

IMPROVING UPON TRADITIONAL AMERICAN PREMARITAL COUNSELING  
METHODS:  
TEACHING A FOUNDATIONAL THEOLOGY FOR A MARRIAGE OF SERVANTHOOD

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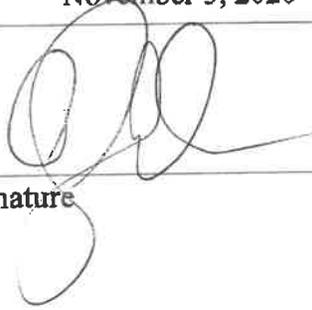
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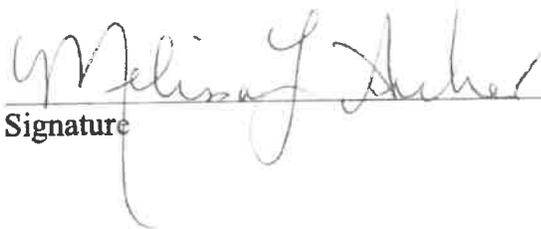
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## ABSTRACT

The intention of this thesis is to stir up marriage counselors into taking a fresh look at their methods for preparing and educating American couples for marriage, as the research will show that couples need much more than mere test results and analytics. Couples need more than a diagnosis; they need the prognosis of the path for healing. The programs developed by Christian therapists that are used in many churches in America do a great job at showing areas where couples are strong and where they need work, but too little is done to address their core beliefs about marriage or otherwise teach a scriptural theology for marriage. How can the focus of traditional premarital counseling methods in American churches be improved from merely providing test results and analytics, to teaching couples the skills and core beliefs they need to adequately build a grace-filled, soul-deep intimacy for a supportive marriage of a lifetime? Through a review of relevant Scripture, a theology for a marriage of servanthood will be presented. Once this foundation is established, chapter three will discuss the research of the methods of the popular pre-marital education programs used in the American church, and whether they provide any sort of path to overcome the deficits exposed by their assessments of couples. It will be shown that such methods could be improved by laying a foundation based on a biblical theology for a marriage of servanthood. This theology provides the motivation for couples to become more holy as they become more whole. Chapter four will present a key ingredient for applying this theology, one which builds on an existing premarital education concept and offer ways for premarital counselors to use it in the premarital counseling process. The ultimate goal of this work is to generate a fresh discussion in the improvement of church-based premarital counseling so that many more couples can sustain a thriving marriage for a lifetime.



*Dedication*

*I dedicate this Thesis to my daughter Macey Savannah, and her children,  
and my posterity for generations to come,  
for the success of their marriages  
to the glory of the One True King.*

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### *The Thesis and the Task*

Christians are getting divorced far too frequently. Hearts of spouses and their children are being broken. A much-needed ministry called Divorce Care has grown in popularity as a valuable small group for the many divorcees in the American church. In her book *The Good News About Marriage*, Shaunti Feldhahn claims she has found “we are closer to 33% of all US marriages ending in divorce.”<sup>1</sup> She adds that the percentage for divorce among Christians who are active in their church is 27 to 50% lower than for the nominal “Christian” Americans who were not committed to a local church. This is still alarming, especially since this study includes nominal Christians as well as true followers of Christ. One would think there must be a better way for churches and the pastors who officiate weddings to prepare a bride and groom to successfully engage in a thriving marriage.

Christian couples can be so willing to commit to a lifetime of fierce love and a faith strong enough to work out all their problems, and yet so many cannot find the tools they need to resolve problems and preserve their devotion to each other. Once the honeymoon is over and couples enter the stage of the power struggle,<sup>2</sup> all pretenses are gone and couples can begin to feel victimized, stuck, or disillusioned, with one or both spouses thinking, “I did not sign up for this!” Successful passage through these waters is invigorating but many get stuck in this stage like a hamster spinning inside its wheel. What is the American church missing? Is the local church leadership providing sufficient premarital counseling and is it required before setting a

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<sup>1</sup> Shaunti Feldhahn. *The Good News About Marriage*. Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2014. p. 29

<sup>2</sup> Les and Leslie Parrott. *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006. p. 47

wedding date, or brought up to the couple as just a part of the wedding planning? Should this chronology be reconsidered?

In this writer's personal experience, once many couples start passionately planning their weddings, the thought of pre-marital counseling appears to become a lower priority. It seems that the idolization of a romantic love affair with an idealized "soulmate" has them wearing rose-colored glasses that puts all doubts aside about how good they are for each other. Once frustrations and bitterness develop, and couples avail themselves of post-wedding counseling, it takes both parties' willingness to be teachable and to set aside any unrealistic expectations. They must apply great effort learning new communication skills and remain vulnerable and transparent with each other. They attend marriage retreats and small groups for couples, read books on the subject, and even pursue marriage counseling with pastors and staff at church. They learn about forgiveness, and perhaps even start to practice the wise counsel they have been given. Oftentimes only *one* has their heart invested in doing what they can to improve the marriage for their spouse. Sadly, many such one-sided marriages result in broken hearts that can only bear a hurting, lifeless marriage for so long before ending up in divorce court. Then the witness of the Church to the world is tarnished, adding to the embarrassment of Christian divorcees who feel ashamed for this.

Christian couples may speak of feeling rushed or pressured into marriage while being duped or blindsided, missing flaws in behaviors and impulsive reactions to situations that should have been discovered and addressed before saying "I do." It would be so much easier, when romantic sparks are still flying, for couples to work on their relational challenges *before* they rush into the wedding day. It is reminiscent of the biblical passage within

Songs of Songs, “Catch the foxes for us, the little foxes that spoil the vineyards, while our vineyards are in blossom” (2:1). Otherwise, they are likely to wake up one morning feeling merely obligated to pursue restoration of their marital love when criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling have already settled in. Dr. John Gottman, professor of Psychology at the University of Washington, calls these progressive stages the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” which predict a future divorce.<sup>3</sup> When couples succumb to a hefty dose of unforgiveness, they often have no comprehension of how to prevent such breakdown from happening. Perhaps those who find themselves in such predicament were not challenged enough in their premarital counseling to see each other as imperfect, sinful people who both need a spouse that will help them overcome their weak areas. In many cases, the counselors may very well challenge the couple to dig deeper into their soul-wounds but couples resist their recommendations. Perhaps many times couples do not know *what* they should seek from their counselors, and as a result they are not motivated to grow in this way. Could it be they are not shown the great reward for doing the work in their weak areas before getting married?

This is my story too. In hindsight, I looked solemnly at my marital failure and analyzed the reasons for the breakdown, reviewing our attempts at post-wedding day triage at the emergency room of marriage hospital. We did not avail ourselves of any premarital education addressing the theology for marriage from God’s perspective, which would have given us the reason *why* we should get married in the first place. We did not understand that marriage is meant as the forum wherein we are to become more sanctified and be refined until we radiate the

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<sup>3</sup> John Gottman. *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. The Gottman Institute. 2013. Accessed July 26, 2020 at <https://www.gottman.com/blog/the-four-horsemen-recognizing-criticism-contempt-defensiveness-and-stonewalling/>

glory of God. After being married for a few years, we participated in a marriage therapy seminar called “Soul-Healing Love,” and I came to learn that we both entered the marriage with soul-wounds from our childhood. For this thesis the term “soul-wound” is defined as: formative experiences that have negatively influenced their core beliefs which continue to produce negative, hurtful reactions when their spouse behaves in a way that triggers one of those soul wounds.<sup>4</sup> We did not address these wounds together before we married, and learning about them at a time when contempt and disrespect against me was peaking put our marriage in a very precarious place. Only one of us committed to be a caring agent for the inner healing of the other, and the other one, bitter with contempt, remained blinded to the value of working toward healing. Within 2 years the relationship died. Knowledge of each other’s weak spots is best to address before the engagement when love and compassion runs hot, especially when coupled with a strong foundation of the God-ordained purpose for marriage.

My thought is that if we were shown how to become agents of healing grace to help each other overcome our deficits shown in the premarital assessment, prior to getting engaged, we likely would have had a much stronger foundation for our marriage. If we would have been able to avail ourselves of objective counseling that showed us the root causes of our soul-wounds and how to help each other overcome them, it would have possibly brought deeper transparency and a resulting intimacy as we headed into marriage. Or it would have caused us to put a hold on our plans while one or both of us obtained therapy. Either of us could have had our eyes opened wider to the real soul-wounds of the other and realize what a commitment to the other truly involves. If one was not willing to marry such an imperfect person, either of us could have bowed out before spending every waking moment planning the wedding and honeymoon. Once

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<sup>4</sup> Beverly and Tom Rodgers. *Soul Healing Love: Turning Relationships That Hurt into Relationships That Heal*. Arizona: Selah Publishing Group, 2006. p. 61-63, 72

we entered this phase of the relationship, I saw some red flags but minimized them, hoping they could be addressed later, unaware of the primary reason for getting married as God sees it. By this stage I just hoped that the problems surfacing in the stress of all such planning would be easier to address once married. We mistakenly thought we were so good for each other that love would give us the power to work it all out.

How many other couples are similarly misguided? They get engaged, start planning the wedding, the reception, and the honeymoon, and think of counseling after their engagement when the race to the wedding day has commenced. Perhaps they almost subconsciously seek out a premarital counselor who would go easy on them, especially if they sense they are so happy together. When couples just seek the approval to get married in the church, is it possible that some church counselors are subconsciously falling prey to an American culture of consumerism where numbers of weddings performed is likened to a sales goal for measuring a supposedly “healthy” church? Where a church has a large population of singles, is there a temptation to see marrying them and thereby shrinking this population a reason for congratulatory celebration in itself?

Author Jennifer Barlow wrote a piece in 1999 for the *Pastoral Psychology* journal detailing the need for churches to change the way they present premarital education. She claims the old method of Sunday School classes or lead pastors doing the counseling has not worked well for years. She contends, “Churches need a new proactive model for building good marriages rather than mending broken ones.”<sup>5</sup> Since then, several programs for pre-marital education and post-marital therapy have been developed and used throughout the country in many American churches. Despite this progress, the numbers of Christians getting divorced is still too high at one

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<sup>5</sup> Jennifer L. Barlow. “A New Model for Premarital Counseling Within the Church.” *Pastoral Psychology* 48, no. 1, 1. (1999) *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 30, 2018).

in four.<sup>6</sup> There are still too many struggling marriages where one spouse has mentally and emotionally abandoned the other already, leading eventually to divorce. How can the focus of traditional premarital counseling methods in American churches be improved from merely providing test results and analytics to teaching couples the skills and core beliefs they need to adequately build a grace-filled, soul-deep intimacy for a lifelong supportive marriage?

The intention of this thesis is to stir up Christian marriage counselors into taking a fresh look at their methods for preparing and educating couples for marriage. As the research will show, couples need much more than mere test results and analytics. They need more than a diagnosis; they need the prognosis of the path for healing. Christian couples should be challenged to begin their marriages with their eyes wide open and learn how to serve their spouse even in their weaknesses, through the good times and the bad. The programs developed by Christian therapists that are used in many churches in America do a great job at showing areas where couples are strong and where they need work, but too little is done to address their core beliefs about marriage and show them how to serve each other in overcoming their weaknesses. This fundamental theology for marriage is frequently lacking. According to the “Story Shaping” problem-solving method by Southeastern University professor Alan Ehler, when developing any significant improvement to ways of doing things that might have been acceptable in the past:

The key component is the increasing of ideas to break the narrowing framing that often results in highly emotional settings. We can tend to default to a ‘your way or my way’ thought process. In such a setting, one person wins and another person loses. Quite often, the best solution is not one of the two starting places. Taking time to expand the options first may introduce a better solution. Even if you decide to agree on one of the initial positions, it can be depersonalized since you took time to consider all options.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Feldhahn. *Good News About Marriage*, p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> Alan Ehler. *How to Make Big Decisions Wisely*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020. p. 125-126.

This writer's expectation is that this thesis would be approached with such open-mindedness, and thus inspire premarital counselors and church leaders to consider making a noteworthy improvement by adding a key missing ingredient in their recipe for preparing couples for a thriving marriage. Such improvement should shrink the divorce rate for Christians.

### *Structure and Flow of the Argument*

This missing ingredient requires the foundation of a biblical theology for marriage, which will be addressed in the chapter two. Marriages suffer if couples do not understand *why* God would want believers to get married, *vis a vis* God's primary purpose for marriage as He sees it. Through a review of relevant Scripture, a theology for a marriage of soul-healing servanthood will be presented. Once this foundation is established, the chapter three will discuss the research of the methods of the most popular premarital education programs used in the American church, and whether they provide any sort of path to overcome the deficits exposed by their assessments of couples. It will be shown that most are notably lacking in the area of teaching a biblical theology for marriage. Most of the premarital counseling programs packaged for churches to use provide no godly insight into the God-ordained purpose for a Christian marriage. In chapter four a key ingredient for applying this theology will be presented which is based on an existing marriage therapy concept that has been adapted for use in the premarital counseling process.<sup>8</sup> In conclusion, it is hoped that premarital counselors will take these concepts to heart and not only begin applying them in their own work, but take them even further in the efforts to more thoroughly prepare couples for the realities of marriage and reduce the number of Christians

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<sup>8</sup> To be clear, this thesis will not include an in-depth analysis of every curriculum for premarital education available historically nor at present, but it will give a brief review of some of the most prevalent Christian curriculums being used in the American church at present. This thesis is also not going to discuss what methods are used in marriage therapy, nor will it be an exhaustive work on all psychological disorders that should be addressed by licensed mental health counselors.

getting divorced.<sup>9</sup> The counselors who read this work will gain some new principles to guide them in improving upon existing premarital education programs used in many American churches today.

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<sup>9</sup> Feldhahn, *Good News About Marriage*, 29.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THEOLOGY FOR A MARRIAGE OF SERVANTHOOD

#### *Introduction*

“Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor over it in vain” (Psalm 127:1). Without proper teaching in the church, Christian people will often enter marriage with many underlying myths about marital bliss they have adopted from the American culture of self-centeredness and consumerism. This is perhaps the primary reason why the foundation of a scriptural theology for marriage must be laid first when preparing couples for marriage. They must all be taught the primary reason *why* God would have anyone marry in the first place. Without the *Why*, couples marry for the wrong reasons. Developing a scriptural understanding for God’s design for marriage and for the individuals entering such a covenant is critical in helping set them free from the mistaken expectations spouses often place upon their partner that lead to frustration. Therefore, this chapter will begin by laying out common myths about marriage and expose them in the light of the Word of God. From there a foundational theology for marriage will be developed from Scripture, establishing the “what” of marriage – how marriage is pictured by its Designer. Then the “why” of marriage as seen from God’s perspective will be shown to be the most crucial element to premarital education. God has a mission for marriage. For couples wanting to “ensure the health and protection of their marriage, a clear theological understanding of marital intimacy is essential.”<sup>1</sup>

Finally, the issues of gender roles and leaving the family of origin will be addressed from the perspective of this theology for a marriage of servanthood. Theologians have wrestled with

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Vigil, “Marital Intimacy: Development of a Course Unit Entitled, ‘Marital Intimacy Within the Course, PS/TH 272 Theology of Marriage’, offered at Central Bible College,” (DMin diss., Trinity Evangelical School, 2007), p. 19.

how to define gender roles in marriage for centuries, and this thesis will not attempt to address all the volumes of such theological discourse due to space and time constraints. For purposes of this thesis the functions of gender will be limited to how each role is designed by God to serve His primary purpose of helping them become more whole and more holy in dedication to their God-ordained mission. Such marital servanthood theology should be taught to premarital couples so they have the core beliefs needed to adequately build a grace-filled, soul-deep intimacy for a supportive lifelong marriage.

### *Myths of Marriage*

One common and significant misconception couples bring to the marriage is that it will be a life happily-ever-after just as portrayed in many popular movies and books. This spawns the other fallacies that Les and Leslie Parrott call “destructive marriage myths”<sup>2</sup> which include mythical thinking such as “We expect exactly the same of each other,” “Everything good in our relationship will improve while everything bad will just disappear,” and “My spouse will make me whole.” The first fallacy is errant since two people growing up in different families cannot possibly be exactly the same in all the expectations they have for each other. In the second myth, one of the underlying false presumptions is that their future spouse will not sin against them, resulting in a romantic idealization that blinds them to the reality of the other’s faults. This presumption has them fall in love with an idealistic illusion of what their spouse will be, but not grow to love the real person, faults and all. This leads to creating an idol of the other that is almost worshipped in competition with their Lord. Scripture says all have sinned and no one is perfect (Rom. 3:23; I John 1:8). Professor Gary Thomas laments that “marriage reminds us of the

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<sup>2</sup> Les and Leslie Parrott. *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006. p.20.

daily reality of living as sinful human beings in a radically broken world.”<sup>3</sup> The other false presumption of the second myth is that the other spouse magically acquires the skills needed to mend all the brokenness as soon as the vows are spoken. No one can do this kind of inner healing in complete unconditional love like Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5). In the Parrotts’ third myth that “My spouse will make me whole,” the truth is that the only person who makes believers whole is Jesus Christ. He fulfills the inner longings of the soul like no one else will; He comforts and restores the soul (Ps. 23:1-4). In John 4:14, Jesus says that He is the living water that quenches the thirsting of the soul. Once couples see their own imperfections and their own need for the unconditional love of Jesus Christ, they can stop having false expectations of the other and start understanding the biblical concepts for a theology of a marriage of servanthood to each other.

#### *Reasons for Marriage That Miss the Mark*

These passages show that God intends that His character be revealed in the marital union, and yet many Christian couples decide to get married for the wrong reasons. They enter marriage without a true understanding of that which God intends for marriage. Dr. Greg and Erin Smalley, who have counseled couples for about twenty-eight years and authored several books on marriage, want couples to learn how marriage is supposed to work so that they can avoid making some devastating mistakes.<sup>4</sup> They claim that most couples’ first response to the question of *why* they want to get married is simply that they are “in love”. From there, they typically say the reasons they are marrying are:

1. to be with their soul mate who makes them complete
2. for companionship so they will not be lonely anymore

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<sup>3</sup> Gary Thomas. *Sacred Marriage: What If God Designed Marriage to Make us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy?* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000. p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> Greg and Erin Smalley. *Ready to Wed: 12 Ways to Start a Marriage You'll Love*. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Pub. 2015. p. 4.

3. to raise a family and share life together
4. to fulfill emotional or sexual needs
5. because they have amazing attraction and chemistry
6. For financial security and safety of a legal commitment

The Smalleys add that those who come into marriage with these objectives are setting themselves up for many years of frustration and disillusionment, because when disappointments come, they struggle with frequent fears of having married the “wrong” person.<sup>5</sup> When this happens, couples become bent on changing their spouse to an idol they have carved in their own heads. The Word of God does not mention any of these goals for marriage, except for procreation. However, the goal of marrying to have children is not enough to keep that marriage together because there must be a much bigger reason *why* two believers would get married. The entire book of the Song of Songs showcases God’s ideal marriage: one that is romantic, sacrificial, passionate and altruistic; and yet no children are in this picture. This shows that His ideal picture of marriage is not dependent upon having children.

### *Marriage Pictured Throughout the Bible*

From the opening of Scripture to its closing, a display of the evidence of God’s passion and love for marriage is easily observed. In Genesis 1:26-28 the creation of humanity in both male and female form showcased the image of God, *imago dei*, in both genders. Gen. 2:18-25 tells how God created Eve to be the comparable helper and companion for Adam, and they were joined as husband and wife before the Lord, as it says in verse 22, “and He brought her to the man.” Then the narrative is interrupted by a principle for all future couples to follow: “a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). The first humans on earth were husband and wife. The book Song of Songs is provocatively

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

passionate about the love between husband and wife, and may also be understood to be an allegory of the love between God and His people. The metaphor of a bride and groom is used to describe God's love for Israel as in Hosea 2:19 where He says "I will make you my wife forever." In Malachi 2:14-16 God declares his passion for the marriage covenant as He advocates for wives by telling their husbands to honor their commitment, because He hates what divorce does to people.

In the New Testament, Jesus performed His first miracle at a wedding in Cana. In Matthew 19:4-5, when Jesus was asked about divorce, He quoted from Genesis 2:24 in substantiating God's design for marriage at the dawn of humanity. The metaphor of bride and groom is used in the New Testament to describe the love of Christ for his Church in Ephesians 5:31-32. Verse 31 also quotes Gen. 2:24 and then states that the mystery of becoming one flesh is referring to Christ and His church. In the final scenes of Revelation, the marriage of the Lamb to his Bride is pictured by the marriage feast of the Lamb of God (Rev. 19:7-9).

The placement of the narrative in Genesis 1 and 2 regarding the first husband and wife is worth noting. The fact that God designed and authored marriage as a part of the creation story prior to the horrific fall of humanity in Genesis 3 shows that marriage is an order of creation, not as a redemptive ritual. Dr. Jim Vigil of Southeastern University writes:

The timing of this Mosaic interruption is important. If Moses had included this passage a few verses later (into chapter three), it would have been reasonable to view marriage as a part of redemption and not creation. On the contrary, the pre-fall introduction of marriage implies that this divine institute was not intended to be a sacrament of grace as the Catholic Church assumes, rather it is an ordinance of creation. As such, it is to be sacredly practiced and recognized by all of humanity, not simply those within the church.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Vigil, *Marital Intimacy*, p. 39.

It is apparent that God did not institute marriage as a form of punitive correction, nor as a sacrament or rite of purification from sin. People were never required to marry as a condition of salvation. The idea of marriage originated with God from the inception of humanity. It was His dream. He authored it: a union of one man with one woman. He tailored the woman specifically to the man so they were naturally compatible to be companions for life, and together be a witness, a testimony of God's justice and His mercy. God empowered spouses to support each other's walk with Jesus and to be a witness to the world.<sup>7</sup> God has chosen from the very first humans – whose wedding He officiated - to show both His masculine and His feminine attributes to their children. (This concept is developed further below.) This is one of the reasons why God created heterosexual marriage and rejects homosexual partnerships as evidenced by multiple Scriptures in both the Old and New Testaments.<sup>8</sup> For purposes of this thesis then only heterosexual, monogamous marriage is discussed.

Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott teach that marriage is closer to the nature of God's character and interaction with humanity than any other human experience.<sup>9</sup> They point out that God's love for His people is likened to a marital love: "As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you" (Isaiah 62:5). In marriage, God reveals his covenantal faithfulness and his forgiveness. Marriage depends on two people being faithful and loyal to each other, and this is sustained by God's demonstration of faithfulness to them. God will remain faithful even when his sinful people are not faithful (Rev. 19:11 and 2 Tim. 2:13). Couples do not achieve abiding confidence in their own fidelity until they first recognize God's faithfulness to them.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Steven Waterhouse. *Holy Matrimony: The Image of God in the Family*. Amarillo, TX: Westcliff Press, 2006. p. 5

<sup>8</sup> Gen. 19:4-5; Rom. 1:24-28; 1 Cor. 6:9-11; and 1 Tim. 1:9-10.

<sup>9</sup> Les and Leslie Parrott, *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts*, p. 143.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145

God's forgiveness empowers their ability to forgive their spouses for what they do wrong, and to see their partner through eyes of the same mercy they each have received (Matt. 6:12). When spouses forgive, they show the forgiveness of God that frees one from condemnation.<sup>11</sup> A theology of forgiveness is crucial to the foundation of any marriage, since a skewed understanding of God's forgiveness limits the degree of forgiveness extended to and sought after from their spouse. To what degree they forgive, to what degree do they see others forgiven by God, to what degree do they seek forgiveness, and to what degree they allow themselves to be forgiven all depends upon their theology of God's forgiveness applied in their own journey with the Lord.

#### *God's Primary Purpose for Marriage*

A high-level view of marriage as pictured in the Scriptures just presented must be developed into a theology for marriage which should be taught by premarital counselors to keep couples from missing the mark. Couples need to be shown the foundational purpose God has for marriage. What does the Word of God tell us about the reason God instituted marriage that provides such a foundational purpose in the scheme of eternity? Without a clear answer to the "why" question, Mark and Priscilla Young contend that the answers to the "what is marriage" questions and "how to" questions "lack a theological framework that might keep them from becoming little more than common wisdom or pop psychology."<sup>12</sup> Therefore, a discussion on the primary theological purpose for a God-honoring marriage is necessary. It should be noted that the truths of Scripture presented here are true of marriage universally, whether couples acknowledge God's authority in

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 146

<sup>12</sup> Mark S. Young and Priscilla R. Young. "Marriage and the Mission of God" in *Marriage: Its Foundation, Theology, and Mission in a Changing World*, ed. by Curt Hamner, John Trent, Rebekah J. Byrd, Eric L. Johnson, and Erik Thoennes. Chicago, IL: Moody Pub., 2018. P. 355.

their lives or not. God's ways are best and His purposes are highest in all of creation, and any couple who wants God's best must yield themselves to the wisdom of God.

Spiritual growth comes from *applying* Jesus's teachings to life. John 13:15 instructs believers that Jesus has given them an example "that you should do just as I have done for you." The author of *The Five Love Languages*, Dr. Gary D. Chapman, asserts, "Our greatest happiness will be found in spiritual growth – becoming more like Christ."<sup>13</sup> He comments from experience about his own marriage: "When I truly became a follower of Jesus and she reciprocated, our marriage became a mutual aid society."<sup>14</sup> He contends further that "God intends us to be His encourager to each other so that together each of us will accomplish more for his kingdom than we would ever have accomplished alone."<sup>15</sup> Marriage will help couples become more holy as the two care for each other's souls and they become more whole. Then their marriage will "participate in the mission of God for the sake of others"<sup>16</sup> and testify to the unsaved of the goodness of God, that they might be converted. Jesus knows that couples who enter marriage with this perspective will have their greatest relational needs met as they become more like the Son.<sup>17</sup>

God has predestined believers to be conformed to the likeness of His Son (Rom. 8:29). Tim and Kathy Keller argue that the ultimate purpose for marriage is to help your spouse become the person God wants him or her to be, and that the commitment to your spouse's *holiness* is what keeps the marriage going. They say when seeking a marriage partner, each one should be able to look inside the other and see God's work inside them and be excited to be part of the

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<sup>13</sup> Gary D Chapman. *Covenant Marriage*. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003. P. 196.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29

<sup>16</sup> Young and Young, "Marriage and the Mission of God," p. 353-354.

<sup>17</sup> Smalley and Smalley, *Ready to Wed*, p. 7.

process.<sup>18</sup> As both spouses become more like Christ, they grow in their ability to love each other as Christ loves them. God will use their marital struggles and challenges to benefit them spiritually by growing their Christian character.<sup>19</sup> When couples are attuned to this ultimate purpose, the marriage relationship will be a sacred tool to teach sacrificial love, forgiveness, perseverance and servanthood.<sup>20</sup> Vigil maintains that couples “are in need of grace or reconciliation. Marriage facilitates not only the opportunity to receive such grace but also the opportunity to extend grace to others.”<sup>21</sup> Married couples need to show a radical amount of grace, which can only be extended from a heart that is walking more and more in the grace of God itself.

Gary Thomas, the author of *Sacred Marriage: What if God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy?*, teaches married couples that God does not intend to give His people a spouse to fulfill their utopian self-centeredness nor their sexual fantasies, and that He wants to use the marriage relationship to make them more holy. As they grow in serving their spouse as God requires, they will become more and more happy with each other. Thomas believes marriage for believers is more than a sacred covenant; it is a spiritual, multi-faceted discipline designed to teach them to trust God more fully and love him centrally.<sup>22</sup> As their sins are exposed to each other, couples must grow in the mastery of forgiveness, and birthed in their humility before the Lord they must be taught to approach the other’s sins in a nurturing gentleness, encouraging them on the pathway to sanctification<sup>23</sup> (1 Thess. 5:11). Counselors may talk about forgiveness, but they must warn that if each spouse is not committed to growing in

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<sup>18</sup> Tim Keller and Kathy Keller. *The Meaning of Marriage Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2011. p. 112-113.

<sup>19</sup> Smalley and Smalley, *Ready to Wed*. p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas, *Sacred Marriage*, p. 41,109.

<sup>21</sup> Vigil, *Theology of Marital Intimacy*, p. 103.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

humble cognizance of their own sin and the overwhelming generosity of the Lord to forgive, then they will begin saving all the other's sins in a mental file cabinet to use as weapons of bitter accusations.<sup>24</sup> They make enemies of each other, despite their good intentions.

Stepping into marriage with an eternal perspective will help them build a memorable history together as it helps them endure the struggles of life.<sup>25</sup> Romans 2:7-8 declares that to those who persist in doing right (even for their spouse) and seek honor and immortality, God will give them eternal life. Thomas muses that ministering to your spouse will force one to face their character issues and that "if you want to become more like Jesus, I can't imagine any better thing to do than to get married."<sup>26</sup> In marriage, believers experience the sharing of one of God's attributes of loyal love; His purpose for marriage is to make them more like Himself, especially as a showcase for loyalty to a promise and to a relationship.<sup>27</sup>

The Youngs go further with a lengthy essay on the mission for godly marriage, contending that marital intimacy should never be an end in itself, because such pursuit for its own sake undermines the very purpose of marriage, and turns an introspective marriage into a self-centered one.<sup>28</sup> They contend for godly marriages finding their truest sense of purpose in participating in the mission of God by serving His people and making His name famous so that others come to know him. Then couples find their greatest joy and fulfillment together.

The primary reason for anyone getting married is found in such a mission. God created marriage for the most holy purpose: *to help brides and grooms become more like Jesus Christ individually, and in the journey, they engage God's mission for their marriage to serve others for*

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 169-170.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>27</sup> Waterhouse, *Holy Matrimony*, p. 10.

<sup>28</sup> Young and Young, "Marriage and the Mission of God," p. 370-371.

*the glory of God* (*italics added for emphasis*). In their book titled *Intimate Allies*, Dan Allender and Tremper Longman believe that the purpose for every marriage “is to shape the raw material of life to reveal more fully the glory of God.”<sup>29</sup> They continue with the thought that all marriages are no better than their purpose, and if the purpose is to live for God’s kingdom purposes, the couple will experience a growing passion for both God and each other.<sup>30</sup> This purpose is borne out of New Testament marriage passages such as the one in Ephesians 5.

### *Principles for a Marriage of Servanthood*

Ephesians 5:21-33 is an anchoring pericope for developing the theology for a marriage of servanthood, because it is a great picture of the primary purpose for godly marriage. Immediately preceding this passage, in 5:18-21 there are several commands for believers to be filled with the Spirit, encouraging each other in psalms and melodies, giving thanks, and submitting to each other out of reverence for Christ. The context leading into the pericope is a teaching on supportive relationships within the church based on a mutual respect and submission between believers in honor of the Lord. The exhortations to marriage partners are related to what is said in these verses about the relationship of Jesus Christ with His Church and about the Church’s calling in the world.<sup>31</sup> The transition verse (21) in the Greek Textus Receptus is ὑποτασσόμενοι ἀλλήλοις ἐν φόβῳ Θεοῦ, in continuation of the previous thought, and translates into “submitting yourselves to one another in the fear of God” (NKJV).<sup>32</sup> The verb translated

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<sup>29</sup> Dan Allender and Tremper Longman. *Intimate Allies*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1995. p. 73.

<sup>30</sup> Allender and Longman, *Intimate Allies*, p. 74.

<sup>31</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln. “Ephesians, Volume 42.” *Word Biblical Commentary*. Gen Eds. Bruce Metzger, David Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker, Ralph Martin, Lynn Losie. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990. p. 966

<sup>32</sup> “Ephesians 5 (NKJV) - submitting to one another in.” Blue Letter Bible. Accessed Oct. 30, 2020, at [https://www.blueletterbible.org/nkjv/eph/5/21/t\\_conc\\_1102021](https://www.blueletterbible.org/nkjv/eph/5/21/t_conc_1102021)

“submitting yourselves” is a present, passive participle in the plural form, speaking to a group of people who choose to do the submitting and yielding.<sup>33</sup> It is a matter of giving preference to the needs of others, ranking their interests higher. It is this perspective that paves the way for the household instructions of the following verses.

Consider then this passage of Scripture (5:22-33):

**22** Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. **23** For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. **24** Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. **25** Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, **26** that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, **27** that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. **28** So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. **29** For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. **30** For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. **31** “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” **32** This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church. **33** Nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. (NKJV)

This passage reveals the mystery of how earthly marriages are a picture of the relationship between Christ and His Bride, the Church global. Poetic movement occurs back and forth between human marriage and the marriage of Christ and the church. This pericope makes clear that the prototype for human marriage is the union between the heavenly bridegroom and his bride.<sup>34</sup> When the world looks at married Christians, they should see an example of Christ’s unconditional love and the Church’s dedication to Christ.<sup>35</sup> The Youngs contend that “A marriage characterized by these behaviors creates something glorious and mysterious – a compelling picture of the relationship between a loving Christ and a responding Church.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> “Ephesians 5 (NKJV) - submitting to one another in.” Blue Letter Bible.

<sup>34</sup> Lincoln, “Ephesians” *Word Biblical Commentary*, p. 967

<sup>35</sup> Waterhouse, *Holy Matrimony*, p. 5

<sup>36</sup> Young and Young, “Marriage and the Mission of God”, p.369.

Marriage is symbolic of the union between Christ and His Church, the “splendor of marriage” which becomes attractive to a watching world and leads to the conversion of the lost souls.<sup>37</sup>

A theology for a marriage of servanthood rises from this pericope as a standard for New Testament Christianity against the cultural norms of the day when Ephesians was written. A similar passage with household instruction is Colossians 3:18-4:1, and perhaps Paul took from that letter and expanded in greater detail as he outlined how the household code for Christian families should differ from that of the Judeo and Greco-Roman worlds.<sup>38</sup> Both passages follow the same basic sequence in their treatment of the same three pairs of household relationships, that of wife-husband, parents-children, and the slave-master relationship. Colossians emphasizes the last pair, where Ephesians gives most attention to the first.<sup>39</sup> This was important given the patriarchal domination of the households that ruled the day. Jewish writers Philo and Josephus adapted Aristotle’s outline of household subordination, believing that in Mosaic law women are inferior to men in all things.<sup>40</sup> The typical theme was that the man is intended to “rule as husband, father, and master, and that not to adhere to this proper hierarchy was detrimental not only to the household but also to the life of the state.”<sup>41</sup> In the Greco-Roman world the household was viewed as the foundation of the state, and proper household management was a matter of crucial political concern; any upsetting of the traditional hierarchical order would be a threat to the order of society.<sup>42</sup> Christians needed a household code that preserved the hierarchy while

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<sup>37</sup> Chris Brooks. “Why Marriage: Celebrating the Christian View”, in *Marriage: Its Foundation, Theology, and Mission in a Changing World*, ed. by Curt Hamner, John Trent, Rebekah J. Byrd, Eric L. Johnson, and Erik Thoennes (Chicago, IL: Moody Pub., 2018), p. 351.

<sup>38</sup> Apart from its use of Colossians and its household code, Eph 5:21–33 draws on other traditions. Sampley’s monograph “And the Two Shall Become One Flesh” is “a study of traditions in Ephesians 5:21–33” and should be consulted critically for a fuller treatment of some of the issues (cf. esp. 16–85, 158–62).

<sup>39</sup> Lincoln, “Ephesians” *Word Biblical Commentary*, p. 970-71

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 978

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

modeling the servant heart of Jesus. While it is true that Colossians requires husbands to love, “Ephesians adds explicitly the qualifying notion of mutual submission and reinforces the sacrificial and demanding nature of the love required of husbands through its Christological analogy.”<sup>43</sup>

Godly marriages are to reflect the love and devotion that the Church has for its King, both inwardly and outwardly – for themselves and for their community. This is the *Why*. This is the foundation that should be taught to courting and engaged couples because if this is missed, they lack the motivation to take responsibility for all the prescriptions for behavior changes and mindset adjustments needed to build a thriving marriage. Without this understanding that they should marry so they can serve their spouse and become more like Jesus, then why would they want to make any behavior changes or mindset adjustments? They still walk into marriage with the fairy-tale idea that their future spouse will be the one to change and compromise in all areas of disagreement.

All believers come to Jesus in brokenness and shame, as slaves to fear. As they begin their journey with Him, He showers them with mercy as they learn to present their bodies as a living sacrifice to God and be transformed over time by the renewing of their minds so they can walk in the perfect will of God (Rom. 12:1-2). They do not say a simple prayer, get baptized, and get instantly perfected. It is a journey of many lessons learning to put one’s selfish interests behind them, while finding great joy from serving others that the Spirit leads to them (Phil. 2:1-5). This doesn’t change just because two believers get married. If anything, marriage intensifies the need for greater inner healing, greater sacrifice of selfish desires, and less independence and stubborn pride. Believers who desire to be married must be shown this truth *before* the wedding

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<sup>43</sup> Lincoln, “Ephesians” *Word Biblical Commentary*, p. 973

day. The only way husbands and wives will *want* to create a marriage of servanthood is by getting a hold of this foundational truth. It will open their eyes to a whole new level of great joy and satisfaction. It will give them the drive to see their future spouse the way God does from His vantage point. It sustains them through the work required in the last verse of this passage.

Before commencing a discussion of the directives of the pericope for husbands and wives individually in the following sections, consideration should be given to the interdependent synergism of the command in its closing verse. In a symbiotic relationship like that of a couple riding a teeter-totter together, each one must do their part to keep the ride in motion for mutual enjoyment. Ephesians 5:33 says that husbands must love their wives as they love themselves, and that wives should respect their husbands. If each one does their part, the relationship will work great. But it is challenging. This can only be done by the power of the Spirit, yet couples would not think to ask God for help if no one taught it to them. Dr. Emerson Eggerichs writes about couples breaking the “Crazy Cycle” where wives feel so unloved that they berate and belittle their husbands, and in return husbands feel so disrespected that they hurt their wives with unloving remarks. He admonishes couples that husbands are to love their wives regardless of her level of respect for him, and wives are to respect their husbands irrespective of his level of love for her.<sup>44</sup> In other words, each one’s behavior is not conditioned on the other. The Bible teaches unconditional respect: “Show proper respect to everyone ... not only to those who are good and considerate, but ... harsh” (I Pet. 2:17-18). First Peter 3:9 tells all believers to be tenderhearted and courteous, not returning hurt with hurt or insults with insults. Married Christians are called to give respect to their spouse even when they know only too well their character flaws.<sup>45</sup> This primary goal for Christian marriages – that marriage is meant to help couples become more

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<sup>44</sup> Emmerson Eggerichs. *Love and Respect*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2004. p. 16

<sup>45</sup> Thomas, *Sacred Marriage*, p. 55.

internally whole and more holy to God's mission for their marriage - is the foundational perspective that governs the discussions that follow.

*Gender Roles: Husbands*

Once these motivating truths are conveyed, a theology for gender roles within marriage can then be shown. There has been much debate over the centuries among theologians on how to apply the concepts of husbands leading and wives submitting, but for purposes of this thesis the aspects of gender roles will be limited to how each role is designed by God to serve His primary purpose of helping couples become more whole and more holy, in their service to the Lord.

Each premarital counselor who makes it a priority to teach on this subject would likely agree that men in America are heavily influenced by society into complacent masculinity and extended adolescence. God-fearing men who desire to be married must be taught the biblical roles for husbands prior to the wedding. They have a tall order to fill. It is one of servant-leadership, just as Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. This new role will require them to make decisions with the help of their wife for the provision and protection of the whole family, not just for themselves anymore.<sup>46</sup> Future husbands must be taught to do this from a spirit of love and empathy.

In comparison to the short section addressing wives, most of the verses in this pericope speak to husbands. Eph. 5:25-33a tells husbands to love their wives, just as Christ loves His Bride. He loves her unconditionally before she ever loved in return (Rom. 5:8). Then in vs. 28-29b, husbands are told to love their wives as they love their own bodies, just as Christ loves His own Body, the Church. The comparison is then elaborated by the affirmation that in the same

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<sup>46</sup> Waterhouse, *Holy Matrimony*, p. 70.

way a husband “who loves his wife loves himself” and the negative affirmation that no one hates his own body but nourishes and cherishes it.<sup>47</sup> The assertion elicits the return to the analogy of Christ and His nourishment of the Church in vs. 29c-30. The writer’s quotation of Gen. 2:24 appeals to husbands to love their wives as their own bodies. “There is a sense in which wives are their husbands’ bodies, since Gen 2:24 declares that marriage makes husband and wife one body.”<sup>48</sup> In this regard a husband’s way of loving his own body is now directly correlated to how Christ treats his own Body, “since we are members of his body.”<sup>49</sup> She is to be prized and valued in the same manner as Jesus loves His people.

This type of love is the Greek *ἀγαπᾶω* which in this context references a type of divinely sacrificial love.<sup>50</sup> It often gives a picture of God’s unconditional love which is not predicated on the other returning that love, as in John 3:16 when God loved the world by sending Jesus. Just as Jesus sacrificed himself to make humanity holy before the Father, so God calls husbands to lay down their selfishness and their comforts to be serving the needs of their wives. “Husbands are asked to exercise the self-giving love that has as its goal only their wives’ good and that will care for their wives without the expectation of reward.”<sup>51</sup> The directive for wives to yield should not be isolated from this directive for husbands to give this kind of loving leadership through self-sacrifice from a mindset of servanthood; there is no place for self-assertion or self-aggrandizement.<sup>52</sup> It is noteworthy that this concept of *ἀγαπᾶν* does not occur in Greco-Roman household codes regarding a husband’s duties.<sup>53</sup> This instruction to husbands was not

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<sup>47</sup> Lincoln, “Ephesians” *Word Biblical Commentary*, p. 969

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> “Agape”. New World Encyclopedia. Accessed August 29, 2020, at <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Agape>

<sup>51</sup> Lincoln, “Ephesians” *Word Biblical Commentary*, p. 1012

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

conventional in contemporary marriage instructions, so these Pauline directives were needed in the New Testament church.

In vs. 25-26 the writer of Ephesians describes several aspects of how Jesus prepares His Bride to be presented to Him without spot or blemish (v. 27). The self-sacrificing love He showed by giving His life was purposed to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing of His Word, to restore her to perfection as a holy and blameless people who radiate His glory. Scholars say that this cleansing is a reference to baptism, and others say it is describing a Jewish bride taking a prenuptial bath before her wedding.<sup>54</sup> In both cases, the Church is cleansed by the word of the gospel of Christ (John 15:3; 17:17). “The Church’s cleansing from the moral pollution of sin is carried out not through baptism only but through baptism accompanied by the word which points to Christ.”<sup>55</sup> This shows a way that husbands are to serve their wives. He is to be her prayer warrior against the enemy and her encourager in her quest to become more like Jesus by speaking the Word of God into her spirit. Contributing to this concept, Allender and Longman assert that this kind of love seeks the best for each spouse and in this passage, the best is to become like Jesus, “holy and blameless.” Put another way, the command to lovingly serve their wife is “the command to encourage them in their spiritual maturity.”<sup>56</sup>

Husbands are commanded in First Peter 3:7 to understand and give honor to their wives as unto the weaker vessel, as joint heirs of the grace of life, so that their own prayers are not hindered. The word translated “vessel” (NKJV) is *σκευος* is a common Greek word meaning

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<sup>54</sup> Marvin R. Vincent. “Commentary on Ephesians 5:4.” *Vincent's Word Studies in the New Testament*. New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1887. Accessed Oct. 31, 2020, at <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/vnt/ephesians-5.html>.

<sup>55</sup> Lincoln, “Ephesians” *Word Biblical Commentary*, p. 1016

<sup>56</sup> Allender and Longman, *Intimate Allies*, p. 119.

vessel, in one sense as in furniture or household utensil.<sup>57</sup> Here both husband and wife are termed vessels and she is termed “the weaker” not for intellectual or moral weakness, but purely physically weaker or more feeble, “which the husband must recognize with due consideration for marital happiness.”<sup>58</sup> The word vessel is also used in a nautical sense of watercraft or of sails.<sup>59</sup> Marriage therapist Robby Goss, who counseled this writer, says it creates a visual image of wives as sailboats and husbands as ships that can protect her and rescue her in troubled waters.

If this passage is errantly interpreted to mean “inferior” or of positionally lower status, as may have been the dominant view of women in the Greco-Roman era, then it would contradict the latter half of this verse (3:7b). It states that both husbands and wives are joint heirs of God’s grace, equal before Him.<sup>60</sup> Such an errant interpretation of inferiority would also contradict multiple passages in the New Testament which support the elevation of women to equality with men in worth and position in Jesus’ ministry.<sup>61</sup> In his commentary on 1 Peter, Joel B. Green writes that Aristotle held the relation of man to woman to be that of ruler and subject (*Politics* 1.2), and that the Romans assessed women as weak and light-minded in relation to men. “Indeed, In the topsy-turvy world projected by Peter’s Christology, however, what is dishonored is to be honored... Not surprisingly, then, failure to ‘accord honor to her’ results in the failure of a man’s

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<sup>57</sup> “1 Peter 3:7, Robertson’s Word Pictures of the New Testament.” Bible Study Tools. Accessed Oct. 23, 2020, at <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/robertsons-word-pictures/1-peter/1-peter-3-7.html>

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> “G4632 - skeuos - Strong’s Greek Lexicon (NKJV)”. Blue Letter Bible. Accessed Aug. 30, 2020, at <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong=G4632&t=NKJV>

<sup>60</sup> Jamieson, Fausset & Brown. “Commentary on 1 Peter 3.” No Pages. Accessed Oct. 23, 2020, at [https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/jfb/1Pe/1Pe\\_003.cfm](https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/jfb/1Pe/1Pe_003.cfm).

<sup>61</sup> A proper treatise of gender equality is beyond the scope of this thesis. For further research, *the Priscilla Papers* (the academic journal of Christians for Biblical Equality) has numerous articles on egalitarian perspectives which look at some of these texts and gender roles.

prayers.”<sup>62</sup> Christian husbands, then, are to give greater honor to their wives as a reflection of the grace with which Christ has honored them both.

Decisions affecting the family should be made prayerfully and mutually after joint contribution, while husbands draw from their wives’ insight. But if a deadline forces a decision before mutual consensus, the Word gives husbands authority to make the call so long as he is imitating Christ in sacrificial love in honor of his wife’s needs and his children’s best interests (Eph. 5:22; 1 Peter 3:5-6)<sup>63</sup>. If his wife reacts to difficult situations from a place of fear or inner wounds from the past, a caring husband seeks to move forward in a way that calms her fears and speaks life and healing into her soul. Serving her like this takes time, but time must be invested to know the inner working and wounds of her soul. The application of this practical theology will be presented in chapter four.

#### *Gender Roles: Wives*

Premarital education must also address gender equality and the role of Christian wives in marriage as designed by God in fulfillment of His primary reason for marriage. Cultural changes in a post-modern world have caused internal conflicts for many women who want to follow God’s Word, which is almost always counter-cultural. Even the Genesis account of creation written for the Israelites was counter-cultural, written in stark contrast to the creation stories and cosmologies of Egypt and Mesopotamia. In his commentary of Genesis, Walter Brueggemann asserts that it reveals a revolutionary view of a God who governs in loving relationship with His

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<sup>62</sup> Joel B. Green. *1 Peter*. Two Horizons Commentary Series. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007. p. 100

<sup>63</sup> Eggerichs, *Love and Respect*, p. 218.

creatures, not as one who reigns by fiat and remoteness.<sup>64</sup> Starting at the creation of humanity in Genesis 1:26-29, both male and female were equally created in the image of God and equally empowered to be fruitful and multiply, fill and subdue the earth, and rule over creation. This was not just Adam's task. Brueggemann contends that "The creature is seen as the one who is entrusted with power and authority to rule ... This man and woman are not the chattel and servants of God, but the agents of God to whom much is given and from whom much is expected."<sup>65</sup> Humanity is a community of both male and female, and neither is the full image of God individually. God is reflected only in the community of humankind.<sup>66</sup> Still today, both sexes are required to procreate and reproduce such life-giving intimacy as God commanded in that they are to be fruitful and multiply the image of God in their offspring. God has "characteristics reflected in both sexes."<sup>67</sup>

Mothers and fathers together show their children both sides of the nature of God, for the fathers in their masculinity are the typical bearers of justice, and the mothers in their femininity are the typical merciful nurturers for their children. In their thorough essay on "The Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Meaning of Marriage and Sex," authors John C. Clark and Marcus P. Johnson assert that both male and female were created in the *imago dei* and therefore "a solitary male or female most certainly cannot image God in a way that is most basic to who he is: depicting his personal, relational, and life-giving intimacy."<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Walter Brueggemann. "Genesis" in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010. p. 64.

<sup>65</sup> Brueggemann, "Genesis", p. 64

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66

<sup>67</sup> Eric L. Johnson. "The Dance of Gender in New Covenant Marriage" in *Marriage: Its Foundation, Theology, and Mission in a Changing World*, ed. by Curt Hamner, John Trent, Rebekah J. Byrd, Eric L. Johnson, and Erik Thoennes. Chicago, IL: Moody Pub., 2018., p. 157.

<sup>68</sup> John C. Clark and Marcus P. Johnson. "The Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Meaning of Marriage and Sex," in *Marriage: Its Foundation, Theology, and Mission in a Changing World*, ed. by Curt Hamner, John Trent, Rebekah J. Byrd, Eric L. Johnson, and Erik Thoennes. Chicago, IL: Moody Pub., 2018. P. 26.

Genesis 2:18-25 reveals some details of how God created the first humans. God announced that it was not good for the man to be alone. There were no animals from which he could derive soul-deep companionship and spiritual encouragement. Therefore, God created a suitable helper for him by fashioning Eve from a rib taken from Adam's side (2:22), which, as Saint Augustine reportedly quipped, shows her equality with him, since she was not taken from his head nor his feet.<sup>69</sup> The Hebrew word for "suitable" means "counterpart, parallel to, opposite of, in front of."<sup>70</sup> The Hebrew word for "helper" is *ezer*, which is also used of God who aids and helps His people in multiple verses in Exodus (God helped against Pharaoh), Deuteronomy and Psalms.<sup>71</sup> Yet in this scene, God does not intend to be the helper that Adam needs. Brueggemann argues that since his helper must be another similar creature and "not the Creator shows to what extent creation is left to its own resources and expected to honor its vocation."<sup>72</sup> The well-being of the man required a special act of God in the stunning emergence of woman.<sup>73</sup>

Jane Hanson and Marie Powers assert "Something of Adam's own self was removed from him and returned to him in a very different package ... She was part of him, his other self ... When the woman was taken out of him, the image of God ... was male and female."<sup>74</sup> Therefore, she is the human counterpart to man, although opposite in gender, like the opposite side of the same coin, she is faced to face with him, like a mirror reflecting to him the image of God's character. She reflects the feminine aspects of God's image when she helps him, and he reflects to her the masculine aspects of God's nature when he helps her. She is on an equal level

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<sup>69</sup> Richard L. Strauss. *Marriage is for Love*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1988. P. 18.

<sup>70</sup> "H5048 - neged - Strong's Hebrew Lexicon (NIV)." Blue Letter Bible. Accessed Aug. 8, 2020, at <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong's=H5048&t=NIV>

<sup>71</sup> "H5828 - `ezer - Strong's Hebrew Lexicon (NKJV)." Blue Letter Bible. Accessed Oct. 23, 2020, at <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong's=H5828&t=NKJV>

<sup>72</sup> Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p. 85.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* p. 86.

<sup>74</sup> Jane Hansen with Marie Powers. *Fashioned for Intimacy: Reconciling Men and Women to God's Original Design*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1997. P. 52-53.

with him. God designed a wife to help her husband grow into a man of God who serves the kingdom of God, and minister to his inner needs of soul and spirit that no animal can do.<sup>75</sup>

Allender and Longman assert that neither Adam nor Eve could fulfill the entirety of the tasks God had given them – especially in multiplying the human race – for God had designed such interdependence “to reflect His trinitarian being.”<sup>76</sup> As her husband’s counterpart, she should draw the glory of Elohim out of him (and he would do the same for her) so that they “can in turn subdue or better shape the world.”<sup>77</sup>

As a reminder, this thesis is not going to argue for a complete theology on biblical gender roles but is limited to how the gender roles support the mission of inspiring spouses to helping them become more whole and more holy. In the New Testament, the roles for wives are compared to the role of the Church in relation to Christ. Ephesians 5:22 in the Greek is Αἱ γυναῖκες τοῖς ἰδίοις ἀνδράσιν ὑποτάσσεσθε, ὡς τῷ κυρίῳ (Textus Receptus) which translates to “wives submit yourselves to your own husbands as to the Lord.” Some manuscripts do not contain the verb, rather, it is implied from the previous verse, as in, Christians are to have mutual respect in submitting to each other so wives should do the same with their husbands. Lincoln asserts that the Greek verb for “submit” is supplied for English translations since most likely the best Greek text has no verb in 22 and “was dependent for its sense on the participle in the previous verse.”<sup>78</sup>

In the proceeding verses the implication continues with children submitting to parents, and servants to their masters. In this Greco-Roman era, the term is a military ranking idea, that of

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<sup>75</sup> Waterhouse, *Holy Matrimony*, p. 71.

<sup>76</sup> Allender and Longman, *Intimate Allies*, p. 76.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89

<sup>78</sup> Lincoln, “Ephesians,” *Word Biblical Commentary*, p. 963

position not of worth.<sup>79</sup> Submission did not mean inferiority nor silence. It is recognizing someone has a covering authority over them and that they are part of a team; as an individual they are not more important than the working of the team. It is the wife intent on “sub-mission:” putting herself under the mission for a Christian marriage is pursuing holiness together and glorifying God, and perhaps supporting her husband’s calling in a joint effort.<sup>80</sup>

This picture of submission is to emulate how the church submits to Christ. Eric L. Johnson writes extensively about gender issues relating to marriage and contends for the following description of the Pauline picture of submission, which is very fitting to the primary purpose for marriage:

The Holy Spirit through Paul was advocating a glorious, ennobling submission derived from Christ’s life, death and resurrection, capitalizing on her full human capacities, as well as her feminine strengths, in a way that pictures the Church’s relation to Christ. But the goal is the *true* good of her spouse, helping him to become his true self, the virtuous, flourishing man that God is calling him to be.<sup>81</sup>

Even Jesus the Son was submitted to God the Father. According to John 15:10, he kept his Father’s commandments, and he spoke what He had heard from His Father (John 8:38). He was God but he became the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 as the only begotten Son of God (John 3:16). Yet He is still God. It is a matter of position, not of value. The Son chose to submit himself to the redemptive plan of the Father, yet He remained equal to the Father in divinity and worth, as a Person of the Godhead.<sup>82</sup> The wife is equal to the husband in her value and intrinsic worth, even when she enters a marriage covenant and positionally submits herself to the leadership of her husband<sup>83</sup>. How would a husband be able to serve his wife by lovingly

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<sup>79</sup> David Guzik. “Study Guide for Ephesians 5 by David Guzik.” Blue Letter Bible. Accessed Oct. 26, 2020, at [https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/guzik\\_david/StudyGuide2017-Eph/Eph-5.cfm](https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/guzik_david/StudyGuide2017-Eph/Eph-5.cfm)

<sup>80</sup> Guzik, “Study Guide for Ephesians 5”

<sup>81</sup> Eric L. Johnson, “The Dance of Gender”, p. 167.

<sup>82</sup> Waterhouse, *Holy Matrimony*, p. 69.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

ministering to her spirit and renewing her mind with the Word of God if she does not willingly become vulnerable and open her soul to him?

### *Marital Leaving and Cleaving*

In Matthew 19:4-5, Jesus quoted from Genesis 2:24 when He said: “Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female’, and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’”? He validated the order for marriage originated by the Godhead at the creation of man and woman. In 2:24 the Hebrew word *azab*, which is translated “leave” or “forsake,” also means to “depart from” and “leave behind.”<sup>84</sup> According to Bible historian John Walton, this verse “establishes a ‘flesh-line’ that was stronger than a bloodline and causes the man to seek her out. In a sense, a part of him was missing and is, in effect, beckoning him.”<sup>85</sup> Couples need to leave their natal ties with their family of origin by establishing a new relationship with their parents. God’s prescription is that new spouses make such a fundamental shift and establish a nuclear family apart from one’s parents, giving the newlyweds the opportunity to develop a healthy new family.<sup>86</sup> Vigil writes, “Consequently, each spouse must surrender certain facets of their past culture in attempting to find a fit with the other’s valued beliefs and perceptions. This is the first step in the biblical process of marriage.”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> “H5800 - `azab - Strong’s Hebrew Lexicon (NKJV).” Blue Letter Bible. Accessed Aug. 15, 2020 at <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong's=H5800&t=NKJV>

<sup>85</sup> John H. Walton, Gen. Ed. *Genesis: Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010. p. 153

<sup>86</sup> Vigil, *Theology of Marital Intimacy*, p. 40.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

This concept of leaving one's parents should be viewed with Moses' original readers in mind. Vigil writes that it involves more than a geographic relocation from parents.<sup>88</sup> As the Hebrews journeyed through the wilderness in route to the Promised Land, newlyweds could not get far away from parents and in-laws, and often the extended families stayed close in proximity for economic benefits of shared farming, shepherding and trading. There was no doubt some privacy for the couple as they adjusted their priorities to focusing on their new commitment and marital intimacy.<sup>89</sup> Ted Cunningham agrees: "The focus of this text (Gen. 2:24) is not *geographical*... [it] is *relational and emotional* leaving".<sup>90</sup> This means that their spouse, not their parents, is their new priority relationship. Such forsaking is required to begin creating a new family culture. Each spouse enters marriage with a different story. "No marriage exists in isolation from the important people and charged issues in each partner's individual past."<sup>91</sup>

In the Gen. 2:24 the Hebrew word for "cleave" is the verb *davaq* means to adhere (as in glued together), cling, join or unite<sup>92</sup> and in Scripture elsewhere it often speaks of covenant relationship. To cleave to one's wife is to nurture a new bond of security and loyalty to each other - against and to the exclusion of all others.<sup>93</sup> This word *davaq* appears to indicate a strong commitment that builds a deep affection for the object of such commitment, which is characterized by each spouse serving the needs and desires of the other to a greater degree than

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Vigil, *Theology of Marital Intimacy*, p. 42.

<sup>90</sup> Ted Cunningham. "Leaving Your Parents and Cleaving to Your Spouse," in *Ready to Wed: 12 Ways to Start a Marriage You'll Love*, ed. Greg Smalley and Erin Smalley. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Pub. 2015. p. 21.

<sup>91</sup> Maggie Scarf. *Intimate Partners: Patterns in Love and Marriage*. NY: Ballentine Books, 1987. p. 44.

<sup>92</sup> "H1692 – dabaq - Strong's Hebrew Lexicon (NKJV)." Blue Letter Bible. Accessed Aug. 15, 2020, at <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong's=H1692&t=NKJV>

<sup>93</sup> Vigil, *Theology of Marital Intimacy*, p. 44.

their own.<sup>94</sup> As sociologists Peter Berger and Hansfried Kellner have observed, marriage is “a dramatic act in which two strangers come together and re-define themselves.”<sup>95</sup>

Marital counselors and authors Drs. Tom and Bev Rodgers contend that couples must turn away from the influence of their family of origin and what has been imprinted on their psyches. They maintain that marriage is designed as a forum where couples “turn away from the functions and dysfunctions of the past in order to establish a new healing love in marriage.”<sup>96</sup> The Rodgers assert that couples will begin to cleave to each other as they “move from the joys and scars of the past to this new love.”<sup>97</sup> They contend for the deep love that God dreams for His people is one where two different individuals are merged with a synergistic union that is greater than the sum of its two parts, as evidenced by His plan for them to multiply.

This break from each other’s family of origin should enable couples to see their negatively expressed behavior patterns or, possibly, generational curses inherited from them, and get an opportunity to break the old cycle of destructive patterns in their family of origin before they repeat the cycle in their new marriages. Part of breaking the Crazy Cycle that Eggerichs writes about is not doing the same hurtful things their parents or previous generations did if they expect to get better results in their new relationship. Preserving intimacy in their new marriage will require learning what fears have resulted from soul wounds in childhood or adolescence that would cause couples to fight or fight back out of fears of rejection, abandonment, unworthiness or insecurity.

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>95</sup> Peter Berger and Hansfried Kellner. *Marriage and the Construction of Reality: An Exercise in the Microsociology of Knowledge*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1964. p. 10.

<sup>96</sup> Rodgers, *Soul Healing Love*, p. 21.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

### *Summary*

In this chapter it has been shown that many Christians enter married life with many mistaken expectations due to popular myths about marriage. Couples should begin their premarital education perhaps before the engagement occurs so they can learn about serving each other before the frantic pace of wedding planning occupies all their energies. There is a great need in this country to get couples more prepared for marriage so they enter it with their eyes wide open after counselors expose the myths for what they are. They must be taught by the Church and by their counselors *what* marriage is and the *why* for getting married, from God's perspective. If they get married for the wrong reasons, they set themselves up for defeat and potential divorce. If they do not learn the core belief that God uses marriage to make them more whole and more holy, they cannot even begin to comprehend nor accomplish His mission for marriage. Without this, they do not have the motive nor the reason for changing their behaviors that they read about in premarital education programs, nor in all the self-help marriage therapy books after they get married. They must be taught how a marriage of two Christians is a picture of Christ and His Church, and how to approach marriage with a servant's heart, filled with grace toward each other in the realization that both are sinful, soul-wounded people. It has been shown that godly spouses are meant since the very beginning to help each other grow in the likeness of Jesus, as they minister to each other's soul and spirit. Once they have this understanding, they can learn about gender roles from such a caring mindset and be shown the need to separate from their families of origin so they can break the cycle of repeated injury and dysfunction. This theology for marriage will give them the core beliefs to then take the premarital assessments showing a set of deficiencies and begin the process of addressing and working through their soul wounds that lie beneath the emotional and relational defects. Premarital counseling should include a method for

applying these things, and such a method will be developed in Chapter 4. In the next chapter, the current state of American premarital counseling programs will be reviewed to show that for the most part they have not been teaching this foundational theology.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE CURRENT STORY OF PREMARITAL COUNSELING IN THE AMERICAN CHURCH

#### *Introduction*

The tragic problem of divorce in the United States which includes far too many Christians has been introduced in the opening pages of this thesis. It is very unfortunate that too many families are torn apart and children suffer because of divorce. Divorce in this country has become too easy to obtain, and even the Church frowns less upon divorce with providing easy options for obtaining an annulment. Marriage advocate and researcher Shaunti Feldhahn has written multiple books on marriage and family relations, and she cites a Barna Research Group study from 2008 which claimed that after states passed “no-fault” divorce laws, divorce in the US had increased to a 50% divorce rate whether “Christian” or not. As mentioned earlier in this work, in her book *The Good News About Marriage* from 2014, Feldhahn claims her research had shown that “we have never gotten close to 50%” US divorce rate, rather we are closer to 33% of all US marriages ending in divorce. With further research done with George Barna, she found that the percentage for divorce among Christians who are active in their church, is an average 38% lower than for nominal “Christian” Americans who were not committed to a local church.<sup>1</sup> Of those *actively engaged* in a local church, then, the divorce rate is closer to being between 22% and 24%. This lower divorce rate is good news, but this still means that about one in every four and a half (4.5) of Christian marriages fail.

Could there be a direct relationship between failing Christian marriages and the number of them that had obtained thorough premarital counseling in the Church? Do most churches provide premarital education classes and if so, how are they working? How many couples who

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<sup>1</sup> Shaunti Feldhahn. *The Good News About Marriage*. Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books 2014. P. 32.

are involved in their church intentionally and wholeheartedly participate in any premarital counseling classes? According to one study by Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman, cited by David H. Olson, Peter J. Larson, and Amy Olson-Sigg in “Couple Checkup: Tuning Up Relationships,” they found that “premarital couples who marry through a church or synagogue have a logical access point to premarital programs, only about 30% of engaged couples receive any premarital education.”<sup>2</sup> Perhaps this low percentage is due to churches not offering much more than a one-size-fits-all approach, or perhaps the importance of premarital education is not emphasized in church culture. Even Les and Leslie Parrott, who have been marriage and family counselors for over three decades, admit that when they married they did not obtain any premarital counseling, and that they spent a highly disproportionate amount of time planning the wedding as opposed to preparing for marriage.<sup>3</sup> Of those that do get premarital counseling, how many have received any theological understanding of the purpose God has designed for marriage? Are they taught to investigate their core beliefs that may be limiting their ability to make any outward behavior changes?

In this chapter, the various methods and programs for premarital education used in American churches will be shown to have limitations in these areas. Most importantly, it will be shown whether or not they provide counselors at present an in-depth method for teaching the proper theology for marriage that gives couples the best reason why they should get married in the first place. This is the crucial foundation that may be missing in many premarital programs.

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<sup>2</sup> David H. Olson, Peter J. Larson, and Amy Olson-Sigg. “Couple Checkup: Tuning Up Relationships” in *Journal Of Couple & Relationship Therapy* 8, no. 2, 2009. p. 130. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed August 18, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Les and Leslie Parrott. *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006. 13-15.

### *Many Approaches to Premarital Counseling*

There are many different approaches to premarital counseling in the USA. Many churches have a married counseling pastor meet with marriage candidates once or twice, possibly have them complete an intake form, check on their marital expectations for compatibility and give general counsel about the marriage Scriptures discussed in the previous chapter. Based on this writer's personal experience and stories shared by many others in various forums while asking about their experiences, this has been the normal method from multiple denominations and across many states. A reading of any number of marriage therapy books reveals that many couples enter marriage without knowing the theology for marriage, resulting in a lack of knowledge about the primary reason why they should (or should not) get married. By default, then these churches must engage in triage care when a couple's marriage is in trouble, but by then it is challenging.

In more recent years, there have been multiple Marriage Preparation Education Programs (MPEPs) that have been developed and used in churches across the country, thanks to studies and surveys that have been done to show that couples need more premarital education if they want to have a greater chance of having a thriving marriage. According to the study by Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman (2006), research has shown that "premarital education is associated with reduced risks for divorce by 30% and improved overall marital satisfaction"<sup>4</sup> They also claim that marriage education where it's "one-size-fits-all" for a whole group is problematic since it "fails to address the specific needs of the couples."<sup>5</sup> A more customizable approach based on the results of an assessment of serious depth on all the major aspects of the

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<sup>4</sup> Stanley, S. M., Amato, P. R., Johnson, C. A., & Markman, H. J. (2006). "Premarital education, marital quality, and marital stability: Findings from a large, random household survey". *Journal of Family Psychology*, 20, 117–126.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

marriage relationship would be so helpful. The field is moving toward online applications, couple empowerment and competency-based, preventive approaches.<sup>6</sup>

Some churches in more recent years go beyond the norm and use a curriculum for individual couples that comes with assessments of personality types and life goal compatibility, with two or three sessions with the counselor. Other curricula may have a workbook for the couple to use, with a set of six to ten sessions. Some of these programs are specifically designed for Christians and some are designed to be spiritually neutral. Many of these programs have a book to read with topical chapters that address the top ten areas of common disagreement for couples to help them work through their own attitudes and expectations in each area while meeting in classes or even in private with counselors. Some are designed to teach couples things they need to know about proper gender roles and expectations in marriage, complete with suggested wedding vows. Some counselors invite the couples to come back in six months or a year for a checkup. But are they including some level of teaching on a theology of servanthood for marriage that will reshape their core beliefs about marriage and give couples the tools to address their soul wounds with each other so they become true soul mates?

### *Important Issues for the Research*

In researching these MPEPs, several important questions must be asked about their content and their methods, as well as their effectiveness. Such contemporary programs have greatly improved the awareness that couples learn about their outward behaviors and their expectations that they bring into their upcoming marriage. But they should also lay a thorough foundation for the most important and most satisfying purpose for marriage that has been hard-wired into the souls of

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<sup>6</sup> Olson, *Couple Checkup*, 130

humanity by the Designer of marriage Himself, regardless of the current spiritual state of each couple's journey. This is necessary for church counselors to present whether the couples confess having a relationship with Jesus Christ or not, because the truths of Scripture as presented in this thesis are universally true whether humanity abides by them or not. Perhaps those whose relationship with the Lord is weak or nonexistent will be inspired to a deeper faith as they hear the truth from a counselor filled with the conviction of God. After all, many people who are committing to marriage are also growing up spiritually.

The theology for a marriage of servanthood gives purpose and a passion that fuels a thriving marriage because it gives husbands and wives the motivation to fulfill the calling of the Spirit in serving their spouse and becoming an agent of healing to their wounded soul.<sup>7</sup> Dr. Jim Vigil teaches future pastoral counselors his method for getting to the root cause of relational dysfunction. He calls it the "Four psychopneumasomatic components that shape and give definition to our relationship with ourselves, God and others."<sup>8</sup> He believes that all humanity is broken or traumatized by the cruelty of this world to some degree and that dysfunctional actions are caused by inner conflicts. The Christian premarital counselor needs to look at the formative experiences causing these inner conflicts if they want to see outer behavior toward a spouse improve. Dr. Vigil maintains that one cannot change their outer behavior and judgements about others when they have dysfunctional goals and expectations. They cannot change their goals with conflicting or limiting core beliefs.<sup>9</sup> They cannot change their core beliefs with mere mental

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<sup>7</sup> Rodgers, Beverly, and Tom Rodgers. *Soul Healing Love: Turning Relationships that Hurt into Relationships that Heal*. Arizona: Selah Publishing Group. 2006. P. 63

<sup>8</sup> Jim P. Vigil, "Four Psychopneumasomatic Components," PMIN 5373 Holistic Pastoral Counseling (class lecture, Southeastern University, School of Divinity, Lakeland, FL, February 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

assent of true values, they must reinterpret their formative experiences in the truth of Scripture with the help of a mentor.

As shown in the previous chapter of this thesis, the Lord calls spouses to serve each other as agents of grace, where deep healing flows in an atmosphere of unconditional love and acceptance even in the face of the other's weakness and failures.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, in this chapter the following questions are asked of the MPEPs under review. Do typical premarital counseling methods primarily speak to outer behaviors of participating couples? Do they go deep enough to address their core beliefs about the individual's values? Do they work through their formative experiences from their family of origin that perhaps have negatively reinforced faulty core beliefs?

### *Spiritually Neutral Premarital Education Models*

Several models for marriage preparation training that are used in both non-religious and faith-based venues have been examined. The spiritually neutral models that were researched will be addressed first. One of the oldest MPEP researched is called PREP (Prevention and Relationship Enhancement), developed over forty years ago by Dr. Howard Markman after years of empirical research with Dr. Scott M. Stanley, and have refined it over the years with other experts. The ePREP site developed by Dr. Scott Braithwaite is based on PREP and maintains training for counselors and the ePREP online course for couples with seven lessons on improving communication and conflict resolution skills. Based on empirically tested outcome evaluations done through their Center for Marital and Family Studies, they claim the program has helped many couples preserve their marriages with lower rates of "divorce and higher levels of

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<sup>10</sup> Rodgers, *Soul Healing Love*, 26.

relationship satisfaction up to five years following the training (Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Storaasli, 1988, Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, & Clements, 1993).”<sup>11</sup> The website also claims that over one thousand locations used the PREP program as of 2017, including military bases, prisons, and churches.<sup>12</sup> There is no evidence that this course operates from a biblical worldview, and every indication that it is neutral to theology. The apparent primary emphasis is to change outer behaviors, with no significant motive other than “revolutionize your love life.”<sup>13</sup>

Another MPEP investigated was the PAIRS program (Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills) birthed by Dr. Lori Gordon. This research-validated program maintains a website updated in 2020, which contains a description of its variation of programs for diverse populations, such as Christian, Catholic and Jewish formats, and for the military. It is a class that focuses on relationship skills education with an emphasis on working through formative experiences from a couple’s past which affect their reactions in the present, without getting into the students’ personal issues. It is not counseling or therapy. They have several instructors such as trained chaplains and clergy who teach how to build a more enjoyable and intimate relationship where couples learn to meet each other’s needs and express their own without inflicting damage.<sup>14</sup> Writing of their successes, they cite an (unnamed) nationally known attorney who said in a 1996 “Washington Post interview that 12 of 13 divorcing couples she had sent to PAIRS had reconciled.”<sup>15</sup> This model does not appear to teach any biblical theology for marriage, instead using conventional wisdom for marital relationships that address outer

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<sup>11</sup> “Marital Education Programs Help Keep Couples Together.” American Psychological Assn. 2004. Accessed on August 23, 2020, at <https://www.apa.org/research/action/marital#>

<sup>12</sup> “Research Background for PREP 6-16-20.” Accessed August 24, 2020, at <https://app.box.com/s/eerhvl6vh4cstn59bdt2>

<sup>13</sup> ePREP. Accessed August 23, 2020, at <https://www.lovetakeslearning.com>

<sup>14</sup> PAIRS.com 2015. Accessed August 26, 2020, at <http://participant.pairs.com/about.php>

<sup>15</sup> PAIRS.com 2020. Accessed August 28, 2020, at <http://participant.pairs.com/faq.html>

behaviors and the couple's life goals. No reference is made in its website to developing core beliefs or confronting formative experiences.

A website called The Spruce.com (updated June 27, 2019) contains a review of what author Sheri Stritof considers to be the three most widely used premarital education programs in the country. She tells her followers that these three are all user-friendly and therapist-friendly programs, listing RELATE, FOCCUS (Facilitating Open Couple Communication, Understanding & Study), and the Prepare-Enrich program. The FOCCUS and Prepare-Enrich are faith-based and will be addressed further below. The RELATE Assessment is a clinically validated self-inventory of over two hundred questions developed in 1980 by the RELATE Institute at Brigham Young University.<sup>16</sup> Spawning from earlier renditions of the program, the current RELATE assessment was released in 1997, eventually moving to an online model, and its website is up to date this year. This new version of the questionnaire is designed for the single and searching, steadily dating, cohabitating, engaged, or married. It focuses on ten major areas that influence marital satisfaction including personal values, family support, communication skills, and family of origin issues. Couples take the assessment online, then review by themselves or get help from a RELATE counselor. The site gives a twenty-page report showing the strengths and areas for improvement for the couple. The site claims it has helped over 100,000 people since inception, and it contains a link to the research in peer-reviewed journals it says has endorsed its program. However, this link takes one to another page within the site with only the history of RELATE, which is not helpful. It places very little emphasis on working with a trained counselor as compared to other programs. This model again provides only a current diagnosis of relational problems and mismatches of expectations, and by one's own subjective

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<sup>16</sup> RELATE Institute. *The Relate Assessment*. Accessed August 31, 2020, at <https://relatefoundation.com/couples/>

assessment of themselves, at that. This MPEP then fails to provide the path for progressing toward healing of the dysfunctional areas of the future marriage relationship.

*Premarital Education Programs Designed for Churches*

FOCCUS is a couples' inventory of nearly two hundred questions commonly used in the Catholic pre-Cana programs for preparing to be married in a Catholic church. It explores the common topics of marital problems such as interfaith relationships. According to their site, they have alternate programs for Christians and for remarriages, and claim to be used across the USA and in thirty countries in 8,000 organizations. Upon taking the lengthy inventory, couples meet with a facilitator to review the results and get help with any problem areas. This program speaks to outer behaviors without reference to how to begin mending the problem areas.<sup>17</sup> It fails to address any theological foundation for viewing marriage from a biblical core belief, merely stating it is grounded in the Roman Catholic tradition.

A current program used in many churches for both premarital and marriage counseling is the PREPARE/ENRICH program, with online self-assessments that are customized for Protestants and Catholics. This MPEP was first developed in 1980 by Dr. David Olson, Professor of Family Psychology at the University of Minnesota, and his wife Karen Olson, to provide counselors and clergy a method that addresses not merely the spiritual principles but also the relational, psychological and family of origin issues. PREPARE was designed for premarital education and ENRICH for both marriage and remarriage counseling. The website claims that

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<sup>17</sup> FOCCUS, Inc. USA. Find a Facilitator. Accessed August 31, 2020, at <http://www.foccusinc.com/facilitators-find.aspx>

over four million couples have participated in the program.<sup>18</sup> They have trained over 100,000 professional counselors and pastoral counselors, including military chaplains, to be facilitators of the program, who work directly with couples in their offices and churches. Facilitators receive feedback from the assessments through the website and review it with their couples face to face. Together with the facilitator, homework is developed to address their specific issues within multiple relationship components: strengths vs. weaknesses, communication skills, conflict resolution, stress reduction, balanced cohesion with flexibility, and personality differences. The authors postulate that couples in both the group format and the individual format report greater knowledge of each other, feel more confident and satisfied in the relationship, and engage in more positive conflict resolution behaviors.<sup>19</sup>

The program agenda is described as applying four important aspects of an effective preventative approach. First, factors which relate to marital success are identified. Second, couples are assessed on those critical variables. Third, feedback and exercises are given to couples, which will help them deal with problem areas. Fourth, couples are given skill-building exercises focusing on communication and conflict resolution skills.<sup>20</sup> The authors have worked to gather data on how couples are getting along years later by having them take the “Couple Checkup,” an online follow-up assessment of much of the relational content of the PREPARE/ENRICH program.<sup>21</sup> The resulting report comes with their discussion guide and a set of couple exercises, encouraging them in finding solutions for remaining problems.

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<sup>18</sup> David H. Olson, Amy K. Olson, and Peter J. Larson. 2012. “Prepare-Enrich Program: Overview and New Discoveries About Couples.” *Family And Community Ministries (Online)* no. 25, 30. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed August 31, 2020).

<sup>19</sup> Olson, *Overview and New Discoveries*, 33

<sup>20</sup> David H. Olson, Amy K. Olson, and Peter J. Larson. PREPARE/ENRICH Program: Customized Version. Minneapolis, MN: Life Innovations, Inc., 2009. p. 4. Accessed September 1, 2020, at [https://www.prepare-enrich.com/pe/pdf/research/2011/pe\\_customized\\_version\\_overview.pdf](https://www.prepare-enrich.com/pe/pdf/research/2011/pe_customized_version_overview.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Olson, *Couple Checkup*, 130.

According to a 2009 study done by Geniel Childs of Brigham Young University, which analyzed eight MPEPs for their effectiveness, PREPARE-ENRICH ranked “first in content with a score of 92%.”<sup>22</sup> These MPEPs were analyzed using the four components of the Hughes model which outlines “research-supported elements that are essential in the development”<sup>23</sup> of family life education: on content, instructional process, implementation, and evaluation. There is no mention of Scripture or marital theology in either of the assessments and their reports, only a solitary mention within the twenty-four-page report on the spiritual beliefs that the couple share. One without a relationship with the Lord could use this assessment and get similar results, because it is not designed just for those with a specifically religious worldview. Once again, the homework assigned by the facilitator is meant to alter improper behavior without first developing a lasting motive for change based on God’s design for marriage. No reference is made to discovering the couples’ limiting childhood experiences and how to help overcome them.

Another popular MPEP used in American churches today is known as SYMBIS, which stands for Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts, after the book by this name, written by Les and Leslie Parrott. They have developed workbooks and a DVD curriculum to go with the book. The book gives answers to seven pressing questions to ask before one gets married, or to be asked by a couple’s premarital counselor. The book coordinates exercises in the workbook to do one week at a time and review with the counselor. They start with facing the myths of marriage and end with the concept of soul mates, addressing outer behaviors and mindset adjustments needed to keep a marriage healthy. The driving motive is gaining a happy relationship which is said to be

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<sup>22</sup> Geniel Childs. “Marriage Preparation Education Programs: An Evaluation of Essential Elements of Quality”. *All Theses and Dissertations*. (2009) 1744. Accessed September 1, 2020, at <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/1744>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

the responsibility of each spouse. It comes with an online assessment and resulting multi-page report that shows where future spouses are similar and dissimilar in four dimensions of mindset, well-being, context and dynamics. The Spirituality part of the report shows how closely matched they are in various practices of Christian faith, such as studying the Bible, prayer, church attendance, tithing, and serving others. The result is a “diagnosis” of the current state of good and bad about the relationship, but it fails to provide a “prognosis” for healing of the broken areas, or the foundational motive for making any improvements.

This program is very light on biblical theology, and there is no mention of God or a Bible story until the middle of the book which recommends adjusting to things beyond one’s control like Mary and Joseph to gain happiness. They cite many relationship experts in the field of psychology, including Dr. John Gottman, and Cliff and Joyce Penner (authors of *The Gift of Sex*). The last chapter on becoming soul mates finally brings out the spiritual elements of worship, prayer and serving together that promises to improve intimacy and their bedroom passions.<sup>24</sup> They discuss how marriage should be an example of God’s faithfulness and His forgiveness, with a few references of Scripture in support. There is no education on building core beliefs for God’s purpose for marriage, and no mention of facing the limitations caused by formative experiences. The biblical concept of a marriage of servanthood is not mentioned in any form.

Lastly, a book endorsed by Focus on the Family with a lengthy treatise of premarital advice was reviewed. Dr. Greg and Erin Smalley compiled fourteen chapters of premarital counsel from some of the most well-known Christian marriage experts around the country in their book *Ready To Wed: 12 Ways to Start a Marriage You’ll Love*. The first chapter starts with

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<sup>24</sup> Les and Leslie Parrott, *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts*, p. 150.

teaching God's design for marriage to lay a biblical foundation, highlights of which were discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis. The Smalleys believe God will use their marriage to help couples and others around them to become more like Jesus, which in turn helps them love their future spouse as Christ loves them.<sup>25</sup> Because this book cannot reach into all the personal issues of each couple, it does not address each reader's formative experiences or specific life goals. It does address twelve essential behaviors needed to grow a thriving marriage, with six of them on proactively investing in their marriage and six on managing conflict in productive ways. Although this work does in fact lay an ideal foundation for a sound theology for a marriage of servanthood, it does not address any pathway to healing for the soul wounds of negative childhood experiences. If these are not addressed, couples are left without the key ingredient for all the outer behavior changes prescribed by these authors. If formative experiences tarnish one's views of Father God, then teaching them core beliefs for marriage will possibly get into their head cognitively, but not into their spirit where it brings them to life with a deep resonating sense of eternal purpose. In the next chapter, a process for counselors to incorporate teaching couples how to mend their limiting core beliefs in a premarital education program will be developed.

### *Summary*

The focus of this research was on how these MPEPs address the theology for marriage by teaching sound theological core beliefs, which in turn allow for examination of one's formative experiences that may have negatively affected their present core beliefs. These are the beliefs that drive their goals/objectives which drive their outer behavior. Some experiences from their family of origin may be beneficial, and some more negative experiences are quite limiting when

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<sup>25</sup> Greg and Erin Smalley. *Ready to Wed: 12 Ways to Start a Marriage You'll Love*. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Pub. 2015. p. 8-9.

it comes to setting healthy life goals and outward behavior modification.<sup>26</sup> Put another way, if dysfunctional childhood issues inhibit one from correcting improper core beliefs, the field of psychology shows that establishing healthy life goals and changing outward behaviors is most often quite handicapped, if not impossible.<sup>27</sup> This handicap is why the argument is made that any MPEP model merely showing where behavior changes are required is insufficient for setting up a thriving marital relationship.

All the assessments and reports of these MPEPs are helpful, but couples who find a counselor to mentor them through the process is the most important piece of this story. The couple will find it difficult to break free of bad goals and objectives they would bring into a marriage without a thoughtful counselor who will educate them and pray with them. In this chapter it has been shown that typical premarital counseling methods primarily speak to outer behaviors without working through the underlying objectives and life goals of participating couples. Neither do they address their negative or false core beliefs about themselves and about marriage which are limited by their formative experiences from their family of origin. In the next chapter a method for educating couples on how to apply the theology of marital servanthood that was developed in chapter two will be presented as a key missing ingredient for counselors to add to their premarital education format.

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<sup>26</sup> Flavio Osmo, Victor Duran, Amy Wenzel, Irismar Reis de Oliveira, Sara Nepomuceno, Maryana madeira, and Igor Menezes. "The Negative Core Beliefs Inventory: Development and Psychometric Properties." *Journal of Cognitive Psychotherapy, Volume 32, Issue 1*. Accessed August 30, 2020, at [https://connect.springerpub.com/highwire\\_display/entity\\_view/node/87518/full](https://connect.springerpub.com/highwire_display/entity_view/node/87518/full)

<sup>27</sup> Harman Parvez. "How Our Past Experiences Shape Our Personality." 2014. Accessed August 31, 2020, at <https://www.psychmechanics.com/how-our-past-experiences-shape-our/>

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE PRACTICAL APPLICATION FOR PREMARITAL EDUCATION

#### *Introduction*

The end goal of this thesis is to help more marriages thrive and endure for a lifetime in honor of God's design for marriage, by showing the importance of going much deeper in premarital education than mere compatibility assessments with recommended behavior changes to be made. There is so much more than just high-level family planning and budgeting. In the previous chapters it has been shown that where dysfunctional family of origin issues resulted in improper core beliefs about oneself, about God, or His design for marriage, having couples set healthy expectations and change outward behaviors toward a spouse is problematic. Couples may mentally assent to God's purpose for marriage and yet have no change of heart in their core beliefs, and then enter a marriage without a clue how to control their own reactivity when their new spouse triggers a soul wound. Couples may profess undying, unconditional love for each other, meanwhile they ignore all the warning signs and red flags showing up in disagreements so as not to tarnish their romance. However, it is so much easier, when the passion and excitement of the relationship burns hot, to get couples to engage in the work of getting to know their own painful triggers and what soul wounds cause such triggers. This is when they should take time to get to know the inner soul of the other - before they say, "I do."

A counselor may well ask what would motivate couples to truly do such work. The motivation is in learning how vulnerable they can be with all their hurts and scars and still be loved unconditionally. Couples gain a new sense of compassion for the other as their wounds are exposed. While they are learning to be a healing agent of the Lord for their spouse, couples are motivated to help each other overcome and be healed of those wounds. How would a counselor

do all this in premarital counseling? Answering this question is the purpose of this chapter. It has been established in chapter two that a foundational theology for a marriage of servanthood must be laid in the beginning stages of premarital counseling, and applying this theology is the missing key ingredient that unlocks the power that couples need to serve each other in the face of their spouse's shortcomings. Without this, couples are left unprepared for loving and serving their spouse in the face of all their soul wounds. There are counselors who have been incorporating a method for applying this foundational theology which will be presented here as a model to be replicated as an improvement to premarital counseling in the Church. First, the high-level concept will be addressed, and then the details of its application will be developed.

#### *The Missing Ingredient: The Concept*

Helping one's spouse become more whole and more holy has been shown to be the ultimate purpose for which couples should marry. God wants all His children to continue to grow in the likeness of Jesus by the power of Holy Spirit, and He uses one's spouse as a mirror to show where one still needs to grow. Mark and Priscilla Young maintain that marriage will help couples become more holy as the two care for each other's souls and they become more whole. Then their marriage will "participate in the mission of God for the sake of others"<sup>1</sup> and testify to the unsaved of the goodness of God, that they might be converted. Part of this journey is serving each other as an agent of God's healing grace, loving each other enough to learn how to help heal and overcome their soul-wounds. Such wounding, formative experiences occur most often when a parent or other authority figure failed to meet one's need in a way that impacted the soul, and in turn caused that one to adapt to one or more basic fears.<sup>2</sup> If these fears are not confronted

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<sup>1</sup> Young and Young, "Marriage and the Mission of God," p. 353-354.

<sup>2</sup> Tom and Beverly Rodgers. *Soul-Healing Love: Workbook for Couples*. p. 5. Taken from their book, *Soul Healing Love: Turning Relationships That Hurt into Relationships That Heal*. Arizona: Selah Publishing Group, 2006.

along the way, they cause faulty core beliefs to control the way they think about themselves and how they treat others, oftentimes without any awareness. Counselors can help their couples face these painful wounds so they can begin to let God's grace heal them and put it in the past once and for all,<sup>3</sup> and they can teach their couples how to be an agent of God's healing grace when more wounds are revealed in their relationship.

The Scriptures show that God is wanting to heal our wounds, that He wants us healed: "For I will restore health to you and heal you of your wounds", says the Lord" (Jeremiah 30:17, NKJV).<sup>4</sup> Les and Leslie Parrott write about it this way:

"Marriage can become a powerful healing agent over time ... all of us marry in the hope of healing our wounds. We still have hurts and unfulfilled needs that we carry inside... Pastoral psychotherapist Harvell Hendrix explains (in *Getting the Love You Want*) that a healthy marriage becomes a place to wrap up unfinished business from childhood. The healing process begins gradually by uncovering and acknowledging our unresolved childhood issues."<sup>5</sup>

Both husband and wife are designed by the Lord to aid in healing the other's soul wounds, since "In the new covenant, both images of God are encouraged to take responsibility in a unique way for their mutual flourishing."<sup>6</sup> Marriage counselors Tom and Beverly Rodgers state that when a counselee questions if they have any significant soul wounds worth digging into, they respond that everyone does. They teach that God works through the "school of pain"<sup>7</sup> when one understands that their trials are good for them to learn patience, strength of character, and steady faith in God based on Romans 5:3-4.

Based on John 7:24 (which concerns going below the exterior appearance to judge correctly), Dr. Vigil asserts that biblical counselors must look deeper than the superficial

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<sup>3</sup> Rodgers, *Soul Healing Love*, p. 54.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>5</sup> Les and Leslie Parrott, *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts*, p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> Johnson. "The Dance of Gender in New Covenant Marriage," p. 166.

<sup>7</sup> Rodgers, *Soul Healing Love*, p. 55.

behaviors and emotions which are likened to a covering like Adam and Eve used. Counselors should address the inner conflicts that are causing faulty core beliefs. Adam tried to bury his shame and his resulting behavior became irrational: he tried to hide from God, covered up to keep Eve from seeing his true self, and then blamed her and God.<sup>8</sup> Married couples do the same thing today if they are not taught to be vulnerable with each other in learning how to address their inner fears, and if they do not have a counselor who shows them the irrationality of their faulty core beliefs which betray any attempt at behavior improvement.

*Teaching the Truths of Soul-Healing Love in Premarital Counseling*

God wants to use spouses to be healing agents for each other as they learn over time how to minister to the outer expression of a triggered soul wound and show the unconditional grace of God to each other. The Rodgers believe that the same power couples possess to hurt each other so harshly should be used to heal each other by the same grace that God has shown them.<sup>9</sup> They have created an entire weekend workshop they have dubbed “Soul-Healing Love” based on their book by the same name and have trained other counselors to replicate the weekend. For roughly twenty years this weekend experience has been used for married couples, but in time they started using its primary teachings in premarital counseling sessions as well, providing six sessions for first marriages and eight sessions for second marriages.

The Rodgers’ agenda includes the five tenets of soul-healing love, the stages of growth of marital relationships, the types of soul wounds and how they are expressed, the five predominant fears that underlie negative triggers, completing family genograms and what they call ancestral “soul healograms.” From there they cover healthy/unhealthy communication, how to lovingly

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<sup>8</sup> Vigil, “Four Psychopneumasomatic Components.”

<sup>9</sup> Rodgers, *Soul Healing Love*, p. 105.

request a change of behavior, levels of anger with two exercises aimed at getting to the root emotion, the “forgiving experience” exercise, and once these foundational issues are taught, then they cover the outer behaviors needed to sustain a thriving marriage.<sup>10</sup> Such behaviors are the expression of true selfless love motivated by a heart wanting to serve their spouse. Then each spouse becomes an agent of the soul-healing love of God. Couples learn to stop projecting idealistic images of their partner and love them for who they really are before the wedding day. They begin to move from self-absorbed narcissism to altruistic giving, from mere passion to compassion for their future spouse.<sup>11</sup>

The Rodgers’ top priority is teaching the primary tenets of the healing of soul wounds, because these truths need to be understood so the couple can grasp the rest of the process of preparing for a healthy marriage. These crucial five tenets are as follows:

1. God loves unconditionally, and this love heals their soul wounds
2. By God’s healing love they see themselves through His eyes and then love themselves as He does, even with their imperfections.
3. Because they now feel loved and lovable, they allow God’s loving grace to spill onto their spouse, seeing them through His eyes and loving them as God does. (1 Jn. 4:11)
4. Soul-Healing love brings trust, vulnerability, and sharing of the deepest fears, bonding the couple into a satisfying oneness.
5. This oneness replicates the oneness they feel with God, so their love for each other restores wholeness over time. Just as the love of God is soul-healing, so also the love between a husband and a wife is to be soul-healing.<sup>12</sup>

In a telephone conference with Dr. Bev Rodgers, she put it this way: “The stretch that one does to help heal their spouse results in their own healing.”

All the rest of the principles taught in the following sessions cannot be fully grasped and fleshed out if couples miss these primary tenets for helping each other become more whole and more holy. This concept of serving each other in a spirit of empathy and compassion is the

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<sup>10</sup> Rodgers, *Soul-Healing Love: Workbook for Couples*, p. 3-18.

<sup>11</sup> Rodgers, *Soul Healing Love*, p. 222.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24

driving force that motivates one to work through exercises such as: learning a proper four-part apology and how to express heartfelt forgiveness, communicating more intentionally in healthy dialogue and active listening, and examining each one's frustrations for the underlying GIFT (emotions of guilt, inferiority, fear, or trauma).<sup>13</sup> It motivates each one to work through their "Digging Deeper" exercise<sup>14</sup> where they look for the origin or source of these underlying emotions and their respective triggers, perhaps back to their family of origin. It motivates them to look for one of five root fears – fear of abandonment, rejection, inferiority, failure, and insecurity<sup>15</sup> - that are the source emotion causing secondary expressions of negative behaviors like anger and defensiveness,<sup>16</sup> and then take the time to reinterpret that root fear in the truth of Scripture or the reality of their mate's intentions.<sup>17</sup> Their program teaches each one to have much more productive and honest conversation even in the hard times so they can stop repressing emotions in the safety of empathetic understanding. When couples are disappointing each other but learn these important strategies for creating a safe environment for sharing, they learn how to go from being reactive to being intentional.<sup>18</sup>

All these prescriptions for healthy behavior must follow a core belief in a marriage of servanthood which helps each spouse with their healing. This healing then overcomes the controlling power of their formative experiences, and the result is setting healthy expectations and life goals.<sup>19</sup> As Dr. Vigil puts it, "A person cannot change their past experiences, but by the work of the Holy Spirit they can change the degree to which and the manner in which their past

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<sup>13</sup> Rodgers, *Soul Healing Love*, p. 157-160.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161-167.

<sup>15</sup> Rodgers, *Soul-Healing Love: Workbook for Couples*, p. 8

<sup>16</sup> Rodgers, *Soul Healing Love*, p. 154.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101-106.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72, 138.

<sup>19</sup> Vigil, "Four Psychopneumasomatic Components."

controls them.”<sup>20</sup> Each spouse then allows the other to speak life into their soul for the healing of their soul wounds and minister the truth of the Word of God to each other’s spirits.

Therefore, why would a counselor wait to teach these principles until after people get married and get stuck in the power struggle stage of their relationship? Or worse yet, when they are stuck in ruts of bitterness and contempt? These tenets for becoming agents of the healing grace of God are the key ingredient for a thriving marriage that should be taught to every couple before they get down to planning the wedding and honeymoon. Based on the research done on the most widely used MPEPs in the United States for this thesis, it has been shown that improvement is needed in the way churches provide premarital counseling if they are going to lay the proper foundation for God’s purpose for marriage that gives couples the needed motivation for growing in their ability to serve their spouse in the way God prescribes. Incorporating the soul-healing concept into premarital counseling ministry is an ideal way for counselors to get these truths to their couples who come to them. Premarital counselors could either add an intensive weekend workshop or add several more sessions to an existing regiment they already use for couples who are thinking of getting married. Churches could hold marriage preparation classes and have small home groups for teaching these concepts. For example, the Rodgers’ work in this area could be incorporated into a premarital counseling model, and their exercises for couples could serve as a guide for the formatting of an agenda for a weekend intensive.

These tenets for soul-healing love in marriage as a means of helping each future spouse grow more whole and more holy should be taught early in the process perhaps before a compatibility assessment like a SYMBIS or PREPARE/ENRICH assessment is done. As

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<sup>20</sup> Vigil, “Four Psychopneumasomatic Components.”

previously stated herein, correcting the faulty core beliefs about marriage and the purpose for marriage as designed by God will then provide the motivation and capability for behavior changes that are prescribed in later sessions by the counselor.

This is the right time to find out if either one is resistant to being vulnerable about their soul issues (inner conflicts) and to changing for the better. If one party does not want to do the work of learning these things before the wedding, they will likely be even less motivated to do it after the wedding, as they likely see themselves as too good or mostly sinless to need any improvement. Then this dissonance amidst such a couple should be boldly addressed by the counselor before they make any more wedding plans. Provided both are willing to learn these things, they will each get to know the real person they are thinking of marrying before they commit for life.

### *Summary*

In this chapter a concept for applying the foundational theology for a marriage of servanthood was shown along with a proposal for replicating the soul-healing concepts and incorporating them into an existing regiment of premarital counseling in the church. Couples preparing for marriage need a mentor who will help them become fully transparent with each other about their soul issues and learn how to minister the healing grace of God to each other by seeing themselves as agents of the Spirit for this. Who better to show them this than their premarital counselor? The American church should raise up premarital counselors who would incorporate teaching such as the Rodgers' soul-healing love tenets into their agenda for marriage education. Then leaders should promote that courting couples need to get such teaching before the wedding day, or even better yet, before they are engaged.

Couples preparing for marriage need much more than mere compatibility testing and some positive behavior recommendations. It has been shown that this is the equivalent of giving a diagnosis without giving the prognosis for healing. They need more than advice on changing their unbiblical reasons for getting married and reworking their dissonant expectations or life goals. They lack the inner motivation for making these changes if they haven't been shown the foundational reason why God wants anyone to be married in the first place, and that He desires them to serve each other in becoming more whole and more holy. They need to be shown the theology for a marriage of servanthood that establishes a purpose and a passion that fuels a thriving marriage because it gives husbands and wives the motivation to fulfill the calling of the Spirit in serving their spouse and becoming an agent of healing to their wounded soul.<sup>21</sup> As they grow together in their journeys with the Lord, they will start fulfilling the mission God has for their marriage to serve and encourage others in Kingdom ministry.

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<sup>21</sup> Rodgers, *Soul Healing Love*, p. 63

## CONCLUSION

In this thesis it has been shown that if a marriage is to thrive for the duration of a lifetime, then couples need to invest time in their relationship before getting to the wedding planning stage and get to know each other at the core of their souls, with scars and all. They need to learn God's design for marriage so they are motivated to get married for the right reason. If they can grasp the "why" of God's purpose for marriage they will find all the motivation they need to work through all the changes of outer behavior that typical MPEP materials and assessments show is needed. Compatibility assessments give only a diagnosis of potential problem areas but no path for overcoming them. God designed marriage to make couples more whole and more holy: as they serve each other in helping with the healing of their inner soul wounds, the things that inhibit their spiritual growth will fall away, and they will become more consumed by the mission to build the Kingdom of God together.

The goal of this thesis is to see church leaders re-evaluate the depth of their premarital counseling ministry, or the lack of it, and make the necessary improvements as outlined here. Couples desiring to marry should be encouraged by their church leaders to engage in a challenging and soul-searching premarital education before they are even engaged to be married. This way they get to know the real person who they are dating, not the idealized projection they have created in their minds. They also learn about what triggers and reactions to triggers they bring into a marriage. For some, these deeper discoveries will push them to want to help each other in a spirit of compassionate servanthood. For others, such discoveries may cause one to realize perhaps they are not ready yet and need further counseling before committing to the other person. In other cases, the counselor would realize that a couple is not ready to wed and would

then recommend they wait until they work through their problem areas. Either way such a strategy would save a great deal of marital strife and heartache.

Others with expertise in this field are welcome to continue this discussion of alleviating the crisis of failing Christian marriages and build upon this proposition for improving upon existing premarital education models. One area where this concept could be developed further is in the mechanics of how it would be presented to singles in a church who need to be made aware of such a promising program. The research done for this thesis was limited in time and scope so this area was not explored, and neither was the training of counselors and group facilitators who do premarital education sessions. More work should be done to explore the methods of such training. Additionally, further consideration should be given to learn what other premarital counselors are doing to address the theology for a marriage of servanthood and teach a model of compassionate ministry to each spouse's soul. The research performed was not exhaustive by any means due to time constraints. A thoughtful dialogue also to be pursued is that of how premarital education as proposed herein can remain a functional ministry to the whole individual and not become a mere psychological exercise for the cognitive brain. Mental assent by a couple to the tenets proposed herein does not affect real heart change like Holy Spirit does. Prayer changes hearts when counselors are trained to intercede for healing of soul wounds.

In the process of reading, researching, and writing of this thesis, I have personally grown in my own comprehension of why God would have believers get married and how they are called to help make each other more whole and more holy. I realized this foundation of a marriage of servanthood was missing in my previous premarital education, and I contributed to my prior marital failure as a result. It dawned on me so clearly one morning as I was praying, that comprehending the "why" God has designed for marriage is the most important key to finding an

altruistic motivation and passion for fueling the work of ministering to each other's soul wounds while overcoming our own fears and their respective triggers of emotional reactivity. The Spirit of God spoke so clearly that day that I had to repent of my own selfishness as the truth of this concept resonated in the core of my soul. My "ah-ha" moment was a distinct revelation that fueled my passion for this topic and gave me a desire to teach this concept to others. I truly believe that if Christians can comprehend this concept of a theology for a marriage of servanthood, then so many more marriages will start with a deeper intimacy and compassion that will form a strong, unbreakable bond at the levels of soul and spirit. Then more marriages will thrive for a lifetime for the glory of the Author of marriage, the Lord Almighty.

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