

## CHURCH DISCIPLINE: GOD'S TOOL TO PRESERVE AND HEAL MARRIAGES

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**R**edemptive church discipline is one of the most sorely needed yet grievously neglected ministries in the church today. As a result, thousands of marriages that might have been preserved are instead ending in divorce.

The marriage-saving potential of discipline is well illustrated by a story related to me by a young pastor.

This pastor had been under attack for calling his church to discipline a man who was divorcing his wife without biblical grounds. The man had hardened his heart, left the church, and proceeded with the divorce. To make matters even worse, since the church's previous pastor had avoided discipline, the congregation was immature in this area and viewed church discipline as being judgmental and unloving.

After a particularly grueling congregational meeting where several people criticized the pastor's leadership in this area, one man approached the discouraged pastor and said, "Pastor, don't back off on this. Church discipline saved my marriage."

The pastor scratched his head and said, "John, we never disciplined you. I didn't even know your marriage was in trouble."

John replied, "A year ago it was in trouble. It was about that time that you called the church to discipline Max because he would not break off the affair with his secretary. I was just beginning to get involved with someone at my office. When I saw what happened with Max, it shook me up so much that I broke off the relationship and confessed my sin to my wife. She forgave me, and we finally got into the counseling we needed to deal with the problems in our marriage."

This story reveals both the redemptive power of church discipline and the trap we fall into when we try to measure its effectiveness. We tend to measure success according to the response of the person who faced discipline and how well our church supports it. If the offender responds well and our church condones the process, we say we have succeeded, but if the offender leaves the church or several people object to it, we conclude, "It doesn't work!"

But we err in two ways. To begin with, we try to measure success in terms of results. If we do not see immediate repentance in the person under discipline and if we do not experience widespread congregational support, we think we have failed. We forget that God does not measure success in terms of immediate results. Unlike us, He defines success in terms of faithfulness—faithfulness to His Word regardless of the immediate results or consequences (see Heb. 11).

We also fail because we look only at the short-term visible effects of discipline. As the opening story reveals, however, we can never know this side of eternity how many marriages are saved because people in the pews witness discipline in action and are challenged to repent of their sins before they become public.

If faithfulness to God's Word is the true measuring rod for success, then many churches are utter failures in His eyes when it comes to obeying His clear and repeated commands to restore straying saints through redemptive church discipline. In this chapter we will take a careful look at this problem and then explore ways to restore this vital ministry to the church, especially when it comes to preserving and healing struggling marriages.

## **DIVORCE IS RAMPANT IN THE CHURCH**

During the last century, divorce in the United States increased over 400 percent. Tragically, the church has kept perfect step with the culture around us. A recent survey by George Barna revealed that the divorce rate among born-again Christians is disturbingly high.<sup>1</sup>

This is shocking news! Of all the people you would expect to be faithful to their vows and to fight for their marriages, Christians should be at the top of the list. We know that God instituted marriage as a lifelong covenant. We understand the implications of sin; we can draw on the power of the Gospel. We have so much to motivate us and strengthen us. And yet our marriages are failing with the same frequency and in the same ways as those in the world are failing! The effects of this massive, church-wide failure are enormous. Christian families are disintegrating before our very eyes, often through bitter court battles that leave lifelong wounds. Thousands of Christian children are robbed of the security and unified guidance that God intended their parents to provide, and they learn at an early age that vows to God are less important than seeking personal pleasure. Many adults and children who have gone through divorce leave the church altogether. And all the while, the world is given yet another convenient excuse to label Christians as hypocrites and to laugh in our faces when we try to tell them about the redeeming grace of God.<sup>2</sup>

## **THE FOUR CLAMPS ARE GONE**

The church's failure to fight for its marriages comes at the worst possible time. Marriage has always been somewhat of a pressure cooker. Two sinners come together to share life's experiences, and shortly after the honeymoon, their sinful desires begin to clash (cf. Jas. 4:1-3). Conflict erupts, producing heat and pressure that may threaten to blow the marriage apart.

For many years, there were four clamps that helped hold the lid on the pressure cooker until people cooled down and decided to work out their differences. In order to get a divorce, you had to overcome legal hurdles, social disgrace, financial pressures, and church scrutiny. These four obstacles worked together to slow angry people down, force them to count the cost, and motivate them to try once more to overcome their marital problems. As a result, even though most marriages went through times of great disappointment or anger, the lid usually stayed on long enough for people to get past their intense emotions and see the benefit of working together to save their marriages. As a result, most American couples ended their lives with their original life partner, usually thanking God for getting them through the rough spots along the way.

Unfortunately, even though modern marriages are still pressure cookers, all four of the clamps have disappeared. No-fault divorce laws have removed legal barriers to divorce. Society pays no attention one way or the other to people keeping their marriage vows. Many women already have an income from work outside the home, and husbands rarely face lifetime alimony payments. Worst of all, instead of fighting passionately yet firmly for their members' marriages, most churches today stand silently by as their members head off to divorce court.

A growing number of people think it is time to put some of these clamps back into place. Sociologists, legislators, and feminists are beginning to face up to the disastrous financial and social costs imposed by divorce. As a result, some states are reconsidering their no-fault divorce laws, while others are experimenting with new laws that give couples the option of making a more binding marital covenant. But these changes will come slowly and sporadically. There is only one institution that can act promptly and decisively to restore one of these vital clamps, and that institution is the church. If even one clamp could be placed back on the pressure cooker, countless marriages could be saved from divorce.

## **MINISTERING TO PEOPLE IN DIVORCE**

There are four qualities that church leaders must exercise, by God's grace, if they are going to rescue their people from divorce. Most importantly, they need an enormous amount of compassion. When a marriage is on the rocks, people have often been struggling with sin and discouragement for years. Some of them are calloused and hard-hearted, while others are weary and hopeless. It is all too easy to condemn the former and to give simplistic exhortations to the latter. Again and again the Lord has had to convict me of such attitudes, leading me to pray, "God, this attitude will prevent me from ministering to this man or this woman. Please give me the compassion that

Jesus had for the lost and the weary.” It is only as we put on the compassion of Christ that we can effectively obey the timeless counseling instructions provided in 1 Thessalonians 5:14-15 (NIV): “And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.”

Divorce intervention also requires conviction that comes from knowledge. Many pastors are unwilling to stand up to divorce because they have forgotten how strongly the Bible supports the sanctity of marriage, or they do not believe that God will bless their labors to fight for marriages. Thus they deserve the rebuke that Jesus gave to the Sadducees: “You are in error because you do not know the scriptures or the power of God” (Matt. 22:29, NIV). If you are going to go into battle against divorce, you need to dig into the Bible and develop a firm conviction as to what God says about divorce. Then you need to develop a clear and unequivocal policy about marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Finally, you need to teach it to your people so they know what God and the church will call them to. Such teaching is especially important to correct the worldly ideas on marriage and divorce that infiltrate Christian homes through every form of media. Our people desperately need clear guidance on this issue.

As Jesus warned the Sadducees, however, knowledge alone is not enough. You must also have faith that God will back up the commands of His Word with the power of His Spirit. Fear throws up a multitude of objections to exercising discipline. “People will get angry.” “They will call you legalistic.” “It won’t work.” “It’s a waste of time.” “You might be sued.” One of the greatest disappointments in my work with churches is to hear leaders say, “I know the Bible says this, but . . .” No Christian should ever put a “but” after “This is what God’s Word says”! The only thing we should say is, “Scripture says this, and here is how we will do it.” Yes, we need to be thoughtful and careful, but we must never let the fear of man cause us to compromise God’s Word. We must ask God for faith and then move ahead, believing that He will bless our obedience. “Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Cor. 15:58, NIV).

A fourth and related quality is prudence. Divorce intervention often involves legal risks. These risks can be substantially reduced if a church takes precautionary steps to get its house in order legally before a crisis erupts (Prov. 22:3). Among other things, this involves updating your bylaws and guidelines on church discipline so they address the legal pitfalls that have been created in recent court cases that granted church members more latitude in suing their churches. I am not aware of a single denominational book of church order that has kept pace with these legal developments, and I have seen very few sets of church bylaws that were not completely deficient in this area. As a result of this neglect, most churches are unnecessarily exposed to being sued when they exercise discipline. Now is the time, before the storm erupts in your church, to bring your core documents and policies up to date. An ounce of prevention today (which I will describe in detail later) can literally save you twenty thousand dollars in legal fees tomorrow.

## **FORMATIVE AND CORRECTIVE DISCIPLINE**

When people hear the phrase church discipline, they usually think of a formal process that may result in excommunication from the church. But this is actually only a small portion of what discipline is all about. The Bible calls us to think of discipline in broad and generally informal terms. This has led me to develop the following definition for church discipline: the church involving itself in people’s lives to bring them to maturity by teaching and holding them accountable to God’s Word. This definition may be divided into two specific categories of discipline: formative discipline and corrective discipline.

Formative discipline encompasses the teaching and fellowship ministries of the church that help believers grow into maturity. It includes preaching, Sunday school, personal study and prayer, fellowship, small groups, and all of the other day-to-day activities of the church that enable believers to grow in the knowledge of God and inspire them to follow His ways (see 2 Tim. 4:2; Heb. 10:24-25; Jas. 5:16).

A church can use formative discipline to strengthen and preserve marriages by providing thorough teaching on God’s design for marriage, on ways to nurture and mature, and on how to deal with problems that arise in the marital relationship. Through Sunday school classes and small-group Bible studies, the church can provide members with opportunities to discuss questions and difficulties. Mandatory premarital counseling can help couples

deliberately prepare for the challenges of marriage. And through informal fellowship, younger couples can learn from older couples as the latter model the attitudes and skills that lead to a solid marriage.

Corrective discipline is practiced less frequently, and only when a believer strays from God and needs help getting back on track. As Paul explained it to the Galatians, “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently” (Gal. 6:1, NIV). Jesus Himself lays out the general framework for corrective discipline in Matthew 18:12-20 (NIV):

*“What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost. If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”*

As this and related passages teach, corrective discipline has three primary purposes. The first is to restore fallen Christians to usefulness to God and fellowship with His church (see Matt. 18:12-14; 2 Cor. 2:5-11; 7:8-10; Gal. 6:1-2; Jas. 5:19-20). The second is to guard and preserve the honor of God (see Rom. 2:24; 1 Cor. 10:31). And the third purpose is to protect the purity of the church (see Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 5:6; 1 Tim. 5:19-20). As we will see, corrective discipline generally begins in private, but may involve as many people as are necessary to achieve repentance and restoration (see Matt. 18:15-20; Gal. 6:1-2; Col. 3:16; Jas. 5:19-20; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 2 Thess. 3:14-15; 2 Tim. 4:2; Heb. 13:17). The rest of this chapter will be devoted to discussing the exercise of corrective discipline.

## **TEACH AND APPLY THE “SLIPPERY SLOPE”**

Corrective discipline is much easier to administer and to receive if people have been taught about it before it becomes necessary. The trouble is that many Christians have an automatic aversion to the concept of discipline, thinking of it only in formal and extreme terms, such as excommunication. One way to get past this aversion is to show that formal church discipline is only a small part of a wider and more informal process for promoting discipline and resolving conflict. Peacemaker® Ministries has developed a simple diagram that can make this teaching process easier. It is called “the slippery slope of conflict.”<sup>3</sup>

This diagram illustrates the various ways people respond to conflict. On the left side of the curve are the “escape” responses: denial, flight, and even suicide. In most cases, escaping from a conflict only makes matters worse. Occasionally it is appropriate to flee from a conflict to get help or to get away from imminent danger, but in most cases escaping only delays a proper resolution to the problem. Sadly, this is the way many people respond to conflict—quitting a job, changing churches, filing a divorce. They may get temporary relief, but they usually take their problems into future relationships.

On the right side of the slippery slope are the “attack” responses, which are used when people are more interested in winning a conflict than in preserving a relationship. These responses can involve litigation, verbal or physical assault, or even murder, all of which are generally forbidden by Scripture<sup>4</sup> (see 1 Cor. 6:1-8; Eph. 4:29; Exod. 20:13). Obviously, attack responses are almost always destructive to relationships.

Instead of escaping or attacking, Christians are commanded to respond to conflict in six constructive ways, which are shown on the top of the slippery slope. These responses include three “personal peacemaking” responses: overlooking minor offenses (Prov. 19:11); discussing personal offenses that are too serious to overlook, which involves confession, confrontation, and forgiveness (Matt. 5:23-24; 18:15); and negotiating substantive issues (Phil. 2:3-4). If personal peacemaking does not solve the problem, we can ask others to help us through “assisted

peacemaking,” which may include mediation (Matt. 18:16), arbitration (1 Cor. 6:1-8), or formal church discipline (Matt. 18:17-20).

When a congregation is well trained in these concepts and skills, most conflicts between members, including marital conflicts, can be resolved through informal corrective discipline and without direct involvement by the leaders.<sup>5</sup> When members have problems, they can go to each other more easily and try to work them out themselves. Moreover, when they see someone else in a harmful situation, they will know that it is biblically appropriate to go and talk about it. This alone could prevent many divorces in the church. I have been involved in many divorces where a friend of the couple later told me, “I noticed that he was getting a little close to that woman at work. But I told myself it wasn’t any business of mine.” If you teach your people that God commands them to go to each other when they see someone falling into a sin, much questionable behavior could be confronted and changed before it causes great harm.

As you teach these concepts, remind your people that if they are unable to handle a conflict on their own, they should seek assistance. A woman named Patsy did this in a courageous way. She literally dragged a friend into my office. The friend, who was married, had confided in Patsy that she was getting involved with a man at work. When Patsy was unable to persuade her to break off the relationship, she asked the friend to come in and see me. When she refused, Patsy asked her out to lunch. As they walked past the building I was in, Patsy said, “I need to go in here.” When they got to the door outside my office and the other woman saw the sign, she balked. Patsy grabbed her by the arm and literally dragged her into my office. Holding tightly to her friend, she said, “Ken, we need to talk to you.” I was caught completely off guard, but God gave me the words to encourage this young woman to sit down and tell me what was happening. Although we had an awkward beginning, she seemed to realize that God was giving her a last chance to turn aside from an adulterous affair.

As a result of our conversation, she broke off the relationship and got into counseling with her husband. Years later they walked up to me in a church I was visiting to thank me again for being used by God at that critical time in their lives. With them were two youngsters, and the wife held a baby in her arms. She said, “These children are God’s reward to us for staying together.” I could only thank God for His goodness, which included a woman named Patsy who had the love and the guts to get involved in another person’s life at a critical moment.

So train your people to be peacemakers! They are your best workers. They mingle together in their homes, neighborhoods, Bible studies, and places of work; so they are often the first to see signs of conflicts and marital problems. If they have been taught how to respond to conflict biblically, they will often be able to deal with problems in their early stages, thus avoiding the need for formal church discipline and preserving precious relationships in your families and church.

## **ESTABLISH A POLICY ON DIVORCE**

One of the most valuable gifts a church can give to its people is clear biblical guidance on the nature and permanence of marriage. This will necessarily require developing a principled position on when a Christian may legitimately file for divorce. This is not an easy question to answer, which is why many sincere Christians differ in their response. Some believe that divorce is not permissible under any circumstances, while others would allow it if one partner no longer loves or finds fulfillment with the other. Personally, I am persuaded that there are at least two legitimate grounds for divorce. The first is adultery, when one spouse has been sexually unfaithful to the other (see Matt. 5:31-32). The second is desertion, when an unbelieving spouse physically leaves the marriage and indicates that he or she no longer wants to be part of the marriage (see 1 Cor. 7:15-16).

Abuse within a marriage presents special challenges. Referring to God’s love for justice and His concern for the oppressed, some people argue that abuse also constitutes grounds for divorce. I have not yet been persuaded of this argument, but I certainly recognize the need for the church to take serious measures to deal with abuse. This may involve formal church discipline and even calling in civil authorities to protect the family and force the abuser to face the seriousness of his sin.

Many books available today discuss various views on what constitutes grounds for divorce. Unfortunately, there is so much diversity on this issue that after much reading you can still be confused on what the Bible teaches. In the midst of these many conflicting books, I have found two resources that seem to be the most biblically rigorous and practical. One is Jay Adams’s book *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage*.<sup>6</sup> The other resource is a detailed study

done by Alfred Poirier called “What the Bible Says about Divorce and Remarriage.”<sup>7</sup> Both of these resources offer an excellent theological starting point from which a church can develop a policy on marriage and divorce.

## **SLOW THE DIVORCE DOWN**

If a couple in your church is headed toward divorce, you should try to slow the process down so you have time for informal corrective discipline. The first and most important step in this process is to pray for God’s intervention. Be specific and be biblical. For example, if the divorcing spouse is involved in an affair, you can draw on the book of Hosea as you pray: “Lord, put a hedge of thorns around this woman. Make her time with this other man distasteful to her.” You can also pray for God to act as David describes in Psalm 32: “Lord, make Your hand heavy upon her; sap her strength as in the heat of summer; let her bones ache. And every time she walks away from this man, make her feel dirty and unhappy.” That is not a hateful prayer; it is a loving prayer, because it is asking God to bring temporary consequences to her to save her from far more serious lifelong consequences.

Since many divorces arise impulsively or out of anger, delays will often work in favor of reconciliation. As people cool down, they may reconsider their decision, especially if there has not been a great deal of personal and legal damage already. If papers have not already been filed, you can appeal to the couple to hold off for a few days or weeks while they reconsider their actions. If papers have been filed, you can urge the other spouse to have his or her attorney slow the process down by not filing answers until the very end of the required time periods and using other legitimate delaying tactics. You do not want to push this too far or you may see an angry backlash from the divorcing party, but a good attorney can often buy several weeks or even months in which to find a way to turn the divorce around.

You should be aware that there is a potential downside to delaying the divorce process. If someone wants out of a marriage, he or she may feel guilty initially and as a result be more generous on property settlement, alimony, or child support. As time goes by, especially if he or she gets aggravated, some of that guilt may dissipate and his or her heart may harden and be less generous to the person he or she is divorcing. Therefore, you need to pray for wisdom about whether the delay is likely to bring about a turn toward reconciliation or cause a heart to be hardened.

During a delay you should reach out to the person who wants the divorce and try to minister to him or her personally and informally, which may often make formal discipline unnecessary. Your goal is for the person to realize that you really care about him or her and may be able to help with this crisis. If the person is not inclined to listen to you out of respect for your spiritual authority, you will need to appeal to his or her self-interest. There are several things you can say that may induce someone to talk with you. You can indicate a sincere interest for the person’s well-being, for the pain he or she must be going through, and for the effect this must be having on the children.

Sometimes I have persuaded someone to talk with me by saying something like this: “I know you are determined to go ahead with the divorce and don’t think there is any way your marriage can be saved. Even if that is true, I would appreciate your assistance in helping your husband understand where he blew it. He’s willing to continue counseling regardless of what you do. He wants to deal with the issues in his life that contributed to the breakdown of your marriage. He has told me a lot of things, but I know he can’t be entirely objective. I don’t know of anyone else who could tell me more accurately what he does wrong than you. Would you come in and visit with me about this? We don’t even have to talk about you. Just tell me where you think he needs to change.”

I have found that many people are willing to talk with me on this basis. As we talk, I am continually praying that God will build trust between us. After spending time getting the information about the spouse, I say, “I appreciate your coming in. You’ve given me a lot of helpful insights. I was pleased to see that some of the areas you mentioned are areas your husband has already described, and we are working on them.” In saying that, I want to show her there is hope that he will change. Then I will usually say gently, “You know, in most cases in which I get involved there are usually struggles on both sides. You are probably aware of some things you have done to contribute to this situation as well. You don’t have to talk about those things, but if you’d like to, I would be happy to listen.” She will usually hesitate, at which point I will say, “If your marriage ends, the chances are you’re going to be with someone else someday. If you don’t deal with your own attitudes and habits now, you will carry them into a future relationship. Maybe now is a good time to address them.”

I will also try to draw people into counseling by encouraging them to think about their children. I might be fairly frank and say, “What will you say to your daughter eighteen years from now when she asks, ‘Mom, your divorce threw my entire life upside down. Did you do it impulsively, or did you really try to save your marriage with Dad?’”

Depending on how much I think a person can take from me, I may paint some pretty vivid pictures of what will happen if the couple goes through with a divorce. By the very nature of sin—especially in these cases—people are looking straight down at their feet; they are not thinking even two inches ahead. They are only thinking about the pleasure or the relief that they want now, not about the long-term consequences of their choice. So one of your tasks is to lovingly ask questions that the Holy Spirit will echo in their minds after they leave your office. God willing, those echoes will eventually stimulate honest soul-searching and turn them back from a divorce.

## **BUILDING HOPE THROUGH CONFESSION**

Although divorce can be caused by many things, I have found that hopelessness is the factor that pushes people over the edge. They have often endured years of frustration and disappointment, hoping that things might somehow improve. Then one day something happens, and they just give up hope. “Why should I go on being miserable,” they say, “when there is no hope of things ever getting better?”

A hundred years ago people stayed in hopeless marriages out of commitment, but today even among Christians commitment is often not sufficient to see them through tough times. Therefore, one of the most important steps in turning a divorce around is to rebuild hope as quickly as possible. Think of giving hope as a doctor thinks of giving a transfusion to someone who has lost a great deal of blood: Unless this essential element is quickly restored, the patient (or the marriage) will die, and there will be nothing left to work on.

For example, assume you are working with a wife who has decided to leave her husband. When she told him, he was crushed. Trying to get her to change her mind, he said, “I know I haven’t been a very good husband. I’m really going to work hard to change. Please stay!”

The wife responded, “I’ve heard your promises before. You’ve said this again and again, but you never change. I’m not going to stay in a hopeless marriage the rest of my life.”

The husband’s bland confession indicates that he doesn’t have a clue as to how he needs to change. Empty promises and broad generalizations will not turn things around. The best way he can persuade her to give him another chance is to clearly demonstrate that he has truly come to grips with his sins and is earnest about making concrete changes to be the kind of husband God wants him to be.

This calls for serious and accelerated counseling. Through the prayerful application of God’s Word and the working of the Holy Spirit, the husband needs to see how his own selfish desires have ruled his heart and destroyed his marriage (see Matt. 15:19; Jas. 4:1-3). He needs to be truly broken before God. He needs to clearly identify his sinful desires and habit patterns—the self-centeredness, the idolatry, the pride—that contributed to the disintegration of their relationship. And he needs to do this without trying to diminish his guilt by focusing on all of the ways she contributed to their problems.

As he comes to grips with his own sin, you can help him plan how to confess them to his wife in a thorough and specific way. Make sure he understands that the purpose of his confession is not to manipulate her or force her to come back, although you pray together that God will use it to give her hope. He needs to confess because he is guilty and God commands it, regardless of how his wife responds. One way to do this is to use what I call the “Seven A’s of Confession”:

- Address everyone involved (Ps. 41:4; Luke 19:8).
- Avoid saying if, but, and maybe (Ps. 51).
- Admit specifically.
- Acknowledge the hurt (express sincere sorrow for the way you affected that person).
- Accept the consequences (Luke 15:19; Num. 5:5-7; Luke 19:8).
- Alter your behavior (Eph. 4:22-32).
- Ask for forgiveness (Gen. 50:17).

I would walk through each element of the confession with the husband, helping him prepare his confession and even role-playing it with him. If his heart has truly been broken before God, and if he has properly prepared, he will give a very different confession to his wife than he did before. Instead of the bland “I haven’t been a very good

husband,” he will say, “Connie, I’ve sinned against God and you. I haven’t lived up to the standard He gives me. He says I’m supposed to love you as Christ loved the church. I haven’t even come close to that. I’ve loved myself and my own desires far more than I’ve loved you or God. I’ve made my job into an idol, and I gave myself to it. I’ve neglected you, and I’ve broken my word again and again. I have not kept my vows to you. I have left you with the whole burden of raising the kids because I’m too selfish to turn off the TV and help. I can understand why you are so hurt and disappointed and why you feel like you can never be happy with me. I have wronged you in so many ways. . . .”

Time after time when I have been with a couple as the husband makes such a confession, I have sat and watched the color come back into the wife’s face. In many cases the cold, hopeless look is replaced by a softer expression. As she hears her husband’s words, the Holy Spirit uses them to put hope back into her heart. She begins to realize that something really is different and to believe that things might truly change.

As hope is rekindled, the disillusioned spouse will often be willing to postpone the divorce and to try to work out the problems that have plagued their marriage. This is seldom a quick process. The sinful desires and behavior patterns that led people to the point of divorce usually require weeks or months of counseling to understand and change. But at least they are moving in the right direction, and as God works through the church, most couples can experience a genuine reconciliation and steady improvement in their relationship.

## **THE DEVIL’S HANDBOOK ON DIVORCE**

Some people are so determined to get out of an unpleasant marriage that no amount of confession on their spouse’s side will slow them down. The divorcing spouse will often use one of several excuses to justify his or her decision to leave. I have heard the same excuses so often that I have wondered whether Satan has published a little booklet on how to justify a divorce. The excuses comprise what may be called a “popular divorce mythology.”<sup>8</sup> If you want to stop divorces, you need to be prepared to respond to these excuses.

*Myth #1:* When the love has gone out of a marriage, it’s better to get divorced. Although this is the world talking, Christians buy into it. Pastors must address this candidly and help couples see that the basis of marriage is not feelings of love. In God’s design, commitment is the basis of marriage, and love is the fruit.

*Myth #2:* It’s better for the children to go through a divorce than to live with parents who fight all the time. Although parents in a truly unhappy marriage may sincerely believe this, it is usually a superficial rationalization. One way to test their sincerity is to ask them to read Judith Wallerstein’s book, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*, which clearly articulates the many detrimental effects of divorce. If they still decide to go through with a divorce after reading these facts, they usually have to admit that it’s not the children they are looking out for, but their own selfish desires.

*Myth #3:* God led me to this divorce. I repeatedly hear people say, “I know the Bible teaches that divorce usually isn’t God’s will, but in this case God has given me a real peace that this is right.” This statement reveals an underlying problem in popular teachings on spiritual guidance, which elevate a sense of “inner peace” to such a level that it can overrule the clear teaching of Scripture itself. This view of guidance must be specifically exposed and refuted. One way to do so is to help people see that a sense of inner peace is not a conclusive sign of God’s approval. I usually ask people whether they think Jesus felt inner peace in the Garden of Gethsemane. If they try to say yes, I take them to the Gospels and help them see that in fact He was trembling with apprehension and agony. If He had walked out the other side of the garden, He might have had a great sense of relief at escaping from the crucifixion, but in doing so He would have been turning His back on God’s will for His life. In a similar way, divorce may promise immediate relief, but in the long run it too is usually contrary to the will of God.

*Myth #4:* Surely a loving God would not want someone to stay in such an unhappy situation. This myth is based on a humanistic presupposition that God’s purpose in life revolves around me and my happiness.<sup>9</sup> One way to expose it is to ask the counselee to unfold what it means to say, “A loving God wouldn’t want people to suffer this way.” Ask him to imagine that he has gone back in time two thousand years to the days of the persecuted church in Rome. He has been asked by a local church to go to the Colosseum and counsel the Christians who are about to be sent out to the lions. Would he really say to them, “Surely a loving God would not want Christians to suffer like this”? What would have happened to the early church if those Christians had believed such a notion? This kind of word picture will help your counselees begin to understand that they have believed a lie.



It is crucial to help suffering people to understand that God has something far more important in mind for His people than pleasant lives. His purpose is to conform us to the likeness of His Son (Rom. 8:28-29). The Bible teaches that this requires pruning, melting, and purifying to burn away the dross in our lives, and this is often done through the furnace of suffering. Take your counselee to Hebrews 11 or 1 Peter. The Bible contains many passages about the value and purpose of suffering. We can use those Scriptures to encourage people in their painful situations.

*Myth #5:* I know it's wrong, but God is forgiving. If you have done much pastoral counseling, you have heard this statement again and again. Its antidote is Deuteronomy 29:19-21, where Moses warns the Israelites sternly (my paraphrase), "If you presume that you can sin deliberately and then just say magic words and God will forgive you, how great will His wrath be upon you!" It is a frightful thing to sin deliberately. Point people to the example of King David, who willfully sinned against God. God forgave David, but He left consequences that would grieve David for the rest of his life. "The sword will never depart from your house" (2 Sam. 12:10, NIV). David's baby died, and his sons continued to kill each other. David had to bear that on his conscience to his dying day.

And how do people know that God will actually give them a repentant heart after they persist in willful disobedience (see Heb. 3:7-13; 12:16-17; Eph. 4:30; Prov. 28:14)? How can they be sure that God will not turn His face against them and remove His blessings from their lives (Heb. 10:31; 1 Pet. 3:7, 11-12)?

Another way to pierce this myth is to ask a counselee to imagine that she needs some cash. So she decides to rob a bank. She steals the money, then runs down the sidewalk and into an alley. It is clear that she has gotten away. Then she puts the money down and says, "God, I'm so sorry. It was wrong to rob that bank. Please forgive me. Thank You, Lord." Ask her if she thinks she could just pick up the money and walk away. Most people will admit that they could not. What is the evidence of genuine repentance? Undoing the harm of the original wrong by picking the money up and taking it back to the bank. In the same way, real repentance for a sinful divorce will not be empty words, but a turning around and going back to work things out.

These are only a few of the common excuses people hang onto as they try to justify a divorce. Each of them must be dealt with directly, lovingly, and biblically, so that true motives are revealed and people will turn back to the Lord for help.

## **MOVING TO FORMAL DISCIPLINE**

No matter how loving and persuasive you are, some people will ignore all informal efforts to help them reconcile with their spouses and turn away from unbiblical divorces. When this happens, it will be necessary to move from informal discipline to formal discipline (see Matt. 18:16-17).

Formal discipline can take different forms, depending on the polity of the specific church. In most cases when a person is seeking an unbiblical divorce, formal discipline will require that the spiritual leaders of the church, usually referred to as elders, warn the person that he will face formal discipline if he refuses to be reconciled to his spouse and continues to seek a divorce. This warning should be communicated in a loving yet firm way, preferably in person. If the person refuses to acknowledge or heed the warning, it may be repeated both verbally and in writing.<sup>10</sup>

In some cases the person will simply harden his or her heart and refuse any further communications with the church. But in many cases God will use this warning to shock the person into realizing how serious his or her actions are. When someone realizes that he or she may actually face formal discipline that could lead to being put out of the church, he or she will often pause the divorce process and reconsider the possibility of seeking marriage counseling to resolve the problems in his or her marriage. If so, the church should immediately offer encouragement, accountability, and whatever resources are needed to assist the couple in rebuilding their marriage.

## **SEEKING AND RESTORING A LOST SHEEP**

What can a church do if a member persists in pursuing a divorce and even leaves the church itself? The easy thing to do is to say, "Well, we tried" and to give up. But this is not the course that a true shepherd of the flock would take. As Jesus says in Matthew 18:12 (NIV), "What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?"

A church on the West Coast provided a superb example of how to go after a wandering sheep. Cindy (not her real name) had been a member of the church and had had an affair several months earlier. She left her husband and resigned her membership in the church. The church's bylaws did not allow it to continue with formal discipline, but the leaders encouraged the members of the church to continue reaching out to Cindy. When members saw her in the laundromat or the grocery store, they would approach her and say, "Cindy, it's so good to see you! I've been praying for you" or "I just want to give you a hug, Cindy. You know, it's not too late. We love you. Come back." Their loving attitude was clearly expressed, and they always said, "Come back. Repent."

After four months Cindy could not resist any longer. She went to the pastor and said, "My conscience is killing me! Is it too late to come back to the church?" He assured her that it was not. She ended the affair, and she and her husband went through counseling with the pastor and some elders, to confirm that she was genuinely repentant.

I was at the church the day they restored Cindy to membership. The pastor gave a beautiful introduction, saying, "Many of you have been praying for Cindy, and I'm delighted to tell you today that she is back with us. The elders and I have been talking with her for the last few weeks. Cindy has something that she wants to say now." The pastor had helped her write a very discreet statement. She did not specifically mention adultery because there were children in the congregation, but most people knew what had happened. She made a beautiful confession and thanked God for the love of that church—how they had not given up, how they had reached out to her. She thanked God for the way His love had brought her back through her brothers and sisters. She confessed her sin and recommitted herself to the Lord.

Then the pastor stood and said, "Cindy has been restored. The elders have accepted her confession, and she has been forgiven. She has been forgiven by us, and that means you also must forgive her. If any of you hold her at a distance or give her the cold shoulder, I will come and talk to you about your sin of unforgiveness." In this way the church leaders put the congregation on notice. That is what Paul wrote about in 2 Corinthians 2. He instructed the Corinthian church to reaffirm their love for the person who had been put out, "in order that Satan may not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes" (2 Cor. 2:8-11, NIV).

The pastor then prayed for Cindy. Before the period was on his "Amen," people were jumping up, running to the front of the sanctuary, and throwing their arms around Cindy. She was fully restored to her church family. This process was a vivid fulfillment of Jesus' teaching in Luke 15:4-7 (NIV): "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after that lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent."

This is the kind of Sunday when you want unbelievers to visit your church, so they can see the Gospel lived out before their very eyes!

## **GETTING YOUR HOUSE IN ORDER**

Church discipline can have major legal repercussions. If church leaders intervene in their members' lives and bring disciplinary matters before the congregation (as churches historically have done), a disgruntled member may try to sue the church for defamation, invasion of privacy, and infliction of emotional distress. A church can dramatically reduce its exposure to such actions if it gets its house in order from a legal perspective before discipline is carried out.

The most important thing to do from a legal perspective is to obtain "informed consent" from your congregation for your disciplinary practices. This requires that all members are fully informed about your disciplinary policies, and that they agree to submit to those policies.

The process of educating your congregation and obtaining informed consent is described in detail in *Managing Conflict in Your Church*, a resource that is available through Peacemaker® Ministries. The basic steps in the process include:

- Provide your members with thorough instruction on the biblical basis and process for corrective church discipline.

- Revise your bylaws and guidelines for church discipline to explicitly set forth your church's commitment to carry out church discipline. In particular, specify whether you will inform members of the problem, whether you will continue with the disciplinary process even if someone attempts to resign from the church, and whether you will share appropriate information with another church to which a person under discipline attempts to flee.<sup>11</sup>

- Gain support for and consent to these revisions through a careful educational process, open discussions, and congregational meetings.

- Inform all new members of your disciplinary commitments through a new members' class.

- Refresh the congregation's understanding of and commitment to these policies on an annual basis, possibly through a special Reconciliation Sunday, when the sermon and testimonies celebrate God's goodness to His people through the blessing of formative and corrective church discipline.

This process takes time and effort, but it can secure for the church the protection and freedom it needs to provide the redemptive discipline its members sometimes need. A church that has its house in order both biblically and legally will not have to look over its shoulder fearfully as it seeks to restore wandering sheep. Instead, it will be able to minister boldly and confidently as it works to restore broken relationships and guard its flock from divorce.

## **CHRISTIANS ARE LOOKING FOR DISCIPLINE**

Many church leaders are afraid that teaching explicitly about church discipline will scare potential members away from their church. I am convinced that just the opposite is true. I have talked to many believers who are deeply disappointed by their own church's lack of discipline, which sends the message to adults and children alike that obeying God is optional and up to the individual. Many of these disappointed people were looking around for a church that takes godliness seriously and loves its people enough to hold them accountable to God's Word.

Similarly, I have seen that when a church teaches and models biblical discipline in a principled and loving way, sincere believers respond with appreciation and respect for their leaders. This response is beautifully illustrated in a note a twelve-year-old boy wrote to his elders after he completed the church's membership class, which included detailed instruction on church discipline.

*Belonging to a church that practices discipline means a lot to me. It makes me feel secure that someone is caring and watching out for me and tries to keep me from going astray. Just the fact that my brother and I get into so much conflict makes me realize that a church with a lot of members is going to have conflicts, too. Whenever I resolve conflict with my brother, I feel so good that we are reuniting. In that sense I realize how vital church discipline is to the spiritual growth of the church and its members.*

It seems to me that this young boy had a more biblically faithful perspective on church discipline than many adult believers. Therefore, it is my earnest prayer that church leaders would do two simple things. First, that they would open their Bibles and study the many Scriptures cited in this chapter to see what God teaches us to do with regard to discipline. Second, that they would trust God and obey what He commands.

The obedient and loving exercise of church discipline in broken marriages can give couples the motivation and help they need to slow down, count the cost, remember God's promises, and look to Him and not to a judge to solve their marital problems. And no matter how dead their marriages seem to be, they can experience the wonderful truth that we serve a God who delights in bringing dead things back to life, for the benefit of His people and the glory and praise of His name!

1. The Barna Research Group, Ltd., August 6, 2001, *Survey on Divorce, Marriage, and Remarriage*.

Barna's survey says, "Born again Christians are just as likely to get divorced as are non-born again adults. Overall, 33% of all born again individuals who have been married have gone through a divorce, which is statistically identical to the 34% incidence among non-born again adults." (www.barna.org, survey on divorce, August 6, 2001).

However, that 33 percent includes a significant number who have come to faith, or have come to church for healing, after a divorce. The survey says nothing about whether born-again Christians are likely to get a divorce after they become born again. Nevertheless, the percentage is disturbingly high.

2. The problem of divorce and its impact on families in our society is staggering. We cannot begin to measure all its effects on our culture, but what we can measure is frightening. Judith Wallerstein's "Children of Divorce" study has shown that divorce is usually detrimental and often catastrophic for children. The impact can be seen in terms of behavior and academic problems, promiscuity, drug use, crime, and difficulty in forming lasting relationships. See *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A Twenty-Five Year Landmark Study* by Judith Wallerstein, Sandra Blakeslee, and Julia Lewis (Westport, CT: Hyperion Press, 2001). When pastors do not fight for marriages, the lambs almost always suffer.
3. Taken from Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001).
4. I say "generally forbidden" because there are limited circumstances in which it is appropriate to use physical means in self-defense or to resort to civil courts for redress (see, e.g., Rom. 13:1-6). For a more detailed discussion of the slippery slope and when is it appropriate to use a particular response to conflict, see *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*.
5. Peacemaker Ministries has developed Sunday school resources and small-group Bible studies to help you teach these principles to your congregation.
6. Jay Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 1980.
7. This study is available through Peacemaker Ministries at [www.HisPeace.org](http://www.HisPeace.org) or 800-711-7118.
8. R. C. Sproul does an excellent job of describing these myths in his book *The Intimate Marriage* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1986).
9. For an excellent discussion of this issue, see Gary Thomas's book, *Sacred Marriage: What If God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000).
10. For a more detailed discussion of how to carry out the disciplinary process, see *Managing Conflict in Your Church*, which is available through Peacemaker Ministries, [www.HisPeace.org](http://www.HisPeace.org). or 800-711-7118.
11. As is spelled out in detail in *Managing Conflict in Your Church*, all of these steps are consistent with Matthew 18:12-20 and are sometimes necessary to enlist the support needed to compel a fleeing member to repent and return to the church.