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EQUIPPING COUPLES FOR CHRIST-CENTERED MARRIAGES  
AT NEW VISION BAPTIST CHURCH IN  
MURFREESBORO, TENNESSEE

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Presented to  
the Faculty of  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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Doctor of Educational Ministry

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by  
Robbie Paul Piel  
May 2021

**APPROVAL SHEET**

EQUIPPING COUPLES FOR CHRIST-CENTERED MARRIAGES

AT NEW VISION BAPTIST CHURCH IN

MURFREESBORO, TENNESSEE

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## PREFACE

All glory is given to the Lord God who has equipped me through various blessings and trials to be one of His humble servants tasked with counseling His people through His Word. Thank you to Catherine, my godly wife, and co-counselor who encouraged me to continue in my education though we were not sure where it would lead. Thank you to our children Alexandra, Julia, Franklin, and Joseph, who traded some of the quality time that a father owes to his children for the benefit of the body of Christ.

Thank you to New Vision Baptist Church, its pastors, deacons, staff, and members for providing me with the means and opportunity to serve as a biblical counselor and to complete this project under their guidance and supervision. Finally, thank you to Dr. Joseph Harrod, my project supervisor, who genuinely supported and guided me through my doctoral project with skill and grace, and Dr. Robert D. Jones, my second reader, whose insights were invaluable.

Robbie Piel

Murfreesboro, Tennessee

May 2021

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

New Vision Baptist Church (NVBC) of Murfreesboro, Tennessee, is a vibrant and growing Southern Baptist Church in the heart of Tennessee. Ideally positioned in one of the most sought-after areas in the country, a bustling college town, with major industry sectors of medical, insurance, and manufacturing, the population is growing more quickly than it can accommodate. NVBC is experiencing similar growth to that of Murfreesboro and the growth has challenged its abilities to effectively minister to the needs of its attendees. Of the various ministries that comprise NVBC, the Care Ministry seeks to address the needs of those who have special concerns that require individualized care or specialized group support. I serve as a biblical counselor for the Care Ministry. A variety of ministries are offered through the Care Ministry as a means of addressing the needs of the diverse population for the glory of God. Of the most important to be addressed is the ministry for Christ-centered marriage, which seeks gospel transformation of relationships in the present and for the generations that follow.

#### **Context**

From the context of the NVBC Care Ministry, there has arisen a need to create a systematic curriculum that can be employed across a diverse group of pastors and counselors in marriage counseling. About 5,000 people attend NVBC each week. Most of the attendees are family groups ranging in age from young adult to elderly and the spectrum of married or soon-to-be-married couples is significantly high. The diversity of this population is consistent with the surrounding area and many worldly pressures and influences affect the quality of marriages despite the Christian influence of the church.

Murfreesboro is a southern suburb of Nashville, Tennessee, and the area is considered a nominal Christian community. Nonetheless, the south, in general, is home to a large population of cultural-Christians who have grown up in church and have a theoretical understanding of the gospel but in practice are lacking in true biblical faith lived out in a way that glorifies God through Jesus Christ. This knowledge of Christ, without the application of His commands, leaves many marriages in jeopardy of long-term strife or ending in divorce. As of 2017, Rutherford County, home of NVBC, holds a higher rate of divorce than its major metropolitan neighbor of Davidson County, home to Nashville.<sup>1</sup> This alarming statistic highlights a need for biblically-sound marriage education.

Three specific groups make up the local dynamic of the cultural-Christian community and present opportunities for evangelism, discipleship, and training in Christ-centered marriage principles. The first group is the large contingent of college-aged students. Comprising up to a third of the population of NVBC, the college-aged group has been raised in the context of postmodernism and though they seek to grow in Christ, they are somewhat hindered by the politics and social implications of living in a secular college environment with liberal social influences. This group is challenged to break free from the stereotypes of their parents' generations and find a meaningful God-honoring relationship that will lead to marriage in a time when such is not the norm. The college-aged group presents an opportunity for strong Christian leaders to come alongside them and not only to educate them about the biblical purpose of marriage, but also to walk with them as they meet, date, and marry their spouses. This group is likely to fully embrace a relatively short, information-intensive Christ-centered marriage program to increase their

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<sup>1</sup> Tennessee Department of Health, "Marriage and Divorce Statistics," accessed 16 July, 2019, <https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/health/documents/vital-statistics/marriage-divorce/TN%20Marriages%20Divorces%20-%202017prel.pdf>, 1.

knowledge and practice of spiritual disciplines and to improve their chances for sustained Christ-centered marriages.

A second group that presents an opportunity for the marriage ministry are those who entered marriage as a contractual relationship between two non-believers have come to faith, or immature believers that have matured and sought a covenant marriage with Christ as the foundation. This group tends to seek counseling with issues of strife caused by unsatisfied desires of the flesh. They want to have something better than they do but are not sure how to get it. For this group, Christ-centered marriage training is needed to reorient their desires from those of the flesh to those of the Spirit. They will benefit from the normative influence of a class environment over personal counseling and a systematic course can establish their paths toward Christian maturity.

The final group that presents an opportunity for evangelism and discipleship within the marriage ministry are couples who have entered religiously mixed marriages. They married spouses with opposing faith practices because they did not consider the relational problems it would pose within their marriages. This group presents with counseling issues of marital strife and brokenness, usually in the believer. They did not initially seek to engage in a Christ-centered marriage and are experiencing the consequences of their unions. A Christ-centered marriage course will provide this group an opportunity to develop some of the basic knowledge and practices that they would have received in a biblical premarital counseling context.

In general, my counseling ministry at NVBC is focused on marriage and family and the three most common issues I see are marital stress, divorce-related, and premarital counseling requests. In counseling, I find that many couples, though professing Christianity, do not live a life that would reflect His image. They do not fully comprehend that marriage is an institution created and ordained by God and they do not enter marriage with the reverence it requires. Individuals have often had numerous sexual partners before marriage, have been married multiple times, lived together before marriage, or do not

currently practice any spiritual disciplines except for regular church attendance. They lack understanding of the biblical nature of marriage or the roles and responsibilities of husband and wife as designed by God. Moreover, couples have difficulties with the basic communication skills often discussed in premarital counseling, which hinders their ability to effectively work through marital struggles without assistance. Additionally, couples who struggle with marriage relationships affect their children through improper modeling, lack of adequate discipleship, emotional neglect, and sometimes separation through a divorce. These issues damage the witness of the church as being set apart and bring to bear the weight of the world and the focus on sin as the typical family dynamic.

I am one of more than thirty people at NVBC who offer marital counseling. Each pastor or counselor is at his or her discretion on how to approach marital counseling. While the complaints have been few, there is a definitive need, with the number of available counselors, to approach marital counseling with a unified message and a standard curriculum that will address the most common issues of marriage. Unity of messaging within the diversity of the pastoral and counseling staff will lead to an improvement in the delivery of marital-related counseling as well as have a lasting impact on the marriages at NVBC in this generation and the next. The Equipping Couples for Christ-Centered Marriages project will create a systematic approach to the discipleship of couples toward biblically-sound marriage practices and will reduce the need for counseling marital strife and divorce-related issues.

### **Rationale**

In Genesis 1–2, God joined man and woman as “one flesh” and he saw that what He created was “very good” (see Gen 2:23; 1:28, 31). God uses the joining of a man and a woman in marriage to sanctify them and prepare them for Christ. Therefore, because marriage is an institution created and ordained by God to be the cornerstone of society, a systematic Christ-centered marriage course will be developed and made available to the counseling and pastoral staff of NVBC. The counseling ministry, as a care component to

the body of the church, exists to provide spiritual help and discipleship. It is time-consuming and often emotionally difficult. The problems of marriage are rarely isolated to the married couple, but often spill over into the lives of the immediate and extended families. All counselors and pastors are equipped to manage the issues presented in marital counseling (Eph 4:11-16). Nonetheless, their time is limited in accessing resources, developing counseling plans, and providing individualized counseling for more than a few people at a time. The individual efforts of the many, though well-intentioned, will be better equipped with a systematic resource to address the common issues of marriage in a group setting. Such a resource will free up considerable time and effort to be placed where it will be used more effectively.

A systematic Christ-centered marriage course, used properly, will reduce duplication of effort, minimize lost labor-hours, and allow pastoral staff to focus ministry efforts on problems with greater corporate impact. Such a course will reposition staff to allow fewer ministers to service more members in a more concise timeframe with better use of space to do so. Holding a class for twenty becomes far more manageable than filling individual counseling requests for ten couples over multiple sessions.

The issues commonly addressed in marital counseling often relate to problems of knowledge and practice of Christ-centered principles. They frequently include communication, financial management, sexual fulfillment, honesty and integrity, and proper roles of husband and wife. Couples are often either unaware of the purpose of marriage or they have let worldliness take the place of Godliness as the foundation for their marriages. A systematic course in Christ-centered marriage would provide a forum to discuss such issues and minimize the need to address the less-complicated topics in the private counseling room in exchange for sound biblical instruction, peer mentorship, and group dialog in a classroom.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this project was to equip couples for Christ-centered marriages at New Vision Baptist Church in Murfreesboro, Tennessee.

## **Goals**

The following three goals guided the development, assessment, and implementation of this project to equip couples for Christ-centered marriage:

1. The first goal was to create a six-session curriculum to equip couples to develop Christ-centeredness within their marriages.
2. The second goal was to assess the spiritual maturity of married couples at NVBC in the Care Ministry.
3. The third goal was to deepen the spiritual maturity of couples in the Care Ministry of NVBC by teaching the curriculum.

The completion of these goals has led to a Christ-centered marriage course that is offered in weekly sessions or short weekend formats that service the needs of the church and its membership. Each of the three identified goals were supported by a research methodology that is detailed in the following section.

## **Research Methodology**

Three goals were determined essential to develop, implement, and assess the project. The first goal was to create a six-session curriculum that equips couples to develop Christ-centeredness within their marriages. The curriculum focuses on the knowledge of Christian principles and practices of spiritual disciplines within marriage. This goal was measured by a three-member expert panel who utilized a rubric to evaluate the biblical faithfulness, teaching methodology, scope, and applicability of the curriculum.<sup>2</sup> The expert panel included both male and female reviewers: the senior associate pastor, counseling and discipleship pastor, and a senior female biblical counselor. This goal was

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<sup>2</sup> See appendix 3.

considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of the evaluation criterion met or exceeded the “sufficient” level.

The second goal was to assess the spiritual maturity of married couples at NVBC in the Care Ministry. A survey evaluated participants’ spiritual maturity within their marriages.<sup>3</sup> The survey was administered electronically by email through Google Documents upon registration using an anonymously coded response format. This goal was considered successfully met when at least twelve surveys were returned and the results analyzed, providing a clearer picture of the knowledge and practice of spiritual maturity within marriages among participants.

The third goal was to deepen the spiritual maturity of couples in the Care Ministry of NVBC by teaching the curriculum. The result of the participants’ engagement with the curriculum and assimilation of the practices determined any increase in depth of spiritual maturity. This goal was measured by administering a post-survey, which was used to assess the level of knowledge and motivation to practice Christ-centered marriage principles.<sup>4</sup> This goal was considered successfully met when a t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistically significant difference in the pre- and post-survey scores.

The outline of sessions is as follows:

1. Entering into a Group Counseling Dynamic
2. God’s Purpose for Marriage and His Roles for Husbands and Wives
3. Spiritual Disciplines
4. Idolatry, Repentance, and Forgiveness
5. Communication
6. Intimacy and Fidelity

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<sup>3</sup> See appendix 2. All of the research instruments used in this project were performed in compliance with and approved by The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Ethics Committee prior to use in the ministry project.

<sup>4</sup> See appendix 2.



## Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations

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

*Biblical counseling.* The Association of Biblical Counselors states, “Biblical counseling can be defined as a fluid event and process, as part of the Great Commission, when a follower of Jesus Christ in the service of the Holy Spirit provides face-to-face ministry of the Word to others.”<sup>5</sup>

*Christ-centered.* For the purposes of this project, *Christ-centered* will imply one having a life-focus on Jesus Christ and seeking to glorify God through living according to Christ’s commands.

*Cultural-Christian.* Brett McCracken describes *Cultural-Christian* as “a distorted form of Christianity, mostly about family values, Golden Rule moralism, and good citizenship.”<sup>6</sup> *Cultural-Christians* are concerned about the social aspect of group membership and appearance but have a limited scope of practice of Christian morality or value structure.

*Spiritual maturity.* For the purposes of this project, *Spiritual maturity* will refer to the characteristics of a Christian who demonstrates evidence of Christ-centered living. A fitting biblical reference passage to demonstrate spiritual maturity is found in 2 Peter 1:5-8:

For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Two limitations were applied to this project. First, the accuracy of the pre- and post-series surveys was dependent on the honesty of the participants in relating their

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<sup>5</sup> John Henderson, “A Definition for Biblical Counseling,” Association of Biblical Counselors, January 31, 2017, <https://christiancounseling.com/blog/definition-biblical-counseling/>.

<sup>6</sup> Brett McCracken, “The Dying Away of Cultural Christianity,” Crossway, September 23, 2017, <https://www.crossway.org/articles/the-dying-away-of-cultural-christianity/>.

Christ-centered knowledge and practices in their marriage relationships. To mitigate this limitation, participants' surveys are identified by number and not by name. They responded with anonymity. Second, the effectiveness of the training was limited by the constancy of attendance. If the participants do not attend each session, it creates difficulty to measuring training effectiveness. To mitigate this limitation, extensive course outlines and notes were provided to each participant.

Three delimitations were placed on the project. First, the project was limited to ten couples seeking to develop Christ-centeredness within their marriages. Second, the project is confined to a fifteen-week timeframe. This gave adequate time to prepare and teach the six training sessions and conduct the post-series survey after the sessions were completed. Finally, this project was limited to training for improved knowledge and practices of Christ-centered marriages.

### **Conclusion**

The growth of the NVBC and the surrounding community has led to opportunities to witness to a greater diversity of church attendees. It has increased the base of families and with that growth comes a broader spectrum of requests for counseling premarital, marital, and divorce recovery cases. While NVBC has several biblical counselors and pastors to meet this need, the Care Ministry is often challenged to fill each counseling request without overburdening individual counselors with unnecessarily heavy caseloads. To address this issue, a course in Christ-centered marriage will be developed and deployed. This course will equip couples for Christ-centeredness and encourage them to grow in spiritual maturity. As a result, it is anticipated that the church body will become stronger and more mature in their faith for generations to come.

CHAPTER 2  
BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL JUSTIFICATION FOR  
EQUIPPING COUPLES FOR CHRIST-  
CENTERED MARRIAGES

God’s creation of man and woman, and His uniting them in relationship with purpose, evidence His design for marriage. Prominent evangelical author John Piper observes that in Scripture, marriage is the joining of one man and one woman in a lifetime covenant relationship of fidelity to display God’s grace.<sup>1</sup> Raymond C. Ortlund, evangelical pastor, proposed one’s expression of faith in God is “marital in nature.”<sup>2</sup> No other institution more closely mirrors Christ’s sacrificial love for His people or God’s magnificent grace than Christian marriage. However, even in Christian communities, concepts of marriage widely vary. Theologian Earnest D. Martin laments that such concepts include cohabitation, same-gender unions, and a devaluation of the importance of the institution of marriage in general.<sup>3</sup> Christians simply do not place the proper emphasis on the importance of marriage as a God-designed institution. As a basis for human social structure and stability, marriage is losing ground. Simultaneously, faith in God, belief in Jesus Christ as Savior, and the desire to grow in Christian maturity seem less prominent than in previous generations. The combination of these issues presents an opportunity for the church to reinforce the sanctity of marriage as vitally important to the

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<sup>1</sup> John Piper, *This Momentary Marriage: A Parable of Permanence* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 43.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond C. Ortlund, Jr., *Whoredom: God’s Unfaithful Wife in Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 174.

<sup>3</sup> Earnest D. Martin, *Toward a Biblical Theology of Marriage: A Study of the Bible’s Vocabulary of Marriage* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 3, 5.

Christian life; therefore, it is incumbent for the church to equip couples for Christ-centered marriage.

For the purpose of illustrating the importance of Christ-centered marriage, several key passages of Scripture will be examined in this chapter. First, an exegesis of Genesis 1:27-28 demonstrates marriage as a sacred creation of God. Second, an exegesis of Genesis 2:18-25 reveals the covenantal structure and mutual blessings of marriage. Third, an exegesis of Ephesians 5:22-33 evidences that the apostle Paul preaches the gospel through a parallel of the “one-flesh” union of husband and wife, and the union of Christ and His church. Fourth, an exegesis of 1 Peter 3:1-7 identifies the Christlike attributes of spiritually mature believers in submission to Christ. Each of these passages supports the position that marriage is God-designed and demonstrates the gospel; therefore, the church must equip believers for Christ-centered marriages.

### **Marriage Is a Sacred Creation of God**

The Bible proclaims God as the sovereign creator of all things and the first two chapters of Genesis provide an overview of His creative activities within six recorded days. While the Genesis account begins with the heavens and transitions to the earth, the focus of the story is on God’s purposeful creation of man and their unique relationship. Old Testament scholar John H. Sailhamer emphasizes the truth that man, God’s special creation, is not a “heavenly creature” but formed from the “dust of the ground (cf. Gen 3:19).”<sup>4</sup> People are uniquely tied to the earth. Though man was formed from the dust of the ground, God fashioned woman from the substance of man, and together they were blessed with a united purpose in marriage as stewards of the earth. An exegesis of Genesis 1:27-28 demonstrates that marriage is a sacred creation of God.

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<sup>4</sup> John H. Sailhamer, *Genesis*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, vol. 1 (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1967), 37.

## Created in the Image of God

The term *image* bears significance only in so much as what an image reflects. As a reflection of God, mankind bears a unique and glorious image that is both relational and functional. Man's image helps him to better understand himself, but more importantly, to understand his relationship with God. Genesis 1:27 declares, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." From a relational perspective, theologians Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum suggest, "The divine image indicates man's relationship and spiritual fellowship with God."<sup>5</sup> Man was made for fellowship with God and is unique from all the other animals who were created "according to their kinds" (v. 21). God did not imbue nonhuman creatures with His likeness. From a functional perspective, Gentry and Wellum propose, "This speaks to man's relationship to God as son and his relationship to creation as servant king."<sup>6</sup> Viewing God as the Creator and Sustainer of all things, sonship, and servanthood presume "in his own image" establishes that mankind has a special function in creation (v. 27). This function is that men and women are to live in relationship with God as stewards over His creation.

The accounts of God's relationship with Adam and Eve in the passages of Genesis 1–3 demonstrate that He desired to be in close relationship with them. He provided for their needs as well as personally communicated with them in the garden. Theologian Anthony Hoekema proposes that though there is a longstanding debate focused on "let us make man in our image" from Genesis 1:26, it is clear in Genesis 1 that God is a relational being who is in fellowship as He creates.<sup>7</sup> Old Testament professor C. John Collins

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<sup>5</sup> Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *God's Kingdom Through God's Covenants: A Concise Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 86.

<sup>6</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *God's Kingdom Through God's Covenants*, 92.

<sup>7</sup> Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986), 12.

concludes that God was in fellowship with Himself,<sup>8</sup> and he noted that Genesis 1:2 already introduced the Spirit as a means of God’s progressive self-revelation.<sup>9</sup> Theologian Fred Sanders expands on the revelation of the triune personhood of God in Scripture as incremental: “In the fullness of time, God did not give us facts about himself, but gave us himself in the person of the Father who sent, the Son how was sent, and the Holy Spirit who was poured out.”<sup>10</sup> It is within the Triunity of God that He relates to Himself. As God is a relational being, “created in God’s image” in part suggests that man’s relational nature is a reflection of God’s image. Genesis 2–3 provides a more detailed picture than Genesis 1:27-28 of how God was in a personal relationship with Adam and Eve as the first of mankind. The pre-fall passages in Genesis depicts how God intended man to relate to Him. From this fellowship perspective one can begin to determine the meaning of being created in the image of God.

People are created for a relationship with God. That relationship is defined by man being created in the image of God as male and female. Though God is not a physical being (John 4:24), He created man and woman for relationship with each other as well as Himself. Hoekema suggests that the resemblance to God exists in the relational aspect of man’s nature.<sup>11</sup> Man is a creature, but also a person. As a person, he has attributes of personality, relationality, and accountability to God. Though an incomplete image, man and woman share divine attributes of the nature of God, and as Old Testament scholar John H. Walton concludes, can become more like the image of God through a direct

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<sup>8</sup> See Gen 1:1-2; John 1:1-3; Col 1:16-17; Heb 1:3, 10-12.

<sup>9</sup> C. John Collins, *Genesis 1–4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Philipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2006), 61.

<sup>10</sup> Fred Sanders, *The Triune God*, New Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 40.

<sup>11</sup> Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 14.

relationship with Him.<sup>12</sup> Biblical scholar David J. Atkinson points out that God’s image is only truly displayed in Jesus Christ, and His desire for a relationship with man is rooted in grace and forgiveness so that mankind may someday measure up to the image of God in Christ.<sup>13</sup> “Jesus said . . . Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Jesus is the perfect image of the Father and He is what man reflects as God’s image. To reflect the image of God is to emulate the characteristics of Christ. Husbands and wives growing in relationship with Christ and with each other, indwelled and empowered by the Spirit of God, foreshadow Christ’s relationship with His bride, the church, and present earthly marriage as a training ground for eternity with Him.

### **Created Male and Female**

Regarding the creation of man in His image, Genesis 1:27 specifies, “Male and female he created them.” Though other animals were also created with sexual distinction, it is important to note the difference in emphasis. The picture presented with the first man and woman is one of heterosexuality, monogamy, and purpose.<sup>14</sup> This model is instrumental in presenting God’s design for marriage as a union of one man and one woman who will serve as stewards over God’s creation. Martin suggests, “The implication is that it is male and female together in relationship that reflect the image of God.”<sup>15</sup> Though not specifically stated, the inference is that marriage, as observed in Genesis chapters 1–3, is how God designed people to be in relationship to Himself. In the context

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<sup>12</sup> John H. Walton, *Genesis*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 131.

<sup>13</sup> David J. Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1–11*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1990), 37-38.

<sup>14</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger and David Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 25.

<sup>15</sup> Martin, *Toward a Biblical Theology of Marriage*, 18.

of marriage, man and woman share complementary roles and functions for the other and fulfill the blessings and responsibilities owed to God as identified in Genesis 1:28.

### **Blessed with a Purpose**

Men and women, in the context of marriage, are blessed with a purpose in God's creation. Genesis 1:28 says, "And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." Andreas J. Köstenberger, New Testament scholar, and David Jones, theologian, label this purpose as "representative rule," men and women are the representatives of God on earth.<sup>16</sup> They bear His image over creation and are meant to provide godly oversight and exercise authority as is pleasing to God as His image-bearers. While godly oversight and the exercise of authority can be accomplished to an extent in singularity, the Genesis 1:27-28 account ties this responsibility to the joint relationship of man and women in marriage. Through marriage God encourages procreation and the filling of the earth. Likewise, it requires an increased population through procreation to affect the responsibilities of stewardship and dominion.

To be fruitful is to reproduce oneself, which is only humanly possible through the sexual union of man and woman. Old Testament scholar Gordon J. Wenham expounds "a clear statement of the divine purpose of marriage . . . is for the procreation of children."<sup>17</sup> God declared to man and woman to "be fruitful and multiply" (v. 28). In the context of the original audience of Genesis, this is a departure from the pagan practices of fertility cults whereas God has declared man and woman as naturally fertile and able to

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<sup>16</sup> Köstenberger and Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family*, 23-24.

<sup>17</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 33.



produce children as a part of His divine design.<sup>18</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, professor of Old Testament, also emphasizes, “God gives them the power to reproduce themselves.”<sup>19</sup> In doing so, they fulfill part of God’s plan to fill the earth. Also, Walton suggests that though God has blessed man and woman to “be fruitful and fill the earth” (v. 28), this blessing “is understood as a privilege rather than an obligation.”<sup>20</sup> Not every marriage will be blessed with children and not every married couple will be obligated to produce children.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, all people have further responsibilities to God and creation.

God specified mankind’s responsibilities over creation as stewardship and dominion (v. 28). Regarding the earth, verse 28 reads, “And subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” Adam and Eve, as a couple joined in marriage by God, were charged with the responsibility of benevolent stewardship over creation. Old Testament scholar Derek Kidner points to God’s blessing as “not only a gift but a function.”<sup>22</sup> Genesis 2:15 reads, “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.” This observed with Genesis 1:28, “fill the earth and subdue it,” equates to man’s obligation of keeping the earth as God’s representative. Moreover, professor of Hebrew James G. Murphy postulates that, in the image of God, man is expected not to exploit the earth for his needs but to be a benevolent manager of resources to promote the general welfare of mankind and the creatures he has dominion over.<sup>23</sup> To do such is to image God

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<sup>18</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 33.

<sup>19</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1–17*, The New International Commentary of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 139.

<sup>20</sup> Walton, *Genesis*, 144.

<sup>21</sup> Walton, *Genesis*, 144.

<sup>22</sup> Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, vol. 1 (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1967), 52.

<sup>23</sup> James G. Murphy, *Genesis*, Barnes Notes (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 65.

in man and to grow in the likeness of Christ. In marriage, it takes the complementary natures of man and woman to fully engage in stewardship as both husband and wife complement each other for God's purposes and glory.

Dominion is an obligation of mankind to make responsible use of the animals under his control. Like the earth, the animals are created by God and placed under man's authority so that man can express the image of God through his compassion and care. God has provided the animals as a resource, but man must ultimately take responsible actions to promote the general welfare and "to rule nature as a benevolent king."<sup>24</sup>

Marriage is a sacred relationship created by God. The Bible is clear to represent God's creation of man and woman "in his image" (Gen 1:27) and joined them in the union of marriage (Gen 1:28, 2:24) as a complementary relationship to express God's grace, love, and forgiveness. As God's image is most clearly expressed in the person of Jesus Christ, He is the model for all people to emulate, but within marriage, Christ is the head and represents the purpose of God's plan to redeem fallen humanity back to the perfect image of Himself.

### **Covenantal Structure and Mutual Blessing**

A cursory examination of Genesis 2:18-25 does not explicitly state that God designed marriage as a covenant relationship.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, the concept of covenant is present in the language of the passage, and the criteria of a God-ordained covenant exists in the relationship. Theologian Wayne Grudem defines the term *covenant* as "an unchangeable, divinely imposed legal agreement between God and man that stipulates the

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<sup>24</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 33.

<sup>25</sup> Though covenant is not explicitly stated in Gen 2:18-25 see Pro 2:17, Mal 2:14, and Eze 16 for examples of marriage as a covenantal relationship.

conditions of their relationship.”<sup>26</sup> G. L. Archer, Jr., biblical scholar, defines a theological *covenant* as “a gracious undertaking entered into by God for the benefit and blessing of humanity, and specifically of those who by faith receive the promises and commit themselves to the obligations which this undertaking involves.”<sup>27</sup> Though the term *covenant* is not present in Genesis 1–2, Gentry and Wellum demonstrate that the language used to distinguish the formation of a covenant indicate that God established a covenant with Adam.<sup>28</sup> The language differentiates the use of the term “cut,” which signifies the initiation of a covenant and “established” which upholds a previous covenant.<sup>29</sup> God created Adam and Eve as the first of mankind, and through them establishes and sustains humanity as His image-bearers for the purposes of relationship and stewardship over creation. God’s covenantal relationship with Adam is the predecessor for each biblical covenant and Adam serves as the representative of all humanity.<sup>30</sup> Gentry and Wellum conclude that the phrase “establish my covenant” in Genesis 6:18 (and in Gen 9:9, 11, 17) refers to the maintenance of a preexisting *covenant* relationship that can be found in Adam and rooted in creation.<sup>31</sup> The following exegesis of Genesis 2:18-25 illustrates the covenantal structure and mutual blessing of marriage according to God’s design.

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<sup>26</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 515.

<sup>27</sup> G. L. Archer, Jr., “Covenant,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 299.

<sup>28</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *God’s Kingdom Through God’s Covenants*, 257.

<sup>29</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *God’s Kingdom Through God’s Covenants*, 257.

<sup>30</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *God’s Kingdom Through God’s Covenants*, 257-58.

<sup>31</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *God’s Kingdom Through God’s Covenants*, 257.

## It Is Not Good

The first instance of God’s displeasure is observed concerning man’s solitary condition. This is expressed as a “divine observation” of the “importance of companionship for man.”<sup>32</sup> God provided Adam with the company of and dominion over the animals, but none were like him and could not relate to him in a way that was fulfilling. Hamilton suggested that while there is no evidence that Adam was displeased with his condition, it was God, who in His divine judgment determined that man should have a “corresponding companion.”<sup>33</sup> Genesis 2:18 says, “Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone.’” Atkinson proposes that part of the image of God in man is expressed in his desire to commune with others.<sup>34</sup> Sixteenth-century theologian John Calvin maintains that man was formed as a social being.<sup>35</sup> God in His infinite wisdom foresaw the need for Adam to have like companionship and blessed him with Eve. From their union, mankind was established, and communities of people were forged.

Examining Archer’s theological definition of *covenant*, God’s provision of Eve for Adam was a gracious undertaking that not only benefited Adam but humanity in general.<sup>36</sup> Adam received God’s blessing of Eve faithfully and committed himself to her both in joy and under the obligation owed to God for His provision.<sup>37</sup> Before Eve, God knew that Adam was lacking in the fullness of human relationship. God acted with loving-kindness to bless Adam with what he did not recognize he needed. While not expressed specifically as a covenant, it follows the covenantal structure of Scripture and

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<sup>32</sup> Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1–11*, 68.

<sup>33</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17*, 175.

<sup>34</sup> Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1–11*, 68.

<sup>35</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis, Calvin’s Commentaries*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 128.

<sup>36</sup> Archer, “Covenant,” 299.

<sup>37</sup> Archer, “Covenant,” 299.

demonstrates God’s beneficent act of blessing Adam at the point of creation, but also mankind in perpetuity.

### **A Fit Helper**

In God’s self-deliberation, He determined for Adam’s sake, “I will make him a helper fit for him” (Gen 2:18). The phrase *helper fit for him* has left scholars in conflict over the linguistic meaning conveyed. The debate focuses on the woman’s function as a fit helper. Walton’s translation is that woman was created for man as a “partner,” “counterpart,” or as he juxtaposes, “counterpartner.”<sup>38</sup> I believe that Walton’s assessment provides the clearest interpretation of a wife as helper to her husband. Lutheran theologian Gerhard von Rad proposes the language reflects “as the mirror of himself, as he sees himself.”<sup>39</sup> Wenham suggests the phrase means “like opposite him,” which conveys the complementary nature of male and female.<sup>40</sup> Calvin proposes that “woman is given as a companion and an associate to the man to assist him to live well.”<sup>41</sup> Atkinson carefully observes that each connotation of the phrase is meant to convey equality without “inferiority, subordination, or servitude.”<sup>42</sup> In all instances, the woman is equal to the man in likeness, created in God’s image, and a complement to man’s nature to reflect God’s image through their union.

Considering Genesis 1:28 and 2:21–25, in the case of Adam and Eve, God established a covenant that benefited the couple through a union of monogamous companionship and mutual support for His purposes of procreation, stewardship, and

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<sup>38</sup> Walton, *Genesis*, 177.

<sup>39</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, rev. ed., The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 82.

<sup>40</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 68.

<sup>41</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries on The First Book of Moses*, 129.

<sup>42</sup> Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1–11*, 69.

dominion over the earth. The first married couple serves as a witness and pre-fall biblical model for their progeny. While Adam was seemingly content before Eve, his reaction to her in Genesis 2:23 demonstrates that he took Eve as God’s blessing. Likewise, Adam served as a blessing for Eve as well through companionship and support.

### **One-Flesh Union**

The method by which God created a fit helper for Adam was unprecedented. Genesis 2:21-22 reads, “So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.” Eve was built from the substance of Adam. Gerhard Von Rad notes that she was made from him “and they were actually originally one flesh.”<sup>43</sup> Verse 23 says, “Then the man said, ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.’” The one-flesh union has many implications. Gordon J. Wenham noted that woman, taken from the side of man, “stands at his side to be his helper-counterpart, and her soul is bound up with his.”<sup>44</sup> Prominent evangelical pastor John F. MacArthur expresses that *one-flesh* establishes “sexual completeness” and the fitness of “the married pair to reproduce.”<sup>45</sup> It follows that their offspring are their flesh and the perfect product of their union.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, as Hamilton asserts, the “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” declaration of verse 23 “becomes a covenantal statement of his commitment to her.”<sup>47</sup> Von Rad also proposes that their union transcends all other earthly relationships and they “belong to each

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<sup>43</sup> Von Rad, *Genesis*, 85.

<sup>44</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 69.

<sup>45</sup> John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary: Unleashing God’s Truth, One Verse at a Time* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 15.

<sup>46</sup> MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 15.

<sup>47</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1–17*, 180.

other.”<sup>48</sup>

This biblical truth is further expressed in the following two verses: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one-flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed” (Gen 2:24–25). The one-flesh union shifts a man’s priorities from his parents to his wife. The phrase *hold fast* signifies the necessary commitment and “permanence” of the marriage covenant.<sup>49</sup> Their lack of shame indicates their blamelessness before God.<sup>50</sup> It also illustrates the purity on which marriage is founded; the two are completely exposed and accept each other without judgment.

### **Covenantal Marriage**

The Old Testament makes the repeated analogy of God’s covenant with Israel to a marriage relationship.<sup>51</sup> Ortlund writes, “Israel was an unfaithful wife, sharing her love with both Yahweh and the Baals.”<sup>52</sup> Likewise, the New Testament uses the analogy of Christ’s union with the church as a marriage relationship.<sup>53</sup> Jesus even cites Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 in support of the sanctity of marriage and adds, “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate” (Mark 10:9). Marriage figures prominently in the biblical narrative because God has created it for His glory. Atkinson proposes, “The characteristic biblical understanding of marriage is ‘covenant.’”<sup>54</sup> The covenant of marriage

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<sup>48</sup> Von Rad, *Genesis*, 85.

<sup>49</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 71.

<sup>50</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 71-72.

<sup>51</sup> See Isa 54:5; Jer 31:32; Ezek 16:8-14; Hos 2:14-20.

<sup>52</sup> Ortlund, *Whoredom*, 47.

<sup>53</sup> See Eph 5:21-33; 1 Cor 11:1-3; 2 Cor 11:2; Rev 19:7-9.

<sup>54</sup> Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1–11*, 74.

is implicit in Genesis 2:24 and reinforced in verses 1:26-28.<sup>55</sup> Collins describes that *holding fast* to one's wife is symbolic of "loyalty and faithfulness to her."<sup>56</sup> Likewise, God's blessing of the first couple to "be fruitful and multiply" (v. 27) as a means to fulfill God's purposes for man on the earth suggests that God's purposes will continue to be fulfilled through godly children who adopt the covenant with Him.<sup>57</sup>

### **Covenantal Marriage Preaches the Gospel of Christ**

In Ephesians, the apostle Paul addressed Christian relationships and patterns of appropriate behavior. Nearing the end of chapter 5, Paul provided a household code dedicated to marriage. This section is fundamental for understanding proper submission and love and illustrates how marriage should exemplify the church's union with Christ. Married couples can grow in Christlikeness by living in submission to God and fulfilling their obligations to each other in light of Christ. The following exegesis of Ephesians 5:22-32 demonstrates that marriage preaches the gospel through a parallel of the "one flesh" union of biblical marriage and the union of Christ and His church.

#### **Submission**

In societies where individualism and self-worth are highly prized, submission is a difficult concept. Many people are reluctant to submit to authority because it means that they must relinquish autonomy and self-rule. They are blinded by an anti-authoritarian culture that characterizes submission as a weakness. Former evangelical pastor Warren W. Wiersbe emphasizes a contrary perspective: "Submission has nothing to do with the order of authority, but rather governs the operation of authority, how it is given and how

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<sup>55</sup> Collins, *Genesis 1-4*, 142.

<sup>56</sup> Collins, *Genesis 1-4*, 142.

<sup>57</sup> Collins, *Genesis 1-4*, 143.



it is received.”<sup>58</sup> A true Christian must live in submission to Christ because he respects the authority of Christ as Savior. New Testament Scholar F. F. Bruce describes, “As the Philippian believers are told, they should be humble enough to count others better than themselves and put the interests of others before their own, following the example of Christ.”<sup>59</sup> In Ephesians, Paul emphasizes this as “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:21). In both accounts, believers are joyful servants of others because Christ has called them to this purpose. Submission in this context is not a position of inferiority but one of obedience to the divine authority of Christ. New Testament scholar Ralph P. Martin writes, “Christ requires the obedience of his people, who are subject to him.”<sup>60</sup> As all believers are subject to Christ, husbands and wives must consider their subjection as a matter of obedience and live as humble servants for Him. Peter T. O’Brien, New Testament scholar, points out, “God has established certain leadership and authority roles within the family, and submission is a humble recognition of that divine ordering.”<sup>61</sup>

In marriage, husbands must mirror Christ’s submission to God. Christ submitted to God to the point of death on a cross so that believers would be free of the debt of their sins in God’s sight (Phil 2:8; Rom 6:7). Christ loves His bride, the church, and laid down His life to save her. New Testament Professor Arthur G. Patzia states “Christ’s love, which

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<sup>58</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *Ephesians-Revelation*, The Bible Exposition Commentary: New Testament, vol. 11 (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 1989), 50.

<sup>59</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, 2nd rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 382.

<sup>60</sup> Ralph P. Martin, *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 69

<sup>61</sup> Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England: Eerdmans, 1999), 411. Recent scrutiny of O’Brien’s source citations led Eerdmans to withdraw his commentary on Hebrews. Despite his acknowledged unintentional plagiarism, his works are still considered by many scholars as exceptional in their respective fields and his works in Ephesians and Philippians remain in print. Though I have engaged O’Brien’s work prior to learning of the controversy, it has challenged me to develop more stringent standards in my source selection and writing.

the husband is to model, was completely sacrificial.”<sup>62</sup> Husbands must approach marriage with the same regard Christ has for His church. They must love their wives unconditionally, serve them sacrificially, and lead them as Christ leads the church. Anything less than this type of devotion falls short of the glory that exists in the one-flesh union addressed in Genesis 2:24 and Ephesians 5:31. Husbands in submission to Christ, who model godly behavior, will encourage their wives to put on Christlike submission as well.

In marriage, wives must submit to their husbands “as to the Lord” (Eph 5:22). Bruce emphasizes, “‘The Lord’ is certainly Christ and not the husband . . . The implication rather is that Christian wives’ submission to their husbands is one aspect of their obedience to the Lord.”<sup>63</sup> Submission is a responsibility to the marriage, husband, and family, but primarily to Christ. New Testament Professor Andrew T. Lincoln indicates that the first-century audience of Ephesus expected “such obedience would certainly have been seen as part of a wife’s role in relation to her husband.”<sup>64</sup> At present, the cultural norm is that wives are commonly employed outside the home and should desire to pursue careers as a means of autonomy and security. Biblical scholar Francis Foulkes points out that while this is not the biblical model, it is not prohibited “provided that it does not mean the sacrifice of the divine pattern for home life.”<sup>65</sup>

In keeping with Paul’s illustration of Christ’s primacy, he exhorts, “Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands”

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<sup>62</sup> Arthur G. Patzia, *Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 270.

<sup>63</sup> Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 384.

<sup>64</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 42 (Waco, TX: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 367-68.

<sup>65</sup> Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 164.

(Eph 5:24). Submission in everything is culturally challenging. Wives who submit in everything can only do so through Christ, and it is made easier if they trust that their husbands are living in submission to Christ and have their best interests at heart. O'Brien clarifies, "In everything, wives are not to be subordinate in matters that are sinful or contrary to God's commands."<sup>66</sup> Submission is foremost to Christ, which more readily allows a wife to submit to a Christlike husband.

## **Love**

The apostle Paul's first directive to husbands is "love your wives, as Christ loved the church" (Eph 5:25). While the wife's primary obligation to the husband is to respectfully submit to his headship, the husband is to lovingly lead his wife as a Christlike servant. Paul declares, "In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself" (Eph 5:28). Reflecting on the nature of the one-flesh union, nineteenth-century theologian Charles Hodge posits that the husband "should love his wife because she is his body."<sup>67</sup> Jesus stated, "So they are no longer two but one flesh" (Matt 19:6). In the likeness of Christ's love for the church, a husband "nourishes and cherishes" his wife as he does his own body (Eph 5:29).

Hodge notes that, from both his love and divine directive, a husband must "stand in the same relation to his wife as Christ does the church."<sup>68</sup> Ephesians 5:23 states, "For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior." Christ offers salvation through His atoning work on the cross and is the true Savior, but the husband is an imperfect image of Christ in this matter. Foulkes states that the husband "in loving and sacrificial concern" is "the

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<sup>66</sup> O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 418.

<sup>67</sup> Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, The Crossway Classic Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1950), 194.

<sup>68</sup> Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, 184.

protector of his wife.”<sup>69</sup> As the head of the relationship, a husband is expected to demonstrate servant leadership mirroring Christ’s example. Husbands must be careful not to abuse their position of authority. Wiersbe cautions, “Headship is not dictatorship. ‘Each for the other, both for the Lord.’”<sup>70</sup> Both husband and wife are to model their God-given roles to complement each other for God’s glory. Peter T. O’Brien suggests neither is superior nor inferior but the wife’s willing subordination “creates a greater effectiveness in the working together as one.”<sup>71</sup>

### **Divine Mystery**

Concluding his household code for marriage, Paul, quoting Genesis 2:24 states, “And the two shall become one flesh” (Eph 5:31). The reference to Genesis 2:24 demonstrates the Old Testament’s implied covenant of marriage, picturing Eve being created from Adam, and establishing them as one flesh. Paul draws reference from this Old Testament passage because God’s covenant relationship with Israel was modeled as a marriage.<sup>72</sup> Likewise, Ortlund points out that Paul uses the parallel of the marriage “union of Christ and his church,” as “believers are members of Christ’s body.”<sup>73</sup> Paul’s emphasis on marriage and proper relational patterns are focused on Christlikeness. In verse 32, Paul declares, “This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.” O’Brien suggests, herein is Paul’s mystery, “A truly Christian marriage will mirror the relationship between Christ and his church.”<sup>74</sup> The benefit of such a marriage will prepare believers for their eternal union with Christ and thus fulfill God’s

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<sup>69</sup> Foulkes, *Ephesians*, 163.

<sup>70</sup> Wiersbe, *Ephesians-Revelation*, 50.

<sup>71</sup> O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 417.

<sup>72</sup> Ortlund, *Whoredom*, 47.

<sup>73</sup> O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 430.

<sup>74</sup> O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 408.

plan of salvation through Him. It is within this divine mystery that Christian marriage preaches the gospel through a parallel of the “one-flesh” union of man and woman and the union of Christ and His church.

### **Spouses in Submission to Christ**

Mirroring Jesus’ submission to the Father, all Christians should desire to live in submission to Christ. They must adopt His ways and live with humility, care, and consideration for others (Eph 5:21). In marriage, this takes on special significance. Both spouses, in submission to Christ, will grow in their faith and Christian maturity. They will be better equipped to live out their roles as husbands and wives because they are doing so out of obedience to Him and the desire to serve each other. Peter’s marital code, found in 1 Peter 3:1-7, is both an exhortation to believers and general guidance for living above reproach in a society where Christianity is outside the norm. As twentieth-century theologian J. N. D. Kelly communicates, Peter’s marital code was a customary expectation for the original audience and in no way “radically altered by Christianity.”<sup>75</sup> The primary difference from the cultural norm is found in the focus on Christ and a life lived in submission to Him. It is a testimony of Christian virtue that bears witness to lives set apart in service to the Lord. The following exegesis of 1 Peter 3:1-7 identifies the Christlike attributes of spiritually mature Christians who love one another through submission to Christ.

### **Wives in Submission**

The apostle Peter begins his marital exhortations with emphasis on the responsibilities of the wife: “Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, when they see your respectful and pure conduct” (1 Pet 3:1-2). Christian

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<sup>75</sup> J. N. D. Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and Jude*, Black’s New Testament Commentaries (London: A & C Black, 1976), 127.

wives in pagan cultures were expected to adopt the religion of their husbands. This was problematic if a wife became a Christian and her husband did not, it would place her in a position of spousal disobedience and bring dishonor to her husband. New Testament scholar Simon J. Kistemaker proposes that Peter is sympathetic to the challenges a Christian woman faced when married to a nonbeliever.<sup>76</sup> His exhortations to wives are meant for guidance and comfort despite the obstacles. Wives in subjection to their husbands, while biblically normative, takes on a new pattern in light of her submission to Christ. She must first obey Christ and then her husband. Peter is describing the characteristics of a wife who is maintaining integrity with Christ and her unbelieving spouse.

Wives must be quietly submissive and display godly conduct toward their husbands to show them the nature of Christianity. In doing so, wives may win over their husbands to Christianity or to a disposition that allows them the freedom to worship Christ with spousal approval. Theologian J. Ramsey Michaels indicates that “won over” emphasizes Christian conversion but includes an amicable change of heart.<sup>77</sup> In this way, wives are fulfilling the Great Commission within their households and also living in Christian submission.

Peter addressed the women of the church as representatives of Christ. Theologian Edmund Clowney expresses that Christian wives are instrumental in modeling godliness within the church community and to nonbelievers.<sup>78</sup> He urged them to consider modesty of appearance as a matter of their witness. “Do not let your adorning be

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<sup>76</sup> Simon J. Kistemaker, *Peter and Jude*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 118.

<sup>77</sup> J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 49 (Waco, TX: Word, 1988), 157.

<sup>78</sup> Edmund Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1988), 130.

external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear—but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious” (1 Pet 3:3-4). Grudem points out that Peter is not declaring any prohibitions for women’s adornments.<sup>79</sup> Though not a rebuke against such dress, Peter urged a refocus on Christian virtue found primarily with the spirit of the person and not in their external appearance. New Testament scholar Peter Davids suggests that these statements urged women “to live at the highest level of pagan morality” and also served to lessen the “class distinctions within the church.”<sup>80</sup>

Peter emphasized submission as holiness: “For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening” (1 Pet 3:5-6). He called on Christian wives to follow the examples of the wives of the biblical patriarchs who modeled holiness through their submission to often imperfect spouses. They were counted as holy because of their attitudes. Kistemaker identified their holiness not as perfection but as their disposition toward God.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, Peter encouraged wives to fear God rather than be afraid of their spouses. J. N. D. Kelly adds that their focus must be eternal and their “‘godly fear’ should be the mainspring of their lives.”<sup>82</sup>

Like Paul’s instruction to wives (Eph 5:22-24), Peter provides a Christlike model of conduct that will equip wives to fulfill their God-given marital roles. All

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<sup>79</sup> Wayne A. Grudem, *1 Peter*, Tyndale New Testament Series, vol. 17 (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1988), 148.

<sup>80</sup> Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1990), 118.

<sup>81</sup> Kistemaker, *Peter and Jude*, 122.

<sup>82</sup> Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and Jude*, 128.

marriages exist within the world, but not all marriages embody Christlike attributes that set them apart from the world. New Testament Scholar I. Howard Marshall suggests, “The Christian will maintain a higher standard of marital fidelity.”<sup>83</sup> Christian wives must maintain faithfulness with Christ and with their husbands. The two are not mutually exclusive but complementary roles that are possible when in submission. Because Christian wives desire to submit to the Lord, they will also desire to honor their husbands with a quiet and gentle spirit. Twentieth-century professor William Barclay insists that Peter’s instructions in verses 1-6 are “nothing else than to be a good wife.”<sup>84</sup> A good wife, therefore, promotes a relationship and a household environment where her husband is encouraged to reciprocate genuine honor and loving-kindness.

### **Husbands in Submission**

Peter did not devote many words to address the husband in his marital code, but the single verse he provided is heavy with exhortations for the Christian husband. “Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered” (1 Pet 3:7). In addressing husbands in this way, Peter emphasized the unity of husband and wife. Barclay references this as a “reciprocal ethic” that places responsibilities on both sides of the relationship.<sup>85</sup> This reiterates the one-flesh characteristic of Christian marriage and places a burden on each partner to observe their covenantal obligations.

Peter’s first point for husbands is to “live with your wives in an understanding

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<sup>83</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *1 Peter*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1991), 100.

<sup>84</sup> William Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter*, rev. ed. The Daily Study Bible Series (Louisville: Westminster Knox, 1976), 219.

<sup>85</sup> Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter*, 222.



way” (1 Pet 3:7). Biblical use of this phrase is focused on the sexual aspect of the marriage but extends to all parts of the relationship in general.<sup>86</sup> For a husband to be understanding, he must care for his wife and take consideration of her needs in all things. Theologian Scot McKnight relates, “The Christian man . . . is neither demanding nor selfish in his sexual and marital relations; he is instead considerate, sensitive, and serving.”<sup>87</sup> Living in an understanding way becomes the basis of expectation for the Christian husband as he shares his life with a wife who is precious to God and himself.

Peter’s second point for husbands is “showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel” (v. 7). The phrase “weaker vessel” has a few possible meanings that relate to physical stature or social status outside of marriage. McKnight suggested that it refers to the wife’s physical abilities in comparison to the husband.<sup>88</sup> This is an assumed characteristic and part of God’s design. Women tend to be smaller in stature and physically weaker than men. Davids emphasizes that the statement relates to a woman’s vulnerability within society.<sup>89</sup> Nonetheless, it suggests that wives are to be honored within the marriage relationship and treated with all due respect. As a complementarian, I hold to Davids’ assessment of the meaning of weaker vessel. Christian husbands are called to go above the societal norm and to honor their wives with more than just provision and protection. Paired with Ephesians 5:28-29, husbands must care for their wives as they care for themselves. Even more, they must love them with the sacrificial love of Christ (Eph 5:25).

Peter’s third point is “since they are heirs with you of the grace of life” (1 Pet

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<sup>86</sup> Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and Jude*, 167-68.

<sup>87</sup> Scot McKnight, *1 Peter*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 186.

<sup>88</sup> McKnight, *1 Peter*, 186.

<sup>89</sup> Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 122-23.

3:7). In this statement, Peter declared to husbands that their relationships with God are dependent on the unity of their marriages. Their one-flesh union necessitates harmony of spiritual purpose and equality before the Lord. Marshall states, “Peter expresses the equality of husband and wife in as fundamental a matter as their physical sexual relationship.”<sup>90</sup> Husbands and wives are one in God’s sight. Their unity and equality promote a spiritual condition favorable to communion with Him.

Peter’s final point is “so that your prayers may not be hindered” (1 Pet 3:7). For a Christian husband, the inability to effectively pray should be cause for alarm. Peter echoed Jesus’ statements in Matthew 5:23-24, that one must be reconciled to a brother before offering gifts on the altar. Kistemaker expresses that husbands and wives at odds with each other cannot effectively pray.<sup>91</sup> Noting Jesus’ statement in Matthew 18:20, “for where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them,” covenantal marriage creates a unique relationship that mirrors a “church in miniature.”<sup>92</sup> Husband and wife in a proper relationship with each other can effectively pray to God. Peter told the husband that his role is to maintain his marriage in a state of unity so that his prayers will be heard. For a husband to fulfill the exhortations of 1 Peter 3:7, he must be in submission to Christ. The tendencies of the world are too great to overcome without a focus on serving Him as the foundation of the marriage relationship. When couples are in submission to Christ, they can love each other, develop spiritual maturity, grow together, and most importantly live in a relationship with God.

### **Conclusion**

Marriage is designed by God as an institution for human social structure and stability. It is a relationship that encourages a community of two who rely on their Creator

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<sup>90</sup> Marshall, *1 Peter*, 99.

<sup>91</sup> Kistemaker, *Peter and Jude*, 125.

<sup>92</sup> Michaels, *1 Peter*, 170.

for love, provision, grace, and forgiveness. Marriage is a tool to conform believers into the image of God in Christ. It is the most important human relationship that exists, and it does so to glorify God. For these reasons, it is incumbent that the church equips couples for Christ-centered marriages.

CHAPTER 3  
THEOLOGICAL AND PRACTICAL JUSTIFICATION FOR  
EQUIPPING COUPLES FOR CHRIST-  
CENTERED MARRIAGES

Christ-centered covenantal marriage is a three-way relationship between God, husband, and wife. No other relationship adequately expresses the nature of man’s connection with his Creator or God’s loving provision for His creation. To better understand the applications of Christian submission in marriage, this chapter reviews the relevant literature from contemporary biblical counselors and theologians to illustrate practical applications of the theological truths addressed in the previous chapter. As the most important of God-honoring human relationships, Christian marriage relies on distinct biblical expectations for husbands and wives, consistent practice of spiritual disciplines, and a commitment to the one-flesh union.

**Christ-Centered Expectations in Marriage**

In the most practical sense, Ephesians 5:21 is a call for all believers to express proper reverence for Christ through submission. New Testament Professor George W. Knight III asserts that, as believers, husbands and wives live in submission to Christ and relate to each other through a “voluntary yielding” that is common among Christians.<sup>1</sup> Knight adds that the general call to submission found in verse 21 “sets the tone” but does not overshadow the expectations for the husband and wife in their marriage-specific

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<sup>1</sup> George W. Knight III, “Husbands and Wives as Analogues of Christ and the Church,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 166.

roles.<sup>2</sup> All Christians are in submission to Christ, but within marriage, there exists a necessary hierarchy.

### **Husbands as Imperfect Models of Christ**

Husbands are encouraged to model Christlikeness in marriage, but few men consistently demonstrate a heart for their wives that resembles Christ's love for the church. Unlike Christ, husbands are prone to sin and may disregard their responsibilities through authoritarianism or coercion of their wives.<sup>3</sup> These are default characteristics of the sin nature and must be restrained if husbands are to fulfill their obligations of submission to Christ. Even when a husband is at his best, he must concede that he is not Christ to his wife but an imperfect model who desires to become more perfect each day.

### **Loving Husbands**

The 2019 "Marriage and Cohabitation in the U.S." study performed by Pew Research indicated that 90 percent of the married couples surveyed, married for love.<sup>4</sup> This statistic is significant considering the worldly concept of love does not equate to the love God expects of a Christian husband toward his wife. Stuart Scott, Professor of Biblical Counseling, indicates that worldly love is characterized by self-centeredness, the pursuit of "romantic feelings," and the emphasis on superficial characteristics that are often fleeting.<sup>5</sup> In this model, love may be experienced as an extraordinary emotion of closeness yet fails to root itself in an eternal perspective. Both Christians and non-believers alike may marry with worldly expectations, and treat each other with love and

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<sup>2</sup> Knight, "Husbands and Wives," 168.

<sup>3</sup> See Gen 3:16 for post-fall curses upon women brought about by Eve's sin.

<sup>4</sup> Pew Research, "Marriage and Cohabitation in the U.S.," accessed August 29, 2020, <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/11/06/marriage-and-cohabitation-in-the-u-s/>.

<sup>5</sup> Stuart Scott, *The Exemplary Husband: A Biblical Perspective*, rev. ed. (Bemidji, MN: Focus Publishing, 2002), 102.

kindness, but fail to meet the standard of Christlike love. As such, worldly love does not aspire to the biblical expression of love expected of Christian husbands. Scott proposes that Christlike love is “a selfless and enduring commitment of the will to care about and benefit another person by righteous, truthful, and compassionate thoughts, words and actions.”<sup>6</sup> Christian husbands are called to provide Christlike love to their wives.<sup>7</sup>

Wayne Mack, Professor of Biblical Counseling, in his book *Strengthening Your Marriage*, suggests that husbands may demonstrate Christlike love to their wives through their words.<sup>8</sup> Mack describes the simplest expression of love is in the free and regular application of the phrase “I love you.”<sup>9</sup> Husbands often fail to simply express their love verbally because of complacency and presumption. They assume their ability to provide and protect conveys their messages of love in ways that fulfill their wives’ needs. Additionally, Mack encourages husbands to acknowledge their wives regularly for the countless ways that they help and care for their husbands.<sup>10</sup> Proverbs 16:24 captures this practical application of love perfectly: “Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body.” A husband who provides for his wife in this manner, without self-interest, is a loving model of Christ.

Mack also indicates provision, protection, and kindness as some of the many actions that express a husband’s love.<sup>11</sup> A husband’s love is evidenced through his “fruit

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<sup>6</sup> Scott, *The Exemplary Husband*, 106.

<sup>7</sup> See Eph 5:25-30 for expectations of a husband’s Christlike love and 1 Cor 13:4-8 for characteristics of Christlike love.

<sup>8</sup> Wayne Mack, *Strengthening Your Marriage*, 2nd ed. (Philipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1999), 42, 46.

<sup>9</sup> Mack, *Strengthening Your Marriage*, 42.

<sup>10</sup> Mack, *Strengthening Your Marriage*, 45.

<sup>11</sup> For an extensive list of actions that express a husband’s love for his wife see Mack, *Strengthening Your Marriage*, 42-26, and Wayne Mack, *Preparing for Marriage God’s Way: A Step-by-Step Guide for Marriage Success Before and After the Wedding* (Tulsa, OK: Virgil W. Hensley, 1995), 66-67.

of the Spirit” (Eph 5:22).<sup>12</sup> A husband who demonstrates spiritual fruit in his marriage acts to provide for his wife’s needs. As Mack insists, he must consider his wife’s “physical, emotional, intellectual, social, recreational, sexual, and spiritual needs” if he is to love her in a Christlike way.<sup>13</sup>

A Christian husband’s love for his wife flows from his love and submission to Christ. His love must be selfless and enduring as is Christ’s love for His bride. When a husband loves his wife in this way, it makes his leadership of her an appealing characteristic of their one-flesh union.

### **Leading Husbands**

Christian husbands are expected to sacrificially lead their wives with love and kindness and to establish order within the marriage that unifies the couple and glorifies God. While this is the expectation, it is far from the reality that most married couples experience. Scott LaPierre, in his book *Marriage God’s Way*, explains the conflict of leadership between husband and wife as a consequence of sin nature. LaPierre points to Genesis 3:16-17 to illustrate wives’ tendencies to seek the power rightly held by husbands, and for husbands to rule over their wives unjustly.<sup>14</sup> This is not what God intended for men and women to experience in marriage.

Husbands can only rightfully lead their wives with the help of the Spirit and the example of Christ. LaPierre notes that leadership from a husband is expressed in his “heart for God.”<sup>15</sup> Husbands must lead their wives with a spirit of submission. LaPierre asserts that Christian leadership is conducted through prayer, Bible study, and involvement

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<sup>12</sup> See Gal 5:22-23 for a list of the fruit of the Spirit.

<sup>13</sup> Mack, *Strengthening Your Marriage*, 42.

<sup>14</sup> Scott LaPierre, *Marriage God’s Way: A Biblical Recipe for Healthy, Joyful, Christ-Centered Relationships* (Woodlands, WA: Charis Family Publishing, 2016), 52-53.

<sup>15</sup> LaPierre, *Marriage God’s Way*, 126.

in the church.<sup>16</sup> Though these practices are not all-encompassing of a husband's leadership, they do encompass the basic tenets of submission before a Holy God and offer a foundation for Christlike leadership to be built upon.

Scott's basic guidance for Christ-centered leadership begins with determining one's goals and submitting them to the Lord.<sup>17</sup> A Christian husband should always be in submission to God above his own will. Scott recommends that husbands identify their domain so they can focus their leadership efforts in the areas God has established for them.<sup>18</sup> Working outside these areas often creates conflict within the marriage and draws the husband's attention away from the home. Additionally, Scott states that a husband must use discernment in exerting his authority.<sup>19</sup> There are times to act decisively, but there are also times that additional information must be gathered before a decision is made. Christian leadership is the expectation for husbands. Scott emphasizes, "Christ has left you with the perfect example of leadership. Though it is not humanly possible, God is able to make you into the leader you should be."<sup>20</sup>

A husband must have the heart of a servant who willingly submits to Christ. As lover, a husband learns to love his wife not as the world defines love but as Christ embodies love. His love extends to every facet of the relationship and is not a mystery to his wife. As a leader, a husband grows in spiritual maturity and learns to lead his wife as an imperfect model of Christ. Though imperfect, his objectives are godly and his methods are Christlike. A husband who lovingly leads his wife with these attributes glorifies God in his marriage.

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<sup>16</sup> LaPierre, *Marriage God's Way*, 126.

<sup>17</sup> Scott, *The Exemplary Husband*, 130.

<sup>18</sup> Scott, *The Exemplary Husband*, 132-35.

<sup>19</sup> Scott, *The Exemplary Husband*, 135-37.

<sup>20</sup> Scott, *The Exemplary Husband*, 130.



## **Wives as Imperfect Models of the Church**

Christian wives are urged to respect and encourage their husbands in marriage, but as Genesis 3:16 points out, they are prone to sinfulness and can tend to lack proper submission to their husbands' authority. When wives act in opposition to their husbands, it creates unnecessary strife and division in the one-flesh union. Nonetheless, a wife who submits herself to Christ will also submit herself to her husband out of obedience to the Lord (Eph 5:22-24). In this way, the wife is the bride of her husband as the church is the bride of Christ (Eph 5:23). A godly wife is an imperfect model of the church, although she is being prepared, through marriage, for eternity in perfect union with Christ.

## **Respectful Wives**

A respectful wife is a blessing to her husband. Her ways are purposeful, and her spirit is in submission to the Lord. Despite her circumstances, she knows that her respect is a testimony to her relationship with Christ. Biblical counselor Martha Peace, in her book *The Excellent Wife*, examines the nature of Christian marriage from a wife's viewpoint and offers direction on fulfilling the requirements of the role. To summarize Peace's guidance, she is clear to instruct wives that respect for one's husband is "not an option" because he is in a "God-given position" of authority.<sup>21</sup> Presumptions of his level of effectiveness at leadership must be put aside for the wife regards her husband's leadership "as unto the Lord" (Eph 5:22). Peace also points out that respect for one's husband is demonstrated through behavior.<sup>22</sup> For example, she suggests that wives speak to their husbands with "wholesome and edifying words," using "gentle and calm" tones.<sup>23</sup> She notes that positive body language conveys respect even in situations where the wife is in

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<sup>21</sup> Martha Peace, *The Excellent Wife: A Biblical Perspective: Expanded Edition* (Benmidji, MN: Focus Publishing, 2005), 109.

<sup>22</sup> Peace, *The Excellent Wife*, 111.

<sup>23</sup> Peace, *The Excellent Wife*, 111.

disagreement with her husband.<sup>24</sup> Peace cautions wives to avoid manipulation, intimidation, or belittling their husbands.<sup>25</sup> Such actions undermine the authority of the husband, fail to demonstrate respect, and place the wife in opposition to God.

Biblical counselor Rob Green also provides practical recommendations for wives to show respect for their husbands. Drawing from Philippians 4:8-9, Green encourages wives to dwell on the positive aspects of their husbands' character.<sup>26</sup> The positive aspects were likely what endeared the wife to the husband and should be nurtured and encouraged to grow into maturity. Likewise, the negative aspects were overlooked during courtship, but were probably evident to the wife. In marriage, husbands and wives accept each other despite their faults. Green contends that when wives hold on to the positive characteristics of their husbands and forgive the negative, they tend to have a higher regard for them.<sup>27</sup>

Additionally, Green suggests that wives should not chastise their husbands for their failures.<sup>28</sup> Men are imperfect leaders who will make mistakes, and in the best circumstance, learn from them. A husband who sincerely desires to glorify the Lord in his decision-making is to be respected as a godly leader despite sometimes missing the mark of excellence. Wives who respect their husbands support them in all circumstances and encourage them toward Christlikeness.

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<sup>24</sup> Peace, *The Excellent Wife*, 111.

<sup>25</sup> Peace, *The Excellent Wife*, 116-17.

<sup>26</sup> Rob Green, *Tying the Knot: A Premarital Guide to a Strong & Lasting Marriage*, (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2016), 70.

<sup>27</sup> Green, *Tying the Knot*, 70.

<sup>28</sup> Green, *Tying the Knot*, 70.

## Encouraging Wives

Ephesians 4:29 speaks of words of encouragement among believers so that the body of Christ may be built up and given grace. This is also the nature of a wife's encouragement for a husband. She inspires and builds him up to support his leadership and demonstrates her grace toward him. The late biblical counselor David Powlison posed the question, "How can I consistently demonstrate—with my words, actions, and attitudes—the respect, honor, and submission due to the person God has placed over me?"<sup>29</sup> This is an apt question for wives to consider as they navigate the path of encouragement.

Women's Christian discipleship leader Debi Pearl, in her book *Created to Be His Help Meet*, writes to wives: "God made you to be a help meet to your husband so you can bolster him, making him more productive and efficient at whatever he chooses to do."<sup>30</sup> A wife's encouragement is purposeful words, advice, or affirmations that help to support her husband's efforts at Christlike leadership. They are gifts that equip him to persist when the odds seem against him. Michael Pearl, Men's Christian discipleship leader, offers that an encouraging wife helps her husband from losing his vision, and suggests that she is able to identify his "discouragement long before anyone else."<sup>31</sup> Debi Pearl urges wives to recognize the goodness in their husbands, speak well of them, and never "scorn or ridicule" them.<sup>32</sup> She explains, "No woman will ever have peace and joy until her mind is filled with goodwill toward her husband."<sup>33</sup> These actions, applied consistently,

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<sup>29</sup> David Powlison, *Seeing with New Eyes: Counseling the Human Condition through the Lens of Scripture* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2003), 64.

<sup>30</sup> Debi Pearl, *Created to Be His Help Meet: Discover How God Can Make Your Marriage Glorious*, 10th anniversary ed. (Lobelville, TN: No Greater Joy Ministries, 2014), 23.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Pearl, *Created to Need a Help Meet: A Marriage Guide for Men* (Pleasantville, TN: No Greater Joy Ministries, 2011), 39.

<sup>32</sup> Pearl, *Created to Be His Help Meet*, 145.

<sup>33</sup> Pearl, *Created to Be His Help Meet*, 103.

are the expectations of a Christian wife and they demonstrate submission to Christ as well as promote spiritual maturity within the marriage.

A wife must recognize that God established her as a fit helper for her husband. As a respectful wife, she must learn to promote stability and peace with the home. Her husband will know that his interests are well-attended by her. As an encourager, a wife must recognize her husband's challenges and support him with loving-kindness so that he does not become disheartened. Though imperfect herself, her demeanor is Christlike, and her motivations benefit their one-flesh union.

In the second session of this project, husbands and wives were equipped with the knowledge of God's purpose for marriage and His roles for husbands and wives. They were challenged to search their hearts and contemplate their submission to God as well as reflect on the necessary modifications needed to model Christlikeness in these areas of marriage. Group discussions assisted participants to recognize improper heart positions and their resulting negative patterns of a husband's love and leadership, and a wife's respect and encouragement. Couples realigned their visions of marriage toward a more Christ-centered approach and took away tools to practice in their homes.

### **Christ-Centered Disciplines in Marriage**

Marital conflict often stems from self-interested spouses who forsake each other, but in a greater sense who forsake God's role in their relationship. The apostle James asked, "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?" (Jas 4:1). Even Christian spouses can fall prey to the passions of the world. Their attention is easily shifted from eternal significance to temporary comfort. They seek to satisfy their own desires rather than submit to Christ and serve one another in their God-given roles. Maintaining such opposition can lead to bitterness and resentment that acts as a destructive force overshadowing the love the couple has for one another. Husbands and wives must practice spiritual disciplines to foster submission, love, and respect for God and one another. Though many spiritual

disciplines exist, this study will focus on prayer, worship, and service as a means to equip couples for spiritual growth.<sup>34</sup>

## **Family Prayer**

The primary Christ-centered discipline that couples must develop is prayer. Pastor Timothy Keller, in his book *The Meaning of Marriage*, describes prayer as a “conversation with God [that] leads to an encounter with God . . . through it we sense his presence and receive his joy, his love, his peace and confidence, and thereby we are changed in attitude, behavior, and character.”<sup>35</sup> As a discipline for a personal relationship with God, prayer is essential; although, as a discipline to strengthen and equip a marriage, prayer is indispensable. Couples who pray together as a constant practice of their marriage are in submission to Christ and enhance their unity and commitment to each other. Jesus said, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them” (Matt 18:20). No greater intimacy exists on earth than a husband and wife who love the Lord. Pastor Voddie Baucham, Jr., in *Family Shepherds*, suggests that couples who are uncomfortable praying together to “try praying for one another. Write down prayer requests for the week and pray through them, tracking the ways in which God answers.”<sup>36</sup>

Husbands and wives who pray together develop marital unity. With Christ as the foundation of marriage, prayer should be one of the easiest marital practices to adopt. Surprisingly, this is not the case. Prayer requires intense trust that takes time and effort to achieve. Both Gary Thomas, Professor of Spiritual Formation, and Timothy Keller

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<sup>34</sup> For a study on spiritual disciplines, see Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991).

<sup>35</sup> Timothy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 80.

<sup>36</sup> Voddie Baucham, Jr., *Family Shepherds: Calling and Equipping Men to Lead Their Homes* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 79.

acknowledge that developing a marital habit of prayer is a difficult undertaking.<sup>37</sup> Marriage is an institution where two imperfect people commit to sharing their lives with each other. Initially, couples are rarely capable of such unity without conflicts arising from self-interest. Gary Thomas, in his book *Sacred Marriage*, writes, “Dissension is a major prayer-killer. Looked at from this perspective, the institution of marriage is designed to force us to become reconcilers.”<sup>38</sup> Referring to 1 Peter 3:7, Thomas points out that husbands and wives are inextricably tied to one another and, without unity, they cannot effectively approach God in prayer.<sup>39</sup> Reconciliation through Christ becomes evident as a necessary habit for couples to support their unity and equip their prayer lives.

Marriage is the most committed of human relationships. Christian husbands and wives prayerfully commit to a lifelong union with each other before God. Keller, on the meaning of love within Christian marriage, writes, “It is to look at another person and get a glimpse of the person God is creating, and say, ‘I see who God is making you, and it excites me! I want to be a part of that.’”<sup>40</sup> Experiencing God’s work in one’s spouse is a blessing like no other. It is a partnership with a purpose. The two must commit to sharing in God plans for each other and pray for those plans to be fully expressed. Biblical counselor Paul David Tripp offers that “prayer is a very important part of a lifestyle of paying attention.”<sup>41</sup> A lifestyle of prayer requires persistent devotion to the other’s needs and a commitment to do what is necessary to help the other grow in Christlikeness. In

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<sup>37</sup> See Gary Thomas, *Sacred Marriage: What if God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 74; Timothy Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 9-10, 17.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas, *Sacred Marriage*, 82.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas, *Sacred Marriage*, 75.

<sup>40</sup> Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 132.

<sup>41</sup> Paul David Tripp, *What Did You Expect? Redeeming the Realities of Marriage* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 254.

this way, a purposeful prayer life enhances couples' commitments to each other for God's purposes.

In the third session of this project, couples learned of the importance of marital prayer for their unity and commitment to each other before the Lord. They were tasked with examining their current prayer practices to determine the authenticity and openness to the leading of the Spirit in their lives. Moreover, marital prayer was demonstrated and discussed, and couples were equipped to improve in this discipline through consistent practice. Couples who increasingly incorporate prayer into their relationships demonstrate submission to Christ, love for each other, and respect for God's authority in their lives.

### **Family Worship**

Once couples develop a lifestyle of prayer, they will benefit from adding a family time of worship to their Christ-centered disciplines. In its simplest form, family worship consists of activities that encourage couples to reflect on the greatness of God. Together, husbands and wives incorporate specific practices into their lives to share in a devotion to the Lord. Baucham recommends that "you sing together, pray together, and read the Scriptures together. Giving fifteen to twenty minutes a day to these simple practices will transform your family."<sup>42</sup> Glorifying God is the objective of worship, but Christ-centered transformation is a wonderful byproduct for couples who worship together.

While not everyone is comfortable singing, praying together, or reading aloud, it is important to recognize the reason for worship. David Wheeler, Professor of Evangelism, and Vernon Whaley, Professor of Music and Worship, in defining how Christians are to worship, summarize it as to "Love God," and point to Jesus' statement: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and

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<sup>42</sup> Baucham, *Family Shepherds*, 79.

with all your strength” (Mark 12:30 NKJV).<sup>43</sup> Out of an abundance of love for the Lord, Christian couples respond in ways that are not always comfortable. The desire for comfort or the refusal to respond to the Lord with worship is prideful. Two verses are pertinent to worship-resistant pride: “When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with the humble is wisdom” (Prov 11:2); and “Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you” (Jas 4:10). Christ-centered worship is the humble adoration of the Creator and Redeemer. Its kingdom impact is larger than one might imagine. Not only does worship enhance a Christian couple’s marriage, but it also helps to produce spiritual offspring in their children and future generations.

Family worship is an issue of a husband’s leadership and submission to Christ and a wife’s respect for her husband’s authority in the home. Husbands in submission will worship and thereby encourage their families to participate. Family worship is an essential practice. Baucham suggests, “If we are to experience multigenerational faithfulness we must come to a place where we throw off the shackles of our culture and live in the fullness that is found only in Christ.”<sup>44</sup> A lifestyle of worship teaches Christians to remove their focus from the things of this world and to place their attention on Christ. Wheeler and Whaley submit that “we can worship Jesus—totally abandoned from the distractions of this world and focus on the person, work, and wonder of Jesus.”<sup>45</sup> This is purposeful practice, and removing the distractions of the world even for a brief time each day pays dividends in the spiritual maturity of each family member. Baucham

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<sup>43</sup> David Wheeler and Vernon M. Whaley, *The Great Commission to Worship: Biblical Principles for Worship-Based Evangelism* (Nashville: B & H, 2011), 27.

<sup>44</sup> Voddie Baucham, Jr., *Family Driven Faith: Doing What It Takes to Raise Sons and Daughters Who Talk with God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 114.

<sup>45</sup> Wheeler and Whaley, *The Great Commission to Worship*, 37.



proposes, “Regular family worship may well have greater impact on the spiritual life of a man’s family than any other practice he commits himself to.”<sup>46</sup>

The third session of this project also presented family worship as an essential Christ-centered marital discipline. While husbands and wives must provide consistency in this practice, the focus was on strong Christian male leadership and putting off the things of this world to put on the attributes of Christ for the glory of God and the good of the family. A simple plan of worship that includes the singing of a hymn, a brief reading of Scripture, and prayer was demonstrated. Though it took less than ten minutes, it established a precedent that there is enough time each day to fit this discipline into the family dynamic and it does not require a biblical scholar to hold family worship.

### **Family Service**

Christians are called to live in community with one another and to serve each other to build up the body of Christ. First Peter 4:10-11 says, “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that everyone may be glorified through Jesus Christ.” Husbands and wives strengthen their marriages, families, and grow in spiritual maturity when they serve together as representatives of Christ for the greater good of their communities. It causes them to move beyond marital isolationism to Christ-centered care and concern for others. It encourages couples to reach out and exemplify Christ’s commands to “love one another,” while learning to love each other more through their commitment to service.<sup>47</sup>

Service starts with building or expanding upon personal relationships with other believers. Biblical counselor Edward Welch writes, “To glorify God we need people. We

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<sup>46</sup> Baucham, *Family Shepherds*, 73.

<sup>47</sup> See John 13:34; 15:12, 17.

need to be taught and pastored, and we need to teach and pastor.”<sup>48</sup> One example of this is found in the small group model of discipleship. To enhance the community found in the corporate body of the church, small groups of believers gather together regularly to share life with each other on a personal level. Biblical counselors Timothy S. Lane and Paul David Tripp emphasize, “The gospel opens the door to friendships where we can be conformed to the very image of Christ.”<sup>49</sup> Through sharing in this way, believers are encouraged and equipped to take on greater roles of service to their church and community.

As maturing believers, couples can not only grow themselves but also disciple their children through gospel-based service. Service becomes a family activity that illustrates the need to help others, encourages modeling Christ’s love outside the home, and affords evangelistic opportunities. Paul David Tripp explains, “The love of Christ is not only the foundation for our personal hope, but our incarnation of that love is our only hope for being effective for Christ with others.”<sup>50</sup> While individual participation in gospel-driven service is an important aspect of Christ-centeredness, family service affords greater opportunities to reach a broader audience, see more transformational growth, and make a greater impact for the kingdom of God.

The third session of the project addressed service as an opportunity for spiritual growth to strengthen marriages and families. The purpose of this session was to encourage couples to commit to a lifestyle of service through small group participation, volunteerism within the church building, and missional participation in the community and beyond. Couples were challenged to find opportunities for service inside the church, join a small

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<sup>48</sup> Edward T. Welch, *When People Are Big and God Is Small: Overcoming Peer Pressure, Codependency, and the Fear of Man* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Protestant & Reformed, 1997), 203.

<sup>49</sup> Timothy S. Lane and Paul David Tripp, *How People Change* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2006), 68.

<sup>50</sup> Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands: People in Need of Change Helping People in Need of Change* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Protestant & Reformed, 2002), 119.

group if not already committed to one, or consider a community service opportunity within the small groups where they are already members.

### **Christ-Centered Oneness**

Christ-centered oneness encompasses the entire Christian marriage. It exists as a spiritual connection where husband and wife seek to mature into the likeness of Christ and thereby grow closer to one another in marriage. Christ-centered oneness is relational. Couples who adopt Christlikeness in their communication will demonstrate His love and kindness toward each other and seek to serve one another over selfish desires. Christ-centered oneness is also physical. Physical oneness in Christian marriage is ideally expressed with a strong biblical ethic in a spirit of mutual service and care for each other.

### **Spiritual Oneness**

As husbands and wives attempt to live out Christ-centered marriages they need to examine their relationships regularly and realign them to be God-honoring in every facet. Temptations in many forms can shift the trajectory of a marriage ever-so-slightly so that, over time, couples end up significantly off course. One or both spouses may find themselves concentrating on matters that are self-focused rather than Christ-centered. These matters may seem innocuous, although if they take attention away from God, or worse, take the place of God, even the most seemingly harmless pursuit can be idolatrous.

In Exodus 20:3, God declares, “You shall have no other gods before me.” This is a clear position statement. Nothing must take the rightful place of worship owed to the Lord. Nonetheless, Christians regularly submit themselves to matters that place importance on the pursuit far above their emphasis on worshipping the one true God. Common examples of this for husbands include work, sports, sexual fulfillment, recreational activities, hobbies, and children. For wives, examples include children, extended family, friends, work, and hobbies. While none of these are sinful in themselves, their potential

for idolization is a real issue that acts as a destructive force in the spiritual relationship husbands and wives have with God and each other.

Robert D. Jones, Professor of Biblical Counseling, relates that “legitimate desires [can] become ruling demands.”<sup>51</sup> In marriage, ruling demands create significant problems that deteriorate the couple’s unity and trust while leaving them disheartened and resentful toward each other. As with God’s command forbidding idolatry expressed in Exodus 20:3, a similar principle exists within marriage. Couples must first focus their worship on the Lord, but then focus time and attention on their marriage as a means of fulfillment and service to God. Too often, simple pursuits grow in importance and vie for the attention owed to the Lord. Jones suggests that couples examine their desires to see if they are becoming or have become sinful and idolatrous, and he recommends three questions for reflection: “(1) Does it consume my thoughts?, (2) Do I sin to get it?, and (3) Do I sin when I don’t get it?”<sup>52</sup> Each of these questions help to identify idolatry. Once identified, the idols must be removed. The apostle Paul warned, “Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry” (1 Cor 10:14). Fleeing sin requires running in the opposite direction.

Christians must repent of their sins. Repentance is a complete turning away from sin and returning to Christ. The apostle John wrote, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). Likewise, in marriage, couples should confess their sins to each other so that both are aware, accountability is established, and healing can begin in the relationship. Husbands and wives who have identified sin issues and have repented should seek forgiveness from the Lord and their spouses. Pastor Chris Brauns acknowledges, “The gracious *offer* of forgiveness is unconditional. It is an act of recognition of God’s grace, “and whenever

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<sup>51</sup> Robert D. Jones, “Lesson 5: Perspectives, Guidelines, and Diagrams in Marriage Counseling” (classroom lecture, 80554—Marriage and Family Counseling, Winter 2020, photocopy), 54.

<sup>52</sup> Robert D. Jones, *Pursuing Peace: A Christian Guide for Handling Our Conflicts* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 66.

you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses” (Mark 11:25). Christians should always have a disposition of grace toward those who offend them.”<sup>53</sup> Brauns adds, “Jesus said that Christians should forgive if the other party repents.”<sup>54</sup> For Christian husbands and wives, the cycle of sin recognition, repentance, and forgiveness is continuous. When couples fail to engage in this cycle, the sins can become overwhelming and the results often lead to diminished oneness in marriage.

In the fourth session of this project, idolatry was described and discussed in the context of marriage. Couples were challenged to identify idols within their lives and determine how those idols affect their marriages. Repentance was also described and discussed. Building upon the identification of idols, couples practiced an exercise of repentance before God and spouse. Following that activity, Christian forgiveness was described and discussed, and couples approached each other with requests of forgiveness as appropriate to their individual circumstances.

### **Relational Oneness**

Marriage is defined in Scripture six times as a “one-flesh” union.<sup>55</sup> The scope of this oneness extends to every aspect of marriage, but relational oneness often becomes problematic if not nurtured and practiced through Christ-centered communication. Christian authors David Boehi, Brent Nelson, Jeff Schulte and Lloyd Shadrach in their book *Preparing for Marriage*, describe, “Authentic communication is much more than just talking. It is understanding and being understood . . . experiencing the risks and

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<sup>53</sup> Chris Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness: Biblical Answers for Complex Questions and Deep Wounds* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 55.

<sup>54</sup> Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 57.

<sup>55</sup> See Gen 2:34; Matt 19:5, 6; Mark 10:8; 1 Cor 6:16; Eph 5:31.

rewards of knowing and being known; and much more.”<sup>56</sup> For Christ-centered couples, communication is the medium through which marital ministry occurs. Spouses in submission to Christ care for each other by speaking to each other with love and respect and listening with patience and humility.

Christian author Emerson Eggerichs, in his book *Cracking the Communication Code*, describes marital communication as a three-way relationship pictured as a pyramid with husband and wife at the base and Christ at the peak.<sup>57</sup> As Eggerichs’ pyramid illustrates, marital communication has a horizontal aspect where husband and wife relate to each other, but also a vertical aspect where the nature of their communication is a reflection of their relationship with Christ.<sup>58</sup> Adding to the visual of Eggerichs’ pyramid, when a husband and wife are farthest from each other, they are also farthest from Christ. Correspondingly, when they become closer, they are also closer to Christ. Such closeness comes from communicating with love and respect from a position of patience and humility.

Eggerichs offers that loving and respectful words are those that emulate Jesus’ pattern of truthful and uplifting communication.<sup>59</sup> Scripture supports this assertion in several passages. The apostle Paul wrote of “put[ting] away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor” (Eph 4:25), “let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths” (Eph 4:29), and “encourage one another and build one another up” (1 Thess 5:11). While this is the expectation, each person will struggle at times to live up to the challenge. Nonetheless, husbands and wives who serve each other with Christlikeness do so with a desire to communicate this way—their words are truthful and loving, as well as

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<sup>56</sup> David Boehi et al., “Authentic Communication,” in *Preparing for Marriage: Discovering God’s Plan for a Lifetime of Love*, ed. Denis Rainey (Ventura, CA: Gospel Light, 2010), 148.

<sup>57</sup> Emerson Eggerichs, *Cracking the Communication Code: Love for Her Respect for Him* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 250-52.

<sup>58</sup> Eggerichs, *Cracking the Communication Code*, 251.

<sup>59</sup> Eggerichs, *Cracking the Communication Code*, 265.

respectful and encouraging.

Eggerichs encourages spouses to accept one another despite each other's shortcomings.<sup>60</sup> Though it is easy to dwell on the negative aspects, it is not productive to do so. Eggerichs asserts that spouses should be thankful for each other and express that thankfulness consistently.<sup>61</sup> Listening with patience and humility is a Christ-centered way to express that thankfulness. Scripture supports this premise: "If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame" (Prov 18:13). The apostle Paul wrote, "Let each of you look not to his own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Phil 2:4), and "walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness" (Eph 4:1-2). Listening with patience and humility requires that spouses suspend their thoughts and opinions long enough to hear and understand the other's position. Combined with speaking lovingly and respectfully, listening with patience and humility provides the opportunity for spouses to communicate in God-honoring ways. Practicing Christ-centered communication will help couples enhance their relational oneness and increase their spiritual maturity.

In the fifth session of this project, couples learned Christ-centered communication through modeling and practice. They observed the host couple engage in loving and respectful communication about a difficult subject. Afterward each couple each picked one unaddressed marital issue and practiced Christ-centered communication. Once finished, a group discussion addressed the successes and challenges of the activity and provided additional strategies on how to implement this as a new pattern of marital communication.

### **Physical Oneness**

Popular culture is inundated with imagery and ideology of sexuality in

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<sup>60</sup> Eggerichs, *Cracking the Communication Code*, 288-89.

<sup>61</sup> Eggerichs, *Cracking the Communication Code*, 293-94.

opposition to Scripture. Unless Christian couples are firmly established in their commitment to live Christ-centered marriages, they may be subject to the misinformation of the world rather than the truth of the Word. Boehi et al. insist, “Becoming one flesh involves deep relational intimacy of which sexual intercourse is an integral part.”<sup>62</sup> Typically, the physical oneness of marriage is readily associated with the one-flesh union. However integral though, sexual intimacy is a relatively small part of marriage that garners much attention in the relational dynamic. Couples need to base their physical oneness on a solid Christian sexual ethic that expresses sex in the proper context but avoids sexuality outside of the biblical standards.

As described in the previous chapter, God created man and woman and joined them in the one-flesh union of marriage with the blessing of a sexual relationship for His purposes (Gen 1:27-28; 2:24). Sex within the proper context must always have God’s purposes in mind. Couples who minister to each other as an expression of their love for one another and their reverence for God fulfill His purposes. The Christian sexual ethic offers freedom and security for Christ-centered couples. Basing his position on the apostle Paul’s writings in 1 Corinthians 7:2-4, pastor and professor Denny Burk, in *What Is the Meaning of Sex*, explains that Christian spouses owe a duty to provide for each other’s sexual needs.<sup>63</sup> Each person has a “temptation to sexual immorality” (1 Cor 7:2), but marriage reduces that temptation by providing the only God-approved sexual union. Through marriage, husbands and wives are obliged with a sexual duty to their spouses and sex should not exist in the lives of believers outside of the physical oneness of the marriage.<sup>64</sup> Spouses are to have their sexual needs fulfilled by their spouses alone (1 Cor

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<sup>62</sup> Boehi et al., “Authentic Communication,” 212.

<sup>63</sup> Denny Burk, *What Is the Meaning of Sex?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 113.

<sup>64</sup> 1 Cor 7:3 in the Christian Standard Bible (CSB) describes the sexual relationship as a duty owed between husband and wife



7:3-4). Burk offers that proper sexual relations not only support unity within marriage but bring glory to God.<sup>65</sup>

Reflecting on the biblical roles of husband and wife, marital sexuality that unites couples and brings glory to God is expressed in the loving leadership of a husband who values his wife and cares for her as his own body (Eph 5:28-29). Likewise, marital sexuality is expressed by a respectful wife who is in godly submission to her husband's Christlike leadership (Eph 5:22-23). Neither should seek personal gain but desire to provide for each other and thereby receive the benefit of sexual gratification as the result of service. Sex that glorifies God is driven by a spirit of submission, love, and respect. Husband and wife submit to the authority of Christ as their savior. The husband loves his wife and is motivated to meet her needs. The wife respects her husband and serves him because her heart is motivated to meet his needs. This model exemplifies proper biblical roles for spouses as they enhance their physical oneness by adhering to the biblical standard for their union.

Sexuality expressed outside of the biblical standard is destructive to personal relationships and opposes God's order. Pastor Christopher Ash, in his book *Marriage: Sex in the Service of God*, describes that the biblical standard for sex offers a necessary restraint that protects against the destruction of the family, societal instability, and unnecessary suffering.<sup>66</sup> Christian couples run a risk of veering outside the bounds of the biblical standard for sex when they lose focus on marital intimacy. Burk posits, "God created marriage to be covenantal, sexual, procreative, heterosexual, monogamous, nonincestuous, and symbolic of the gospel."<sup>67</sup> Anything apart from this norm is outside of God's will for sexuality, but invariably couples who fail to honor their commitments to

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<sup>65</sup> Burk, *What Is the Meaning of Sex?*, 136.

<sup>66</sup> Christopher Ash, *Marriage: Sex in the Service of God* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2003), 110.

<sup>67</sup> Burk, *What Is the Meaning of Sex?*, 89.

their spouses do so through inattention or infidelity.

Married life presents particular challenges and distractions that can divert attention away from the care owed to one's spouse. Work obligations, service opportunities, career advancement, children, and a host of other situations steal time and energy that should be dedicated to nurturing and growing a Christ-centered marriage. Biblical counselor Paul David Tripp, in his book *What Did You Expect*, explains, "Marriages don't typically change with an explosion. Marriages typically change by the process of erosion."<sup>68</sup> Erosion of attention, communication, unity, and partnership manifest as a suffering sexual relationship. Couples must be sure to remain steadfast in their commitment to each other before the Lord. The apostle Paul warned, "Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control" (1 Cor 7:5). In this statement, Paul acknowledged that the deprivation of a sexual relationship is a tool Satan uses to create temptation for married couples. Such inattention forsakes the responsibilities to fulfill the "marital duty" of one's spouse addressed in 1 Corinthians 7:3.<sup>69</sup> Prolonged inattention makes infidelity, even in an otherwise committed relationship, more alluring.

Partners who do not have their spouse's attention may seek to find a replacement. Scripture is replete with examples of adultery if for no other reason than to warn believers of the nature and consequence of infidelity to one's spouse and to God.<sup>70</sup> While overt adultery is obviously recognized as a sin to most Christians, two subtle forms of adultery that interfere with Christian marriages must be addressed.

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<sup>68</sup> Tripp, *What Did You Expect*, 254.

<sup>69</sup> See 1 Cor 7:3 CSB "marital duty" rather than the use of "conjugal rights" as expressed in the ESV.

<sup>70</sup> See Gen 19:31-38; 34:2; 38:1-24; 1 Sam 2:22; 2 Sam 11:1-5; 2 Sam 11:1-4; 13:1-20.

The first form of adultery that evades many Christians' sensibilities is masturbation. While masturbation is seemingly a victimless activity, it is sinful and destructive. It is a violation of the traditional Christian wedding vows to "honor and cherish" one's spouse, "forsaking all others," and to faithfully perform . . . all the duties" spouses owe to each other. It is the use of sexual energy that is self-focused rather than couple oriented. Moreover, masturbation exists outside of the unity expected of Christ-centered relationships. It usually requires lust-driven fantasy, which is sinful in itself. Masturbation has no place in God-honoring sexuality.

The second form of adultery sometimes tolerated, even among Christian couples, is the use of pornography. Joined with masturbation, the use of pornography devalues the image of God in man and objectifies people as sexual entertainment. Pornography is lust-driven and also deviates from the marital vow of "forsaking all others." Biblical counselor Heath Lambert, in his book *Finally Free*, warns, "If you're not nurturing a heart full of love for your wife on the inside and serving her consistently on the outside, directing your sexual desires toward her will just perpetuate the sexual selfishness of indulging in porn."<sup>71</sup> Pornography is a poor imitation of the beauty God intended for sexual oneness in marriage. Viewing pornography desensitizes people to the natural sexual response of arousal in marriage and destroys the intimacy possible between a loving and faithfully committed couple.

God provided sex as a gift to bond married couples together in physical oneness. If used in the proper context, sex is a blessing that enriches couples' lives and provides them with a very personal aspect of their relationship unlike any other. If used outside of the proper context, sex can be a destructive force that deteriorates the unity and fidelity that should exist within marriage. Christ-centered couples must establish their physical oneness as a ministry to each other that glorifies God.

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<sup>71</sup> Heath Lambert, *Finally Free: Fighting for Purity with the Power of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 101.

The sixth session of this project addressed physical oneness as the marital ministry of God-honoring sexual relations. Couples having previously engaged in sexually immoral relationships, having poor Christian discipleship, or limited understanding of Christ-centered life principles benefited from discussions of what constitutes biblical sexuality as well as forms of infidelity. This session informed couples about biblical sexuality and addressed common issues with fidelity in marriage.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter reviewed the relevant literature from contemporary biblical counselors and theologians to provide practical application of biblical truths. It evidenced the sanctity of marriage as a relationship between husband and wife who are in submission to Christ. It addressed the Christian marriage principles of distinct role expectations for husbands and wives, the necessity of consistent practice of spiritual disciplines, and an unwavering commitment to the one-flesh union.

## CHAPTER 4

### IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROJECT

This chapter describes the progression of the project and offers a detailed account of the three project goals and their results. The purpose of this project was to equip couples for Christ-centered marriages at New Vision Baptist Church in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. The project had three goals: (1) to create a six-session curriculum that equips couples to develop Christ-centeredness within their marriages; (2) to assess the knowledge and practices of Christ-centered disciplines of participant couples at NVBC; and (3) to enhance both knowledge and practices of Christ-centered disciplines of participant couples by teaching the curriculum. Implementation of the project began with a review of the curriculum on September 15, 2020, and continued for fifteen weeks through December 18, 2020, when the statistical analysis was completed.

#### **Project Promotion**

Project promotion occurred from November 12, 2020, to November 22, 2020. Working with the NVBC Care, Deacon, and Small group ministries, advertisement of the “My Christ-centered Marriage” course was placed on the NVBC website, announced through church member email, and offered as a resource in deacon and staff meetings in November.<sup>1</sup> Registration for the course was available through the NVBC website starting November 12, 2020, as well as through direct contact with couples interested in participating. A limited number of couples were referred through the Care Ministry as a supplement to ongoing counseling services. Upon registration, each participant was

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<sup>1</sup> See appendix 4.

provided with an email link to the pre-course survey. The goal of twelve pre-course survey responses was met on November 18, 2020.<sup>2</sup>

### **Summary of Project Goals**

Three goals were determined essential to develop, implement, and assess the project. The first goal was to create a six-session curriculum that equips couples to develop Christ-centeredness within their marriages. The curriculum focused on the knowledge of Christian principles and practices of spiritual disciplines within marriage. This goal was measured by a three-member expert panel who utilized a rubric to evaluate the biblical faithfulness, teaching methodology, scope, and applicability of the curriculum.<sup>3</sup> This goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of the evaluation criterion met or exceeded the “sufficient” level.

The second goal was to assess the knowledge and practices of Christ-centered disciplines of participant couples at NVBC. A pre-course survey evaluated participants’ knowledge and practices of Christ-centered disciplines within their relationships.<sup>4</sup> The survey was emailed to each participant through Google Forms upon registration before using an anonymously coded response format. This goal was considered successfully met when twenty-eight surveys were returned and the results analyzed, providing a clearer picture of the knowledge and practices of Christ-centered disciplines within marriages among participants.

The third goal was to enhance both the knowledge and practice of spiritual disciplines within participants’ marriages by teaching the curriculum. The result of the participants’ engagement with the curriculum and assimilation of the practices

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<sup>2</sup> Twenty-eight pre-course surveys were returned and analyzed. Two additional couples were included beyond the delimitation of twelve to account for possible attrition.

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

<sup>4</sup> See appendix 2.

determined an increase in depth of knowledge and practice of Christ-centered disciplines. This goal was measured by administering a post-course survey, which assessed the level of knowledge and practices of Christ-centered marriage principles.<sup>5</sup> This goal was considered successfully met when a *t*-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistically significant difference in the pre-and post-survey scores (see tables 5, 6, 7).

### **Goal 1 Results**

The first goal was to create a six-session curriculum that equipped couples to develop Christ-centeredness within their marriages. A preliminary curriculum was conceptualized concurrently with chapters 2 and 3 from February through September 2020. Writing of the curriculum and compiling it into usable formats was completed during September 2020. Resources for the curriculum were consistent with Scripture, the general positions of the authors from the bibliographic entries for chapters 2 and 3, and personal premarital and marital biblical counseling experience. The curriculum focused on the knowledge of Christian principles and practices of spiritual disciplines within marriage. The curriculum was created in two formats. The first format was a facilitator outline of lessons with detailed topical resources and points for discussion.<sup>6</sup> The second format was a participant booklet with key points, Scripture references, activities, and homework assignments.<sup>7</sup>

This goal was measured by a three-member expert panel.<sup>8</sup> The panel included both male and female reviewers: (1) the Senior Associate Pastor and Director of the Care

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

<sup>6</sup> See appendix 5.

<sup>7</sup> See appendix 6.

<sup>8</sup> Five panel-members were solicited for curriculum evaluation, although only three returned the survey within the review period.

Ministry of NVBC; (2) the Discipleship and Counseling Pastor of NVBC; and (3) a senior female biblical counselor of the NVBC Care Ministry.

Initial solicitation of curriculum review began on September 15, 2020, when each member of the expert panel was provided an emailed copy of the assessment rubric, the facilitator outlines, and the participant handout. The reviewers used an assessment rubric that measured biblical faithfulness, teaching methodology, scope, and applicability of the curriculum.<sup>9</sup> It also allowed for commentary on each section of the curriculum. A review of materials and feedback continued until September 29, 2020, when each reviewer returned his or her assessment. Revisions of the course material occurred as reviews were submitted. This goal was considered successfully met on September 29, 2020, when a minimum of 90 percent of the evaluation criterion met or exceeded the “sufficient” level.<sup>10</sup>

Several comments were made by the reviewers which helped to refine the project. Comments on session 1 included a recommendation to soften the approach to personal evangelism noted in the facilitator outline by asking leading and open-ended questions. The recommendation was duly noted, although the intent of the facilitator outline was not as an absolute methodology but a possible avenue of discussion. No specific changes were made in the curriculum.

No instructive or critical feedback was offered for session 2. Reviewers were pleased with the biblical focus and direct nature of the lesson.

Regarding session 3, comments included a suggestion for a more thorough explanation of spiritual disciplines with contrast to a works-based philosophy to avoid the mistaken assumption of spiritual disciplines as penance. Also, it was suggested that the character of God should be the overarching reason that Christians practice spiritual

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<sup>9</sup> See appendix 3.

<sup>10</sup> See appendix 3.



disciplines: Christians respond to His character as worship. Though neither of these suggestions rated an unfavorable response, each was incorporated into the curriculum. A suggestion was also made to incorporate additional spiritual disciplines into the conversation, but time constraints of the session were deemed prohibitive and no additions were included as a part of the outline.

Session 4 comments included a suggestion to add a list of modern issues of idolatry. It was noted that many Christians do not know they are placing seemingly harmless interests above their devotion to God. Also, a noted deficiency in session 4 was generalized homework activities. The reviewer recommended a more focused homework assignment covering idolatry, repentance, and forgiveness. Per the recommendation, a more comprehensive and couple-focused homework activity was included and approved as sufficient by the reviewer.

Comments for session 5 also included a call for more meaningful homework activities. This recommendation was also addressed with a communication and conflict resolution-based activity and was included and approved as sufficient by the reviewer.

Session 6 comments included the probability that many couples would be reluctant to discuss marital sexuality with any specificity. It was recommended that providing advice and opening up a participant question session was the best approach. This recommendation was incorporated into the curriculum.

## **Goal 2 Results**

The second goal was to assess the knowledge and practices of Christ-centered disciplines of participant couples at NVBC. A pre-course survey facilitated this goal.<sup>11</sup> The survey was delivered by email through Google Forms upon registration using an anonymously-coded response format. This goal was considered successfully met on November 18, 2020, when twelve surveys were returned but registration and survey

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<sup>11</sup> See appendix 2.

submission continued until November 22, 2020, when twenty-eight surveys were returned and the results analyzed, providing a clearer picture of the knowledge and practice of Christ-centered disciplines within marriages among participants.

Several results provided insight into the participants’ pre-course knowledge and practices of Christ-centeredness within their marriages. First, there were two identified pre-course strengths related to knowledge. Responses from question 1 suggests that participants believe marriage is sacred to God. Also, responses to question 2 suggest that participants know they should live in submission to Christ (see table 1). Both data sets for these questions suggest a foundational knowledge consistent with a Christian worldview and were an appropriate starting place for the “My Christ-centered Marriage Course.”

Table 1. Pre-course mean strengths

Survey Question	Pre-Course Mean (N=28)
Q 1. I believe that Christian marriage is sacred to God.	5.64/6
Q 2. I am called to submit to Christ.	5.46/6

Table 2 demonstrates lower than average mean scores on six of the pre-course survey questions. Two knowledge-based questions evidenced areas of concern. Question 8 relates to 1 Peter 3:7 whereas a husband’s prayers are hindered when he is not in a right relationship with his wife, and Matthew 6:14-15 when God withholds forgiveness if a spirit of unforgiveness exists (see table 2). Question 10 solicits the participants’ current perceptions of being equipped for Christ-centered marriage. While the mean response was 4.32/6, this perception conflicted with other areas of knowledge and practice that would suggest a lower level of preparedness. Likewise, four practice-based questions showed areas of concern. The first was question 12, “I am in submission to Christ.” While most participants responded in agreement to the statement, the level of agreement was weighted toward “agree somewhat” (see table 2). This may suggest the respondents recognize their need to be in submission to Christ but are uncertain of their commitment. Question 13

addresses self-centeredness and reflects a response pattern similar to question 12. Question 14 addresses spousal conflict resolution. The response pattern is less optimistic, and participants acknowledge they have difficulty addressing marital strife effectively. The final pre-course survey question that raises concern is question 15. This question addresses the issue of forgiveness. Nine of the twenty-eight responses to question 15 indicate participants have difficulty with forgiveness of their spouse (see table 2).

While neither the pre-course strengths nor areas of concern definitively indicated spiritual maturity, they helped to identify trends that informed the facilitators. They also created a general profile of spiritual maturity consistent with Christian knowledge and practices. From this information, the course outline was refined to provide a more focused course delivery that emphasized Christ-centeredness through submission, service, proper communication, and forgiveness.

Table 2. Pre-course areas of concern

Survey Question	Mean
Q 8. If I am not in good standing with my spouse, my prayers are hindered.	3.71/6
Q 10. I am equipped to live out a Christ-centered marriage.	4.32/6
Q 12. I am in submission to Christ.	4.00/6
Q 13. I place my spouse's needs above my own.	4.04/6
Q 14. I seek to resolve conflicts within my marriage quickly.	3.79/6
Q 15. I can forgive my spouse when I am sinned against.	4.07/6

### Goal 3 Results

The third goal was to enhance both the knowledge and practice of spiritual disciplines within participants' marriages by teaching the curriculum. The course, "My Christ-centered Marriage," was taught in a six-session format with ninety minutes allocated for each session. To facilitate greater opportunities for discussion three independent sections of the course were offered. The first section was offered weekly starting Sunday, November 29, 2020, from 12:00 p.m. until 3:00 p.m. and concluded on Sunday, December 13, 2020. Five marital enrichment couples participated in the first

section. The second section was offered weekly starting Monday, November 30, 2020, from 6:00 p.m. until 9:00 p.m. and concluded on Monday, December 14, 2020. Four premarital couples participated in the second section. The third section was offered weekly starting on Tuesday, December 1, 2020, from 6:00 p.m. until 9:00 p.m. and concluded on Tuesday, December 15, 2020. Five deacon and church staff couples participated in the third section. The result of the participants' engagement with the curriculum and assimilation of the practices helped to increase their spiritual maturity.

The first and second sessions were held the week of November 29, 2020, and addressed couples' histories and expectations of marriage. The first session allowed couples to share their relationship stories and develop a sense of group safety. This session provided the facilitators an opportunity to learn about each couple and to identify areas of concern for later emphasis. In the first session, importance was placed on hearing couples' testimonies, learning about their families of origin, dating histories, current relationship dynamics, and their expectations of marriage. These topics were of concern to initially assess issues of faith, knowledge, and practice of spiritual disciplines within the relationships.

Participants also engaged in a journaling activity to identify future expectations for their marriages. This activity required them to own their expectations by writing them down and then to give them life by sharing those expectations with their spouses and with the group. After sharing, a group discussion helped to identify common myths of marriage and to reinforce Christ-centered expectations. This activity not only served to identify individual expectations but also modeled a pattern for structured and purposeful marital communication.

Couples were tasked with a homework activity of reading Scripture together aloud and then discussing what they read. The book of 1 John was assigned to be read no less than three times in the following week with specific criteria of discussion for each of

the three readings. This homework activity served to establish a regular habit of spouses spending time in Scripture together and reflecting on the implications of their reading.

The second session provided a framework for the divine nature of marriage and delineated the biblical roles of husband and wife. Emphasis was placed on Genesis 1:27-28; 2:18-25 to demonstrate God's design of man in His image and His purposes for man and woman through marriage. Additionally, an exegetical study of Ephesians 5:22-33 stressed the biblical roles of husband and wife for order and structure within marriage.

Participants were asked to journal a self-reflective analysis of how they currently fulfill their respective biblical roles as husband or wife. Likewise, they were asked to journal an analysis of how their spouses fulfilled their respective biblical roles as husband or wife. This journaling activity led to individual couple's discussions of their relationship dynamics and then a group discussion of successes and areas for improvement.

Participants were also given role-specific homework assignments derived from biblical counselors Wayne Mack, Scott LaPierre, and Martha Peace.<sup>12</sup> Each of the homework assignments was designed to encourage spouses to recognize each other for the ways they fulfill their God-given marital roles. This activity was instrumental in forming patterns of positive and uplifting communication as a method of marital ministry.

The third and fourth sessions were held the week of December 6, 2020. The third session addressed spiritual disciplines. It focused on the importance of implementing these disciplines in marriage to glorify God and increase spiritual maturity. Activity-based lessons provided tools to equip couples to grow in the knowledge and practice of spiritual disciplines of praying, worshipping, and serving.

The third session began with a brief description of the reasons and the importance of personal prayer but elaborated to emphasize the husband's role as the

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<sup>12</sup> Wayne Mack, *Strengthening Your Marriage*, 2nd ed. (Philipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1999), 42; Scott LaPierre, *Marriage God's Way: A Biblical Recipe for Healthy, Joyful, Christ-Centered Relationships* (Woodlands, WA: Charis Family Publishing, 2016), 126; and Martha Peace, *The Excellent Wife: A Biblical Perspective*, expanded ed. (Benmidji, MN: Focus Publishing, 2005), 111.

spiritual leader of the home as well as his role in praying with his wife. Participants were asked to create a prayer list of at least ten issues and then discuss the list with their spouses. As a homework activity, husbands were encouraged to begin or enhance a daily marital ministry of couple's prayer for the issues on their lists and more as needed.

Next, worship was expressed as an outpouring of love for God. This session highlighted worship as a daily activity that allows families to reflect on the majesty of God in a group setting. It recognized worship as a spiritual discipline that promotes a culture of Christ-centeredness within the home. The facilitators demonstrated a model of family worship consisting of singing, reading of Scripture, discussion, and prayer as an achievable practice for Christ-centered couples. As a homework activity, couples were encouraged to duplicate the model in their homes as a regular activity.

The third session also addressed service as a spiritual discipline and a byproduct of Christ-centeredness. It stressed that couples who pray and worship together should serve the church in some capacity. Couples were provided with information on church-based service opportunities and encouraged to incorporate at least one new opportunity into their family time as a couple's or family service ministry.

The fourth session addressed common issues of idolatry, the need for repentance, and forgiveness as an ongoing practice of marital ministry. Emphasis was placed on the command to worship God alone (Exod 20:3-4). All people were made with a heart to worship, but the worship of anything other than God is idolatrous. Husbands and wives are subject to placing improper emphasis on materialism, comfort, activities, people, and pleasure which may become idols—issues of sin in their lives. These idols diminish couples' relationships with God and thereby diminish their relationships with each other. Participants engaged in an activity that required them to identify the potential idols in their lives, as well as the perceived idols within the lives of their spouses. A discussion of these idols ensued along with plans to remove them.

When sin is identified, believers must repent of their sinfulness, flee from it, and return to a proper relationship with God. Session 4 discussed the need for a heart that constantly seeks to be in submission to Christ, free from idolatry, and accountable to one's spouse. Repentance was discussed in a horizontal dimension between spouses who have sinned against each other, as well as in a vertical dimension for believers who have sinned against God. This session reinforced that maintaining the right relationship with God and spouse is an essential practice of Christ-centered couples.

Session 4 also addressed forgiveness as a characteristic of Christian living. Couples learned about forgiveness as a Christian imperative and ongoing marital ministry. Combining the concepts of idolatry, repentance, and forgiveness, the course facilitators modeled the process of recognizing issues of sinfulness, spousal repentance, repentance before God, and forgiveness of each other as they have been forgiven in Christ Jesus. Couples then practiced the activity of recognition, repentance, and forgiveness based on their previously identified idols. Homework was assigned that tasked the couples with duplicating the previously modeled activity with each participant recognizing an issue of idolatry, repenting, and seeking forgiveness.

The fifth and sixth sessions were held the week of December 13, 2020. The fifth session addressed marital communication. The purpose of this session was to provide tools to equip couples to grow in the knowledge and practice of Christ-centered communication. Emphasis was placed on Luke 6:45: "The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks." Couples learned that communication issues are issues of the heart that are in opposition to God. Moreover, they learned that self-centered communication is destructive to the marital relationship and demonstrates a heart that is at "war" with itself (Jas 4:1).

Through practice, couples rehearsed active and compassionate listening, honesty, timeliness, and edification of one's spouse. The course facilitators modeled

Christ-centered communication while addressing common marital issues. Afterward, the couples selected one unaddressed issue in their marriages and duplicated the previously modeled communication pattern. This led to a group discussion of the successes and areas for improvement in marital communication. Moreover, it illustrated that no couple is immune to conflict, but focusing on Christ-centered speech and compassionate understanding provides a method that removes much of the conflict from marital communication.

The sixth session addressed marital oneness from the topic of sexual relations. Couples listened to an explanation of the nature of Christian sexuality in that sex is marital, multi-purposed, ministerial, and mutual.<sup>13</sup> It was reinforced that sex was designed by God and is good, but its goodness is confined to the marriage relationship. Couples learned that sex is multi-purposed and affords relational oneness, pleasure, and the ability to produce children. They learned that sex is a ministry to one's spouse, not to oneself. Personal sexual fulfillment is a byproduct of ministering to the desires of one's spouse. Finally, couples learned that sex is mutual in that either partner can request, initiate, and enjoy sex.<sup>14</sup>

During session 6, facilitators held an open discussion on marital sexuality as well as any topic that participants wanted to explore further. This allowed time for participants to reflect on prior learning and communicate their understanding of the issues related to living out a Christ-centered marriage. Likewise, it allowed time for couples to consider the changes that had occurred over the three-week course in their marriages. Couples left the sixth session better equipped to incorporate Christ-centered disciplines into their lives, their marriages, and more eager to grow in spiritual maturity by placing Christ at the center of their relationship.

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<sup>13</sup> Session 6 was influenced by Robert D. Jones, "Lesson 11: Sexual Intimacy as Marital Ministry" (classroom lecture, 80554—Marriage and Family Counseling, Winter 2020, photocopy), 111-15.

<sup>14</sup> Jones, "Lesson 11: Sexual Intimacy as Marital Ministry," 111-15.



Participants were asked to complete the post-course survey immediately following the final session but no later than twenty-four hours after their respective course sections. While this generally occurred, reminder emails were sent daily for two days until December 17, 2020, when twenty-eight post-course surveys were completed. Analysis of the pre-and post-course survey data occurred from December 17, 2020, until December 18, 2020.

Table 3 demonstrates the greatest change in mean scores between pre- and post-survey responses for knowledge-based questions. Participants initially indicated strong beliefs that Christian marriage is sacred to God and that they are called to submit to Christ. While the mean shifted positively from pre- to post-course surveys, this finding is consistent with a population of participant couples who hold to the foundational principles of Christian faith.

Table 3. Post-course mean change in strengths

Survey Question	Pre-Course Mean (N=28)	Post-Course Mean (N=28)	Change
Q 1. I believe that Christian marriage is sacred to God.	5.64	5.89	+0.25
Q 2. I am called to submit to Christ.	5.46	5.82	+0.36

Table 4 shows the change in mean scores between pre- and post-survey responses for the areas of concern noted in the pre-course survey. The areas of concern noted in goal 2 showed marked improvement in the post-course survey means. Change between the means of question 8 reflected increased attention to maintaining spousal harmony as an extension of one's relationship with God. Change in question 10 reflected participants' positive perceptions of being equipped for Christ-centered marriage after the course. Change in question 12 suggested a greater emphasis on being in submission to Christ. Change in question 13 identified increased care for one's spouse over one's personal needs. Change in question 14 reflected a greater consideration for timely conflict

resolution within marriage. Change in question 15 suggested an increase in the ability or desire to forgive one’s spouse. Each of these areas relates to Christ-centered disciplines and demonstrate an increase in knowledge and practices of Christ-centered disciplines during the course.

Table 4. Post-course change in areas of concern

Survey Question	Pre-Course Mean (N=28)	Post-Course Mean (N=28)	Change
Q 8. If I am not in good standing with my spouse, my prayers are hindered.	3.71	5.29	+1.57
Q 10. I am equipped to live out a Christ-centered marriage	4.32	5.71	+1.39
Q 12. I am in submission to Christ.	4.00	5.29	+1.29
Q 13. I place my spouse’s needs above my own.	4.04	5.43	+1.39
Q 14. I seek to resolve conflicts within my marriage quickly.	3.79	5.61	+1.82
Q 15. I can forgive my spouse when I am sinned against.	4.07	5.43	+1.36

Table 5 presents the results of the *t*-test for dependent samples for the full pre- and post-survey. The third goal for this project was measured by administering a post-survey, which assessed the level of knowledge and practice of Christ-centered marriage principles.<sup>15</sup> This goal was considered successfully met on December 18, 2020, when a *t*-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistically significant difference in the pre- and post-survey total scores:  $t_{(27)} = -6.955546377$ ,  $p = 0.000000089$ . A one-way ANOVA was also conducted to compare the pre-course total means among samples of premarital, marital, and deacon participants. The analysis produced a statistically significant variation among groups,  $F(2, 25) = 14.95621$ ,  $p = 0.000054$ . Post hoc Tukey-Kramer tests revealed significant differences between the premarital group ( $\mu=76$ ) and the marital group ( $\mu =94.6$ ) and the premarital group ( $\mu =76$ ) and the deacon group ( $\mu$

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<sup>15</sup> See appendix 2.

=104.4). Reflection on these findings suggests that the observed differences in the pre-course totals are attributed to the premarital group having considerably less knowledge and application of Christ-centered marital principles than the marital enrichment and deacon groups. In contrast, the marital enrichment and deacon groups, both having a considerable historical advantage as married believers, did not demonstrate a statistically significant difference between groups.

Table 5. Results of *t*-test for dependent samples (total)

	Pre-Course Survey	Post-Course Survey
Mean	92.82142857	113.3214286
Variance	248.6706349	85.11507937
Observations	28	28
Pearson Correlation	0.0311248781	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	27	
T Stat	-6.955546377	
P(T<=t) one tail	0.000000089	
T Critical one tail	1.703288446	
P(T<=t) two tail	0.000000178	
T Critical two tail	2.051830516	

The same analysis was performed on the post-course total means among samples of premarital, marital, and deacon participants. The one-way ANOVA produced a statistically significant variation among groups,  $F(2, 25) = 6.593612$ ,  $p = 0.005015$ , although post hoc Tukey-Kramer tests revealed no significant differences between the premarital group ( $\mu=105$ ), marital group ( $\mu =115.7$ ) or the deacon group ( $\mu =117.6$ ). The combination of these results suggests that the differences between the premarital, marital, and deacon groups were significantly decreased as a result of the training and that learning occurred in each group, but most the significant learning occurred in the premarital group.

Table 6 shows the results of the *t*-test for dependent samples for the knowledge portion of the pre-and post-survey. A *t*-test for dependent samples also demonstrated a positive statistically significant difference in the pre-and post-survey knowledge scores:  $t_{(27)} = -5.087298543$ ,  $p = 0.000012044$ . A one-way ANOVA was also conducted to

compare the pre-course knowledge means among samples of premarital, marital, and deacon participants. The analysis produced a statistically significant variation among groups,  $F(2, 25) = 4.289049$ ,  $p = 0.025035$ . Post hoc Tukey-Kramer tests revealed significant differences between the premarital group ( $\mu=39.5$ ) and the marital group ( $\mu =54.6$ ) and the premarital group ( $\mu =39.5$ ) and the deacon group ( $\mu =55.7$ ). Reflection on these findings suggests that the observed differences in pre-course knowledge is attributed to the premarital group having significantly less knowledge of Christ-centered marital principles than the marital enrichment and deacon groups. Similar to the pre-course total, the marital and deacon groups did not demonstrate a statistically significant difference between groups.

Table 6. Results of *t*-test for dependent samples (knowledge)

	Pre-Course Survey	Post-Course Survey
Mean	48.39285714	57.07142857
Variance	73.58068783	31.99470899
Observations	28	28
Pearson Correlation	0.248247479	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	27	
T Stat	-5.087298543	
P(T<=t) one tail	0.000012044	
T Critical one tail	1.703288446	
P(T<=t) two tail	0.000024089	
T Critical two tail	2.051830516	

The same analysis was performed on the post-course knowledge means among samples of premarital, marital, and deacon participants. The one-way ANOVA produced a statistically significant variation among groups,  $F(2, 25) = 5.121826$ ,  $p = 0.013669$ , although post hoc Tukey-Kramer tests revealed no significant differences between the premarital group ( $\mu=52.375$ ), marital group ( $\mu =58.5$ ) or the deacon group ( $\mu =59.4$ ). The combination of these results suggests that the differences in knowledge between the premarital, marital, and deacon groups were significantly decreased with each group increasing in knowledge, but the premarital group increasing significantly more as a

result of the training and their relative knowledge gap when compared to the other two groups.

Table 7 shows the results of the *t*-test for dependent samples for the practice portion of the pre-and post-survey. A *t*-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistically significant difference in the pre-and post-survey practice scores:  $t_{(27)} = -8.408915517$ ,  $p = 0.000000003$ . A one-way ANOVA was also conducted to compare the pre-course knowledge means among samples of premarital, marital, and deacon participants. The analysis produced a statistically significant variation among groups,  $F(2, 25) = 9.876958$ ,  $p = 0.00069$ . Although, post hoc Tukey-Kramer tests revealed no significant differences between the premarital group ( $\mu=36.5$ ), marital group ( $\mu =46.4$ ) or the deacon group ( $\mu =48.7$ ). Reflection on these findings suggests that Christ-centered marital practices were moderate in each group prior to training.

Table 7. Results of *t*-test for dependent samples (practice)

	Pre-Course Survey	Post-Course Survey
Mean	44.42857143	56.25
Variance	60.47619048	15.52777778
Observations	28	28
Pearson Correlation	0.337204664	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	27	
T Stat	-8.408915517	
P(T<=t) one tail	0.000000003	
T Critical one tail	1.703288446	
P(T<=t) two tail	0.000000005	
T Critical two tail	2.051830516	

The same analysis was performed on the post-course practice means among samples of premarital, marital, and deacon participants. The one-way ANOVA produced a statistically significant variation among groups,  $F(2, 25) = 7.122297$ ,  $p = 0.003565$ , although post hoc Tukey-Kramer tests revealed no significant differences between the premarital group ( $\mu=52.625$ ), marital group ( $\mu =57.2$ ) or the deacon group ( $\mu =58.2$ ). The combination of these results suggests that the differences in practice between the

premarital, marital, and deacon groups were decreased with each group increasing in practice, but the premarital group increasing considerably more as a result of the training and their relative practice gap when compared to the other two groups.

### **Conclusion**

This project met or exceeded expectations in each of the three goals. The first goal was to create a six-session curriculum that equipped couples to develop Christ-centeredness within their marriages. This was achieved concurrently with the development of chapters 2 and 3, allowing for expert panel review and approval above the 90 percent satisfactory rating. The second goal was to assess the knowledge and practices of Christ-centered disciplines of participant couples at NVBC. This goal was exceeded when twenty-eight pre-course surveys were returned, and the results were assessed. The third goal was to enhance both the knowledge and practice of Christ-centered disciplines within participants' marriages by teaching the curriculum. This goal was considered successfully met when a *t*-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive statistically significant difference in the pre-and post-survey and additional testing demonstrated statistically significant differences between groups was determined by one-way ANOVA and Tukey-Kramer post hoc tests.

## CHAPTER 5

### EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

This chapter assesses the project by evaluating its purpose, goals, strengths, and weaknesses. I then provide recommendations for future changes to maximize the potential ministry impact. Finally, I offer theological and personal reflections on my experience with this endeavor.

#### **Evaluation of Project Purpose**

The purpose of this project was to equip couples for Christ-centered marriages at New Vision Baptist Church in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. The purpose originated from years of biblical counseling experience focused on relationship counseling to include premarital, marital stress, and divorce-related issues. Observations from previous counseling experiences helped to formulate a general profile of marriage related issues stemming from spiritual immaturity, ambiguous marital roles and responsibilities, functional idolatry, poor communication, and distrust.

The purpose of equipping couples for Christ-centered marriages is consistent with Scripture in that God created man and woman in part for purposes that flow from the marriage relationship (Gen 1:27-28; 2:18-25). Also, within marriage there exists a necessary order that provides strength, support, and stability, as well as reflects the eternal relationship of believers with Christ (Eph. 5:22-33). Moreover, couples who place Christ at the center of their marriages will more likely grow in spiritual maturity, disciple their children well, and serve in greater capacities in the body of Christ.

## **Evaluation of Project Goals**

The project goals were well-aligned with the project purpose and proved effective in equipping couples for Christ-centered marriages by enhancing both knowledge and practice of Christ-centered disciplines within participants' marriages. The project included three goals (1) to create a six-session curriculum to equip couples to develop Christ-centeredness within their marriages, (2) to assess the knowledge and practices of Christ-centered disciplines of participant couples at NVBC, and (3) to enhance both knowledge and practices of Christ-centered disciplines within participants' marriages by teaching the curriculum.

### **Goal 1**

The first goal was to create a six-session curriculum to equip couples to develop Christ-centeredness within their marriages. The curriculum was developed concurrently with chapters 2 and 3 of this project and the facilitator outlines were presented to an expert panel for review and feedback. Initially, five panel-members agreed to participate in the two-week review period. However, only three panel-members completed and submitted feedback for consideration within the time allotted for review. While the initial feedback rated above 90 percent sufficient, changes to the curriculum were made based on reviewer feedback. Upon completion of the review and revision, this goal was considered successfully met.

### **Goal 2**

The second goal of the project was to assess the knowledge and practices of Christ-centered disciplines of participant couples at NVBC. The pre-course survey was available upon course registration. Using Google Forms proved highly effective for distributing, collecting, and analyzing survey responses. The initial goal of twelve responses was exceeded with twenty-eight responses to the pre-course survey. Evaluation of the data showed an average participant score of 4.84/6 on a Likert scale measuring Christ-centered knowledge, and an average score of 4.44/6 on a Likert scale measuring



Christ-centered practices in their marriages. This data served as the basis for further planning, course delivery, and evaluation of post-course results.

### **Goal 3**

The third goal was to enhance both the knowledge and practices of Christ-centered disciplines within participants' marriages by teaching the curriculum. The course was taught weekly to three stratified small groups for three consecutive weeks covering two sessions per week. The first group consisted of premarital couples seeking knowledge and wisdom for marriage. The second group consisted of married members of the NVBC congregation seeking marital enrichment. The third group consisted of deacon and church staff couples who were also seeking marital enrichment. Each group provided a unique dynamic that lent itself to focused conversations, personal disclosure, and teaching. This goal was considered successfully met when an evaluation of the pre-and post-course surveys demonstrated positive statistically significant results, but the impact of the course measured far beyond the statistics. Participants in each sub-group were challenged to evaluate their knowledge and practices of Christ-centered disciplines as well as to hold each other accountable for establishing and maintaining such disciplines within their respective relationships. From an intellectual perspective, participants grew in knowledge of the biblical expectations for their marriage, but more importantly, from a practical perspective, participants experienced that a Christ-centered marriage is possible, and the processes are achievable for those who desire to change.

### **Evaluation of Project Strengths**

The first strength of this project was its alignment with Scripture. When developing the "My Christ-Centered Marriage" course, I could have modeled it after many other mainstream religious marriage enrichment programs or even incorporated

video teaching content from mainstream sources.<sup>1</sup> After having participated in several video-facilitated courses though, I felt much time was lost while focused on the instructional videos that could have been better spent in group discussions of the content. I wanted to create a course offered in a small-group environment that was scripturally focused and discussion-driven. I assert that people tend to learn more from reading God's Word, talking through issues, and hearing first-hand accounts of how their peers have engaged in Christ-centered practices and how that process has improved their spiritual maturity and marriages.

The second strength of this project was the purposeful allocation of teaching, discussion, and activity time. In the ninety-minute sessions, approximately thirty minutes was devoted to teaching, thirty minutes was devoted to discussion, and thirty minutes was devoted to couples or group activities that helped equip couples to incorporate Christ-centered disciplines into their marriages. Similarly, the equal allocation of time and multiple teaching methods engaged participants' various learning styles and created a structure and flow to each class session that held couples' attention.

The third strength of this project was that couples supported and held each other accountable. This occurred within and between marriages as each couple discussed successes and areas for improvement with the practical applications and homework activities. It was promising to observe participant husbands encouraging other husbands, and wives encouraging other wives in their role-specific responsibilities. Through this interactive participation, couples formed closer friendships, which may lead to lasting relationships of trust and support within the body of Christ.

Another vital strength of the project was the willingness of the participants to engage in the training during the busyness of the holiday season. The first opportunity to

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<sup>1</sup> Participants of a similar project found the video teaching elements repetitive and distracting. See Michael Wayne Marrs, "Developing a Marriage Enrichment Seminar for Couples at Easthaven Baptist Church, Kalispell, Montana" (DMin, project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2015), 111-12.

run the project occurred between Thanksgiving and Christmas of 2020. This consolidated window of opportunity increased the length of each meeting to three hours and included two teaching sessions per meeting.

The final strength of this project was that the facilitators practiced what they taught. As a model for disclosure and accountability, they readily offered insight into their challenges and struggles as well as their successes in living out a Christ-centered marriage. They completed the in-course practical activities and the homework assignments along with the course participants and were willing to share and discuss to encourage conversations.

### **Evaluation of Project Weaknesses**

The COVID-19 global pandemic was a factor in marketing the course to the full NVBC congregation. Table 8 illustrates the difference in church attendance during the first week of November 2019 as compared with the first week of November 2020. In the first week of November of 2019, the weekly attendance total for NVBC was 4,889. In the first week of November of 2020, the weekly attendance total was 2,307 (see table 8). In-person church and small group attendance were on a slow increase and there was an apparent reluctance of the congregation to reemerge from the government-mandated isolation. With this factor, communication with the former in-person congregation was primarily available through the church website and mass emails. Advertisement of the course on the church website was obscure at best and response to mass emails was minimal. Participant couples were mostly identified and secured for the course through word-of-mouth advertising and referral resources.

Table 8. NVBC worship summary first week of November

Weekend Worship	2020	2019	% (+/-)
Worship Total	2307	4889	-53%

The project was envisioned as a six-week in-person course to be held at NVBC during the week in the evening, or on Sunday as a part of normal Sunday school programming. While no in-church offerings garnered enough participants to run a section, three Zoom sections were offered to provide a sample size relative to the population. In all, three separate sections of the course were offered. This took significant additional time and effort in teaching. It also posed situational variations of discussion topics that may have shaped individual participants' understanding of the subject matter.

The congregation's willingness to engage in a course that required vulnerability, exposure of marital issues, and the conviction of the need for change was also a weakness. Marital stress constituted about 22 percent (308/1432) of the NVBC Care Ministry's counseling requests from 2018–2020.<sup>2</sup> This statistic suggests that the church body needs additional education, discipleship, and counseling support for marital issues. That notwithstanding, the sample relative to the population size was lower than desired. It was assumed that there would be no issue in capturing 20-24 couples to participate in the course, but the reality was roughly 60 percent of the expectation.

Administrative support also proved to be a challenge. Coordination for church facilities and scheduling for the project was provided through the Care Ministry staff. Though reasonable efforts were made to coordinate the course into the general fall schedule, conflicting courses took precedence. However, the Care Ministry and its counselors and the Deacon Ministry referred many of the participants for the three section offerings.

### **Proposed Project Changes**

One possible change to this project is consistent with the doctor of ministry project of Michael Wayne Marrs, "Developing a Marriage Enrichment Seminar for

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<sup>2</sup> See appendix 7.

Couples at Easthaven Baptist Church, Kalispell, Montana.” In his project, Marrs outlined a concept for a marriage enrichment program executed in a three-day marital retreat format.<sup>3</sup> A retreat format would have the benefit of capturing the audience for a brief time to allow pre-course survey administration, course delivery, and post-course survey administration. While this was not a particular issue of the current project, the multiple week format could prove challenging for consistent course attendance by each participant. It would also allow for concise delivery, focused participant attention, and timely course feedback. Future iterations of the current project will seek to include an offering of seminar formatting, either at the church or in a retreat setting.

While the current project was able to capture three sections of four to five couples per section, the ideal number of couples seems to favor a smaller offering. The greater the number of couples, the less time is available to spend with each couple. Though the course is not delivered as group counseling, many of the topics and issues elicited from the participant couples did lead to group counseling-like discussions. As such, group cohesiveness and personal trust are best nurtured through fewer participants. It is recommended that participation in a single offering of this or similar courses be limited to three or four couples.

The final change proposed to this project relates to the question “what is next?” The next step at NVBC is connecting couples to ministry small groups. This is a standard procedure and part of the model for NVBC discipleship. Nonetheless, the small group format could be enhanced through a pre-established roster of trained marriage mentor couples who can come alongside new or struggling couples and offer them care, personal mentorship, and accountability as they grow in spiritual maturity and Christ-centeredness within their marriages.

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<sup>3</sup> Marrs, “Developing a Marriage Enrichment Seminar,” 87.

## Theological Reflections

As I read and researched to develop this project, I was struck by the biblical significance of marriage. I thought I grasped the implication before beginning this project, but my understanding was enhanced as a result. In part, I reflect on God's relationship with Israel expressed as a marriage covenant.<sup>4</sup> This covenantal relationship exemplifies the love, faithfulness, care, provision, grace, and forgiveness God has for His people. Despite Israel's cyclical unfaithfulness, God remained constant, providing love and correction to demonstrate His glory. Likewise, in the covenant of Christian marriage, husbands and wives must live out their faith in the Lord through their love, fidelity, care, provision, grace, and forgiveness of each other for the glory of God.

I also reflect on Christ's relationship with His church as a betrothal. Christ is the bridegroom who will be eternally united with His bride, the church, at His second coming. Ephesians 5:25-27 exemplify this metaphor: "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish." Christ is the bridegroom who offered Himself as a sacrifice for His future bride, the church. He has demonstrated unconditional love and care so that those who are faithful to Him can be imputed with His righteousness before God. In Christian marriage, husbands serve as imperfect models of Christ, and wives serve as imperfect models of the church, to prepare each other for eternity in loving submission to the Lord.

Additionally, the importance of one's relationship with God as the foundation for marriage cannot be over-emphasized. Husbands and wives who are not in submission to Christ have difficulty modeling Christlikeness to their spouses. Obedience is a product of Christian submission. If a person is walking in the flesh, then he cannot glorify God and his motivations are contrary to marital unity. The apostle Paul wrote, "But I say, walk by

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<sup>4</sup> For example, see Ezek 16:8-14, 59-60; Jer 31:32.

the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do” (Gal 5:16-17). One’s relationship with his spouse is a reflection of his relationship with God. A strong relationship with God produces a stronger relationship with one’s spouse and vice versa. Married Christians benefit from their devotion to God and thereby their devotion to one another.

In short, as the focus of Christian life must be eternal, the focus of Christian marriage is also eternal. Husbands and wives must strive to put off their earthly desires and put on their desire to become more like Christ each day. Living this way builds spiritual maturity, enhances one’s relationship with God, and equips couples for Christ-centered marriage.

### **Personal Reflections**

As I began this ministry project, I was tasked with examining the context, theology, and practice of Christ-centered marriage, but I was convicted to apply it to my own spiritual life and marriage. Though my wife and I live in ministry to others, we were challenged to improve our consistency with the application of spiritual disciplines to enhance our marriage and to serve as adequate witnesses of the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. As a result, I can say that we are now more spiritually focused than when I started the project, and I pray that fourteen other couples who served as participants of the project can say the same.

### **Conclusion**

While this project succeeded in its stated purpose of equipping couples for Christ-centered marriages at NVBC, its greater potential is yet unfulfilled. The content of the project is merely a starting point and the impact on the body of NVBC is ongoing. Preparing couples for Christ-centered marriages does not stop with a class or a seminar.

Christ-centered marriage must be modeled by spiritually mature believers to couples who are considering marriage, as well as couples who have been married for decades. Marital training must become as visible as corporate worship and as accessible as Sunday morning children's programming. If the body of Christ is to glorify God, it will be through its witness to the world that Christian marriage is unique, and its value structures are deeply rooted in God's purposes for His people.



## APPENDIX 1

### INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

#### **Agreement to Participate**

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to determine Christ-centeredness of husbands and wives and to strengthen this characteristic for the good of the marriage and the witness of the church. This research is being conducted by Robbie Piel for the purpose of doctoral research. In this research, you will take a pre-course survey, participate in a six-session Christ-centered marriage training, and take a post-course survey. Any information you provide will be held strictly confidential, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name be identified with your responses. Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

By your completion of this Internet-based survey, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this research.

For the purposes of comparing pre- and post-course responses, please provide a unique identifying number that you will use throughout the course. It is recommended that you use your date of birth formatted as the month, day, and year (example 07082020).

Your unique code: \_\_\_\_\_

#### General Questions

1. What is your age?  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. What is your gender?  
a. Male      b. Female
3. How many years have you been married?  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. Have you received couple's counseling?  
a. Yes      b. No
5. Have you been...?  
a. Widowed   b. Divorced   c. Both   d. Neither
6. What group best describes your participation status?  
a. Premarital   b. Marital   c. Church Staff/Deacon Family
7. Do you consider yourself a Christian?  
a. Yes   b. No
8. How long have you been a Christian (if yes to the above question)?  
a. 0-5 years   b. 6-10 years   c. 11-15 years   d. Greater than 15 years

## APPENDIX 2

### PRE- AND POST-SURVEY

**Directions:** Please give your opinion to the statements using the following scale. Circle your response.

**SD** = strongly disagree

**D** = disagree

**DS** = disagree somewhat

**AS** = agree somewhat

**A** = agree

**SA** = strongly agree

- |   |    |   |    |    |   |    |
|---|----|---|----|----|---|----|
| 1. I believe that Christian marriage is sacred to God.                                      | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 2. I am called to submit to Christ.   | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 3. I should love my spouse as I love myself.  | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 4. The Bible encourages husbands to be the spiritual leaders of their homes.                | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 5. The Bible encourages wives to be respectful helpers of their husbands.                   | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 6. I believe that viewing pornography is a form of marital unfaithfulness.                  | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 7. Enhancing my personal relationship with God will benefit my relationship with my spouse. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 8. If I am not in good standing with my spouse, my prayers are hindered.                    | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 9. I believe that my marriage is a good representation of Christian marriage.               | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 10. I am equipped to live out a Christ-centered marriage.                                   | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 11. I treat my marriage as a sacred covenant.   | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 12. I am in submission to Christ.   | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 13. I place my spouse's needs above my own.   | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |

- |   |    |   |    |    |   |    |
|---|----|---|----|----|---|----|
| 14. I seek to resolve conflicts within my marriage quickly.     | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 15. I can forgive my spouse when I am sinned against.           | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 16. In my marriage, the husband is the leader of the home.      | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 17. In my marriage, the wife is respectful of her husband.      | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 18. The use of pornography exists in my marriage.               | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 19. My marital relationship demonstrates my spiritual maturity. | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |
| 20. I am committed to living out a Christ-centered marriage.    | SD | D | DS | AS | A | SA |

APPENDIX 3

COMPLETED CURRICULUM EVALUATION RUBRIC

<b>Christ-Centered Marriage Curriculum Evaluation Tool</b>					
<b>Lesson Evaluation</b>					
<b>1= insufficient 2=requires attention 3= sufficient 4=exemplary</b>					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
The lesson is clearly relevant to the issue of spiritual maturity and Christ-centered marriage practices.			7	11	
The material is faithful to the Bible's teaching on marriage.		1	5	12	It would be helpful to see an explanation and or examples of expressed rights? What are a Christians' rights? One point of clarity, explore scripture presented in Psalm 139:23-24.
The material is theologically sound.			6	12	I think there are better open-ended evangelism question. Not real fan of "Do you consider yourself a Christian?" or the "if you were to die tonight." I actually like to just invite them to tell me their experience with faith growing up or tell me about how faith has been a part of your life up until now. Then I simply listen and then ask more pointed questions if needed to affirm the salvation of the counselee.  May consider giving time to defining a spiritual discipline, the dangers of its becoming a "works" rather than a response to a loving God. Avoiding spiritual pride and judging others.
The objective of the lesson is clearly stated.		1	7	10	Could maybe expand on the content explanation of the objective... not add to but better define. Homework is generalized rather than specific.

The points of the lesson clearly support the objective.		5	13	
The lesson contains points of practical application.		8	8	Perhaps connection with God's people in discipleship relationship should be added as a spiritual discipline. Community / Small Group The only reason a three was assigned to both practical application and a clear presentation of spiritual discipline was because emphasis of God's character may be beneficial in this section. This would add to the overall reason why one must be diligent in their practice of praise, worship, and servant hood. To what God do I serve? Otherwise this section was strong and informative. Most couples today do not have the spiritual maturity to understand some of these concepts and will need more teaching to understand some of the language. Due to family and personal history, many couples will find this in-depth sexual conversation very difficult. May consider giving them advice on how best to enter these kinds of conversations.
The lesson is sufficiently thorough in its coverage of the material.		7	11	Again, homework is generalized rather than specific.
Overall, the lesson is clearly presented.		8	10	Well thought out...great first step. Great session!!! Solid proof text - Good Homework. Suggested examples of modern day idols that derail our walk in the Spirit. Also, a misspelling in the homework section, instead of nature it should read natural.

## APPENDIX 4

### MY CHRIST-CENTERED MARRIAGE COURSE PROMOTION



#### *My Christ-Centered Marriage*

##### **Why Marital Enrichment or Preparation**

Many couples spend immeasurable time and energy planning for their wedding ceremonies but fail to prepare for life-long marriages. Likewise, many married couples focus their attention on things that do not encourage unity in their covenant relationships. Neither of these situations promotes stability in the home, growth in Christ, or strength in the church. *My Christ-centered Marriage* is a course designed for couples who are seriously considering, definitely planning, or desiring to (re)commit their marriage to Christ, and to share in a blessed union with Him. Sinners and Saints are encouraged to attend.

**Group Setting:** The class will meet in a group setting so that we may learn from each other's experiences and grow in Christ together. Group settings enable us to build community and enhance learning while still affording personal attention to each couple.

**About the Facilitators:** Robbie and Catherine Piel are biblical counselors within our Care Ministry. For years, they have been helping couples to realize their God-given roles and responsibilities as Christian husbands and wives. Their goal is to glorify God by equipping couples for Christ-centered marriages, not only for the sake of the couples whom they counsel but also for their generations to come. A marriage is never so strong as when Christ is truly its foundation.

**PREMARITAL BONUS!** The course meets the requirements for certified premarital counseling and thereby qualifies you for a \$60 discount off your Tennessee state marriage license. Certificates will be issued at the completion of the course.

APPENDIX 5  
FACILITATOR OUTLINES

**Session 1: Histories and Expectations of Marriage**

**Objective:**

Session one addresses the nature and scope of the course. It allows couples to share their relationship stories and develop a sense of group safety. It offers the course facilitators an opportunity to learn about each couple and to identify particular areas of concern for later emphasis. Specific emphasis is placed on hearing couples' testimonies, learning about their families of origin, dating history, current relationship dynamics, and their expectations of marriage.

*Communication is the means by which a husband-wife relationship . . . is established, grows, and is maintained. (Jay E. Adams)*

*There is no lonelier person than the one who lives with a spouse with whom he or she cannot communicate. (Margaret Mead)*

*“Do two walk together, unless they have agreed to meet” (Amos 3:3, ESV)?*

**Teaching and Discussion Plan:**

**Specific Questions:**

1. Do you consider yourself a Christian?
  - a. If yes, answer question 2
  - b. If no, go to question 3



2. Please tell me how you came to know Christ as your savior.
3. Who is God to you?

**Evangelistic opportunity**

Potential discussion of unequally yoked spouses:

“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, ESV)?

“Do two walk together, unless they have agreed to meet” (Amos 3:3)?

**Families of Origin and Histories**

- Tell me about your parents, siblings, family as you were growing up.
- Have you had any previous significant relationships? If so, how, and why did they end? Is there still a connection to those people (Social media)? What have you taken away from those relationships?
- How did you meet? How long did you date?
- (Premarital) What are your living arrangements? Are you involved in a sexual relationship?

**Practical Application:**

This activity requires each person to reflect on his or her reasons for marrying. It seeks to uncover hidden motivations, issues of idolatry, and selfish expectations.

## **Premarital Focus**

Three Questions:

1. Why marriage?
2. Why now?
3. What do you bring to this marriage?

### **Writing and Discussion Activity:**

This activity expands on the previous by addressing common myths of marriage as well as reinforcing positive God-honoring expectations. It also provides insight into male leadership, willingness to communicate, and the relational dynamics of the couples.

- Write down your top five expectations for your marriage (without showing your fiancé)
- Discuss the lists providing insight into the realities of the expectations.

## Marital Focus

One Question:

1. Why are you committed to this marriage?

### **Writing and Discussion Activity:**

This activity expands on the previous by addressing common marriage struggles as well as reinforcing positive God-honoring expectations. It also provides insight into the relational dynamics of the couples.

- Write down what changes would you like to see going forward in your marriage?
- Write down what changes are you willing to make going forward in your marriage?
- Discuss the lists providing hope and encouragement in God's will for the marriage.

### **Homework:**

Practicing a spiritual discipline: *Reading Scripture as a couple*

- As a couple, three times this week read aloud 1 John all the way through.

#### **After the first reading, discuss:**

What do we know to be true and unchanging? How does that impact our marriage?

1. The Word of Life (Ch 1)
2. Christ as our Advocate (Ch 2)

**After the second reading, discuss:**

How do we respond to Christ as believers? How does that impact our marriage?

1. Do not love the world (Ch 2)
2. Avoid the spirit of the antichrists (Ch 2)
3. Have confidence (Ch 3)
4. Love one another (Ch 3)

**After the third reading, discuss:**

What is fervent devotion? How does that impact our marriage?

1. Knowing God's Love (Ch 4)
2. Abiding in Him (Ch 4)
3. Overcoming the world (Ch 5)

**Continue this practice in other books of the Bible at least three times per week.**

I would recommend *Romans* and *John* as the next logical progression for new believers.

## **Session 2: God's Purposes for Marriage and His Roles for Husbands and Wives**

### **Objectives:**

The first purpose of this session is to provide a solid biblical framework for the divine nature of marriage. The second purpose is to delineate the biblical roles of husband and wife. The third objective is to align attitudes, beliefs, and actions more closely with the exhortations of Ephesians 5:22-33.

### **Teaching and Discussion Plan:**

#### **Godly Foundations of Marriage**

##### **Created in the Image of God**

Couples need to understand that they are created in God's image. This serves as the foundation for our relationship with God and with each other.

“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27, ESV).

##### **Created Male and Female**

Emphasis is placed on marriage between one man and one woman citing the attributes of God's masterful design.

- Complimentary, purposeful design
- Distinct from all of God's other creations (in His image)
- Built for relationship (with each other and with Him)

## **God Created Adam**

All other creatures were spoken into existence, but man was created by God's hands and breath (Spirit). This denotes a special relationship.

“Then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature” (Gen 2:7, ESV).

## **God-Given Purpose**

God gave Adam a specific purpose of stewardship of the earth, afforded him companionship, and established his dominion over the living things.

- ***Stewardship***

“The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it” (Gen 2:15, ESV).

- ***Companionship***

“Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him” (Gen 2:18, ESV).

- ***Dominion***

“Now out of the ground the LORD God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name” (Gen 2:19, ESV).

## **God Created Eve**

God graciously provided for Adam's need for companionship and partnership.

“So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man” (Gen 2:21-22, ESV).

## *Unity*

“Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man” (Gen 2:23, ESV).

## **Christ-centered Covenantal Marriage**

A Christ-centered marriage is a marriage in which both partners are in submission to Christ, are growing in their faith and spiritual practices, and share a mission to serve the kingdom of God.

### *The One-Flesh Union*

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed” (Gen 2:24-25, ESV).

## **God’s Blessing on Covenantal Marriage**

“And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Gen 1:28, ESV).

## **Attributes of a Covenantal Marriage**

Covenantal marriage is unlike contractual marriage in that the unity established under God expects unconditional commitment and permanency.

“So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate” (Matt 19:6, ESV).

- Covenantal marriages require promises without condition
- Covenantal marriages require promises of permanency
- Covenantal marriages require promises to God
- Covenantal marriages require a willingness to give without expressed rights to receive

## Roles of Husband and Wife

**Ice Breaker:** So, Adam and Eve... Whose fault was original sin?

**Introductory “Problem” Passage:** Gen 3:16-17

“To the woman he said, ‘I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you.’ And to Adam he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;” (Gen 3:16-17, ESV).

**Takeaway:**

While both Adam and Eve sinned, Adam was the God-appointed leader, so the failure was his.

## Christ-centered Marital Roles

**Key Passage:** Exegesis of Ephesians 5:22-33 (ESV) for instruction purposes

- 22 “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.”
- 23 “For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.”
- 24 “Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.”
- 25 “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,”
- 26 “that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,”
- 27 “so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.”
- 28 “In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.”
- 29 “For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church,”
- 30 “because we are members of his body.”
- 31 “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.”



- 32 “This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.”
- 33 “However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.”

**Practical Application:**

This activity requires participants to examine their compliance with the biblical expectation of their marital role as well as to assess their (future) spouse’s compliance. The goal is to identify relational strengths and areas that offer opportunities for improvement.

1. Write down each of the ways that you currently fulfill your biblical role in marriage (or premarital relationship).
2. Write down each of the ways your spouse (or fiancé) currently fulfills his or her biblical role in marriage (or premarital relationship).
3. Discuss these lists, compare, and contrast strengths and weaknesses.
  - a. Provide feedback on how each person can grow into the role expectations.
  - b. Demonstrate- prayer, repentance, action

**Homework:**

“Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing” (1 Thess 5:11 ESV).

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thess 5:16-18 ESV).

### **The Loving, Leading Husband:**

To be a loving husband means that I provide for my wife in the ways that she needs. I know that women are verbal. I must express my love to her.<sup>1</sup>

1. Tell your wife that you love her at least once a day. Do this without the expectations of anything in return.
  - a. To be a leading husband I must take initiative. Some of the simplest ways that I can lead are to pray with her, lead a bible study with her, and serve in the church with her.<sup>2</sup>
2. Implement at least one of the activities listed above. Prayer should be daily, bible study should also be daily, but no less than four times per week, service in the church should be at least weekly. (Find ways, there are lots of opportunities).

### **The Respectful, Encouraging Wife:**

“However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband” (Ephesians 5:33 ESV).

To be a respectful wife, I know that I must speak to my husband with “wholesome and edifying words,” using “gentle and calm” tones.<sup>3</sup>

1. Consider your words carefully this week. Seek to build your husband up and have Christlike patience with him.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Wayne Mack, *Strengthening Your Marriage*, 2nd ed. (Philipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1999), 42.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Scott LaPierre, *Marriage God’s Way: A Biblical Recipe for Healthy, Joyful, Christ-Centered Relationships* (Woodlands, WA: Charis Family Publishing, 2016), 126.

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Martha Peace, *The Excellent Wife*. (Bemidji, MN: Focus Publishing, 2002), 111.

- a. To be an encouraging wife, I know that I must use purposeful words, advice, or affirmations that help to support my husband's efforts at Christlike leadership.
2. Affirm the positive steps your husband has taken to model Christlike leadership. Encourage him to grow spiritually. Support him in his efforts.

### Session 3: Christ-Centered Spiritual Disciplines

#### Objective:

This session addresses spiritual disciplines. It focuses on the importance of implementing these disciplines in marriage to glorify God. Activity-based lessons provide tools to equip couples to grow in the knowledge and practice of spiritual disciplines of praying, worshipping, and serving.

#### Teaching and Discussion Plan:

*Attributes of God's Character:* Holy, Merciful, Hates Sin, Omnipotent, Omniscient, Omnipresent<sup>4</sup>

*Spiritual disciplines* are practices that promote spiritual growth and enhances one's relationship with Christ.

#### Prayer

Prayer is an essential discipline of Christ-centered living. Within marriage, prayer is not only an individual disciple but also a responsibility of the husband to implement with the wife for the health of the relationship.

#### Key Passages:

- “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thess 5:16-18, ESV).
- 6 “do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Phil 4:6, ESV).
- “Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours” (Mark 11:24, ESV).

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<sup>4</sup> This is not an exhaustive list of God's attributes.

- “Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working” (Jas 5:16, ESV).

### **Practical Activities:**

1. Husbands and wives will make a list of things that need to be addressed in prayer.
  - a. Each list should have at least 10 specific items.
  - b. Do not stop until both husband and wife have reached at least 10 prayer needs.
2. When the lists are complete, share and discuss them with your spouse.

### **Homework:**

1. Begin a daily habit of praying for and with each other. Pray through your lists tracking “the ways in which God answers.”<sup>5</sup>

## **Worship**

Worship is an outpouring of love for God. Within marriage, worship should be a daily activity that allows couples (families) to reflect on the majesty of God in a group setting. This discipline establishes a culture of Christ-centeredness within the home.

### **Key Passages:**

- “addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart,” (Eph 5:19).

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<sup>5</sup> Voddie Baucham, Jr., *Family Shepherds: Calling and Equipping Men to Lead Their Homes* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 79.

- “And above all these put on 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 one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col 3:14-17, ESV).

### **Practical Activities:**

Participants will actively engage in a demonstration of family worship by singing, reading, discussing, and praying together.

Participate in a group “Family Worship” practice.

1. Singing: Holy, Holy, Holy!
2. Reading: Romans 3:21-31 “The Righteousness of God Through Faith.
3. Discussion of Reading
4. Prayer for the participants

### **Homework:**

- Husbands, incorporate the practice of Family Worship into your household
- Wives, support and encourage your husband in the practice of family worship daily

### **Service**

Service is the byproduct of Christ-centeredness. Couples who pray and worship together should serve the church in some capacity.

**Key Passages:**

- “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies--in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen” (1 Pe 4:10-11, ESV).
- “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ” (Col 3:23-24, ESV).

**Activities:**

Couples are provided with a current list of church-based service opportunities and small groups. Couples will look through the list and identify at least three opportunities that interest them.

**Homework:**

Using the service activities list, couples who are not already engaged in service or a small group will evaluate, seek additional information, and join in on an opportunity for service or small group participation. Couples who are already involved in service and or a small group will evaluate additional or alternative opportunities to expand their level of service as their obligations allow.

## Session 4: Idolatry, Repentance, and Forgiveness

### Objective:

The purpose of this session is to encourage couples to identify their functional idols, repent of their idolatry, return to Christ-centeredness, and forgive each other.

### Teaching and Discussion Plan:

#### Idolatry

Idolatry is the sinful disposition of the heart that is opposed to godly submission. God made himself known in creation and gave us Scripture to know His will for us. Those who turn away from Him, He allows to sow their own destruction. (See Rom 1:18-32)

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it” (Jer 17:9, ESV)?

“And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done” (Rom 1:28, ESV).

#### Examples of Modern-Day Idolatry

- Focus on identity outside of Christ: work, social status, marital status, belonging
- Focus on money and consumerism: love of money, the unnecessary pursuit of “things”
- Focus on entertainment, hobbies, sports, etc . . .
- Focus on comfort or pleasure: the inordinate desire for the niceties of life, sex,
- Focus on technology: cell phones, social media . . .



## **Worship is for God Alone**

God deserves your undivided loyalty and commands that you worship Him alone.

“You shall have no other gods before me. ‘You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth’” Exo 20:3-4, ESV

“Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry” Col 3:5, ESV

“Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal 5:19-21, ESV).

## **Love of the World is Idolatry**

“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world--the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life--is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 2:15-17, ESV).

## **Practical Application:**

### **Consider the following questions:**

1. Where do we spend our time and money?
2. Do the things we spend our time and money on take precedence over our relationship with God?
3. Are we glorifying God in our marriage with the way that we spend our time and money?

### **Discussion:**

While not all of the things that appear in the examples above are functional idols, even good things can become idols if the emphasis overtakes your relationship with God.

1. Which items listed might fall into that category?
2. How will we address them?

### **Repentance Before a Holy God**

Jesus does not expect perfection from us, but he does expect that we will search ourselves to identify unrighteousness, and then repent of it. He will forgive us if we are truly His. Repentance is not only an expression of remorse but a complete turning away from that sin issue.

“if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land” (2 Ch 7:14, ESV).

“Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! 24 And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psa 139:23-24, ESV)!

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9, ESV).

### **Repentance Expressed to a Spouse**

Integrity within marriage requires that we are honest with our spouses. We must keep them informed of our struggles so that they can help us through accountability and prayer.

“Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working” (James 5:16, ESV).

### **Forgiveness of One Another**

Forgiveness of one’s spouse (or any repentant person) is not an option, it is a requirement of a Christian. We can forgive each other as Christians because God has forgiven us of our sins: past, present, and future.

“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph 4:32, ESV).

“For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt 6:14-15, ESV).

### **Practical Application:**

No doubt you have identified an issue of idolatry that is not only affecting your relationship with God but also your spouse.

1. Face your spouse and confess that you have sinned against him or her.
2. Repent of this sin and plan to remove it from your life.
3. Ask for your spouse’s forgiveness and support as you deal with this sin issue.
4. Then join hands, bow your heads, and pray that God would help you to put away the idol and return to Him.

### **Homework:**

**Readdress the previous questions individually and then with your spouse:**

1. Where do we spend our time and money?
  - a. Make a detailed list
2. Do the things we spend our time and money on take precedence over our relationship with God?
  - a. Identify whether each listed item impacts your relationship with God and spouse. Are they taking precedence? If so, in what way?
3. Are we glorifying God in our marriage with the way that we spend our time and money?
  - a. Identify whether each listed item glorifies God. If so, in what way?

4. Discuss your findings with your spouse and seek to change the things that are taking precedence over God and spouse, as well as celebrate the things you have been doing that glorify God.

## Session 5: Christ-Centered Communication

### **Objective:**

Session five addresses marital communication strategies. These strategies are rooted in Christ's teaching on the heart in Luke 6:45. Couples who know how to examine their hearts to determine their motives and desires will become more spiritually mature partners. The purpose of this session is to demonstrate Christ-centered tools to equip couples to grow in the knowledge and practice of Christ-centered communication.

### **Teaching and Discussion Plan:**

“The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45).

### **Marital Communication is a Christ-centered Ministry**

The way spouses communicate with each other is reflective of their relationship with God. Communication in marriage is a ministry of love to each other to maintain peace in the relationship and to glorify God.

“I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:1-3, ESV).

### **Where is your HEART??**

#### **Communication issues are heart issues**

“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you” (Jas 4:1, ESV)?

#### ***Elaborate on this point:***

#### ***Dig into the participants' issues:***

“The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (Mat 12:35-37, ESV).

***Elaborate on this point:  
Dig into the participants' issues:***

“And he called the people to him and said to them, "Hear and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person” (Mat 15:10-11, ESV)

**Opportunities for:**

- Personal Confession
- Repentance
- Beginnings of Forgiveness

**Harsh Words are Harmful and Foolish**

“In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body” (Eph 5:28-30, ESV).

“A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back” (Pro 29:11, ESV).

**Repentance:**

“Yet even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster” (Joel 2:12-13, ESV)

*(See Practical Application)*

**Active Listening**

“Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God” (Jas 1:19-20, ESV).

“A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion” (Pro 18:2, ESV).

*(See Practical Application)*

## **Compassionate Listening**

### **Emphasis on the One-Flesh Union**

“Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (Rom 12:15, ESV).  
If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (1 Co 12:26, ESV).

*(See Practical Application)*

## **Guidelines for Christ-centered Communication**

### **Be Open and Honest with Your Spouse**

“Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another” (Eph 4:25, ESV).

- How far do we take honesty?
- Is the information necessary? Beneficial? Helpful in some way?
- Is excluding the information sinful?
- Can it be presented in a way that builds trust?

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, (Eph 4:15 ESV).

### **Deal with Problems in the Present**

“Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil” (Eph 4:26-27, ESV).

- How do we know when to address an issue?
- Is the issue a matter of sin or preference?
- Is it causing strife or resentment?
- How soon is too soon?
- Can it be discussed with loving-kindness?
- Can we reasonably set aside time right now?
- If not, can we schedule a specific time to address the issue?
- Don't let the issue go unresolved, it will lead to resentment.

See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; (Heb 12:15 ESV).

## **Replace Sinful Patterns with Righteousness**

“Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need” (Eph 4:28, ESV).

- What patterns of communication are causing harm to your relationship?
- How are you stealing from your marriage relationship?
- What heart issues do you need to address to labor honestly in your marriage?

## **Do Not Tear Down Your Spouse, Edify Them**

“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 4:29 ESV).

- What are the common patterns of your corrupt talk?

## **Choose Your Words and Actions Carefully**

“And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (Eph 4:30, ESV).

“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice” (Eph 4:31, ESV).

## **Be Christlike**

“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph 4:32, ESV).

### **Practical Application:**

#### *Demonstration:*

Facilitators will demonstrate Christ-centered communication while discussing a marital issue.

#### **Controlled Conversation:**

1) Person “A” will present an issue for not more than two uninterrupted minutes.

Person “A’s” issue will be presented using the “Guidelines for Christ-centered



Communication”: Honesty, timeliness, focusing on righteous change, addressing the problem—not the person, edifying whenever possible, and using Christlike compassion.

- a) Person “B” will listen attentively for that two-minute period.
- 2) Person “B” will have not more than one minute to summarize the issue as presented by person “A.” No opinions or commentary may be expressed.
  - a) Person “A” may briefly affirm or clarify Person “B’s” summary.
- 3) Person “B” will respond to the issue presented by Person “A” for no more than two uninterrupted minutes. Person “B’s” issue will be presented using the “Guidelines for Christ-centered Communication”: Honesty, timeliness, focusing on righteous change, addressing the problem—not the person, edifying whenever possible, and using Christlike compassion.
- 4) Person “A” will have not more than one minute to summarize the issue as presented by Person “B.” No opinions or commentary may be expressed.
  - a) Person “B” may briefly affirm or clarify Person “A’s” summary.

*Application:*

1. Each couple each picked one unaddressed marital issue.
2. They will apply their understanding of Christ-centered communication by discussing their identified issues.
3. After this activity, couples will participate in a group discussion of the successes and challenges of the activity.
4. Facilitators will provide additional strategies on how to implement this as a new pattern of marital communication.

**Homework:**

- (1) Take two marital issues that have been under-addressed, one initiated by the husband, and one initiated by the wife.

(2) Use the controlled conversation model above to present the issue to each other.

(3) Once you have worked through the model, seek to resolve the issue while employing the Christ-centered communication strategies listed above.

Begin a marital practice of Christ-centered communication when disputes arise.

Husbands are tasked with godly leadership in this area (Eph 5: 25, 28-29). Wives are tasked with respect and submission, as to the Lord (Eph 5: 22-23, 33).

## Session 6: Christ-Centered Oneness

### **Objective:**

Session six addresses marital sexuality, and fidelity. Couples having previously engaged in sexually immoral relationships, having poor Christian discipleship, or limited understanding of Christ-centered life principles benefit from discussions of what constitutes biblical sexuality as well as forms of infidelity. The purpose of this session is to advise couples on biblical sexuality and address common issues with fidelity in marriage.

### **Teaching and Discussion Plan:**

#### **Sex is Marital**

Sex is God-designed and pure within the confines of marriage. Marital partners have committed to monogamy and have given the rights of their sexual expression over to their partner. Likewise, the partner must provide for the other's sexual needs as a spousal responsibility.<sup>6</sup> These rights and duties are not burdensome, but a blessing and an opportunity to have sexual relations without the threats that exist with fornication.

But because sexual immorality is so common, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman should have sexual relations with her own husband. A husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise a wife to her husband. A wife does not have the right over her own body, but her husband does. In the same way, a husband does not have the right over his own body, but his wife does. Do not deprive one another -- except when you agree for a time, to devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again; otherwise, Satan may tempt you because of your lack of self-control. (1 Co 7:2-5, CSB).

#### **Sex is Multi-purposed**

Sex is created by God within the confines of marriage to fulfill His purposes for us.

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<sup>6</sup> Denny Burk, *What Is the Meaning of Sex?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 111.

**Relational oneness:**

Our sexual relationship in marriage establishes a unique and personal sense of oneness that is not found in any other relationship. God uses the sexual relationship to bond us together.<sup>7</sup>

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Gen 2:24, ESV).

**Pleasure:**

Our sexual relationship in marriage is to be enjoyed and appreciated.

“Drink water from your own cistern, flowing water from your own well. Should your springs be scattered abroad, streams of water in the streets? Let them be for yourself alone, and not for strangers with you. Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love. Why should you be intoxicated, my son, with a forbidden woman and embrace the bosom of an adulteress” (Pro 5:15-20, ESV)?

**Procreation:**

Our sexual relationship in marriage is the resource to fulfill God’s blessing of children (if it is His will for our lives).

“Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one’s youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate” (Ps 127:3-5, ESV).

**Sex is Ministerial<sup>8</sup>**

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<sup>7</sup> Robert D. Jones, “Lesson 11: Sexual Intimacy as Marital Ministry” (classroom lecture, 80554—Marriage and Family Counseling, Winter 2020, photocopy), 112.

<sup>8</sup> Jones, “Lesson 11: Sexual Intimacy as Marital Ministry,” 113.

## Goals

The goal of sex is to fulfill your spouse's legitimate desires.

## Motives

Sex is a ministry to your spouse, it is not self-serving, manipulative, or demanding.

In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive' (Act 20:35, ESV).

It is an act of love for your spouse.

"Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away" (1 Co 13:4-8, ESV).

## Process

It requires that we know our spouse's desires and fulfill them as appropriate.

## Frequency

Sex should be a regular part of your marriage.

"Do not deprive one another, (except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer); but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control" (1 Cor 7:5, ESV).

## Practical Application:

Discussion of marital sexuality based on participants' questions or concerns.

## **Homework:**

### **Get to know your spouse (even more)**

Discuss with your spouse

1. What brings you the most pleasure in our sexual relationship?
2. What brings you the least pleasure in our sexual relationship?
3. How have I been a godly sexual partner?
4. How have I failed to be a godly sexual partner?
5. What can I do differently to fulfill your sexual needs?



## **Premarital Focus**

Three Questions:

1. Why marriage?
2. Why now?
3. What do you bring to this marriage?

### **Writing and Discussion Activity:**

Write down your top five expectations for your marriage (without showing your fiancé)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.



## **Marital Focus**

One Question:

1. Why are you committed to this marriage? Be descriptive.

### **Writing and Discussion Activity:**

1. What changes would you like to see going forward in your marriage?

2. What changes are you willing to make going forward in your marriage?

## **Session 1 Homework:**

Practicing a spiritual discipline: *Reading Scripture as a couple*

- As a couple, read aloud *1 John* all the way through three times this week.

### **After the first reading, discuss:**

What do we know to be true and unchanging? How does this affect our marriage?

1. The Word of Life (Ch 1)
2. Christ as our Advocate (Ch 2)

### **After the second reading, discuss:**

How do we respond to Christ as believers? How does this affect our marriage?

1. Do not love the world (Ch 2)
2. Avoid the spirit of the Antichrists (Ch 2)
3. Have confidence (Ch 3)
4. Love one another (Ch 3)

### **After the third reading, discuss:**

What is fervent devotion? How does this affect our marriage?

1. Knowing God's Love (Ch 4)
2. Abiding in Him (Ch 4)
3. Overcoming the world (Ch 5)

## **Session 2: God's Purposes for Marriage and His Roles for Husbands and Wives**

### **Godly Foundations of Marriage**

#### **Created in the Image of God**

It is important to understand we are created in God's image. This serves as the foundation for our relationship with God and with each other.

“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27, ESV).

#### **Created Male and Female**

Christian marriage is between one man and one woman. This is part of God's masterful design.

- Complimentary, purposeful design
- Distinct from all of God's other creations (in His image)
- Built for relationship (with each other and with Him)

#### **God Created Adam**

All other creatures were spoken into existence, but man was created by God's hands and breath (Spirit). This denotes a special relationship.

“then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature” (Gen 2:7, ESV).

## **God-Given Purpose**

God gave Adam a specific purpose of stewardship of the earth, afforded him companionship, and established his dominion over the living things.

- *Stewardship*

“The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it” (Gen 2:15, ESV).

- *Companionship*

“Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him” (Gen 2:18, ESV).

- *Dominion*

“Now out of the ground the LORD God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name” (Gen 2:19, ESV).

## **God Created Eve**

God graciously provided for Adam’s need for companionship and partnership.

“So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man” (Gen 2:21-22, ESV).

### *Unity*

“Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man” (Gen 2:23, ESV).

## **Christ-centered Covenantal Marriage**

A Christ-centered marriage is a marriage in which both partners are in submission to Christ, are growing in their faith and spiritual practices, and share a mission to serve the kingdom of God.

### ***The One-Flesh Union***

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed” (Gen 2:24-25, ESV).

## **God’s Blessing on Covenantal Marriage**

“And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Gen 1:28, ESV).

## **Attributes of a Covenantal Marriage**

Covenantal marriage is unlike contractual marriage in that the unity established under God expects unconditional commitment and permanency.

“So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate” (Matt 19:6, ESV).

- Covenantal marriages require promises without condition
- Covenantal marriages require promises of permanency
- Covenantal marriages require promises to God
- Covenantal marriages require a willingness to give without expressed rights to receive

## Roles of Husband and Wife

So, Adam and Eve... Whose fault was original sin?

### Introductory “Problem” Passage: Gen 3:16-17

“To the woman he said, ‘I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you.’ And to Adam he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;” (Gen 3:16-17, ESV).

### Takeaway:

While both Adam and Eve sinned, Adam was the God-appointed leader, so the failure was his.

## Christ-Centered Marital Roles

**Key Passage:** Exegesis of Ephesians 5:22-33 (ESV) for instruction purposes

- 22 “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.”
- 23 “For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.”
- 24 “Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.”
- 25 “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,”
- 26 “that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,”

- 27 “so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.”
- 28 “In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.”
- 29 “For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church,”
- 30 “because we are members of his body.”
- 31 “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.”
- 32 “This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.”
- 33 “However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.”

**Practical Application:**

1. Write down each of the ways that you currently fulfill your biblical role in marriage (or premarital relationship).
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Write down each of the ways your spouse (or fiancé) currently fulfills his or her biblical role in marriage (or premarital relationship).

## **Session 2 Homework:**

### **The Loving, Leading Husband:**

To be a loving husband means that I provide for my wife in the ways that she needs. I know that she is verbal. I must express my love to her.<sup>1</sup>

1. Tell your wife that you love her at least once a day. Do this without the expectations of anything in return.
  - a. To be a leading husband I must take initiative. Some of the simplest ways that I can lead are to pray with her, lead a bible study with her, and serve in the church with her.<sup>2</sup>
2. Implement at least one of the activities listed above. Prayer should be daily, bible study should also be daily, but no less than four times per week, service in the church should be at least weekly. (Find a way, there are lots of opportunities).

### **The Respectful, Encouraging Wife:**

To be a respectful wife, I know that I must speak to my husband with “wholesome and edifying words,” using “gentle and calm” tones.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Wayne Mack, *Strengthening Your Marriage*, 2nd ed. (Philipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1999), 42.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Scott LaPierre, *Marriage God's Way: A Biblical Recipe for Healthy, Joyful, Christ-Centered Relationships* (Woodlands, WA: Charis Family Publishing, 2016), 126.

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Martha Peace, *The Excellent Wife: A Biblical Perspective*, expanded ed. (Benmidji, MN: Focus Publishing, 2005), 111.



1. Consider your words carefully this week. Seek to build your husband up and have Christlike patience with him.
  - a. To be an encouraging wife, I know that I must use purposeful words, advice, or affirmations that help to support my husband's efforts at Christlike leadership.
2. Affirm the positive steps your husband has taken to model Christlike leadership. Encourage him to grow spiritually. Support him in his efforts.

### **Session 3: Christ-Centered Spiritual Disciplines**

*Attributes of God's Character:* Holy, Merciful, Hates Sin, Omnipotent, Omniscient, Omnipresent

*Spiritual disciplines* are practices that promote spiritual growth and enhances one's relationship with Christ.

#### **Prayer**

Prayer is an essential discipline of Christ-centered living. Within marriage, prayer is not only an individual discipline, but also a responsibility of the husband to implement with the wife for the health of the relationship.

#### **Key Passages:**

- “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thess 5:16-18, ESV).
- “do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Phil 4:6, ESV).
- “Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working” (Jas 5:16, ESV).

### **Practical Activities:**

Husbands and wives will make a list of things that need to be address in prayer.

Each list should have at least 10 specific items.

- |          |           |
|----------|-----------|
| 1. _____ | 6. _____  |
| 2. _____ | 7. _____  |
| 3. _____ | 8. _____  |
| 4. _____ | 9. _____  |
| 5. _____ | 10. _____ |

When the lists are complete, share and discuss them with your spouse.

### **Worship**

Worship is an outpouring of love for God. Within marriage, worship should be a daily activity that allows couples (families) to reflect on the majesty of God in a group setting. This discipline establishes a culture of Christ-centeredness within the home.

### **Key Passages:**

- “addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart,” (Eph 5:19).
- “And above all these put on 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 one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col 3:14-17, ESV).

### **Practical Activities:**

We will actively engage in family worship by singing, reading, discussing, and praying together.

Participate in a group “Family Worship” practice.

1. Singing: Holy, Holy, Holy!
2. Reading: Romans 3:21-31 “The Righteousness of God Through Faith.
3. Discussion of Reading
4. Prayer for the participants

### **Service**

A heart for service is the byproduct of Christ-centeredness. Couples who pray and worship together should serve the church in some capacity. This will build relationships and increase your spiritual maturity through activity and discipleship from other believers.

### **Key Passages:**

- “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies--in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen” (1 Pe 4:10-11, ESV).
- “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ” (Col 3:23-24, ESV).

**Activities:**

Look through the supplemental list of church-based service opportunities and small groups and identify at least three opportunities that interest you.

*(See supplemental handout)*

**Session 3 Homework:**

1. Begin a daily habit of praying for each other. Pray through your lists tracking the ways in which God answers.”<sup>4</sup> Keep each other accountable to this disciple.
2. Husbands, incorporate the practice of Family Worship into your household
  - a. Wives, support and encourage your husband in the practice of family worship daily.
3. Using the service activities list, if you are not already engaged in service or small group you will evaluate, seek additional information, and join in on an opportunity for service or small group participation. If you are already involved in service and or a small group, you will evaluate additional or alternative opportunities to expand your level of service as your obligations allow.

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<sup>4</sup> Voddie Baucham, Jr., *Family Shepherds: Calling and Equipping Men to Lead Their Homes* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 79.

## Session 4: Idolatry, Repentance, and Forgiveness

### Idolatry

Idolatry is the sinful disposition of the heart that is opposed to godly submission. God made himself plainly known in creation and gave us Scripture to know His will for us. Those who turn away from Him, He allows to sow their own destruction. (See Rom 1:18-32)

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it” (Jer 17:9, ESV)?

“And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done” (Rom 1:28, ESV).

### Worship is for God Alone

God deserves your undivided loyalty and commands that you worship Him alone.

“You shall have no other gods before me. ‘You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth’” Exo 20:3-4, ESV

“Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry” Col 3:5, ESV

“Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal 5:19-21, ESV).

### Love of the World is Idolatry

“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world--the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life--is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 2:15-17, ESV).

**Practical Application:**

**Consider the following questions:**

1. Where do we spend our time and money?
2. Do the things we spend our time and money on take precedence over our relationship with God?
3. Are we glorifying God in our marriage with the way that we spend our time and money?

**Discussion:**

While not all of the things that appear on this list are idols, even good things can become idols if the emphasis overtakes your relationship with God.

1. Which items listed might fall into that category?
2. How will you address them?

## **Repentance Before a Holy God**

Jesus does not expect perfection from us, but he does expect that we will search ourselves to identify unrighteousness, and then repent of it. He will forgive us if we are truly His. Repentance is not only an expression of remorse but a complete turning away from that sin issue.

“Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! 24 And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psa 139:23-24, ESV)!

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9, ESV).

## **Repentance Expressed to a Spouse**

Integrity within marriage requires that we are honest with our spouses. We must keep them informed of our struggles so that they can help us through accountability and prayer.

“Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working” (James 5:16, ESV).

## **Forgiveness of One Another**

Forgiveness of one’s spouse (or any repentant person) is not an option, it is a requirement of a Christian. We can forgive each other as Christians because God has forgiven us of our sins: past, present, and future.

“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph 4:32, ESV).

“For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt 6:14-15, ESV).



**Practical Application:**

No doubt you have identified an issue of idolatry that is not only affecting your relationship with God but also your spouse.

1. Face your spouse and confess that you have sinned against him or her.
2. Repent of this sin and plan to remove it from your life.
3. Ask for your spouse's forgiveness and support as you deal with this sin issue.
4. Then join hands, bow your heads, and pray that God would help you to put away the idol and return fully to Him.

**Session 4 Homework:**

- Begin a habit of rooting out idols in your marriage.
- Repeat the steps of the practical activity as needed until they become a natural part of your relationship with God and spouse.

## **Session 5: Christ-Centered Communication**

“The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45).

### **Marital Communication is a Christ-centered Ministry**

The way spouses communicate with each other is reflective of their relationship with God. Communication in marriage is a ministry of love to each other to maintain peace in the relationship and to glorify God.

“I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:1-3, ESV).

### **Where is your HEART??**

#### **Communication issues are heart issues**

“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you” (Jas 4:1, ESV)?

“The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (Mat 12:35-37, ESV).

“And he called the people to him and said to them, "Hear and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person” (Mat 15:10-11, ESV)

**Take time for:**

- Personal Confession
- Repentance
- Forgiveness

**Harsh Words are Harmful and Foolish**

“In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body” (Eph 5:28-30, ESV).

“A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back” (Pro 29:11, ESV).

**Repentance:**

“Yet even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster” (Joel 2:12-13, ESV)

**Active Listening**

“Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God” (Jas 1:19-20, ESV).

“A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion” (Pro 18:2, ESV).

**Compassionate Listening****Emphasis on the One-Flesh Union**

“Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (Rom 12:15, ESV).

If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (1 Co 12:26, ESV).

*(See Practical Application)*

## **Guidelines for Christ-centered Communication**

### **Be Open and Honest with Your Spouse**

“Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another” (Eph 4:25, ESV).

- How far do we take honesty?
- Is the information necessary? Beneficial? Helpful in some way?
- Is excluding the information sinful?
- Can it be presented in a way that builds trust?

### **Deal with Problems in the Present**

“Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil” (Eph 4:26-27, ESV).

- How do we know when to address an issue?
- Is the issue a matter of sin or preference?
- Is it causing strife or resentment?
- How soon is too soon?
- Can it be discussed with loving-kindness?
- Can we reasonably set aside time right now?
- If not, can we schedule a specific time to address the issue?
- Don't let the issue go unresolved, it will lead to resentment.

### **Replace Sinful Patterns with Righteousness**

“Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need” (Eph 4:28, ESV).

- What patterns of communication are causing harm to your relationship?
- How are you stealing from your marriage relationship?
- What heart issues do you need to address to labor honestly in your marriage?

### **Do Not Tear Down Your Spouse, Edify Them**

“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 4:29 ESV).

- What are the common patterns of your corrupt talk?

### **Choose Your Words and Actions Carefully**

“And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (Eph 4:30, ESV).

“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice” (Eph 4:31, ESV).

### **Be Christlike**

“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph 4:32, ESV).

## **Practical Application:**

### *Demonstration:*

Facilitators will demonstrate Christ-centered communication while discussing a marital issue.

### **Controlled Conversation:**

- 1) Person “A” will present an issue for not more than two uninterrupted minutes.  
Person “A’s” issue will be presented using the “Guidelines for Christ-centered Communication”: Honesty, timeliness, focusing on righteous change, addressing the problem—not the person, edifying whenever possible, and using Christlike compassion.
  - a) Person “B” will listen attentively for those two-minutes.
- 2) Person “B” will have not more than one minute to summarize the issue as presented by person “A.” No opinions or commentary may be expressed.
  - a) Person “A” may briefly affirm or clarify Person “B’s” summary.
- 3) Person “B” will respond to the issue presented by Person “A” for no more than two uninterrupted minutes. Person “B’s” issue will be presented using the “Guidelines for Christ-centered Communication”: Honesty, timeliness, focusing on righteous change, addressing the problem—not the person, edifying whenever possible, and using Christlike compassion.
- 4) Person “A” will have not more than one minute to summarize the issue as presented by Person “B.” No opinions or commentary may be expressed.
  - a) Person “B” may briefly affirm or clarify Person “A’s” summary.

### *Application:*

1. Each couple each picked one unaddressed marital issue.
2. They will apply their understanding of Christ-centered communication by discussing their identified issues.

3. After this activity, couples will participate in a group discussion of the successes and challenges of the activity.
4. Facilitators will provide additional strategies on how to implement this as a new pattern of marital communication.

**Homework:**

- (1) Take two marital issues that have been under-addressed, one initiated by the husband, and one initiated by the wife.
- (2) Use the controlled conversation model above to present the issue to each other.
- (3) Once you have worked through the model, seek to resolve the issue while employing the Christ-centered communication strategies listed above.

## Session 6: Christ-Centered Oneness

### Sex is Marital

Sex is God-designed and pure within the confines of marriage. Marital partners have committed to monogamy and have given the rights of their sexual expression over to their partner. Likewise, the partner has a duty to provide for the other's sexual needs as a spousal responsibility. These rights and duties are not burdensome, but a blessing and an opportunity to have sexual relations without the threats that exist with fornication.

But because sexual immorality is so common, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman should have sexual relations with her own husband. A husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise a wife to her husband. A wife does not have the right over her own body, but her husband does. In the same way, a husband does not have the right over his own body, but his wife does. Do not deprive one another -- except when you agree for a time, to devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again; otherwise, Satan may tempt you because of your lack of self-control. (1 Co 7:2-5, CSB).

### Sex is Multi-purposed

Sex is created by God within the confines of marriage to fulfill His purposes for us.

#### Relational oneness:

Our sexual relationship in marriage establishes a unique and personal sense of oneness that is not found in any other relationship. God uses the sexual relationship to bond us together.<sup>5</sup>

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Gen 2:24, ESV).

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<sup>5</sup> Robert D. Jones, “Lesson 11: Sexual Intimacy as Marital Ministry” (classroom lecture, 80554—Marriage and Family Counseling, Winter 2020, photocopy), 112.



**Pleasure:**

Our sexual relationship in marriage brings us physical pleasure which is to be enjoyed and appreciated.

“Drink water from your own cistern, flowing water from your own well. Should your springs be scattered abroad, streams of water in the streets? Let them be for yourself alone, and not for strangers with you. Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love. Why should you be intoxicated, my son, with a forbidden woman and embrace the bosom of an adulteress” (Pro 5:15-20, ESV)?

**Procreation:**

Our sexual relationship in marriage is the resource to fulfill God’s blessing of children (if it is His will for our lives).

“Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one’s youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate” (Ps 127:3-5, ESV).

**Sex is Ministerial<sup>6</sup>****Goals**

The goal of sex is to fulfill your spouse’s natural desires.

**Motives**

Sex should not be self-serving but a ministry to your spouse.

In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’” (Act 20:35, ESV).

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<sup>6</sup> Jones, “Lesson 11: Sexual Intimacy as Marital Ministry,” 113.

It is an act of love for your spouse.

“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away” (1 Co 13:4-8, ESV).

### **Process**

It requires that you intimately know your spouse and provide for their needs in ways that satisfy them.

### **Frequency**

Sex should be a regular part of your marriage.

“Do not deprive one another, (except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer); but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control” (1 Cor 7:5, ESV).

### **Practical Application:**

Discussion of marital sexuality based on participants’ questions or concerns.

### **Session 6 Homework:**

#### **Get to know your spouse (even more)**

Discuss with your spouse

1. What brings you the most pleasure in our sexual relationship?
2. What brings you the least pleasure in our sexual relationship?
3. How have I been a godly sexual partner?

4. How have I failed to be a godly sexual partner?
  
5. What can I do differently to fulfill your sexual needs?

APPENDIX 7

NVBC CARE MINISTRY DATABASE  
STATISTICS 2018-2020 YTD

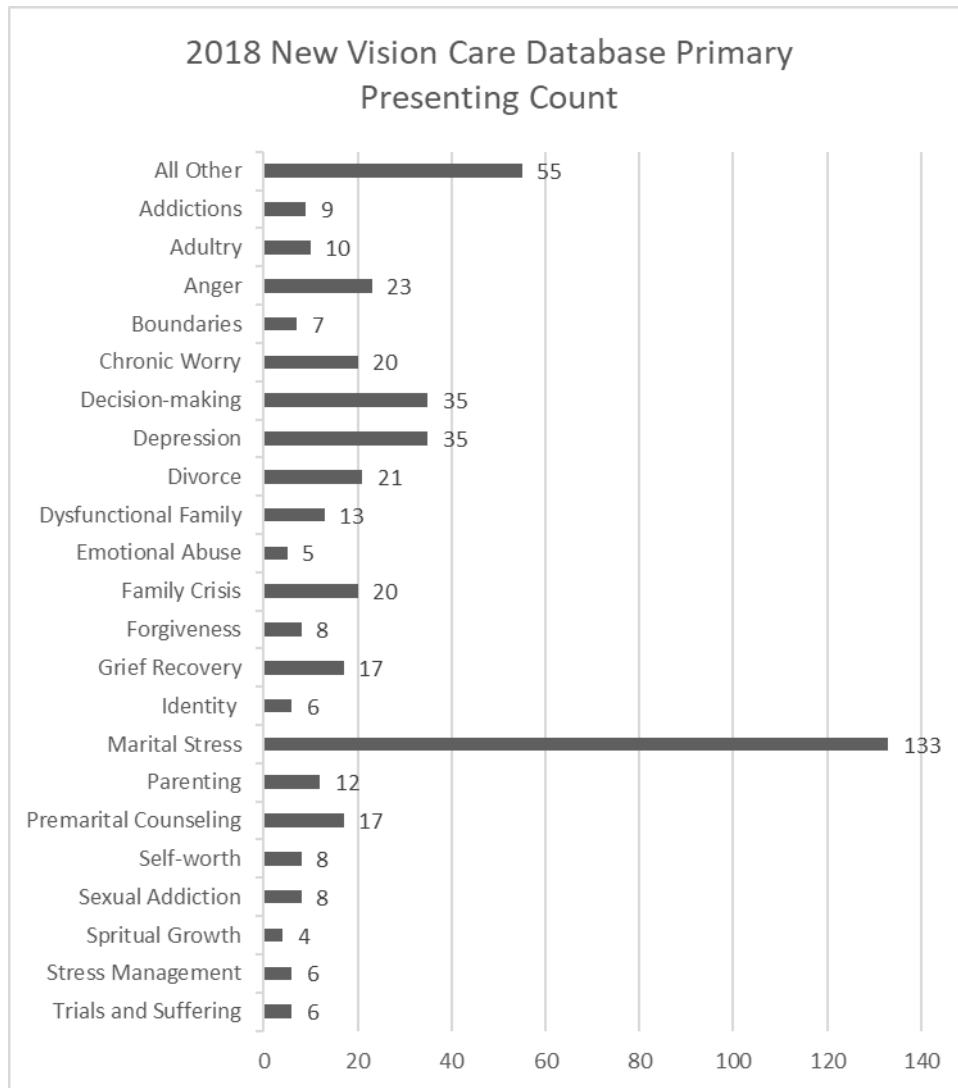


Figure A1. NVBC Care Ministry Counseling database: presenting issues 2018

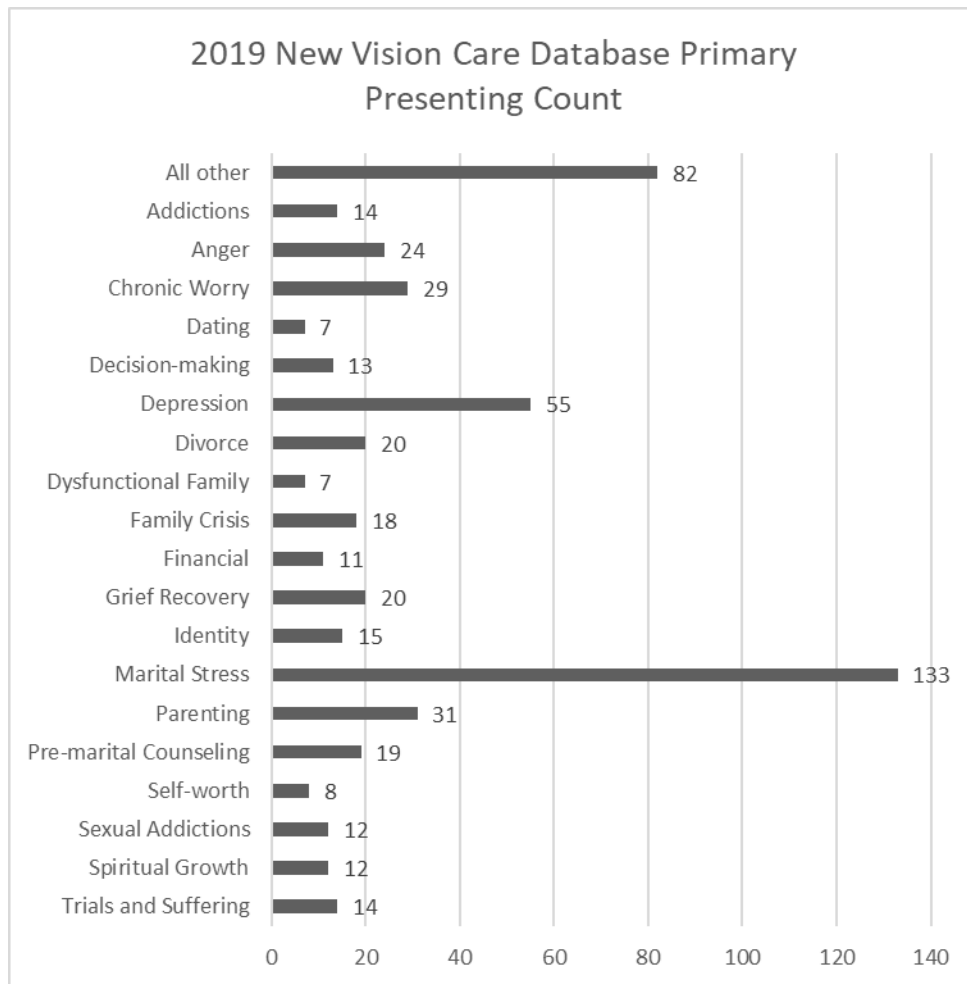


Figure A2. NVBC Care Ministry Counseling database: presenting issues 2019

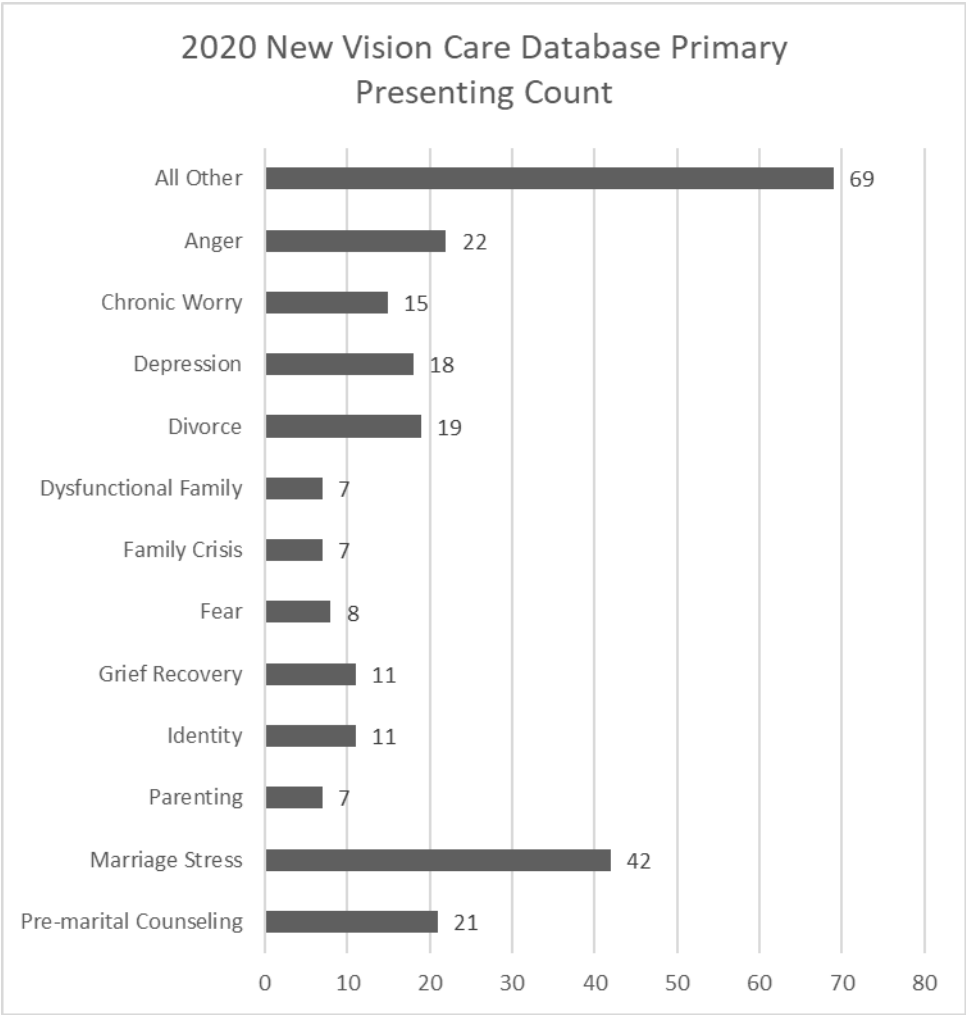


Figure A3. NVBC Care Ministry Counseling database: presenting issues 2020

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## ABSTRACT

### EQUIPPING COUPLES FOR CHRIST-CENTERED MARRIAGES AT NEW VISION BAPTIST CHURCH IN MURFREESBORO, TENNESSEE

Robbie Paul Piel, D.Ed.Min.  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2021  
Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Joseph C. Harrod

This ministry project was designed to equip couples for Christ-centered marriage at New Vision Baptist Church in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, by assessing, training, and developing their desires to become more spiritually mature believers. Chapter 1 explains the context, rationale, purpose, goals, and methodology of the project. Chapter 2 examines Genesis 1:27-28 and 2:18-25 to describe the biblical and theological foundation for Christian marriage, and Ephesians 5:22-33 and 1 Peter 3:1-7 to clarify the biblical roles of husband and wife. Chapter 3 provides practical guidance for couples to develop Christ-centered disciplines to strengthen their marriages. Chapter 4 details the planning, preparation, and implementation of the training program. Chapter 5 evaluates the purpose and goals of the project, examines the strengths and weaknesses, and offers suggestions for future implementation. Chapter 5 also offers a theological and personal reflection on the project.

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