



## Preparing young people for marriage

In this article, I'd like to suggest the general points that I believe must be covered in more formal pre-marital preparation. Some of you may remember your "pre-marital" counseling many years ago: "Yeah, the minister said he'd meet us at the church a half hour early. When he got there, he told us that we ought to treat each other with respect and love, and then asked if we had any questions about the ceremony." You may wonder whether all this "counseling" is necessary. In fact, one old-timer recently blurted out to me that "We never had so many divorces until preachers started playing psychologist"!

I'm afraid I don't agree with the old-timer on this one. The spiritual forces tearing marriages apart are legion, and the examples of good marriages are not nearly as numerous within the churches as they ought to be. More and more I run across kids preparing for marriage who must deal with lots of negative "baggage" from parental role-models. If the evil one seeks to erode the Biblical pattern, and the parents are not providing consistent "nurture by example," these kids are going to need all the help they can get.

### Who should counsel?

I have always believed that I, as a pastor-teacher, am primarily responsible for the pre-marital training of young couples I agree to marry. I say that for a couple of reasons. First, I am expected to screen couples before I agree to marry them. After all, most folks today in Reformed circles recognize that the minister of the Word is not merely a "servant of the state," but has a prior, obligation to the Gospel. They expect the preacher to ask about their faith, their commitments, their loyalty to Christ and to each other. (There are exceptions: those who are not committed to Christ as Savior and Lord seldom are interested in the sort of spiritual inventory I take before I agree to perform a ceremony. They are usually miffed with me.) There is one other reason, however, why I believe the pastor-teacher is the most logical choice, and that has to do with the nature of the "preaching" he has to do in the sessions scheduled. Clearly, the "instruction" to be given is instruction which is based on specific texts, and the counselor must proclaim them to the pair in his office.

At the same time, I am not at all opposed to the local pastoral elder doing the work of preparation in place of the pastor-teacher, nor certainly in the absence of such a preacher. In my experience, such elders could do, and do a better job than many preachers because they avoid "high-falutin" psychological jargon, and get down to the nitty-gritty. They ask the tough questions, offer the hard-nosed advice, and aim to help people deal with the real issues they are going to face in their marriages.

Further, as the suggestions below will make clear, I believe the deacons can play a very important role in preparing couples for financial/stewardship training, a key element to any successful program.

### What must be covered?

In what follows, I lay out a simple thematic outline of the subjects that ought to be covered in counseling that equips couples to prepare for their marriage in our day and age. Some might think this is overkill; others, not nearly enough. I list this out of a conviction of what Scripture demands, out of a realistic assessment of what a pastor or elder can actually accomplish, and out of the firm belief that the Word must remain central in the process.

### **Session 1:60 minutes minimum**

- Determining *eligibility of the couple*. (Assess their basic commitments to Christ and to each other, their awareness of the maturity of their relationship, their personality traits, etc.) Use questionnaire.
- Assign *homework*: a careful study of Ephesians 5:21ff.

### **Session 2:90 minutes minimum**

- Teach, from Genesis 2, *the nature and purpose of marriage*.
- Teach from Matthew 5 and Matthew 19, *the permanence of marriage*.
- Teach from Ephesians 5:21ff, *the Biblically-assigned roles of husband, wife*.
- Teach, from Ephesians 5:21ff (and other passages) the Biblical definition of love (in contrast to the view of our world).

### **Session 3: 60 minutes minimum**

- Study Biblical principles of *communication* (Ephesians 4).
- Reiterate the Biblical model of: *confess, repent, forgive*.

### **Session 4:60 minutes minimum (led by elder)**

- The *family altar*: establishing Bible study and prayer routines
- The *family and the Family of God*: commitment to the local church

### **Session 5:60 minutes minimum**

- Sex (a sensitive but urgent subject, especially so in a world where AIDS is so prevalent)
- Inquire, gently, whether a sexually active past must be confessed, repented of.
- Discuss the beautiful principles established in Genesis 2:24, 1 Corinthians 7:1ff.
- *Birth Control* (important in an age when society wishes to separate sexual activity from consequences): discuss legitimate/ illegitimate reasons for, proper/improper methods of.

### **Session 6:60 minutes minimum (led by a deacon)**

- Stewardship concerns: Establishing a family budget (using one of many available worksheets) that highlights priorities of giving, saving, dangers of borrowing, etc.

### **Session 7:60 minutes minimum (led by the Minister)**

- Discussion of any questions arising from previous sessions
- Planning for the wedding ceremony (Can be done earlier if time demands; however, I suggest waiting, as many ideas may well change because of material studied and discussed in earlier sessions.)

You will immediately notice that this is an aggressive schedule. Pastors of large churches who do many weddings per year will find this almost unworkable, unless they combine several of the couples together in a class for the less personal subjects. I've done it both ways, and it does work well. Key to the whole package is participation by the couple. Pre-marital counseling is not intended to be something to endure; rather, they ought to spend at least as much time preparing for a life of marriage as they do for the wedding! They must commit to study Scripture with you; they must commit to be shaped by what they learn in its pages. Unless they are willing to prepare for marriage, besides planning a wedding, you ought not feel obligated to perform the ceremony, but you must feel obligated to issue an urgent warning!

I hope these ideas help. Understand that they are personally designed, and reflect the priorities I believe to be Scripturally based, reflecting on 16 years of ministry. Your emphasis, style, or structure, may vary. The principles should not. If nothing else, you as elders should use these ideas as a springboard for discussion about the way marriage preparation is done in *your* church.

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