

Thinking About Marriage as Christians

Marriage has fallen on hard times in our culture. Few will deny that claim.

Of course, the spotlight shines brightest on the activists who demand that we stretch marriage far enough to encompass homosexual couples. But even more disturbing is how heterosexual Americans treat marriage.

Much of society regards it as self-evident that a couple should “test drive” their relationship by living together before they “commit” to marriage. But *commitment* doesn’t even mean that much. Studies show that even among Christians, there is a growing disagreement with the idea that divorce is *wrong*.

Nor is the U.S. alone. Canada and Europe are in the same boat – and Europe is light years ahead of us in the percentage of the population that regards marriage as something of an “old fashioned” idea.

Problem is, the Church isn’t exempt.

In the U.S., 7.5 people out of 1,000 got married in 2005, while nearly half that many – 3.6 per 1,000 – got divorced. Among American adults (18 and over), 73 percent have been married – and 35 percent of those have been divorced. That’s terrible news for society at large.

But here’s the worse news: The same percentage of committed Christians have experienced a divorce as those who do not see themselves as committed Christians – 35 percent. And more than 90 percent of Christian divorcees got divorced *after* becoming Christians – not before.

It’s official: we have a problem.

There was a time – not long ago, in fact – when a Reformed minister being asked to perform a wedding could get by with just a few questions. Presumably either the bride or the groom would be a member of his congregation, so he would need to know who the other person was and whether they had made a public profession of faith. He would need to be sure that both sets of parents approved of the marriage. If the couple came from separate Churches, he would want to make sure the elders from both Churches approved. And he needed to know the date and time of the rehearsal – that was important!

But that’s about how far most pastors went. Pre-marital classes were seldom offered, often because it was assumed – for better or worse – that the bride and groom had been raised by Christian parents. It was assumed that such an upbringing served as a real-life marriage preparation course.

Yet many Churches (Reformed and non-Reformed alike) are learning that *all* young adults benefit richly from intensive, Bible-based pre-marriage classes – regardless of the home in which they were raised.

In large part, that recognition stems from a reality that we in the Reformed world ought to know better than anyone else: total depravity.

We aren’t born knowing how to be good spouses, good parents, good stewards, or good people. In fact, we’re born knowing just the opposite! And while many of us have been blessed by the example of Godly parents, we seem more inclined to adopt their *worst* examples and *ignore* their best.

That’s why many consistories among the United Reformed Churches – including ours – have agreed that no one is to be married without first completing a marriage preparation course with the pastor.

Such courses are intended to be more than a formality. Instead, they aim to raise issues and prompt discussions that will help couples to think *Biblically* about the nature and reality of marriage. Using both homework and discussion, such courses cover the nature of marriage, God’s calling for husbands and wives, communication skills, financial wisdom, sexuality, children, and worship.

Such courses require commitment from everyone involved.

The elders need to be committed to the concept. They must recognize the value of carefully preparing for marriage – not only to prevent divorce, but to encourage Christ-centered families. The pastor has to be willing to spend time studying and preparing. He must cherish Godly marriages enough to ask hard questions and talk about uncomfortable subjects. And the couple needs to devote time and energy to studying and discussing. For the sake of their marriage, they must be willing to address matters that can be painful or difficult.

But it’s all worthwhile. God invariably blesses such a living desire to establish Godly marriages through His Word and Spirit!

As a pastor, I believe wholeheartedly in the value of a solid, Scripture-filled marriage preparation course. In fact, I believe we all could benefit from considering the issues such a course will raise.

To that end, I wrote what follows as a series of pastor’s pages which presented something of an outline of our marriage preparation course here at Hills URC. It was my hope that this would serve as an encouragement by showing that the men whom God has set over us truly believe in the sanctity of Christian marriage and desire to do everything possible to foster Godly marriages. I also hoped to lead our young people and our children to start thinking about the kind of relationship they should desire.

Above all, I desired it to stimulate conversation – and prayer – about how we can further strengthen the marriages of Christ’s Church.

Marriage – The Utterly Unique Institution

Marriage is important.

What an understatement! Unless you have been given the gift of celibacy, marriage is the second most important relationship you will ever enter. The only relationship more consequential is your relationship with Christ. The only vow more significant is your public profession of faith in Christ.

Is that a bit overly dramatic? Ok, let's think about it.

The very first institution God established after creating the world was ... what? You've got it: Marriage!

What other institution requires a vow *unto death*? What other relationship has no escape clause for poverty, sickness, or bull-headed stubbornness? What other relationship is said to portray the very love of Christ for His Church?

There is no earthly relationship or institution that compares with this thing we call marriage. None. Period.

If marriage is so lofty and important (not to mention long-lasting) we would be irresponsible to neglect to carefully prepare for it.

That's what our marriage preparation course is all about.

As we begin considering that course, I want to start by considering the nature of marriage itself. Typically, this would come at the end of the first and beginning of the second session – but for our purposes, it helps to think about this first.

So ... *what is marriage*? (Go ahead – try to think of an answer.)

Not all that easy, is it? It's strange how some of the most common things in life are the hardest to define.

Here's the most helpful definition I've found: "Marriage is a God-created, God-governed, covenantal relationship between a man and a woman for the purpose of mutual enrichment, the advancement of the Kingdom of God, and the procreation of the race." Let's think about that.

Marriage is "God-created."

Mankind did not develop the idea to join man and woman in a relationship of mutual love and service. It was God's idea from the start.

Nor was marriage a product of the Fall. Quite the opposite! When God had created Adam, He declared, "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Gen. 2:18). So God formed Eve from Adam. She was different from him, yet quite similar to him – "a helper fit for him" (Gen. 2:18).

That was God's intention at the beginning, and it is not to be changed or broken by mere men (Matt. 19:6).

In fact, God created this institution in such a way that, when everything is working right, it should portray the sacrificial, selfless love of Christ for His Church; the loving submission of the Church for Christ; and the enduring unity of Christ with the Church for whom He died (Eph. 5:22-33).

Marriage was intended to be a living portrayal of the Gospel!

Marriage also is "God-governed."

From first to last, it is God – not man – who sets the ground rules.

For instance, God tells us whom we may marry. Christians may marry only Christians, and both of them must "marry-able" – that is, neither can already be married, nor can either be unbiblically divorced.

God also governs the means by which marriage is recognized. God has given parents authority over their children, so they must grant permission. The elders, having spiritual authority over the Church, must sanction the wedding. The state must officially recognize the union. And the minister must solemnize the marriage through a ceremony of public vows.

Once the marriage exists, the couple finds that God graciously governs every part of their relationship. His Word defines their roles as husband and wife (e.g., Eph. 5:22-33); describes the love they should have for each other (1 Corinthians 13); and sets forth their parental responsibilities (Eph. 6:1-4).

In every part of marriage, God's Word is a lamp unto our feet (Ps. 119:105), showing us how to keep our way pure (Ps. 119:9)!

What's more, marriage is a "covenantal relationship."

Look at a wedding. Here we have a formal, binding agreement created by public vows. Mutual responsibilities are spelled out. And we recognize both formal and informal blessings for those who fulfill their responsibilities, with curses for those who do not.

By definition, that's a covenant.

And that's what Scripture calls it, too, in places like Mal. 2:14 and Prov. 2:17. In fact, God's Word says that those who break their marriage vows also break their relationship with the Lord (Mal. 2:13-14; 1 Pet. 3:7).

So then, what is the *purpose* of marriage? It is threefold.

First, God wants us to bear children – to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Gen. 1:28). Along with that, He uses marriage to advance His Kingdom, extending His Covenant promises not only to believers, but also to their children (Gen. 17:7; Acts 2:39).

But marriage also is for mutual enrichment. Read the Song of Solomon, and marvel at the joy God intends for us to take in the husband or wife He sends us. Says the wise father to his son: “Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe” (Prov. 5:18-19a).

Marriage is *indeed* a reason for rejoicing. May the Lord cause us to rejoice in it all the more as we, together, ponder His purpose for marriage!

Preparing to Marry: Asking the Hard Questions

Consistories shall instruct and admonish those under their spiritual care who are considering marriage to marry in the Lord. Christian marriages should be solemnized with appropriate admonitions, promises and prayers, under the regulation of the Consistory, with the use of the appropriate liturgical form. Ministers shall not solemnize marriages which would conflict with the Word of God. (Church Order of the URCNA, Art. 48)

When a couple comes to their pastor to declare their intention to marry, it’s a time of great joy.

God has led two people to love and appreciate one another, and their commitment to one another has become so deep that they want to seal their unity *forever*. What an amazing desire! How excellent to have such a love!

So this decision and the preparation that follows should be filled with joyful celebration. Of course, a good marriage prep course will ask questions that bring *some* discomfort – but even then, joy should be just below the surface.

Unfortunately, when the couple first visits with the pastor, they need to begin with a chore that is *not* joyful. In fact, it’s downright uncomfortable.

Here’s the reality: People make poor choices – even Christians. (I shudder to think of some of my poor choices!)

The Lord repeatedly tells us that our choice of friends and associates has a dramatic impact on our spiritual life. “Do not be deceived: ‘Bad company ruins good morals’” (1 Cor. 15:33). And again, “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?” (2 Cor. 6:14).

If that’s the case with *friendships*, how much more with *marriages*! So the Lord repeatedly reminds His people that they may not marry those who are not committed to Him. (See, for instance, Ex. 34:16; Deut. 7:3-4; Josh, 23:12-13; Ezra 9; Neh. 13:23-27; 1 Cor. 7:39.)

By the command of both Scripture and Church Order, Ministers may not solemnize marriages which would conflict with Scripture. By the same token, Consistories may not approve of those marriages. That means the pastor has to begin pre-marriage preparation courses with some uncomfortable questions.

The first are basic: “Are you a Christian? What makes you sure of this?”

These are questions that any Christian should be willing and able to answer clearly, from the heart. There are countless ways to express one’s faith in Christ. There also are many ways to raise a red flag – for instance, by expressing comfort on the basis of Church membership or good deeds.

But what if one of the individuals has not yet publicly professed their faith?

Making public profession of faith is a sign of spiritual maturity. It’s akin to saying, “I understand what we confess about Christ; I truly believe it; and I want the world to know that my only comfort lies in belonging to Christ.”

If a person is not spiritually mature enough to profess his or her faith, the shepherds of the Church must ask whether he or she mature enough to marry. There are (rare) exceptions, but generally, the answer is no.

Of course, we don’t want anyone making profession of faith just to get married. We must profess our *faith* – not a *lie*! However, a baptized adult is living in disobedience if he is not willing to profess Christ before men (Matt. 10:32-33). How can someone willingly living in disobedience against the Lord be “equally yoked” with a committed Christian?

A second set of questions must be asked when one half of the couple is from a different Church. Is he or she a professing member? Has the couple discussed any theological differences between their backgrounds?

One of the most important questions is this: *Have they decided which Church they will attend?* If not, they reveal that worship and commitment to the Lord are not priorities for them – a major warning sign.

Another important question whether the elders of the other Church approve of the marriage. That individual is obligated to submit to the oversight of his or her home Church (Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:5). For this reason, we must insist that the elders of the other Church also give their blessing.

These are the most important of the questions the pastor (and elders!) must ask. Why? Because they relate specifically to the couple's commitment to God. Therefore, these questions help to determine whether the marriage is "in the Lord" and whether the couple truly desires a marriage focused on serving Christ and glorifying God.

To be very clear, pastors do not ask such questions because they doubt the faith of the couple. They ask them (or they *should* ask them ...) of *every* couple as a means of verifying – once and for all – the Christian commitment of the two people who have asked to exchange marriage vows before God and His people.

Of course, there *are* other questions that also must be asked. And while they are *less* crucial ... they still are *important*. We will consider those below.

Questions & Commitments for the Happy Couple

Preparing for marriage starts with some tough questions, the toughest of which – as we saw in the preceding section – relate specifically to the couple's individual commitment to the Lord.

But that's not to say there are no other questions that should be asked.

The next question involves submission to *earthly* authorities – namely, parents. "Do your parents know of your plans to be married? Do they approve?"

Of course, any of us could come up with (imaginary) scenarios in which the disapproval of a parent could be overlooked. But that would be an *exception*. The *rule* is that children (even as adults) are called to honor their father and mother – also in the selection of a spouse. If the parents have concerns, we would do well to consider those concerns to be a priority to be addressed.

Assuming that all is well to this point, some questions about personal history need to be asked.

The minister might ask questions about past marriages, divorces and children. Any divorce must have been biblical, or the person cannot be lawfully married. If there are children, their welfare must be considered and their preparation to enter a new family must be addressed.

Then come the touchy questions. "Are you pregnant?" If it is asked of every bride-to-be, the minister is able to assure the couple that he asks as a matter of course. But the question *should* be asked. Likewise, the couple should be asked if they feel they have gone "out of bounds" in their physical involvement.

Note well: The couple isn't being asked the incriminate themselves with these questions. But they *are* being asked to be *honest*. If they have sinned in the past, those sins need to be addressed – and the sooner their sins are confessed and repented of, the better their marriage will be.

"Do either of you have secrets that ought to be shared?" Here is an opportunity for the young couple to share matters that aren't easily broached: medical problems, past sins, dark times in their past. Hidden secrets can eat at a marriage like termites in the support beams of a house. But when brought out into the light, most of them wither and die.

Rounding third base and heading for home, one last set of questions is raised: "What role does God play in your relationship? Do you read or study the Bible together? (How? How often?) Do you pray together? (How often? *Or*: Why not?) Have you discussed your beliefs about God and Christian living? Do you have any disagreements in those areas?"

These are standard family-visiting questions – and they are a *must* for any couple that would have a committed Christian marriage. Think how much *richer* a marriage becomes when spouses devote themselves to praying together daily. On the other hand, consider how much *less* Christian commitment is shown by a couple which has never prayed together, never read the Bible together, never discussed their beliefs about the Lord!

The answers to these questions are *crucial* for guiding further marriage preparation. At the very least, it will inform how the pastor assigns "homework" to the couple. Very likely, it will reveal what elements of the course must be emphasized, and it will help the pastor to advise the couple.

Thus far the questions. The rest of the first pre-marriage session involves a review of the *nature* of marriage – which we've already discussed – and a talk about *commitments*. That merits a few words.

Personally, I want any couple who comes to me to promise, before God, that they will make four commitments.

The first is a commitment to *time*. Done well, a marriage preparation course takes time. Each session concludes with the assignment of homework, and that homework can require several hours for each session. But the lessons they will learn are *crucial* for helping them to shape their marriage.

I put it this way: You will spend *countless* hours preparing for the wedding and reception, which will last less than a half of one day. This course will prepare you for *the rest of your lives*. Isn't that worth a few hours of homework?

The second commitment is *devotions*. If the couple has not been reading the Bible together, they need to begin doing so – even if only by telephone. It's not enough to say, "We'll start after we're married." *Today* is the day to commit!

Chastity is the third commitment. Those who have gone "out of bounds" must commit to *stop* until the wedding night. True repentance means more than being sorry. It means *turning away* from our sin.

And finally: "Commitment to commitment."

Today's world barely understands the concept of a lifelong marriage. *But we're not of the world!* God wants us to *mean it* when we say, "as long as we both shall live." He wants us to *mean it* when we commit to love, to honor, to maintain/obey *no matter what*. So I want them to commit – openly, verbally, and in reliance on God's help – that unfaithfulness and divorce *are not options*.

Because that's what marriage demands: commitment, by God's help.

And that's what we must encourage among our younger brothers and sisters as they enter into this most blessed of human relationships!

Called to the Unique Roles of Husband & Wife

"Marriage is a God-created, God-governed, covenantal relationship between a man and a woman for the purpose of mutual enrichment, the advancement of the Kingdom of God, and the procreation of the race."

I love the *God-centeredness* of this definition of marriage. It is *God* – not man – who ordained marriage, provides its rules and standards, and blesses marriages that are focused on Him. Such a God-centered understanding of marriage is indispensable to promoting Godly marriages within the Church.

To this point in our consideration of this blessed institution of marriage, we have considered the unique nature of marriage, the hard questions that must be asked, and the commitments we must require of couples preparing to marry.

Most of that would be covered in the first of our five pre-marriage classes. The second session would focus on the unique roles of husband and wife.

"Submission" is a key word when considering the responsibility of the wife. "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord" (Eph. 5:22) and "be subject to your own husbands" (1 Pet. 3:1) begin two of the primary passages that discuss the role of a Godly wife.

But "submission" must be defined *Biblically*. Our society balks at this idea of wives being "submissive," but often their objection flows from a failure to understand what Scripture means by *submission*.

Submission is an attitude to which all believers – men and women alike – are called. We are to submit to *one another* (Eph. 5:21; Php. 2:3-4; 1 Pet. 5:5), to the *government* (Rom. 13:1), and to *our elders* (Heb. 13:17). We are to put others first, seeking to imitate Christ in being the servant of all (Mark 9:35). And wives are called *specifically* to submit to their husbands, "as to the Lord."

That does not mean that the wife becomes a slave; that she is not allowed to speak or have an opinion; that she fails to use her abilities; or that she is never to be consulted. Her submission does not make her inferior to her husband, nor is it to be a recognition of her husband's worthiness.

Scripture presents submission as an attitude of respect (Eph. 5:33) and service (Prov. 31:10-31) that wives *willingly embrace* within the marriage relationship. It is to be a *spiritual* submission which testifies to – and flows from – her faith-driven submission to the Lord.

Such submission is not *passive*. The "excellent wife" of Proverbs 31 is clearly submissive – seeking the good of her husband and serving her family in all that she does – yet she is busy using her God-given gifts in the process. She is known for her strength and dignity, her industriousness, and her wisdom – all of which shines forth in her day-to-day actions and her willing attitude.

If "submission" is the watchword for wives, "loving leadership" is the key phrase for husbands. Eph. 5:23,25 tells us: "The husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the Church, His body, and is Himself its Savior. ... Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her."

Christ's love for the Church was a *servant-leadership* love. That is, Jesus showed His love by seeking the good of His people both by selflessly serving them and by wisely leading them. Likewise, a husband's love should lead him to put his wife first (service) and to guide her and help her to grow (leadership).

In other words, loving one's wife "as Christ loved the Church" means more than be willing to take a bullet for her, should the occasion arise. It also means daily choosing to put her needs over his needs. It means

frequently assuring her of his love – not simply with words, but with demonstrations both romantic (dinner and a show) and practical (washing the dishes and bathing the kids).

This is a *leadership* love – but that *doesn't* mean sitting on the throne and giving orders. The Godly husband must *demonstrate* what it means to be a selfless servant (1 Pet. 5:3), that his wife and children might learn by example – just as Jesus did (John 13:1-15). It means spending time with her, just as Christ spent time with His disciples. It means teaching her about God's will, as well as encouraging her to use her talents to serve God, the family, and the Church.

And a Godly husband must take responsibility for his family's welfare. That means he has the final say on decision-making – but it also means he needs to make those decisions not in his own best interest, but in the best interest of his wife and children. That includes consulting them, learning their desires, and keeping those in mind while determining the best course of action.

All of this barely scratches the surface of what it means to be a Godly husband or a Godly wife.

But this is the heart of the lesson that must be examined by those contemplating marriage – because this is the heart of what God has told us about our mutual roles within marriage.

It falls to the happy couple to explore – together, and with the Church – how those roles should look in real life.

Finances, Intimacy & Communications: Conflict in the Making

There never was a marriage without conflict. I can say that with certainty because of the fact that marriages comprise *people*, and people are *sinful*. Where two or more sinful people are gathered, conflict eventually will erupt.

In marriage, there tend to be three subjects around which conflict will arise.

Yet that claim demands a significant qualification. Because the *primary* reason for conflict within marriage – aside from the three “conflict makers” – is a failure to understand the basic nature of marriage and the unique roles of husband and wife within that institution. Ignoring what God has said about marriage is *certain* to cause conflict – every time.

Since we've already discussed the nature of marriage and our roles within it, we'll let that one pass.

Yet even among couples who understand God's intentions about marriage, three issues often bring out the worst between them: finances, intimacy and communication. As one of my former pastors told me, the argument might *seem* to be about her cooking or him leaving his socks on the floor (again!) – but at root, the argument usually is rooted in one of these “conflict makers.”

So before a couple marries, these three subjects *must* be discussed.

Finances are a frequent problem, largely because a lack of money or opposing ideas about money management can cause *significant* stress.

Yet most couples talk little about money before marriage. He has a job; she has a job; both have checking accounts and credit cards. What's to discuss?

But different parents and different experiences have taught them different ways to manage money. Each of them (of course) thinks that their way is best. Compound that with a limited supply of cash, unexpected expenses, and pride, and the fuse is lit. The explosion is just a matter of time.

It doesn't need to be that way. God has given us excellent instruction in stewardship, and our Churches are filled (or should be) with older saints who have carefully refined their money-management skills.

What our young people need, then, is for those with experience to talk with them – and to help them talk to each other – about money *before* marriage.

They need to discuss what sort of budgeting and spending patterns they each have used. They need to study God's Word together to learn what Scripture says about tithing, saving, living within their means, and (as much as possible) avoiding debt.

Then, under the guidance of the pastor or an older mentor, they need to budget for their first year.

That means sitting down, bills and paycheck stubs in hand, to calculate their annual expenses and income. It means discussing what they will spend on entertainment, clothing, gifts and so forth. It also should involve setting some ground rules – like not using credit cards unless they have the cash available in the bank, and neither making major purchases without consulting the other.

Few people consider that kind of discussion and planning to be *fun*. And it takes time, during a period when wedding planning leaves little time to be had.

But it's time well spent! By budgeting carefully, discussing habits, and – above all – studying God's principles for stewardship, the young couple will enter marriage with shared financial understandings and commitments.

And that means the exercise will bring *profitable* dividends by preventing arguments, frustrations and cold shoulders beyond counting!

The next big "conflict maker" is *intimacy*.

Men and women are different. (I'm competing for the *Understatement of the Year Award*.) Those differences are seldom as pronounced as in their differing needs and desires for intimacy.

Unfortunately, it can take years for a couple to figure out the differences in their needs. Meanwhile, they can create hurts and build walls of hostility that will take *even more* years to tear down. They need to begin talking about these matters – in a careful, guided manner – well before the wedding bells sound.

At its most basic, this might need to involve providing information about basic anatomical matters. Men and women have different *physical* needs, and *some* of those differences should be studied before marriage. (I say *some*, because this is a delicate area, and "study" can easily lead to temptation. This is one area of pre-marriage preparation that must be handled with great care!)

A host of complex issues surround the subject of marital intimacy. The Bible tells us, "The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does." What does that mean? What *doesn't* that mean?

Future husbands must learn that their wives will need "intimacy" extending well beyond the one activity they have in mind; while wives need to learn the great significance of that one activity for their husbands. The couple needs to learn the significance of praying together for their marital intimacy. They must consider boundaries, temptations, and openness toward each other.

Then there's birth control. As Christians, we discuss the subject far too little. Yet some common birth control methods (like IUDs and "the pill") act in ways that should alarm us. And in the light of how God calls children a *blessing*, couples should discuss the extent to which *any* birth control is needed.

Intimacy is significant – but so is the final "conflict maker": *Communication*.

Good communication skills can go a long way toward promoting a strong marriage. And poor communication skills can create conflict, pain and distrust, leaving scars that never fully heal. This is *not* a subject to be neglected.

Yet we grow up surrounded by *horrible* examples of family communication. Our culture is exposed to sitcom families getting laughs for verbal hand-grenades which, in real life, would wound to the core. And parents may set a *wonderful* example 95 percent of the time, but kids always seem to remember the five percent of remarks made in the heat of the moment.

We must learn how to *fight* with our spouses ... *as Christians*. Because *conflict* in a marriage is *inevitable*. What matters is how we *handle* that conflict.

Do we seek to score "points," building our own egos at the expense of the other? Do we play the "blame game," doing our best to make sure we never have to say "I'm sorry"? *OR* do we love as we, in Christ, have been loved? Do we forgive as we, in Christ, have been forgiven? Do we refuse to take revenge, leaving vengeance in the hand of Him who truly is just?

Truly *Christian* communication doesn't come naturally. It is a learned skill, which we must harvest from Scripture and from the instruction of brothers and sisters in the faith. But once it is learned, Godly communication skills can be an excellent aid in helping us to find the root of disagreements and to seek peace.

"Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. ... Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear" (Eph. 4:25-27,29).

May the Lord teach us to communicate according to these principles within our marriages – and may He give us success bringing Godly communication to the future marriages He raises up among us!

Marriage, Kids & Devotions: Some Loose Ends

As the marriage date draws near, couples become anxious to leave theory behind and focus on reality. That's why the final matters we address in pre-marriage counseling are nitty-gritty practical: kids and family devotions.

Now, "kids" probably doesn't sound like a very practical subject for most couples preparing for their wedding. Kids are way down the road, right?

How does that song put it? “If you want to make God laugh, tell Him your plans.” My father used to say (usually at weddings): “The first child comes any time. The second one takes nine months.” Child-rearing certainly is a *practical* subject that needs to be addressed before the marriage happens.

But since children aren’t (usually) in the picture at the start, pre-marriage classes generally can provide enough help by outlining the basic needs of instruction, consistency, discipline and discipleship.

Along with a brief discussion about the importance of Christian education, that relatively short conversation should be sufficient. Most couples will learn more from the resources they request later, once they’ve learned that they’re expecting and the idea of actually becoming parents becomes real to them.

Family devotional practices, however, shouldn’t wait nine months to begin. In fact, they shouldn’t wait for the *marriage* to begin. I mentioned it in an earlier pastor’s page, but I re-state it now for emphasis: *Today is the day to begin!*

Couples who come to me to be married need to make several commitments – to me and to the Lord. And one of those is the commitment to begin (or to continue) daily devotions together, immediately. Because that which is put off until the marriage begins is likely never to start at all.

But simply *telling* them to do devotions isn’t enough. After doing it for a few weeks, the young couple needs the opportunity to evaluate what they’ve done and how it has worked. Have they been consistent? Is it helping them to grow closer together? Do they feel that they are being spiritually nourished by it?

And devotions need not be limited to reading the Bible after supper. Couples should discuss having a regular time for praying together. They should consider setting aside time to discuss the sermons. They may want to consider a couples Bible study to help them stay accountable.

And what about when the kids come along? They should be thinking from the start about how children will change things. What kind of family devotions did each of them have growing up? Was it effective? Might there be ways to improve on that?

All of these questions – along with a few more – need to be raised, so that the young couple might have ample opportunity to consider how best to ensure that Christ always remains at the center of their marriage life.

In Conclusion

The columns collected above provide something of a digest of the pre-marriage education which I believe is necessary if we are to encourage Godly marriages.

Of course, it has been *only* a digest. Much that is discussed was left out, and many of the finer points were left untouched. Nonetheless, if there are subject areas on which I didn’t touch, by all means: Tell me! I and the Consistory want to ensure that we are preparing our young couples for marriage in the most God-honoring way possible.

Meanwhile, let us resolve to continue being *intentional* about discipling one another in the light of God’s Word. And let that *particularly* be our concern with regard to those who are preparing for marriage.

If we take the time to carefully help shape and mold these young couples – with much prayer, over much time, and with ample use of Scripture – then generations of children will benefit from our effort. But if we fail to take that time ... then we will have only ourselves to blame when statisticians remark about how *similar* the Church looks to the world.

Let us take to heart the apostle’s admonition to “encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing” (1 Thess. 5:11). Amen!