



HOW CHURCHES CAN PRESERVE AND HEAL MARRIAGES

By Ken Sande, President of RW360

During the last century, divorce in the United States increased over 400 percent. Tragically, the church has kept in step with the culture around us. A survey by George Barna revealed that the divorce rate among “born-again Christians” is virtually the same as non-Christians.¹

This is shocking news! Of all the people you would expect to be faithful to their vows and 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 in the same ways as those in the world are failing! The effects of this church-wide failure are enormous. Christian families are disintegrating before our 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.

It does not stop there, however. As Judith Wallerstein documents in her book, [*The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*](#), children of divorce are far more likely to struggle with behavior and academic problems, promiscuity, drug use, crime, and difficulty in forming lasting relationships. When pastors do not fight for marriages, the lambs often suffer the most.

Ministering to People in Divorce

¹ “Born again Christians who are not evangelical were indistinguishable from the national average on the matter of divorce: 33% have been married and divorced. The survey did not determine if the divorce occurred before or after the person had become born again. However, previous research by Barna has shown that less than two out of every ten people who accept Christ as their savior do so after their first marriage. In fact, when evangelicals and non-evangelical born again Christians are combined into an aggregate class of born-again adults, their divorce figure is statistically identical to that of non-born again adults: 32% versus 33%, respectively.” [New Marriage and Divorce Statistics Released](#) (March 31, 2008).

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 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: "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).

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.² 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. "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

² See model language in section B of RW360's [Relational Commitments](#).

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 (1 Cor. 15:58).

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 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 few sets of church bylaws that were not outdated in this area. As a result of this neglect, most churches are unnecessarily exposed to being sued when they carry out biblical pastoral care or exercise church discipline (see [Informed Consent: Legal Protection for Pastoral Ministry](#)).

One of the best ways to protect your church from legal liability in this area is to adopt the adapt RW360's model "[Relational Commitments](#)" to fit your church's theological convictions and to then use this document to communicate your pastoral policies and practices to your members.

Now is the time, before the storm erupts in your church, to bring your 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 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 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 to the Galatians, “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently” (Gal. 6:1). Jesus Himself lays out the general framework for corrective discipline in Matthew 18:12-20 in the parable of the lost sheep.

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. The second is to guard and preserve the honor of God. And the third purpose is to protect the purity of the church. As we will see, corrective discipline generally begins in private, but may involve as many people as are necessary to achieve repentance and restoration. The rest of this article will be devoted to discussing the exercise of corrective discipline.

Teach and Apply Biblical Peacemaking

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 (see [*The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*](#)).

When a congregation is well trained in basic peacemaking concepts and skills, most conflicts between members, including marital conflicts, can be resolved through informal corrective discipline and without direct involvement by the leaders. 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, many Christian leaders have concluded that ongoing, unrepentant physical, emotional, sexual or spiritual abuse is also a legitimate ground for divorce. Whether a church takes this view or not, it should 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 and articles available today discuss various views on what constitutes grounds for divorce. Therefore, church leaders have good resources they can study as they consider this important issue.

As a starting point in developing a policy for your church, the model language and helpful references provided in section B of RW360's [Relational Commitments](#).

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.

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 in 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. You can even appeal to them to help the other spouse better understand his/her own shortcomings.

I have found that many people are willing to talk with me on this last 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. And 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.

Before moving to formal discipline, I would also give the counsel found in the articles "Hope for Troubled Marriages" and "The Myths of Divorce."

Confront Domestic Abuse Immediately and Firmly

Many marriages are damaged by ongoing patterns of domestic abuse, which can be either emotional, physical or sexual. Church leaders should be especially alert to these dynamics -- I strongly recommend reading Darcy Strickland's excellent book, [*Is It Abuse? A Biblical Guide to Identifying Domestic Abuse and Helping Victims*](#). If such dynamics are present, immediate steps should be taken to move family members to safety and to enlist whatever resources are needed (including calling the police) to stop

the abuse and motivate the abuser to pursue rigorous counseling to change these patterns.

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.

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 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.

I know of one church that 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, "We love you, please come back."

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 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 by God and by us. 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).

The pastor then prayed for Cindy. Before he could say "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:

"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 clarify your pastoral ministry policies and practices and then obtain "informed consent" from your congregation for these practices. This requires that all members are fully informed about your pastoral policies, and that they agree to submit to those policies.

The process of educating your congregation and obtaining informed consent is described in the preface to RW360's model [Relational Commitments](#). The basic steps in the process include:

- Provide your members with thorough instruction on the biblical basis and process for formative and corrective church discipline.
- Revise your guidelines for church discipline to explicitly set forth your church's commitment to carry out church discipline. Your policy should 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.
- Gain support for and consent to these revisions through a careful educational process, open discussions, and congregational meetings.
- Inform all new members of your relational 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 fifteen-year-old girl named Lauren wrote to her elders after she 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 Lauren 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 regarding 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!

Endnotes

This article is based on the chapter entitled, "Church Discipline: God's Tool to Heal and Restore Marriages," written by Ken Sande. This chapter is included in the book *Pastoral Leadership for Manhood and Womanhood* (edited by Wayne Grudem and Dennis Rainey, Crossway Publishing, 2003).