



CAUTION:

Religion Can Hurt Your Marriage.

by Ron Benson

Hall of Famer Kirby Puckett died too soon. He was 44 years old. He had a massive stroke. Considered one of the greatest baseball players of all time, Puckett was always a little pudgy—around 220 pounds when he was playing—but managed to prove time and again that the excess pounds did not deter extraordinary skill.

Estimates of his retirement weight exceeded 300 pounds.

From the Associated Press: “Puckett’s post-retirement weight gain over the past decade concerned friends and family, who were saddened but not shocked by his stroke.”

What happened?

Puckett had many personal issues. Regarding weight, it seems

when the restrictions and requirements for baseball performance were lifted in retirement, a kind of backlash took hold.

What keeps us inside the lines?

When I try to diet, I agree to stay within the lines. There is a set of rules. They’re for my own good. I commit to follow them. Inevitably, I break them. I “cheat” when no one is looking, and often eat much

more than when I wasn't dieting. Dieters consistently gain back all or more of the weight they lose during a diet regimen. Another backlash.

What keeps us inside the lines?

Some statistics indicate that teens who take abstinence pledges are only 10% less likely to have sex before marriage than teens who did not pledge. And when they do, they are less likely to use any protection.

What Keeps Us Inside the Lines?

In a still-controversial study, The Barna Group reported that born again Christians are at least as likely as non-believers to divorce. Every year since, Barna's statistics have proved the point. In an article on the subject in *Marriage Partnership*, George Barna said, "[Divorce is] no longer the shocking reality that it was 30 or 40 years ago."¹

During those decades, divorce was taboo in Christian circles. There was a stigma associated with the decision. Today, the lid on marriage has been removed, and divorce is a problem for the church. Is this legalistic backlash?

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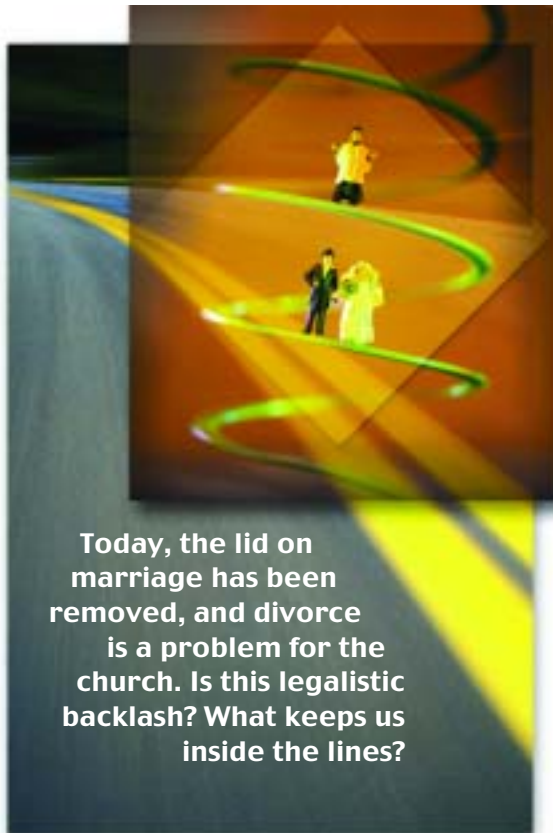
Is divorce the problem? Or is marriage the problem?

Marriages within one Christian group—a movement determined to reform oppressive practices which had crept in over the years—experienced a dramatic reversal of their legalistic tendencies. As a result, married couples were set free from the bondage of law—rules that drew the lines tighter than the Bible. But along with the freedom came a realization that, for many couples, their marriages had been held together by the boundaries of legalism, not by their careful attention to the relationship of marriage. For some, divorces were the result.

God hates divorce. But what is the biblical way to avoid it? Do we maintain the sanctity of marriage by stigmatizing divorce? Do we deter the problem by narrowing

the Bible's teaching to fit careful legalistic proscriptions? In our zeal to protect marriage from divorce do we draw new, more stringent lines?

The Bible says that divorce is a line that should not be crossed, with possible exceptions, depend-



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A Petri-dish Example

The Community Chapel and Bible Training Center, a church that has since disintegrated, serves as a remarkable, but painful "Petri-dish" experiment in legalistic marriage. Pastor Don Barnett led this congregation in the 1970s and '80s, establishing a tight, controlled atmosphere which was extremely attractive to people looking for stability. The church in Burien, Washington (near Seattle), grew to over 3,000 active and loyal participants. Even today, people who were damaged by the church and its teachings comment on the way God seemed to be alive in the church. Mark Blackburn, a former

deacon, describes the attraction: "The worship services were far and away the most moving, beautiful, powerful services I had ever seen, and remain so until today."

"I was a deacon at the CCBTC in Kirkland, Washington, the largest satellite church to the 'mother' church in Burien, Washington (25 miles away). Ours was the largest branch church of what nearly became a denomination."

Mark's marriage ended, the casualty of a law-and-power structure gone to extremes. It is estimated by journalists and many former attendees that Mark and his wife were just one of over 1,000 divorces that were the result of twisted legalism.

The tale is sordid, and tough to tell briefly, so I advise curious readers to "Google" for details. Here are the basics, according to Mark, who was gracious to share his story with me, in addition to newspaper clippings and survivors' web bulletin boards.

Community Chapel, and especially the authoritarian Pastor Barnett, believed it had an edge on the truth. The group saw itself as a remnant of God's chosen people. The followers wanted to maintain a significant distance from the world and its corruption, so members were strongly discouraged from having or watching TVs, or even reading newspapers. They established a Christian school and made it clear to parents that this was the only place for a child to learn the truth. They started a Bible college for the same purpose. The church advocated an isolation from culture that "protected" the flock.

The Chapel required strict adherence to its rules and regulations, which included a limiting dress code, heavy involvement in church activities, substantial financial obligations and coming under "counseling" by leaders in the church. Non-compliant members were threatened with strict discipline and excommunication.

Marriage was especially targeted with strident, but confusing boundaries. According to Mark, “CC was inconsistent. From the pulpit, they preached the Pauline ‘Husbands Love and Wives Submit.’ But in one-on-one counseling this was not upheld. I was told from the pulpit that as the ‘head’ of the wife I had the right to set the tone and direction for the family, but when I did, they condemned and corrected me.” Other elements of the marriage partnership (finances, sexuality, conflict) were controlled by strict rules.

Mark’s experience illustrates the way legalism can position a marriage for failure. By controlling marriage from the outside with discipline and rules, the inside of the relationship is left open to infection. When the external boundaries are removed, there’s not much hope for survival.

The Threat of Legalism to Relationships

Here are five ways the sledgehammer of legalism can harm and weaken a marriage:

Finances. One of the things most common in controlling and/or cultic churches is the influence of the church regarding members’ money. This is strategic for the organization because it takes income to drive a legalistic structure. Marriages often strain under the burden, money being frequently cited as the most serious problem between husbands and wives, in and out of the church.

Mark describes the “Chapel-induced poverty” that was a factor in his destructive marriage. He worked two jobs trying to provide. “Some years our total contributions [to the Chapel] exceeded our net taxable income.

The church leaders had nice incomes, but we worker-bees lived on a shoestring so we could ‘lay up treasures in heaven.’ It was fraud and bondage.”

The effect on his marriage was critical: “It emasculated me, making me feel inadequate to care for my family. And my wife greatly resent-

ed my apparent inability to support her to the degree she felt entitled.”

A church structure that makes excessive demands on the budgets of its adherents creates a snare for relationships.

Time. The use of time, as well as money, is a hallmark of control for legalistic groups. A church asking that more and more time be devoted to its ministries and programs can put a strain on the marriages of its volunteers.

Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton, in their book, *Toxic Faith*, provide a practical warning regarding toxic churches and the demands they make on time and energy: “People become so drained that they can’t think clearly. Their emotions distort. Overwhelmed religious addicts commonly suffer from deep depression, extreme anxiety and a general numbness. Activity takes precedence and dries their souls.”²

Mark agrees, based on his ex-

The drastic change sent the members of the church reeling. Relationships had been held together by religiously imposed laws which no longer existed. After years of church abuse, there was nothing left of these relationships to hold them together from the inside.

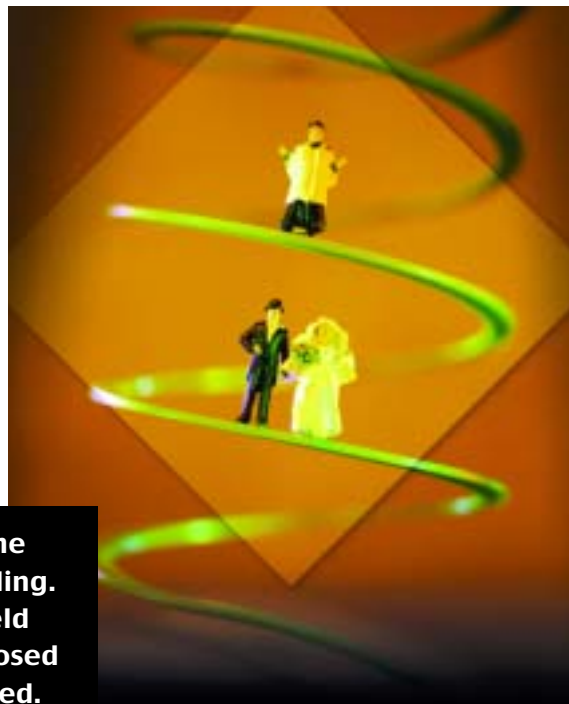
perience at Community Chapel: “I was subject to great sleep deprivation as I was working two jobs plus serving in a volunteer capacity as a deacon. From the pulpit we received constant orders of ever greater responsibility but had no energy or time to become so selfless.”

The resulting guilt, combined with an inner resentment, can cause a downward spiral which strains relationships to the breaking point.

Nature and Role of Marriage. When a church tells us what to do and what to think, it will begin to define all of our relationships. One of the ways legalistic churches control marriage is what Arterburn and

Felton describe as “heavenly match-making.”

This potentially lethal idea presumes that God has a “perfect mate” for each of us, and that the church will help us find that person. Carrying the concept to its logical conclusion, if I’ve married God’s one and only perfect mate for me, then I must stay with that person no matter what. I must put



up with all kinds of behavior, even abuse, for the sake of this union. I must not question the nature of the relationship or the church’s involvement in it.

I must accept this person, without complaint or desire to change, because I’ve been told and I believe they are God’s perfect choice for me. According to Arterburn and Felton, the damage done extends not only to the marriage relationship, but to a person’s trust in God:

“The perfect-mate belief has caused tremendous heartaches for many people. They search for the one person God is supposed to provide, and when they think they have found him or her, they expect marriage to be instant bliss. When nirvana does not arrive, the naïve believers move from a faith in a God who provides perfect

marriage partners to a belief in an impersonal God who does not care about them.”³

Hidden Conflict. If spouses are hand-picked by God and the church, who is to blame when relationships struggle? If God is to

blame, our faith is diminished. If the church is to blame, our allegiance to the church is faulty, something nearly impossible to admit when life itself is vested within the organization. That leaves a couple with only one option: They are damaged goods. The result is hidden conflict.

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Any marriage begins to show wear-and-tear over time. In a strict church environment, the normal struggles are made much more probable and severe by the legalistic demands of the organization. So where can a couple go for help if the conflict itself is viewed as a rebellious act of sin against God and the church?

In such religious environments, with perfectionistic expectations, couples with serious marriage struggles are often forced to take their problems underground. The truth about the relationship is never spoken, never admitted, always denied and submerged under a façade of cheerfulness and politeness masking as a healthy marriage.

This kind of thinking was rampant in Mark’s church. “The Chapel plainly taught that divorce was an unpardonable sin, and that anyone who divorced would be turned over to Satan for the destruction of their soul.”

Merely the stigma of divorce can create this kind of acidic spiritual chemistry. In church systems where divorced people are treated as prodigals, no one will want to admit that their marriage is in trouble. The conflict grows with-

out abatement or help until it is too late, and the subsequent divorce mandates an exit from the church. In cases where the church has been presented as the only or best representation of God on earth, divorce can also mean a complete loss of faith in God.

Externals over internals. Anytime law is used to control and manipulate, it robs a person of his or her opportunity to access the help of God from the inside out. Marriages that are held together by chains of rules and regulations imposed by a church will be threatened when those restrictions are removed, or even when a weak link is exposed. Such was the dramatic and exceptional case with Community Chapel. Eventually the pastor engaged in extra-marital affairs and justified them with “new revelation” which suddenly expunged rules from the organization which formerly had been inviolate.

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Legalism enforces obedience from the outside in. In a controlling and/or cultic environment, pressure is applied externally through unbiblical teaching, stern warnings and abusive discipline. There is often no teaching on the realities of marriage or the internal changes of heart that God will engage through the Holy Spirit. In such spiritually toxic atmospheres, honest questions regarding issues like sexuality, budgets and handling conflict are avoided to discourage independence. This results in couples who have no motivation or training that would help them stay together when artificially imposed laws are removed.

What God’s Grace Teaches Us

In Galatians 3 Paul writes that, “before this faith came,” the law held us prisoners, “put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.” Law was a tool in the hands of a loving God to drive us to

freedom in Christ. Paul continues, “Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law” (Galatians 3:25).

Biblically based marriage has boundaries; there is no such thing as “open marriage.” Staying inside the lines—in this case, the boundaries of the divine marriage covenant—is what God wants for us to do, and is implied in the definition of the relationship. Regulating these boundaries from the outside may work for awhile, but it is not a lasting solution. *So what works?*

What works is grace.

In Titus 2:11-14 Paul writes that grace teaches us to stay inside the lines: “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.”

After his divorce and the demise of the cult, Mark Blackburn discovered grace. “I am a 100 percent recipient and proponent of grace. The grace of God saves and sustains me, not following the rules of men. I am happy if my experience can help others.”

Legalism can kill a marriage. Ask Mark. When the boundaries are enforced by an organization from the outside in, danger lurks. When freedom is exercised in love, and when we live and grow in grace, the lines are healthy, affirming and strong. □

1. *Marriage Partnership*, Summer, 1997, “Don’t Believe the Divorce Statistics,” Jim Killam.

2. *Toxic Faith*, Arterburn and Felton, Shaw, 2001, p.149.

3. *Ibid*, p. 61

Ron Benson has been married to his wife, Linda, for 30 years. He plans on being married to her for 30 more—and not by force! They live in Royal Oak, Michigan, where Ron writes and Linda teaches. Ron loves to get hits on his website at www.ronbenson.net.