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LEARNING TO LIVE IN A GRACE-CENTERED MARRIAGE  
AT FREEDOM CHURCH IN LINCOLNTON,  
NORTH CAROLINA

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A Project  
Presented to  
the Faculty of  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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Doctor of Educational Ministry

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by  
Steven Robert Benson  
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**APPROVAL SHEET**

LEARNING TO LIVE IN A GRACE-CENTERED MARRIAGE  
AT FREEDOM CHURCH IN LINCOLNTON,  
NORTH CAROLINA

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I dedicate this project to those discovering the implications of the gospel in their marriages and relationships. I hope my words and this course give an awareness of peace in the process, grace in understanding, and hope toward moving to redemption. I also dedicate this project to my wife, Krista, our children, Zoe and Christopher, and to the people of Freedom Church, whom I have had the pleasure of serving.

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## PREFACE

Thank you to Dr. Michael White, Rev. Andrew Goodson, and Rev. Aaron Swain for your friendship and partnership in the gospel. I am also thankful to the elders of Freedom Church for the opportunity to present this project. I also appreciate the insight, time, and effort from my supervisor, Dr. Matthew Haste, who contributed wisdom to this project. I also desire to thank Michelle Garbade, a fellow counselor in the trenches, who gave valuable insight into the material. I special appreciation to my wife, Krista, who gives me her wisdom, understanding, and sacrificial time for me to complete this degree. I also thank our two children for allowing me to grow as a father. Most of all, I am thankful to the Lord for adopting me and calling me his beloved!

Steven Benson

Charlotte, North Carolina

December 2020



## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

A loving marriage is scary. It is risky, thrilling, expensive, powerful, and filled with valuable peril. Despite its paradoxes, people thirst for this type of love, crave to be loved, and thrive to be embraced by love's grip in a real and intimate way. However, many couples often sabotage what they want the most. They hide behind self-protective walls. They live within wounds. Couples often satisfy their loneliness with immature mirages. But most of all, many couples are fearful of love's costs.

These are some of the paradoxical thoughts I have encountered from clients as a licensed professional counselor. This project helped people live out the practical implications of a grace-centered and redemptive design for marriage while transforming self-protective relational styles that sabotages intimate relationships.

### **Ministry Context**

#### **History of Grace Roads Counseling Center**

Grace Roads Counseling Center was formed in 2012, by myself, Steve Benson, a Licensed Professional Counselor Supervisor (LPC-S) and a Licensed Counseling Addiction Specialist (LCAS), in Charlotte, North Carolina. Grace Roads is classified as an individual private practice. Grace Roads' vision is to provide teaching, training, and counseling to enable individuals to experience God's grace in their relationships. In January 2016, Grace Roads entered into a partnership with Freedom Church in Lincolnton, North Carolina, as an affiliated counselor to provide counseling to their members and outside referrals, as well as to give support to the staff regarding various life issues. I am the designated support therapist. Although I am not on staff nor do I attend as a member

of the church, Freedom has graciously allowed me to use their church for office space and the context for this ministry project.

### **Historical Context of Freedom Church**

While interviewing lead pastor Michael White for this project, we discussed aspects of Freedom Church's ministry to couples. In addition, several clients have given feedback about the church, which further collaborates much of this information. It is important to understand the history of Freedom because of the context of its founding and the current impact it has on marriages. Located in a small town in North Carolina, Freedom Church began in 2006, after a church split. Freedom essentially became the opposite of the church it was leaving. After the initial energy wore off, the church stagnated because it lacked vision, direction, and reason to exist. After six years, Freedom Church members were fatigued, unenergetic, and directionless. The church was not healthy spiritually and relationally. It was in survival mode.

Over the last four years, Freedom Church changed leadership through calling a new pastor. The new leadership established membership covenants and discipleship-making small groups. In essence, Freedom Church was replanted. In May 2017, Michael White, who at the time was an associate pastor, assumed the lead pastor role of Freedom Church. The previous lead pastor, the second to have served in that position, was sent out to plant a new church. The church now has a renewed vision and energy in direction. Because of these facts, the church was not focused on attending to marriages and was not in a position to provide in-depth discipleship on relationships. But now, the need is prevalent in the current spiritual context.

### **Spiritual Context of Freedom Church**

Over the last three years, I have counseled fifteen couples from the church who presented with the following issues: pornography, anger management, substance abuse, gambling addiction, and the long-lasting effects of childhood sexual abuse. Most, if not

all these issues, have been present in the marriage context and have devastated these relationships. Many people have been playacting marriage and not living in satisfied and intimate relationships. Many of the marriages are more work performance or duty-driven with ripple effects of dissatisfaction, pain, and an unawareness of grace-filled relationships. These issues led to many couples struggling through affairs and the consequences of hiding from God's design of marriage.

Many have found Freedom Church to be a safe place where they can be vulnerable with their souls because of the preaching of grace. This atmosphere has brought many issues to the forefront of people's hearts. The church has developed discipleship groups to meet some of these needs. However, many of the groups lack deep vulnerability and accountability because much of Christianity in today focuses on cultural influence versus a true living relationship. Many people grew up with church rituals to fulfill their duty. As a result, these people hide in cultural Christianity instead of authentic and intimate relationships.

This mentality has transferred over into how they relate in their marriages. Many couples live isolated from themselves and struggle with the foundation of marriage. They live with deep, dark wounds that would never be discussed in the church context. As a result, they live disconnected and self-centered lives. At the present moment, four couples in the church are wrestling through the implications of childhood sexual abuse. When looking at the issues, the marriage context has become one littered with deep soul wounds. Marriages need to be strengthened not only with education, but also an emphasis on transforming the spiritual and emotional aspects of how a person relates to God, self, and others.

Despite efforts, mentoring on relationships has been done more ad hoc or on a reactionary basis. They have not been able to respond in a healthy manner to the crisis of marriages at the church. Instead of the church leadership being proactive, they are more reactive to marriage and individual situations. This is one of the main reasons Freedom

came into partnership with Grace Roads Counseling Center. Thus, there is a need for a more proactive stance on providing a theological foundation for marriages.

Overall, Freedom is in a healthy place with about 200 members. It is on the verge of its adolescent years of growth and development. The many strengths of being a family of survivors that formed another church have led to the church having good direction. Freedom needs to grow and mature in some of the mechanisms that have been put in place. There is a growing need for maturity in people's marriages. The leadership has been working to address these needs but have found many similar themes of cultural Christianity, immaturity in understanding, and a complete lack of design of marriage.

### **Rationale**

There were three rationales for this project based upon the ministry context. They can be divided into theological, biblical, and practical reasons for marriage.

First, this educational series looked at the theological underpinning of redemptive covenant through the gospel of grace. It briefly examined people's stories through the prism of creation, fall, and redemption. Specifically, it looked at the way God relates to humanity through the marriage metaphor found throughout Scripture and how, as a result, God uses the vehicle of marriage as one of the primary institutions to grow and mature people.

Second, many members of Freedom have not experienced power in their marriages. Instead of just surviving marriage, they had the opportunity to thrive by understanding the design of marriage drawn from Paul's discourse in Ephesians 5:1-33. Delving into God's design will transform a person's views, thoughts, and purposes for living a redemptive life.

Last, this project was practical in nature by helping members mature in character, core identity issues, and relational self-protective attitudes. Becoming aware of these thematic narratives impacted the way people relate to God, themselves, and others. Therefore, this educational series was not just a theological study but a practical

conversation on the transformative nature of grace in relationships. In conclusion, the rationales for this project were three-fold: a transformational maturity about grace, a self-awareness of a person's relational style, and becoming in tune with the impact of God's redemptive design for marriage.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this project was to educate people on the biblical principles of marriage, to bring awareness of self-protective attitudes, and to give those in attendance an opportunity to change their relational style in their marriage. This series was specifically intended for the congregation of Freedom Church in Lincolnton, North Carolina.

### **Goals**

This project consisted of four goals to obtain the purpose of this ministry project.

1. The first goal was to assess members' knowledge about the biblical design of marriage, including background, knowledge and understanding of eight self-protective relational attitudes.
2. The second goal was to develop a seven-week educational series on marriage that included the biblical and relational designs of a healthy marriage.
3. The third goal was to implement a teaching series on marriage that challenged and gave awareness and possible change to hearts and minds about how one relates in their marriage.
4. The fourth goal was to administer a follow-up survey and to conduct a review of the series with the pastoral staff to determine if attitudes and thoughts on marriage changed after the seminar.

### **Research Methodology**

These four goals were the guiding principles to analyze the effectiveness of this project. This section covers the methodology to accomplish the stated goals.

The first goal was to pinpoint the background, biblical knowledge, and defense mechanisms of people at Freedom Church. This goal was measured by having in-depth discussions with the pastoral staff on strengths and weaknesses of marriages,

understanding the churches history and background, and the current needs of couples. Furthermore, the pastors provided evaluation, critique, and editorial suggestion for the marriage survey that was produced for this project. The survey was designed to understand people's background, measure knowledge of biblical principles, and to identify specific self-protective attitudes and relational styles.<sup>1</sup>

The second goal was accomplished by three pastors helping in the development of a teaching series curriculum. The pastoral staff and I had collaborative sessions that included brainstorming, critique, and feedback of the material so that it met the particular needs of the congregation. Furthermore, another trained licensed professional therapist also evaluated the material for soundness in practice. Finally, I had experience with former clients who go to Freedom Church that influenced the teaching series. The second goal was deemed successful when initial feedback was given, edited, and the teaching series was ready to be implemented.

The third goal was met by implementing the teaching series January 5, 2020–February 23, 2020. Outlines of materials were provided along with a study guide for enhancement for possible change in a couple's marriage. At the end of the series, feedback was given on the presentation of the material by the pastors. This educational series was assessed through a teaching rubric to evaluate the biblical faithfulness, clarity, relevance, and application of the material.<sup>2</sup>

The last goal was achieved by asking the same participants to complete a post-test survey after the seminar to gauge change in participant's attitudes, awareness, and perspectives on marriage. This data was analyzed using a *t*-test, to understand if there is a positive statistically significance between pre- and post-survey scores. The series was

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<sup>1</sup> See appendix 3. All of the research instruments used in this project were performed in compliance with and approved by The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Research Ethics Committee prior to use in this ministry project.

<sup>2</sup> See appendix 5.

video and audio taped so that people who missed a session could listen to the full series before completing the post-test. Furthermore, one free counseling session was offered to members who had been to each session (or listened to each session) and completed the study guide on ways to improve their marriage. The project was considered successfully met when a *t*-test for dependent samples demonstrates a positive statistical difference in the pre and post survey scores.

### **Definitions and Limitations**

The following definitions of key terms will be used in the ministry project:

*Christian integrationist approach.* I consider myself to be a trained Christian counselor integrating the biblical worldview with known psychological methods. Stanton L Jones gives a helpful understanding of this approach in his review of secular psychotherapies from a Christian perspective. He states, “Our goal is to assist Christian counselors to ground their work in biblical truth, to appropriate the creative and helpful aspects of secular approaches to psychotherapy in a way that is consistent with biblical truth, and to approach psychotherapy in a way that has Christian integrity.”<sup>3</sup> In line with that thinking, I combine known counseling psychological techniques, such as narrative, cognitive-behavioral, and family systems, filtered through the foundational Biblical lens of creation, fall, and redemption. I particularly emphasize a person’s family narrative and life story with the focus on how one learned to relate to themselves, others, and God through a broader theme of the biblical narrative. The emphasis on human relationships was foundational approach to the broader theme of marriage in this project.

*Self- protective relational style.* These are the typical ways people protect themselves so they do not get disappointed or feel pain in relationships.<sup>4</sup> These protective

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<sup>3</sup> Stanton Jones, “An Integration View,” in *Psychology and Christianity: Five Views*, ed. Eric Johnson (Colorado Springs: Intersarsity, 2010), 118.

<sup>4</sup> Dan B. Allender, *The Wounded Heart* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2008), 157.

mechanisms shield people from being vulnerable in relationships with others.<sup>5</sup> Instead of feeling pain, people mask their disappointments. As a result, they relate dysfunctionally in relationships. In other words, these styles are defense mechanisms that stop people from intimacy and connecting with themselves, others, and God.

The following limitations applied to this project: Because I am not a teaching elder nor am I a member of this particular congregation, there were limits placed upon the time and place this curriculum series could implemented. The elders approved an hour-long seminar on Sunday evening for this series. This series was presented on January 5, 2020 to February 23, 2020. This timeframe included one night that the series did not meet because of a pre-planned calendar event. Freedom's church calendar allowed a maximum of seven weeks for this teaching series. The elders graciously moved back the start of their small groups until March for this project to be completed.

### **Conclusion**

A grace-centered marriage is scary but powerfully intimate at the same time. A marriage relationship creates an opportunity for one to mature into conduits of grace not only in the marriage context but also in the wider community. The next chapter will focus on the theological and biblical foundation for marriage.

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<sup>5</sup> Self-protective styles of relating are introduced in Larry Crabb, *Inside Out*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2013), chap. 10; and further developed in Dan Allender, *The Wounded Heart* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2008).



## CHAPTER 2

### A BIBLICAL FOUNDATION FOR A GRACE-CENTERED MARRIAGE

A loving marriage is scary. It is risky, thrilling, expensive, powerful, and filled with valuable peril. Despite its many paradoxes, people thirst for this type of relationship, crave to be loved, and thrive to be embraced by intimacy's grip. However, many couples often sabotage what they want the most. They hide in self-protection, live within wounds, and often satisfy their loneliness with immature mirages of shame. However, most of all, many couples are fearful of the cost love requires to mature in their marriages. So how does a person enter into marriage with all the paradoxes, perils, and costs? The answer is that one must understand the design of marriage and the end results of the mystery one desires to enter. To that end, God designed marriage to be covenantal in nature in order for a couple to mature in character, experience redemptive grace, and learn the deeper implications of love.

This chapter has three main sections: the creational design of marriage, the effects of the fall that sabotages marriage, and the redemption of marriage through the gospel of grace. The first section of this chapter examines Genesis 1-2 from a thematic perspective with special emphasis on the design of marriage. The second section examines the Genesis 3-4 from more of a narrative perspective. This perspective focuses on the details of the story with a special emphasis on eight relational attitudes that sabotage intimacy in marriage. The last section examines the New Testament passage of Ephesians 5:21-33 from theological perspective of grace with an emphasis on the framework of marriage. Furthermore, this section ties together some of the themes understood in the previous sections. By looking at these passages from a thematic, relational, and

theological perspective, a bigger redemptive picture emerges about the mystery and magnitude of marriage.

### **The Creational Design of Marriage: Covenantal Companionship**

In the beginning, God created man and woman to be in relationship with Him but also designed them to be in a special relationship with each other called marriage. To understand God's design for marriage, it is wise to discover the three main themes illustrated in the Genesis narrative: (1) God created people with relational dignity, (2) to have a deep companionship and complementation with each other (3) through the bonds of a covenantal relationship.

#### **Created with Relational Dignity**

First, God created man with relational dignity. In the Genesis 1 narrative, it is important to understand God's perspective of his creation, especially that of human beings. God calls his creation good six times (vv. 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25) but in verse 31 God summarizes his handiwork as "very good" as he looks over his complete creation. Gordon Wenham suggests, "The harmony and perfection of the completed heavens and earth express more adequately the character of their creator than any of the separate components can."<sup>1</sup> God's declaration of all of creation including man as being "very good" speaks to the highest quality of his creation but also that man is created with the highest dignity as well. Anthony Hoekema concludes, "Man, therefore, as he came from the hands of the Creator was not corrupt, depraved, or sinful; he was in a state of integrity, innocence and holiness."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1 (Waco, TX: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 34.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), 15.

The narrative brings out another detail about man. Though distinct from all the other animals, man is in a creature-creator relationship just like the rest of the creation. O. Palmer Robertson notes this detail: “One tree stands in the midst of the garden as a symbolic reminder that man is not God. All has been given to him graciously; but the one exception reminds him that he must not confuse his bountiful blessedness with the state of the Creator. He is a creature and not the Creator.”<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Hoekema explains that a “human person does not exist autonomously or independently but as a creature of God . . . an obvious implication of the fact of creation is that all created reality is completely dependent upon God.”<sup>4</sup> As a creature, men and women are designed to live in dependence and reliance upon their Creator. Mankind was never designed to be sovereign or in total control of their own lives.<sup>5</sup>

Third, God created man in a very distinct way from all of the other animals and creatures. There are several things to note in Genesis 1:26-27 about the creation narratives. God unveils a cosmic conversation when he states, “Let us make mankind in our own image.” Larry Crabb notes the “let us” in the narrative is “the first hint of God as a community of persons (Genesis 1:27).”<sup>6</sup> According to Crabb, this detail is a significant hint to the nature of man: “Because this relational God created us to be like Him, from the moment each of us came into existence, we were created as relational beings, called and designed to live in God-like community as distinct male and female.”<sup>7</sup> Genesis 1:26 gives a glimpse of the harmony of how the Trinity related to each other, which is revealed in other parts of Scripture. The Godhead was in full agreement to make man in “his own

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<sup>3</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1980), 83-84.

<sup>4</sup> Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 15.

<sup>6</sup> Larry Crabb, *Fully Alive: A Biblical Vision of Gender That Frees Men and Women to Live Beyond Stereotypes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 34.

<sup>7</sup> Crabb, *Fully Alive*, 34.

image.” They functioned as “one being” in harmony with each other. Furthermore, God is relational. He created man as a relational being to be in harmony with self and with others. Relational harmony that “images” the relational harmony of the trinity was part of the design from the beginning.

Lastly, God created man in “his image” and “his likeness.” Hoekema gives insight into the Hebrew words of *tselem* and *demuth*. *Tselem* or “image” comes from the root that means to “carve” or to “cut.” The word *demuth*, which is translated as “likeness,” means to “be like” or to be a representative of something.<sup>8</sup> Hoekema summarizes, “When taken together, these two words mean that man is a representative of God who is like God in certain respects.”<sup>9</sup> God created man to show forth his image and to populate the earth with the image of his character. In general, man is not an exact duplicate of God but is a copy that resembles certain aspects of God’s character traits.<sup>10</sup> The creation of man in God’s image demonstrates the highest dignity of man.

In summary, God created man and woman “in his image” with the highest dignity above all of creation to be in a dependent relationship with him. Furthermore, man and woman are designed to live in relational harmony with each other to display God’s character to the world around them.

### **Companionship and Complementation**

A man and woman flourish in their dignity by engaging in the experience of companionship or friendship. To understand this connection, the narrative gives several more aspects in two other passages in Genesis. In Genesis 1, God created all things very good. However, in Genesis 2:18 states, “The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” Now there is a difference in the

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<sup>8</sup> Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 13-15.

<sup>10</sup> Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 13-15.

narrative structure about the creation of man. Wenham concludes, “Against the sevenfold refrain of ‘and God saw that it was (very good)’ in chapter one, the Divine observation that something was not right with man’s situation is startling. It alerts the reader to the importance of companionship.”<sup>11</sup> Inexplicitly, man being alone, having no one to relate to as an equal or as his own kind was not good. This little fact again points to the importance of relationships and the way one relates to people. In *The Meaning of Marriage*, Tim Keller states,

So here is Adam, created by God and put into the garden of paradise, and yet his aloneness is “not good.” The Genesis narrative is implying that our intense relational capacity, created and given to us by God, was not fulfilled completely by our “vertical” relationship with him. God designed us to need “horizontal” relationships with other human beings. That is why even in paradise, loneliness was a terrible thing.<sup>12</sup>

The implication of verse 18 is very important. God built man for friendship with each other and with Himself. However, God alone did not exclusively fulfill this need for companionship. Thus, it was “not good” for man to not have a person to relate to, or, to put it in positive terms—it was good and best for man to have a companion to share his life with in the garden.

Second, God created “a suitable helper” for him. Keller notes the English word “helper” is not a sufficient definition of the Hebrew word *ezer*: “Helper connotes merely assisting someone who could do the task almost as well without the help. But *ezer* is almost always used in the Bible to describe God himself. . . . To help someone then is to make up what is lacking in him with your strength.”<sup>13</sup> Keller concludes,

And therefore when Eve was created as Adam’s helper that absolutely implies deficiencies in Adam that Eve does not have. It implies a power and resources that Eve has got that Adam does not have . . . you can’t help someone unless you have

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<sup>11</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 68.

<sup>12</sup> Timothy Keller and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God* (New York: Riverhead, 2013), 120.

<sup>13</sup> Keller and Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 195.

something they don't. . . . It also implies that Eve has a gift or a way of using that power which is enabling.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, Wenham observes that the word “suitable” has a meaning of “matching him” or “like the opposite of him,” which seems to denote that man and woman were created to be complimentary of one another. They are not identical.<sup>15</sup> Based on this observation, Keller concludes, “Male and female are ‘like opposite’ to one another. They are like two pieces of a puzzle that fit together because they are not exactly alike nor randomly different, but they are differentiated such that together they can create a complete whole.”<sup>16</sup>

The last note on the design of companionship is in Adam’s response to the creation of Eve. When God presents her to him, he responds in a song: “This at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man” (Gen 2:23). Keller interprets the song by expressing what Adam is really saying: “You are really different than me. You are opposite than me and yet you are me. You are opposed to me and you are against me and yet you are me. Yet I find myself in you. You are the missing part.”<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, Keller continues interpreting Adam’s thought as “love you [sic]—I am you and you are me . . . I finally in your presence know who I am. . . . I am finally whole.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Timothy Keller, “Marriage as Completion—One Flesh,” sermon (Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York, September 22, 1991). <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/marriage-as-completion-one-flesh-4652/>. Wording from Timothy Keller’s sermons are quoted and transcribed as stated. Some wording may not be grammatically correct.

<sup>15</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 68.

<sup>16</sup> Keller and Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 196.

<sup>17</sup> Timothy Keller, “Marriage as Completion—One Flesh Gender Roles,” sermon (Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York, October 6, 1991). <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/marriage-as-completion-one-flesh-4652/>.

<sup>18</sup> Timothy Keller, “Marriage as a Priority—Friendship,” sermon (Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York, September 15, 1991). <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/marriage-as-priority-friendship-4650/>.

God designed man and woman to be in relationship with Him (vertical) and with each other (horizontal) in order to have a deep friendship. This friendship climaxes in a complementation of gifts, abilities, and life direction. In being friends, a husband and wife give to one another, learn from each other, and point each other to gaze upon the glory of God. While engaged in this process, they discover themselves.

### **Covenant: An Exclusive Promise**

Marriage is covenantal in its essence. Genesis 2:24 provides three foundational truths to this concept by stating, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (ESV).

First, the phrase “a man should leave his father and mother” denotes an important idea of allegiance. In other versions, “leave” is translated as “forsake,” which means the man’s priorities in life change from parents to wife. Wenham concludes, “Beforehand his first obligations are to his parents: afterwards they are to his wife.”<sup>19</sup> The Genesis narrative described is completely transformational. Wenham also gives insight into the cultural significance: “In traditional societies like Israel where honoring parents is the highest human obligation next to honoring God, this remark about forsaking them is very striking.”<sup>20</sup> Robertson makes an observation that, along with the Sabbath and the mandate to cultivate the earth, marriage is seen as the third and most important part of the creation covenant.<sup>21</sup> In essence, the command to “leave” is completely transformational. To “leave,” then, is to change the relational priority of commitment to the spousal relationship above any other and over all other things in life.

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<sup>19</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 71.

<sup>20</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 71.

<sup>21</sup> Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 74-76.

Second, the Hebrew word meaning “hold fast” can be interpreted as, “to be united to” (NIV) or “to cleave” (AV) also “stick”<sup>22</sup> or “glued” to his wife.<sup>23</sup> Keller observes, “Elsewhere in the Bible the word ‘cleave’ means to unite to someone through a covenant, a binding promise or oath.”<sup>24</sup> Wenham concludes, “This phrase suggests both passion and permanence should characterize marriage. . . . The use of the terms ‘forsake’ and ‘stick’ in the context of Israel’s covenant with the Lord suggests that the OT viewed marriage as a kind of covenant.”<sup>25</sup> Therefore, a man makes a promise to his wife, and consequentially, a wife makes a promise to her husband “to be glued to” each other by a binding permanent and passionate covenant.

Third, the phrase “one flesh” means a consummation of sexual relationship where two become one flesh physically through sexual union. It also has a connotation of being a permanent relationship with one person.<sup>26</sup> Robertson states, “Implicit in this interpersonal fusion as ordered in creation is the fact that two and only two may enter such relationship.”<sup>27</sup> The union of “one flesh” implies an exclusive relationship between male and female that they can only enter into at one time.<sup>28</sup> When husband and wife become “one flesh,” they become one being spiritually, psychologically, and emotionally. They begin to think as one, live in harmony as one, and love one another as one unit. Wayne Grudem suggests, “There is some similarity here: just as there was fellowship and communication and sharing of glory among the members of the Trinity . . . so God made

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<sup>22</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 71

<sup>23</sup> Keller and Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 86.

<sup>24</sup> Keller and Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 86.

<sup>25</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 71.

<sup>26</sup> Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, vol. 1 (Downers Grove, IL: Tyndale, 2008), 71.

<sup>27</sup> Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 75.

<sup>28</sup> Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 75.



Adam and Eve in such a way that they would share love and communication and mutual giving of honor to one another in their interpersonal relationships.”<sup>29</sup> This one flesh principle imitates the grand relationship of the Godhead. The Trinity are three individuals but move together as one being in agreement with one another toward a common horizon; namely, the redemption of man. In the same way, marriage is designed for two people (male and female) to be one in agreement toward a common horizon of holiness and maturity.<sup>30</sup> Keller connects the covenant relationship between man and wife with the covenant relationship with God by understanding the whole of the Biblical context:

Why do we say that marriage is the most deeply covenantal relationship? It is because marriage has both strong horizontal *and* vertical aspects to it. In Malachi 2:14, a man is told that his spouse “is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant” (cf., Ezekiel 16:8). Proverbs 2:17 describes a wayward wife who has “left the partner of her youth, and ignored the covenant she had made before God.” The covenant made between husband and a wife is done “before God” and therefore with God as well as the spouse. To break faith with your spouse is to break faith with God at the same time.<sup>31</sup>

The essence of marriage is a binding and exclusive relational covenant. This covenant seals a promise between man, woman, and God to love one another as they are loved. This relationship is a priority over all others and all things through a vow made to each other and to God himself.

## Summary

Three important concepts are crucial to understanding the design of marriage from the creation narrative:

1. Marriage is designed to be relational. Man and woman are created to be in unity with self, others, and God.
2. The marriage bond is a covenant designed to be an exclusive, permanent covenant with each party. A husband and wife commit themselves to loving another more than self.

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<sup>29</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 455.

<sup>30</sup> Keller and Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 131-32.

<sup>31</sup> Keller and Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 86.

3. Marriage is built for companionship and friendship. By nature, this friendship involves a commitment of vulnerability, honesty, and openness so that both husband and wife live in unity and harmony.

Marriage is the instrument God uses to bring about a picture of holiness through friendship, in order to display maturity and completeness of love and character of God to a watching world.

### **The Fall of Marriage: Relational Self-Protection**

God created Adam and Eve for intimacy, connection, and friendship with each other and with God Himself. Adam and Eve felt no shame, no fear, and no reason to hide. Sadly, the connection ended through a deceptive conversation and the subsequent consequences of sin upon their children. Adam and Eve's unbelief was the central theme of the fall of man. When understood, unbelief has several aspects that correspond and lead to the dynamics of relational self-protectionism.

The first aspect of unbelief was the refusal to live in the presence and providence of God. In the garden, Adam and Eve were given all the provisions for a sustainable life. Wenham pointed out, "We have seen that the garden of Eden narrative is full of symbols suggesting the presence of God and his life-giving power- trees, gold, rivers, and jewels used to adorn the holy of holies. In Israelite worship, true life was experienced when one went to the sanctuary. There God was present. There he gave life."<sup>32</sup> The one requirement was to fulfill what God had asked and to stay within the boundaries God had laid out for them. This obedience would lead to being connected to God's presence and connected to each other in a wonderful and intimate way. However, when they took the fruit and ate it, they not only disobeyed God's rule but, more importantly, they disconnected from his presence. Louis Berkoff summarizes their attitude: "The essence of that sin lay in the fact that Adam placed himself in opposition to God, that he refused to subject his will to the will of God, to have God determine the course of his life; and that actively attempted to

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<sup>32</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 74

take the matter out of God's hands and determine the future for himself."<sup>33</sup> Thus, when Adam and Eve left God's words, they left his presence and pursued an attitude of self-determination or self-sufficiency.

Second, underneath the choice to determine one's own way, is the attitude of disbelief in God's Word. God told Adam to not eat from the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Genesis 2:17). It is presumed that Eve was told of the prohibition because she knew of the prohibition when talking to the serpent. As John Calvin states, "But observe, that men then revolted from God, when, having forsaken his word, lent their ears to the falsehoods of Satan. Hence, we infer, that God will be seen and adored in his word."<sup>34</sup> Calvin connects the forsaking of his word to the fact that they decided not to adore God himself. God's Word reveals who God is and his character. When one forsakes God's Word, he is forsaking the presence and essence of God. As a result, when Adam and Eve decided to disbelieve God's promises and provisions, they decided to turn away from God himself and become self-sufficient. This turning away also led them to believing falsehoods as truth, distortions of truth as sufficient, and manipulations as a way of life.

Last, Adam and Eve's choices conveyed an attitude of reverence toward self instead of reverence for God. Calvin finishes his thought: "And, therefore, that all reverence for him is shaken off when his word is despised. . . . Therefore, unbelief was the root of defection; just as faith alone unites us to God."<sup>35</sup> When Adam and Eve believed falsehoods about God himself, they refused to revere or worship God for who he is—their provider, sustainer, and creator. They forgot God's covenantal word and they despised life and his presence, which led to relational and spiritual death. Sadly, all men

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<sup>33</sup> Louis Berkoff, *Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2005), 222.

<sup>34</sup> John Calvin, *Genesis, Calvin's Commentaries Series*, vol. 1, trans. John King (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 151.

<sup>35</sup> Calvin, *Genesis*, 153.

and women have fallen into the same self-protective dynamics of Adam and Eve in relationship to God and to themselves.

The story of unbelief by Adam and Eve and their children produces a narrative of self-protection. To understand the relational patterns of self-protection, it is wise to define the term. Self-protective behaviors and attitudes are the typical ways people guard themselves, so they do not get disappointed, hurt, or feel pain in relationships.<sup>36</sup> These protective attitudes keep people from being vulnerable in relationships.<sup>37</sup> Instead of feeling pain, people mask their disappointments. Instead of being honest, people hide behind falsehoods. Instead of living in harmony, people live in disconnection. In other words, these attitudes are defense mechanisms that stop people from intimacy.

The fall of Adam and Eve and the relational aftermath illustrated in the sibling rivalry between Cain and Abel introduced eight key attitudes that produce self-protection in human relationships. These eight attributes are fear, pride, control, self-righteousness, blame-shifting, defensiveness, bitterness, and rage.<sup>38</sup> Because of these attitudes, people relate in a dysfunctional manner. One can better understand the way these attitudes sabotage a covenant marriage by examining the following four scenes from a relational and narrative perspective.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Dan B. Allender, *The Wounded Heart* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2008), 157.

<sup>37</sup> Self-protective styles of relating are introduced by Larry Crabb, *Inside Out*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2013), chap. 10; and further developed in Allender, *The Wounded Heart*.

<sup>38</sup> In my book, *Embracing Love: Living on the Other Side of Disconnected Relationships*, I define these eight attitudes and illustrate them through an illustration of “building a wall.” I based this concept on the study of these passages. For more and a fuller description of these eight attitudes, see *Embracing Love: Living on the Other Side of Disconnected Relationships* (Bloomington, IN: West Bow, 2015), chaps. 1-3.

<sup>39</sup> Every couple deals with certain aspects of the fall. However, as a marriage and relational counselor, I have discovered some measure of each of these attitudes in every client. For instance, one person might have a heightened amount of fear while another person is more controlling. However, men and women deal with some aspect of these eight attitudes throughout their lives.

## **Scene 1: Pride, Control, and Self-Righteous Unbelief Become a Reality**

In the temptation of Adam and Eve,<sup>40</sup> the first three attitudes of pride, control, and unbelief are present in conversation with the serpent and Eve.

He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. (Gen 3:1-6 ESV)

Derek Kidner brings insight into the very nature of pride by understanding that the serpent is not just making an argument but sly suggestions about God’s provision and character.<sup>41</sup> In the first suggestion the serpent slowly brings doubt about what God had commanded in the question, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’” It must be remembered that the command was given to Adam first and at some point in time Adam gave this command to Eve. Therefore, Eve at least knows of the command in order to respond to it. No matter the case, the serpent moves Eve to doubt God’s very words. Kidner writes, “The incredulous tone—‘So God has actually said . . .?’ is disturbing and flattering; it smuggles in the assumption that God’s word is subject to our judgment.”<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, Grudem states, “Eve trusted her own evaluation of what was right and what would be good for her, rather than allowing God’s words to define right and wrong.”<sup>43</sup> Man, himself, then becomes the standard by which other things are judged right, wrong, or fair. This judgment or evaluation is where pride seeps into the heart

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<sup>40</sup> There is debate about whether Adam was present when Eve was being tempted. I am of the persuasion that he was there listening to the temptation. For more information, Larry Crabb argues for this position in *The Silence of Adam* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

<sup>41</sup> Kidner, *Genesis*, 72.

<sup>42</sup> Kidner, *Genesis*, 72.

<sup>43</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 493.

of man. It is also interesting the way Eve responds to this suggestion. Kidner observes that Eve over-corrects the serpent's claims by adding onto it a false restriction that God had never said.<sup>44</sup> Now, man perceives God not as a provisional God full of grace and care for his created ones, but a restrictive God who may not be as sincere as He says He is.

Furthermore, the serpent presents another suggestion of disbelief related to pride in stating, "You will not surely die. . . you will be like God." Wenham points out, "Or finally, it could be that the snake is partially quoting God's words in 2:17, 'you will certainly die,' by prefacing them with 'not' and then going on to give a different divine motivation. So we might render his words 'Not "certainly die," but God knows . . . you will become like God knowing good and evil."<sup>45</sup> The shrewd act of changing God's words and motivations speaks to the pride of the serpent; that Eve considered these words demonstrates the pride in her own heart as well. John Calvin interprets "you will be like God" as Satan promises them "divinity" and that the prohibition of the tree of knowledge "was because he feared to have you as companions."<sup>46</sup> Calvin goes on to say, "Therefore unbelief was the root of their defection. . . . Hence flowed ambition and pride, so that the woman first and then her husband, desire to exalt themselves against God."<sup>47</sup> This is what pride does. Pride exalts oneself against the other and relationally makes one out to be the "god" that needs to be worshipped in the relationship. Hoekema summarizes, "This act revealed sinful pride; it meant that they were 'thinking of themselves more highly than they ought' (Rom 12:3). This pride, this conceit, this perversion of the self-image in an upward direction, and was the cause of man's first sin."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Kidner, *Genesis*, 72.

<sup>45</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 74.

<sup>46</sup> Calvin, *Genesis*, 151.

<sup>47</sup> Calvin, *Genesis*, 153.

<sup>48</sup> Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 104.

Second, the concealed suggestion of “you will be like God” holds the connotation that man can be in control. Kidner offers insight into what it means to be in control: “The climax is a lie big enough to reinterpret life (this breadth is the power of a false system) and dynamic enough to redirect the flow of affections and ambition.”<sup>49</sup> Walton adds to this idea: “God offered nothing less to Adam and Eve than the privilege of freedom and the joy of dependence. . . . In rejecting dependence on God (though in no way escaping from it) people choose a far more costly dependency—on themselves and their own resources.”<sup>50</sup> Thus, the temptation of control is to reinterpret life on one’s own terms and to live life where one is autonomous or in control of his own destiny. The temptation to be in total control dismantles God’s design. Control sabotages humanity’s passions and desires. The desire to be in ultimate control now makes man’s desires flow away from God and toward self. Men and women desire to know what God knows; they want to be equal to him. Humanity will desire to have what God has—ultimate sovereignty over their universe. Self-sufficiency becomes a “god” to be pursued. The ultimate idea of control offered to Eve, though in reality it was an allusive illusion.

The third characteristic understood through the serpent’s dialogue with Eve is unbelief in the character of God. The serpent suggests that wisdom is found in something other than God himself when he states, “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” John Sailhamer points out, “It is then at this point in the narrative that the author raises the issue of the place of ‘wisdom.’ . . . The woman’s thoughts show that this is not a question of rebellion. It is, on her part, simply a quest for wisdom. It is a quest for knowing ‘the good’ apart from God’s

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<sup>49</sup> Kidner, *Genesis*, 73.

<sup>50</sup> John H. Walton, *Genesis*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 217.

provision.”<sup>51</sup> Though Sailhamer’s point that Eve’s decision was not out of rebellion is debatable, he gives great insight that Eve desired wisdom apart from God’s provision.

Fretheim continues this thought when he states,

The serpent speaks a key phrase, “God knows.” It claims that God has not told them the truth about the matter, that God keeps something back. . . . The serpent makes it sound as if God’s motivation is self-serving. . . . The issue of knowledge thus becomes an issue of trust. Is the giver of the prohibition one who can be trusted with their own best interests?<sup>52</sup>

God’s very own motivations or character becomes the crux of the serpent debates with Eve. Eve now asks, “Is God who he says he really is? Is he holding something back? Does he really have man’s best interest at heart or is he a self-serving God?” The created now judges the Creator as flawed, distant, and self-serving. The created now becomes the standard of true wisdom, true knowledge, and understanding. This leads to a self-righteous attitude. Self-righteousness becomes a reality of the heart. Self-righteousness is really an outgrowth of pride and control. A person believing that he or she is better than others (pride), and that the world revolves around him or her (control), leads to self-righteousness. Self-righteousness has everything to do with the judgment of wisdom. Self-righteous people believe that they are wiser than all the rest and thus promote themselves over others

In summary, the serpent presents an idea the God’s Word and his character are not to be trusted. This leads to a self-righteous attitude that man deserves more than what God has given. Adam and Eve become enamored with the idea of trusting their own wisdom, creating their own world, and becoming their own god. The complete dialogue results in Eve doubting God’s character of love, care, and provision. With doubt becoming belief, Adam and Eve contemplate life choices apart from God’s promises and

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<sup>51</sup> John H. Sailhamer, *Genesis*, in vol. 1 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 86.

<sup>52</sup> Terrance E. Fretheim, *The Book of Genesis*, in vol. 1 of *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 361.



presence. As a result, relationships suffer the deadly consequences of pride, control, and self-righteousness, which lead to fear and disconnection.

## **Scene 2: Hiding in Fearful Disconnection and Shame**

The story continues with the next theme of fear and all that it denotes. Genesis 3:6-10 states,

She took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.”

There are several important themes to note regarding the impact of Adam and Eve’s decisions. First, the wording “the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked” directly connects the previous narrative in verse 2:28, where they were naked and felt no shame. Furthermore, Fretheim asserts, “They realize that, now having to decide for themselves what is in their own best interests, everything looks somewhat different. Having decided to be on their own, they see the world entirely through their own eyes. They now operate totally out of their own resources.”<sup>53</sup> Hoekema concludes, “Awareness of their nakedness meant now they had a sense of shame.”<sup>54</sup> Shame blinds people from seeing and understanding others and themselves. It leads those to trust their own-blinded sight. Dan Allender describes four aspects of shame: “Shame is interpersonal in nature, an overwhelming fear of being exposed, the revelation that we cannot be enjoyed, and the thoughts of rejection coming true.”<sup>55</sup> Thus, shame inherently is hiding from vulnerability and the true reality of relationships.

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<sup>53</sup> Fretheim, *The Book of Genesis*, 361.

<sup>54</sup> Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 104.

<sup>55</sup> Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 61-69.

Because of their shame, they sewed fig leaves together. They hid from being present with themselves, each other, and with God. Instead of vulnerability and connection, they lived disconnected and separation. The intimacy they experienced became disjointed and ruined. The connection they had was broken. As Kenneth Mathews put it, “They achieved isolation and fear.”<sup>56</sup> The Fall reversed God’s created order of complete perfection and goodness. As a result, they became disconnected from one another physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Calvin surmises the end of this scene: “Being covered with their garments, they passed the night in silence and the quiet of darkness.”<sup>57</sup> The silence of disconnection and death became a way of life.

Last, God called to Adam and Eve by a simple question: “Where are you?” He did not call out of ignorance but for their own sake. The Lord desired them to know the fear that gripped their souls. God called out to them so they would discover their current disconnection and disunity. Adam’s reply verified the reality in their souls—they were afraid. Fear had become the relational reality. Because of their decisions, Adam and Eve had experiential knowledge of “good and evil” in their relationships with God, with each other, and inside themselves. Indeed, they realized their location—instead of intimate walks in the Garden, they walked the path of fear, shame, and disconnection. This became their relational realities and all of mankind’s as well. Intimate walks with God in the garden of paradise became a distant memory. Fear, pride, control, and self-righteousness led to blame-shifting and a disconnected reality.

### **Scene 3: Blame-Shifting: The Denial of Responsibility**

The conversation continues as Adam and Eve struggle to confess their denials. God continues to pursue them in the following conversation in Genesis 3:11-13: “He

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<sup>56</sup> Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, The New American Commentary, vol. 1A (Nashville: B & H, 1996), 237.

<sup>57</sup> Calvin, *Genesis*, 160.

said, ‘Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?’ The man said, ‘The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.’ Then the LORD God said to the woman, ‘What is this that you have done?’ The woman said, ‘The serpent deceived me, and I ate.’”

The relational disconnection led to blame-shifting of responsibility. Notice Adam’s words, “The woman you put here with me.” The Lord calls upon Adam to reveal his heart. Instead of taking responsibility for his actions in humility and openness, he hides through blame-shifting. Adam blames Eve for his situation. There is irony in this statement since the Lord God gave Eve to him as a gift. When Adam first saw Eve, he was in complete and utter awe. However, now he is in complete and utter disgust. Adam cries out, “It was this woman! She is the burden and the cause of this whole situation. It is not I.” Therefore, the gift of companionship became the guile for irresponsibility

Adam also adds qualifying words of “the woman *you* put here.” Calvin observes, Adam “brings at the same time, an accusation against God; objecting that the wife, who had brought ruin upon him had been given by God.”<sup>58</sup> It is as if Adam states in defiance, “If you had not brought her into my life, I would not be here today. I would not have eaten the fruit.” Adam states directly and concisely, “This is God’s fault.” Adam then leads his wife into blame-shifting and she follows in his footsteps quite well. The relational disconnection between self, each other, and God becomes stronger and more impenetrable. Wenham concludes, “Here the divisive effects of sin, setting man against his dearest companion and alienating him from his all-caring creator, are splendidly portrayed.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Calvin, *Genesis*, 164.

<sup>59</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 77.

#### **Scene 4: The Atmosphere of Defensiveness, Bitterness, and Rage**

Adam and Eve walk off the stage, and now the fourth scene continues the story line of disconnection in relationships with their children in Genesis 4:1-7. In this story, the dysfunctional relational patterns are transferred to and heightened with their children. The relational dysfunction climaxes in the final three attitudes of defensiveness, bitterness, and rage. Genesis 4:1-7 says,

Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD." And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it."

Cain's whole countenance is one of relational disconnection through defensiveness. First, there is disconnection between the Lord and Cain, which came to fruition in the different offerings that he and his brother presented to the Lord. Matthew Henry summarizes the reasons for the Lord's differing response: "Cain showed a proud, unbelieving heart. Therefore, he and his offering were rejected. Abel came as a sinner, and according to God's appointment, by his sacrifice expressing humility, sincerity, and believing obedience."<sup>60</sup>

Second, Cain is angry not only with his brother but also with the Lord for not accepting his offering. The anger overflows into bitterness, resentment, and dejection. The back story is unknown, but based upon the events that are about to unfold, there are hints of bitterness in Cain's heart. Matthew Henry comments,

Cain was very wroth, which presently appeared in his very looks, for his countenance fell, which bespeaks not so much his grief and discontent as his malice and rage. His sullen churlish countenance, and a down-look, betrayed his passionate

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<sup>60</sup> Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2005), 12.

resentments: he carried ill-nature in his face, and the show of his countenance witnessed against him.<sup>61</sup>

The Lord confronts Cain by reminding him of two aspects of sin. (1) Sin is “crouching at the door.” It is sinister and sneaky. It will crouch in the crevices of the soul and slowly destroy us from the inside out. (2) Sin “desires to have you” or to master your heart. Sin’s major design is to rule over emotions so that you place your heart in its grip. Once there, it does not let go. Cain must stay vigilant and alert to its effects. Sadly, Cain dismisses the Lord’s correction. It almost seems like Cain was saying, “I am going to continue in my ways. No matter what you say so leave me alone.” Genesis 4:8-9 reads, “Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is Abel your brother?” He said, “I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?”

Filled with bitterness and anger, Cain invited Abel to go on a brotherly walk to the field and then his built-up hatred led to murder. Bitterness led to hate, hate led to murder, and murder led to destruction. Cain’s rage not only destroyed his family in a physical sense, but it also destroyed his spiritual relationship with God. Cain continued the hiding ways of his parents by not heeding the Lord’s reminders. The Lord confronts Cain’s heart. Instead of confession, he replied back with a lie and a defensive jab at God: “I don’t know. Am I my brother’s keeper?” Lies, defensiveness, and anger led to complete and utter disconnection. Genesis 4:10-12 records the consequences of Cain’s actions:

And the LORD said, “What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.”

Victor Hamilton summarized Cain’s destiny: “It is to lose all sense of belonging and identification with a community. It is to become rootless and detached. . . .

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<sup>61</sup> Mathew Henry, *Mathew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Complete), accessed February 20, 2019, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/genesis/4.html>.

Rootlessness is the punishment and the wilderness is the refuge of the sinner.”<sup>62</sup> Today, all humanity too becomes restless wanderers. The restlessness of the heart that wanders around the earth, disconnected from one another, hiding from God, and kept from opportunities to experience safe and real relationships.

### **Summary**

God designed all relationships, especially marriage, to display his love and character to the world. The fall and its relational aftermath sabotaged marriages into a reality of self-centeredness and self-protection. As a result, people disconnect from each other and with the living God. These two stories illustrate eight attitudes that can cause self-protection: (1) fear, (2) pride, (3) control, (4) self-righteousness, (5) blame shifting, (6) defensiveness, (7) bitterness, and (8) fits of rage.

Every marriage relationship has the potential to struggle with some aspect of these eight attitudes of self-protection. Some marriage relationships may struggle more with pride or fear and others with defensiveness or control. However, these self-protective attitudes are lurking underneath many relational dysfunctions. As a result, these attitudes sabotage marriages from honesty, vulnerability, connection, and deep intimacy. The power of these vices tears away at the safety of God-designed relationships. Sadly, marriages and all relationships have struggled with the same consequences since the fall of man. Therefore, people lose love for others, for themselves, and ultimately for God. Self-centeredness became a friend and love became an enemy.

### **The Redemption of Grace in Marriage: Maturing Character**

Not all was lost at the end of both narratives. God clothed Adam and Eve with animal skins so they would not be naked. In addition, God marked Cain as “safe” so no

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<sup>62</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *Genesis*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1990), 232.

one would harm him, even though he continued to be a wanderer. Grace ends each relational narrative. Moreover, grace is at the center of the New Testament explanation of marriage. Ephesians 5:21-33 is the most prolific passage on marriage in all of Scripture. In this passage, Paul beautifully weaves the theology of grace, love, and Christ's redemptive work to give a fuller and deeper picture of marriage. Before moving into this section, it is wise to look briefly at the structure of the letter, and then to understand the importance of how redemption transforms relationships as a whole.

### **The Context of Grace in Ephesians**

Most theologians divide Ephesians into two halves. Chapters 1-3 are indicatives of who Christians are in Christ. The letter reminds Christians of God's electing love, adoption as sons and daughters, and the theology of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. The second half, chapters 4-6, includes exhortations based upon the indicatives presented in the first three chapters. These chapters explore the ethical implications of conduct regarding reconciliation of the Gentiles, the unity of the church, and the maturity in family relationships, including marriage.<sup>63</sup> The implication of God's saving grace as transformative to all relationships is one central theme. Furthermore, the role of Holy Spirit to seal, redeem, and transform believers to the image of God is another theme (Eph 1:14, 4:30).<sup>64</sup> Taken as a whole, F. F. Bruce states that "the emphasis in Ephesians is that God's salvation is all of grace (to be received through faith) and not at all by works."<sup>65</sup> Understanding how these truths connect the book of Ephesians will give insight into the great marriage passage.

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<sup>63</sup> Andrew Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 42 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), xxxvi-vii.

<sup>64</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, 2nd rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 233-34.

<sup>65</sup> Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 233.

Ephesians 1:4-6 provides the purpose and motivation of the themes throughout the letter, which are a preamble to Paul's theological framework to marriage. Ephesians 1:4 begins with the purpose, "For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight." The phrase "holy and blameless" describes the righteousness God has imputed through Christ by grace.<sup>66</sup> It also previews the ethical exhortation of the how God calls believers to live because of the union with Christ.<sup>67</sup> Grace "destroys the barrier" in relationships, provides reconciliation of differences, and brings peace with each other (2:14-18.) Furthermore, Paul challenges Christians to be mature in how they conduct relationships by speaking about general relationships in verses 4:1-11 and 4:25-32, to more specific relationships such as marriage 5:21-33, children 6:1-4, and then people under authority 6:5-9. Grace's consequence is growing in maturity with how to love others more than loving self.

Second, Paul gives the indicative of who Christians are in Christ by indicating their identity as sons (and daughters) of God. Ephesians 1:5-6 says, "In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved." It cannot be missed that the purpose of adoption is prefaced by the words "in love," which preamble the following verse of Ephesians 1:5.<sup>68</sup> God's motivation is love. This love then moves Him to adopt believers as his children with no effort of their own. Peter O'Brian states, "Ephesians 1:5 indicates that before time began God chose to adopt men and women into a personal relationship with himself. . . . It is only through the work of God's

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<sup>66</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Ephesians*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2009), 24.

<sup>67</sup> Frank Thielman, *Ephesians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 51.

<sup>68</sup> Some theologians think "in love" goes with the previous verse. I am inclined to think that "in love" is introductory to the motivation of adoption and predestination.



Son, the Beloved, that believers can be adopted as sons”<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, Christ’s status as God’s son lifts believers out of the status of slaves and makes them sons and daughters of God with him (Gal 3:23-4:7; Rom 8:15-17).<sup>70</sup> Those who are his beloved live with a changed identity. They were once orphans, slaves, enemies, and opposed to God but now they are sons and daughters, accepted and heirs named into the honor the family of God through grace (Eph 1:7). Grace, then, is the conduit for a changed identity, which is the theme the 2:1-11 and Paul’s commission to preach the gospel to the Gentiles (Eph 3:1-13). Thus, in the beginning of the letter Paul firmly establishes the identity of believers as his beloved children, which is the foundation for the imperatives of relating to self. Keller states, “Paul is applying to marriage a general principle about the Christian life—that all Christians who really understand the gospel undergo a radical change in the way they relate to people.”<sup>71</sup>

Last, the terms “holy and blameless” are not only relational toward others but also how one relates to self. In Ephesians 5:1-2, Paul reminds his readers of two phrases he stated at the beginning of his letter: “love” and “beloved children.” Chapell observes, “Our identity in Christ is the primary motivation for our obedience.”<sup>72</sup> This identity now grows believers into who God calls them to be in their character. This is the central theme of Ephesians 5:1-20 in which Paul gives many exhortations, such as not engaging in sexual immorality, greed, course joking, or drunkenness. Furthermore, Paul emphasizes the work of Holy Spirit in character throughout Ephesians (2:17, 4:2, 5:1-2, 5:9, 5:17) echoes the Fruit of the Spirit found in Galatians 5:22-23 and Colossians 3:12-17. The attitude one

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<sup>69</sup> Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester: Eerdmans, 1999), 103. I am aware that Peter O’Brien has admitted plagiarism in some sections of his commentary on Ephesians. I use his work here in only specific instances where his particular phraseology effectively communicates ideas corroborated by others.

<sup>70</sup> Thielman, *Ephesians*, 52.

<sup>71</sup> Keller and Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 51.

<sup>72</sup> Chapell, *Ephesians*, 237.

has toward self is always revealed in relationships with others, which ultimately reveals one's relationship with God. Grace then is the overriding power through the Holy Spirit, which changes how one is to view and relate to self.

In conclusion, the grace of the gospel transforms all three relationships: with God, self and others. The theme of being his beloved children transforms the way one lives as his beloved children through the Holy Spirit. Consequently, one begins to live spirit-filled or becomes others-centered instead of self-centered. Then Paul weaves the theme of grace and relationships with self and others throughout the beautiful prose, reaching a crescendo by revealing more of God's incredible design for marriage because of God's grace.

### **Grace-Centered Marriage (Eph 5:21-33)**

It is not possible to uncover every nuance of truth about marriage in this section. However, five attitudes or themes, when properly understood, provide a relational atmosphere for a healthy marriage. These themes are mutual submission, sacrificial leadership, covenantal love, life-giving nurture, and relational maturity. Grace is the power that weaves itself through the narrative of these five concepts. Grace redeems the narrative of sin and grace redeems the broken aspects of one's story. Grace provides the fuller picture of the operational design to how marriage works in a broken world and through grace reverses the attitudes of the fall. Each theological theme will be examined the light of grace through studying Ephesians 5:21-33.

**Mutual submission.** The opening verses of this section demonstrate the importance of mutual submission: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord" (Eph 5 21-22). Before understanding the implications of this passage, Keller notes that verse 21 connects the previous content about "being filled with the Holy Spirit" to the passage on marriage. He states, "The last mark of Spirit fullness is in this last clause: it is a loss of pride and self-will that leads a

person to humbly serve others.”<sup>73</sup> Thus, submission connects the inner working of the Holy Spirit to two aspects of a person’s life: their attitudes and actions.

First, submission is an attitude. Submission means to be “arranged under,” or obedience to someone.<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, the verb tense used by Paul is important. Thielman notes that the verb is in the passive voice. He states, “And when the passive voice of the verb is used of people (as it is here), it refers to the ‘voluntary submission’ of one person to another (BDAG 1042.)”<sup>75</sup> Therefore, a man and woman voluntarily and considerately relate to one another out of submissive love instead of self-protection. Thielman points out, “Since Christ’s sacrificing grace and love (1:7, 5:2., 25) are integral to his position of authority, however, appropriate fear must be tempered with a knowledge of the incomprehensible vastness of his love.”<sup>76</sup> This verse also has the connotation of Christ’s “sovereign claim and righteous judgment” over all things.<sup>77</sup> Thus, believers who are Spirit-filled voluntarily become others-centered because they are in awe of God’s grace, sacrifice, and love. This submission is in attitude toward one another, which is rooted in Christ’s work on each spouse’s behalf.

Second, submission is an action. It is a pattern of how husbands and wives relate to one another in marriage. Husbands and wives submit to the reality that they are not “gods of their own universe” who act independently from God himself. Mutual submission also implies that either spouse cannot rescue the other from emotional or spiritual wounds. They cannot become “god.” These actions of dependence start to reverse the sabotaging attitudes of pride and actions of control. With this “reverence”

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<sup>73</sup> Keller and Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 47.

<sup>74</sup> Bryan Chapell and Kathy Chapell, *Each for the Other: Marriage as It’s Meant to Be*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 85.

<sup>75</sup> Thielman, *Ephesians*, 372.

<sup>76</sup> Thielman, *Ephesians*, 375.

<sup>77</sup> Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 367.

being the basis of mutual submission, the passage gives insight into how husband and wife are to operate relationally with each other in marriage.

The wife is to submit to the husband as the leader of the family. One of the reasons this is true is described by the phrase “as to the Lord.” Chapell explains, “The words indicate that a woman’s submission is motivated not so much by a husband’s deserving as by God’s purposes. . . . The idea is that a woman submits to her husband, she looks over his shoulder to see the Lord who is saying, ‘You are ultimately doing this not for him but for me.’”<sup>78</sup> When a woman submits she is becoming like the character of Jesus. Jesus submitted to the Father’s will (Phil 2:6-11). Jesus willingly deferred his will to the Father’s will in heaven. So, when a woman submits her will to her husband, she is representing the cosmic submission of one to another represented in the Trinity. The woman then embraces love on a profound level by submitting to her husband just as Jesus loved the Father by submitting to him. By doing so, the wife discovers a greater and deeper security of love.

The husband submits as well even though he is the “head” of his wife; however, his submission looks different. A husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church. Christ loved the church through self-sacrifice. Keller contends that this kind of submission is a “stronger appeal to abandon self-interests than was given to the woman.”<sup>79</sup> A husband is to give up his agenda, wants, and wishes for a larger design to love someone else more than himself in marriage. A husband submits to a pattern of selfless leading in his marriage with his wife in the forefront of his mind and activities. He does not operate alone, selfishly, or independently. On the contrary, he acts with an attitude of humility, abandonment, and honor to his wife.

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<sup>78</sup> Chapell and Chapell, *Each for the Other*, 78.

<sup>79</sup> Keller and Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 50.

When husband and wife mutually submit in their actions and attitudes, a redeeming system operates between the two people. First, the wife surrenders the need to be in control and relates with an attitude of love. Surrender gives her the opportunity to be the “helper” in the relationship because she is submitting her desires to the Lord through him. She becomes open to use her unique resources for the benefit of her husband and not for the benefit of herself. Second, the husband abandons the need to be prideful and thus willingly calls out for “help” in order not to be independent from her. Mutual submission actively prevents self-protective attitudes in the marriage relationship. The wife’s attitude of submission actually negates control and his attitude of becoming humble actively negates his pride. The weaving of mutual submission to the Lord creates a connection of friendship and vulnerability, or, the relationship becomes the redemption of Eden. However, submission is not oppressive or demanding in either relationship. Submission does not mean absolute obedience. If a man or woman goes outside the boundary of scriptural ethics, then the other party’s submission is to the Lord and not to the spouse. Each party has every right to say, “No!” to the other in that area. This response can continue until the spouse repents and submitting himself or herself to Christ’s lordship. Submission is to the Lord first and foremost.

**Sacrificial leadership.** In Ephesians 5:23, the central Greek word is κεφαλή, meaning “head” is the key theme to understand in this passage.<sup>80</sup> Headship has the definition of “having authority over” and to “be a source of life” in reference to the greater context in Ephesians 4:15.<sup>81</sup> Two additional details in the Genesis narrative help

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<sup>80</sup> There are several different interpretations of the word *head*, but most if not all agree it means “authority.” Some understand this word to mean “source” as well from other context in Scripture that tie it back to the Genesis narrative. See discussion in Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 368-69.

<sup>81</sup> Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 369.

to understand the reason for these two definitions.<sup>82</sup> Keller explains these two details from Genesis 1:22, 24: “Adam is the physical source of Eve and he is given the responsibility of naming her. Both of these elements in the narrative lay the basis for the New Testament statements of a husband’s ‘headship.’”<sup>83</sup> This implies that from creation, a husband was given authority over his wife to lead, to be a source for her, or have responsibility for her. However, now this leading is more defined than it was in the Genesis narrative through the phrase “just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”

How did Christ love the church? He used his authority for the wellbeing of others and not for himself. Jesus presents leadership in a whole new way by washing the disciples’ feet. Keller explains Jesus’ leadership: “The master has just made himself into a servant who has washed his disciple’s feet, this demonstrating in the most dramatic way that authority and leadership mean that you become the servant, you die to self in order to love and serve the Other.”<sup>84</sup> Jesus suffered and sacrificed his life for the church by having a mission to redeem her from herself.

In the same way, a husband’s authority is selfless, other-centered, and sacrificial to be an instrument of redemption. Grace motivates a husband’s authority for the benefit of others and not the benefit of self. He leads out of gentle humility. His authority is never oppressive or rageful against his spouse. By taking responsibility of his marriage in this way, a man gets in touch with his created design, which pushes against the ingrained habits of pride and blame-shifting. The marriage itself can make him grow up out of his pride if he allows the power of his marriage to mature him. He must own his life and his

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<sup>82</sup> These verses do not elaborate on the origin of headship. Gen 1-3, 1 Cor 11-3-12, and 1 Tim 2:11-13 ground the idea of headship in the order of creation. For a fuller treatment, see Raymond C. Orland, “Male and Female Equality and Male Headship: Genesis 1-3,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), chap. 3.

<sup>83</sup> Keller and Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 195.

<sup>84</sup> Keller and Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 200.

marriage. By growing in maturity, a man stops blaming others for his sinful errors and grows toward humility. In other words, the marriage leadership role forces the husband to submit to something greater than himself by seeking the greatest benefit of his wife. By leading well, he moves from a self-centered life to a purposeful life.

Second, Keller gives some new insights into the word “head.” He states,

When Paul says “Wives submit to your husband for the husband is the head of the wife. Whether you realize it or not, he is actually pulling us back into Genesis because of this little important word “head.” The Greek word “head” is just like our word authority. . . . The original word authority comes from the word author. If I wrote a poem, I am the author of the poem, and then I am the authority. I can tell you what the poem is about. Why? Because, I am speaking out of my authorship. [sic] I am the source of the poem. Therefore, I have authority. . . . In the same way, this little Greek word “head” originally means source. It actually means, the headwaters of a river. . . . He is referring to the fact of Genesis where Eve is taken out of Adam. In a sense, Adam is the “headwaters” of Eve.<sup>85</sup>

This word picture gives an example of how leadership works in the life of the husband and wife. For example, when an author writes a book, the pages of the book are an extension of himself. Through the process of writing the pages he gets to know himself. After completing the process, others learn from the book but even more importantly it reflects back to the author what he has learned about himself. The author creates something outside of himself that reveals himself in a tangible way.

In the same way, when marriage is following its design, two things are happening at once. First, a husband leads his wife by creating a story or book about him and his wife that reveals themselves. As the husband leads her, studies, and writes about her, she becomes the book that reveals himself. She reflects back to him who he is and how he is made. Second, when a woman becomes the co-author of her marriage through submission, she begins to know and read her husband like a book. The pages of his life then reflect back to her who she is as a person. She then can become aligned with her true design. She gains an awareness of self beyond what she would have already experienced

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<sup>85</sup> Timothy Keller, “Marriage as Completion- One Flesh- Gender Roles,” sermon (Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York, September 29, 1991), <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/marriage-as-completion-gender-roles-33/>.

in her life. By opening herself to him through humility and grace, she discovers her true glorified self. True servant leadership creates an atmosphere where each party is able to enter in and receive the other for a wonderful purpose—intimacy.

**Covenantal love.** In Ephesians 5:25-33 Paul tells husbands to love their wives in four specific instances: “Husbands, love your wives. . .” (v. 25), “In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives. . . . He who loves his wife . . . (v. 28) and “However, each one of you also must love his wife” (v.33). These passages highlight that marriage builds upon the greater theological principle of covenant love as now illustrated in Christ’s love for the church. Furthermore, the theme of love can be traced all the way through the letter: “in love he predestined us” (1:4), “because of his great love” (2:4), “rooted and established in love” (3:17), “grasp how wide and high and deep is the love of Christ” (3:18), “and live a life of love just as Christ loved us” (5:2-3). In these passages, God illustrates his electing and initiating love for man. Man’s efforts, success or failure, or beauty or behavior does not move God to love man. God chooses to love despite all of man’s disappointments. God’s electing love is based upon his eternal character. Chapell summarizes, “Paul wants everyone to remember that we are loved not because of what is in us but because what is in God”<sup>86</sup>

To put it another way, Paul calls the husband to love his wife unconditionally. Performance, outward beauty, successes or failures are not the basis for covenantal love. Christ’s unconditional love is the basis for a husband’s covenantal love. A husband chooses to love. Furthermore, in most of these passages, the word “grace” or the concept of grace connects with the word “love” (Eph 1:5, 2:5, for example). Grace and love always work together in perfect unity. When a man loves his wife in unconditional grace and love he begins to understand the richness and depth of the grace and love God has for him.

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<sup>86</sup> Chapell, *Ephesians*, 46.



Second, another small detail needs to be understood to bring this theme of covenantal love to fruition. In the midst of all these “loves,” Paul quotes the Genesis narrative in Ephesians 5:31: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” However, there is a change in the Greek wording with the phrase “for this reason.” Thielman suggest Paul’s change in the Greek<sup>87</sup> and “the union of husband and wife in ‘one flesh’ was originally intended to prefigure and to illustrate the union that Christ now has with the church.”<sup>88</sup> If this is correct, then Paul reveals the creation covenantal design of marriage from the beginning. Taken all together, there is deepness to marriage because of an electing love. This love chooses actions to benefit others over the benefit of self and even forsakes self. This sacrificial life gives both spouses a glimpse of a heavenly reality in this broken world.

Last, a marriage is a day-to-day working out of these covenants through agreements in the decision-making process. The covenantal vow taken on the day of the wedding is not about present love “but a binding promise of future love.”<sup>89</sup> This future love then operates in consistently making and keeping these promises as the basis for how one structures marriage. These agreements steer a couple in a certain direction and to a specific destination. These covenants then become the guide or manual for how they deal the circumstances of their life. When a couple functions in covenantal agreements and are consistent with them, this relational atmosphere pushes out fearfulness and anxiety. As a result, a couple begins to operate in the perfecting love of God, which casts out fear (1 John 4:6; Eph 2:1-11).

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<sup>87</sup> For the discussion on the change the meaning of the change to Ἀντὶ τοῦτου, see Thielman, *Ephesians*, 388-89.

<sup>88</sup> Thielman, *Ephesians*, 389.

<sup>89</sup> Keller and Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 90-91.

**Relational maturity.** Ephesians 5:25-28 elaborates on three results of Christ love for the church, comparing it to the husband's love for his wife. The three results are holiness, cleansing, and radiance. The first concept is in the words of verse 25, "just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy." Christ's sacrificial life makes the church holy or "set it apart."<sup>90</sup> Thielman points out that Paul uses "the noun form of the adjective ἅγιος (hagios, holy)" as a term for identity for himself and his readers.<sup>91</sup> Thielman continues, "They are "saints (1:1, 15, 18, 2:19; 3:8, 18; 4:12; 5:13; 6:18, the people whom God has freely chosen to set apart as heirs."<sup>92</sup> In essence, Christ sets his affection on his children that allows them to live as his beloved. Thus, part of holiness is living in your identity.

The second concept Paul speaks of is that of "cleansing her by the washing with water through the word." This "cleansing aspect" sanctifies or scrubs the grime of sin from the church. Although there is much debate about the meaning of "the washing with water through the word," the theme of this phrase emphasizes "the cleansing forgiveness in Christ Jesus" redemptive work.<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, though not specifically stated, this cleansing involves Christ's attitude in life exemplified by his humility, obedience, and servanthood (Phil 2:6-15). It also includes Christ's voluntary surrender through his death, which involved his suffering, adversity, and conflict. Christ confronts the church in all its brokenness and redeems it by his redemptive work in life and in death. Thus, facing adversity, brokenness, conflict, and sin are part of the cleansing nature of Christ and his bride so that the bride will be beautiful.

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<sup>90</sup> Thielman, *Ephesians*, 382.

<sup>91</sup> Thielman, *Ephesians*, 382.

<sup>92</sup> Thielman, *Ephesians*, 382-83.

<sup>93</sup> Chapell, *Ephesians*, 280.

The last concept of Christ's love for the church is to "present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless." Lincoln adds that "there is future of eschatological 'bridal imagery'"<sup>94</sup> of Christ presenting the church to himself as complete at the wedding feast or union of Christ and his church (Rev 21:1-5). However, there is also the imagery of a progressive sanctification process that Christ brings to the church in the present.<sup>95</sup>

The theme that bookends the paragraph on the redemptive work of Christ is the phrase, "husbands love or ought to love your wives." Just as Paul did previously in the passage, he uses Christ's example and goal to be the pattern for husbands to follow in leading their marriages. As a result, one of marriage's purposes is to sanctify one another so one can become mature in character.<sup>96</sup> A husband and wife mature in character through the marriage itself. A husband loves his wife by setting his affection upon her, which helps her to become radiant, holy, and blameless. By doing so, this love changes his character. By nature, a husband is immature and as he leads and sacrifices, he then grows up into the man he is to become. The husband loving his wife brings maturity to him and to her. The wife also is immature and grows up through her humble and gentle attitude toward her husband. As a result, she becomes a secure woman without wrinkles or blemishes of character through respecting and loving her husband. Loving leadership and sacrificial submission mature each person up in character.

Paul then brings his readers back to the theme of "holiness." In general, holiness is the result of all believers being redeemed by grace. Now, the marriage relationship is seen as one of the, if not the primary, ways that God sanctifies couples.

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<sup>94</sup> Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 376.

<sup>95</sup> Some commentators, such as Thielman, state that these verses are about definitive or positional sanctification more than progressive sanctification. See Thielman, *Ephesians*, 383-85. Others, such as Chapell and Lincoln, see both positional and progressive sanctification. See Chapell, *Ephesians*, 280; Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 375-76.

<sup>96</sup> Keller and Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 145.

The maturity and completeness of character is the result of Christ's relationship with the church. The maturity and process of marriage is the result of the loving union between husband and wife. So, how does one mature? In general, one matures by becoming like Jesus in character. Keller explains, "It means to have Jesus' character is reproduced in us, outlined as the 'fruit of the spirit'—love, joy, peace patience, kindness, goodness faithful integrity, gentle humility and self-control—in Galatians 5:22-25."<sup>97</sup> Paul previously referenced some of these same characteristics (Eph 4:1-3, 5:1-5) with the understanding to love "just a Christ loved us." Now, he brings this same concept into the marriage relationship. The fruit of the spirit at its core are also relational toward self and others. One learns to mature in patience by being patient with oneself but also with others. One learns to be self-controlled by saying "no" and/or "yes" to themselves and to others. One learns not to fear by growing in a deeper love for God and for others. One becomes peaceful inside the soul so one does not need to gain peace by being controlling of others.<sup>98</sup>

Marriage, then, is the instrument for character transformation. Adversity, conflict, and suffering are some of the cleansing agents God uses to mature each spouse in the marriage. Just as Christ confronts believer's brokenness, a husband and wife confront each other's brokenness through learning how to handle conflict, adversity, and suffering in life and marriage. When a marriage moves through and overcomes these three agents, then maturity of character is built inside of the person and the marriage. Adversity produces character and character, hope, and perseverance (Jas 1:1-3; Rom 5:1-5). With this understanding, one can choose to embrace the adversity of marriage for its redemptive potential instead of running from it into self-protection. As one embraces this process, God uses the marriage to press out the wrinkles, reconfigure what was dim to become radiant,

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<sup>97</sup> Keller and Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 145.

<sup>98</sup> In *Embracing Love*, I wrote two chapters on character transformation. I suggest that the "fruit of the spirit" are the characteristics that tear down the self-protective wall. See chaps. 11 and 12.

and take something disjointed and make it complete. He uses marriage to redeem the self-image of each spouse. In this way, one grows up into love—by relationally imitating the love of Jesus to their spouse.

Last, relational maturity is understood in the concept of being his beloved child (Eph 1:4, 2:18-19, 5:2). A husband needs to remember that his wife is God’s beloved child. As a beloved child of God, she is secure in her identity, safe from his harm, and confident in being loved. The husband becomes the earthly agent through which his wife understands the Father’s love. In other words, the husband imitates the Father relationship. Also, the wife loves her husband by providing the same security, safety, and confidence as the Father provides the husband. A person’s sonship identity enables one to have confidence but not arrogance, humility instead of power, and faith without fear. This truth gives spouses perseverance, courage, and boldness to speak truth into each other brokenness without being afraid of the reaction to their brokenness.

When both spouses operate in life-giving relational maturity, the marriage grows in confidence and commitment. Furthermore, the character of each matures so both spouses begin to live out the redeemed “image of God.” Through this process, the husband and wife become the honest versions of themselves and discover their truer identity.

**Life-giving nurture.** The last characteristic of marriage is life-giving nurture expounded upon in Ephesians 5:28-30. Before understanding this concept, Paul alludes to the second of the greatest commandments to “love your neighbor as yourself” by changing it just a little based upon the quoted Genesis 2:24 passage.<sup>99</sup> Paul states, “In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself” (Eph 5:28). With this change, Paul emphasizes the union of the two becoming one flesh. Or, when a husband loves his wife, he then in reality understands what it

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<sup>99</sup> Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 391.

means to truly love himself. When he loves himself and not his wife, he truly feels the consequences of being alone and the reality of love becomes lost. The three relationships of God, self, and others are continually being connected on a more intimate level.

Then, Paul uses the words “feeds and cares for it” in verse 29 to describe how one is to relate to his spouse. Chapell points out, “The word ‘feed’ can be translated as ‘nourish’ (KJV) or to bring maturity. ‘Care for’ can be translated as ‘cherish’ (KJV) and means to nurture with tender care.”<sup>100</sup> “Nourish” and “care” do not just mean nourishing and caring physically, but also emotionally. The two terms were commonly used to describe the physical nurture and emotional warmth that one person gives to another, including spouse, children, and lover.<sup>101</sup> Nourish and cherish are means of emotional maturity between a husband and a wife. If the cleansing process involves overcoming adversity, then the nurturing process creates relational atmosphere for a marriage to overcome adversity. The main emphasis being on the husband’s actions does not preclude the wife’s attitude because of the one flesh principle previously mentioned.

When one nourishes the body, he feeds the body with life-giving care. He is not harsh with his body. He does not purposely hurt himself. He thinks about how his body will feel when he does a certain activity. In the same way, a husband gives gentle care toward his wife. He validates and cares for her. He thinks about the consequences of his own actions before he does them. He gives to her compassion and kindness instead of defensive aggression. He is faithful and gracious to her, which means a husband needs to grow emotionally to provide these attributes to her. The same attributes apply to the wife. She becomes compassionate, kind, and gentle to her husband as well. These attitudes are part of the mutual submission to one another out of love of Christ. Thielman also points out that the terms *nourish* and *cherish* taken together have the connotation of husbands

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<sup>100</sup> Chapell, *Ephesians*, 282.

<sup>101</sup> Thielman, *Ephesians*, 388.

loving their wives and “taking care of them both physically and emotionally.”<sup>102</sup> Thus, cherishing has the idea of not damaging, demeaning, or being destructive to a person, but treasuring them as a person. Therefore, a husband and wife gently care for each other—emotionally, spiritually, psychologically, and sexually, which is a powerful aspect of marriage. The maturity of both husband and wife to connect with, nurture, and cherish one another has the power to completely redeem and renew the other. This is the power of the gospel living in and through a marriage. The marriage becomes a living parable of the renewal of the church. In other words, when one asks, “What does it mean for God to love and redeem us?” The answer is, look at my marriage and you will see God’s love, grace, and redemption lived out in the reality of our marriage.

### **Conclusion**

Marriage is relational by design. God created marriage for the express purpose of covenantal love and friendship. The marriage bond is a covenant designed to be an exclusive permanent promise with each party to love another more than self. Companionship and friendship are the foundation of this covenant. It is through friendship that both spouses experience vulnerability, honesty, and openness so that they live in unity and harmony with each other and God. Because of the fall of Adam and Eve, men and women live self-protective and self-centered lives. These self-protective attitudes are fear, pride, control, self-righteousness, blame-shifting, defensiveness, bitterness, and fits of rage. Each attitude causes relational chaos as one learns to hide behind the wall of self-defense. These attitudes sabotage the created design of marriage. Instead of vulnerability, there is shame. Instead of openness, there is hiding. Instead of becoming one with each other, there is division, defeat, and divisiveness. Love becomes lost, immaturity reigns, and relationships experience death. In the end, each party becomes a restless wanderer in the desert terrain of marriage.

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<sup>102</sup> Theilman, Ephesians, 388.

However, God redesigns marriage through the grace modeled in Christ's covenantal love for the church. Grace allows a husband and wife to have an attitude of mutual submission. A wife submits to the husband because the husband relates to her with a sacrificial attitude. He uses his authority for the well-being and benefit of his wife. He loves her more than he loves himself. The wife uses her abilities for the benefit of the husband. They both have an attitude of submission because of Christ's love for them.

This covenantal love secures the relationship so that the husband and wife are unified in decision-making agreements. As a result, each spouse learns to grow up in relational maturity by being gentler and more tender with one another. They nurture and cherish each other. Marriage pushes each toward intimacy with God and toward honesty with one another. The husband and wife do not hide in self-protection but overcome adversity with strength and courage. They love each other and experience the reality of love. Their relationship becomes a safe place where each can be vulnerable, open, and authentic with their souls. In summary, grace lived out in marriage provides the power to redeem the self-protective attitude, the re-creation of each other's story, and the renewal of living as God's beloved child.



## CHAPTER 3

### AN HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY VIEW OF MARRIAGE

Since the Reformation in Protestant and secular thought, marriage has been viewed as one of the primary means to mature a person's character. However, this idea was not the main purpose, meaning, and application of marriage throughout church history. In the first section of this chapter, the history of marriage is briefly explored through the lens of the early and medieval church, which viewed marriage as being a second-best option for sanctification. The second section focuses on how the Reformation, mainly through Martin Luther and John Calvin, changed the views of marriage to being one of the primary ways God brings about sanctification. The third section understands marriage through the lens of Puritan thought, which understood marriage as a means of choosing to love the other, which brought about maturity in character. And finally, the last section explores several overall themes of agreement that both contemporary Christian and secular thought have on the purpose and application of marriage.

#### **Perspectives on Marriage prior to the Reformation**

In the early church, the attitude toward marriage was to remain a virgin and dedicate oneself to the cause of Christ, which was the preferred state represented by Paul's own testimony of singleness: "I wish that all were as I myself am" (1 Cor 7:7). Furthermore, the persecutions of the early church in the second and third centuries caused Christians to look more eschatological to the promise of Christ's return and the view toward living for heaven than earthly pleasures. Peter Coleman in *Christian Attitudes to Marriage* states, "The corollary of this mindset toward eternity was to loosen the ties between one's earthly body and ones' ultimate significance. . . . The consequence was a

change in the Christian's attitude to sex, marriage and children; they seemed less important."<sup>1</sup> Thus, marriage was a second option but took a back seat to virginity and the pursuit of righteousness because of an eschatological perspective brought on by persecution.

Even after the era of tolerance established by Constantine in his Edict of Milan in AD 313, which stopped the persecution of Christians, marriage was still viewed as a lower and second best option.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the theology of separation from the world and the pursuit of perfectionism began to dominate the fourth century with the establishment of the monastic institution. In *Christian Marriage: A Historical Study*, Glen W. Olson states, "Quest for perfection seemed grounded in the abandonment of marriage and property; this was the opinion of a tradition of Christian asceticism which coalesced into the institution of monasticism about 300."<sup>3</sup>

As ascetism took over the West, conflict arose over the theological and practical outcomes of such a life. Olson notes, "Fathers and mothers were reluctant to see their sons and daughters disappoint family expectations and adopt a radical mode of Christian life. Upper class families were especially concerned with perpetuating their family lines, and this obligation lay particularly heavily on women."<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Teresa Olson Pierre states on the mindset of the early Middle Ages: "For the upper classes, marriage usually had the appearance of a transaction involving property. When noble parents contracted marriages for their children, they usually aimed to maintain or increase the

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Coleman, *Christian Attitudes to Marriage*, ed. Michael Langford (London: SCM Press, 2004), 126.

<sup>2</sup> Coleman, *Christian Attitudes to Marriage*, 126-27.

<sup>3</sup> Glen W. Olson, "Progeny, Faithfulness, Sacred Bond: Marriage in the Age of Augustine," in *Christian Marriage: A Historical Study*, ed. Glenn W. Olsen (New York: Crossroad, 2001), 101.

<sup>4</sup> Olson, "Progeny, Faithfulness, Sacred Bond," 120.

family fortune; the family status and property of the suiter was weighed meticulously before an agreement was concluded.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus, Augustine, a prominent Catholic theologian of the time, became one of the leading figures on marriage. Augustine tried to straddle between the two extremes of being married for the purpose of maintaining the family line or remaining celibate and single for the purpose of deep inner communion with God. Olson summarizes

Augustine’s conflict:

Virginitly was superior to marriage, as he argued in *Holy Virginitly* (c.401), but this point could be made without depreciating the lesser state of life [marriage]. Further, one had to distinguish between the degree of perfection found in each state of life in general and the love embodied in any particular life: by the quality of their love some laymen stand higher than some priests and monks. Others might simply place the virgins in the top rank, but Augustine advanced a “mixed” notion of perfection in which the most perfect Christian was the one who united the highest state of perfection, virginitly with office in the Church.<sup>6</sup>

Augustine concluded that virginitly was best. However, one getting married took on more of a spiritual nature of a sacred sign of Christ and the church. This mixed view was an attempt to bring together the two extreme perspectives of virginitly and marriage. Olson points out, “For Augustine, it most commonly designated a sacred sign, something that somehow pointed to or was connected with or expressed a divine reality: thus marriage was a ‘sign of the union between Christ and the church.’”<sup>7</sup> This sacred theology was a pre-cursor for marriage to be included as one of the sacraments of the Catholic Church many years later.

In summary, the early church persecution, emphasis on eschatological return of Christ, separation from the fleshly desires, and growing asceticism movement made marriage to many a lower status. Coleman notes,

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<sup>5</sup> Teresa Olson Pierre, “Marriage, Body and Sacrament in the Age of Hugh of St. Victor,” in Olsen, *Christian Marriage*, 214.

<sup>6</sup> Olson, “Progeny, Faithfulness, Sacred Bond,” 121.

<sup>7</sup> Olson, “Progeny, Faithfulness, Sacred Bond,” 125.

But the plain fact is that whatever political changes and chances of the Middle Ages, the Christian churches continued to teach precepts hammered out in the Patristic age with very little modification, and the legacy of Augustine remained dominant. Until the Reformation, the view that celibacy was the more perfect way and marriage in some ways a second best was attested by the monastic life.<sup>8</sup>

### **Perspectives on Marriage during the Reformation**

The Reformation started by Martin Luther was not only a return to the doctrine of justification by faith and the authority of Scripture against papal supremacy but a movement for a better way of spiritual life. According to Coleman, “At the heart of the protesting movement was the longing for a better quality of religion, and this was felt equally by those who remained within the Catholic Church and by those who, albeit reluctantly, left it.”<sup>9</sup> This longing for something better included the changing thoughts on marriage from something reluctantly permitted to something viewed as good and beautiful. Martin Luther and John Calvin were two of the more influential people who challenged and helped change the theology of marriage.

Luther constructed a different kind of theology on marriage that refuted the sacramental view of marriage, monastic celibacy, and the marriage pattern of the early sixteenth century. James Turner suggest that this theology “became centrally characteristic of the Protestant approach to sexuality and marriage as they were taken up and developed by later Protestant thought and practice.”<sup>10</sup> There are many intricacies to Luther’s theology, but two important concepts were stressed, which had lasting impact upon others view of marriage.

First, Luther understood marriage to be a natural progression of human relationships understood in the Genesis narrative. Luther wrote,

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<sup>8</sup> Coleman, *Christian Attitudes to Marriage*, 148.

<sup>9</sup> Coleman, *Christian Attitudes to Marriage*, 175.

<sup>10</sup> James Turner Johnson, “Marriage as Covenant in Early Protestant Thought: Its Development and Implications,” in *Covenant Marriage in Comparative Perspective*, ed. John Witte, Jr., and Eliza Ellison (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 127.

The words of Gen., ch. 1, clearly state this [a woman is to bear children], and the members of her body sufficiently show that God himself formed her for this purpose. Just as eating, drinking, walking and sleeping are appointed by God to be natural, so God also wills that it be natural for a man and a woman to live together in matrimony.<sup>11</sup>

In essence, Luther proclaimed marriage to be an institution grounded in the created order as a normal part of human relationships, in order to have children and to live in a marriage relationship. Luther's thoughts were a new and radical departure from the previous theology of the church.

Second, Luther refuted the idea of marriage as a sacramental system devised by the Catholic Church in the thirteenth century. Johnson explains that Thomas Aquinas, one of the leading Catholic theologians, thought marriage “functioned as a kind of ‘super-end’ of marriage, denoting the transforming effect of grace *ex opera operato* throughout all elements of every Christian marriage.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, according to Aquinas, marriage's end was procreation and a restraint of lust. According to Johnson, Aquinas concluded that this kind of bond results “in love directed toward God as rooted in but transcending human loves.”<sup>13</sup> In contrast, Luther argued that “marriage is a civic matter (*res politica*). It is really not, together with all its circumstances the business of the church. It is so only when a matter of conscience is involved.”<sup>14</sup> However, Luther did not exclude marriage from being a spiritual union ordained by God. He stated, “Marriage is the God appointed and legitimate union of man and woman in the hope of having children or at least for the purpose of avoiding fornication and sin and living to the glory of God.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, Luther agreed that the purpose of marriage was for pro-creation and an institution that cured lust.

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<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther, “August 6, 1544,” in *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert (London: SC Press, 1955), 270-71.

<sup>12</sup> Johnson, “Marriage as Covenant,” 125.

<sup>13</sup> Johnson, “Marriage as Covenant,” 126.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Luther, *What Luther Says, An Anthology*, ed. Ewald M. Plass (St Louis: Concordia, 1959), 884.

<sup>15</sup> Luther, *What Luther Says*, 884.

However, he disagreed with the supernatural grace that the Catholic church instituted in the marriage itself. The Reformation was founded on grace through faith alone not on the works of the sacraments.

Finally, Luther understood marriage to be a two-fold blessing in sanctification. The first blessing is for the wife to be a helpmate to the husband and the second is for the marriage to be a “help” or be a testimony to others. In a letter written to a friend contemplating marriage, both of being a helpmate and a testimony are mentioned as the benefit of marriage:

Whoever, therefore, considers himself a man and believes himself to be included in this general term should hear what God, his Creator, here says and decrees for him: he does not wish man to be alone but desires that he should multiply, and so he makes him a helpmeet to be with him and help him so that he may not be alone. . . . Besides, your marriage would be an excellent, noble example to help many who are hesitant to broaden their paths and give themselves more scope, and many others may escape the dangers of the flesh and follow you.<sup>16</sup>

Roland Bainton notes, “After his own marriage, Luther’s tone shifted to the stress upon the home as a schoolteacher for character. It is the area where the Christian virtues find their readiest exemplification.”<sup>17</sup> Instead, Luther now saw marriage as a means of sanctification by which one’s character is matured, which is a radical reversal of thought from the previous generation.

Like Luther, Calvin challenged much of the Catholic Church’s theology of marriage, but his perspective was more covenantal in nature. Unfortunately, Calvin did not put his thoughts in one thesis. As Witte puts it, his covenantal views were like a “patch work quilt stitched together over many thin strands of argument strewn all over Calvin’s late-life commentaries, sermons, letters, consilia and legal fragments”<sup>18</sup> In

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<sup>16</sup> Luther, “March 27, 1525,” in *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 273-74.

<sup>17</sup> Roland H. Bainton, *What Christianity Says about Sex, Love and Marriage* (New York: Associated Press, 1957), 79.

<sup>18</sup> John Witte, Jr., *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion and Law in the Western Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 108.

essence, Calvin's view of marriage progressed and matured throughout his life as he wrote and thought upon the subject.

First, Calvin framed marriage as covenantal in nature, as explained in his sermon on the Ten Commandments:

In truth, all contracts and all promises that we make ought to be faithfully upheld. But if we should make a comparison, it is not without cause that marriage is called [a] covenant with God . . . whenever a husband breaks his promise which he has made to his wife, he has not only perjured himself with respect to her, but also with respect to God. The same is true of the wife.<sup>19</sup>

Calvin clearly understood marriage as a covenantal vow that had spiritual connotations and consequences if broken. This was another radical departure from the past theology of the church.

As Calvin matured in his thinking, he understood the narratives of the Old and New Testaments through the image of a bride and her husband. In essence, the whole story of the Bible was an image of God loving his bride (Israel and then the church) through a relationship based upon covenantal marriage love. Witte gives cohesion to Calvin's mature view:

Calvin also described more fully the biblical uses of marriage to symbolize the relationship of God with humanity. He analyzed the length of the Old Testament image of Yahweh's covenant of marriage with Israel, and Israel's proclivity for "playing the harlot." . . . He returned repeatedly to the New Testament image of Christ's marriage to the church, holding up Christ's faith and sacrificial love toward us as a model to which spouses and parents should aspire."<sup>20</sup>

Second, Calvin agreed with Luther that the foundation of marriage was rooted in the Genesis narrative but also individual choice. Witte summarizes Calvin's thoughts:

Marriage was grounded in the will and consent of both parties. But it was also founded in the creation and commandments of God. Marriage deterred sinful persons from the lust and incontinence of this earthly life. . . . Marriage served the

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<sup>19</sup> John Calvin, *John Calvin's Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, ed. and trans. Benjamin W. Farley (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2019), 170.

<sup>20</sup> Witte, *From Sacrament to Contract*, 110.

social purpose of procreation and protection from sin. But it also served the divine purpose of sanctification and edification by grace.<sup>21</sup>

Now marriage is understood as a picture of Christ's relationship with his bride, the church, which is functionally presented in the real-life parable of husband and wife.

Last, Calvin understood marriage as an instrument of sanctification through friendship and companionship in order to be a help and support. In his commentary on Genesis, Calvin states,

Now since, God assigns the woman as a help to the man, he pronounces that marriage will really prove to men the best support for life. . . . The vulgar proverb, indeed is, that she is a necessary evil; but the voice of God is rather to be heard, which declares that woman is given as a companion and an associate to the man to assist him to live well.<sup>22</sup>

Further, Calvin's thoughts took on a more personal tone after his wife Idelette died on March 29, 1549, only nine years into marriage: "And truly mine is no common source of grief, I have been bereaved of the best possible companion of my life. . . . During her life she was my faithful co-labourer in my ministry."<sup>23</sup> In his grief, Calvin gave a glimpse into his real life experience of marriage as friendship, companionship, and a means of grace toward sanctification. Calvin's theology shifted the landscape of marriage being an institution as God ordained for the purpose of modeling Christ's love toward others.

Michael Haykin summarizes the Reformation movement well:

According to the Reformers and those who followed in their stead—such as the Puritans of the seventeenth century and the Evangelicals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—marriage has an innate excellence, is vital for the development of Christian affection and friendship, and is one of God's major means for developing Christian character and spiritual maturity.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Witte, *From Sacrament to Contract*, 111.

<sup>22</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses called Genesis*, ed. Anthony Uyl (Ontario: Devoted Publishing, 2018), 1:48.

<sup>23</sup> Michael A. G. Haykin, "Christian Marriage in the 21st Century: Listening to Calvin on the Purpose of Marriage," in *Calvin for Today*, ed. Joel R. Beeke (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2009), 221.

<sup>24</sup> Haykin, "Christian Marriage in the 21st Century," 214.



## Perspectives on Marriage after the Reformation

The Puritans built off the Reformed tradition theologically that marriage was grounded in the totality of Scripture. J. I. Packer notes that the Puritans “went to the Bible for their understanding of the relationship—to Genesis for its institution, to Ephesians for its full meaning, to Leviticus for its hygiene, to the Proverbs for its management, to several New Testament books for its ethic and to Ester, Ruth, and the Song of Songs for illustrations and exhibitions of the ideal.”<sup>25</sup> Along with a biblical view, the Puritans had several notable thoughts on marriage which expounded upon the theology of Luther and Calvin.

First, the Puritans did not consider the idea of falling in love with a person to be paramount toward marriage. Edmund Morgan notes, “As a matter of fact, Puritan diaries and letters seem to indicate that the decision to marry was usually made by a man or woman without reference to any particular match.”<sup>26</sup> Mark Dever summarizes the process of dating: “With this goal in mind, a Puritan man would seek out a partner who met certain, generally biblical criteria. He did not simply wait to be smitten by the first woman who made his stomach flutter. . . . Once married, he would then bend his purposes toward loving his wife entirely.”<sup>27</sup> A Puritan man would make a decision to love and then find a person whom he can love. The choice of love was made over the feelings of being in love. London Puritan Richard Steele (1629-1692) succinctly stated, “Do not first love, and then consider; but first consider, and then love.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision for the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 263.

<sup>26</sup> Edmund Morgan, *The Puritan Family: Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century New England* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 54.

<sup>27</sup> Mark Dever, “Christian Hedonists or Religious Prudes? The Puritans on Sex,” in *Sex and the Supremacy of Christ*, ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 250.

<sup>28</sup> Dever, “Christian Hedonists or Religious Prudes?,” 250.

Second, with the choice of loving one's spouse, the Puritans understood marriage as companionship that embodied this love in words and action. Marriage was to be filled with affection toward each other in a loving care and compassionate manner. Richard Baxter, one of the most prolific Puritan writers, listed eight ways to love in marriage. One of the "ways" is noteworthy to this discussion: "Especially to be helpers of each other's salvation; to stir up each other to faith, love, and obedience, and good works; to warn and help each other against sin, and all temptations; to join in God's worship in the family, and in private; to prepare each other for approach of death, and comfort each other in the hopes of life eternal."<sup>29</sup> Tim Beougher summarizes Baxter's thoughts that each spouse should be the "caretaker" of each other's souls . . . to watch over the hearts and lives of their spouses, to discern where they have failings in order to apply the most appropriate help."<sup>30</sup> Just like the Reformers before him, Baxter understood marriage as part of the sanctification process that incorporated the worship of God with being a lover of the spouse's soul.

Last, the Puritans embraced the beauty of sexual activity within the covenant of marriage. Though it was more of a private matter, they often alluded to it in sermons as honorable and healthy. Packer states, "Puritan preachers made constant use of Proverbs 5:18-19 'May you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer—may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love.'"<sup>31</sup>

William Gouge summarizes the Puritan position:

One of the best remedies [against adultery and lust] that can be prescribed to married persons (next to an awful fear of God, and a continual setting of him before them, whersoever they are) is, that husband and wife mutually delight each in the

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<sup>29</sup> Richard Baxter, *The Practical Works of the Rev. Richard Baxter* (London: Mills, Jowell and Mills, 1830), 19:496.

<sup>30</sup> Tim Beougher, "The Puritan View of Marriage: The Nature of the Husband/Wife Relationship in Puritan England as Taught and Experienced by a Representative Puritan Pastor, Richard Baxter," *Trinity Journal* 10 (1989): 140.

<sup>31</sup> Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 265-66.

other, and maintain a pure and fervent love betwixt themselves, yielding that “due benevolence” one to another which is warranted and sanctified by God’s word, and ordained of God for this particular end.<sup>32</sup>

Matthew Haste, in his dissertation on marriage, summarizes the Puritan view on sexuality:

It is significant to note how Gouge connected sexuality to each of God’s purposes for marriage. Whereas previous generations of Christians had viewed sex as merely permissive for the purpose of procreation and the satisfaction of lust, the Puritans argued that the “due benevolence” of sexual relations within marriage was a key means of cultivating companionship.<sup>33</sup>

In summary, the Puritans stressed the practice of love through compassionate care and others-centered living. Marriage was the choice of loving someone more than self. Once married, each person transformed their purposes and affection toward a whole-hearted pursuit of the other, which allowed marriage to be successful. Beougher states the Puritan position simply: “With both parties seeking to fulfill the objective of love as set forth in 1 Corinthians 13, the focus turned from ‘what can I get out of this marriage,’ to ‘what can I contribute to this relationship’”<sup>34</sup>

Taken as a whole, the Protestant Reformation brought about a new perspective on marriage among Protestants as the primary instrument of help toward maturity and holiness. The Roman Catholic Church’s views largely remained the same over the next couple of centuries. Today, contemporary theologians, counselors, and psychologists, both Christian and secular, view marriage quite the same way as the Reformers, which is the next emphasis of this chapter.

### **Perspectives on Marriage in Contemporary Thought**

Many secular and Christian theorists, including psychologists and pastors, affirm that a healthy marriage has the power to change both spouses toward personal growth and

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<sup>32</sup> Willian Gouge, *Domesticall Duties 1622*, ed. George Fox (Pensacola, FL: Chapel Library, 2006), 158.

<sup>33</sup> Mathew David Haste, “Marriage in the Life and Theology of John Gill, Samuel Stennett and Andrew Fuller” (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2015), 65.

<sup>34</sup> Beougher, “The Puritan View of Marriage,” 157.

maturity, and a dysfunctional marriage can cause them to remain stagnant in immaturity. Tim Keller states, “It [marriage] has the power to set the course of your life as a whole.”<sup>35</sup> Four themes are commonly held in agreement by secular and Christian therapists. These four themes are emotional awareness, recognizing self-protective attitudes, faithful commitment, and character development. These themes will be briefly explored by weaving together main thoughts from both secular and Christian viewpoints into a cohesive whole. Though they come from different angles and do not agree in certain aspects, there is a shared overlap to what constitutes a healthy marriage. These four themes are not exclusive to a healthy marriage but are general patterns most often mentioned in contemporary Christian and secular thought.

### **Emotional Awareness**

The first area of agreement is emotional awareness or maturity. Emotional maturity can be best understood in its operation in relationships in three main areas: connection to God, attachment to spouse, and ownership of oneself for the end goal of an attitude to love. Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence*, describes emotional intelligence as “as an ongoing awareness to one’s internal state.” Goleman also states that self-awareness is being “attuned to identify and name emotions being aroused.”<sup>36</sup> Peter Scazzero gives a fuller succinct definition of emotional maturity from a Christian perspective:

Emotional health . . . concerns itself with loving others well. It connects us to our interiors, making possible the seeing and treating of each individual as worthy of respect, created in the image of God and not just objects to use. For this reason, self-awareness, knowing what is going on inside of us, is indispensable to emotional health and loving others well.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Timothy Keller and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God* (New York: Riverhead, 2013), 144.

<sup>36</sup> Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Matters more than IQ* (New York: Bantam Books, 2006), 46-47.

<sup>37</sup> Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 47.

First, emotions give great insight into a person's soul's connection with God.

Dan Allender and Tremper Longman state,

Emotions are the language of the soul. They are the cry that gives the heart a voice. To understand our deepest passions and convictions, we must learn to listen to the cry of the soul. . . . However, we often turn a deaf ear—through emotional denial, distortion or disengagement. . . . In neglecting our intense emotions, we are false to ourselves and lose a wonderful opportunity to know God. We forget that change comes through brutal honesty and vulnerability before God.<sup>38</sup>

Emotions can give insight into how a person relates to God—distant, close, confused, angry, desperate. The Psalms are filled with people who displayed great vulnerability with their emotions with God, which brought them closer to his presence. Psalm 42:5 is a good example of this journey: “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation.” Emotions can give a barometer of what is mastering the heart. In *The Reign of Grace*, Scotty Smith states, “Whether [negative emotions] manifested as spontaneous outbursts or chronic life patterns, these exaggerated emotions can provide an unobstructed view into the cathedral of our idol worship.”<sup>39</sup> Becoming emotionally aware can bring a person into an intimate connection with God through understanding the motivations of the heart, pains of disappointments, and identification of one's greatest vulnerabilities. The opposite is true as well. An emotionally immature person is dismissive of others, aloof in his own world, and detached from a whole-hearted intimacy with God.

Second, emotional awareness is key to attachment and connection in intimate relationships. Susan M. Johnson, creator of one of the leading couples' therapy, Emotionally Focused Therapy, explains, “Emotion is central to attachment. . . . Attachment relationships are where our strongest emotions arise and where they seem to have most impact. Emotions tell us and communicate to others what are motivations and

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<sup>38</sup> Dan Allender and Tremper Longman III, *The Cry of the Soul* (Colorado Springs: Nav Press, year), 25.

<sup>39</sup> Scotty Smith, *The Reign of Grace: The Delights and Demands of God's Love* (Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing, 2003), 160.

needs are; they are the music of the attachment dance.”<sup>40</sup> John Bowlby created and promoted relational attachment theory. He writes, “He believed that seeking and maintaining contact with significant others as a primary motivating principle for human beings that has been ‘wired in’ by evolution.”<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, Bowlby believed that “safe and secure” attachments provided “safe havens” to understand your inner and outer world. As a result, “security in key relationships help us regulate our emotions, process information effectively and communicate clearly”<sup>42</sup> In essence, emotional attachment is a key component to having connected, vulnerable, and healthy relationships.

To have a healthy marriage, both spouses need to have an awareness and ability to communicate their emotions. This awareness gives insight into their specific needs, wants, and desires. In their book *Healing Parents*, Michael Orlans and Terry Levy give insight into the importance of secure attachment of adult parents to wounded children: “Adults are secure when they make sense of their attachment experience in an honest and realistic way, understand the connection between the past and the present and deeply value attachment. . . . They have a ‘coherent’ state of mind. . . . Their emotional baggage does not get in the way of being a sensitive and responsive parent”<sup>43</sup> Additionally, emotional attachment secures the relationship so one can live in the reality of openness and honesty. Willard Harley, Jr. writes on building an affair proof marriage: “It [radical honesty] meets an important emotional need. For many, especially women, honesty and openness deposit so many love units that they fall in love with the person who’s radically

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<sup>40</sup> Susan Johnson, *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy: Creating Connection* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2004), 27.

<sup>41</sup> Susan Johnson and Wayne Denton, “Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy: Creating Secure Attachments,” in *Clinical Handbook of Couple Therapy*, 5th ed., ed. Allan S. Gurman and Neil S. Jacobson (New York: Guilford Press, 2002), 226.

<sup>42</sup> Johnson and Denton, “Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy,” 227.

<sup>43</sup> Michael Orlans and Terry Levy, *Healing Parents: Helping Wounded Children Learn to Trust and Love* (Washington, DC: CWLA Press, 2006), 92.

honest with them.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, emotionally secure people understand the ramifications of their sinful nature, the dysfunctional patterns of the past, and respond to life’s adversities through emotional awareness and honesty about themselves and relationships as a whole.

Last, emotional awareness promotes ownership toward an attitude to love. Leading Christian psychologists on relationships Henry Cloud and John Townsend write, “A mature, complete adult not only takes responsibility for himself, but also requires the same from people he loves.”<sup>45</sup> This responsibility, especially in marriage, allows people to own their sin and self-centeredness. Gary Thomas adds this personal reflection on emotional awareness: “What marriage has done for me is hold a mirror to my sin. It forces me to face myself honestly and consider my character flaws, selfishness and anti-Christian attitudes, encouraging me to be sanctified and cleansed and to grow in godliness.”<sup>46</sup> Further, an awareness of oneself provides freedom to love others with empathy through validation. John Gottman, a leading researcher on marriage relationships, states, “Validation is simply putting yourself in your partner’s shoes and imagining his or her emotional state. It is then a simple matter to let your mate know that you understand those feelings and consider them valid, even if you don’t share them.”<sup>47</sup> Marsha Linehan, creator of the skills-based therapy called Dialectical Behavior Therapy adds, “Validation of others feelings, beliefs, experiences and actions is essential in building any relationship of trust and intimacy.”<sup>48</sup> When a person validates another, it gives dignity, importance,

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<sup>44</sup> Willard F. Harley *His Needs, Her Needs: Building an Affair—Proof Marriage* (Grand Rapids: Revell Publishing, 2011), 105.

<sup>45</sup> Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *Boundaries in Marriage* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 93.

<sup>46</sup> Gary Thomas, *Sacred Marriage* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 93.

<sup>47</sup> John Gottman, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 195.

<sup>48</sup> Marsha M. Linehan, *DBT Skills Training Manual*, 2nd ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2015), 294.

focus and fosters a deeper relationship. Both Gottman and Linehan define emotionally healthy relationships as other-centered in focus that brings to the forefront aspects of biblical love. Keller and Keller summarizes biblical love: “When the Bible speaks of love, it measures it not by how much you want to receive but by how much you are willing to give of yourself to someone. How much are you willing to lose for the sake of this person. . . . How much of your precious time, emotion and resources are you willing to invest in this person?”<sup>49</sup> Brian Chapell summarizes the consequences and rewards of emotional maturity:

The connection of personal wholeness to marital completion becomes evident as we look at another individual (or even at ourselves) after a few years of marriage and observe: That person has so matured, so leveled out, or become so much less self-absorbed since marrying so and so. At least that is what we say if the marriage is functioning well. If the marriage is going poorly, we typically recognize that the individual’s self-absorption, immaturity or character flaws are even more prominent.<sup>50</sup>

Emotional awareness is one of the keys to personal and marriage maturity. God in his immense wisdom saw fit to make marriage to emotionally grow people to become who God has called them to be in the relationship now and into eternity.

### **Recognizing Self-Protective Attitudes**

A second common area of agreement between secular thought and a Christian view of marriage is the destructive nature of self-protective attitudes and patterns. Gottman states, “Every marriage demands an effort to keep it on the right track; there is a constant tension between the forces that hold you together and those that can tear you apart. . . . Even if you and your spouse have arrived at a stable pattern, you should be alert to early warning signs that tell you if you are beginning to get shunted toward a dead end.”<sup>51</sup> These “warning signs” are negative attitudes that often turn into destructive relational patterns,

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<sup>49</sup> Keller and Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 80.

<sup>50</sup> Bryan Chapell and Kathy Chapell, *Each for the Other: Marriage as It’s Meant to Be*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 86.

<sup>51</sup> Gottman, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, 69.



which ultimately sabotage by slowly killing love and intimacy in the relationship. Gottman describes four protective attitudes that he refers as “the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.” These attitudes are criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling.<sup>52</sup>

Many marriage therapists, both secular and Christian, agree with Gottman’s research. Though they use different terms, they integrate his research with their own views and follow Gottman’s approach. These attitudes are similar to the eight self-protective relational attitudes described from the Genesis narratives in the previous chapter. Because Gottman is not coming from a Christian viewpoint, the definitions and root motivation are different in nature from the biblical narrative. However, there is considerable overlap of themes and consequences of these attitudes on a marriage. In this section, Gottman’s views will be used as a guide to understanding self-protective attitudes. Furthermore, secular and Christian perspectives will supplement his research to bring a fuller understanding of these relational attitudes.

**Criticism.** The first horseman is the use of criticism in a marriage. All marriages have disagreements and complaints. However, Gottman distinguishes between criticism and complaint by defining them in a certain way: “As a general rule, a criticism entails blaming, making a personal attack or an accusation, while a complaint is a negative comment about something you wish were otherwise. To oversimplify, complaints could easily begin with the word *I* and a criticism with the word *you*.”<sup>53</sup> Marsha Linehan agrees with the destructive nature of criticism. She describes criticism in terms of having a judgmental attitude:

Negative judgmentalness creates conflict and can damage relationships with people we care for. . . . Judging others might get people to change temporarily, but more often it leads people to avoid or retaliate against those who judge them badly. . . .

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<sup>52</sup> See Gottman, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, 68-102, for a fuller treatment of these attitudes.

<sup>53</sup> Gottman, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, 74.

Judging is any labeling or evaluating of something as good or bad, as valuable or not, as worthwhile or worthless.<sup>54</sup>

Allan Fruzzetti, gives another consequence of judgementalism in relationships:

Judgements then increases arousal, which produces more judgments, which leads to inaccurate and ineffective expressions of emotions and desires which then result in misunderstanding and conflict. . . . Thus angry feelings and angry expressions in close relationships almost always create distance, and distance is the enemy of closeness and intimacy.<sup>55</sup>

Cloud and Townsend agree with Gottman, Linehan, and Fruzzetti about the consequences of judgmentalism and criticism. They state, “Nothing kills love in a marriage more than judgmentalism. . . . This creates an atmosphere of fear as the judged spouse walks on eggshells to avoid the wrath to come. Love cannot grow in a climate of fear.”<sup>56</sup> As a result of a critical spirit, one or both spouses live in fear of failure or the fear of being exposed.

**Contempt.** The second horseman Gottman describes is contempt. Contempt is the intention to insult and psychologically abuse one’s partner.

With your words and body language, you’re lobbing insults right into the heart of your partner’s sense of self. . . . When this [pattern] happened, they often cease being able to admire each other, or to remember why they had fallen in love in the first place. As a consequence, they rarely complimented each other anymore or express mutual admiration or attraction.<sup>57</sup>

Gottman also defines four ways contempt can show up in a marriage: insults and name-calling, hostile humor, mockery, or body language.<sup>58</sup>

In a point of agreement with Gottman, Allender coined the term “other-centered contempt” to describe these kinds of actions. He summarizes the impact of this behavior:

Other-centered contempt is evident whenever fault is found with another and the motivation is not love. It is used to diminish some inner struggle that is almost invariably linked to a sense of being exposed as inadequate or undesirable. Quiet or

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<sup>54</sup> Linehan, *DBT Skills Training*, 203.

<sup>55</sup> Alan E. Fruzzetti, *The High Conflict Couple* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger, 2006), 23.

<sup>56</sup> Cloud and Townsend, *Boundaries in Marriage*, 75.

<sup>57</sup> Gottman, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, 79.

<sup>58</sup> Gottman, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, 80-81.

public condemnation of another keeps them in a place that is manageable, secure and diminishes whatever threat they may pose.<sup>59</sup>

Each of these patterns of contempt shows a disdain for the other, denies the dignity of the image of God, and keeps the other spouse at a distance so intimacy becomes dead.

**Defensiveness.** The third pattern Gottman identifies is defensiveness. Gottman understands defensiveness as “fundamentally an attempt to protect yourself and ward off a perceived attack.”<sup>60</sup> This relational attitude is a response to criticism and contempt. However, according to Gottman, the person using it does not understand how destructive it is: “The victim doesn’t see anything wrong with being defensive. But defensive attitudes they express, tend to escalate a conflict rather than resolve it.”<sup>61</sup> Many of the defensive postures Gottman lists can be summarized as behaviors that deflect, devalue, or are dismissive in nature of the other party.<sup>62</sup> Cloud and Townsend add that receiving feedback and not being defensive is one of the core components of a safe and healthy relationship:

But safe people are the wise ones that can hear their sin and respond to our hurt. In short, they can “own” where they are wrong. If, however, someone has the character of defensiveness . . . we are going to be stuck with all the hurt that his natural imperfections cause in the relationship. Someone who does not own his need to change, does not change and the hurt is likely to continue.<sup>63</sup>

In essence, defensive people ward off criticism by cancelling out feedback, excusing their behavior, and setting up a vicious cycle of attack and defend. Gottman explains that the consequences of using these actions is that “nothing gets resolved, so the conflict continues to escalate and more discussions characterized by attack and defensiveness occur.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Dan B. Allender, *The Wounded Heart* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2008), 77.

<sup>60</sup> Gottman, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, 85.

<sup>61</sup> Gottman, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, 85.

<sup>62</sup> The nine postures are denying responsibility, making excuses, disagreeing with negative mind reading, cross-complaining, rubber man/rubber woman, yes-butting, repeating yourself whining, and taking a defensive body posture.

<sup>63</sup> Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *Safe People* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 31.

<sup>64</sup> Gottman, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, 90.

**Stonewalling.** The fourth attitude Gottman describes is stonewalling.

Stonewallers remove themselves from the conversation by withdrawing, their demeanor turns into icy silence, mutterings, or changing the subject. Stonewalling conveys disapproval, icy distance, and smugness. As a result, “the message to the spouse is the same: I am withdrawing, disengaging, from any meaningful interaction with you.”<sup>65</sup>

Emerson Eggerichs, author of the book *Love & Respect*, describes several components that both a wife and a husband need in a healthy relationship. A wife desires closeness and openness. Eggerichs defines closeness as a time to connect or to “face-to-face involvement,” and he defines openness as a time to “simply talk to her and with her.”<sup>66</sup> A husband desires his wife to appreciate and acknowledge his authority and his ability to “analyze and counsel” or to have insight into situations and circumstances.<sup>67</sup> Stonewalling, or avoidance, prevents both of these valuable components from happening. It also can produce overwhelming negativity that will spiral out of control leading to loneliness and separation where both parties block each other and themselves from resolving issues and repairing the relationship.<sup>68</sup> These behaviors results in both parties engaged in a power struggle over who is going to win the conflict.

Thus, criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling are behaviors that attempt to control the relationship. When these behaviors are enacted over a long period of time, it creates an atmosphere of fear. Johnson states,

Fear is the most pertinent and endemic emotion in distressed marriages. It invokes compelling fight-or-flight behaviors and constricts how partners perceive and interact with each other. Various authors have identified fears that typically arise in

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<sup>65</sup> Gottman, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, 94-95.

<sup>66</sup> Emmerson Eggerichs, *Love and Respect* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson), 127, 139.

<sup>67</sup> Eggerichs, *Love and Respect*, 221, 235.

<sup>68</sup> Gottman, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, 94-95.

attachment relationships, such as fear of being left or abandoned, fear of being rejected or found unlovable and fear of being controlled or helpless.<sup>69</sup>

Johnson also states, “In general, anxiety and avoidance foster a rigid hypervigilant attitude to novelty and uncertainty and an equation of letting down one’s guard with helplessness.”<sup>70</sup> Fear keeps spouses from experiencing intimacy and eventually corrodes the marriage into an atmosphere of judgementalism and helplessness.

The clear difference between Gottman and other secular therapists and a Christian view is the root cause of these controlling behaviors. Dave Harvey gives good insight into the human heart and the struggle of marriage. He interprets Paul’s words in 1 Timothy 1:15, “Christ Jesus came to this world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst,” in this way: “Look, I know my sin. And what I have seen in my own heart is darker more awful; it’s more proud, selfish and self-exalting; and it more consistently and regularly in rebellion against God.”<sup>71</sup> Christian psychiatrist Richard Winter defines *control* as

the desire to be ruler of our own world and to make sure we are in control. . . . Freud was so close to the truth when he said that the heart of all human problems was the Oedipus complex, a man’s desire to get rid of his father, the authority in his life. Freud of course, meant our biological human father. The Bible defines the root problem as rebellion and hardness toward our heavenly Father, God (Rom. 1:21-25).<sup>72</sup>

Tim Keller summarizes,

Self-centeredness is a havoc-wreaking problem in many marriages, and it is the ever-present enemy in every marriage. . . . Self-centeredness is easily seen in signs Paul lists [1st Corinthians 13:4-5] impatience, irritability, a lack of graciousness and kindness in speech, envious brooding on the better situations of others and holding past injuries and hurt against others. . . . In Dana Adam Shapiro’s interviews of divorced couples, it is clear that this was the heart of what led to marital disintegration. Each spouse’s self-centeredness asserted itself (as it always will), but in response, the other spouse got more impatient, resentful, harsh and cold. In other

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<sup>69</sup> Johnson, *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy*, 222.

<sup>70</sup> Johnson, *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy*, 30.

<sup>71</sup> Dave Harvey, *When Sinners Say “I Do”*: *Discovering the Power of the Gospel for Marriage* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 2007), 36.

<sup>72</sup> Richard Winter, *Perfecting Ourselves to Death: The Pursuit of Excellence and the Perils of Perfectionism* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2005), 126-27.

words, they responded to the self-centeredness of their partner with their own self-centeredness.<sup>73</sup>

These communication tactics are a failure to love others more than oneself. C. S. Lewis sums up the consequences of the human heart when one does not learn how to love:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable.<sup>74</sup>

### **Faithful Commitment**

The third aspect of agreement between secular and Christian therapies is the need for faithful commitment of each spouse to the other for a successful marriage. There are many aspects to commitment in marriage, but three main themes command the most attention—loyalty to one another in the everyday moments, loyalty to be with one another, and the shared experience of repentance and forgiveness.

First, commitment is an attitude of faithful loyalty to one another in the everyday moments. Everett L. Worthington states, “Commitment involves the environmental events that we share with our spouses.”<sup>75</sup> For instance, marriage requires a commitment to maintain a shared spirit by doing things together, like buying house together. It also requires spouses to share everyday events and feelings with one another and to arrange life through mutual agreements or symbols, such as pictures or wedding rings.<sup>76</sup> Gottman adds to this shared spirit by a concept called “turning toward” your spouse: “It only takes small gestures to lead to another and then another. ‘Turning Toward’ operates under a law of positive feedback—like a snowball rolling downhill, it can start small yet generate

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<sup>73</sup> Keller and Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 55-56.

<sup>74</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1991), 121.

<sup>75</sup> Everett L. Worthington, Jr., *Marriage Counseling: A Christian Approach to Counseling Couples* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1989), 51.

<sup>76</sup> Worthington, *Marriage Counseling*, 51.

enormous results.”<sup>77</sup> Thus, couples who share small things, like the laundry, little encouragement, and everyday feelings, experience the tangible commitment of the wedding vows in action.

Second, marriage requires a loyalty to be with one another in who they are at the moment. In their book *Intimate Allies*, Dan Allender and Tremper Longman state, “Marriage requires a radical commitment to love our spouses as they are, while longing for them to become what they are not yet. Every marriage moves either toward enhancing one another’s glory or toward degrading each other.”<sup>78</sup> Allender also adds insight from his work on one spouse suffering sexual abuse:

What our spouse needs more than any gift is the promise, the vow, that we will not merely survive as a couple but also grow together. . . . The truth is that one person often needs more focus and care during this process [of healing]. The supportive spouse, however, is not merely there to endure the turmoil. . . . Instead, it is time for both husband and wife to be transformed.<sup>79</sup>

Furthermore, faithfulness is a daily act because of one’s commitment to love one another not just in the sexual area but in every area of the marriage. Cloud and Townsend address faithfulness beyond the sexual relationship:

But faithfulness means to be trusted in all areas, not just the sexual, trusted in the matters of the heart as well as those of the body. . . . Being faithful to your spouse means that you can be depended upon to do what you have promised, to follow through on what your spouse has entrusted to you. It means that your spouse can be certain that you will deliver on what you have promised.<sup>80</sup>

Third, the means to keep the commitment to the marriage bond together is through the central acts of repentance and forgiveness. Larry Crabb writes, “Once we understand the concept of relational sin, we repent by radically shifting our motivations

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<sup>77</sup> John Gottman and Nan Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work: A Practical Guide from the Country’s Foremost Relationship Expert* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999), 89.

<sup>78</sup> Dan B. Allender and Tremper Longman III, *Intimate Allies* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1995), 11.

<sup>79</sup> Dan B. Allender, *Healing the Wounded Heart: The Heartache of Sexual Abuse and the Hope of Transformation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 199.

<sup>80</sup> Cloud and Townsend, *Boundaries in Marriage*, 131.

and direction from self-preservation to trust on the basis of the belief that Christ has given and is preserving our life. The fruit of repentance is a change in style of relating that replaces self-protective maneuvering with loving involvement.”<sup>81</sup> In essence, repentance is a broken heart that continually turns away from old patterns, confesses hurtful attitudes, and changes one’s motivations and behaviors toward holiness to love others more than self. Moreover, repentance always accompanies the road of asking and giving forgiveness. Susan Johnson outlines six steps to forgiveness that will begin the process of realigning the relationship toward trust:

1. The hurt partner needs to speak his or her pain as openly and as simply as possible.
2. The injuring partner stays emotionally present and acknowledges the wounded partner’s pain and his/her part in it.
3. The injured partner moves out from her protective wall and shares with her partner the depth of loneliness, grief, and despair.
4. Injuring partners now take ownership of how they inflicted this injury on their lover and express regret and remorse
5. The injured partner identifies what is needed right now to bring closure to the trauma.
6. The couple now creates a new narrative by confronting together the trauma and how they healed it.<sup>82</sup>

Although Johnson’s steps lack the spiritual essence of sin by not acknowledging how a spouse has sinned against the heart of God and not obeyed the spiritual covenant, they do overlap with the biblical idea of forgiveness and reconciliation. They are helpful patterns to follow to repair and reattach the commitment. These steps allow both parties to move relationally beyond the self-protective relational pattern of the present. In addition, forgiveness involves the choice of releasing the wound and recommitting oneself to the covenant of marriage. Without forgiveness, bitterness becomes the friend of a marriage

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<sup>81</sup> Larry Crabb, *Inside Out* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2013), 225.

<sup>82</sup> These are summaries of the process in Susan Johnson, *Hold Me Tight* (New York: Little Brown Spark, 2008), 173-78.



and, as Worthington puts it, the “disease of the soul”<sup>83</sup> Allender and Longman add, “People are under the false impression that many faults or sins can only destroy a marriage. And they can, unless we adopt a forgiving attitude that stems from recognition that my faults are greater than my spouse’s. But the surprising truth is that forgiveness enhances love.”<sup>84</sup> This process involves the maturity of the character of both parties. Worthington sums up the process:

When one spouse confesses and repents the task of the other is to forgive (See Lk 6:37, 11:4, 17:4). . . . When Jesus told his disciples that they were to forgive their brother repeatedly, regardless of how many times the brother sinner against them their immediate response was “Lord increase our faith.” As a counselor who deals with couples in conflict, you will continually attempt to increase faith until they can truly “lay down their lives” for each other.<sup>85</sup>

Worthington ends with an encouragement after much practice of the process of confession, repentance, and forgiveness: “Such is the power of commitment.”<sup>86</sup>

### **Character Development**

The last theme of agreement is that marriage develops a person’s character. In marriage, people’s character develops through encouraging them to become who God has called them to be or to become the “glory self.” Keller developed the phraseology of the “glory self” in *The Meaning of Marriage*. Keller introduces this concept by asking, “What, then is marriage for?” He answers this rhetorical question:

It is helping each other to become our future glory-selves, the new creations that God will eventually make us. . . . You have an old self and a new self (Ephesians 4:24). The old self is crippled with anxieties, the need to prove yourself, bad habits you can’t break, and many besetting sins and entrenched character flaws. This new self is still you, but you have been liberated from all your sins and flaws. The new self is always a work in progress.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Worthington, *Marriage Counseling*, 154.

<sup>84</sup> Allender and Longman, *Intimate Allies*, 333.

<sup>85</sup> Worthington, *Marriage Counseling*, 58-59.

<sup>86</sup> Worthington, *Marriage Counseling*, 59.

<sup>87</sup> Keller and Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 131-32.

Keller defines this concept more: “It [the glory self] is to look at another person and get a glimpse of the person God is creating and say, ‘I see who God is making you, and it excites me!’ . . . In a Christian marriage, the spouse envisions the other as a perfect person which she/he will one day be and ‘gets excited about’ helping become that perfect person.”<sup>88</sup> To see the “glory self” one must understand “your mate’s deep flaws and weaknesses and dependencies.”<sup>89</sup> However, one must also understand his or her future character growth and possibilities. Keller explains, “The goal is to see something absolutely ravishing that God is making of the beloved. You see even now flashes of glory. You want to help your spouse become the person God wants him or her to be.”<sup>90</sup> Or, in a practical sense, spouses must know their mate’s impatience, anxieties, and self-protective mechanism, and confront them through truth, but also encouragement. When the spouse changes those characteristics, the “glory self” begins to emerge. In essence, the glory self is character development where sins and flaws are slowly transformed, and the spouse becomes the person God has called that person to be. Character development has three aspects: sacrifice, struggle, and shaping.

First, character development emerges through the process of choosing to sacrifice one’s inner patterns of selfishness and help shape the other toward holiness and completeness. Sacrifice involves struggling well. Sacrifice is not just putting up with little inconveniences, like giving up the last donut or picking up the dirty laundry, it is struggling well with and through tendencies, patterns, and self-focused attitudes. Gary Thomas states,

If there is one thing young engaged couples needs to hear, it’s that a good marriage is not something you find, it’s something you work for. It takes struggle. You must crucify your selfishness. You must at times confront and other times confess. . . .

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<sup>88</sup> Keller and Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 134.

<sup>89</sup> Keller and Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 134.

<sup>90</sup> Keller and Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 134.

The desire for ease, comfort and stress-free living is an indirect desire to remain “unseasoned,” immature Christian.<sup>91</sup>

Allender and Longman continue on this theme: “Even if couples take sin more seriously, on a conceptual level, it is rare for them to see and face sin deeply enough for them to seek God and to struggle to comprehend his grace for their lives. Oddly, it will be the wounds of marriage that may propel each partner to look to God in the midst of the heartache.”<sup>92</sup> Keller explains, “The merged life of marriage brings you into the closet, most inescapable contact with another person possible. And that means not only that you see each other close up, but that you are forced to deal with the flaws and sins of another.”<sup>93</sup>

Second, character development involves a struggle of an attitude from self-centeredness to mercy, kindness, and appreciation while dealing with another person’s sins and imperfections. Harvey gives an example of this attitude:

We don’t wait to be sinned against and then try to respond with mercy. Rather, we adopt the posture of being willing to experience sin against us as part of building a God-glorifying marriage. . . . Kindness says to our spouse, “I know you are a sinner like me and you will sin against me, just like I will sin against you. But I refuse to live defensively with you. I’m going to, to live leaning in your direction with a merciful posture that your sin and weakness cannot erase.”<sup>94</sup>

Though Gottman does not emphasize the spiritual essence, he does pick up on this theme.

He writes,

By simply reminding yourself of your spouse’s good qualities—even as you grapple with each other’s flaws—you can prevent a happy marriage from deteriorating. The simple reason is fondness and admiration are the antidotes to contempt. If you maintain a sense of respect for your spouse, you are less likely to act disgusted with him or her. So fondness and admiration prevent you from being trampled by the four horseman.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Thomas, *Sacred Marriage*, 133.

<sup>92</sup> Allender and Longman, *Intimate Allies*, 301-2.

<sup>93</sup> Keller and Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 152.

<sup>94</sup> Harvey, *When Sinners Say “I Do,”* 84-85.

<sup>95</sup> Gottman and Silver, *The Seven Principles*, 71.

Marriage can make each spouse deal with themselves by struggling with their inner self-centered patterns and their partner's flaws as well. In the midst of learning how to struggle well through conflict, the conflict itself has the potential to grow a spouse's character into a more perfected person. Thomas reiterates this point: "Struggle makes marriage stronger; it builds up and deepens our faith. But this result is achieved only you when we face our struggle head -on, not when we run from it."<sup>96</sup> Thus, a good marriage does not hide in safety of self-preservation but struggles to confront one's selfishness by sacrificing one's attitude for another, which develops character. A sacrificial posture involves the maturity of character. It is choosing to become the "glory-self" God calls each spouse to be as one journeys through marriage. These attitudes of mercy, kindness, remembrance, and vision choose an attitude of sacrifice over self-protective safety.

The third way a person develops character is for each spouse to shape the other toward holiness. Allender and Longman introduce this concept by stating, "The purposes of our marriages are to create life and to shape life to maturity. A marriage is no better than the vision we have for one another and the willingness we have to sacrifice for each other to see growth occur."<sup>97</sup> Allender and Longman also write, "But God's intentions for marriage is to grow or subdue each partner in relation to the other in order to draw each—and eventually the marriage itself—to the character of his Son."<sup>98</sup> Keller agrees with this concept by stating,

Marriage is re-creational. In the context of marriage, one encounters the possible redemption of the full life. The retrospective healing of your personal history. The thorough conversion of one's biography is a divine work begun in this life and it would seem that God has invested the marriage relationship with sufficient emotional power to challenge the authority of accumulated biographical verdicts and thereby redeem the past. . . . You have a massive ability to completely reprogram the self-appreciation of your spouse. Your word has the power to overturn all verdicts that have ever come to pass on your spouse. Your spouse believes about him/her

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<sup>96</sup> Thomas, *Sacred Marriage*, 129.

<sup>97</sup> Allender and Longman, *Intimate Allies*, 182.

<sup>98</sup> Allender and Longman, *Intimate Allies*, 84.

whatever they have been told over the year- hundred and thousands of people have told him what he is like and now you got the power to completely turn that over. If your hearts condemn you, your spouse is greater than your heart.<sup>99</sup>

Marriage becomes a safe place for each person to shape the other through living in vulnerability, openness, and honesty. Johnson writes, “If we have generally found others to be safe havens and have a secure bond with our lover, then it is easier for us to keep our emotional balance when we feel vulnerable, connect with our deeper feelings and voice the attachment longings that is always a part of us.”<sup>100</sup> Allender and Longman explains, “Our greatest privilege is shaping the character of the soul to reflect the image of Christ. We are to invite one another to become more like God. When we reflect his character, we most effectively live out his glory.”<sup>101</sup> This type of vision for character development involves living beyond today into an eternal reality. Thomas summarizes,

If we live without an eternal perspective, earthly trials become larger than life. Without the hope of heaven, or the sense of the importance of a growing character and refinement, there is nothing to prepare for, nothing to look forward to. . . . If we are seeking glory, honor and immortality before God, daily and quiet persistence, faithfulness and obedience is the road to get there.<sup>102</sup>

Emotional awareness, recognizing self-protective attitudes, faithful commitment, and character development are the four themes for a healthy marriage commonly held in agreement between Christian and secular therapist. Though secular and Christian therapists disagree on aspects and motivations of these themes, there is considerable overlap of definitions, attitudes, and behaviors that allow couples to thrive in a marriage. The common thread weaved throughout these themes is that marriage, when healthy, provides the opportunity for maturity of character in the couple and in the marriage itself. When

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<sup>99</sup> Timothy Keller, “Marriage as Friendship” (sermon delivered at Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York, September 8, 1991). <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/marriage-as-priority-friendship-4650/>.

<sup>100</sup> Johnson, *Hold Me Tight*, 143.

<sup>101</sup> Allender and Longman, *Intimate Allies*, 82.

<sup>102</sup> Thomas, *Sacred Marriage*, 150.

unhealthy, the character of the person does not mature, and the marriage will eventually create havoc and immaturity in both spouses.

### **Summary**

Throughout history, the concept of marriage changed from being a second-best option for sanctification in the Catholic Church to being one of the most mysterious relationships for the purposes of changing one's character. This thought was shaped by Calvin and Luther in the Reformation. Subsequently, marriage as an instrument of sanctification was developed more fully by the Puritans. Today, contemporary Christian therapists and secular marriage therapist understand marriage as one of the most profound institutions for the changing and maturing character.

Marriage is designed for growth of maturity of character. Emotional awareness is key for a person to grow as a human being. People must possess an understanding of self and how they relate to themselves and the world around them. This awareness is key to understanding self-protective attitudes and behaviors. Although secular theories do not point to the origin of Genesis narrative, these theories seem to understand that men and women have a great "need" for safe and secure relational attachments in marriage. Thus, self-protective attitudes of criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling will prevent intimacy and vulnerability. Commitment to one another, repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation are the attributes that allow a marriage to thrive and push away the self-protective attitudes. Sacrificial love and committed loyalty are the attributes of a healthy and thriving marriage. Most of all, marriage is a calling for husband and wife to live beyond themselves, to serve the other, and to become an instrument of grace that will develop each person's character and provide healing for each one while living in the brokenness of this world.

## CHAPTER 4

### DETAILS AND DESCRIPTION OF TEACHING A GRACE-CENTERED MARRIAGE

This chapter gives a narrative description of the preparation and implementation stages for the seven-week seminar, consisting of weekly one-hour classes on Sunday evenings at Freedom church, called “A Grace-Centered Marriage.” In this chapter, preparation section explains how I prepared the seminar, the pre-evaluation of the content, and the mindset needed to teach the material. The implementation section describes the demographics of the participants, a content summary for each seminar, and the thematic illustrations I used to help visualize the content. Further, several stories of practical application are included in this section. Lastly, this chapter concludes with a summary of how I collected the data, which will be analyzed in chapter 5.

#### **Preparation Stage**

As I prepared the seminars, I focused on three aspects: the mind, heart, and life. First, I focused on the mind or the content of the seminar. I re-evaluated the pre-survey questionnaire created in the course Project Methodology. In the beginning of this project, I interviewed the pastors on the needs of marriages at Freedom Church. These interviews became the basis of the pre-survey questions. To verify if my information was correct or if the perceived needs had changed, I had a follow up conversation with the pastors. In addition, because I had counseled many couples in the church over the last few years, I corroborated some of my former clients’ notes with the recent pastor interviews. This process gave me a better understanding about the marriage culture at Freedom Church. With this information, I tweaked the design of the questionnaire and narrowed down the

topics.<sup>1</sup> I outlined the topics in a logical order, starting with the theological framework as the basis for the seminar and then moving toward the practical with a focus on relationships. As a theological foundation for the series, I used the thematic content I wrote in chapters 2 and 3 of this project. As for the practical application, I used material from my book, *Embracing Love: Living on the Other Side of Disconnected Relationships*.<sup>2</sup> I was also heavily influenced by Timothy Keller's sermon series on marriage and his related book, *The Meaning of Marriage*.<sup>3</sup> I intertwined the material from this project, my book, and Keller's material, as well as new content I created for this particular seminar.

Second, I sent a draft of the notes to the pastors for review to confirm the content applied not only to the head but, more importantly, to the heart. The pastors gave me some helpful insights for the material to meet the needs of the congregation. I also sent a rough draft to a therapist colleague of mine. She reviewed it with me and gave some other viewpoints from a therapeutic perspective. This insight helped the overall structure of the seminar as well. To make the series look professional, I bought forty-five white notebooks and had the notes printed professionally.<sup>4</sup> The notes included detailed outline with quotes, illustrations, and a study guide. Throughout the process, I prayed and asked the Lord to do His work in the heart of future attendees. My prayer was that the Lord would use my words to transform hearts in the gospel of grace. I prayed that the Lord would give me guidance on the subjects to include, the concepts, the illustrations,

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<sup>1</sup> See appendix 3.

<sup>2</sup> Steve Benson, *Embracing Love: Living on the Other Side of Disconnected Relationships* (Bloomington, IN: West Bow, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Timothy Keller and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God* (New York: Riverhead, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Because more people participated than expected, Freedom Church bought twenty more folders to support this project.



and the real-life examples. My hope was that this series would touch minds, hearts, and lives with the gospel of grace.

Lastly, I evaluated my own practice as a husband and father. As a teacher, I am responsible to teach God’s Word as well as possible with the resources He has given me. As a result, I evaluated myself to make sure my words were consistent with my practice. One cannot successfully teach what one does not do in action. Teaching must be accompanied by consistent (although not always perfect) practice. In essence, I desired that this material would also convict and grow me in the journey toward maturity as a whole person.

### **Implementation Stage**

Freedom Church has about church 192 adult members. There are two main groups in the church: the older group who started the church and new people who have started attending over the last five years. The seminars started January 5, 2020 and went through February 23, 2020.<sup>5</sup> There were two separate sessions in week 5, which is noted in the table 1 below as 5a and 5b. The average attendance was 41 people.

Table 1. Session attendance

Session	Attendance
1	61
2	54
3	53
4	32
5a	42
5b	27
6	35
7	27

A consistent core of people participated on a weekly basis. However, a variety of other couples attended sporadically throughout the seven weeks. As a result, not all of the same

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<sup>5</sup> The seminar occurred on each Sunday, except for Super Bowl Sunday, February 8, 2020.

people participated in the seminars consistently, which does impact the depth of the data collection.

About 30 percent of the people who attend Freedom went to at least one or two of the seminars offered over the seven weeks. Out of the 61 people present at the first session, 56 completed a pre-survey. At the end of the seven weeks, I received 22 post-surveys. When looking at the demographic data of participants, almost half (24 participants) were in the older category (55-64 or older) with the second group (15 participants) being in the younger group (25-34). The two other groups were either younger middle age (35-44) or older middle age (45-54). Both groups had an almost identical number of participants. When taken as a whole, most of the participants (about 58 percent) were 45 years old or above. As a result, I taught the material with this generation in mind.

Table 2. Age of participants

Age of participants	Number
18-24	0
25-34	15
35-44	8
45-54	9
55-64	23
65- Over	1

With this context in mind, the next section offers a weekly summary of the material content, including several examples of real-life transformations.<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 5:21-33 was the primary text expounded upon for this seminar. However, other texts were also examined to supplement certain topics, such as repentance and conflict. This seminar is best understood through the schema of relationships—the way one relates to God (the knowledge and understanding of God), the way one relates to self (or the knowledge and awareness of self), and how one relates to and behaves with other people

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<sup>6</sup> See appendix 1 for an outline of the teaching series.

and the world around them (awareness and knowledge of how a person's behaviors affect others). After each session, I debriefed with the lead pastor to get feedback on the presentation.

### **Week 1: Embracing the Cost of Covenantal Love**

For the first session, I gave each participant a study guide that included dates and times of each seminar, detailed notes, and a pre-test. I gave verbal instructions on how to take the pre-test, which included dating and signing the permission to participate form approved by The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. The pre-test took about fifteen minutes to complete.

As an introduction, I played a clip of Billy Joel's song, *The Piano Man*. The song narrates a story about a man playing a piano in a bar. As he plays, he describes different people who enter the bar and tells a story about who they are and why they came into the establishment. In one part of the song, the piano man sings, "Yes, they're sharing a drink they call loneliness, but it's better than drinkin' alone."<sup>7</sup> The song talks about the themes of brokenness, the idea of a narrative story, and the desire to be in relationships. I used this song as an illustration to describe the chart on the gospel narrative. The chart outlined the natural progression of creation, fall, redemption, and glorification as a story. In summary, humans were designed with dignity by being created in the image of God. In the garden there was wholeness, unity, and love. In the fall, man and woman became sinful, which caused a crisis and conflict in relationships. Man and woman had disruption, death, and disconnection. Therefore, human beings have specific sinful bents particular to them, which causes pain and brokenness. However, God redeems mankind through the gospel and creates maturity by growing people in awareness, contentment, and healing. Finally, there is glorification. One day, all things will be redeemed and

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<sup>7</sup> The lyrics are from the song, "The Piano Man" from the album of the same name written by Billy Joel, Columbia Records, 1973.

everything will be made new. This redemption is happening now and one day will be complete. This chart naturally flowed into the concept of unfolding the schema of relationships by focusing on the way a person relates to God, to self, and to others with particular focus on indwelling sinful patterns.

Lastly, I taught on the purpose of marriage. Marriage is best understood in the greater context of God's redemptive narrative of a covenant. The purpose of marriage is for both spouses to grow toward maturity in character. This relational maturity impacts how they relate to God, to themselves, and to others. These themes were the basic themes I would return back to throughout the series. After the seminar, I briefly looked over the surveys and noticed that about half listed sexual intimacy as one of the issues in their marriage. As a result, I talked to the pastors and added another session in week 5. I taught a two-hour seminar with a break in between to meet the needs of the congregation.

## **Week 2: Self-Centeredness Builds Relational Walls**

I used a quote from Timothy Keller as the main theme of this week's seminar: "Self-centeredness is the enemy of marriage."<sup>8</sup> However, I added to the concept by describing how self-centeredness is revealed in self-protective relational attitudes revealed in Genesis 3–4. To visualize this concept, I built a cinder block brick wall. I used eight cinder block bricks and labeled them from bottom to top with eight words: fear, pride, control, self-righteousness, blame-shifting, defensiveness, bitterness, and fits of rage. This provided a visual illustration for the audience to connect with the material. Then I described each self-protective mechanism and illustrated them by using real life situations to show the potential harm they can cause in relationships.

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<sup>8</sup> Timothy Keller, "Marriage as Ministry Power" (sermon delivered at Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York, August 18, 1991), <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/marriage-as-ministry-power-4647/>.

Second, I described shame and self-contempt as two main consequences of using these attitudes in relationships. Shame was defined as a denial of a person's dignity as an image-bearer of God through self-hatred or self-denial. Self-contempt was described as being more operational by labeling oneself through a dismissive or demeaning comment, such as stupid or moron.

Last, I described six specific verbal communication tactics used by those who self-protect. These tactics include verbal jabs, attacking, defending, manipulation, angry tantrums, and avoidance. These techniques ultimately cause destruction in the relationship. Throughout the teaching, I gave personal stories and illustrations to help make the material personal and applicational to the audience. The main goal was to expound upon the theme of brokenness, to be specific in behaviors, and to challenge participants to examine how they relate to their spouses on a daily basis.

### **Week 3: Friendship—Let Me Love You**

I started the night explaining the story behind the title of this week's lesson. The statement "let me love you" is a phrase my wife often says to me when she wants to serve me sacrificially, but I am hesitant for her to do so. This story led to friendship being one of the main purposes of marriage. The seminar's theme was that deep and uniting friendship pushes against one's self-centered relational patterns, grows one toward maturity, and leads to agreement to love another more than self.

In the first part of the seminar, I described the meaning of friendship in a marriage by suggesting that friendship is one of the means by which God grows a couple toward holiness and maturity. I then explained the nine relational attitudes of friendship that accomplished this goal. These nine attitudes are consistency, compassion, gentleness, faithfulness, kindness, patience, honesty, vulnerability, and blessing.

To contrast these attitudes with self-protective attitudes, I rebuilt the wall. I then asked the pastor and his wife to come up front. In the beginning I had them sit in two chairs on opposite sides of the wall so that the wall divided them. As I described each

positive relational attitude, they began to move out from the wall, reach across and grab each other's hands. As they moved closer to each other, the wall began to fade in the background. In the end, they embraced and walked back to their seats. This was to illustrate how friendship tears down self-protective walls.

This illustration led into the concept of becoming "one flesh," or being like-minded in unity and purpose. I described seven concepts that contrasted between living as an individual and living as a united couple. As a practical application, I explained the results of being like-minded, which was being able to expand a spouse's options and think about how the other spouse would respond in a given situation. Lastly, I cumulated the teaching in a practical understanding of the theology of covenant in a marriage. I outlined seven ways to make agreements with a spouse. These agreements are the basis for being united in one flesh so that the marriage moves both people in the same direction.

#### **Week 4: The Healing Power of Friendship**

The overarching theme of this week's lesson was that marriage friendship has the power to heal negative judgements, relational pains, and the wounds of each spouse's past story. The key verse that I focused upon was Ephesians 5:25-27, concerning the nurturing aspect of a marriage relationships. To illustrate this point, I set back up the wall of cinder block bricks. However, I also put a table to the right of the wall and set a wooden cradle on it. The wooden cradle represented the ideal that deep and loving friendship provides a "cradle of security for your greatest vulnerability." This phraseology is a key concept I gained from Tim Keller's marriage sermon series.<sup>9</sup>

The lesson started out by reviewing the chart of creation, fall, redemption, and glorification from the first seminar, with the particular focus on story. Each person has a narrative story, which is a combination of their families' emotional and behavioral patterns,

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<sup>9</sup> Timothy Keller, "Marriage as Commitment and Priority" (sermon delivered at Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York, September 1, 1991), <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/marriage-as-commitment-priority-4649/>.

messages from others, and, possibly, past traumatic events. When a person gets married, he or she marries the spouse's story as well. I explained how marriage can be a safe place for a person to heal from sinful emotional abuses of the past through the marriage relationship. Spouses have the power to overturn previous judgments and be a cradle of security for their spouse's greatest vulnerabilities.

Then I described four specific means to create a secure marriage: care or validation, faithful commitment, creating an atmosphere of vulnerability through communication, and having a common direction in life. Each concept centered around nurturing the relationship. As I described each important concept, I taped a piece of paper to each side of the cradle. Each paper had the concept written on it. So, when I was done, the cradle stood in stark contrast with the wall, which gave a visual picture for the audience to contemplate as they listened to the description. Furthermore, as I described each concept, I gave a story or an antidote to apply the concept in practical terms so the audience could get a vision for what these concepts may look like in their own marriages.

As I ended my talk, I noticed a young woman in the back who had been tearing up during the last part of the presentation. After the seminar, she confided in me about her current circumstance. In the previous week, she broke her engagement with her fiancé because their dating relationship, and subsequently her future marriage, was not grace-centered but selfish. He did not desire to change it, so she made a bold move to end the relationship. She desired something more. It was a wonderful glimpse into the power of teaching God's truth and watching a soul melt in conviction.

### **Week 5A: The Cleansing Power of Maturity—Conflict Is a Pathway to Maturity**

The theme verses for this week were Ephesians 5:25-26 with the focus being on the word "cleansing." I set up the wall and the cradle as I had done the previous weeks. First, I explained that conflict happens mainly because people live in a broken world. However, on a deeper level, relational conflict happens when sinful bents, wounds

from the past, and circumstance all intersect at one point in time. As a result, one aspect of cleansing is that God uses conflict and adversity as a means to transform one's character through the process of learning.

Second, I spoke on three aspects of conflict. Conflict involves a collision of opposites, complaints about a situation, and a challenge to be utterly amazed at the power of God. I used Old Testament passages, including Psalm 55 and Habakkuk 1:2-5, to help understanding how the Lord and others thought about conflict and adversity. These verses setup a new definition of conflict. Conflict gives both parties an opportunity to mature in character and change deeper relational patterns to be amazed by the power of God.

Last, I taught on seven concepts or methods to resolve relational conflict. The first three concepts involved creating a "safe atmosphere" by resolving one issue at a time, responding to the person instead of reacting, and differentiating the person from the behavior. The second three concepts involved "understanding" by discovering strengths of the opposite point of view, using an active listening method, and understanding how words are spoken to one another. However, these six principles are not effective if one does not first confess his or her sins and mistakes to the other. This is the first and most important step to resolving any type of conflict; however, I spoke on this concept last because it was the most important. I then reiterated the other principles by connecting these concepts to the attitude of humility and vulnerability. As I spoke about confession, I stood behind the cradle to illustrate that confession allows two hearts to become a "cradle of security for their greatest vulnerabilities." This attitude was in contrast to hiding behind the brick wall.

During the talk, I glanced to the back of the room and saw a woman (who happen to be one of my clients) with tears in her eyes. After the session, I briefly spoke to her as she connected her current family conflict with certain wounds of her past nuclear family patterns. It was a wonderful opportunity to be in the audience watching God's redemption happen in the moment.



## **Week 5b: Sexual Sanity in Marriage**

After a fifteen-minute break, I taught a second hour on sexual intimacy.<sup>10</sup> I handed out notes and a five-page handout from the introduction of the book *A Celebration of Sex*, by Douglas E. Rosenau.<sup>11</sup> I briefly gave a summary of the book and some of the concepts in the introduction. I then spoke on five principles that lead to sexual sanity in marriage. The theme of this session was that sexual intimacy in a marriage is an important part of the marriage, but it is not the main emphasis in marriage. One of the main emphasis in this seminar was that sexual pleasure is a consequence of creating a safe atmosphere emotionally and psychologically in which both parties seek what is beneficial for the other instead of what is best for themselves. Second, that both spouses feel a secure attachment by intentionally loving the other spouse and seeking their own good. First Corinthians 7, 10 and 13 were used to expound upon these concepts. I gave examples from couples I had counseled in marital counseling to help make the principles applicational. Most of the participants listened carefully, some took notes, and a few asked questions.

## **Week 6: Living in Gospel Repentance**

The main theme of this lesson was gospel repentance. To have an intimate relationship not only sexually but emotionally, one must live in repentance. I continued the illustration of the cradle and the wall to remind participants of the difference between the two types of marriages.

I started out the talk with the participants evaluating two letters of apology from John to Ginny. The first letter acknowledged sins by calling them unfortunate mistakes, glossing over specific attitudes and the consequences of John's behavior toward Ginny. The second letter acknowledged sin by name, asked forgiveness for behavior that caused

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<sup>10</sup> See appendix 2 for the study guide on this extra seminar.

<sup>11</sup> Douglass E. Rosenau, *A Celebration of Sex* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002).

the pain, and asked for thoughts to correct the situation. This illustration started a discussion about the difference between Godly repentance and worldly sorrow and repentance mentioned by Paul in 2 Corinthians 7:10.

I then taught on the biblical understanding of repentance using Psalm 51 as the main text. I summarized the story of David and Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11 to frame the story. I then taught through the psalm verse by verse. I defined repentance as becoming broken hearted about sinful actions and attitudes toward God and others by turning away from self-centered attitudes toward the worship of God and loving others more than oneself. This process changes character.

I outlined five concepts of deep repentance. The first step of repentance is to return to the Lord because of his mercy and love. The second concept is to acknowledge the depths of selfishness in relationship with God. The third step is to desire God to reveal truth to the way one lives his or her life. This involves being honest and open about motivations and admitting painful truth about how one relates to others and the selfish motivations of the heart. The fourth step is a rearrangement of direction by asking the Lord to create a new heart that allows a person to love his or her spouse with new insights and motivations. The last step is the restorative nature of grace. When one understands the process of repentance, not only does one now live in this process on a daily basis but one also teaches others how to live as a repentant and worshipful person. Repentance is a change in character by learning how to love others more than self in motivations, actions, and practice.

After going through the outline, I told one more story. A husband and wife who I have been counseling for over two years attended the seminar. The wife was sexually abused at the age of eight and the husband had been addicted to pornography since age twelve. They are both thirty. Their marriage was a power struggle that resulted in needing to have control or emotionally withdrawing when one does not get his or her way. This resulted in fierce and often painful conflict. Over the previous three months, they had

worked hard to learn how to repent of motivations, acknowledge sin, and then understand the pain their sin had caused to the other. They learned to love the other more than self. It was wonderful to watch their progress. Because they are living examples of repentance, I asked them to give a testimony about their own experience of repentance in their relationship. Despite their desire to do so, they were not emotionally ready to tell their story; however, they gave me permission to tell their story in the rawness (except for the sexual abuse) and the blessings of working through pain of self-centeredness. As I told their story, tears came down their faces as they leaned into one another. A sobering silence came throughout the room. It was an immensely powerful moment in the whole course.

### **Week 7: The Seven Tenacious Grips of Forgiveness—Daring to Live Beyond Pain**

In the last session I built the wall, but this time I put a big wooden cross in front of the wall. Then, I put the cradle in front of the cross. The picture illustrated the power of the cross to overshadow the wall of self-protective mechanisms. The cradle continued to illustrate the experience of deep friendship described in the previous seminars.

The last session's theme was on the nature and power of forgiveness. I taught on Jesus' parable of the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18:21-34. In summary, a master forgives a debt owed to him by his servant when he pleads for mercy, and the master releases the servant to freedom. Sadly, the forgiven servant finds a person who owes him less money and demands that he be repaid. The master confronts the servant with his merciless heart and throws him in jail until he repays back all that is owed. The point of the parable is that one must forgive others from the heart as one has been forgiven by the heart of God. Based upon this parable, I taught on seven themes of forgiveness. Next is a summary of each theme.

First, forgiveness is a choice to give mercy and grace to another who does not deserve it. This choice involves a process of releasing sins or mistakes others have done by giving the other party mercy.

Second, forgiveness is not a one-time event but an ongoing process to release people from their sins. This is the process of seventy times seven. Forgiveness must be practiced over and over just like the Father forgives sins over and over.

Third, forgiveness does not come easily, and one must be willing to suffer a loss in order to forgive. As with any type of forgiveness, the process will involve loss and grief. The reason for this process is because the one who forgives rightfully abandons what is due him. He or she sets the person free from debt and does not desire any restitution.

Fourth, along with grieving, a person must be willing to say good-bye to what they rightfully deserve. A person who forgives will not receive answers and will not demand what may rightfully be his or hers. He or she lives in contentment in God's unknown sovereignty.

Fifth, the one who forgives betrayals understands what it means to be forgiven from his or her own betrayals. This person not only has received forgiveness but also experientially lives in the benefits of forgiveness. Practically, this means a person gives grace without holding grudges.

Sixth, forgiveness then leads a person to redirect his or her energy in a new direction. The old is gone and the new has come. This person sets course in a new direction and does not allow the past to become the present.

Seventh, forgiveness allows a person to live in freedom from bitterness, vain conceit, and perpetual anger. A person who experiences forgiveness allows oneself to love without fear, receive love without residual anger, and tenaciously grips a person toward experiencing a redemptive narrative.

## **Conclusion**

After the talk, I asked participants to take a few minutes as they looked at the cross and cradle to pray and reflect on where they are in their marriage and the changes that need to be made. I then walked to the back of the room and read a benediction from Jude 24-25 and said a final prayer to end the series.

After the prayer, I gave a post-test to the participants to measure change in their awareness, thoughts, and beliefs on marriage. This was the same test given at the beginning of the seminar. However, four additional questions at the end of the post-test provided additional comments or thoughts on the seminar as a whole. I also interacted with several participants I mentioned in the implantation narrative and referred a few people to the pastoral staff for follow-up in consultation.

Over the next several weeks, I examined and analyzed the data from the pre-tests to understand the initial beliefs and thoughts on marriage as well as to compare it to the demographic information. Furthermore, I performed a *t*-test to discover if there was change in awareness of relational patterns. I also had a debriefing with the entire staff of pastors about the effectiveness of the seminar, which included overall content, illustrations, and presentation by using a curriculum review rubric. Chapter 5 will complete this project as I give analysis of the data and reflection on the overall experience of completing this project.

## CHAPTER 5

### EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

This chapter evaluates the project as a whole. The first section evaluates the project's purpose and goals by examining and analyzing the data and then drawing conclusions on the effectiveness of the seminar. The second section will then evaluate five thematic strengths of the project. The third section will evaluate four weaknesses. The fourth section will evaluate the learning process by giving reflections on the methodology, theological, and personal learning from this project. Finally, I give concluding thoughts with a family story that sums up some personal reflections.

#### **Evaluation of the Project's Purpose and Goals**

The purpose of this project was to educate people on the biblical principles of marriage, to bring awareness of self-protective attitudes, and to give those in attendance an opportunity to change their relational style in their marriage. This section offers a brief summary of the data collected by analyzing it from several different angles. I will briefly state the measurements used to achieve each goal, give an evaluation of each goal, and then assess if I accomplished the goal as established in chapter 1. Furthermore, I give the pastors' evaluations of the seminar and several stories of transformation that people experienced throughout the teaching. I had the privilege to not only be the lead teacher for this seminar but also to be in the audience watching God's transformation of several individuals and couples.

#### **Goal 1**

The first goal was to assess members' knowledge about the biblical design of marriage, including background, knowledge and understanding of eight self-protective

relational attitudes. To measure and accomplish this goal, I created and gave the participants a pre-seminar survey to assess the members' knowledge about the biblical design of marriage, including background, knowledge and understanding of eight self-protective relational attitudes. The survey had five parts: the demographic information (covered in chapter 4), Christian faith and marriage purpose, internal and external struggles, biblical knowledge, and awareness of relational patterns. This section will analyze the data from the Christian faith and marriage purpose, internal and external struggles, and biblical knowledge sections. Goal 4 will analyze the data from the relational patterns and give evidence of change I received from the participants.

**Christian faith and marriage purpose:** When looking at the longevity of Christian faith, 31 out of 56 people, or 55 percent, claimed to be Christians for 26 years or more. The second group of people (11 out of 56 or about 19 percent) claimed to be Christians for 20 to 25 years. Thus, 73 percent of the participants, the overwhelming majority, claimed to have faith for 20 years or longer. A few others had become Christians within the last 5 years and 2 participants did not claim to be Christians. The majority of participants were married. However, there were a couple of singles and one engaged couple.

When the married couples were asked if they received pre-marital counseling, 36 out of 51 replied yes, which was just over 70 percent. The average number of sessions received in pre-marital counseling was 4. However, at least 13 out of 36 people, or roughly 36 percent, replied that they received just one or two sessions of pre-marital counseling before they got married. When asked why they got married or want to get married, some answered because of "the feeling of being in love" or because of other circumstances, such as pregnancy. However, the majority answered with some variation of these five answers: I loved the person or fell in love with the person, I wanted a friendship, I wanted a helpmate or companion with whom to spend my life, I wanted a family, or I wanted to

honor God. Friendship or companionship was the overwhelming answer given for people deciding to get married.

Table 3. Years as a Christian

How long have you been a Christian?	Number
0-5 years	3
6-10 years	0
11-15 years	5
16-20 years	1
21-25 years	11
26 years and over	31
Non- Christian	2
No answer	3

When asked to rate their marriages on a scale of 1-10, with 1 being lowest and 10 being highest, 32 out of 56 rated their marriage an 8 or higher. Another 9 participants rated their marriage a 7 out of 10. Thus, 41 out of 56, or 73 percent, rated their marriages as high or strong.

Based on the initial data, the correspondence of longevity of Christian faith (73 percent) matches exactly those who felt their marriage is strong. Furthermore, the initial data also showed that at least the same number (70 percent) had some sort of initial pre-marital counseling, even if it was short in duration. Thus, many initially felt that their marriage was strong. Despite advertising the seminar to the church for several months and younger couples signing up through the website, a majority of the couples who came to the seminar were older and had a faith journey of at least twenty years

**Biblical views of marriage.** Nine questions asked about how a person viewed marriage from a biblical viewpoint. Each question pointed to a particular theme of marriage. These were simple questions and did not probe the depth of knowledge of marriage but gave a snapshot of the people’s views. The three themes were foundation, purpose, and roles of marriage.



For the foundation of marriage, three statements pointed to commitment or covenant as being the foundational theme of marriage. The majority of the participants defined *covenant* as commitment (23), promise (17), or contract/agreement (8). When understanding the idea of *grace* and marriage, the majority of the people listed forgiveness (30), undeserved favor (8), or love (7). Lastly, the participants understood *repentance* to mean confession of sin (19), turning away from sin (17), or asking forgiveness (15).

Three questions were designed to understand the purpose of marriage, which is to grow into holiness and maturity of character. The participants named the theme of unity (17), glorifying God (14), and growth (10) as the purpose of marriage. People listed the theme of honoring God (16), holiness (14), and unity (10) as the goal of marriage. The overwhelming majority gave the definition of leaving and cleaving as leaving parents or family of origin (30) with the second most popular answer being putting your spouse first (10).

Three questions were designed to measure thoughts on roles in marriage. The husband's role is to lead the wife by sacrificial love. The wife is to be a sacrificial helpmate through respect and love. Most importantly, both the wife and husband are to have mutual submission to Christ and to love each other more than self. The majority of the participants responded that the husband is to lead or provide (36) and to love his wife (16). The answers for the role of the wife were grouped in the idea of nurturing or helping (23) and loving, supporting, or respecting (18). The majority of the answers to submission were to follow (17) and to serve (14).

When looking at the answers as a whole, the majority of participants had a foundational knowledge of the biblical basis for marriage. Participants understood that a marriage was built upon a commitment to love another. Most understood that the purpose of marriage is to glorify God by becoming holy in character. Lastly, they had a good

understanding of roles of each spouse. Most answers conveyed a conservative idea of roles: the man to be the provider and the woman to be the helpmate or to follow.

In interpreting the data, some of the reasons for the results could be due to the fact that the participants live in a small, southern Bible Belt town. In other words, Christianity is a cultural part of life. An interesting observation was that only a few people answered the questions more in-depth or theologically on the bigger narrative structure of creation, fall, and redemption and how this relates to marriage, Christ, and the church. The history and makeup of the church's people could factor into this result because the last two pastors were young, with this church being their first pastorate. However, the results showed that most participants had a solid foundation of biblical knowledge on structure, purposes, and roles of marriage, which meant that most participants understood God's design for marriage.

**Internal and external struggles.** The participants were asked to give two answers to the following questions. First, they were asked about the two most external stresses in their marriage. The majority of the participants responded with finances (30) being the main issue and stresses at their place of employment (27), and another high response was struggling to have time (20) because of life being so busy. Second, they were asked about two internal stresses in their marriage. The majority of participants answered that communication (31) was a struggle in their marriage with sexual intimacy (24) being the second most popular answer given.

Participants were then asked to give one general answer to the following question: What is the main problem in marriage? The most popular answer was self-centeredness (16), and the second most popular answer was communication (12). These questions were not exhaustive but were a snapshot of how participants thought about their marriage at the time.

In analyzing the data, it was not surprising that a majority of people mentioned finances and work as the two external stressors since over half of the participants were

from the age bracket of 45 and above and these outside stressors tend to be practical realities at this stage of life. Many mentioned they were concerned about not having enough money for retirement. Communication was not a surprising answer as an internal stressor. However, it was interesting that 24 people, or 42 percent, mentioned that sexual intimacy was a real struggle in their marriage. Furthermore, many in the 45-65 age group mentioned the sexual struggle in their stressors. This response was interesting because biblical knowledge was remarkably high, but the fact that it was a big issue showed the struggle to apply biblical knowledge to this sensitive area. I did not expect this as one of the major needs in the congregation.

Goal 1 was accomplished through the pre-seminar survey. The survey gave an in-depth snapshot of members' thoughts on marriage, their internal and external struggles, and a theological foundation. The answers provided insight into the audience and helped me tweak the methodology I used to present the material. The survey also corresponded with the pastor's assessment that many congregants are theologically astute but are often times practically unaware of how to apply biblical truths to sensitive areas of their lives. The survey findings further corresponded with my experience with clients. My clients understand Christianity in terms of disciplines, such as going to church, attending a Bible study, or volunteering; however, they struggle to understand a deeper spiritual meaning that God transforms how one communicates and thinks about sensitive issues such as money and sexuality.

## **Goal 2**

The second goal was to develop a seven-week educational series on marriage that included the biblical and relational designs of a healthy marriage. The goal was measured through a collaborative approach with the three pastors along with insight from a professional colleague. The second means to measure this goal was through in-depth theological study provided in chapters 2 and 3 in this project. Lastly, experience with former clients gave me insight into patterns of thought at Freedom Church.

**Collaborative approach.** I asked the pastors to help me investigate, process, and analyze the needs of the congregation. The pastors gave input about the survey questions, content, and direction I desired to go during the seven weeks. They challenged my thinking, affirmed certain directions, and gave valuable insight into the congregation as a whole. For instance, the lead pastor gave me valuable insight into the historical context of one of the verses I used for understanding God’s sovereignty in the midst of struggle. Furthermore, I sent the content to a colleague who is a licensed professional counselor. She gave valuable insight into the content, flow of the sessions, and practical application of the material. This collaboration enhanced my knowledge but also added to the overall presentation.

**Theological study.** The theological foundation in chapter 2 and the historical and contemporary study of chapter 3 were influential in the flow of the content. I had previously written much of this material in my book; however, this more in-depth study gave valuable discernment into the practical applications of the theological concepts. I also used a combination of other authors’ thoughts and materials, such as Tim Keller, Dan Allender, Gary Thomas, and C. S. Lewis, to supplement my own material. These insights enhanced the presentations and gave a wide depth of knowledge into marriage relationships.

**Client insights.** One of the great advantages of being a counselor and being outside the church is that I was able to interact with people from Freedom from a therapeutic perspective. I was able to ask questions and get valuable insight from clients on the specific content, needs, and struggles of people who attend the church. I am thankful they were willing to be open and vulnerable with their hearts.

The goal was accomplished by creating a forty-two-page guide, which included notes, illustrations, and study questions for further growth. The combination of the pastors’ collaboration, my study, a licensed counselor’s input, and my experiences

with former clients gave me valuable insights into creating practical content to challenge the heart.

### **Goal 3**

The third goal was to implement a teaching series on marriage that challenged and gave awareness and possible change to hearts and minds about how one relates in their marriage. The measurement of this goal was to implement a teaching series on marriage. This seminar was presented on Sunday evenings from January 5, 2020, to February 23, 2020. Furthermore, a second seminar on sexuality was added to meet a specific need of many couples at Freedom Church. As for effectiveness of changing hearts, it is always hard to judge if a teaching is successful or not because many times the Holy Spirit uses the teaching when the person connects the dots in a future moment that cannot be seen in the present. Other times, it is truly apparent when God is moving in a person's heart. I believe there were three tangible moments of change inside people's hearts and one practical addition to the curriculum that enhanced the whole seminar.

**Tangible moments.** The first moment came when an engaged thirty-year old woman who had been in a relationship for eight years broke her engagement to her fiancé. They both came to the first seminar, but he refused to come back. Over the next few weeks, she came, pondered, and had a counseling session with the pastor. After week 4, she decided that the relationship was not following the biblical principles and the vision for marriage that she desired for her life. She made a hard decision that was the best decision for her future. She told me later on that the seminar was the changing moment that convicted her to end the relationship for good.

The second moment came when a couple outside the church came to the fourth seminar. They had been to marriage counselors but still were having issues. After hearing session 4, they came up to me afterwards and asked if I was available to counsel them. At the end of April, we started down the journey of working together through their issues.

They stated in the first session, “The reason why we wanted to come to you was the vision of marriage that you laid out we have not heard before from other therapists.” They are eager, willing, and teachable. What a joy to walk with them.

The third tangible moment was when I taught on personal wounds. One of my current clients connected the dots of her reaction to a family situation through the seminar content. She realized that her strong reaction was because of an old wound and disappointment she had not really faced from her nuclear family. The teaching brought clarity to her heart and also a new profound awareness about the reasons she reacts to certain triggers in her family. We were able to process this awareness in our next counseling session. This was an example of how teaching and counseling can come together in a beautiful tapestry.

**Sexuality seminar.** As noted in the internal and external struggles, sexual intimacy was listed as an overwhelming issue in the pre-survey. I did not include that subject in the initial seminar content. However, after talking over the issue with the pastors, I added an extra hour of teaching immediately following session 5. As a result, I taught a two-hour session instead of one. The first was on conflict and the second was on guidelines for sexual intimacy. I named this session, “Sexual Sanity in Marriage.” Twenty-seven people attended this session. It was a surreal moment to talk about sex openly and honestly in a church setting. This was an illustration of the surveys impacting the subject matter and being willing to change and add an extra session.

Overall, the goal was accomplished through implementing the teaching series by the use of note, illustrations, and videotaping of the sessions. I was satisfied with the subject matter, the flow of the sessions, and how the content connected to the head and to the heart. The tangible moments were a blessing as I was able to visually watch the Holy Spirit convict and transform lives. Furthermore, I also challenged the participants to think on a deeper level about brokenness, relational patterns, and a bigger narrative of God redeeming their individual stories in areas of concern.

#### **Goal 4**

The fourth goal was to administer a follow-up survey and to conduct a review of the series with the pastoral staff to determine if attitudes and thoughts on marriage changed after the seminar.

This goal was measured by administering a post-survey to understand change in people's thoughts and relational patterns. Second, the goal was also measured by conducting a debriefing session with the pastors using a teaching rubric to evaluate the biblical faithfulness, clarity, relevance, and application of the material. This rubric supplemented the information gained through the survey and corroborated the effectiveness of the seminar as a whole.

**Post-survey.** I gave the same survey I had given to participants in the beginning of the seminar; however, a copying error was not discovered until after the seminar was completed. This copying error resulted in the participants unable to fill out the internal and external stressors and the theological sections. As a result, this data was not collected, but the answers given in the pre-test were mainly theologically correct. There would not have been much room for growth or new information from the post-test surveys.

I used a Likert scale to measure awareness of relational attitudes and patterns to identify how well a person does or does not relate to his or her spouse. The reason the test was designed to measure awareness instead of change is because seven weeks is not enough time to change engrained patterns. Change happens over time through conviction, by hard work, and through experience. An educational seminar brings change to awareness and structure, but the actual practice of learning how to implement change happens through conscious efforts in everyday living.

During the last seminar, 22 participants completed the post-test. Out of those received, 2 of them did not have a pre-test so I could not use the results. Furthermore, I determined that another pre-test/post-test combination was an outlier because the

participant broke up with her fiancé during the seven-week seminar. She wrote on the post-test that this is “what she hopes for in a marriage.” However, this new knowledge does not match experientially the reality of her situation since she is no longer in a relationship. Second, it does not match the reality of how she relates as she wrote about “hope of change” and not awareness of change. As a result, I did not include her responses in the results. Thus, I had 19 pre- and post-surveys to compare.

**Relational patterns.** To measure if there were changes in awareness of relational patterns, I performed a *t*-test. The *t*-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive change in awareness and a statistical difference between pre- and post-test survey scores:  $t(18) = -3.4275, p < .0001501$ .<sup>1</sup>

To look a little deeper into the results of the relational patterns, I keyed the twenty-four questions about the eight self-protective patterns of fear, pride, control, self-righteousness, blame-shifting, defensiveness, bitterness, and fits of rage.<sup>2</sup> Each pattern had three questions that measured one’s awareness. The test measured a person’s two main self-protective attitudes in how a person relates to their spouse. Nineteen people took the pre-test and post-test. However, for one survey I did not analyze the data because the participant circled all the correct answers. I have analyzed this particular one separately in another section.

Out of eighteen people who took the pre-test, the overwhelming majority (8 out of 18) listed fear as their primary protective mechanism. The main definition of fear was the lack of vulnerability with their spouse. Other primary mechanisms mentioned were pride (3), blame-shifting (2), defensiveness (2), bitterness (2), and anger (1). The second self-protective attitude mentioned (7 out of 18) was control. Control’s main definition was that each spouse desires to have his or her own way come to fruition.

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<sup>1</sup> See appendix 4 for *t*-test results.

<sup>2</sup> See appendix 4 for key to the pre-and post-test.



Other secondary mechanisms mentioned were pride (4), blame-shifting (2), defensiveness (2), bitterness (2), and anger (1).

When looking at the post-surveys on the two primary defensive mechanisms, there was a gain, on average, of 2.8 points from the previous survey. This means there was growth in awareness of how a person relates to his or her spouse in these specific areas. When understanding the secondary self-protective mechanism, there was a gain, on average, of 2.3 points. This means there was growth in awareness of their secondary self-protective mechanisms as well. Furthermore, the participants were asked, “What was one concept (“brick” or relational pattern, wound, sinful bent, repentance, etc.) that God has made you aware over these past seven weeks?” Just under half (44 percent) of the participants were able to pinpoint the specific attitude that hindered their relationship. These answers also corresponded with the analysis of the pre and post-test. This correspondence was another sign of overall growth in awareness.

Last, the one survey I did not analyze with the others was completed by a non-Christian. This person circled either strongly agree or strongly disagree for all the correct answers. In essence, he chose all the “right” answers. Without interviewing him, these answers showed either an understanding of how the questionnaire was composed, a lack of awareness of how he relates, and/or a self-righteous attitude. It is interesting to note that when asked about new awareness or learning from the seminar, he gave the answer: “I became aware of my own self-righteousness.” As a result, I concluded that his defense mechanism was self-righteousness by the evidence of how he filled out the survey and his own admission to this area of weakness.

To follow up the test results, I received several comments on the post-survey that not only supplemented the data in the post-test but even more so brought joy to my heart. Below are some of the comments I received.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> These comments were copied as written from the participants. There are typographical and grammatical errors.

I am practicing maturity much more consciously, allow me to become more mature.

I am recognizing immaturity more clearly and avoiding it more easily for having focused on it.

Thank you for these sessions. They reinforced to me how truly blessed I am in my marriage

My spouse is not my enemy nor is he my savior. We're both wounded warriors hobbling home.

There was a lot of information that we are still processing but this time has changed our marriage and helped us down a new path.

I see my wife's role in a different way as my partner leading me to Christ.

I love that this is universal in dealing/relating to people in all areas of my life.

I need to strive to mature more in my marriage and fight my selfishness. I'm so thankful to all your hard work and commitment to the Lord and helping others. You're a gift to many!

I feel blessed to have been touched by Steve's words and knowledge. The Lord gave me him at the most right time in my life and have made certain decisions and changes in the past seven weeks. . .

**Debriefing with pastors.** I had a debriefing with the three pastors and asked them to give feedback for the entire seminar.<sup>4</sup> In summary, they stated that the seminar was theological and practical. Each lesson had a depth of content that was presented with clarity and thought. They also stated that the use of illustrations helped bring the material together in a personal way to the audience. One pastor gave me an incredible compliment when he stated, "I have been to other marriage seminars but this one had a depth of content which looked underneath everyday issues and got to the core message of grace and healthy relationships." The pastor of discipleship told me, "The depth of content challenged me not only in my relationship with my wife but also made me think more deeply about how I am in other relationships." The lead pastor stated, "It is rare that I don't wince when an outsider teaches but Steve was faithful consistently to the biblical text." He also stated, "The content had an emotional depth to it that was challenging and convicting to me in my own marriage."

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<sup>4</sup> See appendix 5 for their reviews.

The pastors agreed in one area of critique. In one lesson, I had to speed through the last part of the material because of a time crunch. The church notoriously starts things about five to ten minutes late. On that Sunday, the church had a faith and family meeting following the seminar. I knew of the meeting, but I did not have time to teach all of the material. Furthermore, I discussed my self-analysis of tripping over words when I am reading Scripture or written material. The pastors did not seem to notice this as much as I did when I was teaching or when I reviewed the video. Overall, the pastors were pleased with the overall seminar and the results.

The *t*-test, participant's comments, and debriefing with the pastors are all indicators that the goal 4 for the seminar was accomplished. Most of all, I was able to sit back and realize how much I am a spectator to the work of God. He is doing the work and I have the privilege of being intimately involved in his redemptive plan. I am filled with thanksgiving and awe that I am allowed to be an instrument of God's grace in people's souls.

### **Strengths of the Project**

As I reflect upon the seven-week project, there were five overarching strengths: the team approach, outside influence, experiential and practical application, narrative approach, and sitting in the audience of redemption.

#### **Team Approach**

Although it was my project for this degree, three pastors were influential in helping me understand the pulse and heartbeat of the congregation they are shepherding. Furthermore, several clients were willing to provide valuable insight not only from their own experience but also from the experience of others. This allowed me to speak to the heart of the matters because I had a listening ear to the heartbeat of the sheep at Freedom Church. Lastly, my colleague provided great insight from a counseling perspective. So not only did I get the pastors input, but on a deeper level I was able to receive valuable

insights from current clients and a colleague. This collaboration allowed me to speak into the relational dynamics at Freedom in a fresh way. I enjoyed collaborating as a team, having people give me feedback, and changing the direction a few times based upon their insights. This process provided a model for me to follow if I am to do another seminar like this in the future.

### **Outside Influencer**

The second strength of the project is that I was able to be an “outside influencer.” I was able to come into a church and speak truth about hard and touchy issues, such as personal wounds, conflict, and sexual intimacy, without harming relationships. Sometimes it is difficult to speak truth to people one knows because of fear of causing pain or fracturing the relationship. When this happens, issues are avoided or fester and cause waves underneath the surface. One of the weaknesses exposed at the church level was that many members are theologically astute but emotionally unaware. This means they do not deal with their defense mechanisms. Since I am not a member of the congregation, I was able to speak into some of these matters in a careful but truthful way. Furthermore, this also allowed the members to hear content from a different voice other than their own pastors. One of the advantages of doing it this way is that I can point to the same themes but say it differently and from an outside perspective, which may connect differently from the way the congregation hears it on a weekly basis. In other words, the truth is the same but the lens by which the truth is presented is different. As someone who was leading, I was also in the audience watching God work out his redemption in the same moment.

### **Experiential and Practical Application**

The third strength of the project was that it came from over five years of experiential and practical application of the resources I have used for counseling couples. By using the material from my book *Embracing Love: Living on the Other Side of*

*Disconnected Relationships*, I was able to incorporate not only my writing but also the experience of counseling many different couples. This valuable experience allowed me to share live and actual stories of people whom I have walked with in an intimate way. Furthermore, my own study that I put into this project enhanced my understanding and allowed me to present the material both theologically in an intellectual manner and practically to the heart. It was also an honor to review the material presented with a couple who came to the seminar whom I have also been counseling in some way for the past three years. This couple has faced pornography addiction and sexual childhood abuse. For me to interact with them on this teaching gave valuable insight into how I am presenting and what was hitting the heart throughout the seven weeks. The couple gave me permission to share their story of repentance without giving their names to encourage others who may be struggling in the same area.

### **Narrative Approach**

The fourth strength of the project was the use of story or a narrative. Since marriage is a narrative of two stories, I approached the teaching through a lens of a bigger redemptive story. My teaching was not just a theological and exegetical study of marriage but also a practical understanding of how one is to relate in marriage. In doing so, I told stories of past and current clients to make the teaching come to life. At certain points, I told a couple's story in one session and then completed this story in the next session. In essence, I was hooking the teaching to a narrative so the audience could have a practical application of the exegetical theology. I also used my own marriage (with permission from my wife) to illustrate our learning as a couple. This is the power of story. Furthermore, I used illustrations of the "wall," with defense mechanisms named as bricks to illustrate self-protective measures, a cradle that represented security, and a cross that represented redemption. These visual illustrations of concepts were key to understanding the concepts of each lesson. When combined together, a narrative illustrated with pictures

told a bigger narrative. For me, it was exciting for all of this to come together throughout the seven-week series.

### **Sitting in the Audience of Redemption**

The real strength of the project was that lives were changed through being an instrument of God's grace. It was honor to teach God's Word, but it was even more so a privilege to watch transformation. As stated previously, there were several acts of transformation from broken engagements to awareness of old wounds. One man and his wife are now in counseling with me because they attended one of the seminars. This was just a glimpse I have into how God has used this project to impact lives. One of the neatest things about being a professional counselor is that I get to be in the audience and watch the movie screens of people's life stories up close and personal. Not only am I in the audience, but I am an active participant in God's meta-narrative of redeeming all things and making everything new. I am an instrument of God's grace, a participant in the powerful play of God's grace, and an audience member of His redemption.

### **Weaknesses of the Project**

As I reflect upon the project, I have identified four overarching thematic weaknesses: the collection of data, an unknown congregation, adversity and uncontrollable circumstance, and my continued struggle to read out loud.

#### **Collection of Data**

One of the hardest things about this project was the collection of data. Instead of sending out surveys that would inform the series development, I had to wait until the first day of the seminar to gain the information. The cultural context of Freedom Church did not allow for internet-based surveys. They have tried computer surveys in the past and did not receive a great response. As a result, I handed out paper surveys before the first class. I also handed out post-test surveys at the end of the seminar. I had a good response in the beginning, but because of certain situations (described below), I did not

get the same number of post-surveys back. In addition, because of a copying issue, I was unable to collect the post-survey information on theological thoughts on marriage.

This difficulty in collecting the data also influenced the way I developed the material. In writing the material, I left room for adding to it when I received the survey responses. Since I was unable to collect data, I did not know about certain difficulties that the participants might encounter in their marriages. It would have been easier if I knew certain information ahead of time, but it worked out well in the end. However, this was one of the constraints and weaknesses of the project.

### **Unknown Congregation**

As with much of life, many times one's strengths are one's weaknesses. So being an outside influencer was a strength, but it also was a weakness. Although I did research on the congregation, asked questions of the pastors, and had client input, I did not know the people of Freedom Church. When I was preparing the lessons, I had little information about who may attend, the pulse of the congregation at the moment, or issues they were facing. Therefore, I was developing this seminar a little bit in the dark and detached from the congregation as a whole. Some of the material developed did not hit the real needs of the church. For instance, one of the surprising "needs" discovered was the struggle with sexual intimacy. This had been in the original eight topics, but I cut it due to scheduling issues. As a result, I added it back and had a special session on the topic of sexual intimacy. Another example of not knowing the people was that most of the congregation had a good theological foundation on marriage but found it difficult to put it into practice in some areas. From the information I gathered, I designed the curriculum to be more practically oriented with theological insights built into the lessons. In the end, I developed the material from an educated assumption that my investigation of the parts was thematic of the whole. In this case, I was correct. However, it would have been better to have experiential knowledge to go on instead of an educated hunch.

## **Adversity and Uncontrollable Events**

When conducting any type of project, there are adversities and uncontrollable events. In this case, the seminar was scheduled during the first part of the year. Unfortunately, Freedom Church, and most of the county in which it is located, was hit with a strain of the flu that was very contagious. This influenza caused attendance to fluctuate during the seminar. On a week-to-week basis people were coming, but it was not the same people every week. To get more data collection, we also videotaped the sessions and sent out the videos each week. This actually had a reverse impact. Because of the recordings, some people who came initially did not come back. They just watched the sessions online. A few people also told me that they came back to the seminar after watching it on video because they wanted to experience it in person. It was great to hear that people were engaging in the material. Unfortunately, it was hard to gather consistent data since I was interacting with a different group each week.

## **Reading Out Loud**

After watching the videos of the series, I found that I continued to stumble over words when I read. There is a back story to this weakness. When I was young, I had a stuttering problem and a lisp. I worked to overcome both of these issues, even though I still have a small lisp today. However, I am not able to read Scripture or typewritten words out loud well. I read too fast and then stumble over my words. Part of that (as my wife, who is a special education teacher, tells me) is a processing issue. My brain cannot process the words as fast as I read them. As a result, I end up skipping over words. For instance, I will skip over words such as “like,” “and,” “a,” or “that.” Other times I run the words together, which creates new words or variation of words. As I watched the video, I noticed that I skipped over more words than I originally thought. Most of the time I am aware of this skipping when I am reading fast to get through the text. Other times I do not catch my skipping until I listen to it again. This is the main reason I outline and teach by memory instead of writing and reading a manuscript.



## **Reflections on My Learning Process**

In this section I reflect on the learning process of the completed project as a whole. This section is divided into three parts: methodological, theological, and personal reflections.

### **Methodological Reflections**

Overall, I accomplished the goals established in chapter 1 of this project. There are three areas I would revise if I were to do this project again. First, I would like to find a different methodology to gather participant information other than an in-person survey on the first day of the seminar. In this setting, the in-person survey was the only possible means to obtain the information because of the church context. However, I would like to have had a computer survey sent out before the actual class or another means to get data that could inform the curriculum.

Second, I would like a small group of participants to give me weekly feedback. This would allow me to tweak information based upon real time feedback. Furthermore, a lay person's viewpoint would be helpful when teaching difficult concepts and would cover areas that were needs in the community.

Third, I would have liked the participants to be seated in a circle instead of rows, which might have led to more discussion. Originally, I thought about having a circle, but this format would have been more intimidating to the congregation, making it less likely that people would have participated on a weekly basis.

### **Theological Reflections**

When reflecting on this project theologically, I have discovered three insights that have made an impression on my heart. The first overall theme was the confidence I gained in the description of the self-protective attitudes through the exegetical study in Genesis. In my previous study I had done a cursory overview of these mechanisms. In this project I did more in-depth analysis and research. I came to many of the same conclusions I had previously, but this time I had more verification. With that said, I am

more convinced than ever that man's sinful depravity mainly works itself out through relational self-protectionism. This study also caused me to look at my own heart and to be keenly aware of how I relate to my wife, our children, and others. I am asking my heart more questions about motivations as I seek to love others more than I love myself.

Second, the historical study of marriage in chapter 3 proved educational. My understanding was enlightened about the purpose of marriage over the history of the Christian church. As I walked through the different stages of history, it became apparent how the views of marriage had changed from the early church history through the Reformation and into the Puritan view of marriage. This history actually helped me understand the narrative to present day thought and gave me a context of how I was going to present the teaching series. Though I did not mention the history in the seminar due to time restraints, it was in the backstory of many of the concepts I brought together.

Third, as I put together the seminars, I wove the theological foundation into the practical application. By nature, the first two seminars were more theological as a foundation for the practical. I first wanted to set the context of marriage in the schema of creation, fall, and redemption. Then I wanted to present a theological understanding of the fall against the backdrop of the bigger narrative of God's redemptive story. This theological backdrop was especially important to the practical application. Without the theological, the practical might be interpreted as the morals of marriage rather than a truth of grace as the foundation of marriage. I am thankful I was able to "marry" the concepts into a beautiful tapestry that presented a whole picture of God's redeeming love.

Last, as I worked through the material, it brought me back to my own covenant with my wife—to love her more than myself. I could not teach on marriage without being convicted in the areas I need to grow as a husband and father. The first audience of any seminar is the audience of the teacher's heart. I am thankful that God allowed me to be part of this project to grow and mature as a person. As my college professor used to say, "The heart of the matter is the matter of the heart."

## **Personal Reflections**

As I reflect on this project as a whole, I have recovered two themes that I have known for some time and discovered a third new skill. The first theme was that I enjoy the teaching process. As a professional counselor, I teach to my clients, but that teaching occurs one-on-one or in the context of a couple. However, I have not taught a thematic series with notes, storyline, and practical wisdom in three years. It was a joy for me to put together the curriculum and outline. I enjoyed the process of mapping it out, thinking about couples I have counseled, and using a story line of experiences to make the material come alive for the audience. The exciting part of the project was envisioning the series in my heart and head and then watching it come to reality. For instance, in my book I designed a picture of a wall of self-defense mechanisms. In the series I actually built a five-foot wall to represent these mechanisms. The illustration served to contrast the cradle of security with a tough wall of isolation. On the last evening, I had the wall, a six foot- high cross in front of the wall, and then a cradle. The contrast was beautiful. I asked the member to look at the cradle and the cross as they heard the benediction of God's blessing over them. The creativity of illustration, the Word of God spoken, and the vision came together in a beautiful way.

This leads to the second discovery—transformation. As a counselor, I witness transformation in person. I get to speak into the structure of the soul while dialoguing with a couple or an individual. In teaching, I witness individuals dialoguing with themselves and God through the Word of God being taught, but I do not have access to the soul. However, by observing the Holy Spirit's work, I saw transformation. I miss the times of teaching and watching God's redemption in front of me. It was a joy to be in the audience and witness transformation in another way through a series that God allowed me to envision, create, and produce for this project. I was able to witness a glimpse of heaven in a broken world.

The new skill I discovered is the ability to write academically and to embark on the research process. I am a devotional and narrative writer, which means crafting a story

and creating a narrative of learning around a plotline of character development. This project stretched me to write more academically and to do critical evaluation of what I read. In a discussion with my pastor about this project, he stated, “Now, you know you can ‘turn on’ those skills when needed and perform high academic work.” Although I did use my normal writing style in some areas of this project, it was a stretch for me to “turn off” my devotional writing and “turn on” this academic side of me. I was not sure I had the ability. Some of this doubt came from my previous seminary work. I have graduated from two highly academic seminaries. Although I did fine, I felt I was behind others in their academic expertise. I was not a master of Greek or Hebrew or ahead of the class in exegesis, so academic writing at that time seemed farfetched. Although the book I published (which I am proud of) has some research in it, it is more practically driven than research driven. All of this is to say that the Lord used this project to give me confidence and prove to myself that I have those skills. Now it is a matter of “turning on” and using those skills as I move forward in my career.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

I would like to end this project with a short story. My grandfather, Simon Benson, died before I was born. He was a brilliant man. He immigrated from Sweden to the United States at age sixteen. He learned English as a second language. He worked hard to obtain a high school diploma. Then, in a span of ten years, he earned a bachelor’s degree, a master’s degree, and a PhD in pharmacology. To my knowledge, he is the only person in my family history to have a doctorate of any kind. On both sides of my family I come from a blue collar, hard-working line of factory workers, except for my father who was an environmental engineer. When I graduate, I will be the second person in my family line who has earned a doctorate. My grandfather was an atheist. However, he gave freedom of choice to believe in what he called “ghosts and goblins.” So as a young boy, my father went to church with his mother. One day I asked my dad what my grandfather would have thought if he knew his grandson was in Christian ministry. My dad replied,

“He would turn over in his grave.” My father then explained his answer by telling me a story when he was seven years old:

*One day, I came home from church and my dad said to me, ‘Come here, son. Tell me what you learned at church today.’”*

*So, I crawled up on his lap filled with excitement. I told him, ‘I learned about how Jesus rode into a city on a donkey’”*

*My dad asked, “How did he get the donkey?”*

*“He took it from a person and told him that he would give it back when he is done.”*

*“Oh, I see,” my father replied, “I want you to think about this, son. Think about this very carefully. The God you praise and honor is nothing but a common thief. He is nothing but a common thief. You worship a thief.”*

*I left his lap very confused and disappointed.*

My dad ended the story by saying this to me, “Even though your grandfather would turn over in his grave, I am certain heaven cheers.”

Sadly, my grandfather was an abusive person and an antagonistic atheist. On the other hand, my father was a loving and dedicated believer and hardworking man. My father redeemed the shadow of his own past. He passed into Heaven’s arms from bone cancer in 2009. Actually, on my first wedding anniversary I was preparing his eulogy. My father will not see the day when I receive my doctorate degree, but I think he would say, “I am proud of you, son. Well done!”

God is a God of redemption. He heals. He redeems. He makes all things new. He brings restoration to broken lives and stories. And now in a real and tangible way, God is redeeming another part of my family storyline through this project and this degree. God is overturning the past through this endeavor. I am privileged and honored to be a part of His redemption in other people’s stories and humbled to see redemption in my own storyline as well. And all heaven certainly does cheer!

## APPENDIX 1

### GRACE-CENTERED MARRIAGE STUDY GUIDE

This appendix includes the study guide for the seminar series. It contains notes for each seminar as well as study questions.

Steve Benson holds a Master of Divinity and a Master of Arts in Counseling. He is a Licensed Professional Counselor Supervisor (LPC-S) and a Licensed Clinical Addictions Specialist (LCAS).

He is the author of the book, *Embracing Love: Living on the Other Side of Disconnected Relationships*. Steve started Grace Roads Counseling Center to journey with others on the road toward healing, hope, and grace. He is married to Krista and has two children, Zoe and Christopher, and a dog named Brody. To find out more information, please go to his website at [www.groundedinGrace.net](http://www.groundedinGrace.net).

<u>Date</u>	<u>Time</u>	<u>Title</u>
January 5, 2020	5:00	Part 1: Embracing the Cost of Covenantal Love
January 12, 2020	5:00	Part 2: Self-Centeredness Builds Relational Walls
January 19, 2020	5:00	Part 3: The Healing Power of Friendship
January 26, 2020	4:30*	Part 4: Friendship: Let Me Love You Note: The time is changed because of a Faith Family Meeting at 6:00
February 2, 2020	No Class (Super Bowl Sunday)	
February 9, 2020	5:00	Part 5: Navigating Conflict: Adversity is a Pathway to Maturity
February 16, 2020	5:00	Part 6: Living in Gospel Repentance
February 23, 2020	5:00	Part 7: The Seven Tenacious Grips of Forgiveness: Daring to Live Beyond Pain

Hello Beloved of Freedom Church,

My name is Steve Benson. I am thankful to have been in partnership with Freedom Church as an affiliated licensed professional counselor for over three years. I am also thankful to serve many of you and the local Lincolnton area. Finally, I am thankful to the leadership of Freedom Church to allow me to do this seven-week course to help strengthen marriages.

This course is part of a Doctoral Ministry research project at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. As part of the project, there will be a survey conducted on your thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs that you may have about your marriage. After the course, there will be a post-survey given to measure your awareness, knowledge, and change in thoughts about marriage. Any information you provide will be held strictly confidential and at no time will your name be reported or identified with your responses. Participation is strictly voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time.

For helping me with this project, you will receive a certificate for one free counseling session (one for a couple or one for an individual) to be used at any time. To receive this gift, one must fill out a pre-survey, attend or watch all seven sessions, and then fill out a post-survey. If you are unable to attend one of the sessions, they will be videotaped so they can be viewed at a later time.

Now on to the content of these seven weeks... If we are to be vulnerable, a loving marriage is scary. It is risky, thrilling, expensive, powerful, and filled with valuable peril. Despite its paradoxes, we thirst for this type of love, crave to be loved, and thrive to be embraced by love's grip in a real and intimate way. However, many of us often sabotage what we want the most. We hide behind self-protective walls. We live within wounds. We often satisfy our loneliness with immature mirages. But most of all, many of us are fearful of love's costs.



Over the next seven weeks, we are going to walk through the complexities and “mysteries” of marriage. We will look at a Biblical framework to marriage by understanding God’s call to love our spouses more than ourselves, to become aware of how God calls us to enter into the thrills and perils of marriage, and to practically live out the implications of the gospel through loving others more than ourselves. We will look at topics of conflict, repentance, forgiveness, and how to break through our self-protective walls that shield us from loving others and being loved.

My hope is that this time will be transformational in the way we view ourselves, our marriages, and the richness of the love of God. Thank you for joining me on this journey.

May you be gripped by His grace,

Steve

21 Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

22 Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord.

23 For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior.

24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her

26 to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word,

27 and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

28 In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.

29 After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church--

30 for we are members of his body.

31 "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh."

32 This is a profound mystery--but I am talking about Christ and the church.

33 However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

Ephesians 5:21-33

## Part 1: Embracing the Cost of Covenantal Love

“The gospel is not a doctrine of the tongue, but of life. It cannot be grasped by reason and memory only, but it is fully understood when it possesses the whole soul and penetrates to the inner recesses of the heart.” John Calvin, *The Golden Booklet of the Christian Life*

*Now Paul is a real estate novelist, Who never had time for a wife  
And he's talkin' with Davy, who's still in the Navy  
And probably will be for life.  
And the waitress is practicing politics  
As the businessmen slowly get stoned  
Yes, they're sharing a drink they call loneliness  
But it's better than drinkin' alone*  
— from Piano Man by Billy Joel

### 1. Phases of Our Stories in Grace

Garden	Engagement in the Story of Grace			City
(The Middle)				
Creation (Gen. 1-2) 22)	Fall	Redemption	Glorification (Revelation 21-22)	
<u>Intimacy</u>	Crisis	Brokenness	Maturity	<u>Restoration</u>
Completeness	Conflict	Pain	Healing	Healed
Children	Orphan	Wounded	Beloved	Child/Heir
Love	Death	Brokenness	Awareness	Renewal
Joy	Disputes	Sorrow	Contentment	Joy
No shame	Abuse	Shame	Sadness	Restored
Communion	Disruption	Separation	Satisfaction	Community
Connection	Disconnection	Loneliness	Reconnection	Completeness
Community	Betrayal	Disunity	Growth	Glory

<sup>5</sup> He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” <sup>6</sup> He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. <sup>7</sup> Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children. Revelation 21:5-7

- a. God has a bigger story or narrative going on in this world. He is redeeming all things and making them new EVEN NOW!

Adoption is the highest privilege that the gospel offers: higher even than justification . . . To be right with God the Judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the Father is greater. J.I Packer- Knowing God, pg. 231.

b. Because of the fall we have “Sinful Bents” in us!

A “Sinful Bent” → Sin corrupted our whole being—spiritual, emotional, physical, psychological and sexual. Every human being has a predisposition toward something or a “bent” in their personality, chemical make-up or our being that moves them in one direction or the other.

“One very difficult aspect about sin is that my sin never feels like sin to me. My sin feels like life, plain and simple. My heart is an idol factory and my mind an excuse-making factory, especially when it comes to dealing with the kind of sin that clobbers me the most—indwelling sin—the unrelenting, ever-present kind that never takes a Sabbath”

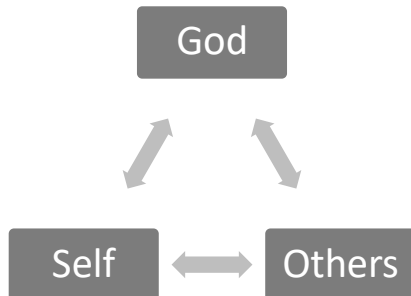
—Rosaria Champagne Butterfield: Openness Unhindered: Further Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert on Sexual Identity and Union with Christ

c. God uses marriage as a vehicle toward redemption.

- In marriage, our sinful bents become exposed and revealed.
- God uses our spouse to straighten us up!

## 2. Presence of Three Relationships- God, Self, and Others

<sup>37</sup> Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ <sup>38</sup> This is the first and greatest commandment. <sup>39</sup> And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ <sup>40</sup> All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” Matthew 22:37-40



<sup>15</sup> For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” <sup>16</sup> The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, <sup>17</sup> and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. Romans 8:15-17

<sup>12</sup> Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. <sup>13</sup> Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. <sup>14</sup> And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Colossians 3:12-14

“You sum up the whole of New Testament religion if you describe it as the knowledge of God as one’s holy Father. If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God’s child, and having God as his Father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all. For everything that Christ taught, everything that makes the New Testament new, and better than the Old, everything that is distinctively Christian as opposed to merely Jewish, is summed up in the knowledge of the Fatherhood of God. ‘Father’ is the Christian name for God. Our understanding of Christianity cannot be better than our grasp of adoption.” J. I. Packer- Knowing God, pg. 201

- How one relates to God (as the Father) and relates to self (as his beloved) has a distinct impact on how one relates to others.
- The Bible is a story of inter-related stories of relationships between God and man, man and man, and self to self.

a. The Consequence of insecurity

If your relationship with God is insecure, unknown, or disconnected, or you relate to him as an orphan, then you will move into this world with arrogance and insecurity. As a result, relationships become about what you can get or manipulate from others in order to make yourself safe. This protects you from any type of failure or disappointment. You then move into this world in self-protection instead of power of love. Life becomes all about you.

b. The Courage of Security

If your relationship with God is secure as the beloved, spiritually viable, and growing then you will move into this world with strength and courage. As a result, relationships are not about what you can get from others but what you can give to others. Your security rests in an eternal God even when others disappoint, betray, or harm you. You then have the courage to move out into this world with strength with God-protected love that will not be shattered or broken.

### 3. Priorities of a Covenantal Marriage

<sup>6</sup>For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.<sup>7</sup> The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. <sup>8</sup>But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. <sup>9</sup>Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments. Deuteronomy 7:6-9

<sup>25</sup>Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her <sup>26</sup>to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, <sup>27</sup>and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. Ephesians 5:25-27

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. <sup>2</sup>Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. 1 John 3:1-2

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. Revelation 21:1-2

Marriage is based upon God's pattern of how God loves his people (the church).

- a. The Process of Maturity in Grace- A growth in personal, emotional and spiritual holiness.
- b. The Power of Reforming Your Identity- Allowing another to walk with you, confront you, hold you, suffer with you, and bring you to the throne of grace.
- c. The Passion of Covenantal Love- Experiencing the real cost of covenantal love. It is a death that leads to life.

**Going Deeper:**

1. What does it mean for your marriage to be part of a bigger narrative? How does this impact your attitude toward your spouse or marriage?
2. God is about relationships. How does the idea of relating to self and to God impact how you relate to others? By what name does God call you?
3. God uses marriage as a parable in how he relates to us. What does it mean to remember the covenant of marriage every day?
4. Marriage is about the process of maturity. What does it mean to mature as a person? List the areas in which you need to grow as a person.
5. If you were to make one change in how you relate with your spouse/fiancé, what would it be?

## Part 2: Self-Centeredness Builds Relational Walls

<sup>24</sup>That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.<sup>25</sup> Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame. Genesis 2:24-25

<sup>7</sup>Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. Genesis 3:7

“The enemy of marriage is self-centeredness!” Dr. Timothy Keller



- Relational walls are attitudes, behaviors, or inner motivations that keep people from seeing and getting to know the deepest desires (or parts) of their souls. In essence, they are defense mechanisms that shield us from authentic, intimate and connected relationships with others and with ourselves.
- Thematically, every person deals with these self-protective behaviors in one form or another.
- Sin is always relational. It is never a private matter. It will always impact others even if you don't know who they are or are not aware of its future consequences.

**Brick 1: Fear / Pain** - *“I am afraid to be vulnerable with my heart because it will cost me too much to be honest. It will be too hard to admit to my weakness. I intentionally do not deal with my past wounds, pain, or shame.”*

- Fear keeps us from being honest. We choose protection over intimacy, stagnation growth, and comfort over challenge.
- Fear keeps us living in denial. Instead of willingly dealing with our pain and past wounds, we hide from the reality of our own heart.
- Fear costs us the ability to love with power, with strength, and with endurance. Fear becomes a driving force of our relational bondage. It keeps us in chains, which leads to an isolated life.

**Brick 2: Pride / Arrogance** - *“I am more concerned about my abilities, reputation, and appearance. I am unwilling to live in brokenness and humility because then I must admit that there is something wrong with my soul.”*

- Pride takes the gifts God gives us and turns them into contraptions that promote ourselves over other people.
- It promotes an outward appearance but does not transform an inward heart.



- Pride prevents connection. Pride kills empathy. It secretly devours and silently destroys relationships.

**Brick 3: Control / Manipulation-** *“I need to have my agenda followed because it brings me worth, comfort, and accomplishment. I will manipulate people or situations so I can feel comfortable. I refuse to live in an unknown future because my being will ultimately be lost and insignificant.”*

- Control brings intrinsic worth: Controllers struggle with insecurity and are not firmly grounded in who they are as an individual.
- Control gives comfort: A controlling person aligns everything in his or her life in order to feel safe.
- Control gives a sense of accomplishment: Controllers build resumes. They desire to be known for activities, abilities, and accomplishments.
- Control denies the feeling of being lost: A controller will do anything not to feel lost. Like a person without a GPS or a map stranded on an unknown street corner, being lost feels very powerless.
- Control promises significance: A controller struggles with not being needed or wanted and therefore lacks the confidence to delegate. Insignificance is a scary proposition.

**Brick 4: Self-Righteousness-** *“I believe and behave in such a manner that promotes my superiority. As a result, I justify my wrongful actions and promote myself over you. My life is built upon performance in order to cover up my insecure and isolated soul.”*

- Self-righteous people promote themselves as morally superior. They become intolerant of differing opinions and use power as a means of intimidation.
- Self-righteous people’s lives are based upon the appearance of great performance. This is a paradox. The need to portray stability is so great due to internal instability and insecurity.
- The self-righteous sabotage what they desire the most—intimacy.

**Brick 5: Blame-Shifting-** *“I don’t take responsibility for my behaviors. I minimize my actions, which shifts the accountability onto others, current circumstances, past events, misunderstandings, or ignorance. As a result, I live in emotional immaturity because it is everyone else’s fault and not mine.”*

- Others: Blame-shifters will consistently make others out to be the perpetrator of wrongful events. They take on the role of a victim.
- Current Circumstances: Blame-shifters will make excuses concerning situations that they perceive to be out of their control. They struggle to own their part in the present situation.
- Past Events: Blame-shifters will view life as being unfair. They will use their own past wounds as an excuse for their current behavior.
- Misunderstandings: Blame-shifters have knowledge in order to make good decisions. However, they conveniently forget these facts when it benefits them in order to avoid responsibility.

- Ignorance: They have not researched, grown, or educated themselves through learning by mistakes. They do the same thing over and over again without changing.

**Brick 6: Defensiveness-** *“I will protect my heart from perceived threats or any form of criticism. I will guard myself against feeling lesser or having my weaknesses exposed, which results in hiding my heart from you and ultimately myself.”*

- Defensiveness blocks any form of feedback, opposing thoughts, or any kind of communication that may divert a person from his or her agenda.
- Defensiveness guards our hearts from feeling lesser than others in qualifications, experience, or performance.
- A defensive attitude often indicates a feeling that one’s competence is being challenged.
- A defensive attitude fortifies the wall around their insecurity and also simultaneously chisels away at the gift of sensitivity.

**Brick 7: Bitterness-** *“I have experienced a violation of my boundaries by another’s behavior. I willingly keep my heart in this place of resentment until the other party meets my expectation or appeases me or until my vengeance is satisfied.”*

- Bitterness takes root because of unmet expectations.
- Bitterness does not reach out but reaches back. Yesterday becomes today and scars of the past become wounds of the present.
- A bitter soul stubbornly deceives itself to believe peace is only through payment for the sins committed.

**Brick 8: Fits of Rage-** *“I stay in my anger by making sure you feel my pain. I will not get hurt again. As a result, I will scare you into submission, pay you back through intimidation, or passively subvert any type of reconciliation with you.”*

Four common aspects of Ragers

- Fear of Hurt: They do not desire to get hurt again. So, they must strike with outward force to protect themselves from pain.
- Desire for Pain: They desire others to feel their pain. Ragers stay in the place of anger and make it their homes.
- Revengeful Words: They often will spew certain statements that contain some truth. However, because they are out of control, the truth they try to convey turns into scouring water that burns their victim. Truth said in a rage is not truth but revengeful words.
- Wounded Prayers: Ragers’ tantrums are merely screaming prayers to God to which others are forced to listen whether they want to or not.

Fits of Rage	<p>"I 'stay' in my anger by making sure you feel my pain. I will not get hurt again. As a result, I will scare you into submission, pay you back through intimidation, or passively subvert any type of reconciliation with you."</p>
Bitterness	<p>"I have experienced a violation of my boundaries by another's behavior. I willingly keep my heart in this place of resentment until the other party meets my expectation or appeases me or until my vengeance is satisfied."</p>
Defensiveness	<p>"I will protect my heart from perceived threats or any form of criticism. I will guard myself against feeling lesser or having my weaknesses exposed, which results in hiding my heart from you and ultimately myself."</p>
Blame-shifting	<p>"I don't take responsibility for my behaviors. I minimize my actions, which shifts the accountability onto others, current circumstances, past events, misunderstandings, or ignorance. As a result, I live in emotional immaturity because it is everyone else's fault and not mine."</p>
Self-Righteousness	<p>"I believe and behave in such a manner that promotes my superiority. As a result, I justify my wrongful actions and promote myself over you. My life is built upon performance in order to cover up my insecure and isolated soul."</p>
Control/Manipulation	<p>"I need to have my agenda followed because it brings me worth, comfort, and accomplishment. I will manipulate people or situations so I can feel comfortable. I refuse to live in an unknown future because my being will ultimately be lost and insignificant."</p>
Pride/Arrogance	<p>"I am more concerned about my abilities, reputation, and appearance. I am unwilling to live in brokenness and humility because then I must admit that there is something wrong with my soul."</p>
Fear/Pain	<p>"I am afraid to be vulnerable with my heart because it will cost me too much to be honest. It will be too hard to admit to my weakness. I intentionally do not deal with my past wounds, pain, or shame."</p>

How do you relate to your spouse when you are hiding behind the wall?

1. Shame is the deep mortification that if I were to be real with my soul to another I would be exposed as a complete failure, ugly or a mistake. It is a hemorrhage of my identity.
2. Self-contempt is best understood in operation. It is a condemnation of your own soul which denies your own dignity through self-bashing opportunities such as naming yourself stupid, ignorant or other derogatory names.
3. Other-centered contempt is criticism, critique or declaration of or about another in which the motivation is not love. It is finding fault, exposing one as inadequate or undesirable.

Definitions summarized by Dr. Dan Allender The Wounded Heart Chapter 2 and 3

### **Communication Tactics**

1. Barbs are little remarks, non-verbal (rolling of the eyes) or verbal (sarcasm), that are intended to not only convey a message but also hurt the other person.
2. Blades are actions (slamming doors) or comments (gossiping or saying half-truths) that draws a little bit of blood from the heart.
3. Bombs are verbal attitudes and actions that attack others and cause wounds. Though the intended target will get the force of it, all others in the room will feel the effects.
4. Silence is the action and attitude of saying nothing about your feelings, which in effect causes the other person to become uncomfortable because they don't understand the truth of the situation.
5. Sniper Attacks are manipulations, set ups, or distortions of the truth through gaining alliances in order to make others take the blame for our actions.
6. Missiles are verbal attitudes and actions that attack others and cause wounds. However, the person knows the way to hurt the other party, intends to destroy the other party, and then does it any ways. It is Set, Aim, Fire, Destroy.

**Going Deeper:**

1. Dr. Timothy Keller states, “The enemy of marriage is self-centeredness!” If you were to think about your day-to-day life, how are you selfish in your marriage/relationship?
2. Which three bricks do you tend to hide behind that separate you from intimate relationships? How does this impact your relationships with others?
3. Which of the six communication tactics listed above do you tend to use with your spouse?
4. You named the three bricks you hide behind in question two. Why do you think you hide behind them? What happened in your life that might have caused you to hide behind these bricks?
5. Pray for the Holy Spirit’s help to actively focus on breaking down one of the self-protective bricks in your life. Keep a journal on how you are actively tearing down this wall.

### Part 3: Friendship: Let Me Love You

<sup>28</sup>In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.<sup>29</sup>After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church--<sup>30</sup>for we are members of his body.<sup>31</sup>"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh."

#### 1. What is friendship?

Answer: Friendship is learning to love someone more than yourself.

"My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.<sup>13</sup> Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. <sup>14</sup>You are my friends if you do what I command. <sup>15</sup>I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you." John 15:13-15

What is friendship?

A friend is a person who journeys with you, suffers with you, listens to you, and gently confronts you toward maturity. A friend makes you see your soul! And they allow you to see their soul. They do not allow you to stay complacent, lazy, or live in stupidity. They don't enable you to stay immature. A friend challenges you to grow, love, and gaze into the eyes of the Savior. They push you towards the gospel of grace and enable you to know how to love. And you do so in return.

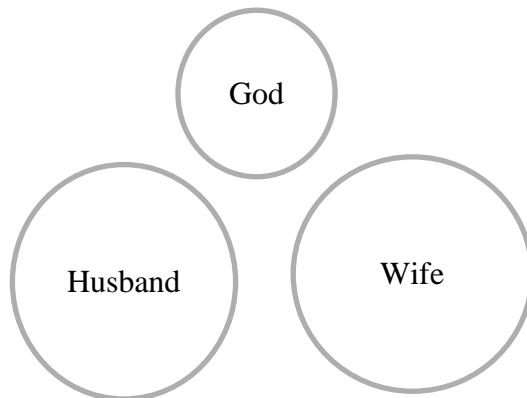
#### 2. Relational Attitudes of Friendship

- Consistent: My words align with my actions so you can depend upon my character. You know who I am. If a person is not consistent, then there is not a friendship.
- Compassionate: I am willing "to suffer with" you in your pain and in your weakness.
- Gentleness: I confirm grace upon you. I hold you in the deepest depths of your despair without judgment or performance. I validate who you are.
- Faithful: I remain committed to your maturity despite my current feelings or circumstances.
- Kindness: I build you up and speak tenderly to you. I do not attack you when I am disappointed or when you fail to meet my expectations

- Patience: I have honest endurance by extending calmness to others or waiting positively for situations to come to fruition.
- Honesty: I am truthful even when I am afraid. I may disappoint you or you may be hurt for a season, but this is far better than living in isolation.
- Vulnerability: I am able and willing to be transparent. I am showing you all that I am with no secrets. I will not hold anything back. I let you know the struggles, hurts and pains, and temptations. I allow you to see me.
- Blessing: I affirm and validate you. I look inside of you, confirm this part of you, and in return become a blessing to the depth of your soul.

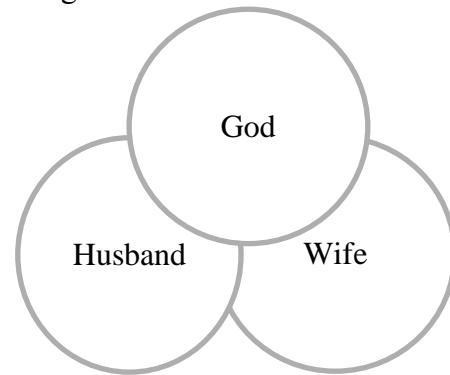
### 3. Becoming One Flesh- Like-minded in Unity and Purpose

Living single in a married world



1. Individual
2. Stubborn
3. Demanding
4. Controlling
5. Self-sufficient
6. Self-absorbed
7. Glorifying my desires

Living married in a one-flesh world



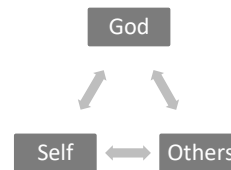
1. Like-minded
2. Sacrificing
3. Nurturing
4. Collaborating
5. Covenantal
6. Serving others
7. Glorifying God

The marriage relationship creates an atmosphere of either contamination to disconnection or consummation toward intimacy. It is the air you breathe, the atmosphere you live in, and the culture you create. Either you will create a place where you both can grow in maturity, transform your character, and learn to know the beauty of love or you will create a place where you both will slowly die in self-preservation and live in immaturity of self-addicted pleasures until you both become a living coffin for your selfishness.

#### 4. How do you get to a like-minded and unified marriage?

- a. Become like-minded
  1. **Two options:** I begin to think like my spouse. My spouse pushes me to think outside of myself and the way I regularly do things. I consider a second option and allow my spouse to influence my decision making
  2. **Other-centered:** I am forced to think about someone else more than myself. I am being forced to think, work, and consider another person's perspective, feelings, and thoughts other than my own. In essence, my spouse begins to undue or transform my selfishness.

#### b. Covenant Agreements



Reminder: A covenant is an exclusive legal contract to love someone more than self.

- c. How do you make covenant agreements?
  - Glorifying God: When you make an agreement, it is first with God and then with your spouse. The agreement is an act of worship toward God (or reverence to Christ), which then serves the other party.
  - Wrestling: Wrestle and wrestle until you come to a place of an agreement. This takes time, work, and a willingness to leave behind self-protective attitudes. It might not happen overnight. This is the hard work of marriage.
  - Negotiation: Both need to learn how to give up or abandon their own “rights” for something that is better for the marriage and the other party.
  - Consistency: You maintain your part of the agreement no matter what the other party does. This is key because it builds trust in the relationship.
  - Trial and error: This process will continue over and over until you find one that works.
  - Re-arrangement: Try the agreement to see if it works for **both** parties. If it does not, then go back and negotiate again until you both find a balance and a place that works.



- Reflect: Always evaluate the agreement to see if it needs to be amended, changed, or completely revised and thrown out. Don't get stuck in the rut. This is what we "always do."

**Going Deeper:**

1. How does the idea of "friendship" change your view of marriage?
2. Which relational attitudes of friendship defines your marriage? Which one do you struggle with in your marriage?
3. How does being "like-minded" help you all be better friends in your marriage?
4. When looking at your marriage are you "near" or "one" in your marriage?
5. What covenants do you need to define in your marriage?

## **Part 4: The Healing Power of Redeeming Friendship**

<sup>25</sup>Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her <sup>26</sup>to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, <sup>27</sup>and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

“You either become a conduit of healing in your spouse’s story or you become the one that cements the past judgments of their personal story.”

Jesus entered into our story, to redeem our story so we can be connected to his greater story: redemption!

### **1. The Healing Power of Story**

- a. Messages from the Playgrounds
- b. Tapestry of the Family System
- c. God can use you to reprogram your spouse’s identity

“You have a massive ability to completely reprogram the self- appreciation of your spouse. Your word has the power to overturn all verdicts that have ever come to pass on your spouse. Your spouse believes about him/her whatever they have been told over the years- and now you have the power to completely turn that over. If your hearts condemn you – your spouse is greater than your heart. And that means if everybody in the world calls you ugly but your spouse says you are beautiful you will feel beautiful. That also means that if everybody in the whole world calls you beautiful and your spouse calls you ugly- you will feel ugly.” Dr. Timothy Keller – Sermon Series: Marriage as Friendship – 1991

Your spouse has a safe place to land his or her soul when the waves of life crash. Your spouse points you to the gospel. Your spouse validates your deepest need and pushes you to become who God has called you to be. Your spouse knows beyond a shadow of a doubt who you are emotionally and spiritually.

## 2. Nurture allows you to heal your spouse's story.

### a. Care → Validation

- It means to give appreciation for or to someone. It is to find something admirable about the person, to give dignity, or to acknowledge the value of their position.
- Looks for **truth and grace** in every situation
- It means telling someone that what he or she feels, thinks, believes, and experiences is real logical, and understandable, even if you are not experiencing it yourself.
- **Allows you the freedom to *quietly reassure yourself*** that what you feel inside is real, is important, and makes sense to you. (This is self-validation.)
- It does not mean that you fully agree or approve with a person's behavior, thoughts, or actions.
- Three ways to validate:
  - Give encouraging and affirming words to your spouse.
  - Write notes, texts, or any other means to lift up your spouse on a daily basis.
  - Gentle actions and consistency are keys to a marriage.

### b. Commitment → Faithfulness

- Make choices to love someone in the little things. It is the little things that add up to big things.
- I am faithful to serve you, to care for you by living out my vows in front of you for you, and to do so for your benefit. It is the gospel flowing from me and through me for the benefit of you!
- Being faithful to another's maturity is not just loyalty to him or her but being loyal to his or her growth as a person toward holiness.

“What our spouse needs more than any gift is the promise, the vow, that we will not merely survive as a couple but also grow together. . . . The truth is that one person often needs more focus and care during this process [of healing]. The supportive spouse, however, is not merely there to endure the turmoil. . . . Instead, it is time for both husband and wife to be transformed.” Dan Allender, *Healing the Wounded Heart* p. 199.

- Endurance in the right direction to love another more than self. It is learning to love as God loves.

c. Communication → Create an Atmosphere

Dignity is the state of giving value or honor to another person. Honoring another becomes an act of giving them a place to be known without judgment or condemnation even if or when they are different than us.

Integrity is the ability to be consistent in our actions, holding onto our convictions despite adversity. A person with integrity stands strong through humility.

Respect is the ability to respond to others with appreciative regard even if we do not agree with their thoughts, decisions, and/or lifestyle.

Empathy is the capacity to feel the complexities of another's heart without having experienced his or her circumstances. It is feeling beyond yourself and engaging another person in his or her story right at that very moment

Compassion means to suffer with another. It is engaging in the suffering of another and sometimes at your own personal expense.

Truthfulness operates in truth and truth operates in grace. One cannot operate without the other. Honesty to the truth breaks down the need for us to live in denials.

Intentional is being concise and clarity with our words and our intentions. This allows people to know where we stand.

Openness is having a heart and mind open to receive a message from another party and to understand their position.

Negotiation involves learning other people's desires so that you put the other party above yourself.

d. Common Horizon: a vision beyond oneself

“Friendship is deep oneness that comes through a mutual journey to the same horizon.” Dr. Timothy Keller

1. A Kingdom Horizon- To become holy and blameless, without spot or blemish
2. A Vision Horizon- To have a calling, dream, or passion that the two of you move toward that is something bigger and broader than you
3. From me, outside of me, for the benefit of others

All of these attributes are moving us from being self-centered to being other-centered. In doing so we get in touch with what it means to really love like Jesus. There will be pain, a sacrificial pain, because now God is doing a work in us to “love another like Christ loved the church.” It does not come naturally. There will sometimes be pain in doing so, but this is the pain of learning to love as God loves!

*“Watch your thoughts, they become your beliefs. Watch your beliefs, they become your words. Watch your words, they become your actions. Watch your actions, they become your habits. Watch your habits, they become your character.”* Vince Lombardi

Your Marriage

Storms of Life

Marriage becomes a cradle of security, which shields us from the outside storms of life!

“Your spouse becomes a cradle of security for your greatest vulnerability.” Dr. Timothy Keller

### **Going Deeper:**

1. What wounds need to be healed from your story?
2. What does it mean to reprogram someone's story? How have you been reprogramming your spouse's story?
3. How well do you communicate with your spouse using D.I.R.E.C.T.I.O.N?
4. What is your "common horizon" in your marriage?
5. What concept have you learned so far which has convicted your heart?

## Part 5: The Cleansing Power of Adversity: Conflict is a Pathway to Maturity

<sup>25</sup>Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her <sup>26</sup>to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, <sup>27</sup>and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

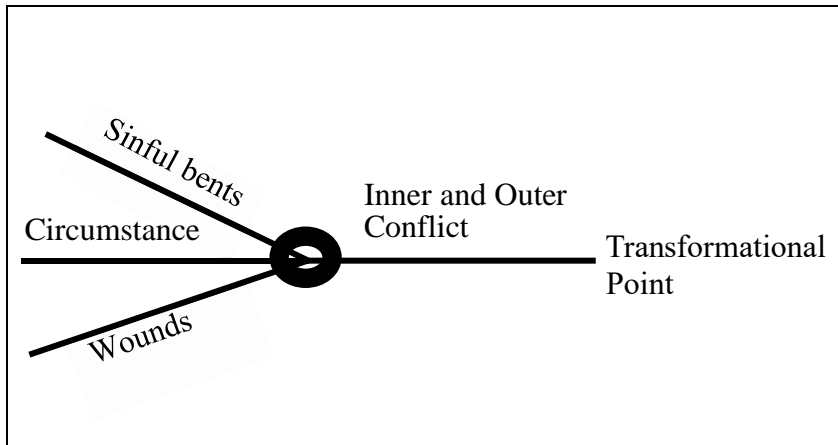
Adversity is life's best teacher and a friend that builds character. It cleanses you of your selfishness and self-righteousness. If a person does not experience adversity, shields themselves or does not learn from it, they ultimately live in immaturity. They miss the blessing that can be theirs. Conflict makes you understand that you need someone outside of you to scrub those areas so that you will become whole, blameless without blemish. Sometimes this is exhausting, but it is for a good purpose.

"I firmly believe that any man's finest hour, the greatest fulfillment of all that he holds dear, is the moment when he has worked his heart out in a good cause and lies exhausted on the field of battle, victorious." Vince Lombardi

### 1. Why does conflict happen?

The simple answer: we live in a broken world.

The more complete answer: Relational Conflict happens at the intersection of. . .



- Our Wounds: We have certain wounds (that will eventually be healed) that trigger emotions in us.
- Our Sinful Bents: We are sinful people; we have certain bents toward issues such as impatience, anger, control, powerlessness, etc.
- Our Circumstances: A certain situation happens in our life. Conflict happens when both of your sinful bents, wounds, and circumstances intersect inside of our hearts at a specific time and place.

- This conflict reveals our hidden wounds and sinful bents that need to be healed or transformed.
- This leads us to understand our points of transformation.

Promise of the Gospel: But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. Psalm 53:5

Central Question: How do you view conflict? A battle to be **WON** or a situation that matures you to be **ONE!**

## 2. What is a new way of understanding conflict?

### a. Collision: When Two Opposites Meet

Webster's dictionary defines conflict as:

- *a*: competitive or opposing action of incompatibles: antagonistic state or action (as of divergent ideas, interests, or persons)
- *b*: mental struggle resulting from incompatible or opposing needs, drives, wishes, or external or internal demands

Conflict happens when two opposing thoughts, expectations, emotions, or behaviors collide with one another in a specific time and place.

### b. Complaints: Offering Our Voice

<sup>17</sup>Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, and he hears my voice.<sup>18</sup> He redeems my soul in safety from the battle that I wage, for many are arrayed against me. Psalm 55:17-18

<sup>2</sup> How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!"

but you do not save? <sup>3</sup> Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds... Habakkuk 1:2-3

Conflict involves voicing our dissatisfaction with something in the relationship that we feel needs to be changed. It involves situations that need explained, expectations that need to be clarified, or feelings that needs to be expressed.



c. Challenge: An opportunity to be utterly amazed in God's redemption

- Redemption

The first attitude is proclaimed by David when he stated that the Lord "redeems (his) soul in safety." Psalm 55:18

- Utterly amazing

(The Lord Answers) <sup>5</sup> "Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your day that you would not believe, even if you were told. Habakkuk 1:5

- In context, God used the Babylonians to bring judgement and discipline on his people. This was painful for them.
- In our context, God is using painful and difficult things and circumstances to correct, challenge, and discipline his people so that they might repent and follow him.
- Bigger picture... God is still going to pursue and redeem his people

### **A New Definition of Conflict**

*Conflict involves a complaint from a person or party when they feel that two opposites are continually meeting. This gives both parties **the opportunity to learn and grow in becoming mature in character, changes deeper motivation/patterns, and challenges in ways that will leave us utterly amazed at the power of God.***

In essence, conflict or adversity is a tool God uses to move us to the end of ourselves and into dependence upon him.

- Each party wrestles with God but is asked to understand the bigger picture and to see something beyond the current conflict or adversity that is happening at the moment.
- Conflict challenges everyone involved to move beyond their patterns (family, personal story, selfishness) to become the people God has called them to be.
- Conflict allows people the opportunity to mature and grow as a person. (James 1:2-4)

"You're foolish not to take the opportunity to learn and grow from adversity and use it as valued experience. Anytime you can gain experience like that, it's an investment toward success." – Mike McCarthy – former Green Bay Packers Head Coach



Is your voice loud?  
Is your voice demanding?

- You can say all the right things but you can say it all wrong and have your message lost in translation.

#### A. CONFESSION

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.<sup>9</sup> If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 1 John 1:8-9

Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. James 5:2

- The first step in any conflict resolution is to admit your sins, your mistakes, your tendencies, and your weaknesses.
- Confession shields others from you and provides a walkway toward growth, understanding, and peace.

“I’m Sorry” and “Will you Forgive me?”

I’m sorry is a statement which asks for no answer

Will you forgive me is a question which expects an answer

I’m sorry is not taking responsibility-

Will you forgive me is acknowledging your guilt

I’m sorry for the pain is feeling bad that someone is hurting

Will you forgive me is acknowledging the sins that caused the pain

I’m sorry never deals with the issues of the heart

Will you forgive me is a confession that there is something wrong with your heart

I’m sorry can’t lead to brokenness because it doesn’t see the need for repentance

Will you forgive me is already repentant and is on a pathway to brokenness

I am sorry may lead to a dead end without a path toward reconciliation

Will you forgive me provides a road and a map toward reconciliation

Summary: Conflict brings you in touch with your sinful bent and your deep wounds. It makes you feel the brokenness of your own heart while at the same time making you reach out to the Savior who can heal your brokenness. Adversity moves you to become mature, complete, and not lacking anything. It brings you into the spirit of repentance.



## Part 6: Living in Gospel Repentance

“Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death” 2 Corinthians 7:10

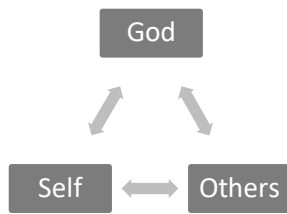
“If there is one thing young engaged couples needs to hear, it’s that a good marriage is not something you find, it’s something you work for. It takes struggle. You must crucify your selfishness. You must at times confront and other times confess. . . . The desire for ease, comfort and stress-free living is an indirect desire to remain “unseasoned,” immature Christian.” Gary Thomas, *Sacred Marriage* – p 133.

A look at two letters:

<p>Dear Ginny,</p> <p>I apologize for an error in my decision-making and judgment that affected you. To explain my accidental mistake, I found that I did not research this topic fully and confused several issues that you rightly informed me about earlier. I am sorry for telling others about this incorrect decision when it was wrong. I will correct this unfortunate situation with people involved. I’m sorry for this misunderstanding.</p> <p>Sincerely, John</p>	<p>Dear Ginny,</p> <p>I deeply apologize for the pain I caused you in my decision-making and judgment. I deeply hurt you because of my pride and defensiveness in not accepting your criticism. I do not have any justification for treating you in this manner. I ask your heartfelt forgiveness for gossiping about you. You did not deserve this pain. Will you forgive me? In this e-mail, I am enclosing a rough draft letter that I desire to send to those involved. Please give me your thoughts before I send it. I desire to correct this situation as soon as possible. I hope I can rebuild your trust.</p> <p>Sincerely, John</p>
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Which letter is “Godly Sorrow” and which is “Worldly Sorrow”?

What is Repentance?



“Repentance always involves three relationships: God, self and others. Repentance is a broken heart that continually turns away from old patterns, confesses hurtful attitudes, and changes one’s motivations and behaviors toward holiness. Repentance, then, is a product of brokenness. One cannot be repentant unless one is broken, and one cannot be broken unless one is repentant.” *Embracing Love*, p. 118.

## The Gospel Cycle of Repentance

### 1. Return to the lover of your soul

51:1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.

- Repentance always begins with the awareness of the unfailing love and grace of God.
- It is the return of the soul into the arms of a loving father.

### 2. Recognize the depth of your brokenness with God

PS 51:2 Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.:3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.:4 Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge 51:5 Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

- Repentance begins when there is a deep awareness of your sin toward God and God alone.
- There is a broken heart toward breaking God’s heart.

### 3. Reveal the truth of your selfishness

51:6 Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place. 7 Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. 8 Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice.9 Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity.

- Truth inner parts → Being honest about how you relate to your spouse  
Part of repentance is admitting the truth of your spirit toward your spouse. How am I relating? Fearful, prideful, controlling, defensive, etc.

- Teach wisdom in the inmost place → understanding of the heart

Am I willing to turn away from “not being wise” with my own life?

What is my motivation?

- Turn → Wash me whiter than snow, bones you have crushed rejoice.

Acknowledge the need to be cleansed.

Understand the Lord’s disciplining grace that moves us to holiness.

#### **4. Rearrangement of Inner Direction: A turning toward a new life**

<sup>10</sup> Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.<sup>11</sup>  
Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me:<sup>12</sup>  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

- Create heart: God has to create → It cannot come from within.
- Restore joy: Live in the joy of the light of the gospel.
- Sustain my heart: Keep me, hold me, let me cling and cleave to you.

#### **5. Restorative nature of love—teaching others about God’s grace.**

13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you 14  
Save me from bloodguilt, O God, the God who saves me, and my tongue will  
sing of your righteousness 15 O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare  
your praise.:16 You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it you do not  
take pleasure in burnt offerings.17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a  
broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

THEN

- Teach sinners about God so they will turn back to grace.
- Sing praises as an act of worship to your restoration because I have seen you.
- Broken Heart: a contrite heart or a humble heart!

**Repentance returns you back to the gospel!**

### **Going Deeper:**

1. Why is repentance so important in a marriage? How does this attitude combat selfishness?
2. How does the gospel cycle of repentance change your marriage? If you are not in this cycle, then what is the result?
3. Where do you need to be repentant in your marriage? In your relationships? Who do you need to go to and ask forgiveness?
4. Of what attitudes do you need to be repentant in your marriage? List them and then pray for the Holy Spirit to change you in these areas.
5. What have you learned about yourself and your marriage? What practical steps do you need to take to transform your marriage?

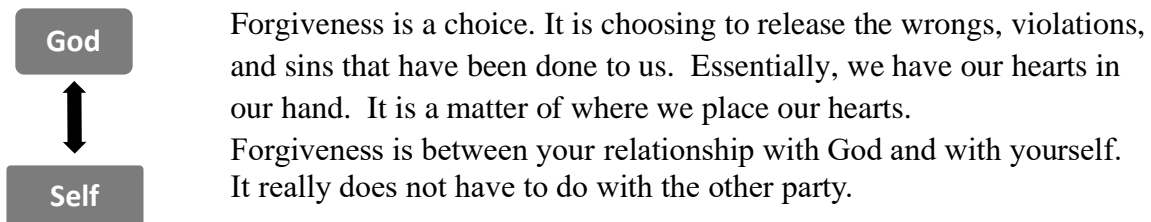


## Part 7: The Seven Tenacious Grips of Forgiveness: Daring to Love Beyond the Pain

“If you don’t forgive you will not be forgiven. No part of his teaching is clearer, and there are no exceptions to it. He doesn’t say that we forgive other people’s sins provided they are not too frightful or provided there are extenuating circumstances or anything of that sort. We are to forgive them all, however spiteful, however mean, however often they are repeated. . . .To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.” C. S Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*

### Tenacious Grip #1: Forgiveness is a choice of where you place your heart

“Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you not seven times but seventy-times seven.” (Matthew 18:21, NIV)



### Tenacious Grip #2: Forgiveness is living in the process of seventy-times-seven

- The tense of the verb forgive is often past imperfect, which means we continually forgive.
- Forgiveness is not only a one-time past event but an active process which continues into the present.
- Each time forgive the new details. Each time release the new pains. Each time allow mercy to flow over the betrayal. Each time do not allow another’s stupidity to become our foolishness.

### **Tenacious Grip #3 Forgiveness involves tears of grief what will not be or what never was**

<sup>23</sup> “Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. <sup>24</sup> When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. <sup>25</sup> And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. <sup>26</sup> So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ <sup>27</sup> And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.

- Out of pity- The king released him and forgave his debts.
- Grieving allows forgiveness to prosper while denial allows resentment to fester. Grieving has to do with acceptance. When one releases pain, one gains perspective on the circumstance and learns to live in the present. Without grief, forgiveness has no place to grip tenaciously.

### **Tenacious Grip # 4: Forgiveness says goodbye and hello well**

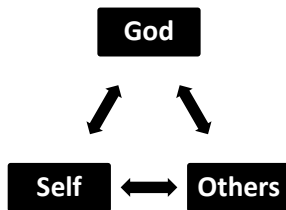
- Saying goodbye well requires suffering over safety. It is often safe to live in our past pains because it gives us a reason to act foolishly. However, when we say goodbye well we are willing to suffer by giving up our right to live in our violations.

### **Tenacious Grip # 5: Forgiveness is experiencing our own betrayal**

<sup>8</sup> But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ <sup>29</sup> So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ <sup>30</sup> He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt.

### **Tenacious Grip #6: Forgiveness redirects one's energy in a new direction**

<sup>31</sup> When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. <sup>32</sup> Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup> And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' Matthew 18:31-33



Forgiveness restores the power that was stolen from us. When we are given the power of forgiveness, we are stewards of that power. This power allows us to live and to love. This power allows us to find this new direction and gives us energy to walk down this unknown path.

### **Tenacious Grip #7: Forgiveness releases us into living in freedom**

<sup>34</sup> And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers until he should pay all his debt. Matthew 18:34

- Forgiveness will always lead to freedom. Forgiveness involves releasing the perpetrator, the debtor, or the thief so you can be set free.

“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.” Matthew 18:35

## **Going Deeper:**

1. How is “forgiveness” a process and a choice?
2. What is the reason “forgiveness” is so important to a healthy relationship with God, self, and others?
3. What “bitterness” or grudges do I need to forgive? Will I take steps this week to allow my heart to be placed in the grip of forgiveness?
4. What have you learned throughout the last seven weeks about your marriage?
5. What direction (or change) do you and/or your spouse need to take action after these last seven weeks?

### Paraphrase of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13:4-8

Love never runs out. It constantly flows with gentle power. Love seeks the needs of others before they know that they even exist. Love is not jealous of other people's successes but applauds and enjoys them as their own. Love does not showcase an image that does not exist but is authentic, humble, and honest. Love does not draw attention to our victories but allows them to be a secret parade where all heaven cheers. Love keeps good boundaries of self-control and accepts feedback from others even if one does not agree. Love does not allow others to endure our impulses, our selfishness, or our irritable attitudes.

Love looks forward and does not look back. It forgets yesterday's failures because tomorrow is a new day coming. Love stands up for truth and speaks it with calm clarity. Love will persevere to the end. Love never gives up when all hope is lost. Instead, love provides the power for hope to prosper. Love never gives in when one is tired and weak. Instead, love supplies strength to overcome. Love will always provide security, safety, steadfastness. Love endures forever.

*(From Embracing Love: Living on the Other Side of Disconnected Relationships, 256)*

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## APPENDIX 2

### NOTES FOR ADDITIONAL SEMINAR

#### **Sexual Sanity in Marriage Part 5 B**

**Principle #1 Sexual intercourse is not the main “meal” of a relationship. It is the dessert of the relationship because of the candlelight meal of relational intimacy.**

<sup>25</sup> Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her <sup>26</sup> to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, <sup>27</sup> and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. <sup>28</sup> In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. <sup>29</sup> After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church— <sup>30</sup> for we are members of his body. <sup>31</sup> “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” <sup>32</sup> This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. <sup>33</sup> However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband. Ephesians 5:21-32

<sup>3</sup> The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. <sup>4</sup> The wife’s body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband’s body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife. <sup>5</sup> Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. 1st Corinthians 7:3-5

- a. Making Love is important part of the marriage design but it is not the highlight or the foundation of the relationship. It is the culmination of cooking a gospel- centered meal through relational commitment, discovering, the individual soul and learning to be grace-centered in our relationships.
- b. Sex is not to be demanded. It is not to say to the woman, “Your body is mine Give it to me.” Rather it is to say, “My body is yours. How can I serve you with it? How can I love you with it?”
- c. It is a mutual delight and an attitude of other-centeredness.

**Principle # 2 Engage in creating an atmosphere of making love throughout the week before the actual act of intercourse.**

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup> If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup> If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. <sup>4</sup> Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. <sup>5</sup> It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. <sup>6</sup> Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup> It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13:1-6

- a. “Making Love” is done throughout the whole week by doing the mundane things like taking out the garbage, spending time, listening and cultivating an atmosphere of intimacy.
- b. Making Love is a culmination of intimacy of love, communication, affection, adoration that allows sex to be experienced as a delight. (Remember 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 7 (about marriage and relationships) were just five chapters earlier.)

**Principle #3 Sexual activities between a husband and a wife are mutually pleasurable but should never make a person uncomfortable, demeaning or abusive.**

<sup>12</sup>“Everything is permissible for me”—but not everything is beneficial. “Everything is permissible for me”—but I will not be mastered by anything. <sup>13</sup>“Food for the stomach and the stomach for food”—but God will destroy them both. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. <sup>14</sup> By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. <sup>15</sup> Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! <sup>16</sup> Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, “The two will become one flesh.”<sup>17</sup> But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit.

- a. All kinds of sexual activity solely between a husband and a wife are acceptable and can be enjoyed in the context of marriage.
- b. The key to sexual activity is to make sure each party is comfortable and whatever activity is pursued does not violate their preciousness, their conscience or their self-image. Communication with vulnerability is key to this part of your relationship.



**Principle #4 Never use sex as a carrot to be won or a manipulative tactic to try to gain an advantage for something you want or something to be gained.**

It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; <sup>4</sup> that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, <sup>5</sup> not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; <sup>6</sup> and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 4: 3-4

- a. If we are not to “take advantage of each other” outside of marriage, how much more so within the context of marriage?
- b. Sex is not an instrument of coerciveness or manipulation. It is an instrument of grace and delight.

**Principle #5 It is important to understand that in the sexual relationship there is both Godly submission or other-centeredness and healthy sexual self-orientedness. Be open and honest about your own desires as well as allowing the other to have freedom to respond to your requests.**

**See Dr. Doug Rosenau article from the “Celebration of Sex” pages 5-8 attached.**

- a. “But fulfilling sex also requires being selfish. If we are always other-focused and if we repress or ignore our own needs, we forfeit complete sexual fulfillment. Intimate love making is a partnership with both selfishness and unselfishness.” Pg 5-6
- b. “Orgasms are an excellent example of healthy sexual selfishness. Your mate does not experience your orgasm. You focus on your sexual feelings and allow them to build to a climax.” Pg 6
- c. “You selfishly enjoy your orgasms but unselfishly allow your mate to observe how much pleasure your mate brings you.” Pg 6
- d. The downside of selfishness is being egocentric and thinking the world revolves around your needs. This creates an unwillingness to empathize with another person's needs and lovingly satisfy them. Greed, insecurity, false pride, and laziness create a negative self-centeredness and play havoc with sexual intimacy. Pg 6-7

## APPENDIX 3

### MARRIAGE PRE- AND POST-PROJECT SURVEY

#### **Agreement to Participate**

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to identify the current understanding of your thoughts about marriage including background, theological beliefs, and relational dynamics. Steve Benson, MA, MDIV, LPC-S, LCAS is conducting this research for the purpose of collecting data for a ministry project for a doctoral degree in educational ministry at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

In this research, you will answer questions about your background, beliefs and relational dynamics in your marriage before the seven-week educational series. Then after the series, you will answer the same questions. Any information you provide will be held *strictly confidential*, and at no time will your name be reported or identified with your responses. Participation is strictly voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time.

By completion of this survey, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this research, and signing your name below, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this research.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Part 1: Demographic information**

The first section of this questionnaire will obtain some demographic information.

Directions: Answer the following questions by placing a check next to the appropriate answer or filling in the blank.

- 1. What is your age in years?  
 A. 18-24  
 B. 25-34  
 C. 35-44  
 D. 45-54  
 E. 55-64  
 F. 65 and over
  
- 2. Are you married?  If so, for how long? \_\_\_\_\_
  
- 3. Did you have pre-marital counseling?  
A. Yes  
B. No  
C N/A

If so, approximately how many sessions? \_\_\_\_\_

- 4. Are you a Christian, if so how long?  
A. 0-5  
B. 6-10  
C. 11-15  
D. 16-20  
E. 21-25  
F. 26 and over  
G. I do not proclaim to be a Christian.

- 5. Do you have children?  How many and ages? (Please don't put names.)

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**Part 2: Background of Marriage**

For each of the next five questions, please give a phrase or sentence in response. Don't think too hard on it but answer with the first thoughts that come to mind.

- 6. Why did you get married or want to get married?

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7. What are two external stresses (finances, work, time etc) in your marriage?
  - A. \_\_\_\_\_
  - B. \_\_\_\_\_
8. What are two internal struggles (communication, conflict, intimacy etc) in your marriage?
  - A. \_\_\_\_\_
  - B. \_\_\_\_\_
9. If I could change one thing in my marriage it would be. . .  
\_\_\_\_\_
10. On a scale of 1-10 (1 being lowest and 10 being highest), how do you rate your overall marriage? \_\_\_\_\_

### **Part 3: Biblical Knowledge of Marriage**

For each of the next ten questions, please complete the sentence. Don't think too hard on it but answer with the first words that come to mind.

11. In regard to marriage, covenant means \_\_\_\_\_
12. Grace means to \_\_\_\_\_
13. "Leave and cleave" means to \_\_\_\_\_
14. The purpose for marriage is to \_\_\_\_\_
15. The goal of marriage is to \_\_\_\_\_
16. The role of a husband is to \_\_\_\_\_
17. The role of the wife is to \_\_\_\_\_
18. I believe submission means to \_\_\_\_\_
19. Repentance means \_\_\_\_\_
20. The main general problem (not necessarily your personal marriage) in marriage is:  
\_\_\_\_\_

Personal Identification Number: (last four digits of your phone number) \_\_\_\_\_

#### Part 4: Relational Marriage Patterns

Directions: Based on the following scale, circle the option that best represents your agreement with the statement (Don't think too hard on it but circle the first answer that comes to mind): SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, DS = Disagree Somewhat, AS = Agree Somewhat, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree.

1	I am comfortable losing an argument with my spouse	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
2	I will put pressure on or discourage my spouse to get what I want.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
3	I am willing to own my sins/mistakes without minimizing them	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
4	I can easily let go of and forgive when my spouse wrongs me	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
5	I can own my choices and actions when in a conflict	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
6	I can easily share my deepest thoughts, hurts, or sins with my spouse.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
7	I don't automatically consider my spouse's thoughts when making choices	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
8	I don't like to feel "lesser than" in an argument, so I point out my spouse's flaws first	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
9	I can easily and respectfully accept feedback from my spouse	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
10	I am uncomfortable telling my spouse about my inadequacies and failures.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
11	I want my spouse to do things my way most of the time.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
12	I am completely honest with my spouse	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
13	I am consistent with my actions	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
14	I will say, "I forgive you!" but will remember my spouse's past failures in an argument	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
15	I try to make others follow my desires even when I know they don't want to	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
16	I act forcefully toward my spouse to get what I want.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
17	I don't need approval of others to have self-confidence.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
18	When I get hurt, I shut down and tune others out.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA

19	I feel my spouse brings me comfort and security	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
20	I carefully weigh out all options and possible consequences before making my decisions.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
21	I usually make excuses for my sins instead of owning them	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
22	When I get angry, I have control of my actions, responses, and words	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
23	I need for my spouse to meet my expectation before I forgive them	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
24	My spouse does not need to agree with me to accept me.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA

Personal Identification Number: (last four digits of your phone number) \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX 4

T-TEST: PAIRED TWO SAMPLE FOR MEANS RESULTS

	<i>PRE-TEST TOTAL</i>	<i>POST-TEST- TOTAL</i>	
Mean	102.1579	111.6316	yes
Variance	228.3626	214.6901	
Observations	19	19	
Pearson Correlation	0.672702		
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0		
df	18		
t Stat	-3.42755		
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.001501		yes
t Critical one-tail	1.734064		yes
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.003003		
t Critical two-tail	2.100922		yes

Key to Pre and Post Test

Defensive Mechanism				<b>Total</b>
Fear	6. ____	10 ____	12. ____	____
Pride	1. ____	7 ____	13 ____	____
Control	11 ____	15 ____	20 ____	____
Self-righteousness	17. ____	19 ____	24. ____	____
Blame-shifting	3 ____	5 ____	21. ____	____
Defensive	8. ____	9. ____	18. ____	____
Bitterness	4. ____	14 ____	23 ____	____
Rage	2 ____	16 ____	22 ____	____

**Results:** My dominant mechanism is \_\_\_\_\_ (Your **LOWEST** score)

and my back-up mechanism is \_\_\_\_\_ (Your second Lowest score)

APPENDIX 5

CURRICULUM EVALUATION RUBRIC

This appendix includes the three evaluations from the pastoral staff at Freedom Church.

Living in a Grace Centered Marriage Curriculum Evaluation Tool					
Lesson One					
1=insufficient 2= needs attention 3 =sufficient, 3= 4=exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
The material is faithful to the biblical text				✓	It is rare that I don't wince when an outsider teaches. Steve was faithful and consistent to the Biblical text.
The material is theologically sound.				✓	Robust view of brokenness, depravity and corresponding strong view of grace, repentance, and forgiveness.
The thesis of the lesson is clearly stated.			✓		Clear aim in each lesson
The points of the lesson clearly support the thesis.			✓		Clear supported points
The lesson contains practical application				✓	Emotionally practical and useful content
The lesson is sufficiently thorough in its coverage of the material.				✓	Great depth and maturity of content
The lesson is clearly relevant to understanding the principles of grace				✓	Relationships require grace!
Overall, the lesson is clearly presented.				✓	Outstanding material which I plan to return to



Living in a Grace Centered Marriage Curriculum Evaluation Tool					
Lesson One					
1=insufficient 2= needs attention 3 =sufficient, 3= 4=exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
The material is faithful to the biblical text				✓	Thankful for faithfulness
The material is theologically sound.				✓	
The thesis of the lesson is clearly stated.				✓	
The points of the lesson clearly support the thesis.				✓	
The lesson contains practical application				✓	
The lesson is sufficiently thorough in its coverage of the material.			✓		Time crunch was out of your hands
The lesson is clearly relevant to understanding the principles of grace				✓	You remind us that we are his beloved!
Overall, the lesson is clearly presented.				✓	

Living in a Grace Centered Marriage Curriculum Evaluation Tool					
Lesson One					
1=insufficient 2= needs attention 3 =sufficient, 3= 4=exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
The material is faithful to the biblical text				✓	Each lesson is founded upon scripture. Texts were faithfully presented from scripture.
The material is theologically sound.				✓	Confident that Freedom members were given theologically faithful diet
The thesis of the lesson is clearly stated.				✓	The main point of overall study and each lesson presented with clarity
The points of the lesson clearly support the thesis.				✓	Each lesson connected and built upon the other
The lesson contains practical application				✓	Good illustration- filled with good application
The lesson is sufficiently thorough in its coverage of the material.				✓	In-depth study of each topic presented
The lesson is clearly relevant to understanding the principles of grace				✓	Each lesson was dripping with grace. Steve presented the material not as a perfectionist but as a fellow sinner pointing us to the grace found in Jesus.
Overall, the lesson is clearly presented.				✓	Steve did a great job getting to the root of the problems we face in marriage that mutually leads to a better fruitful life.

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## ABSTRACT

### LEARNING TO LIVE IN A GRACE-CENTERED MARRIAGE AT FREEDOM CHURCH IN LINCOLNTON, NORTH CAROLINA

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This project seeks to equip members of Freedom Church in Lincolnton, North Carolina to live in Grace-Centered Marriages. Chapter 1 presents the history and ministry context of Freedom Church, the partnership with Grace Roads Counseling Center and the goals of this project. Chapter 2 provides exegesis of two main passages of Scripture (Ephesians 5:21-33; Genesis 3 and 4) to show the redemptive design of how grace matures our character, identities and relating styles. Chapter 3 presents resources for the historical, contemporary views and philosophies, purpose and practices of marriage available. Chapter 4 describes the project itself, recounting the content and teaching methodology of the specific course curriculum. Chapter 5 evaluates the efficacy of the project based on completion of the specified goals. Ultimately, this project seeks to equip Christians with the confidence to live the gospel of grace in their marriages.



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