

Intervening in Crisis Marriages

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The situation could be a shock to the church or it could be a shock to one of the members of the marriage. Either way, something has happened that is now life threatening for the relationship. Over the last year, I have faced more of these relationships than any other time in ministry and therefore have spent a significant amount of time thinking of strategies of intervention. What can a church do? Is church discipline the only option?¹

Before we get to some suggested steps, I'll attempt to define a crisis marriage.

Definition of a crisis marriage

I am not discussing a relationship that is having brush fires break out. The marriages I have in mind are full-blown wild fires. Divorce is threatened or papers have actually been filed. Violence has become public. An affair has been revealed. A struggle with a secret sin has become known. Therefore, the crisis marriage is a shock to you or a shock to one of the partners that is causing stress on the marriage so that the marriage is unraveling.

Motivations for getting involved

Because marriage represents Christ relationship to His Church it is worth intervening sacrificially. A lot is on the line here, like the name of our Lord. Not only that but also the health of children. They hear that the gospel is about love and forgiveness and grew up believing their parents actually believed these things but now fight. The consequence—children mock Christianity and end up cohabiting because they don't want the pain of a failed marriage. There are many other reasons. Therefore, the love of Christ constrains us... (2 Corinthians 5: 14).

Principles to help

Remember the advantages of having a one another culture in the church—when these crises happen it is much more natural to have the conversations and harder for the people involved to resist if there has been investment in relationship. Maybe the first thing you need to work on in the ministry is one anothering one another as a long-term solution to many soul care issues (see Romans 12: 4-21). Your appeal will be potent in the context of personal relationship.

Key scripture and key questions—Please consider how these questions and passages could be used with the couple. How could Philippians 2:3-14 change the way you are dealing with the relationship? How can our Lord's example of washing feet (John 13: 1-17) impact the way you relate to your spouse? What personal rights do you

¹ The assumption for this article is that we are dealing with people who claim to be Christians.

believe are being violated? What are the two or three big issues that are perpetually unresolved that have built barriers between you?

Offer hope –through scripture, through resources, through loving support. This doesn't just have to happen through the church leadership. All members of the body are responsible for other members of the body (Ephesians 4:3).

Ask them to stop whatever they are doing to handle it-stop talking to others, stop divorce proceedings. Stop adding fuel to the fire! Just stop.

Move towards through personal contact—you may need to go find the person (Matthew 18: 12-14). Make it as personal as possible. Face to face is best but also through email, text and phone messages. I'm lovingly persistent. The biblical thinking here is that God in Christ moved toward us even while we were still rebels.

Offer alternatives like mediation and other resources. Biblical mediations are ideal for crisis marriages especially if the couple will not do more long-term marriage counseling. See my article, "The Beauty of Mediation as a Ministry Tool" (biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2017/02/08/the-beauty-of-mediation-as-a-ministry-tool).

Listening equally to both sides if they will even talk with you. Build a loving, hope filled, relationship with both and be very careful in taking a side on an issue that is dividing the couple. I am not talking about clear sin issues but issues they have fought over like the cleanliness of the house or how often they should have sex. There are always two sides (Proverbs 18: 17)! If you take a side on an issue you just positioned yourself with one spouse versus the other. Objective neutrality sets you up to minister to all involved.

Give loving warning—For years I have been struck by John Bunyan's advice, "we woo and warn". I tell them what to expect in court and the results of divorce. I use two resources. The one is a secular article on the devastating effects of divorce on America. We have summarized it for our use and you can find it archived on the BCC site here _____.² I also use a great chapter from *Men Counseling Men*. Written by biblical counselor/lawyer Ed Wilde, it gives a realistic picture of divorce court. The purpose is to send a message that divorce court is worse than what you think and to give hope-filled alternatives.³ I also make clear that if they are claiming to be Christians they are violating I Corinthians 6 that admonishes brothers and sisters not to sue one another.

Negotiate for time. I ask, "How long have you been married?" Let's imagine he or she says, "ten years." I then say, "How long did it take for your marriage to get to this

² There was also a recent Fox News report on the effect of fatherless homes on children (Tucker Carlson, report "Men In America" March 9-20, 2018).

³ Wilde, Ed. "When Marriage Problems Become legal Problems." In *Men Counseling Men*, edited by John D. Street, pages 333-349. Eugene: Harvest House, 2013.

point?” He might say, “ten years.” I then say, “how about giving the Lord ten sessions of marriage counseling to see if He can breathe some hope back into your marriage?” If he says he can’t do that then I’ll say, “how about 8?”

More than a one-person job—get the body mobilized to listen, pray, plead with and warn. Crisis is always more than a one-person job.

Don’t forget the family-- The husband has left and the mom is depressed—who is feeding the kids and who is cleaning the house?

Finally, Church discipline—some churches think this is the first thing to do but please notice I have it last on my list. It is to be utilized when your brother “refuses to listen” (Matthew 18: 16-17). Threatening church discipline ought to be a last trigger pulled not the first shot fired.

Continuing the conversation

What have you found helpful when intervening in crisis marriages?

Word count: 1068

Target: People who offer care and people who train caregivers

Tags: conflict, marriage counseling, divorce, domestic violence

Summary: What can the church do when it becomes aware of a crisis marriage? Is threatening church discipline the only option? I hope not. Let’s explore some principles to follow that can help us when the wild fire breaks out.