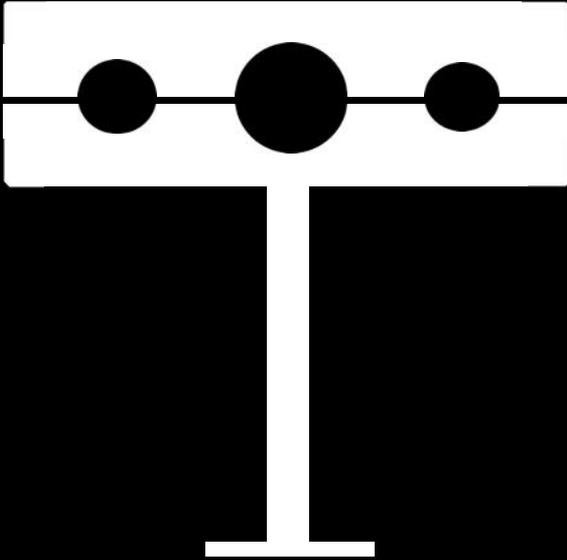


New Calvinism and Church Discipline



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Since I became a Christian in 1983, I have seen the church move back to the practice of church discipline in a big way. After years of seeing open sin tolerated in the church (and I was not in a liberal church), the discovery of church discipline was an epiphany for me some seven years after becoming a Christian. For those who may be in the same shoes I was in, an explanation: The Scriptures give specific instructions regarding those practicing blatant sin within the church and are obstinate about it. It is a step by step process to exhort the member to cease from the behavior. If he or she doesn't, the person is separated from the fellowship of believers until they repent. Once outside the blessings and protection of the church, God promises to correct (discipline) the person if he or she was actually a true believer to begin with (1 Corinthians, chapter 5).

It is my contention that "church discipline" is not a good label (*conflict resolution* would be better). The discipline is done by the Lord, not the church. There is also a discipline by God within the church (Heb 12:5-11), and self discipline that prevents the need for God's discipline (1Cor 11:30-32). The necessity of this is simple; outrageous behavior by believers is a distraction and hindrance to ministry within the church and to outsiders as well. Therefore, it does my heart good that church discipline is back. However, being the mortals that we are, we almost always find a way to make a controversy out of something good. Church discipline is no exception. We now have a buffet, a smorgasbord of church discipline models. By introduction, I will outline Three models that are a good representation of most.

1. Traditional Church Discipline (as normally surmised from Matt. 18):

First of all, I believe the focus of traditional church discipline is public sin of the baser sort. In verses I will cite later, the apostle Paul even seems to list them as an example of types. The purpose of traditional church discipline is not to fine tune the church the way teaching, counseling, and confrontation does. I see church discipline as more of a vessel used to keep general order in the church so other ministry may not be hindered; speaking in general terms, certainly finer points and benefits could be discussed.

The first step is to approach the sinning individual one-on-one via the person who has knowledge of the sin or who has been wronged in some way. If the individual is obstinate, you return with witnesses. If the individual still refuses to repent, you involve the whole church under the supervision of pastors (not specified in Scripture but a good idea for many reasons). If the person even refuses to be persuaded by the whole congregation, he or she is removed from membership for the purpose of the Lord's discipline. Unfortunately, many churches announce a decision to remove the member without involving the congregation in the third step. This clearly contradicts Scripture.

2. Redemptive Church Discipline and Counseling:

In this model, the steps work the same as the traditional model. However, if the person repents, this begins the next phase of the church discipline "process." The person is now required to enter counseling. This model integrates counseling and church discipline as one process. If the person refuses the counseling, he or she is not really repentant and the "process" goes to the next step. If the person enters formal counseling to "restore" him (Gal. 6:1,2), the discipline process ends when he/she is released from counseling. In other words, the person is "under" corrective (redemptive) church discipline until they are released from counseling.

The counseling is the correction part. Proponents of this model would scoff at the traditional view because it does not deal with the person's heart. Only outward repentance is required. The person is only giving lip service to avoid public humiliation (as if the Lord wouldn't use that to correct a person: 1Tim 5:20). Dropping the matter on the person's verbal repentance alone is just "chopping off daisies," and we don't want the daisies popping back up tomorrow. We need to supposedly get to the "root" of the problem.

The goal (supposedly), of church discipline is "real and lasting" change. On its face value, a very strong argument, if you approach the Scriptures using a *heart theology* hermeneutic, thus interpreting all of Scripture through that prism rather than drawing meaning from the plain sense of a particular text or combination of texts. The overall flavor of texts dealing with church discipline is the idea that the matter is dropped upon **verbal** repentance (Luke 17:3,4). Again, I think proponents of this model see church discipline as one of the tools used to fine tune the church and therefore error concerning the truth.

It reasons from the viewpoint of this model that all types of sin would be in play. In other words, you could be brought under church discipline for anything that is sin (just like counseling is for any kind of problem). If you carry that equation to various logical conclusions, the imagination goes wild, but this is in fact one of the tenants of this model.

3. Second Model of Redemptive Church Discipline:

This model encompasses all of model two, except there is no confrontation because true repentance is determined by those who are spiritual (pastors, counselors, etc.) during the process. If it is observed that you are in sin, any sin, you can be placed in this process. You are "under" church discipline until it is determined by examining counselors or elders that you have repented. This is accomplished by examination and observation over time. The steps are not confrontations to exhort repentance but warnings within the process that you are a step closer to *disfellowship* due to slackness or lack of change, or additional misbehaviors while in the process. Leaving the process without the blessings of church leaders who have not yet determined true repentance would usually result in *disfellowship* and treatment as an unbeliever. A decision to place a person into this process by church elders is usually based on the testimony of others because mere verbal repentance on the part of the sinner is never acceptable.

The Terminology

No matter which model is practiced, and these are by no means comprehensive, the usual description for all models in constitutions and bylaws is the process of "corrective church discipline." This description fits all three models and many more. Which one does your church practice? Are you sure?

Let me share some thoughts that come from my own personal study on church discipline.

1. The Bible states specific reasons for the initiation of the process toward discipline:

Sins Against Brothers

Though Matthew 18:15-20 is often cited as the general template for the so-called church discipline "process", I would argue that these are steps in regard to offenses between believers only. Verse 15 makes this abundantly clear: *"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."* Of course, it is argued that the earlier manuscripts do not include "against you", which allows the passage to address general sin. So, how do we know for sure what is correct? Are the earlier manuscripts the final word? I would say the context of both reveals the best interpretation. In all versions, forgiveness by the one who is to go to him alone is in view (Luke 17:3,4). Why would a brother who observed another in sin necessarily seek a personal apology (repentance)? Peter, who was there to hear the lesson first hand, seemed to draw this conclusion as well when he asked this interpretive question to Jesus: *"Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?'"* (Matthew 18:21).

So, what we have here is the steps to reconcile two brothers / sisters and I would argue nothing more. Corrective measures in regard to other types of sins will be addressed later. What unfolds in the rest of this passage is a process that protects the confronted as well as the confronter. In the final step the whole congregation is called on to exhort the offending brother, but also giving opportunity, if applicable, for the offending brother to tell his side of the story to the whole congregation in order to hold the offended party and witnesses accountable. In any regard, this process is intended to exhaust all possibilities before one is to be treated as an unbeliever. The success of one parishioner to bring the offender to his senses would quickly become common knowledge to the congregation, possibly after several attempts by many members. This process also allows for compensation if possible.

In conclusion, one more point can be added: Even in regard to personal offences, we are encouraged to cover a multitude of sins with love (1 Peter 4:8). If a Matthew 18 situation is petty, the hope is that the one or two witnesses brought into the situation could somehow rectify that reality.

False Teaching That Causes Division

1 Timothy 6:3-5; *If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain.*

2 John:10,11; *If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work.*

Titus 3:10; *Warn a divisive [other translations: "heretick"] person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him.*

Romans 16:17,18; *I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people.*

Note the procedure concerning heretics in the church that cause divisions: they are to be warned twice, then rejected (You can conclude from these verses that a divisive person is biblically synonymous with one who teaches false doctrine). This is a notably different procedure than Matthew 18. There is no exhortation, only warning. Apparently, this individual can be rejected without the involvement of the congregation. However, the rejection would almost certainly be announced to the congregation. It also stands to reason that the congregation as a whole would not be the judge of sound doctrine, but rather the leaders or elders.

Sinning Elders

1 Timothy 5:19; *Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning.*

In regard to elders, we see a different procedure than Matthew 18. If any member persuades the offender to repent, the matter is dropped in the first or second step. If it is established by two or three witnesses that an elder has sinned, he is to be rebuked before the congregation so that the other elders will fear.

Gross Immorality

1 Corinthians 5:1-13; *It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.*

Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth. I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. Expel the wicked man from among you.

Though confrontation is not specified, verse 4 speaks concerning the necessity of involving the whole congregation in the casting out of the believer (except for false teaching issues). This is absolutely critical. I think confrontation beforehand and opportunity for repentance can be assumed here. Verse 11 gives a good indication of what type of sins warrant the process. I do believe there is the liberty to apply some of the Matthew 18 process to what Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians, chapter 5 concerning gross public sin as a way to error on the side of mercy.

2. Confrontation:

Idleness: Confrontation, Not Discipline

2 Thessalonians 3:6-15 *In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat." We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat. And as for you, brothers, never tire of doing what is right. If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.*

I believe idleness falls under a category of confrontation apart from church discipline. Verse 14 says not to keep company with him, but is followed by instruction to admonish him as a brother as opposed to treating him as a tax collector or heathen. This would certainly differ from Matthew 18. Verse 10 seems to indicate a refusal to help the brother until he starts working; fellowship would create a legal loophole for him to get monetary help through the back door, so-to-speak. The brother is to be ostracized within the church except for exhortation concerning work. This of course could include formal counseling.

Broken Fellowship Between Parishioners

At Phillipi, there was a situation where two parties refused to reconcile. Paul calls on them to agree while also calling on the congregation to help them. Since this was a public letter, the incentive for these women to quickly reconcile before the congregation got involved would have been greatly enhanced. However, church discipline is in no way implicated here. Again, the Bible is very specific concerning the various types of situations that arise:

Philippians 4:2,3; *I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.*

3. Counseling and Restoration:

Galatians 6:1; *Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.*

Those who interpret Matthew 18 in regard to general sins will now interpret this verse as a proof text that restoration is part of the steps in Matthew 18. However, Jesus clearly establishes the purpose of the second step in Matthew 18:16, that "every word may be established." This does not seem consistent with restoring a fallen brother to spiritual health.

The Matthew 18 process is confrontational in nature. It seems to be primarily concerned with investigating a brother's willingness to renounce his behavior and seek forgiveness from the one he offended. Furthermore, there is really no hint of church discipline in the context of Galatians 6:1. To attribute this verse to church discipline is assumptive at best. As I said before, I believe the *discipline* of church discipline takes place outside of the church and is administered by God. We have specific instruction in the word for the purpose of ascertaining whether that should be done or not, and what types of situations should be applied. It is not discipline within the church and it is not counseling. However, correction from a wayward course and further instruction could, and often does result.

It sounds unspiritual, but the process is concerned with a change in behavior concerning blatant, abstinence sin. The repentant brother may seek additional help as a result of being confronted, but it is not a requirement to prevent further steps. A verbal commitment to cease the behavior is all that is required in most cases ("if he **says**" Luke 17:4). In all of the above verses, protracted counseling as a means of restoration to prevent further steps is nowhere to be found (as in redemptive church discipline). To further bolster this argument, keep in mind the qualifications for elders. They are not to be characterized by anger, excessive drinking, mishandling of finances or flirtations (1Tim. 3:1-12 Titus1:5-9). Paul says they can't be elders, he doesn't say to bring them up on church discipline. Obviously, consideration for eldership would be a mute point.

Ongoing struggles with besetting sins will always be among God's people. Some sort of discipline process that will eradicate the need for daily forgiveness is not what the Scriptures call for. In 1 Thessalonians 5:14, the apostle Paul mentions several types of sinning Christians and what they need, and it's not a one size fits all church discipline.

Lastly, let's keep in mind that the only explicit apostolic call for *disfellowship* is in 1 Corinthians, chapter 5 regarding gross immorality. The remainder seems to suggest a change in fellowship status that only focuses on the unrepentant sin. Treating someone as a tax collector and publican does not necessarily or explicitly equal *disfellowship*.

“Regardless of the chaos and controversy surrounding the revival of church discipline in reformed circles, getting it right is not the highest priority. Any ‘sacred’ doctrine that makes reformed a part of what it is, demands the higher priority. Trashed lives and crushed spirits are the unfortunate collateral damage in this all important practice of church discipline and its reformed accreditation.”

One day I was listening to a mp3 of a workshop from a pastor’s conference. Much to my surprise, the counselor teaching the workshop began to describe how he once considered placing a counselee into the church discipline process. I guess the counseling wasn’t going so well. This, by no means, is an isolated incident; the integration of formal and informal counseling into the church discipline process is the newest fad, primarily among reformed groups. It looks something like this:

You go to your counseling session and find two additional persons there you weren’t expecting to be present. They are the witnesses for the second step of church discipline. But what happened to the first step? Well, your counselor has been working with you for some time in regard to your problem and things aren’t getting resolved, so all that counts for the first step. You then say: "I could see that if we are talking about a real serious sin." Maybe, maybe not. Many church leaders now see church discipline as a tool for dealing with any sin or sin in general. Point in case: the church leadership that put 256 of their members in the church discipline process for non-attendance. But you say: "Doesn't the Bible say not to forsake the assembling together of each other?" Yes, it does. The Bible also says to obey every ordinance of man. Where does one draw the line here? Should we discipline members who drive over the speed limit?

let's let the Bible draw the line. But then you say: "I would be done with that counselor post haste!" Not so fast. If the subject leaves the church, he/she is leaving the church to flee church discipline. "What if they, at that time, agree to get serious about the ‘sin?’" If you are not too confused and surprised to think on your feet to that degree, it would depend on that churches view of what the process is.

Many would consider a positive outcome of the counseling, which is now part of the discipline process, as the determining factor as to when the "process" ends. You would not be free to leave that church until you were released from the counseling process.

Counselee's beware, even if you are meeting someone informally for breakfast to share a struggle in your life, that leader may see counseling and the first step of church discipline as one and the same. This is one of the many variables morphing out of *redemptive church discipline*, a *gospel sanctification* distinctive.

The folly can be seen in the above scenario when you consider the third step of the discipline process, "tell it to the Church." What if some in the congregation thought the subject had dealt with the problem but others didn't? Would you vote on it? What's next? Are we going to start bringing the deeply depressed up on church discipline? It wouldn't surprise me.

Because reformed evangelicals are so anxious to see a rebirth of church discipline, it seems the mentality is any discipline is good discipline. Regardless of the chaos and controversy surrounding the revival of church discipline in reformed circles, getting it right is not the highest priority. Any "sacred" doctrine that makes reformed a part of what it is, demands the higher priority. Trashed lives and crushed spirits are the unfortunate collateral damage in this all important practice of church discipline and its reformed accreditation.

As I have written before, the Bible is very specific concerning the purpose and process of church discipline. Christians now need to be totally aware of a church's discipline policy before they join, and it's possible implications to formal and informal counseling. As Christians become more privy to this trend, I believe the shunning of counsel will follow. Furthermore, continued abuse of church discipline will also lead to a reluctance by parishioners to submit themselves to church authority via membership, and unfortunately, one would understand why.

3 Should We Ever “Declare” Someone an Unbeliever?

When considering the topic of church discipline, excommunication is an element that should be examined closely from a biblical perspective. The only account we have, or cause for an expulsion from the assembly, is in 1 Corinthians 5:1-13. This is the only passage where expulsion is not in doubt, and the reason is gross immorality of the sexual kind. Paul says in no uncertain terms: “Shouldn’t you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?” And, “Expel the wicked man from among you.” Again, this is the only place where expulsion is explicitly instructed.

Also note: in all of the other sins confronted in the letter to the Corinthians, this is the only place any kind of disciplinary action is commanded! I think this is a point well worth mentioning. Paul motivates them throughout the letter to obey because of God’s promise of reward, loss of reward, judgment, the coming resurrection, etc., but chapter 5 is the only place where God’s people are commanded to take specific action to remove a parishioner from the fellowship. I believe this speaks volumes toward an argument that church discipline is reserved for sins of the baser sort, those “of a kind that does not occur even among pagans.” Likewise, Jonathan Edwards stating in his Yale commentary that expulsion is only for the “visibly wicked” sin of the “gross” sort, and “gross public sin” accompanied by a stiff-necked, unrepentant arrogance (volume 22, pages 69 and 78).

Even in this one explicit case where we have a man expelled from the congregation, Paul does not declare him to be an unbeliever, but rather assumes the opposite: “When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.” Bottom line: nowhere does the Bible say that a professing believer should ever be “declared” an unbeliever for any reason; to the contrary, Paul states the opposite by assuming that the expelled Corinthian was saved. It is also worth mentioning that Jesus assumes that the lost sheep that stray from the flock are in fact part of the flock and should be diligently sought after (Matt. 18:10-14). Perhaps the idea that we can do this (declare individuals to be unbelievers) is spawned by the belief that it is the church that actually does the disciplining when the term its self (“church discipline”) is a misnomer. In rare circumstance we expel, but it is the Lord that does the disciplining outside of the church: “What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church?”

In rare circumstance we expel, but it is the Lord that does the disciplining outside of the church: “What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside.” There is discipline by the Lord inside and outside of the church (Hebrews 12:5-11, 1Cor. 11:30), and *self* discipline (1Cor. 11:31-32), but there is no “church discipline” practiced by elders or the church (exception: 1Tim 5:19).

There is a fellow that is in the business of accusing the brethren of being unbelieving. It is the mode of operation practiced by Satan. Though we cannot find any reference to a duty of the church to “declare” someone an unbeliever, the Scriptures are replete with examples of Satan doing so. In fact, God calls him the “accuser of the brethren” (Rev. 12:10). And trust me, he (Satan) has plenty of reasons to bring the accusations as Paul did in regard to the Corinthian man, but in contrast, Paul assumed the opposite was true. We get a good picture of what I am saying in Zechariah 3:1-4;

“Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him. The LORD said to Satan, ‘The LORD rebuke you, Satan! The LORD, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you! Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?’ Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. The angel said to those who were standing before him, ‘Take off his filthy clothes.’ Then he said to Joshua, ‘See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you.’”

I might also add that in Matthew 13:24-30, Jesus said the following:

“Jesus told them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. “The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’ ‘An enemy did this,’ he replied. “The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’ ” ‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’ “

It is clear that the “servants” in this parable are unable to ascertain the true spiritual standing of anyone in the church. Christ makes it clear that they could be mistaken. It would follow then that we are in no better position to “declare” anyone an unbeliever. The whole notion is patently absurd, unless you are Satan.

Rush Limbaugh often says he knows liberals like every inch of his glorious naked body. I must confess, even with all of the study I have done on the *gospel driven life*, or *gospel driven sanctification*, I think I still know my body much better. New revelations concerning GDS are often so bizarre that it takes time to finally come to grips with the fact that its proponents actually advocate various elements. First, for those who are not familiar with GDS, here is a thumbnail of what it teaches:

The same gospel that saved us must be meditated upon every day in order to grow spiritually. The whole Bible is about the gospel and nothing else. According to John Piper: “That’s why the Bible is so big; there’s a gospel application to every event in life” (slight paraphrase-see video entitled “The Gospel in 6 Minutes” Sept. 12, 2007- Desiring God Ministries). Therefore, we meditate on the gospel through looking for it in the Scriptures, and as we meditate on the gospel as seen in the Scriptures, “we are changed from glory to glory,” or in other words: “Beholding as a way of becoming” (John Piper, “The Pleasures of God” pg 15). Also, according to John Piper, we should “never, never, never, never, never, never, never, think that the gospel saves us and then we move on to something else”(“The Gospel in 6 Minutes”). In fact, most proponents of GDS think that any “moving on to something else,” even if it falls under the category of discipleship, is a false gospel and you therefore forfeit both justification and sanctification. In other words, if you believe in synergistic sanctification- your lost.

So then, everything in the Bible must be seen in light of the gospel, and interpreted accordingly; marriage and divorce would not be an exception to this rule in any regard. In short, if you are a believing spouse, and your marriage doesn’t “look like the gospel” (the relationship between Christ and his bride, the church) you are free to divorce your spouse. Buckle-up, here is an article that advocates this GDS view:

Gospel Love, Marriage & Divorce

“Recently, I have been studying the Scriptures and paying closer attention to how it is most of us as Christians have understood love, marriage and divorce. Surprisingly, although we say we believe that the most intimate of marriage relationships is to be modeled by Christ and his relationship to the Church, we do not, in our theology, really seem to believe or practice that.

We seem to have allowed our understanding and definition of marriage be something that is not a reflection of Christ and the Church. Marriage, we are told, is between a man and a woman. Agreed. That is a principle definition of marriage that definitely stems from God's design of marriage back in the garden of Eden. However, that is only part of the formula for what constitutes a marriage. The most important ingredient that we as the Church have allowed our secular influences to omit is none other than God himself. Biblically, God is necessarily 1/3 of the relational equation in order for a marriage (or a church!) to be "joined together by God." Likewise, apostate churches that do not properly include God, are not recognized by God. By definition, a true marriage or Church must include the one true God as a common denominator.

As the Church, we have then failed to see the legacies of Divine love, marriage and divorce throughout the Scriptures. And because we have embraced a marital world-view that can be devoid of God, we have found ourselves struggling with the whole subsequent understanding of how to understand divorce.

In Scripture, where divorce is sanctioned by God, the aim is always redemptive in some sense. It is always gospel driven.

Abraham divorced his 2nd wife, Hagar, because of gospel unbelief (Genesis 21:10-12; Galatians 4:29, 30).

Ezra, the prophet, counseled the entire nation of Israel to divorce their foreign/unbelieving wives..."according to the Law" (Ezra 9, 10).

God gave Israel a certificate of divorce for her antinomian apostasy: gospel rejection (Jeremiah 3; John 15; Romans 11).

The men who divorced their wives in Malachi were rebuked for doing so due to the fact that their wives remained faithful to God. These men divorced their "believing" wives only to marry non-believers. This, God hated.

Paul exhorts the believers in Corinth who are still in a mixed marriage to "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers...come out from among them and be separate" (2 Corinthians 6:14-18).

Again, Christ divorced the church of Laodicea for its gospel rejection, for embracing an antinomian apostasy as well (Revelation 3).

The common denominator that is found amongst every single divorce that was sanctioned by God was a HEART denominator, a GOD denominator that was identified as not being existent in the marriage.

So when we read the words of Jesus, "Except for fornication, a man must not divorce his wife," we do not take his meaning of fornication (GK: pornea) as being literal. From the consistent revelation given elsewhere in Scripture, he was understandably speaking of a spiritual fornication: love for the world.

Once this God centered understanding of marriage and divorce is understood, we no longer have to struggle with the idea of "what kind of sins can qualify as "pornea"? We no longer have to tell married wives, "I know your husband beats you, occasionally, and perhaps he only beats your children. However, God never said it would be easy to be a follower of Jesus, so you need to understand that it is His will for you to remain married to your miserable and unbelieving husband (or apostate spouse)."

"I tell you the truth," Jesus said to them, "no one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life." Luke 18:29, 30."

Get the picture? The crux of the article is this excerpt: “In Scripture, where divorce is sanctioned by God, the aim is always redemptive in some sense. It is always gospel driven.” Basically, what it boils down to is this: in reformed circles where GDS is propagated, all bets are off; any marriage that doesn’t “look like the gospel” is possible fodder for divorce court. But who in the world would be the judge of that? No marriage is perfect; at what point would one decide that it is or isn’t? Well, welcome to the nebulous world that is GDS.

However, in this environment, any mixed marriage (believer and unbeliever) would certainly be doomed to failure, for no unbelieving spouse could live up to a picture of God’s marriage with the church. The believing spouse, once in such a church, will have a green light to divorce the second the ink is dry on the membership application. But here is a problem as well: now you have a situation where the marriage is only valid if a certain standard is met. Isn’t that the antithesis of the gospel? Well, welcome to the contradictory world that is also GDS. But you say, “hey Paul, at least the other spouse has to be an unbeliever. If your both saved; and in such a church, your safe, right?” Yes you are, if you both are proponents of GDS. Remember, more traditional views of the relationship between justification and sanctification are deemed to be a false gospel in GDS circles.

The proof is in the pudding. I predict that divorce will soon become rampant in reformed churches, if it isn’t already. I know of a few that actually pride themselves in “building marriages that look like the gospel.” Unfortunately, this is often done through divorce and remarriage, with God’s supposed stamp of approval. Some of these churches, even small ones of 200 or 300 members, average a divorce and remarriage to the tune of one per year. I also predict that as the word gets out, spouses will begin to go to these churches with the ill intent of getting a church-sanctioned divorce. Stay tuned.

5 Some Reformed Churches Now Offer Discipline Program for Husbands

The question posted by a friend on my blog awakened a reality I am familiar with concerning some reformed churches. The friend was participating in a women's Bible study and became surprised when the discussion turned to wives involving church elders in disputes with “disobedient” husbands. The hypothetical scenario presented in the question concerned a husband going to ball games instead of church and ignoring the wife's concerns accordingly. Could she then go to the church elders and have her husband brought up on church discipline? This wasn't my friend's question to me, this is the question she listened to at the study and wanted to know my thoughts.

Let me set the table here. More and more reformed churches are practicing what is known as *redemptive church discipline*. It goes along with making everything in the church and church life “redemptive.” In other words, **everything** is about the gospel and redemption. We must read everything in the Bible with a redemptive theme and interpret it accordingly. For example, all sermons must have a redemptive theme. Our life must also be ordered by the gospel instead of biblical precepts, etc., etc.

Here is how it works: A husband is going to football games instead of church. The wife confronts her husband about it (first step of Matthew 18, if your brother offends you, go to him alone). He does not repent. The wife then goes to the elders about the situation. The elders (probably two of them) then go and talk to the husband about the situation. This is not confrontational or instructive, the elders are there to determine the facts of the situation. If the elders confront the husband, he may only conform outwardly because the elders are involved and that wouldn't be true “heart change.”

The two elders then go to the other elders to decide whether the errant husband needs “redemptive church discipline.” If he does, a meeting is then set up with the husband. In the meeting he is informed that he is now “under church discipline.” Tag, you're it! In most cases, the husband is going to be bewildered because most reformed parishioners don't understand how this form of church discipline works and the reason for that is easy; if potential members had a complete understanding of how it works, there wouldn't be any members there.

But more to the point, here is how the “process” now proceeds: the husband is now under the first step of church discipline. If he verbally repents when meeting with the elders, that isn’t sufficient; he might be repenting to get out of the situation. What they are after is “real heart change.” The elders will now observe the errant husband over a period of time to determine true repentance. If he tries to take his family and leave during this time, he will be excommunicated from the fellowship and declared an unbeliever (see endnote 8). Lack of progress during the process will result in the elders moving the husband to the next step of discipline, which can also lead to excommunication if he reaches the third and final step. An example would be if the husband started to watch too much football on TV instead of helping around the house or leading the family in devotionals. This would be merely replacing one idol for another idol; and again, what they are after is true “redemption.” The gospel not only saves us, it must redeem us from the remnant of sin as well. Hence, *redemptive church discipline*. In many cases the husband will be expected to repent from a traditional view of sanctification and embrace *gospel sanctification* to be eligible for release (How could he really be changing without partaking in the *gospel-driven life?*).

As a former elder who has experienced the frustration of husbands who just don’t get it, including myself, this is a very attractive scenario. Husbands either shape up, or you can ship them out. **Any** sin is game for redemptive church discipline. It is a sure way of fine tuning the church body while keeping people in line and looking like a church that means serious business in regard to the gospel. If you have any sin issues in your church, it’s not going to be an issue for long, the elders have a license to clean house.

Furthermore, the word gets out to frustrated wives via “Bible studies” that there are churches out there that will deal with your husband one way or the other, unlike churches that turn a blind eye to “sin.” Though I have no direct knowledge of the latter unlike the above, I strongly suspect that some wives talk their husbands into going to certain churches for this reason and the husband follows as a dumb ox being led to the slaughter.

There is only one problem with all of this: it’s not biblical. If you are in a reformed church, you need to get on top of what kind of church discipline is being practiced.

The bottom line is this: church discipline is for sins of the baser sort, not silly husbands. Look at the qualifications for elders. The Holy Spirit assumes that some men in the church will struggle with anger, not ruling their home well, and even hanging out around the juice longer than they should. Do you know what that means? It means they can’t be elders, it doesn’t mean you place them under church discipline, especially unscriptural church

discipline.

My friend ended her inquisition with this comment: "It has always been my approach to guard my husband's honor." Sadly, that attitude is becoming a lost concept among reformed women. Have we really come to the point where that is not the first inclination among reformed women, but rather to find a way to have their husbands brought up on church discipline? Also, one might wonder if such a concept is even biblical. Ephesians 5:22-24 makes it clear that husbands enjoy a substantial degree of authority in their own homes in the same way that Christ is head over the church. In this same passage, elders are not mentioned anywhere.

For elders to have biblical premise in regard to this discussion would require rare, and severe circumstance.