Counsel for the
Nearly and Newly Married

Leader’s Guide

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Chapter 1

Foundations for Premarital Counseling

Friends have been asking, “Have you built a house before?” You see, for the past six months we’ve been building a house; and my friends seem eager to know if we know what we are doing. How would you teach someone to build a house who has never built a house before or has built one and it didn’t turn out right?

Consider this: A couple are sitting in your office, and they’ve just announced that they are getting married and want you to marry them. Mike is 23, a college graduate, has an entry-level manager’s job, and seems a bit cocky. He does all the talking. Melanie is 20, has two years of college, is a secretary, and seems solicitous to please Mike and nervous with you.

How do you help them? They seem to think, at least according to Mike, that they already have their marriage half built and certainly all the plans in place. Both of them grew up in the church, and Melanie still attends, but Mike dropped out some time ago. The families each came from are active in the church, and Mike’s father holds some important leadership positions. You’ve already guessed Mike has some ideas that may have to be modified about arrangements for the wedding. Where do you take hold of their plans?

That is what this manual is all about—teaching people how to build a home when all they want from you is to get them to the door. Of course, many couples want much more than a wedding ceremony when they come to you as a pastor. Many of them want you to teach them how to build a beautiful Christian home. That’s part of the pastor’s dilemma—neither the pastor nor the couple know what to expect.

In this guide we are going to walk step-by-step through the ministry of premarital counseling and give you a guide to lead couples through their own home-planning process. We will try to make the guide adaptable enough that it will be usable for many different situations for the pastor and many different kinds of couples. For the Christian pastor some universals and some principles are applicable to many premarital counseling, wherever it is done. Actually, this guide is a companion resource to Covenant Marriage, which was first developed in 1987. We want to help you, as a pastor or family ministry leader, be better equipped to do Christian ministry with the couples who come to be married by you.

In this chapter and those that follow, we will look at some basic principles of premarital counseling and the Christian teachings on which the pastor or family life leader can base premarital guidance. In this chapter we will establish some foundational approaches to premarital counseling. In chapter 2, we will explore the biblical and theological meaning of marriage and families. We will view them as system networks which reach beyond the couple or the “nuclear family.” Chapter 3 addresses the range of issues which must be addressed if premarital counseling is to be well-rounded and encourage balanced married life. In chapter 4, we will explore a variety of ways premarital counseling may be done, some of which will be innovative. We will look at the wedding ceremony itself as an act of worship in chapter 5.

Chapter 6 will be a launchpad into the space of premarital counseling. With this chapter will come guidance for couples themselves in exploring the world of married life. With this guide we will be able to provide adventures into areas such as family of origin (the family in which a person grows up), commitment, self-esteem, intimacy, communication skills, conflict management, and growth issues. As you can see, we envision looking at premarital counseling in a multifaceted way. Let us turn now to uncover the foundations on which we will build.
The Foundations

Four foundation principles form the cornerstone of premarital counseling. They are connected to one another; and, thus, their order is not as important as the relationship they bear to one another.

Premarital Counseling Offers a Creative and Redemptive Ministry

In some respects weddings are more taxing on pastors than are funerals. The results of weddings often remain more visible with pastors having a more continuous relationship with the families involved. Of course, it varies case by case. However, this realization tends to underscore one of many reasons pastors need to be well trained in premarital counseling. Pastors are called on to excel in many different kinds of ministry. Among them premarital counseling and ministry are easy to neglect. Pastors can—and many need to—improve and grow in their premarital ministry, especially counseling the couple.

Premarital counseling offers unique opportunities for ministry which are not duplicated in any other transition of life. It is an invitation to help create and mold a relationship that blesses or curses those whose lives will be daily shaped by that relationship. Like the creative dimension of this ministry, the redemptive potential pushes out in several directions. Marriage is an occasion of redemptive ministry to the persons. At this important turning point their spiritual lives are available to a pastor. This is not a time for insensitively assaulting their spiritual needs; it is a time for examining and strengthening the spiritual resources they bring to marriage. We will come back to this at a later time. An opportunity is provided for redemptive ministry to the relationship they bring for God’s blessing in the wedding. Our whole effort in this guide will be to discover ways to enhance and “sanctify” the relationship brought to marriage.

Premarital counseling is not only a private issue between the pastor and the couple, although all appropriate confidences must be protected as sacred. The ministry to couples being married is also a church ministry; and in the person of the pastor, the whole church is, in a measure, involved with the ministry to the couple. Leaders, such as deacons, need to know and help communicate how the church ministers to couples being married through the counseling of the pastor and other services.

The preaching ministry offers an opportunity for the pastor to make premarital counseling available to those planning to marry. Sermons on the home and family create open doors for the church to be informed about how the pastor ministers for the church to couples being married. This can be done without boasting of the time spent or revealing confidences of those counseled, lest those planning to marry are repulsed by fear of exploitation. Preaching creates a climate in the church whereby the pastor becomes approachable and supportive for those initiating marriage plans.

Premarital counseling as a creative and redemptive ministry is a form of contracting. The pastor or family life leader contracts for the church that those who come to be married will be sensitively and spiritually cared for. Those who come to the pastor bring expectations to the experience, and those expectations are confirmed or changed as the counseling proceeds. The pastor has expectations of those who come to be married, and he must communicate clearly and compassionately those expectations as a contract is formed for the counseling and the wedding. This contracting becomes a relationship between the pastor and the couple. It can certainly symbolize, for the couple, their relationship to God and to the Christian community. To marry a couple is a sacred trust by the couple and by God who gives us access to the inner lives of persons on such occasions.

This first cornerstone marks a clear boundary by which pastors help couples build their first home together. It is a creative and redemptive ministry.

Premarital Counseling Is Christ Centered and Person Centered

The pastor, other minister, or family life leader knows where to start with Christ as the measure of all of life. While premarital counseling is not a monologue/preaching session, it is an occasion for searching with the couple for the Christian meaning in life and marriage. Even when counseling couples where one or both is not a Christian, the pastor has a companion Guide to bring to the counseling, and the couple will soon realize that another Presence is possible for them.

Additionally, the pastor’s whole frame of reference for premarital counseling is Christ centered. Professional counselors once thought they should approach counseling “value free.” That is, they should communicate no value preference to the persons counseled. Counseling has matured enough by this time that most responsible counseling professionals and therapists are willing to be aware of and acknowledge their value orientation.

Couples come to a Christian pastor to lead their marriage ritual for a reason. The pastor’s role carries

Foundations for Premarital Counseling
a message, and that message ought to be acknowledged by the pastor to the couple. “I am glad you’ve come to me as a pastor to plan your wedding and your marriage.” At this point the pastor is Christ’s representative to the couple, whatever their affiliation with the church. This acknowledgment by the pastor frees the pastor to address the spiritual dimensions of marriage with the couple. Christ-centered premarital counseling starts with who does the counseling and goes on to what is done in the counseling processes.

Premarital counseling is also person centered. Consider who these persons are who come to you and what they bring with them. Pastors often do not realize that much premarital counseling is done because the pastor has a need to be responsible with the couple being married more than the couple has a desire to be helped by the pastor. The pastor’s agenda is served by the counseling, and the couple give assent to secure the wedding services of the pastor. Wise is the pastor who knows and acknowledges this with the couple so that their concerns may also be addressed in the session.

Person-centered counseling allows the couple to voice their interests without fear of being rejected or summarily corrected. In person-centered counseling the pastor always needs to ask in his own heart, “Whose agenda is this?” The caring pastor will ensure that everyone’s agenda has an opportunity for consideration and discussion.

Person-centered counseling requires the ability to recognize the variety of needs among persons who come to be married. Because all of us develop somewhat set patterns, we are sometimes subject to seeing every couple who comes in the same way. When this happens, the pastor is likely to develop one set way of responding to and dealing with every couple.

Pastors who marry people over many years may see more variety of persons and needs than on any other occasion except Sunday morning worship. The persons who come as couples come from two different family systems, and some bring additional material from earlier relationships. Carefully unwrapping the needs, backgrounds, and interests of each person requires skill and sensitivity. Pastors need to take care not to tear the wrappings off against the will of the person in person-centered counseling. A good beginning point is to build authentic love and trust in the relationship with the couple.

Consider some of the variety of persons ministers meet in premarital counseling—couples who have known each other a short time, couples who have a pregnancy already begun, couples whose ages are separated, couples marrying against family wishes or permission, couples with one or both having been married before, couples with one or both widowed, couples who are in their middle or even early teens, couples who come from abusive or addictive families, couples in which one is a committed Christian and the other is not, couples in which each is deeply committed to her/his family faith and neither is willing to change. Obviously, the list has only begun with the above sketch.

For a wide range of reasons, any one of the conditions above may be something the couple may want to—and sometimes does so successfully—hide from the pastor for a long time or completely. In fact, individuals frequently keep such information from their marital partner while they think they know each other well. One of our goals in this guide is to help you help couples know who they are marrying as well as possible. Persons who marry illusions of the other person soon find themselves deep in disillusion.

Person-centered premarital counseling also gives attention to the kind of relationship which the couple presents when they come to be married. By the time a couple gets married, regardless of the length of their courtship, they have begun to develop their own rules of relationship. Some of these have come from the families in which they grew up, and others have come from their discoveries about each other. Among the more recognizable patterns are those relationships in which one partner uses anger to control and the other placates—all in the name of love.

This principle of premarital counseling that is both Christ centered and person centered will demonstrated more fully as we proceed through the guide.

Premarital Counseling Must Be Done with Integrity

Integrity requires the pastor or minister to be clear about what premarital counseling is. Is it preaching a sermon to an audience of two? Is it a teaching experience to communicate certain values and information to the couple marrying? Is it a counseling opportunity in which the psychological and emotional deficits of the marrying persons are to be discovered and repaired? Is it an orientation to Christian married life and a reflection on the relationship the couple has begun to construct for their future life together? This last option offers a most fruitful and realistic approach to the task of premarital counseling. It can be pursued and communicated with integrity by the pastor to the couple. Clarity for the pastor about what is being undertaken helps the couple become full partners in the adventure.
**Integrity to marriage itself must be a concern for the pastor and the couple.** If premarital counseling is Christ centered for the pastor, the concepts of marriage must be biblically based and clearly worked out in the mind and consciousness of the pastor as leader in the guidance. For this reason the next chapter of this guide will explore the biblical and theological meaning of marriage in an abbreviated form. It will be an occasion for “thinking through” marriage as an encouragement for each pastor/family life leader to work out one’s theology of marriage. The Covenant Marriage resource provides another excellent discussion of the nature of marriage.

**A third kind of integrity necessary for responsible pre-marital counseling concerns the integrity of the pastor.** Based on one’s understanding of marriage, a pastor must live by Christian convictions. This raises question about whom a pastor can willingly decide to marry. For example, if a pastor believes marriage cannot be scripturally dissolved by divorce, the pastor will need to find ways to communicate this to divorced persons who come, attempting to avoid rejection of them as persons.

Again, if a pastor requires a serious approach to marriage and weddings which involves a commitment to premarital counseling, the pastor will need to make decisions about those who will not or cannot meet that requirement. Pastors are regularly requested to marry persons in circumstances which violate their own sense of professional or Christian responsibility. The ability to say no to circumstances or requests without communicating rejection of the persons is a skill and a courage the pastor must possess.

Sometimes this may result in saying no to young couples for whom marriage is only an escape from the emotional poverty of the homes from which they come. These may be children of or related to influential members of the church. In such cases a pastor must certainly be aware of and prepared for the systemic implications of one’s decisions. The pastor may need to explain the concerns to the larger family as well as the couple. Couples often generate a greater resolve to achieve a higher degree of commitment because a caring pastor is faithful to them in setting limits of marriage possibilities.

Few occasions of ministry impose as many efforts for the pastor to compromise integrity as in weddings and decisions about whom and how to perform weddings. Without being rigid and dictatorial, pastors do need to know and live with themselves and their own identity in decisions of marrying couples. Just as one would not expect a physician to violate good medical practice in order to appease a patient, a pastor must not violate responsible Christian ministry in order to placate a couple or their families.

**This leads to a fourth kind of integrity required in premarital counseling.** Because the pastor is a representative of the church and the Christian faith, integrity to those two concerns must also be exercised.

Integrity to the church involves such issues as the church’s being involved with decisions about supporting premarital counseling as part of its ministry. The pastor does not act alone or apart from the church when couples are being married. The larger system of the church is and should be involved. Where possible, church members should know who is being married both in the church and by the pastor. The pastor’s ministry is the church’s ministry.

Integrity to the church concerns what practices are allowed or approved in weddings. Pastors should lead churches to write policies that are applicable to all weddings so that such decisions are not the burden of the pastor alone. Decisions about appropriate music, what instrumentalists are required, and prohibitions against alcoholic beverages at receptions are but a few of the concerns which ought to be developed as standard policies. Such a set of policies can be handed to the couple, and they can know these are the standards of the church. Pastors should not have to practice in secret in serving the needs of marrying couples.

Integrity to the church assumes integrity to the Christian faith in premarital counseling practice. Pastors may be asked to use wedding ceremonies which are devoid of Christian understanding of marriage. On occasions pastors may even be asked to lie about whether a couple was married or what some of the circumstances of the marriage were. Certainly a pastor should keep appropriate confidences, but that does not require violating truth or honesty in the larger community of faith. Integrity runs in many directions when one begins to pursue its various courses, but it is a stopping place which helps build strong relationships for all concerned.

**Premarital Counseling Requires Pastoral Responsibility**

While this final corner of the premarital counseling survey seems to be on the same end as the previous boundary, I am locating it in the area of “duties.” That is, some responsibilities need to be addressed as premarital counseling is done.

One of these responsibilities is keeping records. In later chapters these records are described in more detail, but here I want to suggest a few kinds of records that can be helpful to everyone and how they may be secured. No one
would want to go to a physician who did not care enough to keep records. Pastors owe at least that much concern for those they marry.

Pastors and family life leaders can develop a basic personal information sheet the couple can be asked to complete. This record of family background, education, interests, how they met, etc. can be the basis for conversation with the couple. A form should be available for the couple to complete about the wedding they are planning. This offers an opportunity for discussion of the couple’s wedding plans and serves as a reminder for the pastor so details do not get lost from memory. Records of persons married, when, and where should be kept in short form for a pastor’s permanent life ministry file. Years later the information may become valuable.

Process records of conversations during premarital counseling sessions should probably not be made in front of the couple. Two concerns arise. First, the couple may feel attention is on the recording of material more than on the conversation with the pastor. Second, some couples will feel threatened by having their conversations and information written down in this way; and it may impede securing valuable information or conversation. Process notes can be taken quickly after the couple leaves and while the information is fresh in the pastor’s mind. These process notes should be kept in a place where they do not fall into unauthorized hands. Good records are essential to responsible ministry practice.

A second responsibility for the pastor is to find out who is getting married. Of course, I mean more than their names and addresses. Get them to tell you their story of meeting and significant times in their dating. Have them talk about their work and what they enjoy for recreation. Let them tell you about their childhood and what has impressed them along the way. Who were the important adults in their lives? This kind of getting acquainted, even with young people who have grown up in the church and whom you may know well, accomplishes two goals. First, it communicates real interest in them as individual persons; and second, it lets you see their lives through their eyes. Everyone has his or her own story to tell, and a pastor should hear the story of those he plans to marry.

Another responsibility pastors have is to meet the families couples bring with them to the marriage. The persons who appear in the pastor’s study have whole families in their heads and their experiences. The pastor can see these family members through the eyes of those marrying and learn much about what the partners bring to their marriage. Reflecting with marrying couples on what emotions each brings from their homes to their relationship is helpful. The more a pastor knows the families in each person, the better will be the comparisons with what the couples relate. The pastor can help them deal with their families where negotiation is needed.

A final task of pastoral responsibility is the discovery of the wider set of relationships the couple possesses as they come to marry. These wider relationships of work, social life, and friendships carry important information about the setting into which this marriage will be expected to grow. A pastor can help a couple reflect on the influence and the meaning of these relationships for their marriage. Couples who close themselves off from all other relationships can be damaged as much as couples who are too open to every outside influence.

A pastor or family life leader can use these cornerstones or foundation stones to mark the way to teach a couple to build a home. Within these boundaries couples can design their marriage home as best fits them, but the pastor must teach them how to fit life together.
When you marry a couple, where are you leading them? In fact, whose marriage is it? Does it belong solely to them, or does it also belong to God? What do you tell a couple to do with the families they leave for this marriage? In order to be Christian, do married life and partners have to become ideal? What does and what can a couple know when they marry? These are only a few of the questions a couple and a pastor face when it is time to marry.

In this chapter, I will give a basic sketch of a New Testament theology of marriage so we can see more clearly what couples do when they enter into a marriage. Each pastor must work out a marriage theology, under the Holy Spirit and with the Scriptures. Such a clear picture will be reflected in the way premarital counseling is done. A pastor may not say or review all marriage theology, but it will direct how the pastor guides the couple.

Two foundational statements shaping a biblical theology of marriage are found in Genesis 1–2. Genesis 1:26-28 describes how humanity was created as sexual beings (male and female) in the image of God. Genesis 2:18-25 records how God created marriage and companionship out of His human creation. The simplest and most comprehensive statement of marriage is found in the words, “And they shall become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24, NASB). In this chapter we are going to explore the meaning of “one flesh.” We will do it by examining some of the verbs in the creation accounts—“leave,” “cleave,” and “create.”

**Cleaving in a Covenant**

Marriages are made by “leaving” and “cleaving,” according to Genesis 2:24. Physically, a person leaves before the cleaving begins, but emotionally both can be done at the same time (if they really do happen). Here we will look at cleaving before leaving, so we can focus on the meaning of “one flesh.”

“One flesh” comes from cleaving in a covenant. In is more necessary than to in this covenant. The cleaving is to each other in the covenant if “one flesh” is to happen and develop. It is becoming “one flesh.” Both the Hebrew and the Greek words from which “cleaving” is translated mean “stuck to” or “glued.” Christian marriage has glue. Jesus picked up this Genesis phrase to express the ideal of marriage (see Matt. 19:1-10; Mark 10:1-9). “One flesh” means much more than a physical union or a sexual relationship. The Hebrew and Greek words for flesh (basar and sarx) have many intricate meanings in the Old and New Testaments. Flesh in the New Testament evolved to mean “the whole body or the whole person in . . . external physical existence.” As it is used in “one flesh,” it is a representation of the whole person, so that it “emphasizes . . . that the totality of personality and being is invested in the marriage relationship” and “is the basic description of the marriage relationship.” When Jesus used the phrase, as did the Genesis writer, He was declaring that a new being, a new unity, a new personality is created in marriage.

**“One Flesh” and Sexual Union**

Sexual union provides a symbol of the new unity and being, but the unity is far more. Paul referred to the symbolism of sexual union when he forbade sex with prostitutes and quoted the “one flesh” statement (see 1 Cor. 6:16). In other words, to have sex with a prostitute is to be false about “one flesh.” It is false because all the rest of the commitment that accompanies marriage is absent, and the covenant has no cleaving. Sexual union is but one expression of “one flesh.” In marriage as a covenant, many more commitments and expressions are
present. Couples who come for marriage counseling, like many other members of our society, will tend to think that "one flesh" refers solely to a sexual union.

**Christian Sexuality**

A theology of marriage leads directly to a theology of sexuality. The meaning of male and female together requires understanding. Sexuality is more than sex. Sexuality encompasses the whole personality of what it means to be male and female. No definitions of femininity and masculinity have found universal acceptance. Many definitions exist of what it is to be male or female. Couples can be helped to realize that males and females do approach many areas of life differently. One way is not always right and the other always wrong. God designed difference into marriage in creation so couples can complement each other.

Pastors can help couples know the difference between sexuality and a sexual relationship. Most marrying couples are so focused on the sexual relationship that they have never sorted out its meaning. Pastors need a clear concept of the sexual relationship meaning.

**Sex as Communication**

Four approaches have historically been taken in men and women having sex:

1. Traditional Roman Catholic theology says that the purpose of sex is procreation.
2. From ancient times, nearly every society has made sexual union commercial. From the beginning through prostitution and more recently through advertising, its purpose is commercial.
3. Related to the commercial approach but popularized by modern society, sexual union is viewed as primarily recreational, like tennis or golf.
4. Biblically, sexual intercourse and sexual behavior are communication and relational acts.

Sex as communication has the purpose of building a relationship and an intimacy. The biblical word for having sex is *know*. Persons not only reveal their bodies in sex, but they also reveal themselves, so that the Bible is accurate when it says to have sex is to "know" someone. Sex communicates the person and a commitment to be responsible to and for the other person. A woman and a man “cleave” to each other—are committed to each other.

With sex as communication, the crucial question is what a person says with sex. Just as we would not expect a person to use words to lie about one’s relationships, a Christian does not lie with sexual communication. Sex says one is committed and caring about one’s partner. Just as a person can say false or hurtful words, sex can be turned into selfishness, hurtfulness, or hate making instead of love making.

**The Creator’s Purpose**

The purposes of sex in Christian marriage are part of God’s creative intention for humanity. Sex expresses the goodness of creation and of God as Creator (see Gen. 1:31). Hence, the purpose of sex is to build and not to destroy human life and well-being. Sex is intended as a contributor to the creation of relationship established in marriage. Sex holds the potential for expressing life’s deepest love, agape. Out of coming together in love, the potential exists also for marriage partners to create new life out of their love, in the birth of children. Sex furnishes an attraction of male and female to each other. Yet sex does not comprise the whole of the “one flesh” relationship.

Two extremes can happen regarding sexuality in premarital counseling. Some pastors focus too soon and too much on sexual information for couples, and some pastors avoid this area entirely. A pastor needs to be comfortable but not curious in discussing the sexual dimension of life.

**Family Views of Sex**

A marrying person’s view of sex and sexuality will be shaped by the family of origin (the family in which a person grows up). Some families talk openly about sexual and more personal body concerns. Some have a positive attitude toward sex, but it is more private. Some families have a more ribald approach to sexuality, shocking and crudely explicit in conversation. For some families the subject is taboo or negative.

The couple marrying usually bring some combination of the above approaches. Persons who may see themselves as more sexually liberated and even active in dating circumstances may return to a more inhibited and negative approach to sex after marriage. A pastor can help a couple identify the messages about sex they received from their families. The messages will endow them and the pastor with some clues about how they will form their own philosophy and theology of sexuality in their marriage.
Developing Intimacy

Intimacy often gets defined only as sexual union. Intimacy is far wider and deeper than sex. The covenant marriage requires authentic intimacy. Indeed, it is possible to have sex without intimacy.

Besides physical intimacy, covenant marriage includes emotional intimacy, intellectual intimacy, avocational intimacy, spiritual intimacy, and social intimacy. Many persons come to marriage incapable of genuine intimacy, however torrid their courtship may have been. Intimacy is more than expressiveness; it is the ability to reveal one’s self and be close to another person.

“The man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed” (Gen. 2:25, NASB) furnishes more than a description of physical appearance. It suggests an inner ability to be transparent with each other and unfraid of what the other person will see. It is a guilt-free, shame-free existence and relationship. To be sure the couple was in a state of innocence in the garden of Eden, but in that condition the transparency of intimacy was possible. Persons who are capable of a genuine intimacy are able to allow others to see them as they really are, including other aspects than just physical. The “one flesh” ideal moves a couple toward intimacy in all areas of their lives. “One flesh” is the biblical phrase for authentic intimacy and union.

Families vary widely in the kinds and styles of intimacy they practice. Some families are physically affectionate and expressive. Some families are verbal in expressing and sharing feelings. Other families show their feelings by what members do for one another. Still other families are private about feelings. The emotional and intimacy training in which a person has developed determines much about how intimacy will be practiced in marriage. Courtship is often a poor indicator of how intimacy will be practiced in the marriage. A pastor can help a couple assess the intimacy strengths and potential weaknesses of the families from which they come. Helping them to reflect on intimacy patterns in the family of origin is important.

Covenant Marriage

We are now ready to look at marriage as a covenant called “one flesh.” God’s relationship with human beings is viewed as covenant throughout the Bible (see Gen. 9:9; Jer. 31:31). Sometimes God’s faithfulness in the covenant relationship is shown, and sometimes God’s people are shown breaking the covenant. God always makes the covenant (or biblically, “cuts” a covenant), and He keeps the covenant. A covenant with God is the commitment of God to the well-being and accompaniment of His people. On their part, it is a commitment to faithfulness in the will of God. These expectations make up a covenant.

Thus, marriage as a covenant has two basic components. Commitment and expectations are the material from which a covenant is created. Other qualities reside in a marriage covenant, such as love, trust, and hope; but the commitment and expectations build it.

Commitment

Commitment carries a person’s decision to remain in a relationship. Commitment ensures a relationship’s endurance beyond feelings or circumstances that may threaten it. In a marriage ceremony which I wrote several years ago, commitment is expressed in fidelity. It says, “Fidelity will carry them (the marrying couple) through the treacherous waters of disappointment and heartache; it will also carry them through the enticing green valleys of success and prosperity.” Commitment furnishes the core cable by which couples can span the gaps that occur between them in the ever-changing course of a marriage relationship. Commitment is the glue that keeps marriage partners “cleaving.”

Expectations

Expectations are a principal ingredient in any relationship. Every relationship has built-in expectations. I speak of a relationship as a contract because of the expectations. A covenant has this contract (set of expectations) inside of it. A major portion of premarital counseling concerns the expectations persons bring to their marriage. We will give major attention to these expectations as we develop the approach pastors can take.

Elsewhere I have formulated White’s Law of Happiness. It says simply, “One is happy to the degree one’s expectations are met or exceeded.” Joy and satisfaction in a covenant depend heavily on how or whether one meets expectations. Later in this book we will examine some implications and applications of this “law.” How well covenants work relates to the degree of expectation fulfillment. In covenant marriage major attention must be given both to fulfilling and to changing expectations.

“Cleaving” in a covenant is comprised of creating a “one flesh” marriage relationship. This relationship becomes a living system with a life of its own. Being married means giving attention to the life of the relationship. Like other living organisms, marriages can grow, can be injured, can be starved, can thrive, and can be killed.
Premarital counseling has as its goal the enhancement of the life of the marriage relationship. In Christian marriage, two persons, with the guidance of Christ, bring into being a unique and unifying pattern of relationships with which each can bless the other. This is “cleaving.”

**“Leaving” from a Lineage**

Leaving needs to come first if cleaving is to occur. Leaving tells us where we come to the marriage we are beginning. Leaving speaks of the family from which each person comes—“a man shall leave his father and his mother” (Gen. 2:24, NASB).

**When It’s Tough to Leave**

For some persons, leaving is as difficult (if not more so) than cleaving. How persons leave the family of origin determines much about the marriage they enter. Some depart, but they never really leave their original families. They are as tied and controlled by one or both of their parents as they were when they lived at home. Indeed, some are more controlled. A young widow in her forties said to me: “I liked your sermon. Tell my parents I know what I’m doing.” She had not left home.

A person may leave home but do it in such a way that is not a clean leaving. Many young people find leaving home so painful that the only way they can do it is by an angry or sudden break. In such cases uncut strings usually keep occupying energy and attention by the person and the family left. The persons leaving must keep proving (and announcing in various ways) that they have left or must physically abandon the family entirely.

**What is leaving?**

Leaving is a maturing process that has psychological, emotional, and spiritual aspects. When persons healthily leave, they are ready to be on their own and are able to take responsibility for their own life. These persons have separated themselves, as wholesome persons, from their families or origin. (This separating has different meanings in different cultures around the world.)

When persons have emotionally left home, they are no longer dependent on family members to meet their emotional needs. Not that they feel parents, brothers, sisters, and other family members have nothing to contribute; but the person is not dependent on them for emotional survival. As an adult a person has learned to establish other significant relationships and is self-assured enough to be able to survive without constant family nurture.

**Spiritual Leaving**

Spiritual leaving is as necessary as are the other kinds of leaving to the persons getting married. Spiritual leaving does not require the rejection of the faith in which a person has been reared or which Christian parents practice. Rather, spiritual leaving is the ability to be responsible for one’s own relationship to God and to forge one’s spiritual life under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, even if it differs from messages brought from home. An adult level of faith is necessary for a person to leave the original family spiritually. However, some adults believe they must smash the spiritual cradles that rocked them to prove they no longer need them. Such an approach leaves more of a ragged breaking with home than a mature leaving of home.

The task of leaving confronts every young adult person, not just those about to marry. Leaving is called “differentiating” in psychological studies. The process requires a person to be able to find one’s self and be comfortable about setting out on life’s journey alone or with persons of one’s own choosing. When leaving is wholesome, the young adult maintains appreciation for the family and the life one has been given without choice in the original family. Yet a person can have an objectivity about the weaknesses and scars one may bring to adulthood from the family. Premarital counseling can help marrying persons look at their path to leaving so that they can cleave in a more wholesome way.

**Leaving or Fleeing?**

Some who come to be married are not leaving but fleeing to another relationship as a substitute for the unsatisfactory family they knew at home. These persons will only trade one unsatisfactory relationship for another when they marry. Such persons usually possess little insight as to their inner motivations for marriage and will often vehemently deny any negatives to their proposed marriage. A pastor can serve as a gentle mirror for such persons so that they may get a glimpse of their inability to leave their family on their own. People who have problems leaving will often enmesh themselves in a controlling relationship in marriage. Their attempt is to make up for what they missed as children and young persons.

Premarital counseling offers couples an invitation to look as objectively as possible at the families from which they come. They can be invited to tell stories
of their families in order to reflect on family patterns and react to those patterns in conversation. In this way each can get better acquainted with the family of the other and with their own families. Every person comes to a marriage with a “lineage.” And both partners need to know as much as possible about that lineage. “Leaving” is a whole family affair. The family relationship that has been primary for marriage partners must become secondary. The relationship of the marriage becomes primary. Many families and extended families never understand and accept this need. Hence, they try to insist that the original family relationship remain primary. Such is the price and process of “leaving.”

Creating a Companionship

“It is not good that the man should be alone, I will make him a helper [suitable helper] fit for him” (Gen. 2:18, RSV). God created man and woman for each other so that they could share their lives. The couple’s task is to create their companionship. Out of the “leaving” and “cleaving” comes the companionship of the “one flesh” unity. Since we have already seen that marriage is a living relationship, we need to see what this living organism, created by the couple and in the will of God, can do.

Growing a Marriage

Living marriages can grow. In fact, premarital counseling is all about helping couples learn how to cultivate and nurture growth in their marriage. Partners contribute most to the growth of their marriage when they encourage the growth of their partners. As persons genuinely grow, their relationships also grow. Selfish growth is not genuine growth. “We are to grow up in all aspects into Him” (Eph. 4:15, NASB) as Christ’s followers. One of the best descriptions of love I know says, “Love is the overwhelming desire and the persistent effort of two people to create for each other the conditions in which each may become the person God intended.” In other words, real love creates growth.

Premarital and postmarital counseling is an excellent opportunity to help couples set goals of growth for themselves and their relationship. A relationship will not remain static. Couples must be intentional about the growth of their companionship if it is to occur.

Where Shall We Grow?

Areas where relationships can grow include knowing and understanding each other, communication, needs, values, interests, activities, vocations, and shared spiritual life. Companionship increases as couples improve their ability to know and accept each other, provided one or the other is not destructive in the way he or she relates. As partners take interest in each other’s concerns, they increase the range of potential companionship. Couples who do Bible study together can nurture each other in spiritual understanding, expand knowledge of values, and enjoy each other’s presence and ideas.

Almost any shared undertaking can create more companionship for a couple if it is entered with goodwill and appreciation for each other. Marriage relationships, like our bodies, must be nurtured and fed if they are to grow and become strong. In the sessions described later in this manual, we will look at some of the ways to care for and feed a relationship. Creating companionship is an art as well as a vocation.

Binding Up and Blending the Broken

Marriage in the Bible

The biblical ideal for marriage is clearly a lifelong, loving relationship for two people. Jesus expressed the ideal with “therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Mark 10:9, NRSV). These are His words of reply to a question about the legitimacy of divorce. The ideal and intention of God with regard to marriage is no divorce.

Yet provision was made from the time of the Mosaic law for human life to be less than the ideal (see Deut. 9:6). Moses, Jesus, and Paul all seemed to recognize that some provision must be made for human life which fails to meet the ideal. Matthew records two instances of attributing to Jesus provision for divorce in cases of adultery (see Matt. 6:32; 19:9). These are called “the exception clauses.” Paul accepted separation in case of spiritual incompatibility (see 1 Cor. 7:15). Thus, throughout the Bible, divorce is recognized as a necessary provision for human imperfection.

Divorce in Everyday Life

The divorce reality coincides with pastors’ and family experience. Divorces occur in marriages where least expected as well as where divorce is the accepted way of ending a marriage. Marriage as a living relationship always has the potential of dying or being killed. When marriage relationships die, the partners are faced with the question of what to do with their marriage relationship potential for the rest of their lives. Likewise, marriage partners whose mate dies must determine if they will seek another marriage partner. The human reality is that
persons with marriages broken by death or divorce will come to pastors for another marriage.

Binding up the broken and blending families is an inescapable challenge and increasingly frequent need for pastors. Every person who comes to be married brings some brokenness and imperfection as does the pastor. Some who come have been broken by a failed relationship, and some come with broken relationships. Marriage veterans, those who have been through a marriage and survived even though the marriage did not, present themselves to the church and the pastor for ministry and blessing in a coming marriage.

**What Should the Church Do?**

How can the church and the pastor be redemptive? In chapter 1, we alluded to the need for the pastor to work out how marriage ministry can be done with personal integrity. If a pastor is willing to minister to those who will come with broken marriage, even greater skill is necessary in premarital counseling.

When issues are still unresolved from a previous marriage or children from a previous marriage are involved, family blending is careful work. Many more areas of expectations must be explored, such as feelings about continuing financial obligations, parenting styles, children's feelings about the marriage, the role of the newcomer to the one-parent family, and extended family connections that may affect the family. For these concerns, a pastor must develop a relationship with those in counseling that both builds and rebuilds. Does Christ not also send us to “bind up the broken-hearted” (Isa. 61:1, NASB)?

**The Pastor's Privilege**

The tasks of becoming “one flesh” begin in the mind and the heart. “As he thinketh in his heart, so is he” (Prov. 23:7, KJV) was never truer than how marriage partners think about marriage. Everyone brings pictures of marriage to marriage. Those who hold them may presume they are the only pictures of marriage. They have never compared them with any others and have never asked if their pictures of marriage are Christian.

Premarital counseling involves helping people discover their mental pictures of marriage. They need to look at their pictures of “leaving,” “cleaving,” and “creating.” The pastor must have some clear pictures to share with couples who come so that they may be invited to build a better home. A pastor can carry some helpful marriage designs that marrying partners have never seen in their own experiences. In the next chapter we will see how the pastor can help couples draw the details of their marriage plans.

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3 Ibid.


6 White, The Art of Human Relations, 163.

7 Scripture quotations marked NRSV are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
Marriage is an area in which couples and a pastor share some common ground. Both the pastor and the couple want the marriage to succeed. That is a good affirmation for the pastor to give as premarital counseling begins. They may express differences of opinion about the viability of the marriage being undertaken. They may also disagree about how the marriage will best succeed. Yet means to the successful marriage guides the search. The goal of a successful marriage can be a good starting place.

In this chapter we will survey the range of issues available for premarital counseling. The goal will be to encourage both a balanced married life and a balanced approach to premarital counseling. To do this, a pastor needs a sensitivity to the comfort level of the couple coming to be married. Couples can be put at ease in the counseling sessions, and the pastor needs an awareness about which issues the couple or one of them becomes uncomfortable. A good opening question to the couple is, “How do you feel about coming to see me about getting married?” Important information is signaled by assessing the comfort level of the couple in the sessions.

The Balanced Approach

One goal of premarital counseling moves a couple toward a healthy balance among all of life’s concerns. To be sure, in Christian marriage as in all of life, seeking “first his kingdom and his righteousness” (Matt. 6:33, RSV) is basic. Yet, when the kingdom of God is being fully pursued, a person is open to all of life’s responsibilities and potentials.

A marrying couple should, of course, be encouraged to give attention to their spiritual lives. Their companion life must have ample space in which to grow. Their vocational lives will require appropriate attention and appreciation from each other. Their social life and avocational interests have a place in their planning, both in scheduling and in budget. Educational or skill development interests should not be neglected or ignored as couples arrange their living. Living arrangements of a house, apartment, or condominium occupy a significant place of attention as a couple marries. How a couple goes about allocating financial resources must also be a piece of the puzzle fitting together. These are not all the pieces of the puzzle, as we will review in this chapter; but, without a balance from each piece, the picture of a wholesome and complete marriage will have holes in it.

So much offers itself to be explored in premarital counseling that a pastor has almost unlimited fields to examine. For this reason a pastor needs discipline to stay in the discovery mode with a couple in the sessions. A “preaching mode” in premarital counseling will cut off the opportunity for discovery and become too narrow in the concerns pursued. Premarital counseling, like life itself, needs to exhibit a well-balanced approach that gives every concern an opportunity to be heard.

Contributions to Healthy Marriages

Dolores Curran has written two books and other materials based on her surveys of what makes a healthy family. She has found a number of streams that enrich the flow of marriage. These same streams, however, can poison and pollute as well as enrich a marriage. The aspects which contribute to marriage health can also infect with disease, depending on how married life is experienced and practiced. The sources surveyed in this chapter are not exhaustive, but they point to the main resources for building healthy marriages.
Family of Origin
A biblical description of the effect of families of origin (those in which persons grow up) says, “The Fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge” (Jer. 31:29, RSV). Families, especially parents, powerfully shape children who grow up in them. Nothing contributes more to healthy married life than growing up in a home where parents are emotionally and spiritually mature and strong. Children use their family members as mirrors by which to decide what they ought to be and ought to look like to others. These reflecting relationships create self-images and relationship patterns which last an entire lifetime.

Every family develops feeling patterns of which members are unaware. Some create feeling patterns of warmth and intimacy, with positive regard for others. Some create feeling patterns of feeling badly about themselves or how they are treated by others. Negative patterns will continue into marriages of children. Pastors do well to explore lightly the feeling patterns of marrying couples so they will begin to be aware of the feeling habits they bring to marriage. Families of origin make many other contributions, such as values, to coming marriages. Families are systems in which each part affects every other part and the whole family.

Commitment
The depth of commitment in a relationship determines much of the strength of the relationship. In chapter 2, we looked at this basic requirement. Premarital counseling can be a time for reinforcing commitments necessary for good marriage. In The Art of Human Relations, I measured commitment and looked at some of the barriers, such as fears of permanency, the unknown, self, and requirements.3

Commitment must be pointed in two directions for a Christian marriage. First, commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord of life lays a foundation for other faithful relationships. Second, commitment to the well-being of the marriage partner focuses one’s energy on building that relationship. Couples can, and surprisingly often do, marry with one of the couple not really committed to the other person or the marriage. Commitment goes well beyond feelings of love which wax and wane from day to day. Commitment is the decision to give fidelity to this person and this relationship, regardless of circumstances.

Self-Esteem
The Bible gives many cautions to people not to “think of yourself” more highly than you ought to think” (Rom. 12:3, NRSV).4 The next phrase says to “think with sober judgment.” A good translation of the word for “sober judgment” is “accurately.” Many people err on the side of thinking inaccurately by thinking too little of themselves, just as those who seem to be too proud. Accurate self-esteem is a sticky wicket.

Self-esteem affects everything about marriage. Persons of good self-esteem can own their own strengths and affirm the strengths of their partners. Healthy self-esteem prevents partners from being too sensitive to each other in perceived criticisms. The ability to give and receive love depends on one’s level of self-esteem. Consideration for others grows out of a healthy view of one’s self. In the teaching sections we will identify some of the sources of good self-esteem; they are closely tied to a person’s experience in the family of origin.

Capacity for Intimacy
Intimacy was examined in chapter 2, but it is so necessary to healthy marriages that we must include it in our resources here. The realization of a “one flesh” relationship is impossible without the capacity for intimacy. As noted in chapter 2, intimacy includes but is far more than sexual intimacy.

Intimacy requires the courage of self-disclosure. Persons who can be transparent about themselves in their view of themselves, their weaknesses, their strengths, their hopes and fears, their doubts and beliefs have a capacity for intimacy. The other side of intimacy rests on two persons' ability to accept each other as each is. Intimacy can never occur unless two people are able to trust their inner selves to another person and know that trust will not be betrayed nor will they be rejected. Earlier we identified a number of different kinds of intimacy to which marrying couples can be led by caring premarital counseling. Couples need to know their capacity for intimacy will determine marital satisfaction.

Respect
Respect ties closely to intimacy. Yet respect is often neglected in premarital counseling because couples think that if they love each other respect is automatic. It is not. Respect or the lack of it is one of the most visible qualities
to the premarital counselor who has an eye to notice it.

For all of the discussions about a proper interpretation of Paul's church/marriage analogy in Ephesians 5:21-33, something important is often missed. Verse 21 says, “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (RSV). “Be subject” is a Greek verb that says one does this of one's own will, not in coercion or duty. “Being subject” is best translated as respect for one another as it is tied to “reverence for Christ.” Respect is the wholesome regard for another person as having worth and dignity.

Surprisingly, many families fail to demonstrate respect among members. Parents may require respect from children while not exhibiting respect toward the children or toward each other. Respect fosters high regard for the thoughts, opinions, desires, wishes, and preferences of another. Habits of disrespect include ridicule, ignoring, sarcasm, and labeling such as “dumb,” “stupid,” or “silly.” Pastors can best assess the respect factor of a relationship by observation and by questions about how respect was experienced in the families of origin. This leads us directly to the next contributor to a healthy marriage.

**Communication Skills**

Good communication skills have four outstanding qualities. They are positive, accurate, subjective, and reciprocal. Married couples often complain, “We just can’t communicate.” That usually is not true. They communicate well, but all of it is negative. They know what they don’t like about each other and what is wrong about each in the eyes of the other. You cannot not communicate. But you can communicate negatively and with attack. Positive communication builds; negative communication destroys.

Accurate communication requires saying what one means in a positive manner so that the meaning can be understood. Communication is sharing meaning. Thus, couples must learn from each other how to communicate to be best understood. Only a communication partner can tell you that.

Subjective communication may be a surprise. In most areas we prize objectivity. Subjective communication is the ability to own our statements as our opinions or positions. It is the willingness to say, “I think we need to do this,” or, “I feel that is too much,” or, “I am feeling down about what you’re saying.” Subjective communication is the honesty to use “I messages.” A person can be the world's greatest authority on how one experiences something. However, that does not become fact for a partner who experiences it differently. “I messages” leave room for the other person's reality. Opinions do not need to become fact, nor is one's experience the only reality.

Reciprocal communication paves a two-way street for messages to travel. In communication the ability to listen is more important than the ability to speak. Listening means checking out with the other person what you think you have heard so that your hearing can be accurate. Both giving and receiving feedback from one's partner is necessary for good communication. The simple ability to say, “This is what I heard you saying; is that right?” erases much miscommunication. Communication skills are a lifetime growth course.

**Conflict Management**

Each contributor to a healthy marriage seems to lead naturally into the next. Good communication skills are resources for conflict management. Every authentic relationship will develop some conflict during its life if it means anything to its partners. The relationship cycle which I developed in *The Art of Human Relations* helps readers see the naturalness of conflict in relationships. Conflict is normal to a relationship and should not be feared or denied.

Marriage partners can be helped to “make friends” of conflict and be ready to make it productive, rather than destructive, for their lives. A basic task in managing conflict resides in the maturity to express and handle anger. Premarital counseling can be especially helpful to Christian couples with regard to anger. Many have been taught or believe that anger is evil and, therefore, to be suppressed. When anger is suppressed, it rises to the surface in relationships in other forms. The forms it takes may be coldness, hurt, withdrawal, or unconscious sabotaging.

Good conflict management begins with the acknowledgment and ownership of anger. When both parties can own anger without accusing each other of “being mad,” they can find out what is threatening them in their relationship. When “broken contracts” can be identified, the couple is in a position to renegotiate a new relationship. Andrew Lester's *Coping with Your Anger* can be helpful for pastors and couples to understand the place and management of anger in life. As with communication skills, conflict management must be learned as a relationship develops and grows.

**Ability to Grow**

Marriages are healthier when both the marriage and the marriage partners are growing and interested in growing.
No person and no relationship ever remains the same. Change will occur in marriage as partners move through the various phases of life and their marriage moves through new phases. Openness to change and a desire to grow through the changes gives a couple a new marriage at many turns in life.

In premarital counseling a couple can be launched on an adventure of mutual growth. Couples who come with a static view of their relationship need help in welcoming the unfolding of their relationship to new growth opportunities. In the previous chapter we noted some of the growth opportunities; we will specify more of them in the teaching chapters. A marriage that does not grow is no less a tragedy than a child who cannot grow. The whole Christian life is one oriented toward the goal to “grow up in every way into him . . . into Christ” (Eph. 4:15, RSV).

Many factors can feed and nurture a marriage just as many assaults can destroy marriages. The task of premarital counseling is pointing couples to those Christian resources which will give marriage a healthy glow.

**Pictures We Bring to Marriage**

I often say to couples who come to be married, “Oh, I’m glad to know you brought your picture album with you.” The response usually is, “What album?” Then I say: “We’ve talked a little while, and I have discovered that each of you has some pictures in your mind of what your marriage ought to be like. I want us to look at as many of those pictures as we can and compare the pictures each of you brings.” The pictures are their conscious and unconscious expectations of what marriage should be. They are based on their experience of family of origin and their observations of married couples they know.

Premarital counseling is the process of getting couples to look at the pictures they bring. They can also exchange pictures of their expectations. Several pages of “pictures” need to be looked at with the couple so they can compare pictures they never knew they had. Comparing pictures also helps them to know that when they marry each of them will have pictures they’ve never looked at but will appear as they live in marriage. Some of the pages of pictures engaged couples can be encouraged to examine follow. These are areas of adjustment and renegotiation which they will encounter in their marriage.

**Money**

Money is not the most important concern in a marriage, but it is often the most troublesome. Nearly every couple will have differences in their approach to money. One will be more of a saver, and one will be more of a spender. For one, money is a source of security; for the other it is a means of acquisition. Couples need to be encouraged to look together at their pictures of the meaning of money.

An efficient exercise for getting a couple to compare their pictures of money is working with them to develop a beginning budget. It will help them to come to realities about their financial resources and desires. It will also help them reveal their real attitudes and expectations about money. The quicker they discover they have different mental pictures in the use of money, the sooner they can begin to negotiate their differences without surprise.

**Vocation**

More couples today come to marriage each having a vocation or a job than ever before. More marriage issues grow out of vocation today than ever before. If it is a two-career marriage, how schedules, work demands, and financial living contributions are met are all potential areas of negotiation. If the husband or wife or both are in school, the special demands of time and housekeeping chores confront the couple with choices. If only the husband works (or the wife), what are the attitudes of both about the wife (or the husband) not working? In a two-career marriage, what happens when or if one of them gets transferred? Also for a two-career couple, what if the wife would like to quit her job or the husband would like for her to be at home in a more traditional marriage? The pastor’s own feelings and preferences will affect how such premarital issues are approached.

The discovery of the pictures each brings to the marriage about vocations assists the couple to be more realistic about who these persons are who are marrying. Vocational discussion leads readily to the issues of roles within the home. Who does what and what is believed to be “appropriate” for male and female responsibilities? Many secret pictures about husband and wife roles can be developed by looking at vocation. The more shared image of vocational life a couple can negotiate, the greater will be their satisfaction.

**Family and In-laws**

To a bride who protests, “But I’m not marrying his family; I’m marrying him,” you can respond, “But you’re marrying into his family.” Some occasions have already arisen for pointing to the importance of families of origin. In chapter 2, we examined the issue of “leaving” one’s family to be married, including some of the deeper psychological
and emotional dimensions of leaving. Finding a comfortable relationship with one’s own family and the partner’s family is an early task in marriage.

One’s own family, of course, is the place where most of the pictures of marriage come from which are carried to one’s marriage. A child begins taking mental pictures at birth about what family and marriage are all about. Many are so indelibly impressed they can never be erased; some cannot even be identified. But they are there, and they make a difference in how a person approaches marriage.

Pictures which couples can compare about family and in-laws range from acceptable roles for husbands and wives to rituals of eating and personal cleanliness. Every couple brings two sets of pictures about family customs and how holidays and special events are celebrated. It often does not occur to persons when they marry that some routines can be done any other way than that which was practiced in their family. Some are offended when other customs are introduced or when some customs are not appreciated.

A couple must negotiate how they will relate to their families and what the boundaries will be after they are married. Each will need to renegotiate the relationship with one’s family that fits the needs of the marriage. These are sometimes difficult pictures to alter and to redesign.

**Children**

The issue of children naturally follows the concerns about extended family relations. If the couple is entering a first marriage for both, they come with some expectation “pictures” of whether and how many children they desire. Couples can usually compare these pictures easily; but if they cannot, the need for negotiation of shared expectations is high. Premarital counseling is not too early to encourage the couple to talk about their ideas of discipline and what is appropriate for father or mother to do in child rearing. The scenarios they envision may be different, each supposing the other agrees with one’s own view.

In cases in which one or both already have children and the marriage will make a blended family, that couple urgently needs to compare child-rearing pictures. Styles of discipline, values taught, homemaking habits, expressions of respect, and other types of communication leave room for different home-life approaches. The role a new parent assumes in an already established family must be carefully crafted. The premarital counselor deals with expensive pictures for the family when children are in view.

**Sex**

Pictures of sex in marriage need not be pornographic. If sex is viewed as a creation and a gift of God, positive and wholesome sketches can be offered. Those are the drawings we made in chapter 2 as we developed the outlines of a theology of sex and sexuality.

Few figures of family feelings must be treated as delicately as attitudes toward sex by the counseling pastor. Pastors can easily become uncomfortable and avoid a wholesome view of sex. Others may feel comfortable only when preaching a monologue that does not touch where the couple is. Using the resources in the *Couple’s Guide* will help the pastor discuss this area with the couple.

Whatever means is used to invite a couple to discuss the meaning of sexual relations, it should communicate comfort by the pastor and an acceptance of the couple. The discussion ought never appear to be an interrogation. A pastor can emphasize three points in premarital counseling about sex—a Christian attitude, physical information if needed, and openness to burdens of inhibition or guilt. A pastor moves into a parental role for many couples in sexual concerns. The pastor does best when resources for learning and growing about sex are offered. Couples are more likely to keep their pictures hidden in this area than in any other.

**Social Life and Avocations**

Social life usually changes after a couple marries. Even the people with whom they socialize may change but not always. Some partners imagine they will have the mate exclusively to themselves after marriage. Pictures of social life also need to be opened before the wedding.

Hobbies or recreational interest which a person may have sometimes become problems for couples after a marriage. The other partner may tolerate or even encourage the interest during courtship but may have an unspoken expectation that with the wedding the hobby or interest will cease. Engaged couples need to be able to show each other pictures of what they expect to do for recreation after they are married. Premarital counseling encourages exploring what people expect to do with their leisure time.

**Practice of Faith**

Even Christians can have different assumptions about how a married couple will practice their faith. How much time will be given to the life of the church? Will tithing be a part of the financial plans? Will the family say grace before meals, and who will say grace if it is said? Will the
couple share a devotional time? How regularly and faithfully will the couple share a devotional time? How regularly and faithfully will the couple attend worship and church activities? Persons who marry and who have different habits in the expression of their faiths will discover different pictures that may hold some surprises.

Premarital counseling is an opportunity to help a couple build their own committed practice of faith. If they can form their own symbols of the presence of Christ in their lives, they have taken a big step toward incorporating spiritual life in their marriage. The rituals or the symbols they select can have special meaning for them, such as holding hands as they say grace. The pictures of married life are not complete until the couple has a family portrait of their shared faith in Christ.

These pages of pictures do not exhaust the size of the expectation album persons bring to the altar when they marry. However, helping a couple turn these pages will alert them that many more pictures lie waiting to be shown to each other. Thus, when life’s circumstances call forth more pictures which are new to a partner, that person will not need to feel deceived or betrayed because a new expectation arrives. Rather, each will know that not all pictures have been seen, and some pictures will change as the marriage grows.

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4Scripture quotations marked NRSV are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
6Andrew Lester, Coping with Your Anger (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1983).
Admittedly I was once a premarital counseling skeptic. In my first pastorate I eagerly attempted to apply my newly acquired seminary counseling expertise by establishing elaborate premarital counseling requirements. My pastoral care professor had convinced me that I could make a real difference in the divorce rate by teaching young couples all they would need to know about marriage before they got tangled up in relationship difficulties. With confident idealism I approached my premarital counseling task by subjecting couples to what I believed they ought to know about marriage. I based my assumptions not only on what I learned in seminary but also upon my own experience as a married person.

Two areas drove me to premarital skepticism. First, in almost every case the couples seemed to float into my study believing that they had discovered, probably for the first time in the history of the world, the essence of love. Their typical response to my admonitions was a half smile, half smirk, and a knowing glance cast in the direction of their intended which said: “That will never happen to us. We love each other.” They simply could not really believe they would face the same problems which sometimes wrecked others’ relationships.

The other elements which caused me to doubt the effectiveness of premarital counseling was that some of the knots I had tied began to unravel. In spite of the care with which I had tried to prepare couples for marriage and in spite of their promises that they would come to counsel with me if they believed their marriage to be in trouble, some marriages ended in divorce.

Disillusioned, I continued to provide an abbreviated form of prenuptial preparation but with considerably fewer expectations. My frustration led me to examine what others were doing and to experiment with better approaches. I discovered that I had made three primary errors: I had tried to meet my need, not theirs. I had been force-feeding them information they could not process, and I had never clearly defined my objectives.

Whose Need Are We Trying to Meet?

Every pastor I know has more to do than any one individual can get done. For that reason we sometimes approach premarital counseling with mixed emotions. While we are usually genuinely happy for the couple about to be married, we sometimes view the counseling before the ceremony as an additional demand on an already full schedule. This reality will be discussed in greater length in the next chapter on innovative ways to provide counseling for the nearly and newly married.

The approach pastors usually take is to prepare a “canned” premarital presentation aimed at arming the couple to conquer the forces which might interfere with their wedded bliss. Premarital counseling becomes a kind of marriage boot camp—a crash course in everything they will need to know to survive. Traditionally, we have tried to teach them to fight fairly, to avoid in-law aggression, to win the battle of the budget, and to accept the fortification of faith. Perhaps we have even supplied intelligence information about the secrets of anatomy and physiology. The trouble with this approach is that it leaves the couple out. They are uninvolved in planning what they need and want from the counseling experience.

In this manual we have encouraged you to look at the “pictures” the couple brings with them to the counseling sessions. An approach cannot always be tailor-made for each couple, but we can listen to them just to make sure we have identified the needs to be met. We have also encouraged the counselor to develop an attitude of discovery in the counseling format.
Premarital Class or Premarital Counseling?

Those who counsel the nearly married often fail to consider the unique nature of engagement. The premarital state of romanticized bliss is unlike any other period in the family life cycle. For that reason couples about to be married may view as irrelevant to themselves discussions about the primary causes of marital dysfunction. Yet, out of concern for what we know they will face, we desperately attempt to prepare them for the inevitable. The problem is, we are trying to teach them what they are not ready to learn. The teachable moment has not yet arrived. Authorities are dubious, therefore, about the value of “teaching” a nearly married couple about marriage.

The approach to premarital counseling can be didactic or dynamic. We can instruct them as a professor might teach students in a classroom, or we can invite them to participate in a mutual learning experience. We can adopt a preaching mode or a discovery mode. The nature of counseling, however, is dynamic discovery.

What Are We Trying to Accomplish?

Too often pastoral counselors are unsure about what they are trying to do in meeting with the engaged couple. What are the expectations of the church? What does the Lord expect of us as we prepare to join two lives into one? Aside from their willingness to meet the premarital-counseling requirements of the pastor or church, what expectations do the engaged pair bring to the sessions? Knowing what we are attempting to accomplish is important. Unless we do, we may use a format which actually hinders what we want to do.

Four basic premarital counseling formats have developed. The first is a generalized educational approach such as those found in marriage and family classes in high schools and colleges. This format represents a shotgun approach to marriage preparation.

The second format is more specific—the instructional approach. In this format the teacher (counselor) attempts to focus on specific problem-causing issues in marriages and to offer help in formulating realistic expectations. This instructional format depends on information being shared from the counselor to the couple.

The third approach is therapeutic counseling. Relatively few pastors are qualified to provide therapy for troubled relationships. More often this format is offered by professional counselors who provide this service for engaged couples who have encountered serious relational difficulties.

The fourth premarital counseling format is called enrichment. As the name implies, with this format the counselor seeks to enrich the lives of the couple by developing the qualities or skills necessary to foster a happy, healthy, and balanced relationship. Enrichment is the approach we suggest in this resource. To review briefly the skills listed in the previous chapter, we contend that understanding the patterns of the family of origin, commitment, self-esteem, intimacy, respect, communication skills, conflict resolution skills, and growth are among the enriching ingredients in a Christian marriage. The enrichment format does not seek merely to convey information or advice as an instructor in a classroom might do. Rather, the counselor and the couple interact in a discovery process.

In the remainder of this chapter, we will consider three counseling options using the enrichment approach.

All Premarital Sessions

The first mention of premarital counseling as a significant service provided for the nearly married was made in the American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology in 1928. For the next two decades premarital counseling was chiefly provided by physicians during premarital examinations. In the 1950s, however, materials began to be prepared for use by pastors in providing counseling for those about to be married. The idea of premarital counseling caught on and eventually came to be expected of pastors by their congregations. A study conducted in 1989 revealed that 84 percent of Southern Baptist churches surveyed required premarital counseling. Of the churches or pastors requiring premarital counseling, only 7.1 percent required any additional postmarital sessions. By far the most common option used in Southern Baptist circles, then, provides that all counseling sessions be held prior to the wedding. This option has several advantages.

Advantages of the All Premarital Option

Greater acceptance—Since, by definition, premarital counseling happens before the wedding, this approach has generally been accepted as the norm. Of the three options, it can more nearly be called “traditional.” For this reason, even couples who may have some resistance to the idea of “counseling” usually accept it as “what we have to do to get married in the church.”

Relocation—Frequently couples relocate after their
wedding. Follow-up sessions are difficult if the bride and groom have moved.

**Concentrated focus** — The period prior to their wedding can never be duplicated in the lives of this particular couple. For a few months the focus of their entire lives is almost exclusively on each other. That concentrated focus makes the premarital period ideal for examining issues which affect their relationship.

**Hectic schedules** — Schedules tend to become more hectic after the wedding ceremony as the couple begins meeting the responsibilities as a new family. A bride or groom is sometimes in the process of finishing school or settling into a new job. Schedules are filled with other activities.

**Tendency to delay** — Unless the couple experiences a relational crisis, postponing counseling sessions after marriage frequently occurs because no one feels a sense of urgency to make or keep follow-up appointments.

**Opportunity for spiritual input** — Still another advantage of premarital counseling is the possibility that in the anticipation of a new level of relating on a human level, the couple can be brought to a new level of commitment to God on a spiritual level.

**Chance to prevent a bad marriage** — Finally, while most couples are resolute in their determination to marry, a few will have inner reservations about proceeding with marriage plans. Occasionally, a couple will actually decide not to marry as the result of the premarital counseling they receive. While the goal of premarital counseling is obviously not to get couples to call off their wedding plans, deciding that they are not right for each other is a decision faced better by the prospective bride and groom before the wedding than after!

**Disadvantages to the All Premarital Option**

In spite of the advantages listed, the disadvantages must also be considered.

**Lack of objectivity** — Although the premarital period is one of intense focus on the approaching marriage, it is also such a highly romanticized time that objectivity by the couple is difficult to attain. Often the couple is caught up in a fairyland mentality in which the only fitting assumption is “and they lived happily ever after.”

**Inexperience with problems** — The “teachable moment” may not yet have arrived in premarital counseling. If the educator who quipped, “People think only when they are confronted with a problem,” was correct, couples are not able to think seriously about solutions to relationship problems until the problems confront them.

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All Postmarital Counseling

Another counseling option is to offer counseling only after the wedding ceremony. As with the all-premarital counseling option, certain advantages follow.

**Advantages of All Postmarital Sessions**

**Realization of problems** — Marriage and family therapists do not completely agree at what point a couple comes to realize they are not immune to the difficulties which plague other relationships. Therapists do agree, however, that sometime within three to twelve months after the ceremony the couple has discovered that in the real world living happily ever after is hard work. Within six to eight months after their wedding, most couples are painfully aware that neither of them is always reasonable and logical. The primary advantage of postmarital counseling is that the couples are usually eager to apply to their relationship those principles and skills which will enrich their marriage.

**Experience** — A second advantage is related to the first. Only after their weddings do couples have a living laboratory in which to test the skills they are called upon to develop. The engagement period, because it is charged with idealism and romanticism, does not offer the same kind of opportunity to identify problems and work toward their resolutions.

**Laboratory for dealing with issues** — Postmarital counseling provides a structure for engaging a couple in skills designed to build their relationship. For those fortunate couples who have a good relationship already, the skills will serve to enrich a stable marriage. For other couples, whose relationships have gotten off to a shaky start, the skills can help stabilize their marriages before too much damage is done. For these couples, postmarital counseling can be remedial, dealing with problems which should have been resolved before marriage was ever considered.

At times persons may be so eager to marry that they ignore the warning signs of a bad relationship. Sadly, many people marry for a host of unhealthy reasons. Some marry to escape painful circumstances. Others marry to obtain the security they believe marriage offers. Still others have acquired the mistaken belief that they are not OK unless they are married. For them, the fact that they are married is more important than to whom they are married. For these persons, postmarital counseling opens the door to needed therapy.

**Routine** — A fourth advantage is that the routine after six months of marriage may be more settled than the six
months prior to the wedding. While this will depend on the couples involved, the time before marriage can be filled with such anxiety that the benefits of premarital counsel are counterbalanced by the additional stress the sessions create.

**Disadvantages of All Postmarital Sessions**

Since the pastor will want to meet with the couple to plan the wedding ceremony, some premarital sessions are inevitable. With this exception, other counseling sessions can be scheduled following the wedding itself.

- **Lack of needed information**—The greatest single disadvantage of this method is that the couple is left with no information and enriching skills and techniques until the counseling sessions begin. While this may not be especially traumatic for most couples, getting off on the right foot, so to speak, may set the stage for a loving, emotionally intimate relationship.

- **Relocation**—A second disadvantage of scheduling all counseling sessions after the wedding is that often the new bride and groom will relocate to distant cities to continue their education or because of career requirements. Although not impossible, follow-up is made more difficult when the newly married couple does not live within commuting distance.

- **Threat of the unknown**—Another disadvantage is that the concept of all postmarital sessions is such a departure from the norm that some couples might feel threatened by it. After all, these sessions do not fit the definition of premarital counseling. Postmarital counseling becomes almost by definition, marriage counseling. Insecure couples who need counseling might be the least likely to seek or accept it. One eager young prospective bridegroom summed up this fear when he said: “I can almost hear my friends asking, ‘Why are they going for marriage counseling? They must be having trouble.’”

- **Requirement/commitment**—If a couple receives premarital counseling only because it is required, what motivation exists for them to receive relationship counseling once they are married? That some couples may decide they are either too busy to take time for counseling or that they simply don’t need it is a fourth disadvantage to scheduling all counseling appointments after the wedding.

- **Too little too late**—If the counseling sessions are offered only after the ceremony, what about the few couples who might have decided not to marry each other as the result of counseling they receive? Granted, this number is usually small; but it does happen.

- **Lack of spiritual opportunity**—The final disadvantage is that the pastor does not have opportunity to get intimately acquainted with the couple and cannot know whether the man or woman is about to become “unequally yoked” (2 Cor. 6:14). While each pastor will, in accord with his own conscience and sense of integrity, determine for himself whom he will and will not marry, this concept must at least be considered. Unless the pastor is already well acquainted with the individuals seeking to be married, postmarital sessions alone will not allow him to assess the spiritual dimensions of their lives before he marries them.

**A Combination Option**

The third format option for providing counseling is to offer both premarital and postmarital counseling. For a variety of reasons, this option seems to offer the most satisfactory approach. One pastor developed a combination approach of which he wrote:

> It includes counseling and educational operations both before and after the wedding. Its premise is this: We can more effectively minister to today’s couples at their entrance into marriage if we seek to identify and meet their felt needs at any given moment. This results in trimming the time spent with first-time-marrying couples during the rush before the wedding and expanding time spent with them to at least eight months after the wedding, when they are beginning to feel the need for preferred help. One hour of wanted help is worth four hours of help tolerated.¹

**Advantages of a Combination Option**

Combining the two approaches outlined above incorporates all of the advantages and eliminates many of the disadvantages. The primary advantage of this option is that it seizes the teachable moments both before and after the ceremony. Prior to the wedding, during the uniqueness of the engagement period, the counselor can take advantage of the focus on their relationship and sort through the baggage each is bringing to the wedding altar. Such issues as family background, how their parents resolved (or failed to resolve) issues, individual abilities to be committed, self-esteem, and intimacy are ideal premarital themes. In the case of second marriages, the counselor can also gently probe to see whether the memory of the first spouse has any power to affect the new relationship.

While communication techniques, conflict management, and growth issues may be addressed superficially during
premarital counseling, six to eight months after the wedding the couple usually becomes eager to learn and apply these skills to their relationship.

**Disadvantages of the Combination Option**
The primary disadvantage is that it requires greater discipline on the part of the couple receiving counseling and greater administrative follow-up on the part of the counselor.

A second obstacle is that some couples will move out of the area after the ceremony or will have come “home” to be married even though they live elsewhere. This fact makes the postmarital part of this option difficult to manage. This problem can be overcome, however, by using creative alternatives to face-to-face counseling. The next chapter outlines innovative approaches to counseling the nearly and newly married.

Finally, if a couple does not sense the need for the postmarital follow-up sessions or if they consider themselves too busy to take the sessions seriously, they will not receive the skill building they may need in the future. Usually, however, if the couple and the counselor have formed a good relationship and if the couple found the premarital sessions helpful, they will be happy to continue with the postmarital sessions.

We suggest that the counselor ask the couple to sign a “contract” which commits both the couple and the counselor to the premarital and postmarital sessions. The contract may be as general or specific as circumstances require. Actually scheduling the postmarital sessions six to eight months after the wedding may be helpful, with a letter reminding the couple of the appointment to be sent three weeks in advance.

**SAMPLE CONTRACT**

We, ____________ and _________________ wish to establish a Christian home. In keeping with this desire, we have asked to be married on (date) _______________.

We understand that because marriage is to be fulfilling for both and to endure until they are parted by death, we agree to engage in counseling which will prepare us for marriage and enrich our relationship after marriage.

We agree to attend four premarital counseling sessions to be scheduled by us. We further agree to schedule four counseling sessions six to twelve months following our wedding, or sooner if necessary.

We promise to contact the pastor, or other counselor if he is not available, should difficulties arise which threaten our relationship.

We understand that during the first two sessions the pastor is becoming acquainted with us and assessing our relationship. If, for some reason, he feels he cannot commit himself to performing our ceremony, he will indicate this before the third premarital session.

_________________ (groom) _________________ (date)
_________________ (bride) _________________ (date)
_________________ (pastor) _________________ (date)

Just as necessity is the mother of invention, unusual circumstance must be the father of innovation. Most of these innovations are offered because necessity or unusual circumstances make the “ideal” impossible or impractical. For that matter, determining the ideal situation is difficult. One person contends that the pastor should lead all the sessions since he will have the greatest opportunity to interact with the couple on all levels—spiritual, emotional, and physical. In response, however, in some churches to think that the pastor could manage to counsel every couple about to be married is unrealistic even if it is the ideal.

Another person is quick to point out that in our age of specialization no pastor can be an expert in all areas of work. For this reason the work of counseling is best delegated to those professionally trained to do it. This, they contend, is the ideal. But most Baptist churches will not have the kind of financial resources necessary to have a counselor on staff—even if it is the ideal.

In some churches circumstances are such that the pastor cannot lead the counseling sessions. In most Baptist churches, however, both by necessity and by choice, the pastor will lead the counseling sessions for the nearly married. Therefore, we begin with the traditional, pastor-led approach.

**Pastor-led Approaches to Pre/Postmarital Counseling**

In the previous chapter I shared a portion of my premarital counseling pilgrimage. At one time I despaired of premarital counseling because I doubted the ability of engaged couples to comprehend and apply to themselves theoretical information. Years later I learned that the couples who came to see me needed a trusted and knowledgeable friend more than they needed an instructor. They needed someone to help them discover their motives for marrying and the expectations they held for their wedded relationship. What they least needed was someone to tell them what they should know and do. In short, they didn’t need someone to preach at them. In truth, most of them made appointments with me merely because the sessions were required.

Curiously, some of the same couples with whom I had counseled before their marriage later came to me because of problems in their relationships. At this point they were either eager to hear what I had tried to tell them before they were married, or their relationship had become so soured that they weren’t sure they wanted it to survive. In either case they now needed someone to listen and help them discover what had gone wrong. They also needed someone to teach them the skills they needed to enrich (or in some cases, to heal) their relationships. The teachable moment had arrived.

Also in the previous chapter, we outlined three format options for the counselor. By way of brief review, they are: all counseling to be done prior to the wedding, all counseling sessions held after the wedding, and a combination of premarital and postmarital sessions. Because a combination format offers the best opportunity to meet the greatest needs during the most opportune times, it is the one we recommend most heartily. The combination approach works beautifully if the pastor makes counseling the nearly and newly married a priority and if the couple cooperates by living nearby after the wedding.

Occasionally a pastor has the opportunity to marry two persons, both of whom grew up in the same church. Ideally, both the pastor and the couple would continue...
to live in the community, providing opportunity for the pastor to minister to them through all the seasons of their marriage. This is the ideal. But no pastor has the luxury of always dealing with ideal situations. In reality, couples often move after the wedding. In fact, some couples cannot get together for premarital counseling before the wedding. How can premarital counseling be provided under such circumstances?

**Counseling the Couple as Individuals**

The earliest method of counseling those who were preparing for marriage was to counsel the couple as individuals. Most commonly this was done by the medical doctor, who, either as a prelude to or following a premarital physical examination, would discuss some of the other issues involved in marriage. In the early days of premarital counseling, the discussion was limited to the physiological aspects of sexual relations. As the discipline became more defined, however, physicians began to deal with the emotional aspects as well. While the benefits of such counsel were helpful, the problem with this approach was twofold. First, the medical doctor was not always well qualified to present the skills necessary in building happy and healthy relationships. The second problem was that the counsel was given to only one person.

Eventually, as the idea of premarital counseling caught on, pastors began to provide the service because they were better suited to provide counsel to both individuals as the wedding was planned.

Usually, the pastor does meet with both persons. Occasionally, however, circumstances require that the counselor see only one person. The church I pastor is near several military installations. At times young women in our congregation have become engaged to men in the military. Often a relationship is formed while a man is stationed in this area, but it reaches full bloom just about the time he ships out to another area. After a few months of separation, they may decide to get married. But counseling those who are living great distances away is a problem. Other churches may experience similar problems with college students who are studying away but returning to get married. This is made especially difficult if one of the goals of the premarital sessions is to get acquainted with the couple, their background, and their family history.

Believing, however, that with a goal we can find a solution in less than ideal situations, we offer the following suggestions. First, schedule an appointment with the individual who can meet with you at a time the other can be available for the telephone call. By using a speaker phone, the three of you can carry on a conversation even though one is absent. Admittedly, this is not satisfying as a face-to-face session; but it is better than meeting with only one person, or worse, foregoing the counseling altogether.

Each can work on exercises in the *Couple’s Guide*. Then during the phone calls, the sessions in the *Couple’s Guide* can be discussed together.

This same approach can be taken, of course, when both the husband-to-be and wife-to-be are out of town. If they are away and also apart from each other, a conference call can be arranged. The church could make the cost of the call a part of its overall ministry to the couple, or the couple could bear the expense themselves.

If the cost of the telephone call is too great, other approaches can be taken. With enough lead time before the ceremony, a schedule can be developed for the absent party to send cassette tapes to be played during the sessions.

Audio or videocassette recordings can be made of the sessions with the individual who meets with the pastor. These, in turn, can be sent to the absent person, allowing him or her to be involved in the process. These will give the individual who cannot be present the same information the other person gets.

If the above suggestions sound too technologically involved, written correspondence is another alternative. Copies of completed worksheets from the *Couple’s Guide* may be sent without the taped recording.

Preferably each person will have a copy of the *Couple’s Guide*. Couples can then study it together or in a group setting. If they cannot be together, however, nothing prevents the couple from reading the sessions and completing the exercises separately and sharing the information by mail.

Sometimes the counselor may want to schedule a session with the man or woman without the other’s being present. This is especially true when the counselor has detected some indication that he or she is having second thoughts about the marriage. The counselor may also ask to see the future bride or groom individually if he thinks the other person is speaking for or intimidating him or her.

**Counseling the Couple Together**

One of the primary problems in premarital counseling is getting the couple to believe they will face the same kinds of problems others do. This can be overcome by inviting a couple married about a year to one of the premarital sessions. Ask the newly married couple to share with the nearly married couple the kinds of issues they have faced and the kinds of adjustments they have had to make during the past year. This will validate the bene-
fits of preparing themselves during the counseling sessions. If possible, try to establish an ongoing dialogue between the couples.

Pairing the nearly married couple with an older couple in the church is also helpful. Naturally you will want to choose an older couple who have a good relationship and who do not mind sharing how they have met and overcome obstacles they have faced through the years. Depending on the time demands made on them, this may be a ministry the pastor and his wife would want to undertake themselves. This couple can become mentors as they invite the younger couple inside their relationship.

Occasionally, a couple will be together in the same area but apart from the pastor who will marry them. In addition to the possibility of a conference call discussed earlier, the couple, or the pastor, might arrange for a nearby pastor or counselor to provide the premarital or postmarital counseling. The family ministry program director in the Baptist state office can help you locate a pastor or other counselor to help in this way.

Another obvious option for those living at a distance from the pastor is to schedule conferences when they will be in town or when he will be near them.

**When You Counsel the Couple in a Group Setting**

Another approach to premarital counseling is to offer counseling as part of a group. While the group setting is not usually an appropriate one in which to discuss specific problems the individual couples may face, group interaction can be less threatening because other couples share the experience.

In addition to this advantage, by allowing the pastor to meet with more than one couple at a time, he is able to multiply his efforts. For a number of years a Georgia pastor and his wife have offered premarital counseling as part of a Sunday School experience. Couples contemplating marriage enroll in the Sunday School class, which is taught for eight weeks, using materials written specifically for this purpose.

At the end of this eight-week period, the class continues under the guidance of a Sunday School teacher using regular Sunday School curriculum. In using this approach, they discovered that couples not already attending Sunday School developed a habit of Sunday morning attendance. In addition, they also developed relationships with persons having similar interests and needs. Since the Sunday School class is geared specifically for those who are nearly and newly married, the teacher can focus on issues faced by this group.

One newly married couple complained that a Sunday School class they had been attending just didn’t meet their needs. It was difficult for them to relate to others in the class who were concerned about whether the baby’s formula was too rich or whether a runny nose was an indication that their baby was cutting teeth.

While in some settings establishing a Sunday School class for the nearly and newly married may not be possible, in other settings it will meet a real need. In a Sunday School class setting, the pastor can focus on the same issues he would cover with individual couples but with the advantage that the group has opportunity to discuss them. This approach also enables the pastor to make routine appearances from time to time to deal with follow-up skill development issues.

The group format also works well when it is incorporated into the Discipleship Training emphasis of the church. Our church has offered new marriage orientation every spring in anticipation of summer weddings. We have opened enrollment to community members and have had couples who were not members of any church participate. This becomes a witnessing opportunity while providing a well-received ministry to the community.

Retreat settings are ideal for groups. The relaxed atmosphere and the sense of getting away enables each couple to concentrate on their own relationship even though they are part of a group.

One word of caution: Group counseling tends to become a classroom where information is taught. The pastor will need to be careful that the counseling focus is not only on information sharing but on the discovery process as well.

While the group approach has certain advantages, it cannot completely replace counseling with individual couples. The objective of group counseling remains the same—to develop within the couple the skills necessary for them to enrich their marriage.

**Advantages of Pastor-led Sessions**

As we have observed, the pastor may not choose to lead all the premarital sessions. His providing the counseling does, however, offer certain obvious advantages.

*As he becomes acquainted with the couple, he has opportunity to assess their total life needs.* For those with great spiritual needs, he can provide guidance in that dimension. If one or both are not Christians, he can share Christ with them. The pastor may wish to establish a confidential file for each couple he marries. In this file he will keep personality profile scores and process notes on issues which surfaced during the sessions. You may wish to review the section on “Pastoral Responsibility” in chapter 1.

*Since he is the one who performs the ceremony and*
“ties the knot,” many couples naturally expect him to counsel them. After all, in a sense, the pastor is responsible for getting them into marriage. They may reasonably assume that he should make sure they are ready to get married! Seeing one person for counseling and another to plan the wedding might also cause the process to seem disjointed. But, as we shall observe, we live in an age of specialization!

A third advantage to the pastor’s doing the counseling is that it puts the marriage into a spiritual context. Because they are electing to be married in a church and have a pastor officiate, they are inherently, if not consciously, acknowledging that marriage is not merely two lives merging on the physical and emotional levels. At its heart, marriage is a spiritual union of two soul mates.

A final advantage is that most Southern Baptist churches are already accustomed to a pastor’s requiring premarital counseling. Especially in single-staff churches, the suggestion that someone other than the pastor should do the premarital counseling could meet with resistance.

In the section which follows, we will acknowledge that others besides the pastor may be asked to fulfill the counseling role.

When the Pastor Is Not the Counselor

Although persons getting married in most churches assume the pastor will be the one to provide the counseling, sometimes this is impossible or impractical. In large congregations the pastor may not have time to give each couple the attention they deserve. For the pastor to try, under such circumstances, to counsel each couple would probably leave him frustrated. It could also leave the couple feeling discounted if their expectations were not met.

We live in an age of specialization. While we are familiar with specialists in the medical field, specialists emerge in other fields as their professions and disciplines become more technical. Automotive specialization has recognized markets for specific areas of maintenance and repair.

Though many still seem to believe that the pastor should know a lot about everything, the fact is that the pastor can no longer meet all members’ needs. Usually, he must see himself as a generalist rather than as a specialist even though he may have an advanced degree in a specific field. The nature of the pastorate is general because he must deal with a variety of issues. But because of training or giftedness, another person in the church or on the staff may be a more logical choice than the pastor to do the counseling.

Occasionally, a pastor is fortunate enough to have serving with him a staff member who is a specialist in the area of counseling. When this is the case, the needs of everyone are better served if the gifts of the staff member are used in providing counsel for couples about to be married. Some churches are large enough and fortunate enough to have a counselor on staff; most churches are not.

Other churches may decide to support cooperatively a counselor or a counseling center through their local association or through an informal network or alliance. Professional therapists are able not only to provide educational information and relationship-building skills but are also qualified to look for specific character disorders which will be detrimental to the long-term happiness of the couple. Counselors will also more often be trained in using various personality profiles which may be helpful revealing areas of possible conflict.

Another group often overlooked as premarital counselors are institutional and military chaplains. Since military chaplains typically deal with young persons of marriageable age, their training and insights can be invaluable resources.

Still other potential counselors exist within practically every church. Using this resource as a guide, the pastor might ask a couple in the church to serve as premarital counselors. If this couple happens to have training in counseling, so much the better. If not, they may still undertake this kind of counseling as their ministry offered to Christ through the church. Depending on the need and commitment level of the couple involved, training is available from various sources. Local colleges usually offer courses in communication techniques and in family living. LifeWay Church Resources produces materials and sponsors conferences which are designed to help. If the pastor is careful to select the right couple, they can not only provide the counseling necessary but can also serve as role models for the nearly married or newlyweds. This is especially helpful for couples each of whom came from dysfunctional family systems.

A final suggestion is to entrust the pre/postmarital counseling to the family enrichment committee of the church. Ideally, this committee provides marriage and family enrichment activities for the entire church. Therefore, beginning with the family in its premarital state is merely an extension of the committee’s responsibility. Because the needs of those nearly married are so unique, the committee would want to give special emphasis to this extremely sensitive period in the life of the couple.

Advantages

We have already examined the advantages of the pastor-led approach, but what advantages exist in allowing someone else to do the counseling?
First, someone other than the pastor is allowed to get involved. This is not to depreciate the value of the pastor’s participation in the process, but it allows others to use their gifts and abilities in significant ministry. As we continue to emphasize from pulpits and periodicals that every Christian is called to ministry, we must also provide avenues for their ministries to be used.

A second advantage may be that the person is better qualified in terms of training and skills to provide the counseling. The counseling courses required at the master’s level of seminary training cannot compare to the in-depth counseling courses required in some degree programs. If some in the church are better trained than the pastor, he should enlist their assistance.

The possibility exists for the pastor and another counselor to work together in providing the counseling for the nearly and newly married. Then, some of the advantages of both the pastor-led and the nonpastor-led approaches can be consolidated into a team effort. Obviously, this will depend on the unique nature of the church, the skills of the laity, and the ability of the pastor to share ministry with others in the church. The team approach exists, it seems to us, in allowing the family enrichment committee to assume a leading role, along with the pastor, in conducting the pre/postmarital sessions.

Profiles and Inventories

Many different kinds of personality profiles and personal development inventories are available. For my own purposes, I have found the Taylor-Johnson Temperament Analysis (T-JTA) to be especially helpful. It measures nine different personality traits. By comparing where they fall between the extremes in each of the nine traits, their compatibility (or incompatibility) can be seen at once. This particular inventory also enables couples to do a crisscross inventory whereby each assesses the personality traits of the other as well as his or her own. A comparison of their scores indicates how well the prospective bride and groom really know each other. As with most psychological instruments, the T-JTA can be administered only by those who have received training in the instrument and its interpretation. Information may be obtained by writing Psychological Publications, Inc., 5300 Hollywood Boulevard, Los Angeles, California 90027.

Another instrument, designed specifically for use as a premarital inventory, is called PREPARE (PREmarital Personal And Relationship Evaluation). PREPARE consists of 125 questions and measures 11 relationship areas—realistic expectations, personality issues, communication, conflict resolution, financial management, leisure activities, sexual relationship, children and parenting, family and friends, equilitarian roles, and religious orientation. The objectives of the feedback provided to couples are to: (1) enable them to examine their relationship strengths and growth areas, (2) provide a means of discussing with each other their own family of origin, (3) help develop conflict resolution skills, and (4) encourage them to invest themselves and their resources in improving their marriage over time.

A variation of PREPARE (called PREPARE-MC) has been developed for use with those who have been previously married and have children. “PREPARE-MC contains the same eleven categories as does PREPARE . . . However, the PREPARE-MC includes specific items related to stepchildren and parenting in the marriage. Thus, this form of the inventory can be used by the counselor to help identify strengths and weaknesses in the premarital relationship.” As a matter of course, a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses revealed by the inventory becomes a part of the counseling process. Information about PREPARE and PREPARE-MC and a companion inventory, called ENRICH, for married couples may be obtained by writing Prepare-Enrich, Inc., P.O. Box 190, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55440. Several other personality inventories, some designed for use especially with premarital couples, are available. The two just mentioned, however, are used widely by pastors and counselors within the total premarital counseling process.

Marriage Enrichment Opportunities

Whoever provides counseling for the nearly and newly married, certain enrichment opportunities will naturally become a part of the overall counseling strategy. You will want to incorporate the marriage enrichment conferences offered by your state or association and to calendar those marriage enrichment opportunities provided at LifeWay Ridgecrest and Glorieta Conference Centers.

Companion to these are the Covenant Marriage resources, produced by LifeWay Church Resources. They are extremely valuable in emphasizing the skills taught in the postmarital sessions. This kind of dovetailed approach enables the various layers of the counseling for the nearly and newly married to build into an overall strategy for their relationship development.

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Chapter 6

Why a Church Wedding?

People who seem to have no relationship to Christ often want to be married in a church. While their decision is made in part on cultural grounds, I’m convinced that others choose to be married by a pastor rather than a justice of the peace because they are aware that something inherently spiritual is about to happen as two lives merge into one.

Because marriage is not only a critically important rite of passage but usually also a time of openness, the pastor has the opportunity and the obligation to redirect the couple’s emphasis from self-centeredness to the awareness of God and His purposes. Weddings “provide an excellent forum to speak a word from God about the family—at a particularly crucial time in the lives of several individuals. . . . The occasion allows for the possibility of an evangelical word to the many non-Christians who come to the wedding ceremony of their Christian friends.” In addition, a pastor will sometimes feel an inner ambivalence as to whether a couple understands or even cares that their wedding is also to be worship. He may sometimes even conclude that he cannot in good conscience perform a Christian wedding ceremony for a couple who have no concept of what Christian marriage is. All this makes wedding preparation with the bride and groom essential.

Preparing for the Wedding

Planning for Marriage Begins Before Engagement

During his preaching a pastor can begin to educate young people about Christian marriage while they are still forming in their minds the picture of an ideal mate. Besides preaching, Discipleship Training materials and youth retreats also provide opportunities to set the stage for marriage.

The Ceremony Begins with Good Planning

The sooner a pastor can establish that he expects couples to contact him early in the wedding-planning stage, the better. If the church has taken action by adopting a set of wedding guidelines or policies, the pastor can be saved from appearing to be uncooperative if he does not allow whatever the bride and groom (or the mother of either) wish. In one church Saturday evening weddings had become commonplace. A problem arose because often the wedding party and guests did not leave until after 9:30 p.m. To have the hall cleaned and arranged for Sunday School the next morning meant that the custodian worked well into the night. In this particular case an already established policy that the church fellowship hall may not be used after 7:00 p.m. on Saturday evenings would have saved frustration and hard feelings.

Other areas of potential conflict include who may get married in the church facilities, who may officiate at a wedding ceremony, whether church instrumentalists must be used (or whether they must be asked first), whether smoking is permitted on church grounds or in church facilities, fees and honoraria, premarital counseling expectations, whether videotaping or flashbulbs are permitted during the ceremony, and the right of the pastor or minister of music to approve all songs used in the ceremony. Obviously, this is not intended to be an exhaustive list. Each church must decide for itself which policies uniquely fit its own circumstances.

The Wedding Party

Persons who will be involved in the wedding must be chosen with care, for they represent the bride and groom. Their personal presence will visually symbolize to the guests the tone of the ceremony itself. The usher who wore green high-top tennis shoes with his black tuxedo
may have been making an individual statement, but he did so at the expense of an otherwise dignified ceremony.

**The Wedding Rehearsal**

More frustrating than a poorly planned wedding rehearsal is a poorly planned wedding. Failure to plan the former almost always guarantees the latter. Most pastors have spent hours waiting for members of the wedding party to decide such matters as whether to light the candles before or after the bride’s mother enters. For this reason, arranging a time with the bride and groom at least two weeks before the ceremony to plan specifically in what order everything is to occur will save a lot of time and confusion just before the ceremony.

In many parts of the country, the bride customarily secures the services of a wedding planner to help with such details. Unless the church has a person specifically designated to function in this role, brides often ask a friend—who may have no more experience in planning wedding ceremonies than the bride herself—to serve in this capacity. Some, of course are capable persons who plan the ceremony to perfection. This is not always the case, however. If the bride has asked someone to help her, I ask the bride to take what we have developed to her so she will be aware of the order in which we have agreed events will occur. If she has questions or suggestions, she may call me; and we can discuss altering the established order.

Because the wedding ceremony is a worship service, the pastor of the church must have the option of final decisions about the worship. Usually, only when the integrity of the worship is about to be compromised will he inject himself authoritatively. Allowing the bride and groom to have as much latitude as possible in planning the wedding is usually best—with the guidance of the pastor, of course.

Every pastor has also spent a good deal of time waiting for bridesmaids or ushers to arrive for the rehearsal. Emphasize to the bride and groom that the rehearsal needs to start on time. Often a rehearsal dinner is planned at a restaurant some distance from the church. I sometimes walk through the time schedule, allowing for travel time to the rehearsal dinner, with the bride and groom to emphasize the importance of starting on time and having the rehearsal flow smoothly. If the church is difficult to find, providing a simple map will prevent frayed nerves and lost time.

In one church a woman served as director for all weddings taking place in that church. She discussed with the couple what would happen at the rehearsal. She was so proficient—partially because she had done it so often—that the presence of the pastor was required only during the time the wedding party rehearsed the ceremony itself. The processional, recessional, music, and songs were all rehearsed without the pastor’s being present. While not every pastor would choose to do this, senior ministers of larger congregations may find this approach necessary because of the number of weddings they are called upon to perform.

The purpose of the wedding rehearsal is fourfold. 

*First, and most obvious, those who will be involved in the wedding ceremony itself need to know what to do and when to do it.* Awkward hesitation and ambivalent motions will cause embarrassment and detract from the dignity of the worship and ceremony. Except in the smallest weddings, a rehearsal is essential if the ceremony is to flow smoothly and with dignified elegance.

*The second purpose of the wedding rehearsal is to get the wedding party acquainted with one another.* Often members of the wedding party have never met before the rehearsal. Sometimes even the parents of the bride and the parents of the groom have not met prior to the evening of rehearsal.

*A third purpose of rehearsal is to allow restrained tensions to release prior to the wedding ceremony itself.* A relaxed time of going through the motions and saying the words before the ceremony provides a time for tensions to drain away. I almost always begin the rehearsal with a prayer, after which I remind the wedding party that we are there to rehearse for a spiritual experience. The rehearsal can be a spiritual time, too, but should not be regarded as somber or solemn. I encourage the bride and groom to laugh and enjoy themselves. I try to ease the stress as much as possible at the rehearsal.

*A final purpose of the rehearsal is to check the audiovisual equipment and to establish the levels of lighting and sound.* The rehearsal also allows the organist to test the stops to ensure that they are set exactly as he or she wants them.

**The Wedding Ceremony**

In the free church tradition we have occasionally taken pride that our worship is not established by predetermined guidelines or printed rituals. We recognize that rituals can be meaningless if we go through the motions without giving thought to the reasoning behind them. Rituals also have great power, however—particularly when they mark the passage from one stage of life to another. With the
possible exception of the church ordinances, the wedding ceremony is probably the most traditional and powerful ritual we celebrate. Yet by sheer repetition it has largely lost its meaning except as a legal rite of passage. If we were to dissect the components of the wedding ceremony, what would we find?

The Wedding as Worship
Because an ordained minister has been asked to perform the wedding ceremony, the couple has every reason to expect the wedding ceremony to be a service of worship. This is true whether the two persons being joined in holy matrimony are particularly religious.

Depending on the commitment level and the desires of the couple, the wedding/worship may involve only the wedding party or may incorporate the entire congregation as participants in worship. When I officiated at the wedding ceremony of a church staff member, he wanted the entire congregation to celebrate the Lord's Supper as a symbol that “in him we live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28). This emphasized that marriage, at least for the Christian, fits into the larger context of life in the church—the bride of Christ. This enabled the entire congregation to bless the event in a way which not only affirmed the couple's relationship with Christ but also their relationship with the entire church.

The Wedding as a Rite of Passage
More powerfully than any other symbol, the wedding ceremony marks a transition from the former way of living and relating to a new and distinct life-style. In The Church and the Rites of Passage, Wayne Price concluded that the minister represents the faith community and serves a priestly function as well. All symbols of faith are directed to this transitional time of leaving the unmarried state, the homes of fathers and mothers, and crossing the bridge to a new relationship within their own home and family. As God presided over the union of the first man and woman, so in the church we ask God to preside over the unions of all the sons and daughters of the first couple.7

Traditionally, the presentation of the bride to the groom or the “giving away the bride” as it has been called, by the bride's father, symbolizes this transition. The role assumed by the bride's father has taken on the power of a vicarious symbol. At one time, of course, the wife literally left her father's home to be accepted into the home of her husband and his father; now the concept of “giving away the bride” is outmoded and archaic. The bride's father continues to have a role in most weddings because of the weight of tradition and also because he symbolizes for both bride and groom the passage from birth home and parents to a new home established with the spouse.

As traditions change, our rituals of passage must change with them, or they lose their power as symbols. A ritual which more accurately expresses our understanding and tradition would be for the parents of the bride and groom to be involved in this significant rite of passage. But tradition is powerful and continues to entice educated young women, who would be incensed at the suggestion that they were chattel, to insist that their fathers “give them away.”

Another symbol of transition is the lighting of the unity candle. Occasionally the mothers of the bride and groom light the two candles representing the lives of their son and daughter. This denotes the giving of life. When the bride and groom take their candles and light the center candle, they are expressly symbolizing that a new creation—their marriage—has taken place. If the bride and groom elect to extinguish their candles, it further symbolizes the transition from the old to the new. Some couples elect to leave their candles burning rather than extinguish them. This may visually demonstrate that they continue to be separate, unique persons even though they become united in marriage. The three lighted candles might symbolize “I, you, and we.”

Occasionally the rite of passage will include not only the bride and groom and their parents but children of the bride and groom as well. Including members of the blended family in the wedding ceremony recognizes that the children and their passages are of concern and value to their parents.

The Wedding as Blessing
To some extent, by merely gathering to witness the wedding ceremony, the family and friends of the bride and groom add their silent blessings to the creation of their new home. Whenever the two persons being married have been a significant part of the church family, the congregation has the opportunity to add a blessing of its own. Myron Madden elaborates on the idea of blessing:

The blessing is more than love—it is the very renewal of life itself, it is the power to beget. . . . It must be “spoken” into being by the authority of the Father or by the one who speaks for him; it is in a profound sense the power to heal, to make alive.8

When the church family can be involved as participants, it has greater power to add its “Amen!” to a new home’s coming into being.
If a printed order of service is provided, a blessing read by the congregation can be given at an appropriate point in the ceremony. Not every couple will desire this, but for faithful Christian couples the blessing of the congregation can be significant.

The congregational blessing may also come in other forms. A scriptural responsive reading, a congregational hymn, a prayer, or a simple statement by the minister may add the weight of church sanction to the ceremony.

When it can be incorporated into the ceremony without being contrived, the parents of the bride and groom can voice their blessing. I have witnessed weddings where a representative of the family pronounced the blessing of the parents and extended family upon the couple in a moving and meaningful way.

However it is included, the blessing is a meaningful and powerful symbol of affirmation and sanction.

The Wedding as Covenant
Throughout the Bible the idea of covenant is important to our understanding that we are God's people. A covenant is more than a contract which requires both parties to fulfill certain specified duties to be binding. Rather it is an agreement which does not require mutual faithfulness. If the promise to be sexually faithful to one's marriage partner were contractual, one partner would no longer be required to be faithful if the other partner committed adultery. The idea of a covenant more nearly expresses the loyal relationship expected of marriage partners.

In the previous chapter we recommended using Covenant Marriage resources for postmarital counseling. One of the writers expressed the idea of the marriage as covenant like this:

Covenant marriage means giving of myself without any conditions. There are not “if . . . then” clauses in a covenant: if you love me, then I will love you; if you are faithful to me, then I will be faithful to you; if you communicate openly with me, then I will be sexually open to you. . . . Covenant marriage is based on freely and responsibly giving myself to you, being loyal to you, trying to meet your needs. Covenant marriage is not destroyed by a partner failing to live up to promises, because its foundation is not only exchanged vows, but commitment without conditions.

The agape love of 1 Corinthians 13 describes covenant love. It is patient and kind. It is not jealous, boastful, arrogant, ill-mannered, exclusive, or easily provoked. Covenant love does not keep score.

The vows (oaths), through which the bride and the groom commit themselves without reserve to the other, establish the covenant. The traditional language of the vows, “for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part,” convey unconditional love and commitment. Whether the vows are taken from a published ceremony or written by the bride and groom themselves, they should establish the covenant of lifelong love offered freely and without conditions regardless of circumstances encountered.

Usually, when God established a covenant with a person or with His people, He gave a sign of the covenant. The sign was a visual reminder that He had given His word that something would or would not happen. The word, once spoken, established what was said as fact.

Along with His covenant with Noah, God gave the rainbow as a sign. With Abraham, God gave the sign of circumcision. Other signs of covenants include a gift of seven ewe lambs (see Gen. 21:29-30), the heap of stones (see Gen. 31:44-46), passover (see Ex. 13:9-10), and the sabbath (see Ex. 31:16-17). The ark of the covenant was itself a sign of God's covenant to be present with His people.

The most common sign of the marriage covenant is the exchange of rings between the bride or groom. These “signs” should serve as a visual reminder of the covenant they have established between them by their exchange of vows.

In the Bible, covenants were often sealed with such rituals as a handshake, a kiss, or a shared meal. Thus, the kiss at the conclusion of the ceremony is much more than their first kiss as husband and wife. It is the seal of their covenant marriage.

The Wedding as Legal Ceremony
In addition to everything else, the wedding is an event which joins together a man and a woman into a binding relationship in which each has rights and responsibilities according to the laws of the state in which they are married. In at least one state the bar association produces a pamphlet outlining the legal aspects of marriage. If the pastor moves to a new state or is asked to perform a wedding ceremony in a different state, he should check to see what requirements must be met in order to qualify to marry persons legally in that state.
Sample Wedding Ceremony

Introduction
We gather as family members and friends of
_____________________________ (groom)
and ___________________________ (bride)
to witness and add our blessings to the ceremony which
joins them in holy matrimony. What we shall witness is
their wedding not their marriage. Their marriage will be
formed in the weeks and months and years ahead as they
grow together in oneness. In this ceremony we shall wor-
schip our God as, in His presence, they establish their
covenant of marriage. In doing so, we are mindful that our
Lord declared that a man shall leave his father and his
mother and unite with his wife in building their own home.

Statement of Intent
_____________________________ (bride)
and __________________________ (groom),
the covenant of marriage joins together as husband and
wife a man and a woman who pledge themselves uncondi-
tionally each to the other. Recognizing that no one can
predict what the future will bring in terms of prosperity
or poverty, success or failure, health or illness, you must
face the future with faith in God and faith in each other.
Is it your intent to each give yourself in unconditional
love to the other?
RESPONSE: It is.

Parental Blessing
Do you, the parents of ________________________
(groom) and ____________________________ (bride),
pledge to affirm and encourage them as they pass from the
shelter of your home to establish their own family? And,
further, do you now add your blessing to them as they
become husband and wife?
RESPONSE: “We do.”
Who presents this woman to this man that they may be
joined in Christian marriage? (Including this question and
response is optional.)
RESPONSE OF THE BRIDE’S FATHER: “Her mother and I.”
CONGREGATIONAL HYMN: “Love Divine, All Loves
Excelling”

The Covenant Established
_____________________________ (bride)
and ___________________________ (groom), in
your wedding ceremony you are making many statements.
Because you have chosen to be married in this sanctuary
by a Christian minister, you are saying that you are sub-
ject to God and that you seek His blessing on your mar-
riage as we worship. Your ceremony also marks the time
when each of you leaves your home of origin to establish
your own home. You have just received your parents’
blessing to do that. This wedding ceremony is also a legal
proceeding. In the eyes of our state, you shall be legally
married when we finish here. Above all, however, in your
wedding ceremony you are establishing a covenant
between the two of you. A covenant is unlike a contract
in that a covenant does not require that both parties
be faithful to their promises. In a contract, if one party
breaks faith with the other, both are released from its
terms. But in this covenant, you are each asked to pledge
your faithfulness whether the other always responds faith-
fully. Such a pledge requires absolute faith in the other.
Such a covenant expresses unconditional love.

In the New Testament, unconditional giving of the self
is best understood as agape—divine love. It is the kind of
love Paul described in the 13th chapter of his first letter
to the Corinthian Christians. Let our love be measured
by these qualities:

Love is patient and kind, love is not jealous or boastful;
it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its
own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not
rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears
all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures
all things. Love never ends. . . . So faith, hope, love
abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love
(1 Cor. 13:4-8a, 13).

_____________________________ (bride)
and ___________________________ (groom),
if this is the kind of unconditional love you pledge to the
other, please join your right hands as, with these vows,
you establish your marriage covenant.

_____________________________ (groom),
in taking the woman you hold by the hand to be your
wife, do you solemnly promise to love her without quali-
fication, to give yourself without reserve to her, to consider
her needs to be of equal importance to your own, and
to be faithful to her alone as long as you both shall live?
GROOM’S RESPONSE: I do.

_____________________________ (bride),
in taking the man you hold by the hand to be your hus-
band, do you solemnly promise to love him without quali-
fication, to give yourself without reserve to him, to con-
sider his needs to be of equal importance to your own, and
to be faithful to him alone as long as you both shall live?
BRIDE’S RESPONSE: I do.
You are giving and receiving rings as signs of the covenant you have established with your vows. In ancient times, whenever an important covenant was established, some outward, visible sign of that covenant was often exchanged to remind all who saw it of the commitments they had made. As you wear these rings, they shall serve always to remind you of this day and of the vows you have made.

____________________________ (groom), take this ring, place it on the finger of your bride, and repeat after me. __________________________ (bride), I give you this ring (repeat) as a sign of my commitment (repeat) to you alone (repeat). As you wear it (repeat), remember that I love you (repeat).

____________________________ (bride) take this ring, place it on the finger of your groom, and repeat after me. __________________________ (groom), I give this ring (repeat) as a sign of my commitment (repeat) to you alone (repeat). As you wear it (repeat), remember that I love you (repeat).

The Prayer of Blessing
We are mindful, O Lord, that just as You blessed with Your presence the marriage of a bride and groom in Cana of Galilee, Your unseen presence adds blessing to the wedding of __________________________ (bride) and __________________________ (groom). To Your blessing, we ask now that You add Your power to protect and guide them through the trials of life. Make every provision for them in their journey through life together. We do not ask that You keep them from all difficulties, for in overcoming them they will grow stronger in their union. We ask only that with every obstacle strewn in the pathway of their pilgrimage You provide strength and perseverance enough to overcome. Be for them their divine Enabler.

To Your blessing we now add the blessing of Your bride, the church. We pledge to you that we shall nurture them and support them in the faith and that together we shall serve you, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

The Unity Candle as a Symbol
The unity candle expresses visually what is taking place spiritually. The two of you, until this moment, have lived your lives separate and apart. From this time onward, as long as you both shall live, your lives shall be joined and inseparable. The flame of each candle continues not separately and alone but in union with the other. (The bride and groom each take lighted candles representing their individual lives and light a third, center candle representing their lives now wedded.)

The Wedding Covenant Sealed
It is my happy privilege to proclaim that according to the laws of this state and, more significantly, in accord with the higher law of heaven, that as __________________________ (groom) and __________________________ (bride) seal their wedding covenant with a kiss they shall become from this day forward, husband and wife. Whom God has joined together in the holy covenant of marriage, let no one attempt to separate. (The bride and groom seal their marriage with a kiss.)

The Conclusion of Worship
In symbol of their submission to Christ, Mr. and Mrs. __________________________ (groom) ask you to join them in concluding their wedding ceremony by saying in unison the prayer of our Lord:

Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen (Matt. 6:9-13).

When the Bride or Groom Have Adult Children Present
Most pastors have witnessed the joy experienced by an older widow and widower whose lives take on new joy when they decide to get married. The wedding, for these few individuals, can be an occasion for receiving the blessings of adult children. The blessing of the children may be as powerful as the blessing of the parents to a young bride and groom. Its significance as a blessing should not be overlooked. The following is a sample of such a blessing:

Do you, the children of __________________________ (bride) and the children of __________________________ (groom) add to their union your blessing as your promise to love and accept them?

RESPONSE: We do.

When the Bride and/or Groom Have Young Children Present
Depending on the ages of the children, having the parent and stepparent of the children to speak a word of affirmation and acceptance to them may be more appropriate than receiving a blessing from them. In a time when fami-
ly systems are becoming increasingly complicated, the wedding ceremony sometimes marks the start of blending families. With sensitivity and meaning the children can be acknowledged and included in the ceremony itself. In many ceremonies of this type, the bride-and-groom parents present to the children a sign of their love and acceptance. A ring, a necklace, or a medallion may be ideally suited to serve as a reminder of the occasion. I have seen the presentation of the gifts incorporated nicely into the wedding ceremony itself, but they may also be given prior to the ceremony during meaningful moments with the children, parent, and stepparent. If the presentations are made during the ceremony, the exchange usually follows the ring exchange. The promises of affirmation might take the form of the following:

______________________________ (bride and/or groom), you (each) come to this moment with children present. Do you both affirm these children, and do you accept them without condition into your home and your family?

RESPONSE OF THE BRIDE AND GROOM: We do.

And do you children promise to love _____________ (bride) and _____________ (groom) and accept them?

RESPONSE OF THE CHILDREN: We do.

To help your children remember this day and that you love and accept them just as they are as an important part of the family, you are presenting to each of them a (ring, medallion, etc.). Present these now to your children and repeat after me.

As we establish our home (repeat), we want you to know (repeat) how much we love you (repeat). All of us together (repeat) make up our family (repeat). We promise to nurture you (repeat) and to help you in every way possible. As you wear this (ring, medallion, etc.), (repeat) remember that we are, (repeat) and always will be, (repeat) a loving family (repeat).

If the family desires, the minister may introduce them as “Mr. and Mrs. ______________ (last name) and family” at the end of the wedding ceremony.

Session 1

We Want to Get Married

This first session offers you the opportunity to lead the couple or couples to be married at the point of their immediate interest—their wedding. Their wedding interest will open the door to introduce the couple to the many other issues that need to be explored in premarital counseling.

Our task in this session is to help each couple begin to be aware of their marriage expectations by exploring their plans for their wedding. In premarital counseling, as in all helping relationships, the best place to begin is where the people to be helped find themselves. The first interest of most couples, when they come to the pastor, is their wedding. How a couple goes about making plans for their wedding uncovers much about how their coming marriage relationship is developing.

You can learn a great deal about the prospective bride and groom and their families as you discuss the wedding. And you can build a relationship for discussing other topics throughout these sessions.

The Wedding—
the First Event of Marriage

A good start in a marriage is as advantageous as in a race. The pastor, or family life leader, can emphasize that the whole purpose of this premarital counseling guide is to ensure that the couple launches their marriage from a good start. Since the wedding is the first major event of the marriage, it deserves careful planning and attention.

In this first session with the couple or couples, the leader can help the couple inventory their ideas about their wedding. What kind of wedding do they want—simple, elaborate, or in between? Where do they want the wedding to be held? How many will be expected to attend? Who is paying for the wedding? Who are the important people who will be helping them make decisions about the wedding? What are their ideas about music for the wedding? Will they have a reception? If so, what kind of reception do they want? What weddings have they seen that they like and are using to model their own? Which partner has most of the ideas about the wedding? Does one have a much larger interest in the wedding than the other?

In other words, the pastor/leader can find out what the couple brings in their plans for their wedding. Such an inventory does not commit the pastor to all the ideas and desires the couple brings. It does help both pastor and couple to know what they have to work with in the wedding plan.

As a pastor, you have the task of helping the couple shape their wedding into a Christian event. This will be a goal some couples bring. Others will bring wedding ideas that have little to do with the church or the Christian faith. One of the most difficult challenges a pastor confronts is to help couples see their wedding as an expression of the Christian faith as well as an expression of their love for each other. The pastor attempts to do this without dogmatism but in persistent Christian love and faithfulness to the church. As we will explore later, this may involve attempting to help one or both of the partners find a first-time commitment to Christ.

Since the wedding is the first event of a marriage, both partners need to be involved in the planning. Often only the bride is involved in the planning. Either by choice of the groom or by the assumption of the bride that it is her domain, grooms are often emotionally removed from investing in the wedding plans. If, as a pastor, you observe this, you can encourage the couple to share the work of planning the wedding with you. Just as at one time fathers were not expected to be involved in the birth of the
child, many families continue the tradition that the wedding is only the bride’s responsibility. Both partners can emerge from the wedding with a feeling that both of them helped to create it.

During this first session the pastor can help the couple review their outside influences. Does the family of one or the other provide most of the influence? Does another relative, other than parents, have a primary voice? Do some friends or business associates exercise major influence in their lives and, thus, their wedding plans? Are they a couple relatively isolated from all others? Such information can help a pastor and help a couple become aware of how their relationship and their wedding are being shaped. From the first session a pastor and the couple should receive a good overall sense of what the couple brings to the wedding and the marriage. This first event of their wedding needs to be entered into freely, advisedly, and with Christian commitment.

**Contracting for Your Wedding**

The first session with a couple begins the process of contracting with a couple about their wedding and the pre- and postmarital help a pastor may provide. Contracting is the process of helping a couple be aware of what they expect and what the pastor and/or the church expects. The church participates in the wedding inasmuch as the pastor is a symbol of the church and as most couples will marry in the church building.

Along with helping the couple inventory their expectations about the wedding, the pastor communicates his and the church’s expectations about the conduct of the wedding. In this comparison of expectations, the couple and the pastor contract for the wedding and the premarital counseling. The contracting by which arrangements are made for the wedding can become a model for the way in which a couple establishes their marriage relationship. We will develop it in later sessions.

As the pastor leads the couple in exploring their expectations about the wedding, he will also inform the couple about those issues from his point of view. In this way the couple are prevented from assuming that, since they have certain expectations, the pastor will automatically accept those expectations. A pastor owes it to a couple to spell out under what conditions the wedding can be conducted with integrity for the pastor. Some flexibility in the pastor’s and/or the church’s requirements will likely allow for some nonessential accommodations to the couple’s requests. In more ideal situations the couple’s expectations and the pastor’s or the church’s requirements do not conflict. Because arrangements for weddings can be so emotionally loaded for couples, beginning the contracting process at the first session is essential.

As indicated, specific areas require the contracting process. A pastor may have an established process of premarital counseling required of all couples who come to be married. In the first session the pastor and the couple should covenant together about the number, dates, and times when premarital counseling will take place. This premarital guide seminar may be the commitment which the couple makes to prepare for their marriage. A pastor will certainly want some individual time with a couple even if such a seminar is conducted. The couple deserve the personal attention and time of the pastor for this unique occasion in their lives. However it is done, specific agreements need to be reached in the first session about the conduct of the premarital counseling process.

Another area of specific contracting focuses on the place of the wedding. If the church is to be the place, clear requirements of the church need to be given to the couple in the first session. Churches need established wedding policies which can be handed to the couple and reviewed with them. This prevents the pastor from having to be the heavy if the couple do not agree with certain requirements.

The use of the church for weddings is one of the most potentially explosive issues for many churches. Couples who have expectations the church cannot or chooses not to meet may themselves be resentful. Further, as they report their disappointments to family and friends, the church may be maligned for having “unreasonable rules.” Often these reports become exaggerated; and the church, while attempting to serve couples for their weddings, receives the brunt of uninformed criticism. The problem can become personally directed toward the pastor if the church does not take responsibility to set policies. The pastor should not be left to decree and enforce protection of the church’s interest. Couples can be informed in this session to ask for a complete list of the church’s policies for the conduct of weddings.

The set of policies adopted by the church ought to cover a wide range of areas but certainly cannot be so elaborate as to cover every possible situation. For the wedding the church needs to specify how the church is reserved. Policies regarding arrangements for the rehearsal and the reception should be included. The costs for use of the church, reception hall, and janitorial service and how payment is to be made can be made clear. Policies regarding details such as flowers, candles, and rice arrangements for the church, reception hall, and janitorial service and how payment is to be made can be made clear.
often save a church misunderstanding. If the church has an organ, a policy needs to state who can play the organ and under what conditions the organ can be used. Many churches require the church organist to play for weddings because of inexperience with the instrument and because abuse of the instruments often occurs.

If the church has a wedding hostess or director, the pastor can explain the role and duties of that person so that expectations are clear. The role of any wedding director needs to be clear, inasmuch as some wedding directors assume prerogatives of the pastor or of the couple who are planning their wedding. The wedding director’s role should be one of service to the pastor and the couple in planning and executing their wedding, not a role of determining the style and sequence of events for the couple and the pastor.

Under most circumstances a single sheet of policies can be sufficient to cover the most pertinent areas and provide couples with clear expectations from the church. In a church which has a church staff, someone other than the pastor may well handle the physical and facility arrangements of the wedding with the couple, after having been introduced by the pastor. This person can handle questions of payment for the church use fees, organist and other church musicians, and honoraria, if any, for the pastor. Since most couples have not married before and those who have may not know the customs of this church, they often do not know what to do regarding honoraria for the minister.

By this time you can help couples realize that planning for a wedding becomes a model for decision making in the marriage. The contracting is an exercise to communicate clearly with the pastor and the church about the wedding. It is also an opportunity to test out how a couple contract with each other to accomplish life’s tasks.

The Wedding—a Slice of Life

Approaching the wedding in the first session takes care of the first concern of most couples. It also provides a launchpad for the rest of premarital counseling.

By the time a pastor and a couple have explored expectations about the wedding, the pastor and the couple have a large amount of information about each other. In fact, a pastor can help a couple discover the “album of pictures” the couple has brought with them to plan their wedding. This “album of pictures” will introduce them to the other “album of pictures” they carry with them about marriage. In this way a pastor can begin the rest of marriage counseling by inviting them to discover the pictures each has and follows.

The “pictures” they have are their expectations of themselves, of their marriage partner, and of marriage itself. Most of these pictures have never been consciously examined, either by themselves or by their partners. Many naturally assume that the way they look at themselves or marriage is the way the partner sees them, too.

In this Leader’s Guide, the Couple’s Guide, and the sessions themselves, premarital counseling revolves around looking at “pictures” of marriage. By doing this we will discover differences of pictures. We will also explore ways of bringing pictures to the surface so they can be combined with the pictures of the other person.

To do this you can help a couple understand how relationships develop and grow. Relationships are built out of contracts persons establish with each other. Their contracts contain the expectations of the other person and of themselves. Three kinds of contracts are used in building relationships, and all three may be operating at the same time.

The Formal Contract

A formal contract is easiest to recognize. In a formal contract, two people set down their expectations and give some form to the agreement. This may be a written legal contract, or the relationship may be formalized by a ceremony such as a wedding. The formal contract is openly stated or symbolized, and both parties have freely acknowledged it in some way. The expectations have been clearly stated to each other, and each knows those expectations are reliable. Formal contracts rarely cause many problems unless one or the other of the partners decides to change the contract or the stated expectations.

The Informal Contract

The informal contract is not supported by any established form, but the expectations are stated. The expectations may be stated by only one of a couple; but the other hears and, at least, does not disagree. The other may agree passively. At least the couple has a set of expectations both of them have heard. This contract works as long as one or the other does not decide to ignore or change the expectations informally stated. If the expectations are changed, it is usually done without telling the other person; but a different behavior is begun. Informal contracts may be as simple as making an announcement of a meeting or inviting someone to your home without getting a firm acceptance. The expectations have been stated, and that seems enough.
The Hidden or Secret Contract

The third kind of contract is the most common and the most difficult. The hidden or secret contract makes up most of our relationships. Here are unspoken, assumed expectations that one or both persons have. These presumptions form the basis for how partners behave toward each other and how they do many of their activities. As long as both partners make the same assumptions and act accordingly, hidden contracts give little trouble, and a relationship works.

However, partners may have hidden contracts the other does not know about. Hidden contracts are discovered when they are broken. When one partner fails to meet the expectations of the other partner, that partner discovers the other had expectations not stated and sometimes not known. The most severe problems of a marriage relationship occur because hidden contracts exist and are broken.

A couple I met in a conference told about their hidden contract. She expected that when she was serving dessert her husband would wait until she sat down to begin eating. He was accustomed in his home to begin eating dessert when it was set in front of him. She would become hurt and offended each time they had dessert, and he couldn’t understand why her mood changed. She finally told him what she expected and how offended she was by his behavior. He had never known of that expectation.

Such are the contracts couples live and cry by when they are developing their marriage relationship. Couples can be invited to open many of their picture albums to each other as time allows. No one can ever open all one has, but partners can become aware that they have not yet seen many pictures. Premarital counseling is all about helping couples discover and uncover their most important hidden contracts and expectations.

The importance of discovering these contracts has to do with the power of our expectations within us. I referred earlier to what I somewhat facetiously call “White’s Law of Happiness.” It states: “One is happy to the degree one’s expectations are met or exceeded.” As long as both partners make the same assumptions and act accordingly, hidden contracts give little trouble, and a relationship works.

In building relationships we must discover our expectations and our hidden contracts so that they can become more conscious and spoken expectations. When a person discovers a hidden contract and its expectations are not being met, that person has three choices. He can be disappointed and hurt that the hidden contract is broken. He can work to get the expectations met. Or he can try to change the expectations. Some persons almost seem to believe they can never change their expectations. When a person becomes aware of his own expectations and those of the partner, adjustments must be made if both are to find happiness together. The first task is to become aware of and to communicate expectations.

Many expectations, some hidden and some not, can be uncovered in planning for the wedding. If the couple have hidden or assumed expectations about the first event of the marriage, we can know that thousands of expectations exist about the rest of marriage that may be hidden. Premarital counseling helps couples start identifying and dealing with hidden expectations as they arise, just as they do in planning a wedding. The wedding is a slice of married life—even if it is not a piece of cake.

Wedding Pictures to Explore

While driving around Indianapolis on the interstate a few years ago, my wife and I were involved in an unusual accident. A car ran into the right side of our car, coming from behind. We couldn’t imagine how the young woman driver could not have seen our car as she came into our lane from behind us. However, in conversation with her and her female passenger, I discovered that they were looking at her wedding pictures as they drove.

Looking at wedding pictures is fun, but it can get you in trouble if you do it in the wrong way. In this section we are going to look at wedding and marriage pictures taken before the wedding. As the leader, you can invite your couples to look at these pictures with you with great profit.

What groups of pictures do couples need to examine before marriage? What major areas of expectations do persons bring to marriage?

In chapter 3 in the administrative section at the beginning of this book, you read a layout of the principal sets of pictures (expectations and adjustments) which concern developing a wholesome marriage. You can review those, and I will briefly list them here.

In the section where I described the “Contributions to a Healthy Marriage,” we examined our expectations of marriage. These are the sources that shape our pictures. They include what couples bring to marriage from family
of origin, commitment, self-esteem, capacity for intimacy, respect, communication skills, conflict management, and one's ability to grow. Couples can be helped to become aware that these are carrying cases, if not cameras, for the pictures they bring to their weddings and their marriages. They powerfully shape a couple's ability to create and contribute to a healthy and growing marriage relationship.

The actual areas of expectations (or pictures) which partners must compare are listed in chapter 3 as areas of adjustment. What are the major expectations of partners in the areas of money, vocation, family and in-laws, children, sex, social life or avocational interests, and the practice of their faith? We will have occasions to study these areas of adjustment as we move through the sessions.

Hidden contracts about these areas will continue to be discovered as long as a couple are married. Many of the hidden contracts change as marriage proceeds. A couple are greatly advantaged if they know where to look for their hidden contracts and how to recognize them when they are discovered. Again, premarital counseling cannot uncover every hidden contract; it can help couples discover where the largest deposits are buried.

The other major question to explore about the wedding pictures concerns what to do about them. Can a couple change their expectations? Can they compare pictures and bring two sets into the same focus so that the couple do not try to live with double exposures? If the minister believes the concerns are significant, referral to another caregiver might be appropriate.

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The other sessions of this guide and course will focus on both the sources and the areas of adjustment or expectations couples bring to marriage. A heavy emphasis is given to those areas that contribute to healthy marriages, but attention is also given to the specific areas of adjustment. In this session you have an overview of the many facets of marriage preparation which pastors and family life leaders must keep in view as they lead couples to design the homes they want and Christ has for them.

**Pictures to Take Before the Wedding**

Taking pictures during a wedding sometimes seems to become as important as the wedding itself. Couples want to remember how they and their families looked at the time of the wedding. Weddings are supreme photo opportunities.

Another kind of picture can be taken at the time persons are marrying. This type picture comes in the form of personality inventories which can be administered as the couple prepare for marriage. The personality inventories (sometimes called personality “tests”) are useful in helping couples see themselves as they appear by their answers.

The inventories should not be used to label persons so that couples develop fixed views of themselves and their partners. They can be treated as snapshots of personality at a particular time in life.

Their benefit in premarital counseling is to generate conversation with the couple about the differences which may be suggested by the inventories. If couples can be encouraged to see how each may approach reality and decision making and how they differ from each other, inventories become a valuable resource. If they are used to caricature or attack “what's wrong” with those who take them, they can be destructive to persons and to the marriage relationship. Listing available inventories is impossible. Pastors tend to favor the ones they are most comfortable in administering. I will describe a few of the more widely used inventories and encourage you to learn to administer and discuss at least one with couples. Again, the process of discussing the results with the couple is the real value for premarital counseling—not finding a label or a pigeonhole for persons.

The Firo-B, developed by William C. Shultz, is simple to administer and discuss. It measures three tendencies in human personality—control, inclusion, and affection. The three tendencies are measured on the basis of a person's expressed behavior and what one wants in behavior from others. When a couple compares these tendencies, each may discover why certain issues become difficult or easy for their relationship. For example, if one person needs an extreme amount of control, the other person may feel smothered. High affection needs by both may result in an expressive relationship between them. Remind couples that needs and tendencies change as we move through life.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is a more complex inventory but useful in helping persons discover their personality tendencies. It measures preference strengths in contrasts such as extroversion or introversion and thinking or feeling. Four sets of these contrasts are identified, and a profile is developed as a pattern of the strengths from these contrasts. Couples who take the inventory can see the comparisons of their approaches to each of the strengths. The administration of this instrument, as with others, requires training for interpretation. The Myers-Briggs is thorough enough that an in-depth discussion of marriage partners' life approaches can be engaged.

One of the older instruments that has been revised in
recent years is the Taylor-Johnson Temperament Analysis. It has been used to identify traits of a happy or unhappy marriage. It has measurements for traits such as nervous, depressed, active, cordial, sympathetic, subjective, aggressive, critical, and self-mastery. On the basis of questions answered, a profile is developed. When a couple can compare their profiles, they have material that allows them to see how differently they look at the world. Training is also required for this administration.

Other inventories often used include The Mooney Problem Check List and The Tennessee Self-Concept Scale. Marriage Insights, a behavioral assessment service of LifeWay Christian Resources, is designed to help couples understand their God-given strengths and blend their differences. Two others which must be administered by certified persons are the Personal Profile System and The 16PF. Less scientific inventories are also available and may serve well the purposes of discussion when couples are trying to look at themselves.

How these instruments are used by the pastor/leader is crucial. If they are used to highlight problems or weaknesses, they can further damage those with poor self-images. If they can be used as mirrors by which marriage partners can see themselves and the partner more clearly, they can help couples discover more secret contracts.

A pastor or family life leader should use them with a reassuring approach to couples so that they feel secure in seeing themselves. These pictures should be taken with care. Many people say, “I do not take a good picture.” This same fear can be reinforced with personality inventories. Yet valuable information can be more objectively available in their use.

If this manual is used as a training guide for a group, having someone trained in the use of inventories administer and interpret them might be best. No one should be forced or coerced to take an inventory who does not want to do so. The fact that a person may be fearful of taking an inventory is in itself important information about the person. Extroverted persons are less threatened by inventories than introverts.

The best time to administer inventories is at the beginning of the premarital counseling process. This way the inventory can serve as a picture of reference during the discussion of various issues explored in the counseling sessions. These pictures are most valuable soon after they are taken and have less value as time passes. Emphasis on our ability and the naturalness of change should accompany looking at the self-pictures.

**Stay Open to Shape the Wedding**

A final word to both the pastor and the couple as wedding preparations are begun and proceed. While few problems routinely arise in planning a wedding, in those cases where expectations are discovered to clash, an atmosphere of understanding and cooperation can be developed. Room for negotiation and change must be discovered in planning a wedding as in developing a healthy marriage. In this way the wedding becomes a working model for designing the marriage that will bring fulfillment and satisfaction to both partners and also please the Lord. A good wedding is a wonderful way to start a marriage.

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Have a Family Reunion!

Encourage the couple to have a family reunion with you in this session. Tell them you want to meet the members of their families and you want the marriage partner to meet family members that may not have been introduced yet. A reunion can help everyone know who is getting married in the wedding being planned. We know ourselves much better when we know our families. We are different in many ways from our families; but our families have shaped us in important ways, even if we have been separated from them in some way for a long time. Marriage partners certainly know each other better if they know each other’s family.

In this session couples will have a chance to discover and realize how much they already know but had not been aware of about their families. As the leader, you can help couples see their families more clearly and in fresh ways. As much as possible, this session ought to be kept fun and approached as an adventure. I have a friend who has traveled from his home in Kansas to many places in Germany, tracing his family roots; he has written a book about his family origins. We know ourselves best when we know our families.

Looking at Family Albums

Since you cannot have couples actually have a family reunion, the next best plan is to have it by way of a “family album.” I’ve already introduced the idea of sharing “pictures” of expectations in premarital counseling. Let’s use this same approach to help couples get in touch with the families they came from. Many couples get married, and years later one or the other finds out something important about the other person’s family. In one case a wife did not know her husband had a sister until they had been married for some time.

The idea of a “family album” is to help couples look at the people who make up or made up the family into which they were born and/or reared. In family studies, genograms are used to construct a family tree. In that way a person can see who are the grandfathers, grandmothers, father, mother, brothers, sisters, and extended families. You can see what kinds of marriages and persons these were. People are helped by seeing what roles various persons took in their families. In this session we want to begin forming a family portrait for each person.

To develop this family portrait, couples can be helped to ask, “Who were/are the important people in the family?” Who were the people who took up more emotional and relationship space than anyone else? Who got most of the attention in the family?

From here you can have couples give their pictures of these important people. Some were domineering, some were angry, some were controlling, some were alcoholics, some were always victims, and some were family clowns. Memories and impressions partners had long forgotten will begin to surface in this family scavenger hunt.

Closely related to remembering what people were/are like is the question of what roles various people played in the family. As I am writing this, I am attending a working conference in England. When the notice came that I had been accepted for the conference, it read, “A place has been reserved for you.” Families “reserve a place” for every person in the family, and each person is different. Help partners identify the roles which they took or were given in the family.

Couples also need to consider those family members who have a “nothing place” in the family. How did they
get and keep that position? Who was the black sheep? Who was the favored child? Whether their assessments are accurate does not matter. If the family portrait of the person getting married has someone in a particular place, that is reality for that person.

From remembering various family members, the couple can describe for you their family portrait and some of the family customs. Encourage couples to recall the family habits around holidays or important family occasions. Who always did what? In everyday life what routines could everyone count on? Every family develops and follows some rituals. These are important ways of doing routines.

For the past five years our four married children and their families, my wife, and I have met in St. Louis at a motel for a weekend to celebrate Christmas. We have made a ritual of it and thoroughly enjoyed playing together for the weekend. We catch up on how our grandchildren are growing and other family changes such as jobs. Every family has its customs and rituals. Marriage partners know much more about each other when they know the family traditions. Traditions are a way for the family to hold meaning so that members can experience the family.

Still more is to be seen by looking at family portraits together. When couples begin to compare family portraits, each discovers information not known or forgotten about one’s family. Family rules are close to family rituals. Rules, however, are approved or disapproved ways of behavior in families. Family rules usually have words like “you never” or “you always” attached to them. The rules may concern family etiquette or ways of talking to one another. One young man said to me, “In our family, you never took a bite at mealtime until Dad had started.”

Most family rules are unconscious and, certainly, unwritten. Yet everyone in the family knows what they are, and someone responds negatively when one of the rules is broken. The response does not even have to be spoken to be felt in the family or by the person who breaks the rule. Couples will have a harder time identifying these; but once they get started, partners may be surprised at how many of these rules and responses they can recall. Partners also may know the other’s family well enough to help identify rules. These are valuable pictures to share if couples are to know fully each other’s expectations in their marriage.

When couples can fill out their family portraits along the lines we’ve just drawn, another question can be asked: “How did people get what they wanted in my family?” As couples begin to answer this question for themselves, they will discover some surprises. They may be surprised to discover that some got what they wanted by anger; some, by pouting; some, by being victims; and some, by trying to do everything for everyone else so all will be in debt. The family patterns of how members get and use power in the family can be discussed more safely when looking at the whole family portrait.

By now couples can realize the value of being able to look at the family albums. They carry their pictures with them but may never have taken the time to look at the pictures. As a leader, by making this process interesting and nonthreatening, you can help them see the pictures and let them tell themselves and each other what the pictures mean for their marriage.

**Spotting Yourself**

Have you had someone show you an old class picture from childhood? Next the person asks you to find him or her in the picture. Sometimes group pictures are shown, and the person of attention is identified by having a light around the person’s head. These are ways of spotting people. Our next task with couples is to help them spot themselves in their family portraits. They can be helped to ask and answer the question, “What is/was my place in the family?”

Couples who come to be married can be encouraged to explore what growing up as a boy or a girl meant in their families. What were the male roles the family gave to its members? What were the female roles assigned in the family? In some families these are rigid and fixed roles. In others they are more flexible, and in some they are confusing. Marriage partners have pictures of these roles in their minds (and even in their unconscious) which will guide them in deciding roles in their marriage.

What is the significance if, for instance, a young woman knows her family really wanted a boy when she was born? Likewise, how his family felt about the boy (now the young man) who comes to be married affects the role he will take in marriage.

These concerns relate to remembering how a person learned to fit into the family of origin. What did each person feel she or he had to do to fit into the family? Or did the person ever feel that he or she did not fit in; and, if not, why? A young mother reported remembering her mother say repeatedly, “I don’t know why I ever had you.”

Many studies have been done on the influence of a person’s birth order in the family. If a person is the oldest
child, he or she (especially) is likely to have had some parenting responsibilities for the other children. This often results in oldest children being more like caretakers in a marriage relationship.

In contrast, youngest children often become the ones who are cared for. Often they expect to be taken care of in relationships. Middle children are more likely to grow up somewhat isolated or feeling left out and so tend to learn to take care of themselves alone. A friend who grew up as the third child in a family of four girls tells me, “I never felt that I belonged in the family.”

You can help couples reflect with each other about the place of each in their families. This doesn’t mean one or both of them are alienated from their families. However, if one is alienated, acknowledging this would be helpful. A couple may work through what that has meant and will mean for both persons.

While looking at the family portrait with the focus on the persons marrying, each partner may be able to remember how he or she got what they needed or wanted in the family. Some of these routines or processes become so automatic that they fall into the unconscious. To the degree persons can bring these patterns into awareness, they can make good choices about how they arrange their present relationships.

Everyone has and finds ways to get what they want in relationships. Young people may imitate other important persons in the family, as noted before; but getting couples to explore this area together is helpful. In areas like these, people need to be able to describe how they behave. When one is ashamed of the patterns developed, hiding them is the only option.

Another area of adventure is to explore the messages a person received from the original family. All of us carry messages in our heads about what to do, how to be, what to feel, how to feel, and dozens of other messages. Some writers refer to this process as “being scripted.” In other words, early in life we are given a script by our parents or other powerful people about how to live our lives. These scripts are never pointed out, and we receive them without realizing we have them. Nevertheless, they operate in many of our life decisions and how we go about life.

Other writers have been able to identify messages parents give to children. Here is one list the leader can use to allow couples to see if they recognize any of them. Read the list with the couple or group and ask for reaction: “Don’t. Don’t be. Don’t be close. Don’t be important. Don’t be a child. Don’t grow. Don’t succeed. Don’t be you. Don’t be sane. Don’t be well. Don’t belong.”

These messages can evoke memories for couples who reflect on how they were shaped by messages from their families. We do not get rid of these just because we hear them, but they do help us realize we have some commands (pictures) with us about what we ought to be like. Knowing about ourselves from our backgrounds helps us choose what we, as self-responsible adults, want to keep and what we believe we should appropriately give up.

All of this may sound negative to some couples. Assure them that they have received good as well as bad from their families. Also help them realize that their families may have made mistakes or been imperfect families but they were doing the best they knew.

People who are marrying are left with the task of deciding what to do with the negatives or the scars they carry into their marriages. If they never look at or admit the scars, they are likely to continue trying to work out unresolved issues from childhood or previous family experience. They usually do not even know they are doing this. When a person can admit and own his or her scars and life disappointments, that person is in far better position to move past them. The person is freer to work with life and relationships here and now. As pastor or leader, this is one of the most delicate tasks in premarital counseling. Helping persons see where they were in their families is something that is rarely done at any other time. It can be rewarding for the couple and for the leader or pastor.

Find Out Where Their Families Are

Couples who come to be married may be far removed from their families, or they may be much involved with their families. The miles of distance or geographical closeness seems to make little difference about how much a person is connected to family. Certainly, when a person’s family lives in another city or far away, the amount of physical contact varies. That is not as important in premarital counseling as finding out where the persons marrying feel their families are in relation to them. “Where is your family now?” should be asked in both a location sense and in an emotional sense. Some persons are enmeshed with their families, and others are removed.

For some persons who come to be married, their original families have been banished; or the person has been banished by the family. Some of the scars we talked about earlier may be deep. The relationship may have been ruptured, and little or no contact is permitted. Such cases require the tender application of Christian resources.

The pastor has a wonderful opportunity to invite
couples who are marrying to experience forgiveness. If families have disappointed or even hurt persons who are marrying, the time to forgive and overcome the long-held feelings or resentments is before marriage. Christian forgiveness can help persons avoid carrying stored-up negative feelings into a new relationship. If these stored-up negative feelings are taken into the marriage, they will jump out at times the person who holds them does not even recognize. They could do more damage than just to the person who holds them. One of the best gifts a marriage partner can give the other is to forgive one’s family and enter marriage clean and free. Christ offers the help in the heart to forgive.

Once a person sees more clearly her or his place in the family of origin, that person knows much more about who he or she is in relationship to the future spouse. The other person also can see the marriage partner more clearly by exploring this family portrait together. Family portraits are always hanging in the mind. When we look at them openly, they lose some of their power. We can be more grateful for the good of them.

The pastor should help each person describe how she or he is relating to the family of origin now. Being hostile to one’s family is not the only option. It is also not the only option that may create problems for the couple in the future. Being too attached to one’s family can also present a problem for the couple.

In the next session we give additional attention to “leaving and cleaving.” We will also examine relationships with in-laws or the family of the partner. How a marrying person will relate to the partner’s family is as important as how each relates to his or her own family. As leader, you will be able to help couples find out where they will keep their families now that they are marrying.

Are You “Fit” to Be a Parent?

The most natural place to introduce couples to their plans for having children follows a look at their own family portraits. While feelings about being parented are fresh on their minds, they have materials with which to examine their plans for children and parenting.

Couples may need encouragement to discuss whether they plan to have children. This may be an area they have not been able to discuss openly, or it may be something they are eager to share. Couples often have different expectations about children. They are not always willing to tell each other how they really feel. Pastors and leaders need to make the discussion as safe as possible for couples to look together at their potential parenting life. A couple may face some factor that either prevents or makes undesirable their having children. One or both may hide feelings or protect the other about such situations.

The issue of whether to have children may introduce another issue couples need to address. Hereditary factors and other health conditions need to be thoroughly discussed by a couple. A pastor or leader can encourage both partners to have a full physical examination well ahead of the wedding if premarital counseling comes soon enough in their wedding planning. It is a Christian consideration for the person one is marrying to be as knowledgeable as possible about one’s health. A problem for young people is their belief/assumption that they are invincible and health problems don’t really matter.

Darryl had cancer when he was a child. Some of his glands were affected. When he and Susan decided to get married, he wanted Susan to know what his physical condition was—they may not be able to have children. He and Susan went to his physician and discussed what his health status could mean. Afterward they discussed thoroughly what they knew and decided together that they wanted to proceed with their marriage. They entered marriage with the full knowledge of the medical factors.

The pastor has an opportunity to develop a team approach at this stage of premarital counseling. If group sessions are being held, perhaps a medical doctor with Christian values can be invited to lead a discussion on health. A pastor should also be present to refer couples to sensitive physicians who understand the many issues for marrying couples. She or he should be a physician who believes in taking time with patients when they are seeking information.

In addition to medical information from a physician, a pastor may also want to secure resources of medical information pamphlets to give to couples. Many sources of information are available from health professionals in most communities. A pastor does significant work with couples when they are encouraged to move beyond where they were in the development of their relationship.

Parents pass on much to their children. Among these, the physical health and potential disease tendencies are serious concerns for marriage partners. We know more both about genetic sources and the many physical problems that can be transmitted by parents. Couples need to be knowledgeable and realistic about the health they offer their partners.
What Kind of Parents Will You Be?

When couples have been willing to explore both their expectations and their physical condition for marriage and parenting, they are ready to look at the job of parenting. What will they expect of their children? From some of the discussions they’ve had about their own families, a pastor or leader will have many questions to offer them to discuss. What do they expect to do with their children that their own parents did? What will they not want to do with their children that their parents did? Other questions can flow from these.

Some parents expect their children to be everything the parents are and more. Some parents expect their children to be everything they wish they had been. I played football in high school and was too small to achieve anything. When our oldest son was taller than anyone in our family, I encouraged him to play football in high school. He never did enjoy it and quit after trying to please me for a while by playing. Our younger son became a runner and excelled at it because it was his choice. We’ve discovered parents do not even have to say anything to convey their expectations to their children.

Cautions about expectations of children should not be read as encouraging couples to have no expectations for their children. Every parent will develop or have an “ideal” for one’s children. We will look at this ideal again. What is important for couples marrying is that they recognize their expectations for their children and are able to share them with each other.

These expectations include what parents will expect of their children’s behavior. Parents come equipped with an automatic approach to discipline. Couples can discover their own approach to discipline. Couples can discover their own discipline assumptions by reflecting on the wide variety of discipline types. Group discussions are especially helpful in exposing marriage candidates to comparisons of strict versus laissez discipline. Exploring ideas about punishment uncovers assumptions about physical punishment as compared with talking or privilege withdrawal penalties. With this discussion can come an encouragement for couples to reflect on how they were disciplined as children. Partners need to evaluate with each other whether their experiences of discipline were satisfactory. They can also compare their expectations of discipline in this way.

If couples can review their memories of how much they were touched and how they were disciplined, they will have good clues about their own parenting behavior.

With most couples one will be more nurturing than the other. Which is it? This helps them identify what the parenting role of each will be. Who will be “the heavy”—do most of the disciplining? Who will be the “soft touch,” and how will the other feel about that?

In premarital counseling parent training is impossible and impractical. The learning moment for such training has not arrived in most cases. Couples can be encouraged to plan to participate in parent training when the parent phase of their marriage comes. The discussion at this point has the benefit of helping them disclose more of their expectations which may not have been known to each other. Couples need to set some mutual goals for parenting. Setting goals about how parenting will be shared is easier at this point than ever again in their life together.

Another aspect of parenting expectations is the question of who will do what with the children. Beyond the issues of who will do the discipline, other parenting responsibilities will be allotted. Couples may have different assumptions about whose role it is to care for the physical needs of children. Couples are often surprised to learn that a husband assumes the wife does all the physical care. In other cases wives believe husbands should take at least equal, if not the largest, physical care responsibilities. An amazing number of couples only discover these expectations when a child arrives. In a family with five children, the mother assumed all the responsibility for physical care, discipline, and communication with the children. The father said it was his job to make them a good living.

A large majority of mothers of young children are employed outside the home in today’s society. The issue of child care while both parents or mothers are working confronts most families. How does each partner feel about day care? Whether the wife/mother works after the children are born can be another contrast in couples’ expectations. The incidence of fathers staying home to care for children has significantly increased. Just as no one set of roles works for every husband and wife, no universally accepted roles for mothers and fathers apply. Parenting must be negotiated.

The question of what parents will do with their children extends to areas of play and recreation. Do partners feel comfortable to play and learn together with their children? What sorts of activities will children be taught such as sports, arts, or other family interests? Married couples need to be able to play with their children as well as with each other. While decisions about these areas do not have to be made at the time a couple is marrying,
What Faith Will You Give Your Children?

Faith in Christ is a gift of God. Yet parents and family are the primary messengers which deliver that gift of faith. The question for parents is really not, Will our children have faith? Rather the question is, What kind of faith will our children have? Children are incurable believers; they will believe in something even if they do not know fully how to trust.

The richest gift a married couple can give their children is their relationship to Christ and to each other. Giving children the gift of faith in Christ begins with the quality of relationship the child has with mother and father from the day of birth. A child must experience love, trust, and hope before she or he can understand the words taught about the “fruit of the Spirit.”

How a couple expects to practice their faith determines how well they will gift their children with faith. Patterns of faithfulness to their church communicate early to the child what is important in life and to the parents. Routines or rituals in the home, such as grace before meals and reading the Bible or Bible stories, establishes a framework for faith. The time for marriage is not too early for a couple to make some plans and commitments about how they will give their children the capacity to believe in Christ.

Above the practices of faith in the home, the quality of relationships ranks first in nurturing faith in Christ with all its Christian facets. Love, trust, forgiveness, respect, consideration, joy, self-control, peace, and positive communication are lived in the home before they can be taught in the heart. As couples prepare to marry, they can take inventory about how committed both are to bringing these qualities to their relationship.

Faith in Christ must be lived naturally if it is to be authentic. A faith which depends on feelings of duty or even guilt will not communicate itself as a genuine trust for children. The spiritual quality of a marriage is the only preparation a couple can make to give their children a vision of faith in Christ.

In this session we have looked at the larger pictures of who is getting married. Spending some time getting acquainted, as an adult, with one’s own family and the family of one’s partner changes a person’s perspective on self. These family pictures tell volumes about what expectations marriage partners will bring to their relationship. All of us develop patterns for our living. Families have recognizable patterns when we are free to look at them. Premarital counseling is the time to help discover family patterns that seem so natural.

After looking at the families from which they come, couples can be more intentional and conscious about the expectations they will hold for their marriage. The couple will also be better equipped to make decisions about children and parenting in their family. A couple does not have to make all the decisions of raising a family when they marry. They do need to reveal their expectations about children and parenting to each other if theirs is to be a stable relationship. The foundation for a solid relationship and for the ability to parent effectively is a shared commitment to Christ. “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 3:11, NRSV).

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Session 3

Marriage Is “Leaving and Cleaving”

Successfully building a house requires having ways to hold the floors, walls, and roof together. This became a particular issue in building our house. Since our ceilings go to the roof, the architect came in and asked our builder to double the number of supports so the roof would be more stable. He said he wanted to be sure it all stayed together.

What ties a home or a marriage together? Commitment forms the bond for a marriage. This session emphasizes the ingredients that increase commitment in marriages. Commitment cannot be taken for granted. For many persons, marriage commitment has a high emotional price. The task of the pastor or family ministry leader is to help couples “count the cost” of commitment during this discussion.

The unique marriage commitment is expressed in the Genesis description of marriage, quoted by Jesus, “For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife” (Matt. 19:5, NASB). “Leaving” and “cleaving” will be the main features we explore on the trail to commitment.

Helping Couples “Leave”

Stephanie and Chip were married before either was 20. Their marriage seemed to go well at first as they tried to finish college. Then Stephanie’s mother decided they should move back to her community. Next Stephanie’s mother began to pressure her to leave Chip. When that was unsuccessful, Stephanie’s mother told her she would have to choose between Chip and being her daughter. In desperation Stephanie finally filed for divorce and moved back home.

A few years later Stephanie moved to another state to find work. Her mother followed her and bought a house in the same city where Stephanie had married for a second time. Stephanie discovered how hard it is to leave home in some families.

In order to enter a healthy marriage, couples must be able to leave home. Leaving home involves the ability to establish one’s self as a person without needing continuous validation and support from one’s family.

Partners Must Leave to Begin Marriage

Marriage is a life journey, a trip. The trip takes us away from the home in which we grew up if we make progress in life. Unfortunately, for some the trip is an escape from an unsatisfactory home situation. For others, the trip away from home into marriage is a difficult struggle. The ties continue to bind to the home left in ways that impede progress. The journey to marriage takes people into territory that requires a mature readiness.

When is a person ready to marry? The requirements can easily be made so high that no one qualifies. However, couples do need to assess their ability to contribute strength to a marriage and their ability to receive fully the gifts of marriage. Readiness for marriage can be measured in many ways as a person prepares to leave family and join a partner.

Readiness requires, at least, a good start on the process of separating from one’s family. The developmental task to establish a person’s own identity is not always fully begun when persons decide to marry. Persons can marry in such a way as to avoid having to disconnect from family. Or they can transfer dependency to the marriage partner. The prodigal son was foolish in his attempt to be independent, but at least he made a choice to find his own identity apart from his family. He would never have appreciated being a son of his father had he not had to find himself in a foreign land. Separating from one’s
family need not be done destructively, but a distinct identity is necessary.

Along with achieving a distinctive identity comes establishing one’s self-directedness. Readiness for marriage should include a healthy self-acceptance and self-trust. For the Christian this self-authority is based on God’s creation of us in His image. Self-acceptance does not mean arrogance or belief that we do not need God. Rather, it gives an inner strength to use based on our commitment to God’s purposes for our lives.

Christian qualities of life flow from a clear identity. A mature person has a sense of inner harmony with self and with Christ. Christ lives within. Out of His presence streams a sense of appreciation for others, our own lives, and the world in which God has placed us. When we are secure about ourselves, we can be close to other people and relate more meaningfully. This ability is enhanced by an appropriate sense of humor so that life does not always have to be serious.

Yet another facet of marriage readiness shows in taking responsibility for ourselves. When a person is ready to be married, she or he can take responsibility for social relationships. No longer do you need to rely on someone else to select the right relationships. In the same way a person can take responsibility for one moral outlook and practice. A mature person has an inner sense of guidance to decide what is right and act on it.

Spiritual readiness provides an asset for persons marrying. Spiritual maturity is never totally achieved. Yet a person who comes to marriage has an advantage if his or her faith has become personal and not just derived from the family. Spiritual growth is marked by integrating faith in Christ into all of life's decisions and actions. Yet a spiritually mature person does not need to supervise the spirituality of other persons such as one’s mate. Devoted Christians need to avoid spiritual manipulation.

A significant mark of readiness must include a willingness to take financial responsibility for one’s self. Couples or marriage partners who are still financially dependent on their families will not easily be emotionally independent. Financial and vocational self-reliance are important symbols of personal maturity and a healthy identity. Money and emotions run close together. A person may profess that he or she is not that interested in money; but if someone else is supporting that person, he or she is still dependent. Personal wholeness requires the willingness and ability to take care of one’s physical needs as far as is possible.

Leaving is more than packing one’s suitcase. It carries the achievement of a clear identity and the acceptance of responsibility for one’s life. When a healthy personality has been realized, the way a person acts gives evidence. That person is guided by clear thinking and respect for others. A mature person can take initiative to meet one’s own needs with a healthy and Christian love of self and to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39, NASB).

**Partners Must Leave to Sustain Marriage**

A major task of newlyweds arrives in managing the couple’s new relationship with family and with in-laws. Until marriage, in most cases, the primary relationship of each partner will have been with the family or origin. Many parents of brides and grooms assume that the relationship with them as parents will remain primary for the married child. If leaving takes place and the marriage is to be healthy, the relationship with the parents must become secondary. The primary relationship is in the marriage of two persons. Often the couple will have to do most of the work to accomplish this renegotiated relationship.

The secure and separated personal identity we envisioned earlier is necessary if newly married persons accomplish this new relationship with family. Without achieving a comfortable, secondary relationship with one’s family, a marriage will be difficult to sustain. The newly married person who has not left “father and mother” (Gen. 2:24) will find himself or herself in inner conflict and, sometimes, outer turmoil.

Where difficult issues arise with the family of husband or wife, who should take initiative to manage the relationship in a different way? As a rule, each partner should handle the marriage relationship with one’s own family. Otherwise the new son-in-law or daughter-in-law becomes the family enemy or troublemaker. Additionally, the son or daughter gets torn between mate and family.

Occasionally, of course, the issue is between an in-law and a husband or wife. On personal issues the two persons in conflict should work through to reconciliation. The development of full personhood and a healthy marriage is harmed if either partner hides behind the other in dealing with one’s family. For a wife to say to her husband, “You tell Mother and Daddy why we can’t do that” is to surrender responsibility for one’s self. The goal for married couples is to seek and achieve a comfortable place for all concerned. Many couples and families find no difficulty in adjusting to new roles and relationships.

Discussing the renegotiation of relationships with family members and in-laws can leave the impression that all such relationships are difficult. That need not be so. In-laws can be helpful to newlyweds. From a wholesome
relationship with in-laws, a newly married person can discover and even appreciate the in-law family customs. The customs and actions may not be adopted, but each partner can have a better understanding of the other’s formative life.

In-laws can be helpful, also, as newly marrieds move to an adult-friend relationship with in-law families. Where couples live close enough for regular contact with in-laws, some recreation and social activities can help forge new relationships and experiences of mutual interest.

Because relationships with in-laws and families can be difficult for newlyweds, the couple must be alert to signs of relationship trouble. The clearest sign of an unworkable relationship appears when one or both of a couple repeatedly go away from contact with the family with bad feelings. Feelings usually give the signal that relationship stress is occurring at some level. Families that engage in emotional “games” with each other will produce bad feelings without being able to name what is happening. In-laws have been known to engage in subtle put-downs that seem innocent enough on the surface. Couples can be careful about being too sensitive but also need to be alert to behaviors that impair their relationships. Good relationships with family and in-laws continue to enhance the maintenance of a healthy marriage.

Relations with in-laws have pressure points. Among them, holiday observance, such as Thanksgiving and Christmas, can be somewhat intense. Every family establishes customs and rituals for observing holidays, even those who profess to have none. These holiday observances carry large meaning and emotional investments among family members. The newly married couple is faced with the task of deciding an observance schedule for each of the families. From these they can construct an observance custom of their own. Both married persons must have made the transition from dependence on family to self-reliance. Then they will be able to decide how holidays will be observed in their marriage. In a healthy marriage family efforts to dictate observance will be resisted.

Another pressure point from families and in-laws is the message that the newly married couple “owes” the family something in loyalty or obligation. Ideally, families should love their married children with unconditional love. Unfortunately, some families attach conditions or price to the love they offer their members. The status of having left home is useful when parents communicate an obligation to conform to the wishes of the family.

Some parents may attempt to force a couple to adopt longstanding rules, values, or customs. This relates to the first two pressure points with families and in-laws. Rules or values may have served the family well, but each couple must decide their own standards of behavior. They must decide what issues they value as basic. Persons who have had trouble leaving “father and mother” will experience turmoil in deciding what is Christian and appropriate for their marriage in the face of parental pressure.

The point of leaving one’s family is not to disown one’s heritage and, certainly not, one’s family. Rather, a clean and clear leaving positions a person to be able to reunite with one’s family as a responsible adult. Healthy families will receive back their married adult children freely, recognizing their independence and new relationship.

Is “Cleaving” Really Necessary?

Married couples need to maintain both individuality and togetherness. The biblical formula of leaving and cleaving is psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually correct. Couples who are marrying need help in understanding and achieving each skill. During the last half of this session, we will investigate the potential for togetherness which both partners must bring to marriage. In marriage persons need to be able to be alone and together.

Cleaving Means Commitment

One Independence Day David and Julie had made no plans. David liked to do odd jobs around the house on his days off. Julie enjoyed going to the pool with her friends. Julie asked David if he would like to go to the pool with her. He said that, if she didn’t mind, he’d just as soon do some repairs he had wanted to do at home. She said that was fine with her. Each had a pleasant day, doing what each liked. That evening they fixed dinner together and enjoyed a pleasant evening. They had learned the secret of being alone and together without being anxious.

The two processes of leaving and cleaving are connected. Some persons achieve independence or individuality without attaching to a new relationship. They develop a stand-alone status. For some young persons, however, a new relationship becomes their means of leaving home. They cannot turn loose with one hand until they have taken hold of someone else with the other hand. Thus for some, cleaving can help them complete leaving. Many persons who are marrying have as much trouble cleaving as they do leaving.

Cleaving results from commitment. In the biblical sense commitment leads to covenant in marriage. From Genesis
2:24 and Matthew 19:5, the words used for “cleaving” (King James), dabak in Hebrew and kollao in Greek, mean “joined to,” “united with,” or “fastened to.” In relationships these words carry the idea of intense commitment.

Relationship commitment creates marriage as a covenant. Couples who are marrying may not be familiar with the idea of covenant, but helping them understand covenants can be linked with life experience in marriage.

The covenant idea is basic in the Old Testament. Every relationship of God with his special servants and with groups is described as covenant. Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Solomon, and David are among the covenant individuals as well as Israel and Judah as covenant peoples in the Old Testament. New Testament writers emphasize the covenant idea of Jesus' teaching and later epistles. Prophets pictured God's relationship with Israel and Judah as a marriage covenant (see Jer. 3:20) and spoke of marriage as a covenant (see Mal. 2:14). Paul's description of the marriage relationship as parallel to Christ's relationship to the church expresses the covenant idea. From these teachings couples can be shown that not only is their relationship to each other a covenant but it is also a covenant with God.

In fact, their individual commitments to Christ are a model for their covenant with each other. Just as a person must totally give one's self to Christ and be completely accepted by Christ, so it is in marriage. This is the vital link in making a marriage Christian.

Couples can now be helped to understand the meaning of “one flesh.” “One flesh” is the biblical description of the marriage covenant. As we discussed earlier in the administrative guide section, “one flesh” is much more than a physical union of two persons. It is the joining of two personalities into a new unity of relationship. Every facet of each person should be available to be united in “one flesh.” Partners do not lose their individuality and do not become so fused that they cannot exist without each other. However, “one flesh” is the most complete union available in human experience. The oneness of marriage becomes a covenant of two complete persons to each other in Christ. This union is not based on law, duty, or necessity; it is based on freely given commitment of two people to each other.

**Commitment Can Be Difficult**

Based on the ideal of commitment in marriage described above, can commitment be assumed in marriage? Regrettably, it cannot. Many barriers arise on the road to commitment. Society often pushes up barriers to commitment by pressuring people away from commitments. It raises norms and standards that discourage commitment so that a person is always free to seek another relationship.

Fears that roam inside persons who are marrying may cancel commitment capacity. Some fear the long-term permanency in marriage. Persons who have had experiences of meaningful relationships that did not last may fear to grasp a commitment of lifelong devotion. Fear of the unknown often stalks those who are about to enter marriage. Having never been married or having never been married to this person, the marriage partners may withhold commitment.

Fear of the unknown linked to fear of one's self can also block commitment. Some sincere persons fear they may not be capable of sustaining a relationship with the commitment of a marriage. This fear relates closely to the fear of the requirements of marriage. A partner may believe that more will be expected by the marriage partner than he or she can do or can share.

As a result of these fears, a person may marry with severe reservations. Holding back prevents a full commitment to the marriage and to the other person. Couples can be led to discuss openly their fears that cut off commitment in marriage. Many persons have told me they did not commit to their marriage at their wedding.

Couples who are marrying can be encouraged to realize that commitment requires the courage to risk. The courage necessary to risk yourself in marriage can only come from discovering a love deep enough that it is worth the venture. Marriage commitment is not possible until a person finds another person who becomes the object of absolute devotion. When two people discover in each other that each can be happy for life seeing the other person happy, they are ready for commitment. If persons marry believing the other person is to make them happy, they are committing to themselves, not to the other person.

Commitment in marriage is to the happiness and well-being of the other person. Obviously, this requires that both persons are prepared to make such a commitment. Commitment contributes generously to a marriage. Commitment allows a marriage to be rich. It makes a relationship safe for the necessary ingredients of a marriage. When commitment is present, marriage partners can safely love, trust, have confidence in, respect, and accept each other. Commitment is the only condition where these qualities can grow in a marriage.
Saying, “I Do”

Why do traditional marriage ceremonies require the couple both to say, “I do”? Why not, “I will” or something else? Because “I do” signals a present commitment to the other person in marriage. If commitment accompanies marriage, it must be expressed. “I will” or something else may leave partners the option of deciding when the commitment will begin sometime in the future. How do you say, “I commit myself,” in a marriage? Some may want to say, “I commit myself if . . . .” Conditional commitment will never develop into a “one flesh” covenant of marriage. Couples can discover many good ways to say “I do.”

Couples Say “I Do” with the Wedding Ceremony

Ceremonies are more important than many young people realize. Couples, and especially brides, are often enthralled by the anticipation of the wedding spectacular and elaborate dress, floral and pictorial arrangements. Regrettably these sometimes overshadow the actual wedding ceremony.

Ceremonies and rituals accomplish some tasks for us as nothing else can. Ceremonies take our feelings of the event we are observing and pass them through the ritual in a way that intensifies the feelings. Our memories are then fixed about the meaning of that event. With the ceremony comes a deeper commitment to the marriage and to the other person. It is a passage from being a single person to being a person united in marriage. After rituals we always see ourselves differently if we have entered fully into a ceremony that has meaning for us.

Some people resist ceremonies and say they do not matter. The call to commitment may be the reason for resisting. Ceremonies call us to open commitment. Those who do not want to commit themselves fully and publicly may discredit ceremonies as a way to avoid commitment. The wedding ceremony moves marrying persons to the new covenant of marriage. The ceremony is a declaration to each other, to other people, and especially to God that their commitment to each other in Christ is complete.

As a pastor or family life leader, encourage couples to go over the ceremony that will be used in their wedding. Varieties of ceremonies are available. Some couples want to write their own vows. If a pastor agrees to this, he will want to go over what is said carefully with the couple. The commitments spoken in the ceremony should be Christian and meaningful. A partner or a couple may be fascinated by a ceremony heard or seen somewhere but which has little Christian content.

Going over the ceremony with the couple offers an opportunity to explore the meaning of the words used. This opens the way for talking about the theology of marriage without needing to use technical, theological language or words. Discussing the ceremony can underscore the meaning of “one flesh” as a covenant with Christ. When couples have talked about the words and the meaning of the ceremony, the wedding as a commitment ceremony will have more impact. Some pastors use the ceremony discussion to introduce many of the adjustment areas of marriage. However it is done, the ceremony should be used to help the couple see their wedding as a worship event and not just a social display. The way the wedding ceremony is planned can help couples say “I do” with Christian commitment.

Couples Can Say “I Do” with Their Use of Time

Money management is crucial for a satisfactory marriage. Time management is just as central for building a marriage. When commitment is real in a marriage, time for each other is available.

Couples getting married may have noticed acquaintances who spent large amounts of time together when they were going together. After marriage, some of the couples spend little time together. They give the impression that the wedding ended their interest in each other. A partner may act as if giving the other person time is unnecessary after the wedding. How persons spend their time expresses their values.

Giving time to each other in marriage is giving themselves. Obviously, couples cannot suspend all other activities and work when they marry. However, they can plan significant amounts of time in which to share the processes of unity in marriage. Even the Mosaic law certified the importance of couples having time with each other in marriage by stating: “When a man is newly married, he shall not go out with the army or be charged with any business; he shall be free at home one year, to be happy with his wife whom he has taken” (Deut. 24:5, RSV).

“Quality” is not enough when time is allocated to marriage. Time must be given in sufficient quantity if the quality is to have any meaning. “I do” includes the commitment to give each other significant time for marriage.

Couples Can Say “I Do” with Their Ears and Hearts

Commitment in marriage requires couples to be able and willing to listen to each other. Listening builds a marriage by allowing couples to know each other better every day. Without listening, couples may be able to get some
impressions of what the other person is like, is thinking or feeling; but the information is always inferior. Listening requires time to be spent with each other.

Many persons get married with little skill for listening. They grew up in homes where little real listening took place. On their jobs they have spent more time defending themselves or their work than in listening to fellow workers. The hurriedness of our society discourages listening. Listening happens in a marriage, it is usually because partners have been willing to learn listening skills. Rarely is listening automatic. As we will see when we explore communication, listening is difficult in marriage for a number of reasons. Listening can be learned and become more of an art to a relationship than a mechanical skill.

Listening is significant in marriage because it silently says commitment values the other person. The starting point of being able to listen to another is first to value that person. Couples say “I do” with their hearts. When a partner is treasured in the heart, his or her words become sterling. The thoughts and feelings of marriage partners are sacred gifts they give each other, provided they are offered and not imposed. Commitment in marriage includes the decision to receive what the other person is willing to give unless it is destructive to the relationship and the persons involved. Saying “I do” with ears and heart gives commitment a quality of being authentic.

**Couples Say “I Do” with Respect for Each Other**

Valuing one’s partner is impossible without a decision to give that person high regard. Real marriage commitment results in and is supported by deep mutual respect.

Paul’s advice about how to build a marriage relationship and how to think about Christ and the church begins with giving respect. The word for submit in Ephesians 5:21 and in later verses can be translated “respect.” In this verse Paul said, “Respect one another.” In this use of the word, to “respect” (translated “submit”) means to look up to the other person. The looking up is not done on the basis of the other person’s superiority or greater authority but on the basis of not thinking “of yourself more highly than you ought to think” (Rom. 12:3, NRSV).1

Where respect is operative, the relationships may be significantly enhanced. Respect is an attitude in which partners can learn from each other. In a respectful relationship two persons honor the other’s worth. They protect each other’s privacy. Each values the other’s opinions. They are sensitive to each other’s needs. Respect reinforces commitment between married persons in ways few other gifts can do.

Commitment has many voices and numerous expressions. When it is present, the evidence is unmistakable. Commitment furnishes the cable that crosses every chasm which would divide “what God has joined together.” When love fades, when stress steams, when success storms, when dreams die, when catastrophe crushes, commitment will hold the hands together however stretched the arms.

Cleaving is necessary. Cleaving is impossible, however, if marriage partners have not progressed to the ability of being together. The together ability is achieved when partners are able to be by themselves comfortably and to be with others contentedly. When marriage partners have completed their journey of leaving home, they are ready to embark on the adventure of cleaving to another person. As we have seen, leaving and cleaving have many dimensions. Basic to leaving is one’s inner security and self-responsibility. Basic to cleaving is the capacity for commitment which generates deep and meaningful relationships.

Pastors or leaders can introduce marrying persons to these journeys and developments; they cannot ensure their accomplishment. In premarital counseling, opening the doors of leaving and cleaving is enough. Couples may return later to explore the interior meaning of these tasks. Most couples will assume and profess to having completed them at the time of marriage. Only later will some begin to realize how primitive were their efforts before marriage.

Yet the couple should be equipped with the knowledge of the higher stages to be scaled.

When a person can leave father and mother and cleave to a husband or wife, he or she will usually be a few years past the wedding date. Fortunately, neither the Bible nor the courts of law require perfection or completeness in anything in order to be married. In premarital counseling you can hold up goals and ideals, but most will be achieved after the wedding rather than before. The role of the premarital counselor is to point the way into the journey.

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Couples need to take two important steps when they marry—“leaving” and “cleaving.” These are addressed in this and the next sessions. The issues of becoming an individual and achieving meaningful togetherness surface in every phase of premarital counseling. In this session we explore how individuality affects what a person sees when she or he looks at oneself. Self-esteem touches every facet of building a marriage.

**Help Couples Check Their Self-Esteem**

Early in marriage couples need to know how much self-esteem each brings to the marriage. Premarital counseling offers a rare opportunity for self-esteem to be evaluated. However, in premarital counseling a pastor can easily reduce the amount of self-esteem a person brings to marriage. Persons of low self-esteem will listen for remarks that further reduce their self-esteem.

Couples need to reflect on self-esteem as a component in deciding whom to marry. Mate selection is greatly affected by the self-esteem of partners. Persons of low self-esteem will be attracted to persons whose self-esteem is equally diminished. Partners may have different ways of expressing their low self-esteem. One person may seem submissive and the other domineering, but both can be expressions of low self-esteem.

On the other hand, persons of good self-esteem will respond to partners who are confident and secure. Pastors cannot change the self-esteem of couples who come to be married. In premarital counseling couples can be led to assess their self-esteem and prepare to be objective about it in their marriage.

Self-esteem also determines how couples relate to each other. Persons of low self-esteem are often easily hurt by being criticized, neglected, or taken for granted. Partners will need to know that persons with low self-esteem often require far more reassurance in a relationship than secure persons need.

Persons of good self-esteem can give themselves to others without losing self in the giving. When a person feels good about self, he or she will not look to the partner to make up what is lacking in the self.

Life goals are another way to check self-esteem. Partners who bring low self-esteem to marriage will often carry low goals for themselves or be clinging in their marriage. As a result, low self-esteem often expresses itself in selfish goals for immediate gratification. High self-esteem permits marriage partners to acquire and pursue challenging goals.

Couples need to check their self-esteem for a number of reasons, but these are some of the first issues. Life decisions made on the basis of low self-esteem will lead to greater unhappiness for both partners in the future. Pastors have an opportunity to be faithful mirrors by which those who come to be married can look at their self-esteem.

**What Builds Self-Esteem?**

Pastors or family ministry leaders cannot have much lasting effect on self-esteem from premarital counseling. Self-esteem is too imbedded in human personality to be altered in a few brief sessions. Pastors can help marriage partners learn the sources of their self-esteem and how they can help each other build it.

Who and what are the builders of self-esteem? Families are the primary builders (or destroyers) of self-esteem.
In the second session we reviewed the power of families to shape people. The self-images people carry with them are often most solidly formed by their families.

Both by model and by message, families fashion how family members photograph themselves. If parents are confident, assured, and at peace with themselves, children have an advantage in building self-esteem. If a parent or a family carries a high level of anxiety, children may lack self-assurance. Self-esteem is caught more than taught, but messages from family also determine self-esteem. Earlier we looked at some of the messages which can deteriorate self-esteem.

Families function as mirrors by which self-esteem is constructed by a person. The reactions and reflections which families give one’s memory become a blueprint for drawing one’s self-esteem. Families are powerful instructors to tell marriage partners who the person is and what one should think of oneself.

Beginning with our families as the primary building contractors of self-image, what are the materials used to build the person who builds a marriage? Here are six kinds of materials which can contribute to a healthy self-esteem. Some of these come from lectures given by Anne Davis, who was dean of the School of Social Work at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky.

**Spiritually, Self-Esteem Is Built from Our Image of God**

That we are created in the image of God deeply affects how we look at ourselves. If our mental and emotional image of God is that He is vindictive, angry, and cruel, that will shape what sort of persons we believe we ought to be. If we believe God is love and has created us for fellowship with Him so that we can work constructively in the world He created, our ideal of life will be a positive one of for ourselves.

To be created in the image of God is to be created for wholesome, worthy purposes. Such an understanding allows us to say emphatically to ourselves, “I amount to something to God; He has a meaningful plan for my life.” When partners come to marriage with a secure faith in God’s place for them in the world, they have a foundation for solid self-esteem.

Self-esteem that comes from seeing oneself with the image of God within feeds the current of virtue about the way one lives. When a person violates one’s ethical or moral code, self-esteem runs out the bottom of a person’s life. We can only respect ourselves and enhance our self-esteem when we live by the Christian moral light we have. A person who lives with open or secret violations of moral standards cannot maintain a healthy self-view. Forgiveness from God and from self are prerequisites to regaining self-esteem if conscious offenses have been committed.

Self-esteem has a spiritual base. The Holy Spirit reassures our hearts, when we live by the Spirit’s guidance, that we are the children of God. Why not feel good about ourselves?

**Love Builds Self-Esteem**

Every person must be loved and be able to receive love for self-esteem to accumulate. If God is love, to be loved by Him and to receive love from Him is natural. Loving others is also natural. To be loved tells us we are valued, and to be valued is to have value in ourselves.

If a person is to be loved in marriage, that person needs to have experienced love before marriage. Otherwise, the love in marriage will be difficult to receive. Every person develops his or her own way of wanting to be loved. Marriage partners need to be able to state how they like to be loved for it to have the greatest meaning.

If couples are to build each other’s self-esteem, they need to know what the other’s picture of being loved looks like. Self-esteem cannot be fed without love.

**Body Image Controls Self-Esteem**

All societies have standards of beauty and attractiveness. Those standards are always linked to body image and appearance. In American society the standards are strongly shaped by Miss America and body-building displays. Society drills young people with the connection between body image and self-esteem.

Young people who are advantaged by heredity or exercise and diet discipline to meet popular standards of attractiveness receive support for self-esteem. Persons who do not meet those standards because of heredity, malformation, weight variation, or other accident may suffer greatly in self-esteem. Because of the physical dimension of marriage, body image often has its greatest effect on self-esteem at marriage time.

Pastors can enhance the growth of self-esteem by encouraging partners to express sincere admiration for each other’s appearance. How a person dresses or cares for appearance is often a clue about self-esteem. Marriage partners can be reminded that marriage should not end their concern to appear as pleasant and attractive as they can to each other. Neglect of appearance can signal that
partners no longer are actively working at their romance. While couples ought to reassure each other that each accepts and appreciates the other regardless of body image, each should do all possible to maintain and improve appearance for the partner.

**Experience Can Solidify Self-Esteem**

The person who marries with a background of some satisfying experiences of life has assets for good self-esteem. Successful relationships tend to multiply themselves. Whether they are experiences of work, friendships, vocation, or education, they reinforce a person’s self-esteem.

The person who lives with a sense of blessing in life will find self-esteem heightened. When a person can positively interpret life’s events, he or she functions with good self-esteem. A healthy spiritual life encourages this. When we feel supported by God and can sensibly trust the world about us, our self-esteem is working for us. The pastor or family life leader can profitably encourage couples to discuss their different approaches to life’s experiences.

**Competence also Produces Self-Esteem**

The ability to do something well enlarges self-esteem. Our accomplishments are another set of mirrors we use regularly. If we believe we are good at something, we can more easily like ourselves. When people see themselves failing or as failures, their self-esteem is reduced.

As a premarital counseling leader, you can guide couples to list tasks each does well. In fact, couples can help each other by each naming tasks the other does well. Often persons who have an unusual competence assume everyone can do as well. We have a friend who has an amazing ability to recognize unusually valuable jewelry and furniture. He thinks his competence is nothing unusual. Reviewing competencies with each other also strengthens a couple’s relationship.

I helped my four-year-old grandson climb part of a mountain. When we returned to the house, he said to his mother, “I’m a good mountain climber.” Competence builds confidence. A person who can do some tasks well feels strong and has a sense of being in charge of life. Feelings of inadequacy often spread from one area of life to another. The more areas in which a person feels inadequate, the more the feelings will affect how well a marriage partner can function in relationships.

**Power Reinforces Self-Esteem**

Power is the ability to make a difference in a situation. Powerlessness is the sense of being incapable of changing anything and having no significance in a situation or relationship. Person who believe they have no power have little potential for self-esteem.

Couples need to see that power is an issue of marriage. When couples compete for power, the marriage becomes a conflict. When couples grant each other power, marriage becomes empowering. Both partners need some power in the relationship. Each needs to feel and experience that he or she can make a difference with the other and in the marriage. Respect is required for marriage partners to give each other power.

Marriage candidates who have grown up believing they have little or no power will tend to give their power to their partner. Decision making demonstrates where power resides in a relationship. Planning the wedding reveals this pattern vividly. Persons of low self-esteem are paralyzed in decision making. The pastor or family life leader can encourage couples to talk about where each has power in the relationship. When each can exercise an appropriate power, each reaches a greater potential for self-esteem.

These are the principal building blocks for self-esteem. A mentally and spiritually healthy person will act in ways that enhance self-esteem. That person will also contribute to the self-esteem of others. Self-esteem is not the only component for building a healthy marriage, but it certainly is an asset.

**Self-Esteem Has Destroyers**

Marriage partners need to know what destroys self-esteem as much as how to build it. The destroyers of self-esteem can almost be found by looking at the back side of what builds self-esteem. Self-esteem, for many people, remains fragile. For some, not much is needed to empty the self-esteem reserve.

In session 6, we will explore the strengths and skills of communication. Through good and positive communication, couples can learn to avoid using self-esteem destroyers. Seven deadly sins against self-esteem can be easily identified. We will name them here so the pastor can help couples recognize them when they meet them in their relationship.

**Criticism**

Many families regularly practice the negative communication of criticism. Criticism is the tool of verbal attack. When a person grows up receiving a steady stream of criticism, self-esteem will have little opportunity to take root.
As a result, such a person will come to expect criticism even when none is intended. Hypercriticism leads to hypersensitivity. Pastors can lead couples to evaluate the degree of critical atmosphere each has breathed in life.

Patterns of criticism vary. Some persons are critical of others or have been criticized about all areas of life. Others have known criticism for appearance, mental ability, physical skill, or some other focal point. Persons in any situation where criticism has been constant will have little capacity for genuine self-esteem. Criticism is the acid that eats away self-esteem.

**Perfectionism**
Perfectionism works much like criticism in its effect on self-esteem. The difference lies in the source; perfectionism comes from within. The two are often connected; criticism can breed perfectionism. An oppressive inner ideal forms the core of perfectionism. Marriage partners can be led to look within and discover that one or both carry an inner set of standards that can never be met. With such a standard within, a person will always be left with the feeling of having fallen short.

Self-esteem will have no room to develop where the inner person is fully occupied with an ideal larger than a person’s performance capability. Self-esteem will be withered by the heat of an unrelenting demand for perfection. A conscience is beneficial, provided it does not destroy the person it is to guide. Many couples will need help in accepting their humanness without any encouragement to laziness, mediocrity, or low standards.

**Failure**
Earlier we saw how competence contributes to self-esteem. The back side of competence is failure which destroys self-esteem. When we attempt something, we extend our personal well-being in doing it. If we are unsuccessful, we feel it on the inside; and our self-esteem is drained away. Failure becomes a body blow to self-esteem.

The perfectionists we talked about above are especially subject to feelings of failure. Such a person will almost always think she or he has failed or failed to do something adequately. Certainly moral failure in which a person violates some ethical standard results in a reduced self-esteem. When a person does not perform or accomplish something attempted, self-esteem is eroded. When relationships do not work out as expected, failure chips away at self-esteem. Failure is often in the eye of the beholder but is no less detrimental to self-esteem.

**Fear**
The fearful person will be incapable of constructing a wholesome self-esteem. The fearful person is frequently threatened. Each instance of fear robs a person of self-esteem strength. Every threatening wind blows self-esteem out of the hands of persons who live with chronic anxiety. Premarital counseling offers a good opportunity to test how fearful marriage partners are because something new is being faced. Fearful persons are so occupied attending to anxiety that no strength is available to build self-esteem. Such fears may be deep-seated. They may not be eradicated in premarital counseling, but an important step has been taken to identify them. Fear terrorizes self-esteem.

**Anger**
Self-esteem is not always destroyed by anger, but it does impair the self-concept. In some instances self-esteem is required for a person to be able to use anger. A person must think enough of oneself or personal concerns to be able to use anger to defend against threats. Without some self-esteem we are totally defenseless.

On the other hand, anger does signal that a person is threatened. Persons who find themselves continually angry are threatened easily because they have low self-esteem. The energy that is used to maintain anger certainly drags down one’s self-view. Anger is an enemy to self-esteem because it wears away a person’s emotional reserves. Marriage partners can become conscious of what their anger does to their own and to the other person’s self-esteem.

**Wrong Time Frame**
Persons who live too much in the future will have difficulty building self-esteem. Living in the future interferes with self-esteem by generating anxiety about what is going to happen. Certain kinds of negative anticipation can prevent self-esteem from accumulating. A person loses the capacity for a sense of well-being by dwelling on an uncertain and threatening future.

In the same way, persons who live too much in the past are hampered from self-esteem strength. Living with regret over missed opportunities or misdeeds wastes self-esteem on history that cannot be repaired. Persons who carry all the past with them so that they examine it every day will be so emotionally exhausted self-esteem will escape.

Couples who come to be married can be encouraged to
live in the present. As indicated when we look at families of origin, partners will want to know their past and their families. They will also want to make plans and set goals for the future. However, if either of those becomes the burden of the present, self-esteem will have no room for expansion. Self-esteem requires living fully in the present with appreciation for the past and hope for the future.

**Living Without Forgiving**
This attacker of self-esteem is related to living in the wrong time frame. It is living in the present in the wrong way. The person who uses energy to nurse hurts and cultivate resentments will have no space to plant self-esteem. Carrying unforgiveness places a heavy burden on one’s personality, and the personality is shaped by it.

The unforgiving person feels devalued if one carries the unforgiveness. In maintaining the unforgiveness, persons validate the worthlessness they resent from the injury. The cost for carrying unforgiveness has a higher interest rate for the one who cannot forgive than the one not forgiven pays. Pastors are in the special place to urge and teach couples marrying to clean out their resentment bins and dismiss unpaid emotional notes they carry.

These seven deadly sins against self-esteem may not have exhausted the possible list, but they are certainly the major floods that wash away self-esteem. When a person is coming to be married, he or she should be so in love as to want to give the partner the best person one can be. Authentic and solid self-esteem need not be wasted on the dragons we’ve named here. By naming them, the pastor may be able to help a person who entertains one or more of these to give them up. Good self-esteem is a treasure to be valued for persons who are marrying.

**Good Self-Esteem Stabilizes Marriage**
Self-esteem determines much about marriage including whom a person chooses to marry. Persons of low self-esteem have difficulty becoming full partners.

Pastors can lead marrying couples to discover the contributions which good self-esteem (as opposed to just high self-esteem) can make to a marriage. Following are some of the benefits of good self-esteem when couples come to their wedding.

**Good Self-Esteem Reduces Anxiety**
Partners will rarely recognize it, but most couples come to marriage with anxiety carried from anxious families where they grew up. Self-esteem helps reduce the amount of anxiety a marriage partner brings. Pastors help couples by guiding them to a path where each contributes to the self-esteem of the other.

Self-esteem reduces anxiety by promoting personal security. When a person possesses a sense of well-being, he or she has less need for anxiety. As anxiety recedes, confidence grows. Christians are encouraged to live confidently in their faith “Be strong (confident) in the Lord, and in the power of his might” (Eph. 6:10). Obviously a person needs to be confident about the right areas of life.

**Good Self-Esteem Supports Individuality and a Clear Personal Identity**
The separating out to be an individual, we noted earlier, requires good self-esteem. A person can be an individual with independent thoughts, approaches, and direction only when self-esteem is strong. Otherwise a person is always trying to become what some outside influence says to be.

A person is strong when she or he can be clear about who one is, how one lives, what one likes and does not like, and where one is going in life. A strong person has a sense of self-authority that is solid but not dominating. Self-esteem shows through when marriage partners can make conscious choices to give themselves, as whole persons, to their marriage.

**Good Self-Esteem Increases Effective Communication**
As we will explore in a later session, effective communication determines the success of a marriage. The strong persons we’ve been talking about are persons who can communicate well with their partners. Self-esteem contributes to communication by giving partners the ability to take initiative in communication. Otherwise each one will wait on the other to carry communication and never reveal one’s own needs or wants.

Good self-esteem also strengthens a person so that he or she can hear the other person. A secure person is one who is able to listen and respond to others’ concerns. Premarital counseling must major on assisting couples to learn positive and effective communication.

**Good Self-Esteem Permits and Enhances Intimacy**
When a person can value oneself, that person can also invite others to value him or her. When a person cannot value self, that person will have difficulty receiving value
from others. Further, when a person can properly value oneself, she or he can value another in marriage. Intimacy is based on valuing and being valued. If a person continually says to oneself, “I’m not worth anything,” the other person will hear, “Don’t value me.” In the next session we will look intently at the importance of intimacy, but its base is self-esteem.

Good self-esteem also allows a person to reveal the self to others. Intimacy requires being able to let another person know you extremely well. To do this couples must learn to trust each other with their most private and treasured feelings. When couples can achieve this kind of trust, they are given freedom to explore their relationship in ways that deepen it. Premarital counseling is a time for understanding the relation of self-esteem to the necessity of intimacy for marriage.

**Good Self-Esteem Eases Conflict Resolution**

Every meaningful relationship will have conflict at some time. In a later session we will spend some time learning how to manage (not avoid) conflict. Self-esteem is especially important in the ability to handle and resolve conflict. Many couples flee conflict because one or both have so little self-esteem they would be destroyed if they tried to face conflict.

Persons of good self-esteem have the strength to negotiate and, where necessary, compromise in conflict. The right kind of self-regard also helps a person care what happens to the other person in conflict. Extremely low self-esteem or high, selfish self-esteem may leave a person only trying to survive or win the conflict. Good self-esteem moves a person toward a win-win approach to conflict. In premarital counseling good self-esteem can be offered as a basic resource for building and rebuilding relationships when conflict appears.

**Good Self-Esteem Equips for Parenting**

As indicated earlier, the time to begin preparing for parenting is before the wedding occurs. It is part of planning to be married. Like marriage itself, one of the best resources couples bring to parenting is the positive self-esteem they have.

Children need help in many areas; and some of them, such as discipline or encouragement in the face of deep disappointments, claim all the self-esteem parents have. Parenting will usually be done poorly if self-esteem is lacking. A self-assured, confident parent communicates security to his or her children, unless the confidence is used to tower over others and one’s children. Pastors are doing right when they encourage couples to find their inner strength so they can give strength to their children.

These are the six ways self-esteem brings stability and solidarity to marriage. Great changes may not occur in the amount of self-esteem a couple has during premarital counseling; it can become a priority which they seek to build in themselves and each other.

**Self-Esteem Has Its Limits**

In this session self-esteem has been presented as a powerful resource for good marriages. Along the way we have been careful to point to “good” self-esteem. I have affirmed good self-esteem and encouraged you as a pastor or family life leader to guide couples toward it. Yet serious cautions must be attended in assessing self-esteem.

The validity of self-esteem has limits. Self-esteem can be dangerous for both the person who has it and for the marriage she or he enters. Persons need to recognize the difference between good self-esteem and dangerous self-esteem.

**Biblical Warnings About Pride**

No exact parallel between self-esteem as we speak of it today and the biblical qualities of persons exists. Yet the negative side of self-esteem is spoken of in the Bible. It is called pride.

Pride and selfishness have always been problems for human beings as the Bible describes them. From the garden of Eden to the pride of Satan in Revelation, unbridled self-conceit turned into self-deceit. Paul warned, “For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves” (Gal. 6:3, NRSV). From the Old Testament comes the wisdom, “Pride goes before destruction, And a haughty spirit before stumbling” (Prov. 16:18, NASB).

Christians are cautioned not to carry an exaggerated sense of their own self-worth, “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned” (Rom. 12:3, NRSV). In short, the Bible warns sternly against false and inflated self-esteem.

Oppressive self-esteem can impair and injure a marriage. Self-esteem that is so self-centered it focuses solely on one’s own desires and welfare can damage relationships. A person whose self-esteem dominates others and competes for dominance in a relationship will destroy
a marriage relationship. Aggressive persons who come to be married should be challenged about what their forcefulness will do to their coming marriage.

In addition to those whose self-esteem is excessive, certain types of persons with personality extremes also exhibit high self-esteem. Persons who are delusional about their abilities or status or importance carry impenetrable self-esteem. Others may be rigid in personality and even suspicious of anyone who challenges their boilerplate self-esteem. Such self-esteem does not contribute to marital stability. Persons of low self-esteem are often controlled by such persons. Pastors are among the few persons who can help couples reflect what extremes of self-esteem present in a couples’ relationship may mean.

Unfortunately, the person with exaggerated self-esteem will rarely accept feedback from anyone. In such cases, working with the partner who is under such domination may be the better course of premarital counseling. While extolling the virtues of good self-esteem for marriage, a pastor must be sensitive to situations where self-esteem is a cover for blatant and exploiting pride.

In this session we have explored the sources of good self-esteem. Married persons can help make up for each other what may have been lacking in the self-esteem building of a marriage partner. Self-esteem can be more easily destroyed than built. Couples need to be aware of the threats to self-esteem that either may impose on the other. Self-esteem has much to contribute to a healthy relationship. However, that contribution depends on the self-esteem of both partners’ being healthy. Unhealthy self-esteem will result in an unhealthy marriage.

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Intimacy: How Close Should You Be?

Guiding couples to prepare for marriage calls pastors/counselors to lead them to a balance between individuality and togetherness. Healthy self-esteem helps partners to be capable of standing alone. The capacity for intimacy equips them to be able to be together. In this session we will concentrate on togetherness in marriage. Intimacy makes love operative in marriage. Without intimacy love stays on the surface of a relationship.

Intimacy creates the atmosphere in which love can be given and received in marriage. Love cannot be experienced without intimacy. We will search for avenues to intimacy so couples can be invited to travel important paths together.

The Paths to Intimacy

Couples who come to be married do not have to be told that togetherness is one of the aims of marriage. They will have to be told how to achieve and maintain togetherness. Unfortunately, courtship often leads many to believe they already have it ensured. Some will mistake the need for physical contact or desire for emotional security for intimacy. Many would never believe they may not feel as close a while after their wedding.

We will try to help them expand their capacity for intimacy by mapping out several roads for them. I will briefly describe five or six paths and then look in-depth at three prominent ones.

Physical/Sexual Intimacy

Physical intimacy can be more than sexual intimacy. Touching, physically playing, and other forms of contact need to be sexually or primarily sexually directed. While we are never without our maleness or femaleness, physical contact without sexual meaning is possible.

For many who are marrying, the mention of intimacy translates into sexual union. As a pastor, expanding the concept of intimacy for couples opens up additional dimensions to their relationship. However, sexual intimacy can be a symbol for all the other kinds of intimacy. Later we will examine how sexual intimacy can enhance the total marriage relationship.

Unfortunately, sexual encounter can occur in marriage without intimacy. Physical and sexual intimacy can be developed in a marriage as can other kinds of intimacy.

Intelectual/Mental Intimacy

Couples can become aware of and expand their intellectual/mental intimacy. Simply sharing ideas with each other is the start of intellectual/mental intimacy. Partners may be intensely attracted to each other but never discuss ideas together. Couples need to be able to talk about their thoughts which may range as wide as the world. One’s opinions and thoughts about politics, values, money, relationships, vocations, and dozens of other topics are fruitful for intellectual intimacy. Check with couples being married to see if they have meaningful intellectual intimacy. Without intellectual intimacy marriage can become boring and unengaging for partners.

Emotional Intimacy

Sharing feelings consists of more than just telling each other how partners feel. Many couples cannot even do that. Lead couples to see another depth level to emotional intimacy. They have potential for understanding each other’s feelings. Persons are often attracted to partners who have a totally different emotional system and set of responses. A person may have little idea how their future marriage partner experiences life.

Emotional intimacy occurs when couples can emotionally trust each other sufficiently to tell the other how life’s experiences feel. Emotional intimacy also requires part-
ners to care to find out what life is like for the other. Genuine emotional intimacy can enrich the marriage relationship, but it is often neglected after the wedding.

**Social Intimacy**

Married couples can enjoy being together socially. Engaged couples may have little trouble enjoying social life together. But couples sometimes neglect each other in social life after marriage. Encourage couples to talk about the models they see in friends and relatives regarding social life. Which do they think have good social intimacy?

Social intimacy does not require clinging to each other in public. Couples who are secure can be together socially and still give each other the distance to have conversations alone with friends. Marriage partners who are so socially dependent on each other they cannot function alone in social settings do not have healthy intimacy. Social intimacy permits couples to share their friends and feel comfortable together in public.

**Spiritual Intimacy**

Later we will look at the development of spiritual intimacy. Here we will simply describe spiritual intimacy so couples will know what they are seeking.

Spiritual intimacy can be described as “the communion of spirits.” That is, beginning with each partner’s experience in Christ, both have a spiritual base in life from which to begin. From there couples can share their understandings and discoveries about their relationship to Christ with each other. They can talk about their spiritual struggles. Spiritual intimacy means praying, studying the Bible, worshiping, and meditating together. When spiritual intimacy is real, couples develop a spiritual unity that cements their relationship.

When couples have surveyed the intimacies described above, they are ready to understand the biblical concept of marriage as “one flesh.” The unity of one flesh includes all of these areas of their relationship. Two distinct and separate personalities enter a relationship of intimacy. Each contributes the self without giving up one’s personhood. The more facets of personality contributed to the one-flesh relationship, the more the biblical ideal is realized. Each partner is fully available to a one-flesh marriage.

The intimacy of a one-flesh relationship is more extensively described by Paul in his sketch of Christ and the church or the marriage relationship in Ephesians 5:21-33. He emphasized mutual respect, loving care, commitment to well-being, and encouragement of growth (purifying) in a relationship so close both are enhanced by it. The driving force of one-flesh intimacy is a Christlike love focused on each other. Pastors can help couples see more than a stilted biblical phrase in the expression “one flesh.”

**Helping Couples Grow in Sexual Intimacy**

One of the most difficult areas of premarital or postmarital counseling concerns guidance in sexual preparation. Pastors and family life leaders have difficulty knowing what a couple or each partner knows about sex.

Almost any assumption a pastor may make about the knowledge or experience a couple brings could be mistaken. The problem intensifies if a pastor seems to be probing to find out what partners know or bring to their marriage. Added to this is the problem of seeming to be too interested in a couple’s sex life. On the other hand, to ignore the concerns and questions of sex in marriage preparation is neglect of duty. Given these limitations and barriers, how should a pastor approach sex adjustment in marriage?

Few facets of married life need Christian guidance more than sexual life. Most sex education comes from the media or society. From these they have received messages that sex is only recreation without permanent commitment. Or they have been indoctrinated with the commercial view that presents sex as an exchange for something else one desires. Family and parents may have said little or nothing but communicated negative messages about sex.

As pastors and family life leaders conduct sessions in this difficult area, they need to check themselves to see if they are completely comfortable and constructive in their own attitudes and experience. Above all, pastors and family life leaders should not use premarital counseling as an occasion for meeting their own frustrations or sexuality needs.

Three important standards can guide a pastor or family life leader in sexual instruction for premarital counseling. The three goals for couples to achieve are: (1) a positive, grateful attitude toward sex and sexuality; (2) a considerate and understanding approach to sex in marriage; and (3) an openness to adjust to changing sexual needs in marriage. These foundations have solid Christian strengths which pastors can lead engaged couples to discuss and understand.

**A Positive, Grateful attitude Toward Sex**

Negative attitudes toward sex are easily developed. Parents’ reactions to anything sexual can communicate a repressed attitude toward sexuality. Childhood and youth experiences of sexual exploitation by adults or others can
scar a person's outlook on sex. Society and entertainment media support the approach that sex is interesting and desirable only if it outside marriage. The message basically states: Sex is good if it is sinful. Sex and sexuality have been taken away from the church and Christian teaching. A person may face circumstances in which pastoral guidance in sexual attitudes must be given to the couple.

A positive attitude toward sex begins with seeing human sexuality as part of God's intentionally good creation. After the Genesis account of God's creating humankind as male and female, along with the rest of animal life, comes this inspired summation: "And God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good" (Gen. 1:31, NASB). Sex and sexuality in its original intention was to be a blessing and gift to human beings. Marrying couples need to affirm or recapture this basic attitude.

A positive, grateful attitude toward sex can be enlarged by leading couples to see sacred and joyful purposes in sex and sexuality. The primary purpose of human sex is communication not procreation. Otherwise humans would have sexual interest only at times of potential conception as do animals. Through sexual relationship married couples can express a profound and committed love. The sexual relationship becomes the most physical expression of intimacy for married couples.

An additional purpose of wholesome sex in marriage is self-discovery. The biblical expression for sexual intercourse is “to know.” Sex in marriage is knowing one’s partner and oneself. The sexual relationship can help a male understand aspects of maleness in contrast to femaleness and what femaleness is for the woman. Likewise females can discover aspects of femininity that contrast with masculinity. In addition, two people who have sex with each other can have a unique knowledge of each other.

Finally, another of the good purposes of sex is the potential for expressed love to produce new life. Out of intercourse by husband and wife can come the new creation of a child in conception. God has created humankind so that, in the communication of love to each other, their lives are extended in the birth of a child. All couples are not required to have children. And procreation does not have to be the intention of every sexual communication. But the human race and families are to be continued out of mutual love expressed by husband and wife.

**A Considerate Approach to Sex in Marriage**

Pastors can help partners realize they may start at different places about sex and its meaning. Males are usually more direct about sex and sexual needs. Females may be more indirect, and sex may be more symbolic for them. Conflict in marriage about sex can easily result from couples’ not being able to understand each other and be considerate.

While Paul was discouraging marriage because he expected Christ to come back soon, he encouraged couples to be considerate in their sexual needs, “Do not refuse one another except perhaps by agreement for a season” (1 Cor. 7:5, RSV). If sexual union is to communicate intimacy, couples must find a mutually satisfactory way of expressing married love.

Couples can be encouraged to talk about their sexual needs and desires to each other. Some partners will be self-conscious about talking about sex to their partners. Others will find it more natural. If they cannot talk to each other, they will have to guess what is considerate and understanding for the other person. They will often misread each other.

Understanding and consideration in the sexual relationship follows the same path as all other facets of marriage. Each should try to meet what the other expects so long as it does not infringe on the respect and personhood of the other. Intimacy depends on the sexual union’s being a safe experience for both.

**An Openness to Adjust to Changing Sexual Needs**

Preparation for marriage includes preparing for changes that will occur in marriage. Couples may assume their sexual interests and needs will remain the same throughout marriage. A pastor can alert partners to be sensitive to the inevitable changes in their sexual communication.

No one can predict what form the changing sex needs or interests will take. The level of interest may increase for some partners as they become more comfortable with each other. Others may discover periods of lessened sexual needs. Female interest frequently heightens a few years after marriage. In other cases, vocation, responsibilities, or stresses may decrease the ability of couples to respond to each other. Couples who develop an ability to communicate and adjust to each other’s sexual interests early are at an advantage. Otherwise partners may prejudge each other and withdraw from each other in sexual intimacy. Intimacy can be maintained in marriage if couples can communicate and adjust to the changing circumstances of their marriage.

These are some of the ways in which couples can approach marriage with a wholesome outlook toward sex. When sex is received with gratitude, God is glorified in His creation. When the good purposes of sex are realized
and accepted, a married couple can express their love with joy and fulfillment. Pastors and family life leaders can help marriage partners redeem sex and sexuality as can few other persons.

**Lead Couples to Develop Spiritual Intimacy**

Another challenging facet of premarital counseling is leading couples to develop their spiritual intimacy. Pastors, as ministers called by Christ, are in a unique position to do this. Most couples expect that the pastor will be interested in their spiritual lives. Yet many partners who come will also be resistant to any discussion of spiritual intimacy. Four areas will require attention in this process.

**Help Partners Bring the Spiritual Self to Marriage**

Some persons naturally bring the spiritual self to their marriage. Other persons may feel this spiritual self is too personal to expose, even to their partners. Others may never have thought about having a spiritual self to bring to marriage. Indeed, some may deny they have a spiritual self. Everyone does have, even it is an unbelieving and untrusting spiritual self from a Christian point of view.

Those who have barriers against bringing their spiritual selves to preparation for marriage will need special understanding. Fear that the spiritual self one has will be rejected blocks some from revealing their faith. For others, an uneasy uncertainty about one’s inner faith makes exposing or talking about spiritual life too high a risk. Talking about spirituality is more difficult than discussing sex if one is not comfortable with faith concerns.

Another obstacle for some persons who come to marry is their separation from the faith of their family or from the church they attended as a child. Often a person’s conflict with family expresses itself in decisions about faith and spiritual life. If a person has spiritually left the church that once held him or her, engaging in conversation about one’s faith journey may be difficult. Pastors can help those persons who feel alienated from spiritual life and their own spiritual selves.

Effective encouragement to bring the spiritual self to marriage is a delicate skill of grace and initiative. The pastor needs to make premarital counseling a safe place to bring the spiritual self. If couples discover they will be lectured or their spiritual expressions rejected or corrected, few will risk revealing faith.

Pastors and family life leaders need to accept the faith partners bring as their right to believe. A pastor does not have to violate his own faith to do this. If the spiritual life of the couple can be approached without rejection or denunciation, spiritual trust will develop. Good counseling requires the counselor to avoid showing shock or surprise at statements with which he may not agree.

Our Lord’s style of ministry is a model for spiritual life caring. He encountered many people who had misguided and crippled faith. In every instance, when someone wanted spiritual help from Him, He took their faith as He found it. Reflect on His manner with Nicodemus, with the woman at the well, and with Zaccheus. He loved them in their partial and incomplete faith and invited them to a wholesome walk with God in complete commitment. In most instances some part of the unfinished faith they bring can be the springboard for a larger leap of faith.

Yet the Christian pastor must not violate the gospel of redeeming love by trying to force decisions for Christ where the Holy Spirit has not prepared the way. To insist on a verbal assent to faith in Christ to satisfy the pastor’s sense of spiritual responsibility may result in a person’s barricading self away from Christ for many years or forever. Overcoming spiritual-life barriers results from sensitive pastoral care of those who come to be married.

**Lead Partners to Enrich Lives with Spirituality**

When partners bring their spiritual selves to marriage, they have something valuable to offer the other person. The spiritual life of one can enrich the spiritual life of the other.

Pastors and family life leaders can lead partners to spiritual enrichment. Couples can be taught to accept the other person as a spiritual self. I am not suggesting that a partner must agree with the other person’s spiritual life. However, if two people are going to be married, they must be able to accept one another spiritually. Otherwise, the pastor or family life leader might question whether they ought to marry. We will return to look at this later.

Pastors can foster a healthy marriage atmosphere by encouraging couples to explore how Christ is forming them. How has Christ shaped their lives? What does being a Christian mean to each? How does each think his or her faith will affect their marriage and goals in life? Christ always shapes our lives for His purposes. In what ways does this couple see that Christ has formed their lives for an enriched marriage?

People have different spiritual styles just as much as they have differing emotional styles. For certain persons, faith is more of a logical understanding of life. For others,
faith is more a feeling experience of acceptance and warmth. Two people of different spiritual styles can be complementary to each other if they can learn to appreciate the other’s contribution.

Other spiritual differences are the ways people feel at home worshiping or doing devotions. Some are liturgical and symbolic in their worship life. Others are more spontaneous and expressive about communion with God. Exploring spiritual differences and potential mutual contributions can help couples know each other better.

Set the Couple on a Path to Grow Spiritually Together

Faith and spiritual life cannot be forced. Spiritual life must come from the heart because it resides in the heart. The pastor doing premarital counseling must develop the skill to guide couples in nurturing the spiritual life from the heart for both partners.

Because respect is so important in marriage, couples must demonstrate that respect regarding matters of faith. Each partner must have the right of individuality in faith as in other areas of life. Couples can be reminded that respect of individuality means they will not invade each other’s spirituality uninvited. Yet, as noted before, the spiritual self of partners cannot be withheld from each other if intimacy is to grow. Encouraging growth and appropriate respect for individuality requires a delicate balance if both are to be achieved.

Couples can be set on a course of deciding some spiritual goals together. How do they want to help each other grow spiritually? What does each need from the other if spiritual growth is to occur? Couples can discover paths they can walk together in spiritual adventure.

What place will prayer have in their relationship? Under what conditions will each feel comfortable having prayer together? silently? both leading? one leading most of the time? Is prayer and meditation so private for one or the other that one would prefer having separate devotions?

Bible study is an obvious path for feeding the spiritual self. How can it be done profitably for both partners? How can they share what God is saying to each in Scriptures? Worship offers another useful pursuit for spiritual development. Couples need to make plans about how they will share worship as much as how they will share household responsibilities. The spiritual self is not mature until a person invests in some type of Christian service. What service for Christ does each find fulfilling to one’s gifts?

Another important area of spiritual life is the ability to interpret life’s events. Each person finds some meaning in the unusual events of life—the good and the bad. What does finding the other mean to each in spiritual terms? What does each think is the meaning of life? Does either partner feel a special calling in life that will need to be shared with the other? Spiritual intimacy above all is the ability to share the meaning of life’s deepest experiences.

Support Couples in Looking at Spiritual Compatibility

One of the first issues for families and marriages in the early church was spiritual compatibility. Corinthian believers were concerned about whether a person who becomes a Christian should continue to live with an unbeliever (see 1 Cor. 7:12-17). Paul’s advice to the believer was to continue in the marriage, provided the partner was willing. If the partner was not willing, separation—and presumably divorce—would be necessary; but the believer was not to try to prevent it. Spiritual compatibility was given a high priority.

A Christian ideal of life is to be “equally yoked” (see 2 Cor. 6:14ff). While Paul did not directly apply this principle to marriage in this passage, it is often interpreted as referring to marriage. Even without the application from Paul, the principle is a broad one which could appropriately include marriage. Believers need to develop partnership relationships with persons with whom they share faith, values, and approach to life. If couples begin marriage with conflict in foundational issues such as spiritual life, their relationship can never be complete.

The pastor’s role is difficult where spiritual division separates couples. The couple will tend to minimize and deny to themselves the differences or the importance of them. If partners have come to the place of planning their wedding without being able to resolve their spiritual incompatibility, they will often resist efforts to examine future problems. More often they will say, “We’ve decided not ‘to let that be a problem between us.’” In essence they have decided to live in marriage while ignoring the most basic values each of them holds.

Gently but firmly the pastor needs to help the couple reexamine their realities. What will they do about sharing worship, or has one said, “I will give up the practice of my faith to be married”? Spiritual life affects the use of money in both giving and spending. Spiritual life can determine relationships with the family of one or both. Spiritual life certainly shapes how children will be reared and nurtured.

If the couple can prayerfully find their way to a shared experience in Christ, they can move toward a solid marriage. If the couple cannot resolve the gaps in their
spend more freely and sometimes want to use debt to means to getting objects one wants or needs. This person ing approaches are paramount. Others see money as a for some persons is a symbol of security. Saving, conserv-
ations. One person will be intent on saving as much as possible. The other may have a hobby or other interest all kinds of secret contracts about each other's expect-
process of planning a budget, engaged couples will discov-
Planning a budget has more value than just deciding it is to lead couples to plan together the use of their money. The goals they have to marry. At some point a pastor may have to make a judgment about whether the marriage looks viable and communicate that to the couple. The pastor may also have a personal, ethical decision to make about whether he can appropriately officiate at a wedding where spiritual incompatibility is paramount from the beginning.

The spiritual self of each partner does come to the mar-
riage. In good marriages the spiritual self of each is open and consciously present. When the spiritual self of part-
ters is hidden or denied to each other, intimacy is restrict-
ed to a narrow meaning. Spiritual intimacy furnishes great resources for a fulfilling marriage for Christian couples.

**Plan Paths to Monetary and Material Intimacy**

Intimacy is not often associated with money and material concerns. However, a close connection exists between intimacy and money or the material objects we have and use. Money serves as a symbol (and sometimes a substitute) for love in our society. The way a person uses his or her money reveals a person's values and commitments. As we saw in the last discussion of spiritual life, values and commitments are the inside of intimacy. Thus, if couples cannot share values and commitments in the use of money, their intimacy will be shaky. Pastors preparing couples for marriage will lead partners to explore how they share values. As a couple work at their jobs, their labor is working toward some goals. The goals they have grow out of the values they hold. Their material values must be shared values if they are to work for the same goals and share an intimacy about the work they do.

A major task of premarital counseling, therefore, is to lead couples to plan together the use of their money. Planning a budget has more value than just deciding ahead of time where the money will be spent. In the process of planning a budget, engaged couples will discover all kinds of secret contracts about each other's expectations. One person will be intent on saving as much as possible. The other may have a hobby or other interest on which she or he expects to spend all the extra money.

Couples need to be encouraged to plan a budget while they are getting ready for marriage. They will discover much about each other's style of handling money. Money for some persons is a symbol of security. Saving, conserving approaches are paramount. Others see money as a means to getting objects one wants or needs. This person will spend more freely and sometimes want to use debt to get what she or he wants ahead of time. Few couples have the same style in handling money. Budgets are good instruments for ferreting out basic attitudes toward money and material possessions.

Couples can be led through a simple process of budget planning. Have each partner separately write a budget for the major areas of living requirements. Then they can compare their budgets and work toward a combined and compromised plan. Encourage them to use this budget for three months and keep track of where they vary from the budget adopted. After three months they can go back and make several necessary and important decisions about their spending plans. They can discover if they have been realistic in their planning. At that point they can rewrite their budget, based on realistic income and realistic spending. They will then have a budget they can use.

Keeping in mind the pressures of advertising and peer pressure for accumulating conveniences or the latest styles, couples must face the tendency to overspend. One of the most prevalent enemies of good marriages is disagreement or pressure about financial conditions. Credit is extended so easily that couples can find themselves overcommitted quickly as they begin to establish their home and style of living. Pastors and family life leaders will do couples large favors by helping them get in charge of their spending and their money. Saving and giving ought to be high on the priority list of Christian couples as they begin sharing material intimacy. The pattern a couple adopts at the beginning will have a lasting impact.

Beginning at the center with “one flesh” marriage, intimacy runs in many directions in the marriage covenant. In this session we have noted a partial list of intimacy’s dimensions. We have focused on three of the most significant dimensions by exploring sexual, spiritual, and material kinds of intimacy. Intimacy, like marriage itself, can continue to grow and develop as long as a couple is married. Love, respect, and trust are essentials if intimacy is to flourish. The skills of communication also are imperative for healthy intimacy. We turn next to search for positive communication.

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The reason some couples think they cannot communicate is because they cannot talk to each other. Talking is only one of many ways to communicate, and it is often the least effective. Couples learn to communicate with how they look at each other; their body language; their behaviors; their tone of voice; their silence; and, as we have seen earlier, their sexual relationship. Communication goes on all the time.

The heart of communication centers on meaning. When partners communicate, they share meaning. Everyone experiences situations and life differently. When two people communicate, they cannot exchange experiences, but they can help each other understand how each experiences what is or has happened.

Communication, in this way, becomes the link in a relationship. Physical systems, such as computers, are linked by energy flows. People systems are linked by communication flow between them even if words are not spoken. Communication involves both people who are communicating. The sender must select the signals, language, or words to send the message. The receiver has a certain way of receiving the message that is unique to that person. A message is given in a particular situation that also affects how the message is sent and how it is received. Thus, when a message is received, it must be interpreted.

Considering all the components of communication where communication can break down, an amazing amount does get through. The sender must select the means; the means must carry the intention; the situation colors the sending and the receiving; the receiver has certain meanings for the message signals; and then the receiver must interpret what has been received. The chances for messages to become garbled are great.

Communication is further complicated by the fact that we can use messages about messages. That is, the manner in which a message is sent becomes another message. “I’ll
get you a drink” can be much more than an offer to furnish another person a liquid to consume. The message about the message can be, “I’m eager to do this for you,” or it can be, “I only did this for you because you demanded it.” Our messages about our messages are often more powerful than our messages themselves.

The kind and quality of relationships in a marriage or elsewhere are determined by the communication employed by two people. When married persons complain they cannot communicate, they usually mean they cannot use words to give positive communication. They can probably communicate negatively, but negative communication is destructive and harms relationships. Positive communication builds up other people and the relationship. We will give some attention to both kinds of communication.

**Teach Newlyweds Positive Communication**

Teaching persons who have grown up and practiced using negative communication how to communicate positively can be more difficult than teaching a new language. Persons who communicate negatively (as well as those who use positives) find their style of communication to be natural. Communication any other way seems unnatural. In this session couples are furnished a checklist by which they can rate their communication. The 10 features can help couples learn and ensure positive communication in their marriage.

1. **Positive Communication Is Clear**

If marriage partners are to get and give information, they must use clear communication. Since words are the clearest set of signals we can use to communicate, words used by couples need to be clear.

Clear communication allows others to know what is happening within us. We can tell them if we have learned something, if we feel something, or if we expect something from someone. Clear communication is required if others are to know what we want or need, what our intentions are, or how situations appear to us. Positive communication has a minimum of “noise” or distortion in it.

The courtship period often deceives couples into believing they can and should read each other’s minds. They become so accustomed to reading other signals they give each other that they may fail to use clear word messages to ensure communication. A false assumption one or both partners often make comes in this form: “If you love me, you’ll know what I want.”

Clear communication cannot contain mixed messages. Such messages are given in a manner that is contrary to what is said in the message. “I enjoy being with you” can be said in a way that sounds like a defense against being charged that one does not enjoy the other’s company. Spoken only as defense, the statement will give the partner little reassurance. Clear messages carry the same intent at all levels of communication. Couples can help each other practice clear communication.

2. **Positive Communication Is Personal**

For communication to be personal, the person communicating must be willing to own the communication as his or hers. Outside of giving information, most messages are expressions of opinion, feelings, or perspective. A big step in effective communication has been taken when partners can learn to say “I messages.” Messages begin with the speaker talking about feelings, desires, or opinions by saying, “I feel . . . .” In this way the speaker owns the message and the feelings with it.

Some advantages come with “I messages.” A person can be an absolute authority only on one’s own feelings and perspectives. No one can refute what one thinks or feels even if others believe thinking or feeling that way is absolutely wrong. The advantage is the authority of one’s subjective experience. Another advantage is that “I messages” are not invasive of others’ feelings or opinions. This kind of message allows room for others’ perspectives. “I messages” are also accurate or precise. They describe only information on which a person has a firm grasp.

With personal messages one does not have to try to establish or defend the objective nature of the message. We slip into that when we declare something by attack. Thus, one might say, “You never help me. . . .” The speaker has taken on the task of describing reality for the other person as well as one’s self. Such messages are invitations to conflict because they call for the other person to refute the statement. Personal messages confine themselves and are much easier to give and to receive.

3. **Positive Communication Looks for the Positives**

Most people have good intentions, even when what they say or do hurts someone or turns out badly. Certainly most married couples want to help each other or do good for each other. If not, communication will be of little value to the marriage.

Positive communication tries to uncover the positive even if a partner is giving negative feedback. A conversa-
tion about one partner's interrupting or correcting the other in telling something has a positive side. The partner corrected might say later, “I know you want to help me be accurate and get all the story, but I am embarrassed when you finish my statements for me.”

Expressing the positive side should only be done when a person can be sincere about it. Learning to see and state the positive side can be difficult for some persons. However, few situations are totally without some positive actions, intentions, or desires. In conflict, when the positive side can be expressed, the other person will be less defensive. Angry feelings can be lowered. Giving a genuinely positive meaning to some action or statement can help the other person be aware of hidden positives in the situation.

4. Positive Communication Shows Respect

The New Testament teaching about attitudes and communication among Christians offers solid respect. Jesus demonstrated respect for those he healed, those he taught, and those who were social outcasts. The New Testament tells us that God respects every person and does not show partiality (see Acts 10:34; Rom. 2:11). Rather, the Father values all of us (see Matt. 6:25-34).

The word for submit in Paul’s letter is best translated “respect,” such as in Ephesians 5:21-22, and 33. Respect also appears repeatedly in the Epistles where Christians are urged to show honor and respect to one another, such as “outdo one another in showing honor” (Rom. 12:10, RSV). Husbands are to show respect (honor) to their wives (see 1 Pet. 3:7). The leader may want to have couples look at others instances of teachings on respect.

When couples communicate to each other with respect, they increase the self-esteem of the other person. Couples can give each other nothing more valuable than respect which communicates the value of the person being addressed. When partners communicate in respect, they make safe for each to have unique feelings and opinions. When having opinions is safe, partners can more freely share themselves with each other. Even when couples disagree, if respect is present, the conflicts are more easily resolved. Positive communication depends on couples having a genuine respect for each other.

5. Positive Communication Gives Support

Christ’s followers are taught in the New Testament to support one another by “bearing one another’s burdens.” Couples who help each other carry the load each must use positive communication. A unique gift partners can give each other is encouragement in the tough times.

Supporting each other also occurs when helping each other reach mutual or personal goals. Nothing is more discouraging for either a husband or a wife than for the other to be negative about goals a person is trying to accomplish. Positive communication says, “I believe in you.” The goals may be vocational, educational, financial, spiritual, or service, but they are all helped by positive support.

Support is often communicated just by being present for a person. Giving advice is not necessary unless the partner asks for it. If a marriage partner wants to share the struggle with her or his partner, listening may be positive communication. Couples who learn to support each other in the everyday course of life will be at an advantage when crises come. Every couple will have some difficult times. Learning to stick together and stand up for each other can take couples through life’s defeats. When the winds blow and the floods come, married persons need support from within their relationships.

6. Positive Communication

Expresses Appreciation and Affirmation

Affirmation and support are close together. Support gives reinforcement for what a person is doing or experiencing. Affirmation gives confirmation for the person and her or his qualities. When we affirm someone, we declare the person’s worth. Positive communication practices expressing the value in one’s partner.

The pastor or family life leader can remind couples that most persons more easily and more naturally tell others what’s wrong than what’s right. Negative feelings are spoken or acted readily, while positive ones are often assumed and kept quiet. In fact, some families fear giving compliments lest children or mates become conceited.

Giving affirmation comes from a basic attitude toward others. Persons who are comfortable building the self-esteem of others give affirmation easily. Jesus’ special ministry was in giving affirmation to people who usually did not receive it. His immediate recognition of Nathanael was, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile” (John 1:47, RSV).

Appreciation ought to flow in a Christian marriage. Partners can be thankful for and to each other. Positive communication should count the ways the other person is pleasing to a marriage partner. Have the couple (or couples) tell each other five traits for which each has admiration and appreciation of the other.
7. Positive Communication Listens
If communication involves both giving and receiving, then listening is as important as speaking for positive communication. Most people are far better at giving their meaning to others than they are at receiving meaning from others. Listening is an intense effort to grasp your partner’s meaning in what is said.

Listening, like the other marks of positive communication, begins with an attitude. It is an attitude that values the other person so that what the person says and means is important. Listening also requires that the listener turn down the volume of one’s own inside thinking or feeling to hear what the other person is saying. Finally, it calls for the willingness to put oneself as totally as possible in the other’s place. In this way, the listener can come closer to grasping what the other thinks or feels about the statement made.

When a person listens, that person becomes a responder in the communication. A responder becomes active in the communication process. The listener communicates understanding and acceptance. A person’s tone, facial expressions, and actions in responding give the other person value. If a person has listened, that person should be able to give back to the other person the important ideas and feelings which have been expressed.

In positive communication listening requires more effort than speaking. To be effective, couples must practice their listening skills with each other. Having the ability to hear each other well is significant in building a relationship.

8. Positive Communication Accepts Feedback
Complete communication cannot be only one way. A feedback loop is required for communication to be effective. The feedback loop allows what one person says to another to be monitored and evaluated.

We have already introduced couples to one form of feedback in affirmation and appreciation. That is positive feedback. Negative feedback can also be valuable provided it is not offered as criticism. Both kinds of feedback give partners an opportunity to see how others hear and experience them. Negative feedback is valuable only if the person giving it refrains from attack with it. Thus, it must be given as the speaker’s opinion, not as fact.

One advantage of giving feedback is that it provides opportunity for clarification. Since communication is often contaminated with distortion, we need some means of removing distortions. When partners listen to each other, they interpret what they hear. Without feedback the interpretation can be misleading.

Feedback requires mature and secure partners. If a husband or a wife is hypersensitive, feedback will be felt as destructive to the relationship. When a couple’s relationship is secure, they can know that each has the other’s well-being in mind with feedback. However, saying, “I’m just telling you this for your own good,” is a sure sign that the message will hurt and the other person is not ready to receive it. Valuable feedback occurs when persons ask for it and it is given with positives spoken, even if some negative is included. Constructive feedback is probably the most difficult part of positive communication.

9. Positive Communication Offers Forgiveness and Accepts Responsibility
Pastor and family life leaders can help couples with the realities of married life. One of those is the reality that disappointment and hurt occur in all marriages. Two people cannot live together in the intensity of marriage and for the length of marriage without some injuries to feelings. Can positive communication help when everything seems to be going wrong between two people?

Forgiveness ranks as a top priority for marriages that go well. Christians have an experience advantage about forgiveness. Christ’s forgiveness offered to all and received by Christians forms the basis for forgiveness in Christian marriage. Jesus’ story about the man who was forgiven an enormous debt and would not forgive a minor debt speaks to marriage. Regardless of the size of our hurts, Christ has forgiven us of far greater offenses.

Marriage partners must learn to manage constructively their hurts and their anger. Exploding with anger and hurting back or holding on to anger for long periods will not build a marriage relationship. Effective management of anger and hurt includes the willingness to acknowledge one’s hurts to the other. Then, when both have understood what is involved, forgiveness offers a couple a new start. Jesus warned against carrying grudges and resentment to the altar when one brings a gift. Just as dangerous is carrying grudges and resentments to the dinner table or the bedroom.

Accompanying forgiveness must be the willingness on the part of both to accept responsibility for injuries done. Couples need to be warned about playing the “who’s to blame” game, but both should be willing to acknowledge a part in places where the relationship doesn’t work well. When partners can accept their appropriate share of responsibility for the relationship, apologies are possible. Repeated apologies tend to be insincere, or one is taking all responsibility to “keep peace” in the marriage. As
apologies are given, they should be freely accepted in the grace in which Christians live. Positive communication offers and receives grace where injury would destroy.

10. Positive Communication Delivers Joy and Playfulness

Playfulness is often easy for couples before marriage. Some, however, need help in continuing playfulness in their relationship after marriage. In most instances one of the partners will be more serious than the other. If the other is immature or extremely playful, the serious one can slip into the role of parent. Playfulness can be canceled in a relationship if one becomes a child and the other becomes the supervising parent.

The capacity to laugh together and be playful with each other is absolutely essential for building a satisfactory relationship. Laughing with each other is different from laughing at each other. Pastors can help couples assess their ability to laugh together by getting couples to talk about their fun moments. Parents and families furnish the pattern by which partners build their capacity to be playful and free in their relationship. Encourage couples to talk about the habits of their families in having fun and being playful.

Premarital or postmarital counseling can be used as an occasion for giving couples permission to free up the joy of their relationship. Joy is one of the genuine fruits of the spirit (see Gal. 5:22). Nowhere should joy be expressed naturally more than in the marriage relationship where partners love each other. Joy found in the presence of the one loved signals that love is really present. Joy is among the important gifts married couples have to give each other. Joy flows naturally when it is genuine.

The checklist of 10 qualities for positive communication can be used to teach couples what to work toward in their communication. Positive communication must become a natural habit to work well in a marriage. Forced positive communication will soon appear as artificial and lose its effectiveness. Couples can gauge their communication by using the list as a rating scale. Each can rate self and the partner to show where they see and hear themselves in positive communication.

Leveling sums up the goal of positive communication. Level communication occurs when meaning is given directly and constructively. It is what Paul referred to when he said, “Speaking the truth in love.” Leveling requires that words and total body language be consistent and give the same message. Both the message and the message about the message carry the same tone and inten-

I have sketched the character of positive communication first because it is as easy to be negative about communication as it is to use negative communication. However, we turn next to the opposites of positive communication so couples can catch themselves (not the partner) in communication that hurts rather than helps.

Teach Couples How to Avoid Negative Communication

Going the wrong way is dangerous, even on a four-lane highway. You may be able to get somewhere that way, but you place yourself and others in grave danger.

Negative communication is just as dangerous and potentially destructive. Premarital counseling must help couples recognize when they are going the wrong way in their communication patterns. Following are some “wrong way” signs couples should be able to spot in their communication.

Vague and Unclear Communication

Vague communication is like driving in the fog—you can’t tell where you are, and other people do not know. Muddled communication confuses both the sender and the receiver. Persons who are indirect in making requests or statements may mislead the hearer. To say, “I don’t get enough help,” is not a clear request. To specify with what and when a person wants help is better.

Attacking with Words

Some people say words make no difference, but they do. The Hebrews believed a word was something you created when you spoke it and it could not be uncreated. Words used to hurt others are difficult to erase, especially when the pattern is often repeated.

Negative communication probably more often consists of attack than any other form spoken. Attack communication declares something bad about one’s partner. The expressions are often global, such as, “You always . . .” or, “You never . . .” or, “Can’t you ever. . . .” People who use attack have grown up in families where it was the standard way of talking. They are usually not aware they do it and have little idea how it feels to others. However, attackers are often sensitive themselves when addressed harshly.

Criticism is the most common form of attack. The
critical person is an expert at spotting what's wrong. These people usually believe they are obligated to point out when something is wrong. Some people actually believe they are being dishonest if they do not announce other people's errors. The habit is difficult to change but eats like acid in a relationship. Helping couples hear themselves and their families may reduce negative communication.

**Defensiveness**

If a person cannot communicate while attacking, neither can a person communicate while defending oneself. A person can be so defensive that all of one's communication is designed to defend or justify what has been done or said. Such a person usually has low self-esteem and may be easily made to feel guilty.

Defensive communication does not give a person the opportunity to express one's desires or opinions. When a person is defensive, if the other partner says something, the defender will begin with something like, “Well, I wouldn’t have done that if . . .” Pastors can help couples recognize defensiveness by having one tell the other something that has happened between them. Then have the other tell what she or he heard being said. The couple can be helped to hear their defensiveness.

**Assigning Motives**

People who communicate negatively often practice assigning faulty motives to those to whom they speak. When they see someone do something with which they disagree, they immediately assume a sinister motivation. Some even use the announcement, “I know why you did (or said) that.” Such as approach communicates a disrespect and a distrust of the other person. No one should assume the ability to read another person's mind, let alone his or her intentions. Partners who have grown up in families where this is practiced need help in detecting the habit.

Negative communication can take many more forms than those we have listed here. Couples can come to recognize negative messages if they are led to listen to what they have heard among family and friends. However, pastors and family life leaders must guard against being too negative about negative communication. Their concern can easily become condemnation which couples will not hear.

Pastors can help couples discover that communication does follow regular patterns. Virginia Satir described four patterns of negative communication. Some people placate so they can avoid making other persons angry. Those who blame are attempting to show they are strong and right. Computing is harder to recognize. People often use big words or detached reason to compute. The pattern of distracting switches attention to something or someone else, and a person does not respond directly to a message. Satir believes all of these develop from low self-worth. When couples discover they have and use these circuits, they may work at finding better ones.

Teaching a couple the language of healthy marriage challenges the best skills a pastor or family life leader can acquire. In this session we have developed a checklist by which couples can rate their positive communication abilities. A person cannot learn a new language quickly. The learner must discover by use how to communicate most effectively. In marriage, couples must be willing to help each other learn the language with which they can communicate best with each other.

Getting rid of patterns of negative communication is even more difficult. Our communication patterns are like our noses; they appear much more prominently to others than to ourselves. Couples can learn to help each other overcome negative patterns while not engaging in negative patterns as they do it. The art of using “I messages” comes the closest to being a key for being able to give constructive feedback.

If couples cannot master learning some positive communication, they will be poorly equipped to approach the challenge of the next session. Whether conflict is creative or demoralizing depends on the kind of communication couples are capable of using. “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy going or a clanging cymbal” (1 Cor. 13:1, RSV).

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3 Ibid., 63.
Session 7

Conflict: Is It Fatal?

Envision a picture of a stepladder as a relationship. On the first step place the word initiate. On the second step write develop. On the third step see perfect. On the top level of the ladder, imagine achieved. This is a picture of how many people view relationships. They move up the ladder until they have their relationship achieved. But if anything happens to the relationship, it falls off the ladder; and you have to start all over. This is the Humpty-Dumpty syndrome. When a relationship falls, all the king's horses and all the king's men can't put the relationship together again. The relationship must be thrown away, and the partners start with another person.

Most people would not openly agree that they see relationships this way. However, in practice, if a relationship runs into trouble, the frequent assumption is that you have to start with a new one. Relationships, like many other items of our society, are seen as disposable.

In this session I hope you and I can lead couples to see other options. They also need help in knowing what attitude to have about conflict. Conflict is natural and normal in all human relationships. If they can understand this, partners will not be as surprised and fearful of conflict when it comes. The model of relationship and conflict I use here, in abbreviated form, is found expanded in my book The Art of Human Relations. Pastors and family life leaders will find it helpful for helping people with other kinds of relationship building needs. It is especially useful for premarital or postmarital counseling.

The Phases of Relationships Are Visible

In session 1, you and your counselees were introduced to the beginnings of relationship development. To help couples successfully handle conflict, you need to take them through all the phases of a relationship. They can then see conflict in a larger perspective of relationship building. Relationships progress through the following phases.

Relationships Begin with Contracting and Commitment

Three kinds of contracts work when people form relationships, as we noted in session 1. A contract is a relationship based on a set of expectations. The contracts are formal, informal, and secret. Partners form these contracts by the expectations they bring to marriage. When the expectations are not expressed but the person has them, they form secret contracts.

Expectations are like pictures persons carry in their minds or even subconscious. The "pictures" prepare people for every circumstance and relationship. When reality does not match the picture carried, a contract is broken. Couples compare their pictures when they begin their relationship. They try to see if they can find expectations that match. If they are strongly attracted to each other, they may slide over expectations that do not match. Contracting proceeds as couples conclude that they share enough expectations to be together.

Commitment cements the contracts couples construct. With commitment a relationship can be more stable, and it is safer to develop. As noted earlier, the strength of a relationship depends on the depth of commitment given to it by both partners. These are the foundation phases of a relationship.

Relationships Lead to the Honeymoon Stage

Unless a relationship is aborted on the launchpad, couples can expect a honeymoon to ensue. Even if they do not go away, the honeymoon offers a time for a couple to celebrate their relationship gift to each other. They have said formally, informally, or secretly, “We can count on each other.” The honeymoon is a discovery process. In a committed relationship couples are safe and free to explore and expand the dimensions of their marriage.

If the relationship works well for both persons, it is because the contracts they made as they came to marriage are dependable. This is the period of productivity or
stability. A partnership has been formed that works, and satisfaction flows from it. If this period lasts a long time, it is a sign of a good relationship from the beginning. Couples should be helped not to expect this state to last forever. “They lived happily ever after” happens only in fairy tales. Other phases unfold. Researchers have demonstrated that the early years of marriage are often the least satisfying.

All Relationships Change
Couples can easily imagine their relationship will always stay the same as at the start. Persons who are marrying need to be open to the changes that will come in themselves and their relationship. Through the various stages of marriage, many changes will occur in the relationship and in the partners. The beginning of marriage is a good time for couples to prepare for transitions they will have to make. Activities which people like or do at one stage in life may not hold their interest at another. In addition to the changes which persons make in themselves, the circumstances of living change. A person may change jobs, income may rise or fall, housing may be different, health or proximity of families may change, and so the list goes. Every change in a couple's circumstances has an effect on their marriage.

Even without the changes, partners are discovering new aspects about themselves and each other. Each person brings many more “secret contracts” (sets of expectations) to marriage than they realize or have talked about with each other. During this period of a relationship, couples will begin to operate on and uncover more of these secret contracts. New circumstances and events will cause them to use the ideal pictures they have carried and match them with what is happening.

When these expectations are not met, a contract is broken; and the person feels it. Broken contracts accumulate over time, and feelings may build. Many marriages carry large deposits of broken contracts. For this reason the more expectations a couple can explore before the wedding, the longer the period of stability can last.

A “Pinch” Develops
The collection of disappointed or bad feelings from broken contracts will eventually take its toll. This is the pinch phase of a relationship and may continue for some time. Couples may not talk to each other about their feelings for fear of disturbing the other person. The discomfort of the pinch may show up in other ways. A partner may not be as friendly or as enthusiastic as at first or in some other way show the feelings that have mounted.

At the pinch stage one partner may be totally unaware that the other feels let down. Partners may not talk about the disappointments because they seem too petty or they cannot allow themselves to have negative feelings. The pinch stage often goes undetected until the next stage. Couples can be alerted to pay attention to this stage so the next one will not be as severe.

A Relationship Can Explode
The explosion may not be violent or earth-shattering, but it does mark the fact that the relationship is having trouble. Couples need to know ahead of time that this phase is not only possible but also probable. It occurs when feelings build up without any attempt to relieve them. Blowups come in forms from angry outbursts to quiet withdrawal.

The first experience of a blowup can be alarming to a couple. Couples often feel disillusioned and fearful when conflict appears. Couples are given a valuable service when they can understand that disruption is not abnormal to their relationship.

Conflict Comes with Relationships
Most of the couples who come to be married will assume that conflict is destructive to relationships and should be avoided if at all possible. Among those who are Christians, many of them will believe that all conflict is sinful. They will believe that, if they are good Christians, they will not have conflict. Without encouraging conflict, pastors and family life leaders can help marriage candidates accept some conflict as natural to all relationships.

Viewed in its proper perspective, conflict can be useful for couples. Conflict becomes a useful signal to know something needs attention in the relationship. When the oil light on a car's instrument panel comes on, the driver knows something is not working properly in the engine. Likewise, when conflict appears, the relationship is malfunctioning.

When couples are marrying, they are so invested in their relationship that they would like to think nothing can ever strain their link. In their idealism they may deny to themselves the reality that conflict can enter their relationship. Yet the effort of two people to meet the other's expectations holds the prospect of conflict. To be a person is to have opinions, expectations, and a perspective of the world. Inevitably, two people who marry cannot have identical views and experiences. The only way two people can totally avoid conflict in their marriage is for one of them to give up being a person. In that case the marriage is incomplete.
One of the healthiest attitudes couples can bring to marriage is that some form of conflict will be part of their marriage experience. They can determine they will not run from it or deny it. Accepting it as normal, they will find ways to let conflict contribute to growth of the marriage and themselves. Conflict is an opportunity to learn about oneself, one's partner, and one's marriage. What can couples do when it comes?

**Conflict Offers Choices**

The ladder model of relationships I asked you to visualize at the beginning of this session offers only one response to conflict. Any severe conflict ends the relationship. However, couples can be invited to explore other roads after conflict. Unfortunately, taking a wrong road out of conflict is easier than finding a good one.

The pattern of handling conflict which couples adopt earlier in marriage will be the one they follow most of the time, so couples need to develop good habits to manage conflict. Lead your couples through these options so they can discover the patterns they already have and can find a better way.

**The Temptation of Termination**

The ladder model of relationships offers termination as the only option for troubled relationships. Disposable relationships do not make good marriages. The high divorce rate of our society indicates that termination offers the most popular response to conflict in marriage. Termination often appeals to persons who feel uncomfortable in a relationship and have no other ways of coping.

Prenuptial agreements are on the rise and suggest a conditional commitment. Christian couples, however, will want a relationship that has permanency. Few couples who come to be married will be thinking about termination as a ready option. Conflict in a relationship can be seen like fever in a person's body. It signals distress. However, a fever is not a reason to call an undertaker. Similarly, a conflict is not a reason for consulting a divorce attorney. Termination of a marriage should always be the option of last resort.

While ending a marriage is not a desirable method of handling conflict, both the Old Testament (Deut. 24) and the New Testament (Jesus’ and Paul’s teaching) recognize its unhappy necessity. Since relationships are alive, as seen in the “one flesh” concept, marriages can die. When marriages die, the people in them begin to be hurt and destroyed, too.

Couples who are marrying should hold the ideal of no divorce, but that ideal should not be used to condemn persons who have suffered divorce. The pastor can lead couples to make a commitment that other options will be pursued before divorce is a consideration. An important commitment couples can make is that, when they cannot handle their conflicts, they will seek spiritual or professional help with their marriage. Such a commitment when couples are planning their wedding may become a good insurance policy if needed later in their relationship.

**Continuous Conflict Crises**

A second option for handling conflict is to stay perpetually in it. While most couples would be horrified with this idea, they can easily identify friends and acquaintances who do this. Persons in such marriages remain locked in a narrow range between pinch and disruption. The relationship may calm down for a while, and soon a new eruption surfaces. These are volcanic marriages.

The pattern which this response takes to conflict is predictable. Feelings of dissatisfaction build up and smolder for a period of time. Each infraction adds to the unrest. When enough resentment or ill will has been created, a partner blows up. The marriage appears to be at an end, but strife abates though nothing is resolved.

These events usually take place: A perceived injury is sustained. The victim is hurt or offended. A verbal assault is launched. A retaliation follows. The relationship is shaken by an outburst. The intensity fades, perhaps with an apology or a withdrawal. And the relationship continues, still carrying resentments. Many persons coming to marry will have lived in this pattern with their parents and their parents’ marriage. It is an easy pattern to adopt. This option is not far from emotional and spiritual divorce, while the form of the marriage remains intact.

**Recommitment that Does Not Renew**

The most appealing option among Christians is the decision to recommit to the relationship. It seems to make sense. If two people care for each other and problems appear, don’t they just need to renew their vows? Married couples are lured into this solution because they remember the good days following their wedding. They seemed to get along well then. If they can recreate the feelings of that time, they believe the conflict will not matter.

For Christian persons and caring partners recommitment would seem to hold real promise. Christians often feel guilty for even having conflicts. They reason, *If we are Christians, we ought to be able to get along without our differences.* While this sounds noble, trying harder...
usually doesn’t solve problems. It becomes pseudo-reconciliation. It is the “kiss and make up” approach to conflict.

The reason recommitment doesn’t work is that the circumstances which caused the conflict have not changed. Broken contracts are still present; and, like a pebble in a shoe, every time the relationship moves, the partners feel it. Indeed, the approach is even dangerous as well as ineffective. If a couple “kiss and make up” without doing anything about the broken contracts, they will be back at disruption in half the time. Disillusionment is even greater, and the feelings that the relationship won’t work have increased. The disruption comes more quickly because partners know what will not work the second time around and spend less time trying. Couples need caution not to get caught in this approach because they really do care about each other.

The Better Way
None of the first three options to conflict management is satisfactory. The most fruitful way to reconciliation is also the most difficult, and a couple will need to be coached to learn it. Renegotiation is the way to renewing a relationship. Yet it can be the most painful of all because it addresses the broken issues and their feelings. It is the choice which can make a relationship stronger. In the next section I will show you how to teach couples to renegotiate.

Recycled Relationships Are Richer
You might suggest to couples that they keep a large box in which to place their relationships for recycling. Marriage relationships can be recycled. When something is recycled, the same material is used; but the product is in a new form. The value of the original is saved and given a more usable future. Our best approach to conflict is to teach couples how to recycle their relationships. Take them through the steps mapped here and found in the Couple’s Guide. These steps follow the spirit of Jesus’ teaching about how to handle conflict between persons as found in Matthew 18:15-17 (NRSV): “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

Step 1: Help Couples See and Own Their Feelings
Conflict furnishes a practical place for couples to use the communication skills we learned in the last session. Couples can learn what to do with broken contracts. The disappointments of unfulfilled expectations often result in anger and/or hurt. Negative feelings soon begin to take up all the space in a relationship. Like smoke, the feelings keep people from seeing each other as they really are and sometimes prevent them from finding each other. The first step requires clearing up the atmosphere of a relationship. The feelings must be acknowledged and managed.

To begin by charging the partner with doing something wrong or having bad intentions is to attack. In the last session we saw that as self-defeating. Each partner should be given space to have one’s feelings. Each partner should have the courage to own one’s feelings. When the feelings of each are out on the table, the rest of the relationship can be reviewed.

Step 2: Help Couples Uncover Broken Contracts
Couples can be helped to identify the broken contracts that appear in their marriage. They must be able to see their own expectations and assumptions that have not been met. Partners have needs, values, and wants which they have presumed would be fulfilled. Many of these are secret expectations which can only be spotted when they fail. The partner whose expectations are not met may be unaware of them, and the partner would certainly be surprised by them.

As couples uncover hidden contracts, they discover new things about themselves and get better acquainted with each other. The basis for renegotiation grows as broken contracts are identified. The process requires partners to be capable of admitting to themselves and each other what really bothers them. If a person denies to oneself or one’s partner what expectations are missed, renegotiation will fail.

“I messages” are required for expressing failed expectations as much as for the feelings that develop. Couples can learn to say, “I expected you to be here. . . .” When one partner owns expectations as one’s own perspective, the other partner is given space to have different expectations.
Knowing this about their relationship opens the way for couples to construct a new and more realistic relationship.

**Step 3: Encourage Couples to See What Threatens**
The feelings of a broken contract result when something important to a person is threatened. A remark may threaten a person's self-image. Spending money on something may threaten a partner's security. Fear and threat always come with broken contracts, however light the fear or threat. When a person can identify what is threatened, that person can then tell why that is important to him or her. As people know what is important to them, they can know how to renegotiate.

An honest naming of threat would be, “I know you want us to have good things; but when you buy things on credit, I get scared that we will never be able to buy a new home.” Both partners now know more about what the other thinks and feels. Couples will discover that what threatens each is as different as their expectations. They can only know this after they have been married a while and some level of conflict teaches them.

**Step 4: Lead Couples to Create Meaningful Goals**
When the feelings, broken contracts, and threats have been revealed, a couple is ready to begin the recycling. The earlier relationship was based on what they thought was true about themselves and the partner. Now a relationship can be built on what they know to be their experience of each other.

Together a couple can form some realistic goals that meet the needs of both. To create a good goal a couple should project some high quality for their relationship or some distant objective to reach together. With these goals established, a couple has a basis for agreement and can decide how to reach their goals in mutually satisfactory ways. Setting goals helps a couple focus on what is most valuable to them. A high goal helps a couple rise above present broken contracts and the press of immediate problems.

**Step 5: Guide Couples to Invent New Contracts**
The work of inventing new contracts begins with partners being able to change their expectations. If expectations cannot be changed, a relationship cannot be reshaped. Couples must be able to engage in two processes as they recycle their relationship.

Couples must find where their different expectations are complementary. The different needs, wants, and styles of partners can complement each other. The partner who is a more feeling person can complement the partner for whom everything is based on fact. The reverse, of course, is also possible. In constructing new relationships based on what they know of each other, couples need to find what each has to contribute to the other and to the relationship. When partners can realize that their differences can be assets rather than liabilities, they will have new hope in their new relationship.

Areas will remain in which needs and expectations do not mesh. The second necessary process is compromise. To compromise, each partner must be willing to forego or change expectations for reaching the goals agreed upon earlier. When both partners are flexible, they can adjust the areas of disagreement so that neither does all the changing and neither has all one’s expectations pursued. Compromise does not mean surrender of spiritual or character commitments that would lead a person to violate one’s faith. It may mean that the way a couple goes about expressing and meeting needs could change. Marriage is seldom equal in all areas. One may need to yield in one area; the other, in another area. As needs, circumstances, or expectations change, so will the give-and-take of marriage.

These two processes can permit a couple to recycle their marriage relationship. Couples are often surprised when they commit themselves to these changes. Their relationship becomes fuller and more satisfying. Some things that seemed important lose some of their priority. The new relationship is different from the original one.

Patterns are deep, and couples can easily fall back to their old patterns. A relationship is not renewed if the old pattern continues to be used.

Recycled relationships resolve conflicts that troubled an earlier relationship. The new relationship is not conflict immune, but it will not create the conflicts faced at an earlier time. Recycled relationships set a pattern for a couple to use over and over again as they discover the natural course of minor and major conflicts in relationships.

Teaching this process is most effective in postmarital counseling. Couples who are getting married need to know about it to equip them to face conflict and deal effectively with it. However, those who have experienced broken contracts in marriage are more ready to learn to master the recycling process. Conflict is natural to relationships; renegotiation is redemptive for relationships.

**Some Conflicts Are Common**

The places conflicts are most likely to appear are not difficult to locate. Certain issues arise repeatedly when one
examines many marriages. We have noted most of these in earlier sessions as adjustments for marrying couples. Some couples adjust to each other with a minimum of conflict.

Statistically, money is one of the more volatile conflict issues in many marriages. Several factors go into the money crunch for couples.

The attention already given to families of origin and in-laws indicates their potential for marital conflict. However, relations with families are satisfactory for many couples.

Each couple and every person will have some different expectations about sex and sexuality. Because the sexual relationship changes over time, the expectations and the need for adjustment change. Conflict in a couple’s sexual relationship is one of the most damaging a couple can sustain.

Our earlier discussion of children points to another area for potential conflict. The different expectations here have to do with having children, discipline of children, and responsibilities of caring for the children.

Vocation can certainly hold potential for conflict. How each partner feels about the other’s vocation as well as one’s own form contracts that must be adjusted if there is conflict. Issues that arise from two-career marriages can create the need for relationship recycling.

How a couple practice their faith would seem to be an unlikely place for conflict. However, because it is so important to every person, it can be an area of secret or separate contracts. A solid relationship in their spiritual lives is a deep resource for couples in their marriage.

Social life and personal lifestyles can be arenas where expectations differ. Couples may think they know each other well but discover many new assumptions when they begin to share their lives on a daily basis. Compromise and negotiation are essential if couples are to unite their lives in these concerns.

Expectations about living arrangements such as housing and domestic duties can be another area where conflict may need to be managed. When two people talk about the role each will have, intentions can be different from what works out in day-to-day living. Negotiation of roles is a significant task for most couples.

Among these areas of adjustment and potential conflict, each couple may discover they have a special “sore point.” Conflict seems to cling to some areas. Most couples will find the pattern where they have trouble with certain adjustments in marriage. Couples can also learn to develop a helpful pattern of recycling their relationships so that conflict can be resolved to the satisfaction of both persons.

Conflict Management Can Have Good Results

The first good result of relationship recycling skills comes in couples knowing each other much better. A large step in marital satisfaction is the ability of a couple to know each other well and accept each other as each is. Persons marrying often marry illusions of each other. As couples renegotiate and uncover secret contracts, they know themselves and their partners much better.

A second good result of healthy conflict management is improved decision making. At the heart of conflict is some form of decision making. Persons may be unaware they have made decisions, but they have. An action taken, a statement made, or an expectation missed are all based on decisions. If the partner disagrees with the decision, conflict is possible.

Good conflict resolution gives a basis for cooperative decision making. Couples can learn that one of them makes good decisions in one area while the other has competence in another area. They can divide up the decision making where each has strength. They can also determine where they will make mutual decisions. The ability to make decisions together strengthens their trust and appreciation for each other. Conflict can lead to learning to make marriage decisions.

This is a crucial session for couples. In premarital counseling they can be helped to get started working creatively with their conflicts. In postmarital counseling they can be given handles with which to control their conflicts and create new relationships. Encouraging couples toward an attitude about conflict that sees it as natural and a part of every relationship can relieve much marital stress.

When couples see the normal phases of a relationship, they can tell where they are in their own relationship. As they master the skills of relationship recycling, they can support each other in achieving the new relationships. Relationship recycling can be an adventure of finding secret contracts, surprising expectations, and potential stronger commitments to each other. Conflict is not all bad; God can teach us about ourselves and others through conflict we cannot learn any other way.

2Scripture verses marked NRSV are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
Helping couples focus on ideals which can enhance their marriage has been the purpose of these sessions. We have also attempted to help couples see reality about marriage and human life. As a pastor or family life leader, you and I have been partners in this endeavor. In this last session, I want us to help couples see reality about marriage and human life. As a pastor or family life leader, you and I have been partners in this endeavor. In this last session, I want us to help couples find a path to growth for their marriage and for themselves. That is marriage at its best.

A garden is the best comparison to show marriage as a place for growth. Gardens are for growing plants, and many kinds of plants can grow in gardens—both good and bad. Marriage is a place for growing persons and relationships, but both good and bad can grow there. Nothing could be more productive of premarital and postmarital counseling than to send couples off to grow together.

The definition of love which we used in an earlier session is a growth definition: Love is the overwhelming desire and persistent effort of two people to create for each other the conditions in which each may become the person God intended. When love operates in this way, marriage becomes a place where both husband and wife grow in trust and hope.

We will lead couples to explore the meaning and opportunities for growth in marriage. We want them to carry a vision of marriage which renews itself and enriches its partners.

**Growth: God’s Intention for Marriage**

In this session as in the others, we will invite couples to see marriage as the instrument of God’s love and creativity for their well-being. God is a present third party to their relationship. Couples will have more sense of the continuing presence of God in their marriage if they can see how God is contributing to growth in their marriage.

**God Continues to Create**

Genesis 1–2 pictures God doing what He does best—creating. (Redemption is a form of creating—recreating.) We know God first as Creator, even before we know He is love. He creates because He loves. God, as Creator, is emphasized in the New Testament as well with passages such as John 1:1-5, Colossians 1:15-20, and Hebrews 1:1-3. Another picture of God as Creator is given in Acts where the Holy Spirit is creating the church. Couples can also know that God continues to create through marriage.

The psalmists were effusive in their praise of the beauty and wonder of God’s creation. The Song of Solomon sings praise for the attraction and human love of man and woman. We should thank God for marriage, as a creation of God, just as we thank Him for food and material goods. Paul said about marriage and food, “which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving” (1 Tim. 4:3-4, RSV). Marriage is one of the joyously beautiful creations of God.

God even used His own image to create human beings as male and female. Marriage, in a sense, reflects the nature of God. We have also seen that God’s design for marriage is “one flesh.” We may conclude that God created a special kind of love to be expressed in marriage. It is a love which causes marriage partners to grow and can produce new persons as babies. God’s continuing creating activity can be seen clearly in marriage.

This important foundation for couples builds their attitudes toward their marriage. Their marriage is theirs to
enjoy with each other, but it is also a gift from God to be enjoyed with Him. If they are to grow together, God is the safe guide to their growth. As marriage guide, God will continue to create in them and through them growth for which they can give thanks. God can create within marriage just as much as He creates in the larger world.

**What Will God Create in Marriage?**

Since God is Creator, He not only creates but builds creativity and growth into His universe. New forms of life are constantly appearing, and even new galaxies may be coming into existence. We ought not be surprised, then, that God implanted creativity in us.

A deep source of creativity in each person is the subconscious. Like the memory of a computer, our subconscious minds hold immense amounts of information and creativity. Psychologists estimate that we use only a small fraction of our mental potential. Every one of us is capable of far more growth and creativity than we accomplish. The inner world is as immense as the outer world.

The creative growth God gives persons requires change. Couples or individual partners may set up barriers to growth. Chief among these is an unwillingness to change or consider change. When marriage partners are too insecure, they may resist all opportunities to grow or change. If so, they will use their energies to maintain a fixed and rigid self-structure and environment. A person will find growth to be difficult if that person must defend who one is or what one does. Biblically, refusing to grow is like getting a picture of oneself and seeing where one needs to grow but going away and ignoring the information (see Jas. 1:22-24). This is the sin of self-satisfaction or paralyzing fear.

A primary requirement of Christians is that we grow. Peter urged spiritual growth from the beginning of a believer’s life (see 1 Pet. 2:2). Paul challenged Christians “to grow up in every way . . . into Christ” (Eph. 4:15, RSV). He also criticized Corinthian Christians for refusing to grow as evidenced by the immaturity in their lives in the church (see 1 Cor. 3:1-3). The ultimate goal of Paul’s ministry was to encourage such growth that he could “present everyone mature in Christ” (Col. 1:28, NRSV). Marriage is certainly a primary arena for growth by Christians.

Growth, whether in marriage or in some other area of life, requires openness. Life as a journey takes us to new places and new experiences. To be open is to be capable of welcoming new experiences and understandings of our world. The ability to risk sensibly is required if openness is to lead to new discoveries. Partners who marry in order to have everything fixed in place for the rest of their lives will resist openness and, therefore, growth. One of the joys of a garden is the continuous discovery that something new has appeared. New growth will appear in marriages, but it can contribute only where a couple is open to the new or different.

Feedback is another source of growth in marriage. Couples were introduced to feedback in the session on communication. Feedback helps us to have information about ourselves we can have in no other way. A couple who can positively exchange feedback can discover more about themselves. If feedback is to be effective, marriage partners must also be able to reveal themselves to each other without fear of being hurt. Couples need to be coached to accept what they discover about each other so that feedback and self-disclosure do not lead to rejection. This kind of openness encourages couples to grow in the ways they relate to each other. They may also discover mutual interests they did not know existed for them.

Perhaps the greatest growth God creates in and through marriage comes as wholeness. Every marriage partner is only a partial person. Every partner has areas where life is or has been broken. Marriage should be the place where, in grace, two people accept each other completely as they move toward wholeness.

Salvation is the biblical word for wholeness. Salvation is a larger idea than the way we often use it. When it is seen as wholeness, it applies to all of a person’s life. Wholeness especially heals our relationships. We have many relationships that need wholeness, such as our relationships with ourselves, God, others, material goods, the world, the church, our mission and calling, and many others.

Maturity is another part of wholeness. Peter encouraged Christians to “grow up to salvation” (1 Pet. 2:2, RSV). Maturity also carries the idea of being made complete. In marriage, maturity is constantly tested. The areas of immaturity and incompleteness will appear readily. Obviously, couples need to know that no one is totally mature, complete, or perfect. Growth moves marriage partners toward maturity so that their marriage is more satisfying and complete.

What God creates in marriage turns out to be people. Just as a garden grows flowers, fruits, and vegetables, marriage grows people. God is creating better persons and better marriage when He is allowed to lead. Couples can grow in their ability to communicate, care, and support each other in a growing marriage. “People making” is the purpose of marriage.
Growth Lives on Hope

Hope will be readily available with the couple you are counseling. Hope comes easily with weddings. The tough assignment in premarital counseling is extending the wedding hope into a permanent marriage hope.

A bride of two weeks came to my study to return a book. I thanked her for returning the book and asked, "Well, how's married life?" She burst into tears, and for the next half hour she told me how the marriage was not going. After listening to her and encouraging her, presently she threw her head back and stood up. She said, "No, it's not going the way it should; but I'm going home and make it work." The last I heard she and her husband were making it work well. She had regained her hope and renewed her dream. Hope is basis of growth in marriage.

Hope Pulls Toward Growth

Something inside a flower causes it to push out toward sunlight. The sunlight pulls the beauty of the flower into sight. Hope works like the sun in our lives. We are pulled by hope into a better future. Couples are pulled toward marriage by their hope of a future together. In the same way, hope helps couples establish goals together toward which their marriage can move. Hope that is fastened to something tangible becomes a goal.

Hope works this way because God is the God of hope. The Bible is full of promises which create hope in the hearts of people. The Christian life is a life of hope. Paul's prayer for the Ephesians Christians included a strong element of hope as he prayed, "Having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance" (Eph. 1:18, RSV). To the Colossians he wrote, "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (1:27, RSV).

The coming kingdom of God inspires and directs the lives of Christians. Christian couples have this hope as a constant resource for planning their lives. Paul told Titus to begin with hope in instructing Christians, referring to, "in hope of eternal life which God, who never lies, promised ages ago" (1:2, RSV). In Romans 8:18-25, Paul described how this hope affects the entire created world and especially Christians, concluding, "For in this hope we were saved" (v. 24, RSV).

Hope shapes the lives of believers and their marriages. In fact, Paul said that persons have no hope without Christ (see Eph. 2:12). He meant that they have no hope that can transcend this world and its values. Couples need to discover how essential their hope in Christ is to the development of their marriage.

Hope will do for couples and persons in the future what grace does in the present. Grace gives a lift to our lives in the present because we have been forgiven when grace comes. Hope elevates our sights for the future to reach higher goals than we have achieved. In marriage, as couples exercise their hope in each other and their marriage, they are pulled to larger goals. Christ gives them a hope which keeps them on track to grow.

Hope Taps Life's Deepest Potential

The flower that is pulled into blossom by the sun also has its potential beauty tapped in the process. Hope warms our lives in the same way so that potentials we never dreamed of are coaxed into the open. Couples can treasure the yet undiscovered potential each brings to marriage. Hope is strengthened by good self-esteem which allows persons to believe in themselves and their potential. Pastors and family life leaders are important people for confirming hope.

When potential begins to flow out of a person's life, something happens to the person. One's view of the world and oneself changes. A larger, more appreciative outlook develops. The prescribed, restricted ways of thinking and doing are no longer operative for the person with discovered potential. Couples can be trained to look for an encourage potential in each other's lives. When potential has been uncovered, persons can never go back to seeing the world the way they did as children. These changes in perspective will change their marriage as well.

The Bible overflows with stories of persons whose potential was tapped by a hope given to them—Joseph, Moses, Gideon, David, Solomon, Jeremiah, Zachariah (father of John the Baptist), Peter, the boy with the loaves and fish, Saul, John Mark, and many others. In every case life became an adventure of discovering potentials and opportunities the person never dreamed would be his. Hope can pull more out of persons than they can imagine, and marriage is a garden for nurturing potential. Couples need to see marriage in this way.

Hope Fuels Motivation to Grow

Hope motivates by giving a vision of what could be. Persons who cannot see life differently than it is at present will have no reason to grow. Apathy and indifference about oneself or life freeze a person in place. Such persons cannot see potential or a future that is filled with promise.
Hope opens one’s eyes to see beyond the present and its limits. Hope makes marriage into a discovery like the boy in this story:

Once upon a time, there was a very bright and alert little boy who skipped along the streets of a busy European town on his way to and from school. Even though his feet moved swiftly, his eyes steadily engaged the familiar and the new. The mysterious sculptor’s shop with its wide window, curious forms, and huge block of marble did not escape him. It was one of his favorite places to stop. He would press his face against the glass and peer in. Gradually, and to his complete amazement, he began to notice that the form of the marble block was changing. Though it did so ever so slowly, the boy now never failed to stop daily to see what had happened overnight. For months and months, day after day he would look, and day after day there was ever so little change. Finally, one morning, he stopped, pressed his face against the glass, and found himself so entirely astonished that he forgot he had been on his way to school. He stood wide-eyed for such a long time that the sculptor finally noticed him and beckoned him to enter. He entered. He circled the magnificent animal that stood where the block of marble had previously been, then turned breathtakingly to the sculptor and asked: “How did you know that that lion was hidden in the stone?”

Such is the power of hope. Like the plants in a garden, hope makes growth natural for each of us. Not to grow is unnatural. Whatever a person is when marrying, both partners need to know that each is capable of becoming something different and better in the future. The vast potential of our subconscious and inner spirit with God’s gift of hope causes people to be transformed in a loving, committed relationship.

**Hope Offers a Valuable Wedding Gift**

“So faith, hope and love abide” (1 Cor. 13:13, RSV).

Love may be greater than hope, but it cannot takes its place. Couples must know that all three of these are the best wedding gifts for each other. They make possible a “one flesh” marriage.

Hope, more than the other two, enlarges the possibilities for a relationship. As we have reviewed in this session, hope empowers marriage partners to discover and develop their potentials. The gift of hope offers opportunity for each partner to grow.

Why is hope so valuable? Because people who marry do so with a dream of some kind. The death of the dream can be debilitating to a marriage. When partners give up on each other or on themselves, the dream dies. Hope keeps the dream alive and renewing. Couples ought to share their dreams about marriage with each other so they can become guardians of each other’s hopes.

**Growth Has Many Varieties**

After we built our new home, we were faced with the task of landscaping the yard. We had no idea there were so many different plants, shrubs, flowers, and trees from which to choose. Like a garden, a marriage has many plants or growth to attend. In the premarital or postmarital sessions, a couple’s awareness can be raised about the different kinds of growth to which they need to give attention.

**Intellectual/Educational Growth**

Educational growth may be the easiest kind of growth to introduce and encourage with marrying couples. Many of them will be made up of partners, one or both of whom, are in school of some kind. Another group will have one partner in school and the other providing support. Others will be postponing college or some other kind of training in order to get married.

In every area of growth, especially educational, growth of both partners needs attention. The pattern of couples who drift apart because one has continued educational growth while the other supported or did not go to school is all too familiar. The time of life most couples marry coincides with the time of highest intellectual and educational growth. The intellectual and/or educational gap can widen quickly for partners if left unattended.

Beyond the immediate plans of partners for education, couples can be offered the possibilities and rewards of one or both going back to school at a later time. The number of persons enrolling in college, specialized training, or graduate schools is growing rapidly. If only one can go to school because of finances, couples ought to covenant that the other partner will be supported in completing school at a later time.

Intellectual growth can be cultivated by a couple without involving formal schooling. Reading books together, such as books in preparation for marriage and childbirth, offers opportunity to share growth. Each person will have his or her own areas of interests which can be shared with one’s partner. Couples can enrich their relationship as well as their knowledge by talking with each other about current events, social concerns, and spiritual understandings. Couples can marry each other with their minds as well as their bodies and emotions.
Vocational Growth

Vocation for marrying couples is an area of adjustment, but it is also an opportunity for growth. Couples should learn all they can about each other’s work, including housekeeping if one stays home. Here the Indian idea of “walking in another’s moccasins” is a crucial understanding of growth. Partners can support each other in work much better if they understand the other’s work situation.

Our son and daughter-in-law work in different but related fields. They put their heads together about each other’s work. They discovered that procedures required in our son’s work could enhance our daughter-in-law’s work. She presented the idea to her company, and they adopted it for a larger expansion of their services.

Mutual growth in vocational interests comes as couples are able to discuss their work with each other. Couples, of course, can be cautioned that one does not try to solve the work problems of the other. Listening and understanding are the goals of vocational sharing.

Growth in vocation comes in many ways. It may be enlarging one’s abilities or competencies in the present job. It may be preparing oneself for promotion in the work being done. It may be growing so that another vocation more suited to one’s sense of life’s purpose and interests can be undertaken. Growth in vocation is enhanced as partners can give each other feedback with which each can improve and enlarge abilities. Satisfying, and personally rewarding work is an asset for a marriage of growth.

Spiritual Growth

In an earlier session we had opportunity to encourage spiritual intimacy, and in this session we have seen growth as basic to Christian living. Peter stated the goal of spiritual growth about as well as it can be stated, “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18, RSV). A worthy goal of premarital or postmarital counseling is to set a couple on a course of spiritual growth together.

The earlier emphasis on assessing where partners are in their spiritual lives with care and sensitivity can be repeated. Wherever each person is at the time of marriage, however, encouragement to progress is essential. Spiritual life is precarious; it does not remain constant. Couples have options to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” or to see that relationship diminish.

Spiritual growth in marriage occurs best when couples undertake a spiritual adventure. As in mountain climbing, couples can learn to help and depend on each other to reach greater heights. No one person can keep another on a spiritual journey, but a shared journey is more joyous and exciting. The formula from 2 Peter includes developing a better concept of God, knowing His Son Christ more intimately, experiencing the leadership of the Holy Spirit, and discovering more fully the call of Christ to one’s life. God is eager to be at work in believers and in marriages.

Growth in Competence

Most people want to be more competent. Marriage is an opportunity for couples to increase their competence. Some of the requirements for marriage we have discussed in earlier sessions are calls for competence in such areas as communication and conflict management. The more competent and stronger a person is when one marries, the more one has to contribute to a relationship.

The larger concept of competence refers to having the capacity to meet life’s needs and discover meanings for the life God has given us. A growing consciousness of the world in which one lives and the persons among whom one lives is part of competence. The ability to take responsibility for oneself and life spells competence. Flowing out of these, competence results in a person’s being able to work effectively, relate meaningfully, and give leadership where it is appropriate. Competence can be a growth area throughout marriage.

Growth in Freedom

Freedom was the theme of earlier sessions where we explored the dimensions of “leaving” and “cleaving.” Until a person is free, he or she cannot genuinely leave or cleave. Establishing one’s own identity and autonomy is required to achieve a measure of freedom. This kind of freedom can continue to develop in marriage if both partners understand it, support it, and do not abuse it.

Rules are necessary for children as they grow. They give guidelines while a person is developing an internal set of controls and a sense of right and wrong. However, if adults are still guided only by rules, they have not matured. A rule-bound person will surrender one’s own sense of judgment, spontaneity, and freedom. Becoming an adult means giving up “childish ways,” according to Paul (see 1 Cor. 13:11, RSV).

Freedom requires being mature enough that a person can live unbound in responsible love with and for another person. Freedom is the ability to make good choices and
the responsibility to live with the results of those choices without guilt or regret. Marrying persons should be “free to be married.”

**Growth in Intimacy**

A full exploration has already been made of the meaning and development of intimacy. Our emphasis here is on the encouragement of couples to continue the growth of intimacy in their relationship. Growth in intimacy is a legitimate goal for Christian marriages.

The growth of intimacy depends heavily on the ability of two people to reveal themselves to each other. In order for self-disclosure to continue and expand, couples must create an atmosphere in the marriage of caring love, trust, and security. A growing person is one who trusts enough and has sufficient security to share more of the inner self as a person discovers it. Privacy certainly has its place, and intimacy does not cancel all rights to privacy.

However, growth in intimacy means that revealing one’s inner self is always safe. Couples can approach marriage with the knowledge that their intimacy can grow deeper as their relationship develops.

**Growth in Self-Actualization**

Human beings have a series of levels of needs, according to psychologists. They range from physical needs to those of self-actualization. The highest form of the creative development of persons as God has created us is termed self-actualization. Paul expressed his drive to self-actualization in these words, “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own” (Phil. 3:12, RSV). In Christian terms, then, self-actualization might be understood to be “spirit-actualization” or “soul-actualization.” It is bringing the whole person to one’s highest potential.

Marriage is a garden for growing the self to one’s fullest potential while encouraging the same growth for one’s partner. Growth in self-actualization is the sum of all the other kinds of growth we have recommended in this session. Couples can include in their marriage dream the idea of letting their marriage be the springboard for the greatest personal development. They can be led to look upon marriage as God’s instrument for continuing to create their lives for higher purposes.

As a pastor or family life leader, you can offer couples the opportunity to make their marriage a place where they can plan to grow together. Something will grow in a marriage—just as something will grow in a garden. Neglected and left to itself, both a garden and a marriage will grow unwanted elements that choke those that are more desirable. If couples want a beautiful and satisfying relationship, they must plant the best seeds and carefully cultivate them. Your work with couples in these sessions is an attempt to sow those good seeds, and couples must be taught how to cultivate them.

**Growth from Stage to Stage**

Couples who are marrying are not often ready to think about future stages of marriage, but they do need to know those stages and phases are coming. They need to know because they need to begin their marriage with an openness to changes that come in every marriage. Couples must build flexibility into their attitude about marriage so that they can healthily respond to coming changes.

Review with couples the stages they can expect, even if they are not ready to face them. If they are young, the next stage may be the birth of children or the decision not to have children or the discovery they cannot have children. Next comes the stage of children in school. They will face the stage of adolescent children. If they have children, they will face the phase of someday launching young adults from their home. They will then be faced with the “empty nest” stage. Nearly half of their married life may be left at the beginning of this stage. Two more long stages of marriage remain for couples who live what we call a normal life—retirement and old age.

Life will not flow smoothly for couples through each of these stages. Some will face divorce, death, and debilitating sickness or injury. The unpredictable changes of married life make impossible planning out an exact route the marriage will take through all the stages. Couples can commit themselves to a perspective that will carry them through the stages or changes as they come. They can develop a flexibility and a sensitivity to each other’s needs that carries them through. They can also drive their commitments to the bedrock of their lives. Their commitments to each other and to Christ need to be unshakable as they enter marriage. In this way they can grow together through all of life’s transitions and challenges.

A better dream for marriage cannot be held than that of growing together in love and commitment. Equipped with these resources, couples can creatively approach every new development. When couples are growing in marriage, each new challenge strengthens the relationship.

We began talking about wedding pictures. Wedding pictures and marriage pictures are different. Wedding pictures cannot be changed after they are taken. Marriage
pictures (expectations) can be changed when couples have discovered them. A marriage grows as partners are able to bring their pictures of marriage together into a dream both of them can dream. Bonnie and I built our dream house this past year. You are helping couples build their dream home. God’s picture of marriage is “one flesh.”

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### Counsel for the Nearly and Newly Married, Couple’s Guide  
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