had to share something about the emergence of crises in the early years of marriage. No family denied the occurrence of crises; however, difficulties are not a cause for divorce as long as they are resolved correctly.

Crises have resulted in the development of partner characters and mutual knowledge. It was found that most of the difficulties encountered in their families in the early years of marriage were financial. Crises have also emerged because of parents' involvement, non-fulfilment of expectations, etc.

Analysing the information collected, we observed an assimilation between the causes of family crises and the causes of divorce. Failure to fulfil expectations, miscommunication, the birth of a child with a disability, the lack of a relationship with God were also causes of family crises. Other causes of the divorce listed by the interlocutors were money, selfishness, remoting from God, and adultery.

Divorce is not a solution: it is a problem that needs and can be resolved. To avoid divorce, respondents were of the opinion that it must be prevented by strengthening relations, identifying more common interests, knowledge more of the partner and avoiding doing things that do not please the partner. If, however, the couple were to face divorce, they would first have to determine their desire to save their marriage, take time for a holiday to rediscover the emotions they experienced at first, allocate time aside for fast and prayer. If a family is not able to solve this problem alone, it needs to appeal to a Christian pastor or counsellor.

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