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Shawn P. McConaughey
shawnmcon@gmail.com

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Shawn P. McConaughey

Professor Howard Macy

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The Church in the Postmarriage Society

Section 1: Where are We and How Did We Get Here?

Pastors hear the same story too many times. The faces are different, and the circumstances have new twists, but the story of another marriage breaking apart is too familiar. The consequences are always the same, a ripping and tearing apart of a family. There are wounded hearts, crushed self-esteem, and plenty of blame to go around. The frustration is that those people breaking up are Christians. Often they are a part of the church, and in many cases the church or their faith didn't seem to be a part of the equation for making a decision to divorce. Many do not view the church as a viable option for getting help. By the time they come to the church it is usually out of a sense of obligation to "let the church know" they are separating.

It doesn't seem to matter who carries the blame, everyone agrees that divorce is not the ideal. While divorce can be the best of the worst, no one sets out to end there. For those who are in the church divorce is supposedly even farther removed. There is a higher standard based on the notion that "God hates divorce." (New International Version, Malachi 2:16). The church traditionally has held fairly strong views against divorce. In addition to being anti-divorce, the church has thought of itself as pro-marriage and pro-family.

In the church there seem to be other dynamics that enter into the fray. Often a whole group of people are caught in the conflict in some way. There are questions about what is the right thing to do. There is always a degree of second-guessing, demonizing, side-taking, and general hurt over the brokenness that reaches into what many consider to be a safe place. The reality of

separation and divorce in the church causes many to shed their illusion of marriage immortality. Doubt and questioning creep in as those who seemed so strong are torn apart by divorce. The culture of divorce is increasingly rampant within the Christian community. The rate of divorce is on the rise and it has taken the church right along with it. Until the 1960's the church in America did not face a huge divorce problem.

"Only 14 percent of the women who married in the early 1940's eventually divorced.... For the average American, the probability that a marriage taking place today will end in divorce or permanent separation is calculated to be a staggering 60 percent." (Council on Families in America, 299)

While the church's reactions to the increasing divorce culture in the 20th century have been somewhat varied, the response has largely been unhelpful. Those reactions have determined whether people perceive the church as a source of effective help for their troubled marriage.

"Christianity has had an enormous influence on the marriage and family theory of Western societies. This influence, however, is not widely understood. Furthermore, it is widely believed in most intellectual quarters that this influence is over." (Browning, 119)

Simply said, the church does not have the influence it once had. While the church used to be a hub of activity and lifestyle in a community, it is largely just part of a long list of options that a family has for spending its discretionary time. While that probably overstates the situation, it is largely true in the minds of more and more people. Along with the lessening of the primary place of the church in the life of families, the obvious loss of influence in the areas of marriage and family is a natural result.

There is an obvious parting of the ways when considering the trends in marriage and family in the West from the message of the church. The divorce rate climbs, the marriage rate drops, the cohabitation rate increases, and more and more children are being born out of wedlock.

"Divorce rates have skyrocketed in the past thirty years, and even more recently we have seen a veritable explosion in the rate of unwed motherhood. What this means, in human terms, is that about half of today's

children will spend at least a portion of their growing up years living apart from their fathers." (Popenoe, Life Without Father, 2)

The church has not historically encouraged divorce, cohabitation or children born out of wedlock. In fact, the opposite is true. Trends opposing the church have become dominate. Now it seems that churches are in a reactive position forced to respond to hurt, perform spiritual triage, and help put lives back together. Instead of the church shaping cultural trends, the culture has often left the church behind, leaving it to find ways to catch up to the ever changing face of the concerns and problems that people find as a part of life. The church often seems to have been reduced to a reactionary force rather than a proactive one.

This situation prompts these questions: Why is the message of the church not heeded as it once was? What does the church have to offer the institutions of marriage and family? Is the message of a life-long marriage commitment relevant? What role should the church take in the marriages and families within a faith community? What role should it take outside of the faith community?

Why is the message of the church apparently not heeded as it once was? It is important to define what the message of the church is. At the center it is that God directs marriage to be a life-long relationship, that divorce is, with few exceptions, not an option, and that children should be conceived only within wedlock. Along with those core beliefs certain values like mutual submission, the primacy of love, servanthood, and Christlikeness are central in the issues of marriage. While marriage for life is not a uniquely Christian theme, one can safely say that its origins are found there.

The answer to the question could take a variety of forms. Some would say that the move away from the church was caused by a change in attitude towards the purpose and intention of marriage.

"Beginning in the late 1950's, Americans began to change their ideas about the individual's obligations to family and society. Broadly described, this change was away from an ethic of obligation to others and toward an obligation to self." (Whitehead, The Divorce Culture, 4)

An increase, or more likely a shift, in marriage expectations could be to blame as well.

"Most of these same authorities also believe, however that changes in values, attitudes, and norms have affected American marriage... spouses now expect more from marriage than they once did and that the roles of husband and wife have been redefined. A few authors refer to a decline in commitment to marriage as an institution and similar cultural and psychological changes that tend to weaken the institution and lower the probability that individual marriages will succeed." (Glenn, 15-16.)

Interestingly, surveys indicate that having a good marriage and family remains at the top of the list of life goals of 18 year olds. Yet at the same time divorce rates increase and marriage rates decrease. Norval D. Glenn poses an answer.

"Having a good marriage could remain a salient goal while the values and norms conducive to attainment of that goal become weaker. People could want and expect more from marriage while they become less willing to make the sacrifices and investments needed for marital success." (16.)

So while it may be true that there are fewer and fewer successful marriages as indicated by divorce rates, it may not hold true that marriage is not important to people. The message of the church then may indeed be relevant, and the challenge for the church will be to share a message with people who have the same hopes and dreams and yet hold very different values and attitudes towards what successful marriage looks like.

Some part of the answer may lie in the way that many have bought into common myths about marriage and divorce. Many of those myths center around the changing attitude of what a successful marriage is. Newer views of marriage have included a value of how the marriage can help the individual fulfill their own needs. At one time success was based on the health and fulfillment of the family as a unit rather than individual fulfillment.

One myth might be that "Marriage is good for men and bad for women". In the late 1970's and early 1980's authors such as Jessie Bernard, Psychologist Sonya Friedman, and Psychiatrist Julian Hafner (Eastman, 45-46) perpetuated this attitude through their writing. Some of the basis for this attitude was the combination of growing women's rights sentiments, the fact that women's rights in marriages were not seen as equal, and the high number of married women who did not work outside of the home.

"The divorce revolution set out to achieve some worthy social goals: to foster greater equality between men and women; to improve the family lives of women; and to expand individual happiness and choice. We recognize the enduring importance of these social goals." (Council on Families in America, 293)

Those attitudes helped make sweeping changes in the views of all people towards marriage, encouraged the normalization of more non-traditional marriage and family arrangements, and influenced legislation around divorce rights especially for women.

"One might think that the lowering of legal, moral, and social barriers to divorce would at least have diminished the proportion of adults in poor marriages, but the 1973-93 data on the percent of all persons age eighteen and older who were in marriages they reported to be less than 'very happy' show virtual stability. The percent in 'very happy' marriages declined substantially while the percent unmarried increased proportionately." (Glenn, 17)

A myth that is coupled to this is that divorce is better for kids because the tension between parents is no longer a present factor in the home.

"Influential voices in the society, including child-welfare professionals, claimed that the happiness of individual parents, rather than an intact marriage, was the key determinant of children's family well-being. If divorce could make one or both parents happier, then it was likely to improve the well-being of children as well." (Whitehead, The Divorce Culture, 6)

These myths have been shown to be false. Many studies now indicate that the price children and women and men pay in divorce is clearly higher than the perceived benefit of divorce. The

benefits of marriage seem to be numerous. Married people and their children statistically are better off financially and emotionally. Their quality of life is higher, there are fewer instances of mental illness, and married people tend to live longer and have lower rates of destructive behaviors. Children who live with both birth parents do better in school, have a lower crime rate, lower drug use, and a higher graduation rate. For instance, in most cases of divorce the child(ren) stays with the mother. In these cases the income of the household declines by about 21% per capita on average. And expenses go up...thus the economies of scale gained from sharing expenses are lost....22 percent of children from single-parent families will experience persistent poverty (of seven years or more), versus only 2 percent from two-parent families. (Popenoe, 53-78).

Another myth that has contributed to the higher divorce rate and lower marriage rate is centered around a high view of marriage. One argument goes that since marriage is so important then one must be sure and, the best way to take it seriously is to live with a potential mate to be sure of who one is marrying before making the commitment to marriage. That is a major reason behind the growing cohabitation rate. Another argument based on high expectations of marriage is that if it is not fulfilling then one must get out of it and find a marriage that is all one hopes it can be. It seems like reverse logic for many who also have a high view of marriage, but who would argue that it is that high view that instead necessitates a strong long-term commitment to a marriage.

The plan has backfired on those who see cohabitation as a way to have a more successful marriage. A high percentage of those who cohabit plan to marry (over 90%) (Stanton, 57) but for some reason the divorce rate for those who cohabit before marriage is significantly higher than for those who do not. The most conservative numbers say that the chance of divorce is at

least 50% higher for those who cohabitate compared to those who do not. Some say it is as high as 80-90%. As for the hopes of a better marriage,

"Contrary to the conventional wisdom that living together before marriage will screen out poor matches and therefore improve subsequent marital stability, there is considerable empirical evidence demonstrating that premarital cohabitation is associated with lowered marital stability." (Stanton, 57)

What does the church have to offer the institution of marriage and family?

Divorce is not something new in Western society. However, it was not until the 1960's that the issue of divorce became common. Until that time divorced people were viewed poorly in society's eyes. For a variety of reasons divorce began to gain momentum and the church's view of marriage as a life commitment became outdated. That was coupled with the lack of care and acceptance that many divorcees found in the church. The shift away from the church as a viable voice began. A chasm between the church and pro-divorce viewpoints was created. That chasm continued to grow until recent years. It has been in those recent years that many who formerly thought of divorce as healthy have begun to rethink that position.

It is becoming increasingly clear that the message of marriage-for-life has definite benefits and is encouraged more and more by those who study the issues of divorce, marriage and family. The marriage-for-life message is not just being touted by Christians. The secular world is recognizing more and more the value of the complete nuclear family. Not only is there recognition but there is a call to challenge the divorce culture and replace it with a renewed value towards building healthy marriages. That attempt is evidenced by efforts such as the book Promises to Keep: Decline and Renewal of Marriage in America which is a collective effort by the Council on Families in America. This Council received support from the Institute for American Values as well as three other major grant foundations, none of which are specifically Christian or based on a religious institution.

The purpose of the book is clearly stated.

"America's divorce revolution has failed. A primary purpose of this report, then, is to urge our society to switch the topic. Our society's current topic might be termed managing family decline, or ameliorating some of the worst consequences of a divorce culture...It is time to raise the stakes, raise our standards, and begin a new discussion. The new discussion will be less about symptoms and problems than about causes and solutions. The new discussion we propose might be termed recreating a marriage culture." (Council on Families in America, 296)

Is the message of a life-long marriage commitment still relevant? As was mentioned earlier, the goal of having a good marriage and family life ranked highest among those high school seniors who were asked "which life goals were extremely important" (Glenn, 21). Based on that notion it appears that there is need and a place for the church to be influential. However, the ideal of life-long healthy marriages is not just a perceived need that the church can speak to. The stability of marriage is scriptural and, for the church at least, that should be a driving force for helping our world build healthy, whole relationships. It brings with it a raft of issues: It influences or ought to influence how the church operates, some of its values and priorities, and how it structures and programs its weekly activities. Maybe most importantly it must take into consideration the actual marriages and families within its walls. Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, in an interview with Christianity Today, says:

"Theologically and practically, what have our churches to say about decisions and behaviors that affect children and other spouses? By not talking about it [divorce], the church sanctions it...What remains unaddressed and underdeveloped has to do exactly not with divorce but with marriage and what it means. That's my challenge to the church." (Christianity Today November 1997, 53)

When a church takes a stand on some issue it may bring some division because there are always people on both sides of the issue. In churches there are those who are divorced for a variety of reasons, those who wish they were divorced, those who are in troubled marriages who

are determined to stick it out, and those in happy marriages, not to mention all those who are not married by choice, death, or age. As the marriage issue rears its head many pastors feel torn at just how to present the issues of marriage and divorce because there is always the risk that someone will be alienated. This often results in no clear teaching. Again the church has become like the world and anything goes. It seems that a church could really help its members by agreeing together on a course of understanding that actively promotes and encourages the building of healthy marriages. Few people (divorced or otherwise) think divorce is a positive thing. At best it is the best of the bad options. Almost everyone favors strong families and marriages even if their own is not. If that is true, the risk of alienation seems to be a preferable to an approach of passive non-opinion on the issue. If a church is willing to take that risk it can find ways to actively care for those who are at risk of alienation in the presence of a strong pro-marriage and family voice.

What role, if any, should the church take in the marriage and families of those within a faith community? In order for the church to have a voice in the lives of people who attend a church or who make themselves a part of a faith community, the church must be willing to do several things. These are briefly outlined here but will be explained further in later sections.

First, the church must be willing to take a proactive role in the lives of people. For many this may be perceived as meddling; but if the church is going to be part of shifting the tide of broken marriages, then she must take an intentional stance. That stance may take a variety of forms. Mostly it means a change in attitude for both the leadership and those who make themselves a part of a particular church. Intentionality will mean creating an expectation that the church places healthy marriages as a high value, and that high value means that the church will be actively involved in the marriages and families of folks within that faith community. Folks new to a

church ought to be able to detect quickly the importance a church places on the well being of marriages and families. Those who grow up in the church should encounter direct teaching about the values, beliefs, and attitudes that build healthy families. This influence ought to begin in the early years of a child's experience. These attitudes of a church must be actively promoted and "advertised" through the language used, the priorities of a budget, and by having quality programs.

Secondly, the church must continually seek to help people discover the connection of spiritual lives with practical everyday life issues. It is easy to focus on the need of families and allow that to overshadow the overarching purpose of the church, which is to help people know and experience God. While the issue of marriage and family health is a central commitment, it must never become a hindrance to the spiritual health of members. Fortunately, it does not have to be an either/or proposition. The very nature of a deep relationship with God leads us to deep healthy relationships with one another. The spiritual life impacts all of life. This wholistic view provides opportunity to make scripture, the gospel, and core beliefs relevant to our marriage. Spirituality does not have to be sacrificed in emphasizing "practical life" and day-to-day living does not have to be lost in light of the spiritual depth and understanding. This may be an obvious point, but it is unlikely that many would list their attitudes about marriage or other relationships as a component of a deeply spiritual life. Often the "practical" classes and programs in a church don't get equal billing as those that are characterized as more spiritual or Bible-oriented.

Third, the church needs to help people understand successful marriage characteristics. The church's response toward those who divorce has largely been either greater tolerance or stricter standards. While these responses have some basis, both seem to be more reactive than proactive. The church has had to react because divorce is a glaring reality. Many damaged people wander

through the doors looking to have needs met. Tolerance may remove perceived barriers for divorced people in the church and make the church a more inviting place. Yet it may provide no real help or constructive challenge in the lives of people who have been welcomed in. The stricter standards direction "raises the bar" and places a high value on the permanence of marriage, but tends to alienate and create motivations based on guilt and fear.

A church that is able to actively love people by caring and helping the healing process will begin to make a difference. At the same time churches must both confront the attitudes and wrong thinking that misleads people and help redefine health through deepening spiritual means.

For those in the church who are not divorced, the church has a great opportunity to actively help build right thinking, deep spiritual health, and practical tools for building life-giving relationships. Unfortunately many churches continue to be only reactive in terms of marriage and family, waiting until a problem arises to act.

Ideally a church could help define those characteristics of a healthy marriage and seek ways to help people live into those. Those characteristics will undoubtedly have basis in scripture and the spiritual health of the individuals. For example, some of those characteristics revolve around selfless love, mutual submission, sacramental living, and marriage as covenant.

While it is obvious to say that a healthy spiritual life will help build a healthy marriage, many times the connections are not made intentionally and are largely assumed. The temptations for people to compartmentalize their lives, separating out the spiritual from other areas of life, is problematic. At the very least a church's willingness to define healthy marriage characteristics and intentionally pursue those could make substantial headway in curbing broken families.

Finally, the church must not be part of the problem. A church's attitudes and expectations can cause damage to its members. The church can be harmful in more subtle ways. The church can

place large time demands on families, especially those that have family members attending meetings and services on many different nights of the week. Secondly, there is a temptation to separate families at events. Thirdly, having minimal faith community involvement in the dating, courting and engagement stages of relationships can be detrimental. Often the community has no real involvement until the wedding occurs and then maybe not again until a crisis arises. Instead of just one or two representatives of the church (usually the pastor) being involved, inviting the involvement of the wider community could create an atmosphere more conducive to the building of healthy relationships.

More blatantly harmful actions and attitudes churches can demonstrate include: Oppressive attitudes towards women, an unwillingness to confront (or denial of) serious marital issues among members especially leadership, and pastors who abuse power and who have affairs or commit other sexual sin.

What role, if any, should the church take with those people and institutions outside of the church? The role of the church in society is crucial but it is difficult to determine just how to go about impacting society. In order to have anything to offer, the church must first be able to deal well with marriages inside the church and have a good idea of what characterizes healthy marriages so that it has a goal to move towards. Most importantly the church must find ways to get outside itself and not wait for people to come through the doors of the church for help. Practically, the church can involve itself in schools, social service agencies, and the courts as a resource option for those who need help. The church can sponsor events, both in its building and in the community, to foster healthy attitudes and actions for good marriages. The church can also be involved in the political and educational arena on behalf of family and marriage building. The

possibilities are endless, but the church will not be effective outside its own walls unless it is intentional, well-educated, and prepared to provide quality programs and services.

The following sections include both theory and practical suggestions for the church to become marriage-friendly. Section #2 takes on the question: What does a healthy marriage look like? It will characterize traits of a healthy marriage, including focus on some scriptural concepts. Section #3 looks at what attitudes, actions, and practices a church can instill to build healthy marriages. Section #4 lists resources for churches to use in many aspects of building a marriage-friendly church.

This project is centered around the increasing divorce culture in the West, primarily in the United States, and how the church can be an active part of reversing that trend. While almost all religious traditions can be helpful in curbing the divorce trend and could adapt this information, this author will focus on these issues within the Christian tradition.

The Church in the Postmarriage Society

Section #2:

What does a healthy marriage look like?

The statistics laid out in section #1 show that marriage is not a healthy institution.

“Of all the social problems facing American civilization, the decline of marriage and the breakup of the family is unquestionably our most pressing problem. Its impact is widespread and comprehensively destructive” (Stanton, 18)

If the church is to be effective in helping marriages grow towards health, then there must be a change from that norm. A reversal in marriage trends must be the new direction. Status quo is not an option for the church or any institution hoping to move marriages towards health and longevity. Everything from attitudes about marriage to marriage practices that build healthy relationships will have to change in order to see improvements. There will also need to be a change in the attitude of the church that helps see marriage as a worthwhile enterprise of the church's time and effort. The church has seen marriage as an important part of human life, but it is unclear the degree to which the church views healthy marriage as being important within the mission of the church.

Several basic questions have to be addressed and acted upon if the church means to make a bigger difference than it presently does. The obvious question seems to be what a healthy marriage looks like. A question of similar importance is whether it is possible to increase the health of a marriage. A final question asks how a couple builds a healthy marriage. The answers to these questions may help couples, institutions, and individuals who set out to construct a healthier, longer-lasting relationship.

Many books and articles have been written to help couples improve their marriages. While most authors seem to have a varied list of just what will help a marriage, there appear to be some

similarities. There are some marriage authors that list characteristics that are typical of healthy marriages. While not every list is identical or even in agreement on all counts, several commonalities exist. Among those sources sampled there emerged a list of about five core characteristics that seem to be constants in healthy marriages.

These five traits are:

1. Strong commitment to one's partner and the marriage.
2. Deep love and admiration.
3. An ability to communicate effectively and resolve conflict.
4. An ability to cope with crisis and make necessary changes.
5. A high level of shared values and power.

Each author's list had different but similar language for these five traits. Several authors also had other traits that are important but not shared as broadly. These authors were also not necessarily Christian in their approach to healthy marriages. Several of the traits could include specifically Christian or Biblical characteristics. For instance, the trait of deep love and admiration could include a discussion about Christian marriage modeling God's deep, unconditional love for humankind. In the area of shared values there could be an understanding of those values being Christ-centered in nature. The following is an explanation of each trait.

1. Strong commitment to one's partner and the marriage:

This trait includes a broad range of issues. It is about the ongoing move away from family of origin to a deep commitment to one's partner. Judith Wallerstein writes,

“The first task in any first marriage is to separate psychologically from the family of origin and simultaneously create a new kind of connectedness with the parents' generation. These intertwined tasks, seemingly in opposition are mutually necessary...To have a good marriage, you must establish an

independent stance and be able to rely on your own moral judgment and your own ability to make choices.

Most of all, you must shift your primary focus to establishing a new family.” (53)

Commitment is also ongoing, not just a one time decision to commit. Commitment is, in the words of John M. Gottman, the choice to continually “turn toward each other instead of away” which may be another way of saying commitment to build the marriage and work towards implementing the rest of the list of traits.

“Turning toward is the basis of emotional connection, romance, passion, and a good sex

life...turning toward your spouse in the little ways is also the key to long-lasting romance.” (Gottman, 81-82).

The transition of turning towards a partner and away from a family of origin is reflected in the wedding ceremonies of many traditions including the Western tradition of the “giving of the bride” by the father or family of the bride. Scripture also indicates the importance of the man leaving his father and mother to join with his bride.

“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.” (New International Version, Genesis 2:24)

Commitment includes the balance of togetherness and autonomy that needs to be present not only for the health of the marriage but the health of the two individuals. In some modern understandings of marriage there is a recognition that each partner needs freedom to be an individual while at the same time each makes a commitment to set aside a portion of that autonomy in order to deepen the health of the relationship. “It works only if the couple regards the well-being of the marriage as more important than the separate desire of either partner. The sense of what is fair is heavily influenced by the family of origin and the social milieu, but the final definition and modifications have to be worked out repeatedly in each marriage. In today’s world each couple negotiates its own code of justice.” (Wallerstein, Blakesly 68-69) The sense of “me” and “we” in the thinking of those who marry today is likely to be different than what it

once was. A definite strength of women's ever growing sense of equality and identity is the move towards a more equal view of marriage. That ideological move has made it possible for women to have identity within a marriage as an individual and a wife. The issue of commitment has potential to have more depth and meaning because each partner is entering in by free choice not out of a sense of duty, obligation or station of life. Obviously freedoms can be abused, in the case of equality in marriage the issue might include an attitude that personal happiness and self-fulfillment are higher values to be pursued over and above the sanctity of marriage. Placing a higher value on increasing one's commitment level could put other more self-centered values at risk, but has potential for great reward . When a partner stays in a relationship because they choose to as opposed to staying out of a sense of duty, there is a chance that marital satisfaction will be higher.

“A marriage that commands loyalty and is worth defending requires each partner to relinquish self-centeredness and to sacrifice a portion of his or her autonomy.” (Wallerstein, Blakesee 62-63).

Commitment, like the other traits, requires intentionality. Many forces and temptations seem to threaten and lure the partner from full commitment. When the autonomy gets out of balance with the “we-ness” there is a threat to the health of the marriage.

“The sense of being part of a couple is what consolidates modern marriage. It is the strongest rampart against the relentless threat of our divorce culture. We-ness gives marriage its staying power in the face of life's inevitable frustrations and temptations to run away or stray.” (Wallerstein, Blakesly 62).

Susan Page notes that ambivalence is deadly to relationships.

“Couples who thrive show no evidence of ambivalence...couples who thrive are happy together because they choose to drive without their brakes on. They throw themselves fully into their marriage and embrace what they have together.” (3-4)

Lack of commitment is crippling to a relationship. Interestingly, ambivalence is the basis that many people use to gauge a relationship, using a “wait and see” attitude. Unfortunately, that

attitude does harm in that the lack of commitment creates tensions and problems which in turn limit commitment. Relationships with weak commitment are not safe places to disagree because the relationship is always in danger of being lost in the heat of conflict. An additional downside is that it takes energy to withhold commitment. There is a need to protect oneself from hurt and prepare for the part of life that does not include the other. That uses energy that could be invested in the health of the relationship. "Lack of commitment is withholding, and withholding is antithetical to intimacy." (21)

Commitment is not about being fully sure that it will work out exactly like you want it to. There is a choice to be made. Page goes on to explain that choosing to commit actually frees one to have a fulfilling relationship because they are free from crippling ambivalence and free to enjoy loving the other person. "Every commitment requires a leap of faith." (24)

Commitment goes beyond a simple decision to stick it out to the bitter end.

"A relationship without commitment is entirely different from a relationship in which the two partners have chosen to commit to each other. The difference goes far beyond the potential duration of the relationship; the entire nature and quality of the experience between the two people involved are affected." (22)

Modern culture would stress the opposite of what commitment is all about. It would call for limited, guarded commitment so that the "getting out" is less painful. This has led many in the last thirty years to treat marriage like a contract, having terms that each side agrees to. Those terms are the foundation of the marriage. When those are broken the marriage is null and void. This has allowed commitment to stay at a contractual level that holds each party to be faithful as long as the other person is. These authors seem to be suggesting that commitment goes beyond that notion of contract. Ironically, it is in complete commitment that there is perfect freedom.

Commitment frees each person to take the brakes off their relationship and enter in fully with no hesitations or reservations.

If we assign some Biblical characteristic to each of the five marriage traits we might do well to compare the idea of commitment to the concept of Biblical covenant. This is not a particularly difficult application to make. We see God making covenant agreements throughout the Old Testament and most visually with Israel. Those agreements are full of deep commitment, especially on the part of God who continues to uphold God's own part of the agreement even when Israel fails to. While the message of the Gospel broadens to include the Gentiles, there continues to exist a strong understanding of the covenant between God and the church. Ephesians 5:25-33 uses the image of marriage to symbolize God's relationship with the church and Christians' relationship with God.

“Just as God draws the elect believer into a covenant relationship with him, Calvin argued, so God draws husband and wife into a covenant relationship with each other” (Witte 95).

Brignoli and Martínez suggest that the model of covenant and marriage is both symbolic and archetypal.

“Certainly, a symbolic perspective should not be exaggerated, and cannot be taken literally. But , nevertheless, the heart of the symbolic message of the covenant, in light of our faithful interpretation of revelation, can provide a source of meaning and strength for the contemporary partners as they live out the relationship in all its ethical demands. In this regard the life-creating and salvific message of the biblical covenant is most relevant in contemporary religious consciousness” (70).

We cannot just understand marriage as only symbolic of covenant because the symbolism breaks down in that we are not God. God is able to perfectly enter and uphold covenant whereas humans are not. Maybe it is helpful to also think about covenant as the model for marriage.

“God’s covenantal love, whose ultimate prototype is the marriage of Christ and his bride, the church, in which Christ sacrifices everything for her, even his life. Thus God has freely given to his people the total gift of himself” (Martinez, Brignoli 70).

As John Calvin created a theology of marriage based on this covenant concept, he developed a very high view of marriage. Calvin saw not only the participants but also the family, the witnesses, the ministers and the magistrates as all having an important role in the formation of the union between a man and woman. Those roles were both symbolic of the God-breathed covenant and actual elements of the new marriage.

Practically speaking, as problems arise in a marriage, it is not uncommon for partners to give up and dissolve the relationship. In covenantal marriage the picture is bigger than oneself. Each of us must bring an active faith, akin to that of the participants of God’s covenant. The covenant stayed the same but how each generation lived into that changed and grew as they saw God’s faithfulness demonstrated. Israel’s commitment also could deteriorate as Israel waned in its faith and chose other paths that were ultimately destructive.

“However it is at this point (problems in the marriage) that the covenantal aspect of marriage becomes most significant. Courageous trust, not that the wife, for example, trusts in her husband, but her trust in the larger meaning of the marriage allows her to live in the transcendent dimension of the relationship, believing that God is somehow present in the brokenness...It can be a profound spiritual experience, even a time of healing. But, without active faith, covenant has no meaning” (Martinez, Brignoli 71).

2. Deep love and admiration

This second trait in many ways is an obvious choice. The use of the word love however seems a bit watered down. Several authors chose different words to describe this trait.

Gottman states this characteristic as “nurturing fondness and admiration (63). Susan Page uses “goodwill”(27). Judith Wallerstein reminds that love is not a separate characteristic but one that

permeates all the traits of a healthy marriage (329). Wallerstein and Blakeslee describe four different kinds of marriages and that within those kinds of marriages different aspects of love were important. For some it was respect, for some it was sexual passion.

“without exception, these couples (in study) mentioned the importance of liking and respecting each other and the pleasure and comfort they took in each other’s company. Some spoke of the passionate love that began their relationship, but for a surprising number love grew in the rich soil of the marriage, nourished by emotional and physical intimacy, appreciation, and fond memories” (329).

The actual words that are used are not as important as their meaning. What does love look like in healthy marriages? John Gottman uses a helpful picture by describing the love aspect as “love maps”. “Love maps are the part of your brain where you store all the relevant information about your partner.” (50) It means being familiar with and aware of your partner’s world. “There are few gifts a couple can give each other than the joy that comes from feeling known and understood” (51).

Susan Page, using the term goodwill, describes love in these ways:

“Showing goodwill means giving your partner the benefit of the doubt...being on your partner’s side...behaving in a reasonable manner...spirits are open to each other....being as concerned about your partner’s needs as you are your own...having empathy with your partner’s point of view...wanting the other to have what they want and need” (27-28).

She rightly assesses that goodwill is “not exactly the American way” (28). The lack of goodwill in our society has infected our marriages. The attitude in the workplace, in politics, and in the drive to get what one needs is that it is not always prudent to be honest, share feelings, or show care and emotion. Those are perceived as weaknesses and they may be costly in the climb up the social, political, or workplace ladder. That attitude of self-preservation rears itself in the marriage relationship as well. This connects with trait #1 since the lack of commitment also means withholding complete love. If one is guarding those things that are separate from his or

her spouse and looking to the possibility of a future without the other, then it is too risky to offer complete love.

Successful marriages, however, demonstrate strong levels of goodwill. More specifically,

Page says, healthy marriages demonstrate:

1. a willingness to focus on positive qualities.
2. an attitude of gratitude.
3. mutual tolerance and acceptance.
4. respect
5. trust and
6. the ability to give. (29)

Page would go as far as to say that a part of mutual tolerance and acceptance is the ability to love unconditionally. Her definition would be that while we cannot love perfectly, that unconditional love is really complete and total acceptance.

“If I choose to love someone, then I am saying, ‘I care for all of you, the whole package. I am invested in your personal and spiritual growth. I don’t want to change you; I want to support you.’ If I choose to make a full commitment to someone, and then I fall short of it, my failure is a statement about me, not about the other person” (33).

Two other words that Gottman uses are “fondness” and “admiration”. His description is something like this:

“Fondness and admiration are two of the most crucial elements in a rewarding and long-lasting romance...Happily married couples feel as if the person they married is worthy of honor and respect... fondness and admiration are antidotes for contempt, which seems to be a major infection in a relationship. Without the fundamental belief that your spouse is worthy of honor and respect where is the basis for any kind of rewarding relationship?” (63-65).

Christians would recognize these descriptions as being very similar to the love God calls believers to demonstrate towards others. Scripture is full of the descriptive qualities of God's love for us that is self-giving.

“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (NIV, Romans 5:8)

“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! (NIV, Philippians 2:5-8)

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (NIV, John 3:16)

We are also called to love in similar ways:

“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 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 have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love” (NIV, 1 Corinthians 13:1-13)

“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. (NIV, 1 John 4:7-8).

Some Christian theology recognizes that love is the basis for our ability to be in relationship with God because God first loved us. Because of God’s perfect love for us we are not only able to be in relationship with God but can begin to take on the characteristics of Jesus because of that relationship. Page asserts the same. “Goodwill is the critical ingredient in any relationship. It is the soil in which all the other qualities are planted and grow” (29).

An important aspect that several authors and scripture seem to affirm is that love is about making choices to love. Gottman says that Love Maps can be enhanced and that fondness and admiration can be nurtured (48). It seems that a helpful part of this love component is helping people find ways to nurture love and urging them to commit to doing so. The battle in helping people love is helping them see that love is about sacrifice and self-giving. It is about choosing to find loving ways to treat the other and not waiting until feelings emerge to do so. The church must continue to assert that love is not about romantic feelings, motion-picture perfect sex, or any other false media-induced notion of what love looks and especially feels like.

The church and those attempting to help folks develop healthy marriages can continually point couples back to characteristics of God’s love, attributes like selflessness, servanthood, active, unconditional, steadfast, mutual, faithful, loyal, and full of grace.

Michael G. Lawler says it this way:

“There are individuals whose goal in life appears to be to get their own way always. The New Testament message proclaims that there is no place for such individuals in a marriage, least of all in a Christian marriage....In a Christian marriage, love requires not insisting on one’s own way, but a mutual empathy with and compassion for the needs, feelings and desires of one’s spouse, and mutual giving way to those needs, feelings, and desires when the occasion demands for the sake of, and in response to, love....For

Christian spouses their married life is where they are to encounter Christ daily, and thereby come to holiness” (18-19).

3. An ability to communicate effectively and resolve conflict

A third trait of healthy marriages has to do with how well couples deal with conflict and communicate at all times during a relationship. This area of communication has begun to receive more and more attention over the past 10-15 years. There is an increasing awareness that how we communicate makes a difference in relationships. Seminars and books abound on the issue of being an effective communicator in business and at home. Authors like Deborah Tannen, a communication expert, have written books like That’s Not What I Meant: How Conversational Style Makes or Breaks Relationships. In this book and others like them, voice pitch, body language, intonation, rhythm, and timing get special attention, all so people can be more aware and build healthier relationships. How To Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish is another example of how the improvement of communication can enhance relationship.

Active listening, conflict resolution models, and various other communication and conflict resolution exercises seem to have raised awareness of the importance of helpful and healthy communication. Poor communication often seems to be at the top of the list of topics troubling marriages.

Another aspect that has increasing popularity is the reflection of differences between genders in communication (among other things). John Gray has made many aware of these differences with his best selling book Men are From Mars, Women are from Venus. This book is an example of the ever increasing popularity of approaching communication problems from the aspect of gender influence. Deborah Tannen in her article Put Down That Paper and Talk to

Me! Rapport-Talk and Report Talk ably describes the differences in the perceived function talk of men and women (211).

Gottman argues that exercises in communication are only as good as their effectiveness in solving problems (158). A method can be well intentioned but if the problem is not resolved the method is useless. Ultimately the method is less important than the effectiveness of the couple to resolve conflict. It is more important that the conflict be resolved than what method is used. Certainly there are methods that increase the chances that a partner will respond more favorably in conflict, so methodology is not unimportant, but possibly success has more to do with the attitudes and mindset of those in the conflict. Gottman offers his basic principle for conflict resolution:

”The basis for coping effectively with either kind of problem is the same: communicating basic acceptance of your partner’s personality. Human nature dictates that it is virtually impossible to accept advice from someone unless you feel that that person understands you” (149).

Gottman also put together a list of steps that healthy loving couples exhibit in resolution.

1. Soften your startup: how partners bring up a conflict makes a big difference in how successfully they get to resolution.
2. Learn to make and receive repair attempts: A comment that deescalates the tension so that the partner is more receptive to finding a compromise.
3. Soothe yourself and each other: Finding ways to relax yourself and your partner so that you can be heard. It may be a phrase, a break in the discussion, or a physical help like going for a walk or a neck rub.
4. Compromise: truly being open to one another’s influence and ideas.
5. Be tolerant of each others faults: Accepting your partner’s flaws and refusing to live in the “if onlies” that only promote a dissatisfaction in the imperfections of the other. “If onlies” seem to keep people trying to change their partner as the key to their own satisfaction (158-186).

Susan Page found similar communication principles. When couples mentioned that they had good communication it didn't mean they knew good methods or even practiced them.

“What they meant when they said they had good communication was one or more of the following: they had relatively few communication impasses; they were able to talk easily about difficult subjects; they felt they understood each other; they withheld very little from each other; and they could rely on their ability to resolve conflicts” (132-133)

Again this author boils down the characteristics of healthy communication.

1. Make “I” statements
2. Listen
3. Understand and accept the differences between men and women
4. Ask for what you want
5. Affirm others (133)

Some similarities exist between Gottman's list and that of Susan Page. While it is not a formal list, Wallerstein makes these comments about conflict in healthy marriages:

“These couples considered learning to disagree and to stand one's ground as one of the gifts of a good marriage...the first step in establishing a safety zone where strong anger can be expressed freely is to make it clear that the fighting will not breach the walls of the marriage. Both partners have to feel sure that their relationship is secure...Conflict in a good marriage occurs within a context of connectedness and caring...One of the satisfactions of a strong marriage is being able to state your mind without fear of dire consequences. But even in a tantrum, restraint is required...Most of all the people in these marriages did not fight over non-issues...They made a special point of knowing each other's vulnerabilities, and they were very careful to avoid rubbing salt into old wounds. Maturity and sensitivity to the partner's needs, their ability to remain connected even in anger, their sense of fairness and their internal brakes all contributed to creating a safe place to have conflict and express anger” (143-149).

Thomas N. Hart and Kathleen Fischer Hart describe their list of healthy communication traits in their essay entitled “Communication:”

1. Use I-statements rather than You-statements.

2. Express feeling rather than thoughts.
3. Listen attentively without interrupting.
4. Check out what you see and hear (listening for the emotions behind the words to see if they match or indicate other intentions).
5. Avoid mind-reading.
6. Make your own needs known.
7. Learn your mate's language of love (each of us has different things that express love to us).
8. Avoid the words "always" and "never".
9. Avoid name-calling.
10. Deal with painful situations as they arise.
11. Make time for talk that goes beyond practical problems.

(236-242).

The methods are not the important thing. What seems important is the character behind the methods. It appears that while the characteristics are not identical, they do have some similar qualities to them. In each list there is some sort of admonition to listen, to consider the feelings of the other, and to be clear about what you want to communicate, which includes how you approach a situation and your body language. Honesty and openness seem to also play a consistent part in the traits of healthy communication.

Colossians 3: 12-17 seems to be one scriptural counterpart to the characteristics of healthy communication. While the scripture is not speaking specifically of marriage, it lays out the characteristics that build healthy relationships of all kinds.

"As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all clothe yourselves with love which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you

richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God” (NIV, Colossians 3:12-17).

4. An ability to cope with crisis and make necessary changes

The fourth trait of healthy marriages is the ongoing ability to survive difficult times.

“Throughout the marriage husband and wife must make room, even if reluctantly, for change and for difference, for altering values, tastes, needs, and careers” (Wallerstein, Blakeslee 68).

“Couples who thrive have learned to identify their rhythms and to accept them. When adversities or stresses arise, or when the couple is in a period of more distance from each other than usual, they don’t panic; instead they trust that they will move through the difficult times and return to the pleasant ones” (Page 110).

Unexpected tragedy as well as life change bring a variety of stresses to a marriage. A lot of marriages don’t survive those things. It is not that some marriages have stress and others do not. Just being married affords a certain amount of stress. Added to the normal stresses of a relationship come life change and crisis. No marriage is without a certain amount of stress over its course.

Why then do some survive and others flail and ultimately fail in the face of crises and change? Do happy marriages have less stress or do less stressful marriages end up being happier? It appears that neither is completely true. Some happy marriages have a great deal of stress, and some marriages that have never faced deep crises seem to end nonetheless.

Perspective in crisis seems to make a big difference as to how damaging a particular crisis will be to a marriage. How partners view the situation they find themselves in and the role the marriage or other partner plays in the crisis is key to the success of the marriage.

Perspective shows up in several ways in crisis. A sense of humor about life is helpful.

“Their ability to laugh at themselves is an indication of their capacity to keep their difficulties in perspective. I saw this same sense of humor in most of the other thriving couples I spoke with” (Page, 112).

Perspective includes a refusal to “scapegoat” the problem onto their partner. Instead there is a commitment to bear the burden together as opposed to blaming. In healthy couples Wallerstein notes the following traits of perspective in crisis:

1. The couples tried to realistically acknowledge and think about the consequences of the crisis. Trying to keep the effects from spreading and trying to not attribute all their problems on the one particular problem.
2. Couples tried to protect each other by not blaming and by trying to protect the other from inappropriate self blame.
3. They took steps to keep some degree of pleasure and fun in their lives.
4. They didn’t play martyr or pretend to be saintly. They recognized the crisis brings about the potential for hurtful response and tried to hold that in check.
5. They intervened at earlier stages of crisis as they saw it coming, not waiting until it was full blown. (122-123).

It seems that those who have successful marriages deal with crisis and recognize that the marriage is a higher value than the crisis or change. People who are self aware seem to be better able to have healthy relationships because they are able to recognize the impact a crisis has on their own responses. They react and relate as much as possible in normal, healthy ways. Those folks seem able to live above the crisis, not allowing it to define the marriage versus those who allow the crisis to define the way they interact.

When people are scared, exhausted, sick, or hurt, intimacy suffers. Susan Page notes her observations about the strategies thriving couples took in crisis.

1. They recognized that anxiety and free-flowing intimacy are basically incompatible, and that a concerted effort to nurture and sustain at least a minimal level of closeness must be made during times of stress.
2. They identified the source of their stress, and began executing an explicit plan to

eliminate it. On the other hand non-thriving couples did not have a plan for changing their lives to reduce stress and used the stress as an excuse to maintain distance as opposed to making sure they had quality time together in the face of extra stress (121-122).

How is perspective gained? It is easy to understand that some of the ability to face crisis comes from values and experiences, both good and bad, that each person may have gained previous to the marriage. It is not enough to have the values; those values must be lived out to truly be valuable. A major source of perspective is experience. One must have had good and bad life experiences to have perspective. When a couple successfully goes through crisis together two positive things seem to occur. First, there is a shared experience that can provide some perspective of life before, during, and after that will serve as a measuring stick for future crisis. Secondly, there is the benefit of survival that bolsters confidence in the relationship. Both partners can see that the crisis produced a healthier marriage. When that is the experience of a couple they can face the next crisis as having the same potential. "Perspective is one of the great prizes that couples who endure get to enjoy and that short-term couples don't know they could ever have" (Page 113).

The church has been encouraging couples for centuries to make Christ the foundation for their marriage. The Christian community has believed that a marriage that is centered in Christ and includes Christ has a greater potential for success in every aspect. None seems more true than in this area of coping with crisis. It seems an understanding of making Christ central to a life or a marriage would give hope, strength, peace, and comfort in times of trial and crisis.

If it is true, however, that Christian marriages are breaking up at a similar rate as those who do not profess Christ, then either Christ is not helpful or couples do not know how to connect a relationship with Christ to the marriage.

A third possibility is that Christian couples assume that Christ will not allow crisis or will miraculously take away those things that are painful. This assumption might lead to several damaging conclusions: a couple might not sense the need to build good habits of communication as they assume they will never need to face true crisis. Or a couple might conclude that crisis is an indicator that they married the wrong person since God is not “blessing” them. Or, since conflict is not in their realm of possibility for Christians, then in times of conflict or crisis they abandon faith and revert to a form of coping that does not include religious principles as a guide for survival, largely because they have no coping mechanisms framed around Christian living.

While having a Christ-centered relationship is the goal of many Christian couples, defining what that means is the difficult part. A task of the church hoping to strengthen marriages is to help couples make Christ a meaningful part of the relationship. As it stands for some couples their hopes of that are high but the reality of how to do that appears to be much more elusive. Here are some thoughts about what that might look like.

Christ-centered: This principle reminds us of who one is and who one is not. Christians are to center their lives on God. As Christians grow and mature in faith, lives become more and more molded and conformed to look and be like Christ. Through consistent practice of disciplines, the intentional deepening of our commitment to Christ, and the work of the Holy Spirit, lives become more and more in tune with the type of person Christ calls followers to be. As people grow in their faith it is tempting to place various aspects of life as a higher priority than the relationship with God. People constantly battle those temptations and find out that there are consequences when one makes other people and things more important than God.

It is no different with marriage. If all of life is to be centered on Christ then marriage is obviously a part of that. However, it seems that there is no more difficult place to live out the

daily disciplines of following Christ than in a family. A spouse is the one who sees the best and worst of his or her partner. Children often witness actions that are less than Christ-like. The close proximity that one experiences in a marriage makes it impossible to hide flaws.

A marriage centered on Christ will place importance on the things that are important to God. Decision-making, resolving conflict, communication, parenting, use of money and time, church involvement, male and female roles, and values are some examples of the areas of marriage that are affected by working to have a Christ-centered marriage. Simply put, the marriage is seen as a part of the individual's Christian life. It is not a separate area to be lived differently than any other segment of life. It also means that as both partners work to be Christ-like in their marriage they also take on some of the characteristics of God for the other. The spouse becomes an agent of grace demonstrating, among other things, love, forgiveness, and accountability for the other. It is the place where God is most vividly lived out. The spouse finds ways to help encourage and nurture the spirituality and spiritual growth of the other.

Being a God-centered couple is not a formula or a list, instead it is a process of becoming more like Christ. So in the ideal sense the God-centered couple demonstrates movement over the course of the marriage. There is consistent growth and maturity of faith and a deepening of the ways that God is included in the marriage. In addition, the Christ-centered couple sees itself as more than individuals. They view the marriage and family as a vehicle that can help bring about and model God's Kingdom and the characteristics of that Kingdom such as justice, peace, self-sacrifice, and unconditional love to one another and the world. It is more than seeing oneself as a Christian who happens to be married, but is a view that the marriage and its many facets can reflect the values and characteristics of Christ.

It is this sort of understanding of a Christ-centered marriage that lays a foundation for seeing that God at work in the midst of crisis and heartache. It is likely that couples who have raised the possibility of God at work in all they are as a couple will more naturally be able to recognize God's presence. If they can recognize God's presence it will be more likely that they can continue to embrace the values of God during crisis because those values are the norm.

5. A high level of shared values and power

This final characteristic of healthy marriages is the observation that thriving couples have a high level of agreement in the area of life values. Healthy couples have also determined to share the power in the relationships. Categories that fall into this characteristic are things like personal autonomy, gender roles, understanding and respecting the values of the other, and partnering in decision making. Below are some thoughts from various authors around these and other similar areas.

A. Autonomy

"Finally, the people in these happy marriages were engaged in worlds outside the family...In my experience, couples who divorce tend to lead more isolated lives and to have fewer friends and community contacts" (Wallerstein, Blakeslee 206).

One study found that an increase in secularism (increased education, decreased religious devotion) can encourage less conventional gender roles, which in turn can undermine marital commitment because of increased autonomy. However, a reverse trend is also present in that increased secularism in encouraging autonomy can actually enhance commitment. Those influences vary in their strength during different stages of life. It is possible that autonomy could be a higher value in one stage of life serving to push spouses apart, while at another time of life autonomy could actually cause a sense of closeness because a person is making a choice to

commit out of the sense of autonomy instead of feeling forced into commitment (Scanzoni 153-154).

Autonomy seems to be one of the paradoxical traits that has come from the women's rights movement. The divorce trend, in part, came out of a sense of women's hopes for more control over their lives. More traditional marriages were viewed as oppressive and confining to women. The liberation of women pushed women to be independent and less traditional. That encouragement helped bring about the increasing divorce rate. While women rightly had the ability to make their own decisions and get out of abusive situations it has also ended up being damaging to women, since that high divorce rate has left many women worse off in many ways.

B. Gender Roles

"Some men may resist being influenced by their wives because they still believe that the upheaval in gender roles is a passing fad or that the pendulum has swung to an extreme and soon things will revert. But there is scientific evidence that we are living through a cultural transformation that will not come undone" (Gottman 111).

C. Respect of values

"But it is also true that a rewarding marriage is about more than sidestepping conflict. The more you can agree about the fundamentals in life, the richer, more meaningful, and in a sense easier, your marriage is likely to be...A crucial goal of any marriage, therefore, is to create an atmosphere that encourages each person to talk honestly about his or her convictions" (Gottman 245).

D. Partnering in decision making

"Our study didn't really find that men should give up all of their personal power and let their wives rule their lives. But we did find that the happiest, most stable marriages in the long run were those where the husband treated his wife with respect and did not resist power sharing and decision making with her. When the couple disagreed, these husbands actively searched for common ground rather than insisting on getting their way" (Gottman 101).

These characteristics are a few examples of ways that couples have determined to share both values and relationship power. Among healthy couples there seems to be an ability to build understanding around what is of high value for both individuals and that is shared between both partners.

A scriptural attitude that seems to relate here is the admonition by the Apostle Paul.

“And further, you will submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. You wives will submit to your husbands as you do to the Lord. For a husband is the head of his wife as Christ is the head of his body, the church; he gave his life to be her Savior. As the church submits to Christ, so you wives must submit to your husbands in everything. And you husbands must love your wives with the same love Christ showed the church. He gave up his life for her to make her holy and clean, washed by baptism and God’s word. He did this to present her to himself as a glorious church without a spot or wrinkle or any other blemish. Instead, she will be holy and without fault. In the same way, husbands ought to love their wives as they love their own bodies. For a man is actually loving himself when he loves his wife. No one hates his own body but lovingly cares for it, just as Christ cares for his body, which is the church. And we are his body.”
(NIV, Ephesians 5:21-27)

Using the example of a healthy marriage as a symbol for the church, Paul admonishes the church to treat each other well by being willing to submit to one another. Christ demonstrates that love is a high and that love is lived out by mutual submission and sacrifice.

It is easy to see how shared power frees a partner to fully love his or her spouse. Each is free to make the decision to love and make the choice to submit. At the same time, when submission is mutual, each person is shown value and care by the choice each makes to submit. True love comes out of the ability to choose, not out of coercion. This could only serve to instill confidence in the relationship because that mutual submission and respect allows conflict to happen in an environment that does not have the threat of separation hanging over it.

Conclusion:

These five characteristics of healthy marriages are broad and have room for each couple to find the place within each trait that best suits their relationship. The traits tend to be overarching principles rather than totally prescriptive.

The next section will look at ways that churches can help bring about stronger marriages. Many, if not most, marriages can be improved and enhanced with thoughtful practice and awareness. In order for most churches to be helpful in the marriages of its members and attenders, there will need to be a renewed emphasis on the importance of healthy marriages. Churches will have to make decisions to take solid steps towards helping parishioners embrace a more active role on the part of the church in the marriages of its constituents. There will be many challenges to increasing the role of the church in the lives and marriages of the people in the church.

The Church in the Postmarriage Society

Section #3

What can the church do?

Movement back towards a marriage culture and away from a divorce culture is going to take a complete shift in the thinking and action of many institutions. In order to see any changes, counselors, public school teachers, social workers, government, media, and the church are just some of the groups that will have to embrace an attitude towards the strengthening of marriages. The redirection of a culture will take a concerted effort over at least one full generation. Some would consider it an impossible task to redirect entrenched societal attitudes back towards attitudes that are largely embraced by a generation that is quickly diminishing. Trying to regain bygone attitudes may be futile. It is important that attitudes towards a marriage culture are seen as being worth embracing because they improve life and society and not because they are a return to earlier days. With that in mind, it is important for the church to begin to view its actions around marriage, not as a retrieval of the past, but as a creation of a renewed set of values.

Our society and world must respond to the condition it now finds itself in, not look to turn back the clock on morality or values. The strength of moving towards a marriage culture will come because of the empty result of the divorce culture. That experience will always be a part of our cultural history. An understanding of the widespread failure of divorce to bring about the fulfillment and freedom for individuals must be a motivating factor for urging a society towards a new high view of marriage. At least three generations have been or are being raised in a divorce culture. Those generations will have to see a move towards a marriage culture as a new step forward. Those existing generations who were raised with a high view of marriage may

sadly be ineffective in helping make a change, simply because those generations are largely not in places of influence because of their age. Older generations, who may tend to value marriage more highly, will largely be moving out of influential positions as retirements and deaths occur. It will be up to younger generations to make any significant change happen.

The church as an institution may have a theoretically higher view of marriage than other groups of people. Although the divorce rate is similar to secular numbers, there are standards of theology, scripture, and teaching that point to marriage as an important value within the church. It is possible to say that the values of healthy marriage already exist to some degree in the church. Whether or not those values are currently a priority in the active mission of each denomination or local church is another matter.

If the church hopes to have an impact on society in preserving and strengthening marriage, it will have to renew marriage as a high priority issue. Peripheral issues, such as drug issues, teen suicide, poverty, teen moms, and many others, will be addressed by strengthening marriages, since many other social problems appear to be negatively influenced by a high divorce rate.

Each local faith community will need to evaluate the attitudes towards marriage and the actual level of marriage health in its own constituency and begin to deal with those issues first. Secondly, a church will need to look at itself as a tool for reaching out to those who are casualties and victims of the divorce culture and to offer pertinent and tangible resources to those outside the church who are married or who are considering marriage. If all the church is able to do is raise the view of marriage in its own congregation, it will be succeeding. But for society to change its view and values, the church will have to be willing to make a helpful impact outside its walls.

Below are some suggestions for churches to consider. It will not be possible nor will it be helpful for a church to try and implement all the suggestions. Each church will have to assess its resources in areas like finances, people, and facility. Each congregation will also need to understand the unmet needs of the marriages in the community it exists in and the resources that are offered to the community through other agencies and local churches. Finally, a church has to truly assess its attitude toward and its level of vision for becoming a tool for helping to build healthy marriages.

The suggestions are divided into four major sections. Those sections are:

1. Attitudes-Ways to help raise the attitudes of people towards a higher view of marriage and helping people view healthy marriage building as a pertinent mission of the church.
2. Education-Educational helps for building healthy marriages
3. Counseling-Networking to build deeper support for couples or individuals through formal counseling.
4. Support-Structures that help support individuals who may have experienced the fallout of divorce or may be looking for ways to build a healthy marriage.

Attitudes

This section of ideas is aimed at helping raise the attitudes about healthy marriages. It may be important to first think about the process that a burden for ministry becomes lived out. First of all, someone in a church has to have a burden for seeing marriage health increase. The concern does not necessarily have to begin with the pastoral staff. A concern can start with one person and grow as that person shares and lives out the calling of that concern with others. It is important to note that each denomination is different in how ministry comes about as an official

part of a congregation's mission. Denominational traditions vary on how involved the pastor must be for a ministry to be recognized in that body. Whether or not a cause receives official recognition or not is not as important as that those who feel called towards a ministry begin to live out that calling at some level.

The hope is that others will eventually join in the ministry as they feel led and called to do so. One of the avenues through which people receive calling to ministry is through the sharing by other people who are ministering. As people are made aware and educated about needs they sometimes feel prompted to join in a ministry. Often ministry that originates with pastoral staff gets more attention and publicity. A "grassroots" concern may take longer to become an active ministry. No matter what the origin of the ministry, it is crucial that there is wide support of a ministry if it is to be a central emphasis in the mission of a particular church.

Whether or not everyone in a congregation actively participates in the ministry of a church, it is important that a majority at least have a sense of the priority that a particular ministry plays in the mission of the church.

Below are some goals and ideas for raising awareness and in turn helping shape attitudes about the importance of healthy marriages and ministry that encourages it.

1. Working to be a marriage and family "friendly" church. This means taking opportunities to publicly encourage support for marriage. This may be verbal or written, but it is woven into many opportunities like newsletter articles and sermons.
2. A marriage friendly church places value on family time. Possibilities include:
 - A. Limiting official church involvement by an individual. A person is limited to a certain number of committees, groups, or ministries that they can be involved in at any one time.

- B. Plan some activities that families attend together instead of always separating by age group. Include elements for whole families in retreats, holiday events, or occasional Christian Education venues.
 - C. Form plans for helping couples spend time together. Provide free or low cost child-care for occasional date nights. This can be church-provided or couples can rotate to co-op the childcare.
3. Churches can provide financial help for marriage and family counseling.
 4. Marriage and family issues are spoken of often publicly. This sets a tone of acceptance to discuss these issues in the church. Marriage growth is encouraged and at the same time marriage problems are spoken of as a normal part of marriage.
 5. Connections are regularly made between healthy marriage and scripture. Including issues of sacrament, covenant, mutuality, love and that marriage is a place that characteristics of God are lived out and experienced. It is also scriptural that God hates divorce, but loves people.
 6. Offer a chance for couples to renew marriage vows publicly.
 7. Have couples share publicly at some level when there has been an experience of relationship growth.
 8. When talking about marriage, use words and approaches that raise the expectation of the permanence of marriage.
 9. Make connections between the spiritual life and marriage. Help couples recognize the interconnectedness of the two. Spiritual growth and depth impacts relationships.
 10. Raise the possibility that God cares about marriage and calls people to right relationships.

11. Pastors and others can help connect or network those who have similar concerns about marriage issues.

Education

Education opportunities exist in many places in the church. When considering the issue of healthy marriages there are countless topics for teaching. Churches should use existing educational opportunities like Sunday School, youth groups, and children's programs to teach about healthy marriages. A church can also target appropriate topics among a variety of age groups and create curriculum or special classes to expand teaching. Below is a list of possible educational opportunities.

1. Special classes: Classes could vary on a broad range of topics. There could be weekly classes for improving communication, money management, conflict resolution, marriage enrichment-exploring the five traits of healthy marriage, and parenting, to name a few. Providing classes that are proactive in nature can make a difference for couples (example: Have a class on being married as you become a first time parent. This could address issues of the relationship in the ever-changing pressures of parenthood).
2. Teach children around topics using age appropriate material.
 - A. Topics for children could include.... Scriptural view of marriage permanence, effective conflict resolution, and loving our neighbors, family, and friends.
 - B. Children can also be taught effective communication skills even as other topics are being taught. Active listening and how to share opinions helpfully can be a part of those skills taught.

- C. Late-grade school children are not too young to begin discussion about how to interact with the opposite sex. Issues of misogyny, sexism, and equality can be taught.
 - D. Obviously helping kids deepen a relationship with God is a must and will help address issues of relationships with others.
 - E. It is important to keep in mind that there is divorce in the church as well. It is possible, probably likely, that some children will have experienced divorce first hand. It is vital that children never feel that they are to blame for the divorce or that their parents or others close to them who have divorced are bad people.
3. Teach youth around topics that pertain to relationships.
- A. Topics include sexuality, marriage and divorce in scripture, building healthy relationships, breaking family cycles of violence or divorce.
 - B. Principles for safe and healthy dating, the problems of sexual harassment, and principles of gender mutuality are helpful topics.
 - C. Youth could benefit by exploring their family history of marriage and divorce and the attitudes that seem prevalent in the marriages in their extended family.
 - D. Values and goal setting for their own relationships and marriage can help set patterns and goals for the future.
 - E. Special retreats that address topics can be an effective way to teach.
 - F. Special guest speakers who are experts on certain topics or who simply have life experience they are willing to share are also helpful teachers.
 - G. Using pre-packaged youth curriculum around various topics: (see resource list for youth related resources.)

-Why Wait curriculum by Josh McDowell

-Good Sex by Youth Specialties

-Relationships

-Dating

- H. Have youth read books on various relationship topics to report back to the group.
- I. A percentage of youth will have experienced divorce or serious conflict in their family, so it is crucial that youth do not feel that they are the cause of the divorce, that they have responsibility to fix a broken marriage or that their parents are being demonized/judged in any way.
4. Adult marriage enrichment retreats are another place that teaching about building healthy relationships can occur. These can cover a variety of topics such as communication, conflict resolution, sexuality, or money management.
 5. Retreats can also be helpful for marriages that are new. Newly married retreats can focus primarily on building strong habits and patterns early in marriage. Each topic may be tailored to address the beginning stages of marriage.
 6. Churches can offer training in helping support other couples in crisis.
 7. Churches can also offer education and training in areas that are results of divorce. Topics could included: divorce recovery, single parenting, anger management, grief recovery.
 8. Churches can provide money for staff to become trained in marriage and family issues. Local universities often offer basic classes and local seminaries often provide classes in counseling for pastors. A church can help its pastors a great deal by helping them further their skills.

9. Classes for those who are considering or preparing to be married. This helps deal with topics differently than pre-marital counseling. This can be a great way to introduce general topics and reserve couple specific issues for pre-marital counseling sessions. This can also provide a way to help couples build relationships with other couples in the church. These often can serve as a form of outreach for a church.

Counseling

One of the great ways for a church to help couples is to provide opportunities for counseling at various stages. Counseling can take place within the church body with congregants who are trained as counselors and who are willing to provide counseling as a part of their ministry. Counseling can also happen with counselors outside of the church. Below are some ways churches can assist in the counseling component.

1. Provide a reference list of reliable counselors for those in need of counseling. Staff, elders, or deacons can be assigned the task of researching and getting references for counselors with different specialties. The list should include billing information, the process for finding a counselor, and sources of funds including what questions to ask a person's insurance company, any government/agency grants available, or the church's source of help.
2. Provide funding to help needy couples get counseling.
3. Sponsor a special workshop around a topic related to marriage and help offset the cost. This could be for church members/attenders only or the community might be invited as well.

4. Hire a trained counselor as a staff position. Smaller churches could provide inexpensive office space to a counselor; in turn, the counselor could reserve a certain number of client spots for people from the church. Issues of confidentiality, financial arrangements, and staff responsibilities must be clear and satisfactory to both parties.
5. Intensive retreat weekends for couples in crisis. These can be tailored to meet the needs of individual couples. Counselors meet with couples in large groups and as couples to work through a retreat schedule for the weekend/week.
6. Provide opportunities for couples to attend weekend workshops or retreat centers that have programs designed for helping troubled marriages or enriching good marriages.
7. Pre-marital counseling. Offer a course of counseling that includes some personality testing, discussion of pertinent relationship issues, as well as the spiritual aspect of marriage. Require that pre-marital counseling occur as a prerequisite for having a wedding in the church building.
8. Use materials such as PREPARE/ENRICH for pre-marital and marital counseling. These materials provide testing around particular marriage issues, materials for understanding family of origin, and exercises for improving various areas of marriage. These can be done in individual counseling sessions or as a Sunday School class or small group. Often a counselor trained in the use of the material is required for its use.
9. Make sure newly married couples are followed up with regularly after the wedding. Building good habits early in a marriage is crucial. This also helps couples realize that the church is open to on-going discussions about marriage issues and that marriage struggles are the norm.

10. Help secure counseling services for people who are experiencing trouble as a result of being a part of a broken family. Grief, abuse, abandonment, and anger are all issues that could result as a part of a broken family.

General Support

There are a variety of ways that a church can be supportive of couples and families above and beyond formal teaching and counseling. These ways are varied and some require very little in the way of resources, while some are more costly. Some of these ideas are listed below:

1. The church can send anniversary cards to couples in the church. This small effort reminds couples of the importance of the relationship. It is an opportunity for a staff member or other caring member of the congregations to show support and care. This is one way to help couples celebrate the important day.
2. Celebrate milestone anniversaries. Help make couples aware of the milestones that help solidify the commitment to marriage. Celebration helps show the value of the marriage longevity.
3. Invite couples who have been married a long time to share their story as a way of encouragement to younger couples. This can help those couples see the value of their commitment. It is also a way that older couples can minister in the church, when a regular ministry commitment is overwhelming.
4. Gather a list of people in the congregation who have had particular life experience (examples: lost a child at birth, had a spouse die, has a handicapped child, has experienced financial difficulties, a marriage that survived an affair, etc.) who would be willing to help others experiencing similar circumstances. This list may need to be

somewhat private depending on the situations. As staff become aware of situations, they could encourage a relationship with a person on the list who can encourage, empathize, and walk through the crisis with a person.

5. Identify and train couples to serve as mentor couples for young marrieds. These mentors do not have to be marriage counselors, but are seen as people who are willing to: share their own experience, encourage the younger couple, be another connection within the congregation, serve as “grandparents” to children whose families are far away, meet regularly to listen to the joys and struggles of the couple.
6. Create ministries that help families. Those types of ministries include: a Mothers of Preschoolers group, parent supervised indoor play time, play groups, and family get away opportunities like an all church retreat or campout.
7. Create opportunities for families or couples to do ministry together. A service project that the whole family can participate in (leaf-raking, short-term mission trip, or church work-day). Maybe visiting shut-ins or those at a care home or simply giving a ride to someone who can't drive. Volunteering to do occasional childcare as a family for a family that does not have the money to hire childcare can be a way families minister together. Often ministering together promotes family togetherness.
8. Encouraging adults to make a priority of attending church regularly. This regular attendance models the importance of church attendance. This may mean a job change or adjustment to a work schedule. It is also something that families can do together.
9. Offer to help arrange discernment opportunities. Couples who are thinking about getting married, individuals who are making life change or families in transition are great opportunities to invite people to gather around those who are making big

decisions and help them discern God's leading. Quakers have used the "Meeting for Clearness" to do just that. These meetings are designed to help give clarity to people making decisions.

10. Involve the whole church in the weddings of those who are a part of the church.

Participants could volunteer to help with areas of the ceremony like running a sound system, serving at a reception, ushering, taking care of details that burden the couple, for example, picking up last minute items, running errands, or clean-up after the wedding/reception.

11. More importantly the church should be encouraged to see themselves as a part of the marriage not just the wedding. This means being willing to take an active part in the lives of the couple. The ceremony itself often invites people to be included as witnesses and as the support group for the couple. If that were taken seriously and acted upon there might be some very helpful and encouraging support systems created. Active ways that people could be involved include praying faithfully for a couple, being willing to ask about how the couple is doing, showing interest in the couple, and finding ways to show tangible support for the couple (for example: new couples often struggle financially and could use financial assistance; sometimes couples lose their friends who are not married and they feel lonely, so an invitation for dinner is often helpful.) Being willing to remind couples that struggles are normal and that finding help sooner than later could be a great help.

It may be that one partner's actions appear to be damaging. In those cases loving gentle concern should be expressed to that partner about the action. Obviously this is a delicate situation and should be handled carefully, but if

the culture is going to change, it is important to not neglect these opportunities. Most couples are encouraged by the care and concern.

12. Fatherhood is an often forgotten or down-played role in our society. The role of parents should be held in high esteem. A church can find ways to encourage and support not just parents but also the important individual roles of mothering and fathering. Folks in the congregation can be surrogate mothers/grandmothers and fathers/grandfathers for those who have none. Reminding people of their important role as a parent is a vital role for the church.

This list is just a beginning point for a church who is considering the call to move towards being a marriage culture. Other ideas can emerge from those listed above. Resources and materials can be created but many have been already written or formed. The following section is a resource list for churches.

The Church in the Postmarriage Society

Section #4

Resources

The following section is a compilation of resources for use by churches and families. These resources include curriculum, books, tapes, video's, periodicals, articles, and organizations might help a church or group within a church become more marriage friendly. The sources are listed topically. So a section could include various kinds of resources. This list a beginning point and is in no way exhaustive.

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