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ABSTRACT

EDUCATING YOUNG ADULTS IN THE CONEJO
VALLEY TO CHOOSE A GODLY SPOUSE

by

Simon Liversidge

Adviser: Peter Swanson

ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Professional Dissertation

Andrews University

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

Title: EDUCATING YOUNG ADULTS IN THE CONEJO VALLEY TO
CHOOSE A GODLY SPOUSE

Name of researcher: Simon Liversidge

Name and degree of faculty adviser: Peter Swanson, PhD

Date completed: December 2019

Problem

Divorce rates and marital satisfaction rates are similar in both Christian and non-Christian young adults. Yet increases in church attendance, religious commitment and spirituality have been shown to make significant differences in divorce and marital satisfaction rates. However, many young adults have no framework to understand how to choose a potential spouse, or what factors or characteristics are most important in making such a choice. Almost all premarital education is aimed at young adults who have already chosen their spouse, but have no education aimed at understanding what matters most in making this choice.

Method

A weekend seminar was designed and presented at The Place Adventist Fellowship the weekend of May 19, 2017, that sought to educate young adults on the characteristics most important in a prospective spouse. Thirteen young adults participated in the entire seminar receiving education on developing a biblical framework for marriage. The participants were asked to complete two separate pre-surveys exploring their beliefs regarding characteristics deemed most important in a potential spouse and two identical post-surveys to measure if their beliefs were influenced by the seminar. The results were evaluated using analysis of the numerical data, observations and written reflections by the participants.

Results

The seminar and data revealed a group of 13 young adults who had received no formal premarital education. They were enthusiastic about learning through biblical education and contemporary research how to best develop a framework for understanding the characteristics most important in a potential spouse, and for themselves as a potential spouse. Throughout the seminar, participants expressed a desire for greater education in this regard. The data indicated they were receptive to the biblical characteristics of “hot, holy and healthy” and the seminar was meaningful in enabling the participants to freely discern what characteristics were truly important to them.

Conclusion

Based on the participants’ reflections, the seminar experience and the data from the pre- and post-surveys, the seminar did appear to have spiritual and educational value

to them. Consequently, further premarital education regarding the characteristics most important in a potential spouse is merited and recommended.

Andrews University
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

EDUCATING YOUNG ADULTS IN THE CONEJO
VALLEY TO CHOOSE A GODLY SPOUSE

A Professional Dissertation
Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Ministry

by
Simon Liversidge
December 2019

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Simon Liversidge

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Marriage is extremely popular today; four out of five Americans over 25 get married at some point in their lives. Yet today there is a growing ambivalence among young people about marriage, an attitude which is driven by economic and social factors, including higher levels of cohabitation and continued high levels of divorce. Despite these factors, many young people desire marriage and research shows the many benefits of marriage (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). However, many are uncertain as to what is most important in a potential spouse and there is little education available on this topic. Still there is hope that education can make a difference. A literature review indicates that premarital education has been shown to be an important factor in marital health (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Silliman, 2003; Hudson, 2008). Moreover, educating young adults on choosing a godly spouse is especially important as higher levels of religiosity and spirituality have been linked with lower divorce rates and higher marital satisfaction (Allgood, Harris, Skogrand, & Lee, 2009; Ford, 2010; Mahoney, 2010; Perry, 2015).

This introductory chapter describes a ministry context in which the challenges young people face in understanding the most important factors to pursue in choosing a potential spouse are addressed in a specific and limited way. It provides an overview of the development of the project, including the steps of reflecting theologically, reviewing recent and relevant literature, as well as developing and evaluating a seminar designed to

educate young adults on this topic. Finally, it offers definitions for technical terms that are unique and central to this study, along with a brief summary of the chapter.

Description of the Ministry Context

The setting for this project was The Place Adventist Fellowship, a contemporary Seventh-day Adventist church in Newbury Park, CA. The Place began as a second service for youth at the Thousand Oaks Seventh-day Adventist church in 1995. In 1999, it moved to its own facility in a business district which it rents from Calvary Chapel. The Place had 15 members with 200 weekly attenders and over 400 monthly attenders with an equal number of each gender. There was ethnic diversity: 60% of attenders were White and 40% a mix of Hispanic, Asian and Black. About 65% of attenders were young families with the other 35% comprised of youth, young adults and empty-nesters. The primary means of interacting with our community were through small groups, ‘adventure’ groups and community service. I was the senior pastor of The Place which also had a staff of two: a full-time youth and young adult pastor, and a 20-hour/week Information Technology and small group coordinator.

Newbury Park is in the western part of the city of Thousand Oaks, an unincorporated area of southeastern Ventura County’s Conejo Valley. The economy is stable and based on a small range of businesses including biotechnology, electronics, automotive, aerospace, healthcare telecommunications, and finance. In 2017, Newbury Park was affluent with a median household income of \$107,276 and median house price of \$549,000. Ninety-three percent of the population had a high school degree at least. The 2017 population was 44,292. The median age was 39.9; 57.12 % were married and 8.74% were divorced. The average household size was 2.93 people. Most were White (77.37%),

34.05% were Hispanic, 1.29% were Black and 10.50% were Asian (www.bestplaces.net).

As the senior pastor at The Place for the last sixteen years, I have seen a great deal of growth. There have been many young families and young people in our church during those years and The Place has specifically targeted those age groups. However, due to the extremely high cost of living in Ventura County, many young adults and young families have moved away in search of an easier economic environment. Others have moved into the area in search of beautiful weather and gracious living. The young adult community at The Place comprised about 10% of the active membership. This percentage was similar to other local churches.

As the primary researcher and implementer of the project, it is important that I locate myself personally and professionally. I am a married, heterosexual, Caucasian male, born in Australia and raised in a missionary family in Papua New Guinea. I have lived in the United States since I was 10 years old, where I attended Adventist schools through college. I subsequently obtained a J.D. from UCLA and stayed in Southern California where I worked as an attorney for three years before changing careers to pastoral ministry, which I have done for the past 23 years. I obtained my Masters of Divinity degree from the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary in 2000 and I was ordained in 2002. I was 49 years old at the time of the seminar for this project.

Statement of the Problem

Divorce rates are almost identical for Christians and non-Christians across the nation (Barna, 2008; Wright, 2015). In addition, for nominal Christians, marital satisfaction rates are almost identical with non-Christians (Clinton, 2003; Heaton, 1990; Village, 2010). But increased church attendance and spirituality have been linked with

lower divorce rates and higher marital satisfaction (Ford, 2010; Shearin, 2016). Indeed, there are multiple factors relating to religiosity and religious commitment which positively impact marital satisfaction (Barkhordari, 2017; Perry, 2015). Research also reveals it is more effective to preemptively educate premarital couples than to restore damaged relationships (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman, 2006).

Sadly, many people, including Christian young adults, lack a framework for understanding how to choose a godly spouse (or boyfriend/girlfriend). As a result of this lack of education, many people make poor choices by selecting a spouse who is unhealthy and unable to make the commitment required for a healthy and enduring marriage. This type of commitment is best understood as godly love, with God Himself as our example of love as demonstrated by his unconditional love, passion, grace and his offer of the power to love. Pastoral observation reveals many young people in our community do not have strong self-identities based on their status as a child of God and are not cognizant of the importance of choosing a spouse with this mind-set. Many young people simply do not understand which factors are most important in determining whom they choose to marry in order to have higher marital satisfaction. Much of the current literature offering assistance in making this choice is so broad as to be unhelpful in practically determining which factors are of utmost priority.

Despite the popularity of marriage, the percentage of people getting married is steadily declining (91% in 1960, compared to approximately 80% in 2017). Many young people choose to cohabitate or avoid commitment entirely due to the fear of divorce or unhappiness in marriage (Wang & Parker, 2014). I have spent a great deal of time during

my 23 years of pastoral ministry engaging with young adults who were stressed about finding the right person, who were preparing to get married and dealing with marital problems. Yet, despite the fact that 93% of Americans rated having a happy marriage as one of their most important objectives (Waite & Gallagher, 2000), only one-third of couples engaged in any form of premarital education (Morris, McMillan, Duncan, & Larson, 2011).

Those young people who do engage in premarital education often learn that there are personal factors which, when present, make it more likely that a marriage will be successful. Among these factors, there have been consistent findings that a greater degree of religiosity, especially when present in both partners, led to greater marital stability and quality (Allgood et al., 2009; Beach, 2011; Perry, 2015). From my research and in my experience, premarital education needs to occur for young people before they choose a potential spouse. They need to have a cognitive framework to help them understand what factors are the most important in a potential spouse and to understand the purpose of marriage. Young people can be educated about how they can become the ideal spouse and how to look for another person who is committed to his or her own emotional and spiritual journey and who has a common understanding of God and His ability to use marriage as an opportunity for growth, maturity and self-discovery. Couples who had the most similarities tended to have healthier marriages (Larson & Holman, 1994). But couples who had similarities in their spiritual journeys tended to have the best opportunities for a healthy marriage (Ford, 2010; Mahoney, 2010; Perry, 2015). It is imperative that young adults be educated with this understanding and mindset.

Statement of the Task

The task of this project was to develop, implement and evaluate a seminar to educate young adults in the Conejo Valley about how to choose a godly spouse. This project sought to create a seminar specifically to educate young adults on the most important biblical perspectives that lead to an enduring and satisfying marriage. This project solicited insight from participating young adults in order to draw conclusions about perceived factors important in a spouse and sought to assist them in identifying other factors that may have greater importance to a healthy and long-lasting marriage. The biblical factors identified by this researcher as most important included “hot, holy and healthy.” Obviously, all young people will vary in the degree to which they possess these characteristics, but this education is designed to assist them in determining the most important characteristics to consider in a potential spouse.

Delimitations of the Project

The scope of this project was limited in several important ways. First, while still considering the wider value of premarital education theory and practice, the project itself focused specifically on premarital education in choosing a godly spouse. Second, the project specifically addressed premarital education from a biblical worldview with the supposition that God is the primary source of wisdom. It sought to educate from the perspective that obtaining such a biblical worldview is essential in making a wise choice. The project was fundamentally focused on the Bible as a sourcebook of wisdom and God’s will and desire for people with the assumption that it reveals wisdom helpful in making important life decisions. Third, the project did not comprehensively address wider commonalities, background and personality traits that may also be beneficial in

choosing an appropriate spouse. It focused specifically on the three qualities of hot, holy and healthy which the researcher found were primary and foundational to a biblical understanding of a godly spouse. Fourth, participation in the project was limited to adults 18 years of age and older. It was also limited to those currently single, including divorced or engaged individuals.

Fifth, as the seminar was held at The Place Adventist Fellowship in Newbury Park, CA, participation in the project was geographically limited to those in the Conejo Valley of Ventura County, and thus proximate. There was no attempt to use social media or live-streaming to increase participation. Sixth, while open to those of any culture, the seminar was decidedly taught from a North American context regarding marriage, and thus imposed various cultural limitations, including an assumption that those participating would have an opportunity to be involved in choosing a spouse. Finally, while the project was not focused specifically on Seventh-day Adventist young people, nor was attendance at the seminar limited to them, there were specific cultural factors inherent in a Seventh-day Adventist pastor educating mostly Seventh-day Adventist young people in a Seventh-day Adventist church.

Description of the Project Process

The project process included building a theological foundation, reviewing recent literature, developing and implementing an intervention, and then evaluating and reporting the results within a selected research methodology and protocol.

Theological Reflection

In order to provide a theological foundation for educating young adults on how to

choose a godly spouse, I decided to focus on the biblical ideals regarding God and a godly marriage. This focus on the attributes of God and the purpose of a godly marriage lead directly to an understanding of the characteristics most important to an enduring and satisfying marriage. This theological reflection focused first on an understanding of God as the ideal Spouse, noticing particularly his passionate pursuit of his bride, even in the context of marital unfaithfulness (see Hos 3:1-3, All Bible references are from the New International Version unless otherwise noted). It also noted the desire for God to sanctify His bride and understood this desire as not simply caring for His bride, but as an act of self-care.

Secondly, God, as ideal Spouse, created a male-female marriage in his image as a reflection of his totality. This creation of marriage is embodied in the “helper” made by God, to interact with each other and bring to wholeness using both their differences and similarities. This marriage forms a covenantal relationship of total intimacy by two individuals who are complete as God’s creation, yet made whole in their union.

Thirdly, this theological reflection focused on some distinct characteristics of a godly spouse as detailed in the stories of the Bible. These characteristics included a willingness to take responsibility followed by repentance as understood within the context of repentance and grace. It also included attention to physical and sexual attractiveness and noted the importance placed on this by God himself in his creation of intimacy and oneness, and as played out in the lives of characters in the Bible. A godly spouse also has wisdom and a permanent commitment to the marriage. This commitment is again understood by the oneness God ordained for marriage.

Finally, this theological reflection focused on the ideal attributes of a healthy

person. A biblically healthy people understand their identity as children of God; see God's primary orientation towards them as positive; and understand the role of a servant leader who leads in humility, but through strength and mutual submission.

Review of Literature

A review of literature relevant to premarital education and the choosing of an ideal spouse was undertaken focusing on selected works in three key areas. Priority was given to current research and literature, particularly seeking to understand the latest available research on the impact of spirituality and religiosity on marital success and longevity as this is a relatively recent area of study. There have been several recent studies on the overall efficacy of premarital education which have attempted to summarize the literature up to the present and these were of particular importance (see Fawcett, Hawkins, Blanchard, & Carroll, 2010; Shearin, 2016, Vail, 2013). However though certain of the most important studies relating to the overall impact of premarital education are older, they were included as helpful in understanding the development of the field and the larger trends of research involving the determination of the value of premarital education.

First, I explored literature relating to the importance of premarital education, including historical overviews of the field, research on the positive impacts of premarital education and societal benefits; and research on different forms of premarital education. I looked particularly at studies linking premarital education with marital satisfaction and longevity. Second, I surveyed literature on the efficacy of premarital education. The early literature assumed efficacy because of the positive benefits associated with premarital education. However later research attempted to explore causality more closely to

determine whether premarital education actually made a practical long-term difference in marital satisfaction and longevity. This literature included a special focus on the timing of relationship education and its potential impact on efficacy. Third, I looked at literature focusing on characteristics of a healthy spouse. I specifically researched literature exploring the potential impact of spirituality and religiosity on marital satisfaction and longevity. Finally, I briefly explored literature from writers specifically addressing premarital education from a spiritual perspective.

Development of the Intervention

I have spent many hours during my pastoral ministry in intervention with married couples whose relationships are struggling, and also in educating young adults through premarital education. I have noted what research has confirmed, that it is easier to preemptively educate premarital couples than to restore damaged relationships (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Stanley, Amato et al., 2006). Yet most couples do not engage in premarital education (Morris et al., 2011), and there is continued uncertainty about the long-term impact of this education (Fawcett, et al., 2010). Indeed, Fawcett concludes her meta-analytic study with a call to educate single adults on how to choose a spouse wisely (Fawcett et al., p. 236). This call was the impetus for the seminar I developed. It intuitively made sense to me that personality factors and certain consistent commonalities in a potential spouse were more important factors in marital satisfaction and longevity than premarital education and post-marital counseling with an already chosen partner. Recent research confirmed that spirituality and religiosity were of particular importance (Allgood et al., 2009; Perry, 2015; Shearin, 2016; Stafford, David, & McPherson, 2014).

Thus, I designed a seminar for single adults which focused on education about

what research shows regarding the factors most likely to lead to successful marriage. From my theological reflection and review of literature, I concluded there were three primary factors that were important for single adults both to look for in a potential spouse and to have as a goal for themselves. I called these three factors hot, holy, and healthy for alliterative purposes. Each of these factors has a unique prominence in biblical teaching of marriage and in literature looking at commonalities in successful marriages. “Hot” focused on the importance of physical attraction and intimate unity as seen in God’s original design for oneness in marriage (Gen 1-3 and throughout). “Holy” stressed the importance of being made in the image of God (Gen 1:26), and understanding the characteristics of God important to marriage, particularly commitment, grace, forgiveness, sanctification, submission and strength. “Healthy” focused on the importance of understanding oneself as a beloved child of God (Eph 1:4-5). This knowledge leads to emotional health, paving the way for appropriate boundaries; willingness to serve another in humility and love; ability to offer forgiveness and more. Focus on each of these factors allowed for teaching a comprehensive framework from a biblical worldview, thus enabling single adults to construct a short “list” of what is most important in a potential spouse.

Structure of the Intervention

The intervention was built on an interactive learning model. It included a weekend seminar of eight hours in length with four areas of education from a biblical perspective: the purpose of marriage; the power of sexuality and attraction; holiness in marriage; health and God-esteem. It was designed for participants to interact with each other, using the Bible as a tool for providing the larger framework of understanding.

Within that context I used recent research, statistics and anecdotes to educate the participants on the characteristics most important to a happy and enduring marriage. The eight hours of education focused primarily on two modalities: exploring and discussing biblical passages in small groups of two or three persons, then with the larger group; discussion with the larger group about the characteristics important to a successful marriage from this biblical perspective; and concluding with what modern literature and research have revealed.

Research Methodology and Protocol

I chose as my research purpose to seek to understand whether premarital education on choosing a godly spouse would shift participants' perspective as to characteristics most desirable in a potential spouse. The research methodology included features of both quantitative and qualitative inquiry. I selected an instrument called, "Mate Preferences Questionnaire" by David Buss (1989) to develop two surveys: Survey One: Factors in Choosing a Mate, and Survey Two: Characteristics Most Desired in a Mate. Both surveys were administered at the beginning and again at the end of the seminar. At the conclusion of the seminar, qualitative data was obtained from participant's written reflections about their experiences during the seminar.

All 13 of the participants (15 registered, but 2 were not present the entire time) who registered and attended the seminar formally agreed to participate in the research by signing an informed consent agreement and by filling out the pre- and post-surveys. All of the participants were single adults known to me as either attenders of The Place Adventist Fellowship or their friends.

Measures were taken to ensure the confidentiality of both the data and the participants, as well as to maintain reliability in the study. The data collected was limited to that collected from the pre- and post-seminar surveys and additional questions relating more subjectively to what participants learned from the seminar. The qualitative, numerical and demographic data were analyzed. This included coding the data received and interpreting it. In Chapter 5, I offer an interpretation of the themes identified in the data. Finally, in Chapter 6, I draw some conclusions from the project as a whole.

Definition of Terms

In general, most of the terms used in this project are easily understood and for the few that are not, I attempted to define them with reference to the local context. However, there are a few specialized terms which may be helpful to more carefully define.

Cohabitation is the state of living together and having a sexual relationship without being married. This has been extensively studied as a factor in marital success relating to the level of commitment made to a relationship (Bumpas & Lu, 2000; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markham, 2009).

Communication skill is an individual's ability to convey information to another effectively and efficiently. Much research has been done evaluating the impact of these skills on marital longevity and satisfaction (Halford, 2004).

Covenant is a formal and solemn binding agreement. A biblical covenant involves unconditional love, permanence and involvement of God (Witte & Ellison, 2005, p. 266).

Efficacy is defined as the ability to produce the desired or intended result. Premarital education is efficacious where it leads to greater marital satisfaction and longevity (Gottman, 1993, 1994).

God-esteem is defined as the person's confidence in their own worth and abilities. This assurance originates from the person's understanding and belief that God has unconditionally chosen the person to be His beloved child (Rom 8:31-39; Eph 1:3-6).

Godly spouse is defined as a person who loves God, seeks to follow Him and follows Christian principles in marriage (Matt 6:33; Matt 22:37; Eph 5:1-2, 21-28).

Healthy is defined as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity (World Health Organization). Biblically, it is a state of mind resulting from a person's understanding of themselves as loved completely and unconditionally (Eph 1:3-6).

Holy is defined as set apart or sacred and worthy of veneration. Holiness is understood as resulting solely from the presence of God (Lev 19:2; 1 Pet 1:16).

Hot is defined as one who is gorgeous, pretty, beautiful, cute or attractive (Urban dictionary.com). Yet, "beauty is in the eye of the beholder" (3d C. BC Greek proverb).

Longitudinal study is an observational research method in which data is gathered on the same subjects repeatedly over time. Researchers have attempted to discern whether premarital education is efficacious using longitudinal studies (Fawcett et al., 2010; Knutson & Olson, 2003; Wong, 2003).

Marital dissolution is the equivalent of divorce.

Marital satisfaction is the mental state that reflects the perceived benefits of being married to a particular person. Numerous research studies have attempted to measure this state in relationship to premarital education (Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Storaasli, 1988; Markman & Hahlweg, 1993).

Premarital counseling is defined by the Mayo Clinic as a type of therapy that helps couples prepare for marriage, obviously dealing with those who have already chosen a mate. This term may also be more broadly understood as premarital education. This education may be facilitated by a therapist or be self-directed (Duncan, Steed, & Needham, 2009).

Religiosity is a strong religious feeling and belief. It is linked with spirituality and found to have a high impact on marital success (Allgood et al., 2009; Mahoney, 2010).

Sanctification is the act or process of acquiring sanctity, of being made or becoming holy and set apart. An attribute of God's character is holiness (1 Pet 1:16), and the goal of each marriage partner is to continually become more like Him (Eph 5:25-26).

Unconditional love is understood as an aspect of God's love. His love is unconditional, perfect and complete because "God is love." With imperfect humans, this term can only be aspirational and incomplete – a moving toward, but also alternating between self-focus and devotion to the other (1 John 4:7-8).

Summary

This introduction offered a brief insight into the challenges facing today's single adults as, with very little prior education regarding the characteristics most important in a spouse, they contemplate the prospect of choosing a potential spouse. The pastoral task lies in offering a biblical worldview by means of which the single adult can identify the most important characteristics in a prospective spouse. The hope is present that through such education single adults may come to understand God's desire for them to be united with a godly spouse and that this decision will lead to a more enduring and satisfying marriage.

CHAPTER 2

TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF A GODLY SPOUSE

In this chapter, I denote the primary characteristics of a godly spouse by first describing how God is the ideal spouse in scripture. The biblical description of God as spouse focuses on His oneness within the Godhead and His unconditional commitment to His lover – His people. Second, I explore how God creates man and woman to be in the same type of relationship with one another that God has with His people and for them to offer the same love to one another that God offers them. Finally, I detail some of the specific characteristics of an ideal spouse as understood in the character of God. These include: willingness to take personal responsibility, sexual and physical attractiveness, wisdom, commitment, and health.

Marriage is extremely prevalent today with four out of five Americans over twenty-five getting married at some point in their lives. Yet, according to the Pew Research Center, in 2017 only 50% of U.S. adults were married, down from 72% in 1960. This downward trend is being driven by difficult economic times, marrying later in life and higher levels of cohabitation. Indeed, only 58% of unmarried adults are even looking to get married (Parker & Stepler, 2017). When they are looking, most women look for a man with a stable job, while most men are seeking a woman who can take care of a family (Wang & Parker, 2014). Part of the ambivalence toward marriage is driven by the awareness of consistently high rates of divorce.

Yet there is hope. An increase in church attendance and spirituality has been linked with lower divorce rates and higher marital satisfaction (Ford, 2010, pp. 31-38; Shearin, 2016). Higher levels of belief in the sanctity of marriage, greater religiosity and strong religious commitment of both married partners correlate with greater marital satisfaction (Allgood et al., 2009; Mahoney, 2010; Perry 2015). Based on this research and my experience, I believe when two people commit themselves to God first, and then to their partner, marital satisfaction increases and marriages endure. For this to happen, it is necessary to find a partner who is committed to being a godly person. But what does that look like? The Scriptures do not simply outline the characteristics of a godly spouse; they contain specific principles relating to the character and emotional and spiritual makeup of a godly spouse. These principles form the theological basis for assisting a person who is seeking a marriage partner in making a wise decision.

Towards a Theology of God as Spouse

The Scriptures do not contain a detailed description of the ideal spouse. They do contain a description of the ideal being...God. God is intrinsically holy and invites us to be holy also (Lev 11:45, NIV). The Scriptures begin with God's creation of male and female "in His image" (Gen 1:27). The Hebrew אָדָם (man) is a collective noun and not to be understood in the singular. It has the meaning of humankind and is inclusive of both male and female (Von Rad, 1972, p. 57). God thus makes both genders to be like Him and live in His image. God is thus our ideal.

In his creation of mankind God reveals something about His own plural nature that assists our understanding of relationship. In Genesis 1:26 God says, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness" This plural form for God is not used anywhere

else in the creation story. This plurality hints that God is not simply in relationship within the Trinity, but that God desires for humans to experience this same community.

Bilezikian (1985) suggests this plural self-designation seems

to refer to the multi personality existing within the Triune God...Inevitably something of the plurality that characterizes the nature of God will be reflected in His image-bearing creatures...In other words, the male/female sexual differentiation reflects realities contained within the very being of God and derived from Him as His Image. (p. 23)

God made both male and female to be like Him and to reflect His image; it is only in the totality of the male/female relationship that we experience the fullness of the creator God. Thus, an ideal spouse would live and find his or her meaning in God.

In 1 Peter 2:21, Peter makes explicit that Christ is our example. We are to be like Christ. Indeed, we have been chosen in Christ before the creation of the world (Eph 1:4) and find meaning and purpose in Him. It makes sense that when a people find God to be their ideal, they can extrapolate this conclusion into two practical calls: first, they choose to live in Christ and desire to become ideal as a spouse; second, they desire to marry a spouse who reflects the character of God. But Christ is more than our example; He is our spouse.

Although the term “God as our spouse” is primarily a New Testament concept, it finds its root in the prophecies of Isaiah. In Isaiah 54:5 we read, “For your maker is your husband – the Lord Almighty is his name.” בַּעַל (husband) literally means one who rules or has dominion. Thus, God marries His creation by His very act of creation. He becomes the ruler of those He creates. But this is a romantic relationship, despite, or perhaps because of God’s rulership. God is love (1 John 4:8). This love is verbalized in Isaiah 62:4, 5 as God takes Zion and its people as His bride, “as a bridegroom rejoices over his

bride, so your God will rejoice over you” (v. 5). God literally “delights” in His bride (v. 4). God takes pleasure in His relationship with His people just as couples would take pleasure in their marriage partners.

In Isaiah 62:10, we find this metaphor taken even further as God dresses Himself in priestly attire for His marriage to the bride whom He also dresses with garments of salvation and righteousness. Thus, God prepares His own bride for her wedding to Him. This love is taken to its outer limits in Hosea where God refuses to divorce His unfaithful bride, Israel. Instead, He leads her out to the wilderness to speak gently to her and “allure her” (Hos 2:14). Hosea uses both Hebrew words for husband to make a play on words as the bride accepts her true love, God, and rejects her false love, Baal. When His bride responds to His call in verse 16, she will be so in love with God she will only call Him “my husband” (אִשְׁתִּי) and no longer call Him “my master” (בַּעְלִי).

In the New Testament we find several specific references to God as the bridegroom and His church as His bride. John the Revelator is explicit in Revelation 19:7, 8 as he links the second coming of Jesus with a wedding. The Lamb is the groom and His bride is prepared with fine linen garments which represent “the righteous acts of God’s holy people” (v. 8). John follows this in Revelation 21:2 with a vision of the New Jerusalem descending “out of Heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.” John the Baptist also calls Jesus the bridegroom and describes himself as the friend of the bridegroom (John 3:29). Similarly, Paul likens himself to the “father of the bride” as he speaks to the Corinthian church. He describes himself as “jealous” as he seeks to fulfill his promise of presenting the church to Christ as her husband, “as a pure virgin to him” (2 Cor 11:3).

These passages clearly describe God as in love with His bride, the church, and desirous of an eternal relationship with her. In Hosea, we find God refusing to allow even extra-marital unfaithfulness from breaking His love. Instead God continues to court His bride and woo her back to Him. This bride is not simply a metaphor for God's people. Paul invites husbands and wives to have the same love for each other as God has for His church (Eph 5:25). In verses 26, 27, Paul uses the imagery of Isaiah 61 as he describes the cleansing process Christ uses as He prepares His bride, the church, for marriage to Him. Christ makes her holy, cleanses her with the water of His Word in order to "present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle" (Eph 5:27).

God loves His church, but He is not recklessly entering into marriage. Instead God takes delight in preparing his bride for her marriage to Him so she will be radiant, holy and blameless. One could even argue that the marriage is part of the refining process itself. Paul concludes by inviting husbands in the "same way" to "love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself" (v. 28). Just as Christ loves His church, so husbands are called to love their wives. But this act of love is also an act of self-love.

After all, marriage is not simply something we do; it is who we become. Just as marriage to Christ makes us members of His body, so marriage to another person gives a person a new identity. In verse 31, Paul quotes Genesis 2:24 in asserting that when a man and a woman become married, they become "united" and "the two will become one flesh." This is a "profound mystery" both as to how Christ and His church become one body and how it happens for a husband and wife (v. 32). The parallel is clear and so is the lesson. When Christ loves His church, He is united with it; but before He joins with His

bride, He prepares her for marriage. This is not simply an act of love; it is an act of self-care. Husbands are invited to this same level of love for their wives. To be married is to be united with another person, thus one should take this commitment very seriously, prepare for it, and recognize it as an extremely important act of self-care (seen in v. 28 as he “who loves his wife, loves himself”).

God is our ideal spouse. Scripture captures the eternal love God has for His bride, the church, and the care God takes in preparation for this relationship. Yet God made humans for more than this relationship with our maker. Even with the presence of God in the Garden of Eden, God says it is “not good for the man to be alone” (Gen 2:18). Tim Keller sees in this statement the idea that the “relational capacity” created in us by God “was not fulfilled completely by our ‘vertical’ relationship with him. God designed us to need ‘horizontal’ relationships with other human beings” (Keller & Keller, 2011, p. 120). Thus, God creates a being, other than Himself, to be a helper-companion for mankind to keep him from feeling lonely and further his relational development.

Towards a Theology of God’s Creation of a Spouse

When God surveys his creation on the sixth day, He pronounces it “very good” (Gen 1:31). The first thing God finds less than perfect is man’s aloneness (Gen 2:18). Paul helps us understand that this does not disparage being single, as indeed this can actually be beneficial for the Kingdom of God (1 Cor 7:32). Christian friendship is similar to marriage in that in the body of Christ all barriers have been removed and the two have become one (Eph 2:14). This spiritual community experienced in Christ is modeled from the original creation of a helper who can complete the other so together they reflect the image of God.

From the beginning we find God in relationship (Gen 1:26). God then creates mankind “in His own image” (v. 27). Both male and female are created in God’s image. The Hebrew **צֶלֶם**(image) has its primary meaning as “duplicate” or “idol.” Mankind is unique, but purposefully created to reveal God as His image in his newly created world. It is because man is created in the image of God that it is not good to be alone. Sin is not yet a problem. God is a God of relationship and man is made in His image, for relationship.

This creation in God’s image endows humans with characteristics possessed by God. They have creative power in themselves (v. 28) and the ability to rule over the other aspects of God’s creation (v. 28). They may possess and eat the fruits of the other parts of creation (vv. 29-30). Because they are like God and formed for relationship, God gives the man a “helper suitable for him” (Gen 2:18). This helper (**עֲזָרָה**) is not simply someone who assists in the work. Indeed, in the Old Testament, God is the one who is almost always called **עֲזָרָה** (helper) (see Deut 33:26 and Ps 33:20 for example). To help is not to assist, but to make up the difference in strength when another is lacking.

This helper is described as suitable (**עֲזָרָה**) (Gen 2:18). Jacques Doukhan points out “this expression is composed of two words, **כֵּן**, ‘like,’ which implies similarity and **נֶגֶד**, ‘against,’ ‘in front of,’ ‘opposite,’ which implies confrontation and difference” (cited in Bell, 2014, p. 36). Doukhan also comments that in the second creation story of Genesis 2, the Hebrew word **אָדָם** (man) is used which “has the connotation of ‘weakness’ and ‘dependence’” (Bell, p. 34). The man and the woman (**אִשָּׁה**) are both weak and dependent, yet together are not alone, thus negating the lack of goodness in their creation. It is actually in their difference, weakness and uniqueness that man and woman are able

to help each other. Bilezikian notes that the Hebrew contains four other words which mean “helper” but denote subordination, but woman is אִשָּׁה, not subordinate to man (Bilezikian, 1985, p. 217).

Male and female are both made in God’s image yet are unique. They are the same, yet different. They are weak, yet strong. Together, it is good. Apart, they are incomplete. They share the same flesh, but have not yet reached the ideal oneness (Gen 3:23). Woman is made from man’s rib (צִלְעָה) (Gen 2:21). This word is not directly a part of the human body, but means “side.” Woman is literally a part of the man. In a very real sense, Adam now assumes his own identity. In the first creation story, Adam is his name because he comes from אֲדָמָה, the dust of the ground (Gen 2:7). But, now for the first time in Genesis, Adam gives himself a name, אָדָם (man), which is understood in relationship to his woman (אִשָּׁה) (Gen 2:23).

But in order to achieve the ideal oneness God intends for him, man will need to leave his parental attachments (Gen 2:24). This leaving (בָּרַח) requires effort and intentionality and can be translated “to forsake.” It is a complete alteration of the priorities of the man who will turn his face away from his parents and toward his wife. In ancient cultures the woman moved to be with her man, but in God’s creation, the man must also make this seismic shift. When man leaves, he does not lightly attach; he shifts allegiance and clings (קָרַב) to his wife. The figurative root means “to catch by pursuit.” Now man is joined together with his wife and united with her. Thus mankind, like God, pursues other humans for relationship.

Unsurprisingly, there are Old Testament examples of being joined with the Lord. Deuteronomy 10:20 invites to “Fear the Lord...Hold fast to him and take your oaths in

his name.” This verse connects the covenant of marriage as both a horizontal and vertical relationship. God initiates a covenantal relationship with His creation, but as God’s image-bearers, God also invites man and woman into a covenantal relationship with one another. In Malachi 2:14 God expresses His disdain for divorce by affirming that a wife is “your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.”

Margaret Brinig and Steven Nock state that a biblical covenant involves three concepts: “(1) unconditional love; (2) permanence; and (3) involvement (or witness) of God, or, at minimum, the larger community” (as cited in Witte & Ellison, 2005, p. 266). Thus, when Adam and Eve sinned, because God is in a covenantal relationship with them, he does not leave them or cast them aside. God is committed to the relationship. A covenant marriage assumes that there may be imbalances along the way, but because the relationship is permanent, things will even out.

A godly marriage reflects the creator God by entering into a covenantal relationship with God as the basis and foundation of a vow to one another. Through this commitment of leaving and cleaving man and woman become one flesh. Doukhan points out that as one flesh, Adam and Eve were able to be naked together, but without shame (Gen 2:25). They were willing to risk complete transparency and vulnerability because of the total commitment they had made together (cited in Bell, 2014, p. 41). God’s creation is good. Man and woman have come together in one flesh, in total intimacy.

In the creation story we find God’s creation of two equally important and valid expressions of Himself. They are of equal value and good, yet need their relationship to fully experience life as image-bearers of God, and to experience their purpose and meaning in life and work. They will leave and cleave to one another and commit to their

relationship as they unite in complete intimacy as one flesh. In this picture we find a detailed expression of God's portrait of an ideal spouse, yet there are other specific characteristics in Scripture.

Characteristics of a Godly Spouse

Throughout Scripture a picture emerges of God. The ideal spouse reflects this image of God. The following characteristics of God are linked with marital and relational health in the Scriptures either by example in stories or by direct command or verbal expression.

Willingness to Take Personal Responsibility

Genesis 2 ends with Adam and Eve naked and without shame. But in Genesis 3 all that changes with the introduction of sin. On a relational level, Adam and Eve fear God (Gen 3:10). The word "fear" (יָרָא) can be used to express awe, but in this verse, it signifies to be afraid. This fear drives Adam and Eve to hide from God. They are afraid to face the consequences of their now-understood sin. Rather than remain united, brokenness drives each of them to place the blame elsewhere: Adam blames the woman (Gen 3:12), while Eve places responsibility on the serpent (v. 13). God is not fooled, however, and there is plenty of blame to go around. The serpent is cursed; Eve receives a different curse - pain in child-birth and a desire for her husband along with conflict over who will be in control (v. 16). Adam receives an indirect curse of painful toil because of the infertile ground (vv. 17-19).

The break in the vertical relationship with God damages the horizontal relationship between husband and wife. Adam and Eve do not desire to be alone (separated), but their togetherness has been strongly damaged by sin and their subsequent

fear and blame against one another. They now experience difficulty not only because of the hard work of child-bearing and rearing and working the soil, but also the battle for dominion between man and woman. But God does not leave them. God has covenanted his permanent love and already begins the process of reconciliation. He does this through the curses, which cause humanity to look to God; through the promise of a savior (Gen 3:15); and through the creation of hatred towards sin (v. 15). Throughout Scripture God calls people to take personal responsibility for their actions. The willingness to do so is a necessary part of any healthy relationship as forgiveness is essential because of the pervasiveness of sin. Yet offering and receiving forgiveness are only possible when people take personal responsibility for their actions.

Both John the Baptist and Jesus make their primary call in Scripture to “repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matt 3:3, 4:17). As God draws near, those who are convicted understand their own sinfulness (see example of Peter in Luke 5:8). It is this recognition of our need for grace that drives people to be able to offer forgiveness and restoration which are essential for long-term relationships. Jesus illustrates this in Matthew 6:14-15 when he links our forgiveness of others with God’s willingness to forgive us. 1 John 1:9 indicates that God is always willing to forgive when there is repentance. Thus, Jesus’ conditional forgiveness is not dependent on God’s willingness, but on individual recognition of need. People who do not understand their own need for forgiveness cannot extend that same grace to others.

This understanding puts a premium on telling the truth and seeing the truth. Paul describes this maturation process in Ephesians where the body of Christ is built up together as unique people use their various spiritual gifts to benefit one another. The

growth occurs as each person is “speaking the truth in love” (Eph 4:15). This truth-telling requires knowing both objective truth about God and subjective truth about a person, but adds the dimension of sharing it in love for the benefit of the listener. In verse 25, Paul clarifies that this truth-telling is necessary because “we are all members of one body” (Christ’s body). Thus, anger does not have the opportunity to become sin because those who are hurt or have hurt another, speak truth, take responsibility for their actions and offer appropriate forgiveness (vv. 26-27). Anger itself is not sin. The sin lies, at least partially, in an unwillingness to deal with the anger.

This understanding culminates in verse 29 with the invitation to only speak words that are “helpful for building others up according to their needs.” This wisdom requires intimate knowledge of another and an ability to see and speak truth. It allows people to clear their lives of “bitterness, rage and anger” (v. 31), resulting in “kind and compassionate” actions and “forgiving one another, just as in Christ God forgave you” (v. 32). In Philippians 2:3, Paul urges, “In humility value others above yourselves.” People who see their own need for grace are able to receive grace and offer it freely, thus breaking the cycle of fear, anger and resentment that threatens marriage. They are safe to be with.

This is the characteristic of a healthy and mature person and an essential ingredient of a healthy marriage. Adam and Eve were unable to take responsibility for their own actions so they blamed others and failed to seek forgiveness from God or to offer it to each other. Yet God invites all people in relationships to both take personal responsibility and to offer grace.

Physical and Sexual Attractiveness

Solomon warns, “Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised” (Prov 31:30). This is ironic from a man who accumulated 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Kgs 11:3). Solomon understood the power of sexuality and joyfully affirmed the beauty of it (see Solomon’s poetic eroticism in the Song of Songs such as Cant 6:4-9 and Cant 7:1-9). But he also recognized its insufficiency. Sex is the ultimate Biblical irony. It is sublimated to the “unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit” (1 Pet 3:4). Yet comes as a gift from God into marriage as the most powerful binding agent. Because of its power, God protects it so fiercely, condemning fornication (1 Cor 7:2); adultery (Exod 20:14), homosexuality (Lev 18:22), impurity (Jas 1:21), orgies (Rom 13:13), prostitution (Lev 19:29), lust (Matt 5:28), sodomy (Gen 19:5-7), inappropriate sexual language (Eph 5:3-4) and incest (Lev 18:7-18). God created man and woman to be one flesh (Gen 2:24), uniting them on every level, including sexually. Jesus affirms and deepens this oneness by commanding “what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Matt 19:5-6; Mark 10:8-9).

Paul adds another layer in 1 Corinthians 6 when he quotes Genesis 2:24 in stating that a person “who unites himself with a prostitute is one body” (1 Cor 6:16). Physical intimacy brings emotional intimacy. That is God’s plan and another reason why God guards sexuality so carefully. God created it to bring intimacy on all levels, and it will unless it is used improperly, at which time it loses the power God intended it to have. Sex, used in a godly way, has power to unite, but it also has the power to divide. It is both vital and secondary.

God created sexual intimacy and physical attraction, yet Romans 1:24, 25 warns against the worship of sex as God. Sexuality can become idolatry. It can replace the very God who made it (see M. Driscoll & Driscoll, 2012, pp. 110-112). Because of the power of sexuality, Christians have often warned against it without embracing the purpose God made it for. As such, Kostenberger and Jones (2010) outline four primary purposes for sex: first, it is procreational as God invites Adam and Eve to be fruitful (Gen 1:28); second, it is relational and social as God gives companionship and oneness to the first couple (Gen 2:18, 21-24); third, it is a public good as it helps prevent the high social cost of marital and familial breakdown by inviting people to a purity of heart (see Jesus' invitation in Matt 5:8, 28), and finally, sex offers pleasure which satisfies, intoxicates and binds a couple together.

Should a Christian seek a sexually attractive mate or someone with a godly character? The Bible affirms both. Beauty is fleeting, yet powerful. To deny the power of sexuality is to invite trouble. After the fall, God “curses” Eve, and declares that her “desire will be for your husband” (Gen 3:16). The word “desire” (תַּשׁוּתָהּ) is used only three times in the Old Testament. It can mean a desire to dominate or control. This idea is rendered in Genesis 3:16 in the New Living Translation (NLT) as “and you will desire to control your husband.” In Canticles 7:10, however, it refers to sexual desire. Perhaps both meanings are intended as man and woman battle for control while also battling an essential desire for each other.

It is undeniable, however, that this desire for sex is powerful, even in Scripture. It interjects itself in unexpected ways. In Genesis 39:6, Joseph is described as “well-built” and “handsome” (יָפֵה). יָפֵה is the same Hebrew word used to describe beauty in a female.

Indeed, Rachel is described with exactly the same three Hebrew words as Joseph in Genesis 29:17. They are both handsome in form and appearance (face). Saul is handsome (1 Sam 9:2). David is handsome (1 Sam 16:12). Absalom is handsome (2 Sam 14:25) and praised for it. Adonijah is handsome (1 Kgs 1:6). Daniel and his friends are chosen partly because they are handsome (Dan 1:4). Even Israel is said to prostitute herself with the Assyrians because they are handsome (Ezek 23:6, 12, 23). In each of these stories it seems extraneous to describe these men as handsome, except that the physical beauty is integral to the story.

Indeed, this love-hate relationship with beauty is a big part of the story of redemption. The degeneration of marriage is described as beginning when “the sons of God saw that the daughters of humans were beautiful and they married any of them they chose” (Gen 6:2). God is not pleased with this development and sees this as symptomatic of evil, thus leading to the destruction of the flood. But beauty continues to inspire. Sarah is very beautiful, indeed so beautiful Abraham fears she will be forcibly taken by Pharaoh (Gen 12:11) and again by Abimelech even when Sarah is older (Gen 20:2). Rebekah is beautiful (Gen 24:16); as is Rachel (Gen 29:17). Indeed, it is fascinating to compare the stories of Rebekah and Rachel. To find his son a wife, Abraham sends his old wise servant (probably Eliezer in Gen 15:2) to find a wife for Isaac. Eliezer conducts a test to ascertain the character of the woman and chooses Rebekah, who just happens, as the Bible makes a point of saying, to be very beautiful (Gen 24:16).

Jacob, on the other hand, chooses a wife for himself. He does not desire to marry the seemingly more virtuous (and older) Leah, but instead falls in love with the comely and beautiful Rachel. Subsequent events seem to show Leah as favored by God. She is

fertile, has twice as many sons, bears the leaders of the kingly (Judah) and priestly (Levi) tribes, outlives Rachel and is buried with Abraham in the family burial cave of Machpelah (Gen 49:31) while Rachel is buried along the side of the road. Yet Jacob loves Rachel more than Leah (Gen 29:30).

Abigail is beautiful (1 Sam 25:3) and David desires her, as he does the beautiful Bathsheba (2 Sam 11:2). Amnon loves beautiful Tamar (2 Sam 13:1), and Absalom names his own beautiful daughter Tamar (2 Sam 14:27). David searches the land and finds the very beautiful Abishag just to keep him warm in his old age (1 Kgs 1:3). The redemption story of Esther turns on her unsurpassed beauty (Esth 2:7) and Job's story concludes with all of his renewed blessings, including having the most beautiful daughters in the land (Job 42:15).

Beauty attracts. God creates sexual desire and intends this powerful chemistry to bind man and woman. Scripture is clear that inner beauty is more desirable than outer beauty, yet physical attraction is clearly powerful and its power should not be minimized.

Wisdom

God's ideal for marriage is rooted in creation. It includes companionship, being a suitable helper, monogamy, fruitfulness, commitment and leadership. The fall threatened marriage in all these areas, resulting in polygamy, divorce, adultery, homosexuality, sterility and power struggles over leadership. Yet the Old Testament wisdom literature calls humanity back to God's original intent for marriage by inviting God's creation to embrace God's wisdom (Prov 1:7). This wisdom is epitomized in Solomon's Proverbs and Song of Songs. Solomon anthropomorphizes wisdom as a godly woman of purity and contrasts her with the foolish woman who is an adulteress (for example see Prov 5:1-4).

A godly spouse is a person of wisdom. In Proverbs Solomon shares many characteristics of wisdom and thus of a godly ideal spouse. Proverbs 31 summarizes this ideal, concluding that “a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised” (v. 30). An ideal spouse is thus godly and contrasts with a wayward adulterous woman who does not know God and has “ignored the covenant she made before God” (Prov 2:17). Thus, godliness is equivalent to wisdom and is found in the ideal spouse (Prov 9:1-6).

The wise woman in Proverbs is faithful (7:19) and committed. She understands the fleeting allure of unfaithfulness and the dire results (7:24-27). She is modest in her dress (7:10), recognizing that beauty is a gift of God not to be flaunted for selfish interests (compare 1 Tim 2:9). Wisdom (defined as a woman) is truthful in speech and motives (7:21). She is disciplined and eager to learn and is a seeker of truth (9:13). She builds up her own house with her words and actions instead of tearing it down (14:1). She is discreet (11:22) and is willing to be corrected and to learn (12:1-3). She is thus gracious (12:4) and blesses her partner with her good nature rather than injuring him with constant attacks (19:13).

Solomon’s ideal woman culminates in his description of the “wife of noble character” in Proverbs 31 (v. 10). This ideal woman is trustworthy and an asset to her husband (v. 11). She is a faithful companion (v. 12). She cares for her home and willingly works to bless it (v. 13). She is industrious and able to care for her entire household (v. 14). She rises early to provide for her family (v. 15), yet goes to bed late to have time to manage her home business (v. 18). She is able to invest on her own to make extra money for her family (v. 16). She is energetic and exercises to stay strong (v. 17). She is productive in caring for both her family and her own business (vv. 18-19, 24). She is

compassionate and cares for the needy (v. 20).

She clothes her family wisely and does not fear bad times (v. 21). Yet, she also dresses with style (v. 22). Her wisdom results in honor to her husband and allows him to concentrate on his own work (vv. 23, 27). She prepares for the future and strong in her own abilities and fear of God (v. 25). She is kind and has wise words for her children and others (v. 26). Her children and her husband praise her and know they are blessed by her (v. 28). She is truly a Godly woman in all areas of her life (v. 30).

Kostenberger and Jones (2010) point out that this poem of the ideal woman is chiasmic, “climaxing in the reference to a woman’s husband being respected at the city gates” (v. 23). This respect the man receives is due in large part to the “accomplishments of his wife” (p. 40). Wisdom is thus shown both in the characteristics of the woman and in the resulting blessing to her husband. Evidently this is a composite picture of an ideal woman. She would have great difficulty continually rising early (31:15) and going to bed late (v. 18); while at the same time working out (v. 25), clothing herself beautifully (v. 22) and running her household (v. 27) and her home-based business (v. 24). Yet she exemplifies this full and satisfying life of godly ideal.

In Proverbs Solomon also has wisdom directed at men or more generally to both males and females about the ideal person. This wisdom is connected with fear of God and obedience to God’s Word (1:2-7). The wise spouse is kind to others, including animals (12:10), generous to those in need (14:21) and cares about justice (29:7). Wisdom is industrious and hard-working (12:11), is faithful and reliable (17:17), strives for peace (17:1) and is optimistic and cheerful (15:15). Wisdom is trustworthy (29:24), tells the

truth (12:17), is gentle in its speech (12:18), can keep a secret (26:20) and is full of integrity (19:1).

The wise person listens to others (12:15), is willing to be corrected even by their spouse (15:31-32), has a humble spirit (16:18-19), is willing to confess faults (28:13) and to forgive others (19:11). Wisdom is patient and self-controlled (16:32), is restrained in words and temper (17:27), is not jealous (27:4) and is able to be self-disciplined (23:20-21). This wise, ideal person has a godly character and is a seeker after God.

This wisdom is further reflected in the explicit physical and sexual intimacy Solomon portrays. There is real tension between the inviting words of the adulteress (7:18-19) and the faithfulness and sexual purity of the virtuous woman (31:10) whose husband has full confidence in her (31:11). Yet this oneness God created between man and woman in Genesis 2:24, 25 is not simply about restraint, but about sexual union and intimacy. The ideal is expressed by Solomon in his passionate outpourings in his Song of Songs. This desire (תְּשׁוּקָה) is epitomized in Canticles 7:10, “I belong to my beloved, and his desire is for me.” Quite literally the two can be naked, as they were in the garden, and not be ashamed. The very oneness God gave to Adam and Eve, and which sin has damaged, is found in the sexual satisfaction of intimacy within the context of a wise couple who have offered themselves only to one another.

Commitment

In Joshua 1:5 God promises Joshua “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” Jesus affirms this commitment to his disciples in Matthew 28:20, “surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” God made Adam and Eve for this type of enduring commitment to each other from the beginning (Gen 2:24). They are described as

becoming one (אֶחָד) flesh (בָּשָׂר) because their attachment is so close. Physically and emotionally, man and woman leave the attachments of father and mother (Gen 2:24) and become a new family unit. This relationship of one flesh is unique to a couple in the Scriptures and not used for other close familial relationships such as parent and child (Bilezekian, 1985, p. 35). From the beginning God intends a permanent relationship of two committed people in marriage. They are not simply close; they become one.

Perhaps ironically this idea is best expressed in the Old Testament in the story of Ruth as she offers her undying devotion to her mother-in-law Naomi. “Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16). This level of commitment becomes part of Boaz’s attraction to Ruth as she seeks for him to become her guardian redeemer. He blesses Ruth by stating, “this kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor” (Ruth 3:10). Boaz then redeems Naomi’s property and takes Ruth as his wife.

Because of the fall this oneness was compromised in multiple ways and commitment was trivialized. Thus, we find the Pharisees in Matthew 19 and Mark 10 trying to trap Jesus by inviting him to enter the dispute between the schools of Shammai and Hillel over the interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 concerning whether “something indecent” (Deut 24:1), which would allow reason for divorce, was limited to sexual immorality (held by Shammai), or allowable if the wife displeased the husband for any reason (held by Hillel).

Jesus clearly sides with Shammai in limiting divorce to sexual immorality as this breaks the bond of oneness intended by God. Yet Jesus goes much deeper in emphasizing

the ideal established by God at creation, quoting the words of Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 that God made “male and female” and that the two become “one flesh.” Thus, Jesus points to the one flesh of man and woman at creation as God’s intention for marriage, even if divorce is permitted. Jesus does not comment on the text, but adds His own authoritative conclusion: “So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Matt 19:6). Jesus adds the element to the Genesis narrative that God Himself is the unifying force between man and woman. They do not simply decide to become one flesh; God has joined them together. Thus, no man (ἄνθρωπος) should attempt to separate them (v. 6).

This action by God of uniting man and woman adds a covenantal element to marriage. The commitment of one spouse to another is on the same level as God’s commitment of Himself to His creation. The Pharisees are not content with Jesus’ explanation of the permanence of marriage as they deem it incompatible with Moses’ commands in Deuteronomy 24:1ff that a man could give his wife a certificate of divorce (Matt 19:7). Jesus responds that Moses’ commands were a concession to human frailty and brokenness and intended to regulate blatant disregard of the marital structure. But it was not God’s creative intent (v. 8).

God designed marriage for permanence as one flesh. Thus, divorce is only permissible when sexual immorality (πορνεία) has broken this oneness (v. 9). In Mark 10:12, Jesus states that a woman also has the ability to divorce. Jesus’ compelling words give further meaning to our understanding of one flesh by explicitly bringing in the idea of sexual oneness, which is broken by sexual intimacy with another person. Yet even Jesus’ words allowing divorce in very limited circumstances are a concession. In the

story of Hosea God illustrates in a very intimate marriage lesson that even if sexual unfaithfulness occurs and continues, God will not stop wooing the unfaithful spouse (Hos 2:14). This level of commitment completely catches his disciples off guard and they question whether it would be better to simply not marry than to commit to a marriage which might be difficult with no ability to extricate themselves (Matt 19:10). Jesus offers help in verse 11, perhaps acknowledging that only by the power of God can humans make this permanent commitment.

Jesus' call for permanent commitment between a man and woman as part of God's original design fits precisely with His interpretations in the Sermon on the Mount regarding God's law. Jesus calls His followers back to God's intent, not to legalism. His words in Matthew 5:27-32 regarding adultery and divorce powerfully invite His followers to pursue complete unity with one's spouse. Even the sheer act of lust (*ἐπιθυμέω*) threatens this oneness (v. 28). Jesus invites a spouse to commit to the other at every level in accord with God's original design as part of a permanent and complete marital unity.

Paul also affirms God's original design of married couples being one flesh in 1 Corinthians 6:16 as he describes the impact of sexual intimacy with a prostitute. The sheer act of uniting oneself with a prostitute (v. 15) results in their becoming one. This principle is expanded to include anything taken into their body (v. 18). Thus, Paul defines sexual fidelity as refraining from any intimacy outside of marriage; he warns that that type of sexual intimacy outside the marriage bond creates a union with the other person, thus threatening the marriage commitment. Paul is so concerned with preserving this unity that he commands husbands and wives to have sexual relations within marriage in

order to avoid temptation (1 Cor 7:2-3). Indeed, the two have become so united that they no longer even have authority over their own bodies, but have yielded control of their bodies to their spouse (1 Cor 7:4). Paul clarifies that this requires mutual consent (v. 5). Yet this oneness is real, practical and permanent.

In 1 Corinthians 7:10-14 Paul also commands against divorce because of God's creation of oneness between spouses, even if one is an unbeliever (v. 13). This unity is so strong that this commitment sanctifies (ἀγιάζω) or makes holy both an unbelieving spouse and their children (v. 14). Yet even in this commitment, there is freedom to let go if one spouse leaves the other as the unity and oneness have now been broken (v. 15).

The commitment required to continue to offer love even in the face of difficult circumstances is enormous. Yet God invites humans to commit to the permanence of marriage in the same way God commits to love His children unconditionally.

Health

Healthiness in Scripture is not primarily about physical health, but emotional health. A healthy person understands his or her identity as a child of God (Rom 8:16). Thus, he or she can act from a "Spirit of sonship," not a spirit of fear (Rom 8:15). Children of God have no fear of being separated from the love of God (Rom 8:38-39). Their orientation is positive as they understand that God is faithful and reliable (2 Cor 1:18). Because they can trust God's promises a godly person understands that God's desire is to say "yes" to them and to bless them (2 Cor 1:20-22). Healthy people thus can rest in God's unconditional love and faithfulness. This attitude enables them to offer this kind of love to others (2 Cor 3:2).

Indeed, it is God's explicit call to offer godly love to one another (1 John 4:7). In

Philippians 2, Paul invites humans to not only look out for their “own interests, but also the interests of others” (v. 4). This invitation is linked with having the same attitude of service as Jesus (v. 5). Yet Jesus does not serve out of a desire to ingratiate. Instead, in verse 6, Jesus is “in very nature God,” yet is willing to humble Himself and refuses to hold on to His “equality with God” (v. 6). Jesus takes “the very nature of a servant” (v. 7) and humbles Himself to die on a cross (v. 8). This servant leadership is based on strength, not weakness. It comes from Jesus’ understanding of His identity as God, yet a willingness to humble Himself as a man.

This spirit of humility and service is the basis of a healthy person, and therefore of a healthy spouse. Such persons can establish boundaries for themselves and their relationship because they understand their own identities. But because they are strong, they can humble themselves and serve one another. It is in this context that Paul is speaking to husbands and wives in Ephesians 5. In understanding Paul’s command, it is helpful to recognize that Ephesians 5:18-23 is one sentence in Greek. Thus, in verse 18, Paul begins by contrasting between those who “get drunk on wine” and those who are “filled with the Spirit,” and continues this thought by inviting his readers to speak, sing, make music and give thanks as part of this Spirit-filled life. Paul concludes with a general call to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (v. 21).

In verse 22 Paul transitions to a more specific call to husbands and wives. But the link with the general call to mutual submission is explicit as verse 22 does not even include the verb submit (ὑποτάσσω), which is implied and “borrowed” from verse 21. Thus, a wife’s submission to her husband is on the same level of mutual submission required of all believers in their relationships. It is a submission chosen by those filled

with the Spirit. Although ὑποτάσσω (submit) may sometimes reflect hierarchy, Paul clarifies that he intends mutual submission in verse 21 by stating this submission is “to one another” and “out of reverence for Christ.” Indeed, Paul’s use of the middle voice in verse 21 invites the idea that people are submitting themselves from their own volition, rather than as something demanded of them.

Thus, in verse 22, Paul invites the wife to be part of a mutual submission with her husband as commanded in verse 21. In verse 23 Paul adds the new thought that this submission should be similar to the way the body of Christ submits to Jesus, her Savior. There has been much discussion of how to interpret “head” (κεφαλή). But in line with the mutual submission already described and the reference to oneness in verse 31 which quotes from Genesis 2:24, it seems best to understand the man’s role in verse 23 as one who serves and nurtures his wife to bring her to salvation (σωτήρ). This understanding requires a healthy person to recognize his or her value and self-worth in Christ, but offers the gift of submission to his or her partner.

In verse 25, Paul invites the husband to the even more difficult role of loving his wife in the same way that “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” Paul offers much more advice to the husband, possibly because this was counter-cultural. Wives were expected to submit to a man in a patriarchal society, but for a man to love his wife and submit to her as an act of humility and service was radical. This is “agape” love and is to be modeled on Jesus’ own love for his children and willingness to humble himself to serve his church, even to the point of death. In verses 26, 27, Paul’s explicit goal for the husband in offering this kind of love is to bring his wife to holiness, “without stain or wrinkle” (v. 27).

In verses 28, 29, Paul offers a further call to men to nurture their wives. Just as a man would “feed and care” for his own body, so he should offer this same loving support to his spouse. In this invitation we again find the principle of health. The man should also love his own body and care for it. He should not neglect his own care for that of another person. Instead his own self-love is seen as foundational to the love for his spouse. The man is invited to love and care for his spouse in the same way Jesus cares for His body (v. 29-30).

Indeed, Paul finds it obvious that this is the case as believers are all members of one body, the body of Christ. Thus, a man would obviously want to care for his wife since they are one body. Paul returns to Genesis 2:24 to make this explicit as he quotes it in verse 31. From the very beginning God made man and woman one. This oneness is a profound mystery (v. 32) which is expressed in God’s unity of His church as His body (Eph 3:9-10). Similarly, since husband and wife are one body, they should take care of each other in the same way they would care for their own bodies. This is a mystery.

Paul’s final admonition in Ephesian 5:33 encapsulates the understanding of a healthy person and echoes Jesus’ command to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt 22:39). Paul assumes self-love by inviting the husband “to love his wife as he loves himself” (Eph 5:33). In both commands, we find self-love and a healthy self-esteem as the basis for love of others. This self-love comes from an understanding that we love one another “as I have loved you” (John 13:34). In recognizing one’s value as God’s child a spouse is then able to offer the same kind of love he or she has received from God. This is the epitome of “health” as this kind of God-esteem is not dependent on circumstances, but on faith.

Similarly, Paul concludes verse 33 by inviting a wife to “respect her husband.” This respect (φοβέω) is the same fear Paul invites believers to have in verse 21 as they mutually submit out of “reverence” for Christ. Thus, Paul is inviting the wife to have respect for her husband and his dignity in the same way she would have it for Christ. Thus, we again find healthy God-esteem as the basis for a healthy marriage relationship. The healthy person has learned, as Paul has, “to be content” in all circumstances (Phil 4:11-12). Rooted in Jesus, a couple is able to move towards offering unconditional love to each other because they are certain of their own identity.

Summary

The ideal spouse in Scriptures is one who looks like God. Indeed, Jesus is explicitly described as the ideal spouse of His bride, the church. As the ideal spouse, God delights in His bride and is intentionally involved in preparing her for marriage. God is completely committed to His bride and refuses to divorce her even when she is unfaithful. This faithful commitment by God to His people experienced in the vertical relationship becomes the defining characteristic of the horizontal human marriage relationship. In this way the ideal spouse knows his or her identity as God’s beloved, which is the basis for of love for ones’ spouse.

Indeed, as God creates marriage in Eden, He endows marriage with His own characteristics and gives Adam a helper so he will not be alone, one who can help him become more like God. By design the two become one and leave other relationships to prioritize marriage. In this unity, they take on their God-given purpose of rulership and procreation.

There are certain biblical characteristics that are helpful to people in making this

kind of commitment and thus making them ideal for marriage. They have a willingness to take personal responsibility and speak the truth in love to one another. There is a physical and sexual attraction which bind them emotionally to their spouse. They have godly wisdom expressed in noble character rooted in God's wisdom. They understand the total commitment God offers and are able to extend this commitment to their spouse. Finally, they are healthy in that they understand their identity as God's children and are willing to humbly serve the other and are positively inclined towards their spouse.

These characteristics of the ideal spouse will need to be developed into a workable curriculum in chapter 4. The challenge will be to avoid making a list of ideal characteristics but to distill broad principles to practically assist a person seeking to find a godly mate. Obviously, a person would desire a mate with as many godly characteristics as possible, yet the characteristics focused on here are those hopefully associated with achieving a greater probability of successful marriage. However, there is much yet to be discovered.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW OF PREMARITAL EDUCATION

Literature relating to marriage today is replete with numerous books, magazine articles, scholarly research and web pages designed to help a person have a happy marriage. Most of the literature relates to finding the “right” person to marry. If one can do this the assumption is that one will be happy. However there is a growing trend among Christian writers such as Gary Chapman (Chapman, 2010), Mark Driscoll (Driscoll, 2013), and Gary Thomas (Thomas, 2000) towards understanding that a happy marriage also requires *being* the right person. Until the last few decades, however, there was little academic research on the factors that help make a “happy” marriage or even if people are “happier” if they are married.

In 2000, Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher made waves with their publication of *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People are Happier, Healthier, and Better off Financially* (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Their book and subsequent research have highlighted the positive impact of marriage in our society on the health, happiness and welfare of the individuals in a marriage (S. P. Gardner, 2001). However, despite the acknowledged benefits of marriage, divorce rates remain high and “happiness” elusive (Barna Group, 2008). Yet there are methods for increasing the probability of marital health, satisfaction and longevity.

The previous chapter focused on biblical principles of identity, attraction,

community and commitment as important in marital satisfaction. This chapter focuses on two other areas of particular interest in marital satisfaction. First, it focuses on the importance, various types, positive impact and benefits of premarital education. Second, it explores questions concerning the efficacy of premarital education and timing of this education, and literature relating to choosing a spouse with characteristics important to a healthy marriage.

Importance of Premarital Education

Premarital education has been around for decades in North America with the earliest known interventions recorded at the Merrill-Palmer Institute in 1932 (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). In the earliest decades this premarital preparation consisted primarily of counseling by clergy, but it gradually developed into a more systematic approach (Stahmann & Hiebert, 1997). Still today the vast majority of premarital education is provided by religious institutions (Hart, 2003; S. M. Stanley & Markman, 1997).

Throughout the years the divorce rate has remained remarkably constant at near the 50% mark (P.R. Amato, 2010) while at the same time 93% of Americans rate having a happy marriage as one of their most important objectives and 70% believe that marriage is a lifelong commitment that should only be ended in extreme circumstances (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). There is a certain irony in that many Americans desire a happy marriage yet only about one-third of marrying couples participate in premarital education (Morris, McMillan, Duncan, & Larson 2011; B. Silliman, 2003) with those already more religious, mature, kind and stable more likely to participate (McAllister, Duncan, & Busby, 2014). Not enough is known about why couples choose to participate or not (Duncan, Holman, & Yang, 2007); although research indicates cost and time commitment

may act as deterrents for some (Blair & Cordova, 2009).

Indeed, W. Bradford Wilcox (2010) argues that there is becoming a greater class divide in marriage in the United States as those with greater income are more likely to have happier marriages and those with lower socio-economic status are becoming increasingly dissatisfied. It is likely that education relating to relationships is a part of this divide.

This irony is deepened as research continues to show the importance of premarital education on the health of a marriage (Carroll & Doherty, 2003), including “evidence of short and long-term improvements in satisfaction, interactive competence, and marital stability” (Silliman, 2003, p. 138). While there is mounting evidence of premarital education’s impact on the health of a marriage, there is less evidence at this point of its impact on marital satisfaction (Hudson, 2008). This has led many social scientists to focus more on the stability of marriage as a societal benefit than focusing on the happiness of those within a marriage (National Marriage Project, 1999).

To this end, the U.S. Federal Government designated \$500 million to support premarital and marital education programs (See discussion in Halford, Markman, & Stanley, 2008; Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008). Various state governments have also either required some form of premarital education or offered a discount or waiver of fees for a marriage license to couples who verify they have engaged in premarital counseling (Carroll, 2003; Stanley, 2001). The government is concerned about the health and duration of marriage due to the well-documented costs to society both to individuals who get divorced and to the children of those marriages (Fagan & Rector, 2000; Stanley, 2001). Waite and Gallagher (2000) chronicle the enormous impact

of divorce relating to higher mortality rates, destructive behavior, wealth disparity and unhappiness. Rank and Hirschl (1999) have documented the enormous risk of poverty on children of divorce and Paul Amato (2001) has extensively researched and reported on the lower levels of academic achievement and psychological health of children of divorce and greater levels of health, economic prosperity and lessened domestic violence for married couples (Amato, 2000; Amato, 2005).

A Brief History of Premarital Education

The National Marriage Project (1999) has catalogued the social history of marriage in the United States. In the early days, privacy was paramount and marital education was a last resort for fear of intrusion into the sacred ground of the marriage. But as females flooded into the workplace in the 1960's attitudes changed and early intervention programs became more prevalent (see Hudson, 2008). Some early efforts were led by David and Vera Mace who focused on marriage improvement and by Father Gabriel Calvo and his development of "Marriage Encounter," a seminar for married couples. In the 1970s there was a significant proliferation of premarital education programs which coincided with the rise of no-fault divorce and the corresponding increase in divorce (see discussion in Vail, 2013). In 1977, H. Norman Wright developed a premarital education program *Before You Say I Do*, which focused on developing skills beneficial for a marriage relationship. This program proved to be a catalyst for more formal premarital training programs.

Today there is a wide range of premarital education available. In their review of the types of existing premarital education, Silliman and Schumm (1999) found the topic selection depended on the expertise of the provider: "religious based programs most often

address spiritual and ecclesiastical issues. Medical providers stress health and sexuality issues. And therapists tend to emphasize family background and couple problems” (p. 24). Yet research has shown that varied formats and curricula may be equally effective (Carroll, 2003; Hawkins, Stanley, Blanchard, & Albright, 2012) and that in therapeutic situations guided self-help is just as effective as face to face therapy (Cuijpers, Donker, van Straten, Li, & Anderson, 2010). In a recent study, Futris et al., (2011) compared engaged couples using PREPARE (PREPARE/ ENRICH was developed by Dr. David Olson and was made available in 1980) material and found that both men and women reported similar increases in understanding and applying relationship enhancement strategies. They also reported increased confidence in their abilities to resolve future conflicts whether they were part of six joint sessions with other couples or a one-day group workshop. Other studies found similar results (McGeorge & Carlson, 2006).

Williams (2007) summarizes the various types of premarital education currently available. These include skills-based programs which teach communication and conflict resolution and programs focusing on the use of premarital inventories which provide individualized feedback based on various topics deemed important to marital satisfaction. A detailed analysis of various programs used today can be found in several recent doctoral research projects (Forkner, 2013, pp. 43-53; Hudson, 2008, pp. 33-38; Vail, 2013, pp. 35-54) and other journal articles (e.g. Groom, 2001).

Self-directed premarital education has also proven to be effective, although there is still limited research on this topic (Gottman, Ryan, Swanson, C. & Swanson, K. 2005; McAllister, Duncan, & Hawkins, 2012). Even the sheer act of providing online material for married couples provided positive changes in empathic communication and

satisfaction when utilized, providing the opportunities for millions (Duncan, Steed, & Needham, 2009). Indeed Larson, Vatter, Galbraith, Holman, and Stahmann (2007) found that engaged or seriously dating couples who completed RELATE (an online comprehensive premarital assessment questionnaire first developed by Wesley Burr in 1980), and received therapist assistance in its interpretation, significantly improved in their perceived readiness for marriage and ability to deal with future issues; it also had a small benefit on those who did not have therapist assistance. Recent research also confirms blended learning incorporating self-directed and directed learning is more effective than mere self-directed study alone at bringing long-term change (Means, 2010).

Most studies up to the present, however, which have focused on the effectiveness of premarital education have not distinguished between premarital education and premarital counseling, which usually involves deeper self-study and couple intervention (Duncan, Childs, & Larson, 2010). Yet any premarital education has proven helpful.

In short there are many personal and societal reasons for couples to stay married. And most couples want to be married forever. But many couples lack the commitment or tools necessary to stay married. Premarital education can help. But, how much and who can it help?

Positive Effects of Premarital Education

Increased interpersonal skills: In 2003, Carroll and Doherty (2003) performed a comprehensive, meta-analysis review of the effectiveness of premarital programs based on a study of 23 published studies evaluating 13 specific premarital programs. They concluded that the “premarital education programs are generally effective in producing

immediate gains in communication skills, conflict management skills, and overall relationship quality, and that these gains appear to hold for at least six months to three years (p. 26). Not surprisingly they found significant and immediate gains in interpersonal skills such as communication, problem solving and empathy. Indeed, Busby, Ivey, Harris, and Ates (2007) concluded that the simple fact of slowing down and taking time to hear the perspective of the other partner is helpful and linked to preventing decline in marital satisfaction.

Increased marital quality: In their large-scale landmark study, Scott Stanley et al., found a significant relationship between the number of hours spent in premarital education and positive marital satisfaction (Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman, 2006). They reported that premarital education is significantly correlated with higher levels of marital quality and lower levels of marital conflict and divorce (p. 120). They also found a gradual increase in the effectiveness of premarital education between one and twenty hours, with limited impact after that (p. 122).

Increased communication skills: David Olson, the developer of PREPARE/ENRICH, a premarital assessment tool which has been used by over 3,000,000 couples, has also been part of various research projects examining its impact. One study suggested the PREPARE program significantly increased marital satisfaction, helping couples become “vitalized” (most happy) and less “conflicted” (least happy and prone to divorce) (Knutson, 2003). Another longitudinal study tracking 25 married couples one to five years after marriage who had used the PREPARE program found significant increases in communication and conflict resolution skills (Olson & Miller, 2007). A more recent study of PREPARE participants also found self-reported increases

in confidence, satisfaction and conflict management skills (Futris, Barton, Aholou, & Seponski, 2011).

Less distress: A broader look at marriage and relational education also found persistent and significant effects of premarital education on communication skills and relationship quality (Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008). In another study examining premarital education in the military, researchers found that although the education did not improve the marital satisfaction of participants, they experienced much lower levels of distress when faced with difficulties and were more likely to seek marriage counseling and received more benefit from it (Schumm, Silliman, & Bell, 2000). A slightly earlier study of 14,000 military personnel led by the same researcher, found those without premarital counseling had the lowest scores on marital satisfaction and that satisfaction increased with length of counseling up to a certain point (Schumm, Resnick, Silliman, & Bell, 1998).

Lower divorce rates: Two other studies concentrated on couples who completed premarital education as part of local church communities. Williams and Jurich examined 333 couples who participated in FOCCUS (Facilitating Open Couple Communication, Understanding & Study, developed by a team of therapists in 1985) as part of their church marital preparation program and found a divorce rate of 7.2% after four years of marriage, about half the expected rate (Williams & Jurich, 1995). Similarly, Latimer and McManus (n.d.) studied couples who during an eight-year period completed comprehensive premarital education in a local church program which included mentoring. They found a divorce rate of only 3.1% of the 222 couples. Two recent studies as part of doctoral research also found a strong positive correlation between

premarital education and increased marital satisfaction (Maybruch, 2012; Vail, 2013).

Increased marital satisfaction: Other studies have shown similar improvement in marital satisfaction rates following premarital education. Carlson and his team found couples (both for men and women) who had completed the PREPARE program had statistically significant improvements in the short-term in marital satisfaction and lower relationship conflict. The men also reported a decrease in individual distress after the wedding (Carlson, 2012). Several older studies also found higher levels of marital satisfaction for couples who had completed premarital education (Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Storaasli, 1988; Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, & Clements, 1993).

Facilitator matters: In a different twist, Williams, Riley, Risch, and Van Dyke (1999) surveyed couples who had completed premarital education on the value of the FOCCUS premarital inventory to determine its impact on their new marriages. About two-thirds of couples indicated it was a valuable experience with education done by clergy perceived as most helpful. Couples indicated the most useful component was simply discussion with their partner. It is useful to notice that enhanced communication is consistently seen as one of the primary benefits of premarital education and has been seen consistently in numerous studies (Bruhn, 2004; Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003; Hawkins & Fackrell, 2010; Oliver & Miller, 1994). Simply talking about their future lives together is helpful prior to marriage, particularly when done with a skilled facilitator.

Efficacy of Premarital Education

Olson and his team state, “Good premarital counseling helps the couple get their marriage off to a more positive start and has been shown to reduce their chance of

divorce by 30%,” citing Scott Stanley’s landmark 2001 article (see also discussion in Olson, Olson, & Larson, 2012). Stanley, however, is extremely balanced both in his high value of premarital education while recognizing that “little research has been conducted on either prevention-oriented or enrichment-oriented programs over longer terms. This is especially true when it comes to research on the outcomes of the use of various well-developed premarital assessment instruments” (Stanley, 2001, p. 276).

Yet this lack of demonstrated research does not diminish his fervor for premarital education. While admitting it will take decades of research to answer the question of effectiveness, Stanley outlines four benefits for premarital education. First, it slows couples down. Second, it conveys the message that marriage is important and worthy of commitment. Third, couples can learn that others want to help. Fourth, empirical research suggests measurable benefits for premarital education. Stanley offers as example the PREP (Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program, first developed by Howard Markman) program and studies of its impact showing an increase in positive communication and lower likelihood of divorce as measurable evidence. Stanley concludes that despite the “absence of data...we know enough to act” (pp. 276-278).

There are logical reasons why premarital education would seem beneficial despite the lack of conclusive evidence. Two of the leading researchers on premarital education have come to the common-sense conclusion that it is more effective to preemptively educate premarital couples than to restore damaged relationships (Carroll & Doherty, 2003, pp. 105, 116; Stanley, 2001, pp. 120-122). It makes sense and has long been understood that identifying risks earlier in a relationship makes it easier to deal with them (Markman & Floyd, 1980). Research also provides evidence for the premise that

premarital communication skills lead to positive marital outcomes (Gottman, 1993, 1994; Markman & Hahlweg, 1993). But it has been easier to teach couples to decrease negative statements than increase positive ones (Wadsworth & Markham, 2012).

Much more research is needed as most studies on efficacy of premarital education have focused on a limited group of non-distressed, middle-class, well-educated couples and set in either a university/clinical location or religious setting (Adler-Baeder, 2010; Fawcett et al., 2010).

There is also evidence that premarital education is self-selecting and those most optimistic about marriage are most likely to choose premarital education and it is likely that couples who most need premarital education are the least willing to do so (Mock, 2014). Those who choose to participate have the greatest level of optimism for their marriage and these perceptions tend to be self-fulfilling (Green & Miller, 2013). The very perception of positivity and openness by one's spouse impacts commitment and willingness to work on the relationship by the other spouse, especially for the female (Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 1999). Indeed, premarital education has proven very effective for couples currently satisfied and committed to their relationship (Halford & Bodenmann, 2013).

The question of efficacy is further complicated by the question of what constitutes effective premarital education. Is its perceived helpfulness by the couple or long-term satisfaction rates? For example, in research of couples married in a Presbyterian church within the past five years who received mandated premarital education, Calvert and Bridges (2006) found that although the initial willingness to participate impacted couples' self-report of the effectiveness of therapy and future willingness to attend

counseling, it was not predictive of marital satisfaction. One study found increased communication helped men, but hurt marriages where women now communicated better about issues with their marriage (Schilling et al., 2003).

The question also remains as to whether distressed couples are as likely to be assisted by premarital education. Several studies have found that couples with higher risk profiles (e.g. nonreligious or premarital cohabitation) are less likely to participate in premarital education (Doss et al., 2009; Halford, O'Donnell, Lizzio, & Wilson, 2006; Sullivan, & Bradbury, 1997). However a study of married couples in Louisiana found formal premarital education had the greatest impact on higher risk couples, reducing their risk of divorce (Nock, Sanchez, & Wright, 2008). It appears logical that distressed couples would benefit from premarital education, but this is largely un-researched. Indeed, it is possible that distressed couples who receive premarital education might simply decide not to marry! On the other hand, since stress has such a powerful detrimental effect on marriages, it is not surprising that several recent studies have found marital education has an even more powerful impact on couples already stressed (Beach, Hurt, Fincham, McNair, & Stanley, 2011; Cowan, 2009).

Part of the difficulty of determining the impact of premarital education on marital satisfaction is the lack of long-term studies (Fawcett et al., 2010) and the possibility that the effects of premarital education diminish over time. Indeed, Fawcett et al., found almost all recent studies focused on relatively new marriages of less than three years. Of recent studies, only a few studied couples with an average relationship length of three to five years (Knutson & Olson, 2003) and only Wong (2003) evaluated premarital couples with an average six-to-ten-year relationship history (Fawcett et al., p. 233). Yet it is likely

that the impact of premarital education varies over time. For example, Williams, Riley, Risch, and Van Dyke (1999) analyzed data from surveys of 1,210 couples married from one to eight years and found that 66.2% believed their premarital education to be valuable but that the “perceived value declined with length of the marriage” (p. 281).

Because of the lack of longitudinal studies on the impact of premarital education on marital satisfaction, several recent studies supported what Scott Stanley concluded, that there is simply insufficient research at this point to state with any certainty the efficacy of premarital education for generalized populations (Green & Miller, 2013; Hudson, 2008; Jakubowski, Milne, Brunner, & Miller, 2004; Vail, 2013).

Perhaps the most persuasive recent study to reach this conclusion is the meta-analysis study by Elizabeth Fawcett et al. They looked at 28 code-able studies starting in 1975 and found moderate impact in improving couple communication, but only when analyzing studies using self-report measurements was there far less significant impact (Fawcett et al., 2010). Fawcett et al. state, “Specifically, we found these prevention programs do not improve relationship quality/satisfaction when unpublished studies are included in the analysis” (p. 235). They opined the reason for a lack of demonstration of the long-term impact of premarital education on marital satisfaction may be linked to the honeymoon effect, the well-recognized understanding that engaged couples see themselves as extremely happy with little room for improvement (see Halford, O’Donnell, Lizzio, & Wilson, 2006). They conclude the lack of long-term studies severely hampers the ability to generalize conclusions as to the efficacy of premarital education.

However, based on their meta-analysis review of current research, Fawcett et al.,

(2010) were optimistic about the impact of premarital education on relationship quality and satisfaction, but skeptical due to the lack of longitudinal studies confirming the impact. On the other hand, they were generally positive about the documented impact of premarital education on the communication skills of married couples (p. 235). This impact is documented by a recent meta-analysis study by Blanchard et al. (2009), which found a measurable impact on communication skills by couples who engaged in premarital education. Blanchard et al., also found there was a larger impact reported from studies using observational methods than those using self-report methods. Although they were uncertain of the cause of this finding, Fawcett et al., interpreted it as underlining the difference between observational methods, which indicate acquisition of communication skills from a researcher's perspective, and self-report methods, which indicate the experience of the couple in implementing these skills into daily life (Fawcett et al., p. 235). Simply put, it may be easier to communicate well in research settings than in real life, particularly as most premarital education is not tailored to specific couple needs. It is thus uncertain that acquired communication skills will make long-term differences to the couple (Halford, 2004).

Fawcett et al., conclude their meta-analysis study with three noteworthy implications for premarital education. First, based on current research, teaching communication and problem-solving skills as part of premarital education is positively correlated with increased marital satisfaction and longevity. Second, couples need help in implementing these skills into daily life. Third, there is a need for more intentional and creative thinking about how to do premarital education in the 21st century (Fawcett et al., pp. 235-236).

Hawkins et al. (2012) also lament the one-size-fits-all current approach to premarital education. Indeed, it is obvious upon reflection that times have changed. A large percentage of couples today live together before marriage with the duration of these cohabiting relationships usually less than twenty-four months (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). But the trend is for more cohabiting couples to marry, although taking longer to make that commitment (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008). Thus, issues relating to cohabitation and expectations are more important and more impactful in premarital education since commitment cannot be assumed (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markham, 2009).

Indeed, since many couples cohabit before marriage today, “premarital education” is often too late. As Fawcett et al., conclude, “Furthermore, little attention is currently given to pre-coupling education that is aimed at teaching single young adults how to choose a spouse wisely and increase quality marital matching” (Fawcett et al., 2010, p. 236). I agree. Yet, while there is a continuing paucity of couples engaged in premarital education today, there is an absolute dearth of education in instructing young people how to choose a healthy and godly spouse.

Timing of Relationship Education

In 2005, the U.S. Government appropriated \$500 million over the subsequent five years for marriage strengthening activities, specifically authorizing relationship education in high school to teach skills necessary for healthy marriages as one of the allowable programs. Unsurprisingly, there was very little documented research to support the effectiveness of this type of education (Adler-Baeder, Kerpelman, Schramm, Higginbotham, & Paulk, 2007). Silliman and Schumm (2004) have shown, at least, that youth are interested in relationship/marriage education. While the research is extremely

limited, studies have shown that relationship education for high school youth can be effective in teaching skills, but the impact reported has been minor (Adler-Baeder, Kerpelman, et al., 2007; Gardner, Giese, & Parrot, 2004).

Kerpelman et al., also found some impact on relational beliefs and interest in future education, but also found that this impact diminished within a two-year period (Kerpelman et al., 2009). This diminishing of relational skills is expected, however, (Gardner, 2007), and may simply require more point-to-point teaching of skills over the course of time (Kerpelman et al., 2009).

Still, most researchers agree that relationship education is vital during adolescence due to the formation of personal development (Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, & Willoughby, 2004). Indeed the quality of adolescent romantic relationships has been found to be a strong predictor of well-being among adolescents, but the presence of a relationship may be correlated with depression, especially among females (Joyner & Udry, 2000). Healthy relationships have been shown to build self-worth and self-competence in adolescents and are very important to youth (Collins, 2003), but adolescents tend to have idealistic and unrealistic views about relationships and are thus in great need of accurate information regarding relationships (Montgomery, 2005).

In her dissertation focused on relationship education among Orthodox Jews, Maybruch (2012) explores the stages of adolescence, concurrent hormonal changes and cognitive and skills development, concluding, “late adolescence may serve as an ideal time for relationship education – to lay the groundwork for successful one-on-one relationships” (p. 27).

In sum, although there is not a great deal of research on the efficacy of

relationship education among high school students, what research there is strongly points to the importance of this education as part of a larger growth in the understanding about what factors make for healthy relationships.

Obviously the rationale for providing relationship education among engaged couples is that they are most interested then (Silliman & Schumm, 1999). But Russell and Lyster (1992) found that couples within two months of marriage were actually less interested in talking about issues or developing new skills, possibly for fear of jeopardizing their future marriage and theorized it may be better to wait until after the wedding to communicate more deeply.

Other studies reveal that the real effects of relationship education may not be visible until years later in a marriage (Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Storaasli, 1988) and that some effects on marital satisfaction are not accurately measurable until four or five years later (Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003).

Relationship education has a positive impact on individuals and couples, but a better understanding of long-term efficacy awaits the results of longitudinal studies. Demonstrably, couples with greater relational education have greater marital satisfaction and lower divorce rates. Perhaps this education merely reflects an openness to self-actualization and that people who are willing to grow are more likely to have happy marriages. The next section explores that possibility by looking at factors that make a person more likely to be in a happy, more satisfying marriage and thus, by definition, also examines the most effective components of premarital education programming.

Research Relating to Characteristics of a Healthy Spouse

Recent research reveals two important factors regarding premarital education. First, as discussed, although it is more effective to preemptively educate premarital couples than restore damaged relationships, most preventive education has been limited to either adolescents or engaged couples (Gurman & Fraenkel, 2002). Second, individuals or couples can possess or learn characteristics that impact the health of marriages. As an example, increase in church attendance and spirituality have been linked with lower divorce rates and higher marital satisfaction (Ford, 2010, pp. 31-38).

In a 1994 article, Larson and Holman examined the last fifty years of research on premarital education and synthesized the results into three categories of premarital factors that influence the health and stability of a marriage: (a) background and contextual factors; (b) individual traits and behaviors; and (c) couples' interactional processes (Larson, & Holman, 1994). Background factors with predictive qualities for marital health include health of their parents' marriage (Glenn & Kramer, 1987), divorce, ethnicity, education and external pressures. Individual traits with predictive qualities of marital health include "emotional health" (Kelly & Conley, 1987), depression and dysfunctional beliefs. Behaviors such as blaming, victimization, and oversimplification have all been linked to unhappiness in marriage (Christensen & Jacobson, 2000). Larson and Holman (1994) conclude that individual personality traits are more important to a healthy marriage than background factors, but that background factors have a high impact on personality traits.

Interactional processes with predictive quality include such things as "homogamy" (Kurdek, 1991), (i.e. couples with more in common are more likely to have

healthy marriages); similarities in attitudes and beliefs, length of friendship and similar understanding of gender roles. Larson and Holman (1994) state these are correlatively predictive for groups, but not necessarily for individual couples. Yet research confirms what common sense suggests, that premarital factors influence the health of the marriage.

In the same vein, commitment to the relationship is enormously important. When couples are highly committed, premarital education is more effective than when commitment is lower. So when couples' satisfaction declines, highly committed couples work on their relationship, whereas lower commitment couples think of ending it (Markman & Rhoades, 2012).

For decades, researchers have studied the characteristics of "healthy" marriages to understand the various factors that can impact a marriage. This list includes: love, reciprocity, hopefulness, communication, personal intimacy, patience, personal identity, persistence, congruence, and more (Fenell, 1993; Robinson & Blanton, 1993). Recently, this list has expanded to include spirituality (Hunler & Gencoz, 2005). A 2008 study of Asian-Indian Americans led by George Kallampally, found a high predictive ability for spirituality and marital satisfaction with a strong connection between spirituality and positive feelings and lesser instances of negative feelings (Kallampally et al., 2008).

Most young adults are not taught the realities of marriage or the factors that can help make marriage more successful. One attempt at this education which has garnered much media attention is "Marriage 101: Building Loving and Lasting Partnerships." This is an undergraduate course at Northwestern University begun in 2001 under the direction of Arthur Nielsen (Nielsen et al., 2004). The course had seven areas of focus: (a) love is not enough; (b) personal maturity and self-understanding; (c) capacity to assess

compatibility with prospective partners; (d) intimacy and personal barriers to achieving it; (e) sexual satisfaction and compatibility; (f) conflict resolution and communication skills; and (g) specific marital challenges. These seven foci are based on specific research on marital satisfaction and an understanding that a healthy individual is a necessary component of a healthy marriage and that healthy marriages have a powerful impact on the health of the individual (Gottman & Notarius, 2002).

Marriage 101 is an attempt to educate young people on the importance of finding someone compatible as it is easy to be misled into a difficult marriage by the pursuit of sexual pleasure, excessive idealization and various subconscious goals (Pines, 1999). Similarly there is the recognition that the ability to offer and receive intimacy is vital to a healthy relationship and thus should be a goal in seeking a marriage partner (Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002). Stanley, Markham, et al., and many other researchers, also found higher commitment led to more marital satisfaction and negative communication patterns were very detrimental to a relationship.

Another important factor for healthy relationships is communication and conflict resolution skills; much research has focused on these skills, with John Gottman and company leading the way (Gottman, Coab, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998). In this landmark longitudinal study, Gottman, Coab, et al., were able to predict eventual six-year marital happiness and stability or eventual divorce through newlywed interactions within the first months of marriage. In looking at various process models they found “the husband's rejecting his wife's influence, negative startup by the wife, a lack of de-escalation of low intensity negative wife affect by the husband, or a lack of de-escalation of high intensity husband negative affect by the wife, and a lack of physiological soothing of the male...all

predicting divorce” (p. 5). Gottman, Coab, et al., called these processes the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” and saw in them the husband’s unwillingness to accept his wife’s influence and subsequent escalation (p. 6). The premarital education model of focusing on communication skills and conflict resolution as primary comes from this conceptual framework.

While important, other researchers assert this focus has neglected other factors important to marital satisfaction that may be more primary. For example, Sullivan et al., explored marital satisfaction from a social support perspective, focusing on the importance of friendship and looking at topics that cause couples to fight, rather than their method of fighting (Sullivan, Pasch, Eldridge, & Bradbury, 1998). Similarly, Fowers (2001) sees the foundational values of courage, honesty, generosity, and self-restraint at play in couples’ interactions and that developing these values is primary to teaching couples effective communication and conflict resolution. Indeed Fincham et al., (2007) make a compelling argument for seeing conflict resolution as only a sideline in marital health [building on the work of Thomas Bradbury (Bradbury, 2004)] despite the acknowledged well-documented impact of conflict on marriages (Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007). They make their case based on the results of longitudinal studies showing conflict is only a small part of marital outcomes; data suggesting conflict is not as useful a predictive factor as once thought; and examples of reversal of conflict and healing of marriages (Beach, Fincham, Amir, & Leonard, 2005).

Fincham, Hall and Beach, (2006) find an increasing trend towards understanding the positive constructs at work in a marriage and that good marriages are a powerful force for meaning in life. As part of this “non-linear” understanding of marriage, they identify

three powerful constructs that can alter the future: first, forgiveness; second, commitment and sacrifice (Adams & Jones, 1997), which alter the nature of relationship and actually provide a benefit, rather than a net cost; and third, sanctification, the process whereby life is seen to have meaning within the divine context (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). Karney (2007) responds by suggesting research on marital health should not move its focus away from understanding conflict resolution, but needs to narrow its question to understanding the goals of marital education, since most people know what they would like to do, but have difficulty actually doing it.

It is precisely because of difficulty in doing what one *knows* that spirituality is important. In 2010, Annette Mahoney published a meta-analysis of 184 studies linking religiosity and spirituality with family and marriage. She found higher ‘sanctification’ of marriage by men and women is related to higher marital quality and that similarities in a couple’s belief about sanctity of marriage is more important than either spouse’s individual belief (Mahoney, 2010). David and Stafford (2013) affirmed this relationship, finding religious homogamy has positive effects on marital satisfaction. They found one’s individual relationship with God is important as it results in religious communication between spouses, leading to greater marital quality. They noted greater willingness to forgive oneself and partner are linked to greater marital satisfaction.

This research conforms to the consistent findings of greater “religiosity” of married persons correlated to marital stability and quality (Allgood et al., 2009; Barkhordari, 2017; Shearin, 2016). This seems reasonable as religions instruct their followers to be loving, patient, forgiving and other traits consistent with positive marital outcomes and that as couples hold marriage as “sacred,” marital satisfaction increases

(Stafford, David, & McPherson, 2014). In fact, another 2014 study shows the religious commitment of one's spouse is strongly correlated toward marital satisfaction if the person is looking for a spiritual spouse, but not otherwise. Indeed religion was very important when a person chose another person who had the same strong sense of religious fervor, but actually had a negative impact if the person was looking for a strongly religious mate, but chose someone who was not (Perry, 2015).

It seems likely from the current research that people who have internalized their religious beliefs about character and the sacred calling of marriage have stronger and happier marriages.

Spiritual Wisdom and Choosing a Godly Spouse

Apart from scholarly research, there is a plethora of advice on how to have a godly marriage. Yet there is far less about how to *choose* a godly spouse, though there are some valuable insights. H. Norman Wright (2004), a pioneer in premarital education, invites couples not to ignore red flags or fears, but provides 101 questions to ask instead. Wright (2008) also invites young people to examine what kind of spouse they will be and to worry less about compatibility and more about commitment.

Gary Thomas (2013) also challenges young people to find a spouse who seeks first the Kingdom of God and not to view marriage through the lens of happiness (pp. 22-23). Thomas sees the importance of sexual attraction, but not at the expense of kindness, caring, parenting ability, and mutual calling (p. 52). Thomas also warns against marrying "takers," disrespectful, or incomplete people. Gary Chapman (2010) recommends taking a personality assessment to ensure knowledge of our potential spouse and understanding of romantic love as a two-stage process. This romantic love begins as physical attraction

and grows into a deeper love based on commitment and common purpose. He suggests five different “love languages” or ways different people experience love. John Jacobs (2012) takes this idea further claiming his personality test focusing on how couples communicate and experience intimacy can predict compatibility before the first date.

Margaret and Dwight Peterson (2011) also invite couples to seek real “love” and less romance. They advise that real love allows development of real friendships with the recognition not all romance leads to marriage. They suggest a short list of characteristics to look for in a potential spouse: character; how well they get along; and similarity in goals and values. They also affirm that it is all right to be single (Peterson & Peterson, 2011). Mark Driscoll (2011) warns against the idolatry of independence (not needing the other person,) and dependence. He invites couples to marry the right person, one who loves Jesus first, in the right way, at the right time, in the right community, for the right reasons. Other books such as Les and Leslie Parrott’s, (2006) *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts*, provide detailed assistance for self-guided premarital education, but do not focus specifically on the process of choosing a spouse.

Summary and Implications of Literature-Search Findings

There is little doubt premarital education is effective in the short-term for those couples who participate. Among other benefits they report higher levels of marital satisfaction and lower levels of marital conflict. But questions remain as to how much they benefit and whether premarital education has a long-term impact. After all, couples who choose premarital education are already more committed to one another and any time spent in communication before marriage can be beneficial even if no counselor is involved. Other questions persist about the long-term benefit of skills development,

particularly in communication and conflict resolution, which are the primary focus of premarital education. It is likely that foundational character issues and virtues the individuals and couples possess are more important over time. It is also difficult for people to use these skills on a daily basis during the practical realities and difficulties of married life. Undoubtedly both character and skills are necessary for a healthy marriage, but to what extent?

It is certain that premarital factors have an impact on marriages, but there is little premarital education aimed at young adults who are not yet engaged, to assist them in understanding the factors that will make the most difference in a successful marriage with a prospective spouse. This is particularly true from a spiritual perspective as spiritual factors have been shown to have a very positive impact on marital satisfaction, but only when homogamy exists. In short, young people are making the most important decision in their lives without much guidance, even though the opportunities are there.

CHAPTER 4

A DESCRIPTION OF THE SEMINAR TO EDUCATE YOUNG ADULTS FROM THE CONEJO VALLEY ABOUT CHOOSING A GODLY SPOUSE

This seminar was designed to help young people understand how to become an “ideal” spouse and assist them in choosing such a spouse. Marriage will always be difficult. There is no ideal person. Yet while understanding this truth, it is the purpose of this project to provide young people with education to help them to choose a spouse who can remain committed to the marriage even when difficulties come and to understand their own need to become such a person.

The first section describes the development of the seminar for educating young adults from the Conejo Valley in choosing a godly spouse. It details the ministry context from which the seminar grew and describes how it developed from the theology of what a godly spouse looks like (Chapter 2) and the theoretical underpinnings elicited from the literature review (Chapter 3). The second section provides a description of the seminar including methodology, structure and breakdown of the three-part foundation of the seminar. The third section outlines the protocol and research methodology used in determining the efficacy of the seminar.

Development of the Seminar

Young people often come to a pastor or spiritual advisor seeking to determine if

the person they are in a relationship with is the “right” person to marry. They are also seeking premarital education regarding how to have a “happy” marriage with the partner they have chosen. In both circumstances the person has already chosen a potential marriage partner and is trying to determine if that individual is the right person or trying to understand how to make that individual into the right person. Yet once they have emotionally invested in a potential partner it is difficult to think objectively about whether or not that person would indeed make an appropriate spouse (Russell & Lyster, 1992). Ironically, it is often too late to even ask that question. Many young people expect premarital education to be help them live well with the person they have selected, without ever asking if they have selected someone they could be happily married to. Many young people have their “list” of factors they are looking for in a potential spouse. Yet these lists may be made up of the “wrong” elements or contain too many elements to be useful.

In my life experience, I received very little premarital education and nothing to assist me in choosing a spouse; very few of my peers received any education regarding the process of choosing a spouse either. Indeed, in my research I have found that very little of this type of education exists at all and even less which offers this form of education from a spiritual perspective. Most material is focused on premarital education for those who have already chosen a spouse and are preparing for marriage. A much larger body of work focuses on how married couples can grow together as a couple or how they can work out the problems that develop during marriage. The few articles that focus on how to choose a spouse tend to take the same course of action: They suggest a lengthy list of personal characteristics that are necessary (or preferable) in a spouse.

While many high schools offer classes on marriage, research has shown the effect

to be limited by the lack of proximity to marriage (Nielsen et al., 2004). There are also universities that offer courses on marriage, but they tend to be purely academic and not inclusive of actual marriage preparation. The most in-depth approach I discovered was a course at Northwestern University titled “Marriage 101: Building Loving Relationships and Lasting Partnerships.” It began in 2001 under the direction of Arthur Nielsen. This detailed course taught students that love is not enough; in other words that the feeling of love is not sufficient for a lasting marriage, but that factors such as commitment, health and commonalities are far more important (Nielsen et al., 2004). It encouraged students to develop their own personal maturity and self-understanding and to explore their own capacity for intimacy as a prerequisite for seeking that in another person. Once that understanding had been fostered, only then did the course seek to address issues relating to sexual compatibility, conflict resolution, communication and specific challenges in marriage.

This course attempted to educate students to seek someone compatible rather than to be waylaid by pursuit of pleasure and other subconscious idealizations. It relied on giving students an understanding of possible neurotic fatal attractions and educating them to look for greater commonalities and to understand their own preferences. But despite the course’s commendable attempt at helping students develop their own emotional health, there was no attempt at guiding the students to actually choose a partner with any specific characteristics, and certainly not spiritual ones. I believe that spirituality offers the greatest hope, as it invites a person to become the kind of person who can offer unconditional love to another person, and to seek to find a similarly compatible person.

Another highly detailed effort at premarital education was designed for the United

States Army. This PICK (Premarital Interpersonal Choices and Knowledge) course focuses on five relationship characteristics one should learn about his/her partner that are likely to lead to marital success. These characteristics are represented by the acronym FACES: Family background, Attitudes and actions of the conscience, Compatibility potential, Examples of other relationships, and Skills in relationships (Van Epp, Futis, Van Epp, & Campbell, 2008). Although not specifically focused on the spiritual aspects, the idea of marrying a conscientious person moves in that direction. Indeed, PICK focuses on both the HEAD – understanding the characteristics that make a healthy marriage more likely, and the HEART – recognizing how love works from a physical, psychological, sociological and emotional perspective.

There are, of course, books and articles which focus on how an individual can prepare for marriage by becoming a more spiritual person and by seeking to find another person with that same dimension. But there are very few compared to the amount of material focused on marriage and premarital education. The literature aimed at preparing people for marriage, from my perspective, also suffers from over-shooting. There are obviously many characteristics which are valuable in any relationship, but how does a young person prioritize which ones are going to be the most important in another person and/or for themselves? The Bible has a plentitude of wisdom on relationships, and even more on being a godly person. Still the question remains: What is most important in the ideal spouse?

In answer to this question, I explored in chapter 2 the theology of a godly spouse. Scripture identifies God as the ideal spouse. He is the husband who delights in his bride and prepares her for marriage by dressing her with robes of salvation and righteousness

(Isa 61:10). Even when His bride is unfaithful, God speaks gently to allure her back (Hos 2:14). God invites husbands and wives to offer the love of submission to one another as an act of self-care (Eph 5:28). God thus demonstrates the most important characteristics of an ideal spouse: holiness, commitment and preparation for marriage.

In God's creation of a spouse, we find God creating someone like the other, but different. We thus see uniqueness is as important as compatibility. Adam and Eve quite literally needed each other and became one flesh, yet they were whole and complete on their own. As they became one flesh, they committed to life together, even though they were unique and whole already.

In the ideal picture of a holy God we find the dominant characteristics of the ideal spouse. These include intimacy, wisdom, commitment, emotional health and willingness to take personal responsibility. It was on parsing these characteristics that I distilled these principles into only three preconditions for the ideal spouse: hot, holy and healthy. In the subsequent section I will explore more fully what these characteristics entail and why they are necessary (at the expense of a myriad of other possible characteristics).

At the same time, I was driven to settle on these three characteristics from my exploration of literature relating to premarital education (in chapter 3). From the literature, I was convinced of the importance of premarital education, yet discouraged by some facts. While only one-third of couples engage in premarital education, research indicates those who do participate are already most healthy, usually more wealthy and often most optimistic and spiritually connected (Green & Miller, 2013). Upon reflection, I recognized those individuals who are already most healthy are those who would make an ideal spouse! Why would one choose to marry someone who is unwilling or unable to

take the relatively simple step of premarital education?

The literature also reveals that the type of premarital education is relatively unimportant. Indeed, even self-directed and on-line education provide positive changes. It is the desire and willingness for this education that matter most. Yet even though premarital education has a demonstrated impact on the health and longevity of marriage, it is less certain that this positive impact continues over time. This makes sense when understood within the context of the factors that make for a healthy and durable marriage. Personal and spiritual characteristics related to emotional health, commitment and compatibility become more important over the course of time as feelings fade and difficulties emerge.

There is little doubt of the short-term impact of premarital education and there may even be a long-term impact. Indeed, some research has shown the most distressed couples are those who are most positively impacted by premarital education, even as they are the least likely to seek it (Nock, Sanchez, & Wright, 2008). Some skills can be taught, particularly relating to communication and conflict resolution. However, skills enhancement seems to have relatively minor impact in maintaining long-term relationships when compared to research showing the impact of compatibility and personal characteristics. While people can change and increase their marital skills, it is a relatively difficult process. Thus, this maximizes the importance of choosing a spouse who already demonstrates certain optimal characteristics.

Indeed, there is a substantial list of characteristics of a potentially healthy spouse. Research has confirmed background factors such as health of the parents' marriage as important. Likewise, individual characteristics such as emotional health, patience, church

attendance and spirituality, love, reciprocity, hopefulness, communication, personal intimacy, personal identity, persistence, and more have been demonstrated to have positive impacts on marital health. On the other hand, negative personal behaviors such as blaming, victimization, oversimplification, jealousy, and others can have a significantly negative impact. It seems very likely from current research that having common similarities, beliefs and interests often led to more healthy marriages. Various research studies have also shown specific spiritual components as being extremely positively correlated with healthy marriages, including: forgiveness, commitment, sacrifice, and sanctification (Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2006; Pargament, 2005).

These spiritual components provide an over-arching meta-narrative for healthy marriages as they provide an environment conducive for growth in skills development. For example, research in conflict resolution demonstrates that even though conflict is a huge stress on marriage, conflict is not a very helpful predictor of marital health or longevity (Beach, Fincham, Amir, & Leonard, 2005; Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007). Instead, underlying values such as courage, honesty, generosity, and self-restraint are often more valuable (Fowers, 2001). People who possess these characteristics are more willing to remain committed, more willing to grow and learn together, and to fight for the marriage. This is particularly true when a couple is seeking a spiritual and sanctified marriage. It is helpful for one person to have this commitment and character, but the real power comes when both spouses share it.

As I reflected on the biblical wisdom and research literature, I narrowed my focus and list of non-negotiable criteria for a potential spouse to “hot, holy and healthy.” I believe that very short list contains the most important criteria for a healthy marriage. I

also determined that this education should be done relatively early, but not too early. Having been involved in youth ministry I believe there is value in sharing this with high school students, but many would not be sufficiently mature to process this information or retain it in a meaningful way. It would be helpful in giving a big-picture construct, but I doubt it would impact the actual choices they would make. Conversely, college- and university-aged young people are more proximate temporally to getting married and cognizant of the impact of this choice and thus more likely to actually use the principles to guide them in a real-life choice of a marriage partner.

Description of the Seminar

This seminar was envisioned as a voluntary learning experience for young adults over the age of eighteen. These young adults were invited from local Seventh-day Adventist churches. There was no charge for the seminar in order to ensure maximal participation. There was no upper age limit for participation, but participation was limited to those not currently married.

The timing of the approximately eight-hour seminar was dependent on the makeup of the group and their availability. The seminar was conducted over the course of a weekend, commencing on Friday evening from 7-9 p.m. It continued on Saturday morning from 9 -11 a.m. It then concluded on Saturday afternoon from 2-6 p.m.

The participants were expected to be present for the entire time and to participate in both in-class activities and out-of-class reading. After the recruitment of volunteers, participants were asked to fill out two surveys regarding their attitudes toward marriage and the factors they consider most important in determining a future spouse. The surveys attempted to measure the participant's attitude toward certain criteria either desired or to

be avoided in a future spouse. It also offered opportunity for the participants to share thoughts more generally on this topic.

The seminar took place at The Place Adventist Fellowship in the hall we call “Suite 16.” The maximum number of participants for the initial seminar was 20 persons to allow for individual time and attention and to maximize participation. The minimum number of participants was 15 persons to allow for a certain level of anonymity and decrease perceived pressure to answer questions. Having a minimum of 15 persons preserved the ability to obtain enough of a sample size for meaningful results to be collected regarding changes in attitudes. There was not sufficient sample size for statistical reliability, but it did allow for some preliminary conclusions to be drawn.

The seminar began with an introduction followed by an analysis of the three characteristics (hot, holy and healthy) which formed the central foci. A notebook and outline were provided with the main points listed and the central questions listed. This notebook also allowed the participant to take notes regarding the seminar and to write questions they may have had along the way. There was no requirement for the notebook to be filled out or completed.

Below I present the outline for the seminar and its various elements. Each section was designed for approximately two hours of class instruction and 30 minutes for questions and clarification. An attempt was made to use various methods of presentation and interaction with the participants in order to maintain concentration and interest levels. These modes of presentation included video clips, story-telling, current psychological research, current events and statistics.

Introduction

1. **The Purpose of Marriage.** Discussion of God's original creation purpose from Genesis 1-3 focusing on the elements of friendship, sexuality, purposeful work together, recreation, procreation, diversity of roles, family, and relationship with God.

2. **Love Is Not Enough.** Discussion of Gary Smalley's thesis in "*Love is a Decision*" (Smalley & Trent, 2001) that love is a decision and not a feeling. Further discussion about the importance of emotions by briefly exploring the biblical stories of Samson and David and recognizing the need for understanding our feelings. Understanding that emotions are an important key to self-knowledge, but that they must be understood within the context of commitment.

3. **I've Got Issues.** Discussion of the biblical picture of the nature of sin and its impact on people individually and in relation to marriage, focusing on Rom 3. Presentation of the understanding of salvation in Jesus, yet the continuing call of God for his followers to live like Him for our blessing and to make life 'easier.'

4. **Commitment:** Discussion of the faithfulness of God as seen in the biblical prophet Hosea and God's approach to Hosea's unfaithful wife; and of the prophet Isaiah and God's wooing of his unfaithful people. Presentation of research regarding the importance of commitment and its central role in the health and longevity of marriage.

5. **It's All about Me.** Discussion of Gary Thomas' thesis in "*Sacred Marriage*" (Thomas, 2000) regarding God's design for marriage being to challenge an individual to personal growth and holiness, not necessarily for happiness. Discussion about recognizing marriage presents great opportunities within the context of great challenges.

Hot

1. It's All about Sex. Discussion of the biblical perspective on the purpose of sex beginning with the story of Adam and Eve. Presentation focusing on the references by Jesus and the Apostle Paul to sexuality and marriage and noting the positive emphasis and benefits. Understanding the power of sexuality and its God-given emotional and physical capacity to bind two people as one flesh.

2. The Power of Attraction. Discussion of the biblical perspective on physical attraction and beauty, briefly exploring references in Scripture; understanding why God created beauty and how it impacts our choice of a partner; helping participants recognize the importance of physical attraction to a future spouse and having good 'chemistry.' Further discussion of the potential difficulties in not having a physical and emotional connection with a future spouse, including the powerful impact of culture and societal expectations.

3. It's NOT All about Being Hot. Discussion of the biblical definitions of beauty and health, especially in the Apostle Paul's writings. Understanding that beauty is in the eye of the beholder and the importance of not conforming to cultural standards of physical health, fitness and beauty; particularly focusing on the changes that occur as the body ages and the differences between the sexes in what is attractive. Recognition that physical attractiveness is not accessible in the same manner to congenitally blind persons, yet they also have their own standards for attractiveness. Further discussion regarding the possible obsession with either being "hot" or finding the "hottest" person and understanding what level of attraction is necessary or helpful.

4. It's NOT All About Sex. Discussion of sexual compatibility and its primarily

emotional component. Further discussion of several contemporary issues relating to sexuality including: singleness, faithfulness to one's spouse, appropriate boundaries, pornography, the effect of cohabitation prior to marriage and the public good of marriage.

Holy

1. God as the Ideal Spouse. Discussion of the biblical picture of God and His characteristics, particularly relating to relationship, intimacy, commitment and connection. Understanding that humans are created in God's image and thus needful and desirous of God's characteristics in a potential spouse, yet at the same time recognizing our human limitations in this regard.

2. Holiness as a Spiritual Journey. Discussion of the sanctifying work of God towards his church, as exemplified in Ephesians 5, and how this relates to marriage. Recognition that no human (including ourselves) will be holy as God is holy, yet understanding the importance of choosing a potential spouse who is seeking to follow God as a high life-priority. Further discussion of the impact of spiritual compatibility and the possible difficulties when it is not present.

3. The Primary Importance of the Commitment to God. Discussion of the vicissitudes of life and the biblical insights of the value of having a partner willing to share that journey, particularly as noted in Genesis 1-3, the words of Jesus, and the book of Ephesians. Further discussion of the covenantal aspect of marriage and its impact on the promises spouses make to each other and the biblical understanding of divorce. Discussion regarding specifically understanding how holiness can be understood as self-care in Ephesians 5.

4. Specific Attributes of Holiness. Discussion of various characteristics God

desires for humans to possess and the relative importance of those characteristics. Specific attention given to a biblical understanding of the willingness to take personal responsibility and the value of wisdom. Further discussion of “body” life as described in the book of Ephesians with particular note of honesty, speaking the truth in love, building up one another, forgiveness and the role of submission and humility.

Healthy

1. Emotional Health. Understanding the roots of a “healthy” person and recognizing the primary importance of knowing one’s identity as a child of God as outlined in Ephesians 1. Understanding that healthy people are “whole” on their own, but then being able to commit to being made “one” with another. Recognizing that an acceptance of God’s unconditional love for a person as the basis of human unconditional love and faithfulness. A healthy person will be able to submit and serve another from a place of strength and servant leadership. Self-love and self-esteem form the basis of being able to love another.

2. The Power of Knowing Ones’ Spiritual Identity. Understanding the benefits of recognizing one’s identity as a child of God. These benefits include: maintaining appropriate boundaries; understanding the nature of humility and service; willingness to communicate and receive truth spoken in love; ability to not be jealous; willingness to be assertive in expressing needs; being comfortable with one’s own emotions; and ability to engage in meaningful conflict resolution. Each of these characteristics is outlined in the book of Ephesians and understood within the context of spiritual warfare.

3. Family Health. Understanding the importance of a person’s family background as preparation for marriage and the impact family history will have on the

marriage. Recognizing how God establishes his body (church) as family also and how that body can potentially positively impact individuals and marriage, and even act as a surrogate family. Understanding the power of having a spiritual community.

4. Compatibility: Recognizing the value in having compatibility and commonalities with a potential spouse. Primary components of compatibility include: personality, particularly the traits of conscientiousness and agreeableness; leisure interests; religion; and a sense of humor. Other secondary compatibility components include similar plans, interests, values and temperament. Recognizing the value in similarities and differences in a potential spouse.

5. Balance. A healthy person will seek health in the four basic areas of life: spiritual; physical; emotional; and intellectual/work. The self-care is essential for loving another person as themselves and as part of their own body as understood in Ephesians 5.

Conclusion

Wrap-up and Final Questions. Instructions for completion of the post-seminar survey, writing a reflection paper and interview with seminar leader.

Protocol and Research Methodology

The Seminar was evaluated and the results reported using a research methodology and protocol that was integrated into the project as a whole. The Seminar was evaluated as to its effectiveness in assisting young adults to realize a biblical and theological model for basing a decision in choosing a spouse. It proposed the following two questions: (a) Will the process of acquiring a biblically-based understanding of the characteristics of a godly spouse have perceived value in the lives of young adults? (b) Will the process of

acquiring a biblically-based understanding of the characteristics of a godly spouse influence the self-reported characteristics young adults indicate are important to them in choosing a spouse?

The Seminar took place in the spring of 2017 at The Place Adventist Fellowship. Analysis occurred based on three different items. First, participants were asked to take two pre- and two post-seminar surveys (the pre- and post-seminar surveys were identical) indicating the characteristics of a prospective spouse they deemed most important to marriage. Second, participants were asked to complete a short post-seminar reflection paper on their experience in the seminar and any self-reported changes in their attitudes towards the characteristics of a prospective spouse they deemed most important to marriage and their perception of the value of the seminar.

All participants in the seminar met the following criteria: (a) Aged 18 years or over from the time they volunteer to participate in the seminar; (b) currently single and not otherwise engaged to be married or divorced; (c) willing to participate in the research activities mentioned above; and (d) able to provide informed consent to their participation in the above described activities.

Recruitment of the seminar participants consisted of bulletin announcements in the local Seventh-day Adventist churches, invitations to Newbury Park Academy seniors aged 18 or older, email and Facebook invitations and personal invitations. Participants who met the above requirements were accepted on a first-come first-served basis without regard to gender, ethnicity or age. Participants participated at their own cost for time and travel and did not receive any financial compensation or incentives for participating in the seminar. There were no known risks anticipated with participation in the seminar. It

was hoped that participants might experience the benefits of spiritual and emotional growth.

The researcher maintained the confidentiality of each survey by retaining all papers associated with the participants in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's private office. All personal identifiers were coded by the researcher prior to the collection of any data. All individuals completed and signed consent forms which are maintained in the locked filing cabinet. All interview notes are kept in the locked filing cabinet. Once the data was coded all links of identification were destroyed.

In order to maintain internal validity for the research, multiple sources of information from the participants were evaluated; participants checked their own reported data; the researcher spent individual time with each participant; and stated personal biases in reporting the research. External validity was maintained through disclosure of my own position as a pastor of a Seventh-day Adventist (Christian) church and by carefully describing the process for obtaining and interpreting data.

Summary

In my research, I have become certain of the value of premarital education. I have also become strongly aware of the lack of formal education for almost all young people regarding marriage itself, and even less formal education regarding the characteristics to be desired in a potential spouse. Even within this minimal education, there is even less education available regarding the biblical or spiritual characteristics of a desirable spouse. There are books and articles outlining the desirability of certain characteristics, but the list is long and without very specific guidelines as to what is truly important.

This seminar aimed to be a first step in assisting young adults to develop a

coherent mental framework from a spiritual perspective about the characteristics most important in a potential spouse and what was most important for them to focus on in their own lives as a potential spouse for another person. The limiting of the criteria to a very-manageable list of three characteristics – hot, holy and healthy – is designed to both be mnemonic and achievable as a way of thinking about one of the most important decisions many young people will ever make. I also included opportunity for the participants to experience self-discovery, particularly related to biblical wisdom and developing a scriptural viewpoint of marriage and healthy relationship.

In this chapter I have outlined a research methodology and implementation narrative for the seminar. I briefly summarized the current state of premarital education and the importance of the task. I have attempted to provide a summary and succinct rationale for the choice of the three defining characteristics of a godly spouse. I have also outlined a basic process for the seminar in which to share from a biblical perspective the importance of these characteristics and to provide some framework for young adults to understand both why they are most important, and how to implement them into their own life.

I have also provided a research methodology for assessing the success of the seminar in changing the perspective of young adults as to which characteristics are of primary importance in choosing a potential spouse. The data gathered will focus mostly on the individual's experience in gaining an intellectual framework for processing this decision. It is also my desire that in assisting young adults to understand the vital importance of establishing their own identities as children of God, they will experience

the presence of God more fully in their lives and will achieve greater depth and more meaningful relationships with other people.

CHAPTER 5

IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION OF THE SEMINAR

Having never administered a formal survey measuring attitudes of young adults toward characteristics most important in choosing a potential spouse, I had concluded most young adults believed they understood what was important in selecting a potential spouse. Instead, I was pleasantly surprised to find that, although many of the participants had strong opinions about prospective spouses, they were very open to guidance as to what characteristics they should consider. Indeed, many responded with enthusiasm to the opportunity to be able to think about this topic from a biblical perspective. They were willing to search the Scriptures diligently and to be open to the counsel of Bible writers, to do research on the question of marriage and premarital education, and to hear from me. It was as if, for the first time, they were given freedom to actively consider this question.

The most surprising result to me was that many of the participants felt freedom to value physical attraction to a potential spouse and to recognize that not only was this attraction not contrary to biblical wisdom, but that the Bible recognized the importance of such an attitude. This chapter explores some of the attitudes of the young adults toward the most important characteristics in choosing a godly spouse and shifts in those attitudes as a result of the seminar. It relies primarily on the pre- and post-surveys, but also uses feedback given by the participants when asked for an evaluation of the seminar's impact.

Details of the Seminar

The seminar entitled “Educating Young adults on How to Choose a Godly Spouse” began on Friday evening, May 19th, 2017 at The Place Adventist Fellowship from 7-9 p.m. in Suite 16. It continued on Saturday morning, May 20th, from 9:15-11:15 a.m. and concluded on Saturday afternoon from 2-6 p.m. There was a total of 13 participants who were a part of the entire seminar and who completed the pre- and post-surveys. There were several others who were present and participated during various segments, but they did not complete the pre- and post-surveys and I have not included any feedback from them as part of this project. All of the participants were either members of The Place or friends or relatives of members. They had either responded to a bulletin announcement inviting young adult participation or who had been personally invited by me or another participant.

The seminar began with each participant completing two pre-surveys and an informed consent form. Copies of the pre-surveys are appended to this document. The surveys consisted of biographical information, a few evaluative questions, a questionnaire inviting evaluation of factors important in choosing a mate, and a questionnaire inviting the participants to rank preferences concerning 15 characteristics of a potential mate in order from most to least desired.

Participants of the Seminar

The average age of the participants was 32 years-of-age, but this was skewed by the fact that one man was 40 and another woman was 55. Eliminating those two participants brings the average age of the participants to 26.5 years of age. Of those

participants, only one had been married prior (and divorced). Seven were male and six were female.

All of the participants were Christians and all of them attended a Seventh-day Adventist church. Two of the participants were recently engaged to each other and several were actively dating. All of them indicated a desire to be married and most were looking to be married by their late 20s or early 30s. Even those who were older indicated they wished they had been married already (the 40-year-old said he would have liked to be married by 24 and the 55-year-old said the time had passed, but she would like to be married before 70!)

The First Session: The Purpose of Marriage

The seminar was divided into three main sections, focusing on the characteristics deemed most important in a prospective spouse: hot, holy and healthy. As I provide a detailed outline of the seminar in chapter 4, I will not go into great detail about the content of the seminar, but I will share some highlights and learning moments from my experience and from those of participants.

The first session focused on the purpose of marriage. Participants were invited to look at Genesis 1, 2 and to consider why God created marriage in the first place. There was a great deal of discussion about oneness and the importance of both being whole as single individuals, and yet being willing and able to become one with another person. Perhaps the most surprising conclusion for me in the whole seminar was to see the desire by the participants to open the Bible and really seek God's purposes, plans and passions for marriage. Many of them stated that although they had been raised in the church and gone to Christian schools, they had never intentionally studied about marriage itself or

thought about why God desired it for them. They were truly excited to learn. (We also discussed the possibility of being single and being fine with that condition. Indeed, many of the same principles apply to deep friendships.)

The most important conclusion they found was that God intended full intimacy between husband and wife. This intimacy included, but was not limited to, sexuality. The group was vocal in noticing the importance of identity rooted in being a child of God and the vital importance of this understanding as a necessary pre-condition to committing to marry another person. We also discussed the relationship between faith and feelings and the necessity of both in making decisions. This understanding led to seeing the gospel as central to marriage since forgiveness and grace are necessary to remain committed to a marriage partner.

The Bible story that impacted the group the most was the story of the prophet Hosea. Many participants were literally astounded to see God's passionate pursuit and wooing of Israel in the context of Hosea repeatedly pursuing his unfaithful wife, Gomer. There were several participants who were amazed at the level of commitment required for marriage and the importance of a relationship with God as a prerequisite for being able to make this commitment. This understanding of commitment led to the sharing of recent research regarding the characteristics of a healthy spouse, including the importance of commonalities in a marriage relationship. I invited the group to raise their hands on whether or not they believed it was important to have commonalities in marriage, and the group was almost evenly divided.

I was then able to share why research shows the importance of commonalities and it led to an animated conversation. This provided a springboard for me to detail current

research showing the value of spirituality and religiosity in successful marriages. They were fascinated to learn that research demonstrates the value of these practices, but amazed that religiosity is as valuable as spirituality in predicting successful marriages. They were unaware of the link between actually practicing spiritual habits (religiosity) and the development of spirituality. They were particularly interested in research regarding the constructs of forgiveness, commitment and sanctification as having a demonstrable impact on the quality of a marriage. While many had hoped spirituality made a difference in a marriage, they were both encouraged and challenged to see how current research demonstrates the power of a spiritual relationship in a marriage. As Martha responded (all names are fictitious in these chapters):

This seminar definitely impacted my perspective. I underestimated the value of commitment in a relationship. Initially, I thought love and happiness were the foundation for an ideal marriage. This seminar emphasized the huge importance of seeking a spiritually mature spouse and someone who actively pursues God. Before I thought I could accept someone who at least shares the same religion.

We had a lively discussion about the importance of spirituality and religiosity in conjunction with other factors more often considered of primary importance in a marriage: communication and conflict resolution. It was helpful for the participants to understand that research is demonstrating that communication skills and conflict resolution abilities can be acquired, but are not as imperative as spiritual factors which invite a spouse to be able to use their acquired skills. The session closed with a discussion regarding God's desire for marriage to lead to holiness and how difficult marriages can actually lead to a greater level of sanctification if the participants are committed to that spiritual growth.

The Second Session: “Hot”

The second session focused on the importance of physical attraction in a prospective spouse. This was undoubtedly the most surprising and welcome presentation for participants. It was as if years of Christian education had conditioned them to fear physical attraction. On the one hand they intuitively understood the importance of attraction to them personally. But, just as intuitively, they rejected their own valuation of attraction as “sinful” or “worldly.” Many expressed that they had subconsciously devalued attraction because of the fear that it was less spiritual and less desirable to God for them to give priority in choosing a prospective spouse. Indeed, there was a great deal of enthusiasm by the group to learn that it was acceptable and even desirable for them to value attraction in a mate. They were excited as they saw biblically the oneness and unity that God desired for them physically and the value of attraction in this unity.

Indeed, their attitude toward the importance of attraction was the most changed of all attitudes in the seminar. This understanding came from the biblical idea of the unity God made, not just between husband and wife, but between God and humankind. God made man and woman in his image and for his glory. Understanding that unity frees them to see the unity of man and woman as reflective of our unity with God, they in turn recognized the importance of being unified in all the various ways man and woman can be unified, including physical unity. I shared the biblical reasons God is so protective of unity in man and woman. He sets up important and serious boundaries, using commands and laws, to protect the unity of the marriage bed. But when this importance is understood, all of a sudden, the participants were able to clearly see the connection with physical attraction. Being “hot” is all right. Physical attraction is a gift from God which is

intended to lead directly to physical intimacy within the context of marriage. It is important to consider that this does not mean that both persons in the relationship are objectively physically attractive. Simply that there is a level of physical attraction between each individual.

Many of the comments reflected this newfound freedom and understanding.

Cathy said: “I always thought attractiveness didn’t matter to me, but I realized that it does.” Herb added, “My desire for mutual attraction is not a thing to be ashamed of, but is proper within the context of the whole person.” Similarly, Rod elaborated:

I didn’t understand how important attraction was in developing and maintaining a healthy relationship... I can now admit how much physical attraction means to me and that’s ok. I should be attracted to my spouse and now understand how God intended for a husband and wife to be so. On the other hand, this seminar has enforced the idea that it’s so much deeper than outward appearance...true love and oneness come when we follow the example of God’s love for us.

And Sarah reflected: “I think it’s important to be talking about the ‘hot’ issue because most of our churches taught us very different ideas about that.”

We also discussed the idea that people are attracted to and find different people attractive. Although research demonstrates that more physically attractive people tend to marry other more physically attractive people, this does not mean we should be preoccupied with being attractive or choosing someone others find physically attractive. The main point to understand is that it is important to actually be physically attracted to the potential partner, not that the other person meets a certain level of objective attractiveness as defined from a cultural perspective.

Of course, we can be attracted to others than our spouses. Thus, it is necessary to recognize that God puts paramount importance on unity. The participants were genuinely surprised to see the numerous biblical references to physical attraction and the way it is

integral to many of the stories. They literally felt freed to value physical attraction. Yet at the same time, the participants understood biblically that attraction is different for each person. Outward beauty is fleeting and changeable, but still of a huge importance if unity is to be maintained. God literally commands a depth of physical intimacy between man and woman and that requires attraction if it is to last and make a lifetime marriage - even when physical beauty fades. We discussed how our culture builds false attraction into so many parts of our lives and uses pornography and many other temptations to mimic the physical attraction God created us for. Because young people are surrounded by so many cultural temptations, they need the power of God's Word as their foundation in order to understand the power of intimacy, the purpose of intimacy, and the necessity of protecting and developing intimacy with one person.

The Third Session: "Holy"

The third session of the seminar focused on the necessity of holiness in a potential spouse. The discussion centered on the biblical picture of God and his characteristics, particularly relating to relationship, intimacy and commitment. The initial focus was on God's holiness and his call to holiness for his people. The most striking feature of this holiness for the participants centered on God's faithfulness even in the midst of our unfaithfulness. It is this level of godly commitment that God demonstrates, demands of us, and that is necessary for a lasting relationship. But the challenge for the participants was understanding that this is the call for each person individually. I cannot expect another person to offer the level of commitment that I am not willing to offer another. This principle works across all aspects of a relationship. Thus, if one is trying to attract a spouse with certain spiritual characteristics and maturity, one cannot expect to attract that

person without being that same type of person. No one but God is completely holy, but the participants were challenged by the call of God to be holy if they were hoping to attract a holy spouse.

Because “holiness” is an abstract idea, we focused on several specific biblical characteristics of holiness that are most helpful in a marriage relationship. One of the most important is submission. The participants explored Ephesians 5 seeking to understand God’s call to mutual submission between husband and wife. They were excited to discover their role as a spouse mirrors God’s relationship with us. God invites a husband to submission in order to bring his wife to salvation, thus resulting in oneness and unity with God and each other and ultimately in holiness. They were amazed that Paul promises that this care for the other person is self-care. It actually blesses the one who humbly submits. Although Paul places first responsibility for submission on the husband, both partners are called to mutual submission as an act of love to bring the other to salvation, this is also an act of self-care.

I took time at this point to share more from current research on the importance of holiness characteristics. This research (detailed in chapter 2 and outlined in chapter 4) shows the greater importance of godly characteristics such as grace, submission, commitment, sacrifice and religiosity, even more than skills that a spouse may possess. This understanding was encouraging to the participants as many were tempted to undervalue holiness characteristics at the expense of more temporal characteristics, even though they intrinsically valued holiness.

Yet they were stunned that current research shows that these characteristics, especially religiosity, are only beneficial when both partners have them. When only one

partner seeks them, the challenge becomes more difficult than if neither partner is concerned with the characteristics of holiness. It gave them a brand-new understanding of what God means when he invites people to be equally yoked. As Candy commented: “This definitely will make me start thinking differently about what God intends marriage to look like for me.” Tammy added,

This seminar allowed me to fully flesh out what characteristics I value in a mate. I realized emotional stability is very important to me as I’ve had to be the more emotionally stable person in a good amount of my relationships. I don’t want to be married to someone who I have to carry all the time.

The discussion concluded with an exploration of the vital importance of commitment. Participants looked at Genesis 2 in understanding how God invites a spouse to be a helper. Even in this sinless couple God appears to recognize implied weakness in being alone and the need for dependency on one another. Yet they have strength together. This need for each other amidst dependency brings a greater understanding of the necessity of commitment to another person and shows why God makes such a strong call for faithfulness and permanency to the marriage bond. It also leads to a willingness to repent and offer forgiveness to restore unity. Participants also explored biblical ideals of honesty, speaking the truth in love, wisdom and humility.

The Fourth Session: “Healthy”

The final session explored the biblical ideal of a healthy person as an ideal spouse. Healthy is not defined biblically as physical health (although that may be relevant), but is understood as a person who has strong self-esteem because one understands one’s value as a child of God (I have used the term “God-esteem” to describe this condition). As such, one understands one is a completely and unconditionally loved

child of God. A person who is “one” with God, may then offer a similar level of unconditional love to another person. A healthy person can thus choose to daily submit and serve another person from a position of strength and servant leadership. Thus, understanding my true identity as a child of God, and subsequently having “God-esteem” for myself, are foundational to being able to love another. It is only when we have this understanding that we are able to forget ourselves as primary and love another unconditionally without constantly requiring the other to love us well first.

Participants were able to explore Bible passages such as Ephesians 1 and Romans 8 to discover God’s unconditional love for them and their status as God’s loved children, apart from any action they take. They could see God’s orientation toward them as positive and reliable. A highlight of the seminar was their self-discovery in Philippians 2 that God’s willingness to humble himself and serve others was from strength, not weakness. Because God is love (and fully healthy), he can choose to love others. Mutual submission is based on God-esteem, not out of need. Participants were excited to learn that submission and humility are self-care and are thus the basis of healthy boundaries. When a person has God-esteem and experiences unconditional love from God, that person is able to offer love to another person out of health and wholeness and not because they need another person’s love in order to be whole. This understanding thus facilitates the formation of healthy boundaries as two whole people offer one another godly love.

For instance, participants came to understand that it is not necessary to try to please another person in order to get him or her to reciprocate love; that one can serve without being subservient, because service is based on strength, not weakness. Cathy responded to this idea by stating: “I realized that I can submit in strength and not

weakness/passive.” David added: “This helped me to recognize the benefits of having a spouse who is aware of who she is in her own identity.” This understanding of God-esteem can be useful in overcoming addiction for several reasons: Individuals do not have to fill empty spaces in their lives; they can learn to be comfortable with their own emotions and sharing their needs in healthy ways; and they can learn to be assertive, instead of passive or aggressive as their primary needs are already being met. They can also engage in constructive conflict resolution as they can focus on the real issues, rather than being defensive or finding fault with the other person.

Participants also studied together many of the “one another” verses in the New Testament, seeking to understand how a healthy family functions. They were excited to discover the power of spiritual community which act as family and can help bring spiritual and emotional health through discipleship, prayer, encouragement, community, accountability and discipline. Again, they were sobered by the understanding that in order to enter into a relationship with a healthy person, it is vital to be a healthy person oneself.

David responded,

This helped me to recognize the benefits of having a spouse who is aware of who they are in their own identity. This affirmed for me that ultimately, it’s about where the heart is and being intentional about auditing one’s emotions and commitment in the long run.

A healthy person, with strong God-esteem, will be reticent to enter into a marriage relationship with an unhealthy person as they will desire another similarly healthy person.

The seminar concluded with a discussion of compatibility and commonalities. I shared my own belief that the characteristics of hot, holy and healthy are essential. Yet beyond those characteristics, as discussed in chapter 2, the greater the areas of commonality in personality, interest, religiosity, background, education, ethnicity, and

more, the greater the likelihood of a successful marriage. As discussed in chapter 2, individual personality traits are more important to a healthy marriage than background factors, but background factors have a high impact on personality traits. These factors can lead to greater levels of commitment and willingness to work on one's marriage even when satisfaction declines. I also shared my own discoveries of the importance of balance - health in spirituality, emotional health, physical health and relational health.

This understanding was reflected by participants. For example, John concluded:

It confirmed some ideas I've thought for years. Mainly I've been looking for my opposite. I'm creative and have wanted someone in a stable concrete career. Maybe I should find someone creative.

Pre- and Post-Survey and Results

As part of the evaluation of the effectiveness of the seminar in assisting young adults to develop a biblical framework for choosing a potential spouse, I invited the participants to complete two distinct pre-surveys and the same two surveys following the seminar (a total of four surveys.) The intent was to identify whether the seminar would impact the characteristics the participants most valued in choosing a potential spouse. Although there were only 13 participants, there were some identifiable differences noted in the responses between the pre- and post-surveys. There is no statistical validity with such a small number, but some reasonable conclusions can be discerned and some learning noted. Both of the pre-surveys were administered at the very beginning of the seminar with no prior discussion or prompting of any kind.

First Pre-Survey: Factors in Choosing a Mate

The first survey asked participants to evaluate 18 separate characteristics, which I chose from literature in the field that might be important to them in choosing a spouse.

The factors were: good cook and housekeeper; pleasing disposition; sociability; similar educational background; refinement; neatness; good financial prospect; chastity (no previous experience in sexual intercourse); dependable character; emotional stability and maturity; desire for home and children; favorable social status or rating; good looks; similar religious background; ambition and industriousness; similar political background; mutual attraction – love; good health; and education and intelligence. Participants were asked to evaluate the 18 factors on a 0-3-point scale. Indispensable factors = 3 points; important, but not indispensable factors = 2 points; desirable, but not very important factors = 1 point; and irrelevant or unimportant factors = 0 points. Thus, the highest possible score for an individual factor (most important) was 3 points, and the lowest score (least important) was 0 points. All the scores (including 0's) were then averaged together to determine which factors were considered important to the participants.

The factors considered most important by the participants on the pre-survey were as follows: mutual attraction – love (3.0) and dependable character (3.0); emotional stability and maturity (2.92); desire for home and children (2.69); pleasing disposition (2.46); similar religious background (2.46); ambition and industriousness (2.23); good health (2.15); sociability (2.08); good financial prospect (2.08); education and intelligence (1.85); good looks (1.85); refinement and neatness (1.77); similar educational background (1.62); good cook and housekeeper (1.38); chastity (no previous sexual experience in intercourse) (1.08); similar political background (1.08); favorable social status or rating (0.85).

These priorities seem reasonable and somewhat predictable. The most important factors tended to be character-driven with commonalities and preferences slightly lower

on the scale. Perhaps the most surprising result was the almost complete lack of concern regarding previous sexual experience. I surmise from many conversations with single young adults that as the age of marriage becomes later, there is less expectation of chastity in a potential spouse. Despite this supposition, I was surprised by the frank admission of this expectation. I was also surprised by the higher rating of good financial prospect yet apparent unconcern for favorable social status, although these two characteristics are often closely associated. Love and mutual attraction have the appearance of obvious requirement for a potential spouse, yet this valuation is also impacted by the understanding that love is a choice and is the consequence of a decision, not simply an attraction.

Second Pre-Survey: Characteristics Most Desired in a Mate

The second pre-survey was similar to the first in that it asked participants to rank a set of characteristics in order of preference from most desired (1) to least desired (15). The fifteen characteristics chosen from a review of the literature were: kind and understanding; religious; spiritual maturity; exciting personality; creative and artistic; good housekeeper; intelligent; good earning capacity/financial stability; desire for children/good parent; easygoing; comes from a good family; college education/education; physically attractive; physical health; emotionally healthy.

Following completion of the pre-survey, I gave each characteristic on the survey a score based on the ranking given by each participant. One (1) represented the most desirable characteristic and (15) the least desirable. Then I averaged each score for each characteristic. The characteristics most desired (i.e. the lowest score) were as follows:

kind and understanding (4.0); spiritual maturity (4.38); emotional maturity (4.92); religious (5.62); physically attractive (6.63); intelligent (6.92); exciting personality (7.23); desire for children/good parent (7.54); easygoing (7.92); physical health (9.08); financial stability (10.54); creative and artistic (10.77); comes from a good family (11.23); college graduate/education (11.23); and good housekeeper (12.23).

Again, these scores were in line with expectations and with the other pre-survey. They tended to move from more core personality issues to more outward characteristics. However, it was surprising to me how financial stability appears to be so undervalued considering its potential impact on a relationship. My supposition is that a lack of prior marriage experience and a lack of financial education for most young people, combined with a fear of appearing to be grasping for money, have predisposed young people to downplay their valuation of financial stability as a highly desirable characteristic in a potential spouse. From my own research and experience, several of the more objective characteristics such as financial stability, family and education were under-valued compared to some of the more subjective characteristics such as exciting personality, desire for children and good parent, easygoing and even intelligence.

First Post-Survey: Factors in Choosing a Mate

After completion of the seminar, I asked participants to complete the same two surveys they had completed as pre-surveys in order to identify any shifts in preferences or attitudes. In order to more easily ascertain any differences between attitudes, I first list the post-survey score and then the pre-survey score in parenthesis for ease of comparison.

In the post survey the factors considered most important were: mutual attraction – love: 3.0 (3.0) and emotional stability and maturity: 3.0 (2.92); dependable character:

2.92 (3.0); pleasing disposition: 2.69 (2.46); desire for home and children: 2.54 (2.69); similar religious background: 2.69 (2.46); good looks: 2.46 (1.85); ambition and industriousness: 2.23 (2.23); education and intelligence: 2.23 (1.85); good health: 2.15 (2.15); sociability: 2.08 (2.08); good financial prospect: 2.0 (2.08); refinement and neatness: 1.69 (1.77); good cook and housekeeper: 1.38 (1.38); similar educational background: 1.31 (1.62) and similar political background: 1.31 (1.08); favorable social status or rating: 1.15 (0.85); and chastity (no previous sexual experience in intercourse): 1.0 (1.08). As is easily noticeable from the data, there was not a great deal of variation in the pre- and post-surveys, yet there are a few significant details.

The obvious most noticeable difference was for “good looks.” This was not altogether surprising as one of the characteristics I focused on the most was “hot.” As noted earlier, developing a biblical understanding of intimacy and physical attraction seemed to free the participants to value good looks, at least as they perceive it. It is difficult with such limited data to draw strong conclusions, but from the discussion it seemed more likely that participants did not change their opinions about their desire to marry someone they were physically attracted to; rather the discussion seemed to free them from their preconceived idea that as godly people they should not value physical attraction. It seemed almost a relief to many to be assured that it was permissible to acknowledge this attraction and desire for it. The elevation in score from pre- to post-survey from 1.85 to 2.46 was the largest numerical difference and seemed to confirm the idea that determining that it is biblically appropriate to be attracted to a potential spouse prodded the participants to rank good looks as more important to them.

The only other important difference was for education and intelligence (from 1.85

to 2.23). This difference appears to follow the same type of thinking referenced for good looks. The participants seemed to feel free to value something they might have otherwise perceived as superficial, but was actually meaningful to the participants when they felt free to express their underlying desires. Although there was only a slight uptick in the results, the other characteristics followed the same pattern: pleasing disposition (2.46 to 2.69); similar religious background (2.46 to 2.69); similar political background (1.08 to 1.31); and favorable social rating (0.85 to 1.15). Participants may have felt freedom to express their desires more fully after having gone through a seminar focused on a biblical worldview of marriage and which emphasized characteristics they had not otherwise focused on. Or, during the course of the seminar, they may simply have thought more deeply about what was most important to them in a potential spouse.

Second Post-Survey: Characteristics Most Desired in a Mate

The second survey asked the participants following the seminar to again rank the same 15 characteristics desirable in a potential spouse from most important (1) to least important (15). The score was then averaged among the 13 participants. Again, I will list first the post-survey score and then the pre-survey score in parenthesis for ease of comparison. In the post survey the characteristics considered most important were: kind and understanding: 3.08 (4.0); emotional maturity: 3.46 (4.92); spiritual maturity: 3.54 (4.38); physically attractive: 4.23 (6.63); religious 7.77 (5.62); intelligent: 8.08 (6.92); exciting personality: 8.30 (7.23); desire for children/good parent: 8.55 (7.54); physical health 8.92 (9.08); easygoing: 9.08 (7.92); financial stability 9.54 (10.54); comes from a good family 9.92 (11.23); creative and artistic 10.54 (10.77); college graduate/education

12.38 (11.23); and good housekeeper 13.08 (12.23).

Again, most of the characteristics remained in a fairly consistent order in the pre- and post-survey, with a few noticeable differences. Identical to the first post-survey, the greatest difference exhibited in the second post-survey was for the characteristic of physically attractive (6.63 pre-survey to 4.23 post-survey). As described above, this increase (a lower score means it was more highly desirable) is very possibly attributable to the result of seeing physical attractiveness as acceptable and desirable by a godly person. The other characteristic that changed significantly seems somewhat surprising on the surface: religious (5.62 pre-survey to 7.77 post-survey). Yet, upon reflection, this seems to coincide with the higher score for spiritual maturity (4.38 to 3.54). Participants may have inferred from the Bible that spiritual maturity (“holy”) is greatly desirable and contrasted with religiosity which may be seen as less desirable. I found this somewhat ironic in that I shared research which seemed to demonstrate that religiosity, in and of itself, has been linked with higher marital satisfaction. That possibility seemed to have either not been understood or evaluated as being related to spiritual maturity.

Perhaps the most interesting pattern noted was the large agreement in the four most desirable characteristics: kind and understanding, emotional maturity, spiritual maturity, physically attractive. The only change from the pre-survey was the replacement of religious with physically attractive as an important ideal in a potential spouse. As this survey required comparing factors against each other, there was a subsequent lower rating for the rest of the characteristics, most of which were related to more external characteristics. The other characteristics that were rated somewhat higher (pre- to post-survey) were: physical health 9.08 to 8.92; financial stability 10.54 to 9.54; comes from a

good family 11.23 to 9.92; and creative and artistic 10.77 to 10.54. It should be noted that financial stability and coming from a good family had scores which were considerably higher. With such a small sample size it is not possible to know if this is statistically significant, but it is possible that thinking about what was most important to each person in a potential spouse invited reflection upon their deepest values. Both money and family are characteristics deeply integral to a marriage.

Summary

Overall there was a great deal of positive response to the weekend seminar. Many of the participants were challenged and grateful simply for the opportunity to intentionally study, from a biblical perspective, this topic, which was of utmost importance to them, from a biblical perspective. As Martha reflected:

The seminar was incredibly valuable in shaping my perspective. I had a general idea about the concepts covered and their importance. However, this seminar went so in depth and broadened my perspective on a biblical basis. This experience was invaluable. I would recommend it to friends.

It was satisfying to see the level of interest and willingness to seek God's counsel among these young people. They were very open to biblical wisdom and direction. Indeed, they were longing for it. Simply being in a group of people seeking God was helpful, but they also enjoyed being led and pointed in a specific direction. For many, they longed to truly have an idea and understanding of what they should be looking for in a potential spouse. The process of reflecting on what was important to them and being led by biblical wisdom was life-changing. For example, Darlene responded:

It showed me that I shouldn't lower my standards just because I see someone as good looking or that he is a good guy. I believe that if someone really likes you, he'll make the effort to not only make me happy, but he sees the relationship going somewhere, such as becoming a team and growing together. The seminar was very valuable to me.

It really opened my eyes and mind about choosing the right spouse, and I know that God will have the right person for me.

This idea was reflected by several of the participants. They were more certain that God was involved in this process and cared about their choice of spouse. When they were able to learn a biblical foundation for marriage, they felt much more certain both about God's leading of their lives in the area of a potential spouse, but of their own conviction that they needed to have a godly perspective for themselves in making that choice. In other words, it mattered how they thought about a potential spouse and the characteristics of their potential spouse. As Rod stated:

I didn't understand how important attraction was in developing and maintaining a healthy relationship. I also now understand how important commitment is and how imperative it is to pair with someone who brings the same level of commitment to the relationship. This seminar showed me I must be willing to serve and love the same way Christ does for me.

There were many similar comments reflecting a new awareness by participants that it mattered to God and would matter a great deal to them what type of person they married. Of course, most had a general idea that it made a difference what their spouse looked like and acted like, but they were simply uncertain about how to think about the process and what characteristics truly would make an important difference to them. As Donna commented:

It is important to pick a spiritually mature person who is willing to seek premarital counseling, change and submit with God; and to be vulnerable with God and future spouse. Cross off a macho man who refuses to be vulnerable.

Many participants had truly never had anyone share with them how to even approach the idea of marriage and what characteristics are important in this process to them, or to God. They had simply been told "not to be unequally yoked" or to marry a "good Adventist." When they understood what being equally yoked meant, they felt

excited and freed to pursue another whole, spiritual and attractive person. This freedom was reflected in Tammy's thoughts:

This seminar has been very valuable especially when considering the type of men I'm attracted to or at least the type of men I think I would want to marry. I've always been told to basically marry a nice Seventh-day Adventist man and keep it simple. But I would like a partner, someone I love and respect and reflects God. This seminar has been enlightening in that I don't need to settle.

For Tammy, and others, they had come to understand which characteristics may be preferable in a potential spouse and which others were absolutely necessary. Kathy also reflected this new desire to seek out a godly spouse: "Dating more will help me discover what is important to me. It will definitely make me start thinking differently about what God intends marriage to look like for me." Arturo added to this idea; "The key point for me was that knowing who to start dating is an important decision."

It was satisfying that most of the participants were open to guidance. They were keen to find God's perspective and develop a biblical foundation for marriage, but were also excited to be educated on current research on the topic of marriage and relationships. Many had never received any formal education about this topic. And, of course, I felt gratified to have my perspective valued. When asked in the post-survey what three characteristics were most valuable to them in a potential spouse, several responded like John: "Hot, holy and healthy." Or, as Linda put it: "I now have more clarity as to what is important to have in an ideal spouse. They must be hot, holy and healthy." I was grateful simply to know that in one weekend, these young people could develop a biblical framework to help them understand the dating process and to be able to think clearly about what characteristics are most important to them and to God in a potential spouse.

CHAPTER 6

PROJECT EVALUATION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary of the Project

This seminar originated from my experience as a pastor working with young adults in observing the difficulty many Christian young adults have in determining the factors most important in choosing a spouse. This observation suggested that premarital education, while helpful for the limited number who engage in it, was too late in the process to be helpful in determining *which* person to choose as a spouse. Yet that is the only education almost all young adults (including Christian young adults) receive regarding what is undoubtedly one of the most important life choices. The limited material available on this topic generally consisted of a summary of biblical verses on marriage with no attempt to distinguish between what is truly necessary and what might be otherwise important or helpful.

The task of this project was to develop, implement and evaluate a basic seminar focused on educating young adults on the primary characteristics from a biblical perspective as most important in choosing a spouse. The project was intended to provide a foundational understanding for young people in developing, from a theological perspective, a short “list” of characteristics essential in a potential spouse and to provide a biblical worldview of a healthy potential spouse.

Chapter 1 of this project described the ministry context, problem, task, delimitations and description of this project process and definition of terms.

Chapter 2 described a theological foundation for a biblical worldview of marriage and the characteristics necessary for such a marriage. It focused on outlining the attributes of God which impact a healthy marriage and the distinct characteristics of a godly spouse. Such theological reflection was necessary to educate young adults in understanding God as an ideal spouse and to understand that God has provided an outline in His own character of the factors most important to a healthy marriage.

Chapter 3 reviewed and evaluated relevant literature relating to the importance of premarital education. It focused on four key areas. First, it focused on the overall development of premarital education during the last few decades. Second, it reviewed literature and research analyzing the relative efficacy of premarital education on marital satisfaction and longevity. Third, and most important to this project, it assessed the relatively recent research specifically addressing the characteristics most impactful on marital satisfaction and longevity, particularly the impact of spirituality and religiosity. Finally, it explored literature specifically from a spiritual perspective addressing characteristics deemed most important in a potential spouse or a healthy marriage.

Chapter 4 described the development of the intervention (seminar) designed for the specific purpose of educating young adults on choosing a godly spouse. It focused on the biblical characteristics most important in choosing a godly spouse. It described my personal process in the research and development of the specific characteristics deemed most important in a potential spouse. It also addressed the outline for the seminar itself and the particular research to be shared and biblical passages to be studied. Finally, it

outlined the study procedures to be used and the questions to be assessed in determining the efficacy of the intervention.

Chapter 5 provided a narrative of the implementation of the project, as well as evaluating the data from its implementation. It outlined the actual event of the seminar and provided highlights. It also reflected both anecdotal evidence and comments on the surveys which provided evidence for the impact of the intervention. The chapter detailed the pre- and post-surveys and the results. It noted the characteristics the participants deemed most important in a potential spouse before the seminar and the resulting changes after the seminar. Although a statistically significant number of participants were not involved, there was a definite trend in the results toward understanding the significance of the three biblical characteristics which I focused on in the seminar: hot, holy and healthy.

Description of the Evaluation

What follows are some qualitative observations about the seminar itself and how the numerical data from the intervention (chapter 5) was evaluated and interpreted.

Observations From the Seminar

The seminar offered two distinct methods of evaluating the effectiveness of the intervention. First, all participants were asked to complete two distinct surveys, both as pre- and post-surveys (a total of four surveys). Each survey asked participants to evaluate which characteristics they judged as most important in choosing a potential spouse. By comparing the responses in the pre- and post-surveys, it was possible to have some numerical data to determine whether the seminar had impacted the choice of

characteristics deemed most important. This numerical data is discussed below. The surveys also provided an opportunity for qualitative feedback by the participants on the seminar itself and the process of exploring a biblical perspective on the ideal spouse. This allowed for some informal observations.

First, participants indicated without exception that this seminar offered their first opportunity for any formal education of any kind on the process of selecting a spouse. They also expressed disappointment that they had never had this opportunity before, especially as many of them had experienced years of Christian education.

Second, many participants were enthusiastic about studying the Bible in detail to develop a biblical worldview on marriage and the ideal characteristics of a potential spouse biblically and personally. Many came to understand the importance of having a godly view of marriage and of recognizing the necessity of being an ideal godly spouse, not simply looking for another person who would be like that.

Third, there was much enthusiasm about research recognizing the value of spirituality and religiosity in a healthy marriage. Most participants had not read any literature on essential characteristics of a godly spouse and were excited to learn current secular research is confirming the biblical picture of what is most important in a spouse.

Finally, many participants were convicted of the primary importance of developing a biblical worldview of an ideal spouse. Some had the non-verbalized expectation that they should choose to be “equally yoked” with a spouse. But aside from a vague understanding that their spouse should be an Adventist, they had never contemplated what that could or should mean. The seminar offered a specific framework for understanding what it means to be equally yoked and united with another person.

Evaluation Method for Numerical Data

As mentioned, the seminar asked each participant to complete four surveys (two pre- and two post-surveys) evaluating characteristics deemed most important in a potential spouse. The first survey asked participants to evaluate 18 distinct characteristics chosen from current literature which might be important to them in choosing a potential spouse. They evaluated each factor on a 0-3-point scale. The second survey asked participants to rank order 15 distinct characteristics from most to least desirable in choosing a potential spouse. Both surveys are laid out with specificity in chapter 5.

As there were only 13 participants who completed all four surveys, the resulting data would not allow for any statistically significant conclusions. (Fifteen participants attended most of the seminar, but two were not present at the beginning and thus the data could not be used to compare any change in attitude.)

Following the post-survey, I scored each pre- and post-survey and thus received 13 sets of numerical data for use in evaluating any change in attitude toward the characteristics deemed most desirable in choosing a potential spouse. Findings and conclusions were then drawn from the data itself. There was no attempt to test a particular hypothesis or to present data that could be generalized to a wider population. But within the confines of the limited data, results indicated some efficacy through the intervention in changing attitudes toward a more biblical approach by participants in prioritizing hoped-for characteristics in a potential spouse.

Interpretation of Numerical Data (Chapter 5)

Some reasonable conclusions can be drawn from the data, despite the obvious limitation of only 13 participants responding to the pre- and post-surveys. First, participants were empowered to be able to value attraction to the potential spouse in a way they had not felt was acceptable for a Christian young person. To understand God's purpose in sexuality and attraction, and His use of them to bind man and woman together, was liberating. In an ironic twist, participants placed very little value on finding a spouse who was sexually chaste. Thus, despite highly valuing sexuality and attraction, they were completely nonjudgmental in viewing a person's past behavior. This valuation seems to reflect a generational change in attitude of young people towards extra-marital sex.

Second, the other characteristics which participants valued more highly after the seminar were centered most often on commonalities. They expressed greater desire for a spouse with similar education, intelligence, religion, politics and social status. The very prospect of contemplating what is most important in a spouse, and seeing the Bible as accepting of those choices, seems to have offered freedom to the participants to express their deeper or latent desires.

Third, after the seminar, participants expressed a greater desire for a spouse who was spiritually mature and religious. Although spirituality and religiosity are often expressed as in opposition, they seemed inclined to agree with the biblical conclusion linking these two ideas. In noticing the importance of choosing a holy person, participants again expressed their desire to marry such a person. I surmise that the reason their scores reflected this desire more after the seminar was, that they felt free to express the desires of their hearts. Many of these young people had expressed doubt that there

were people who valued holiness, but this seminar affirmed their desire for that type of partner.

Finally, from my perspective, one gratifying trend in the data was the consolidation of the four most desirable characteristics in the post surveys: kind and understanding, emotional maturity, spiritual maturity and physically attractive. The repeated focus on the primary importance of a few characteristics to the exclusion of the more superfluous seemed to have taken root. Participants were more forceful in their desire to choose a spouse with the characteristics they deemed most important, and less concerned with other characteristics. This conclusion was in line with my desire for them to understand the characteristics deemed most important in the Bible.

Interpretation of Qualitative Data (Chapter 5)

The instrument used for the pre- and post-surveys contained opportunity for participants to share information relating to biographical information and reflection. This yielded numerical data as well as an evaluative section which also yielded numerical data. Data collected from the biographical section revealed an average age of 32 years, universal membership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and mostly single, with the exception of one engaged couple. One of the participants had been previously married.

Besides the data discussed above relating in general to the seminar itself, participants also provided feedback on the specific aspects of the education process. Participants grappled with God's purpose for marriage, especially as revealed in Genesis. They were moved by the level of commitment God desires for spouses and impacted by the power of sexuality in God's plan for marriage. The story of Hosea touched many as they saw God's unremitting pursuit of his bride, the church. The unity God desires in

marriage was seen as a focal point in understanding the interaction between man and woman. The creation of man and woman in the image of God was also understood as central to the identity of each person as fully complete on his or her own. With that knowledge, they could now unite themselves with another complete person.

Participants were most vocal about three specific components of the seminar. First, they were pleasantly surprised at the practical application of the Bible to each of the elements of the seminar; hot, holy and healthy. They devoted themselves to studying the Bible in detail in the seminar and were amazed at how the teaching of the Bible lined up with current research.

Second, they were intrigued by the current sociological research which affirms the value of spirituality and religiosity in a healthy and enduring marriage. Likewise, many expressed surprise at the value of commonality as they had intuitively believed it was better to be different from their potential spouse.

Third, they were pleasantly shocked at the manner in which the Bible addresses the importance of sexuality, attraction and the physical being. There were deep underlying assumptions gathered from a lifetime of church, education, and culture which had led them to believe God was suspicious of the body. Many of the participants expressed empowerment in being able to understand their own feelings regarding sexuality and their physical expressions of intimacy. They felt free to be able to intellectually value attraction in congruence with their emotions.

Conclusions Drawn From the Data (Chapter 5)

For these participants, Christian young adults from the Conejo Valley, the seminar had real and lasting value. In one weekend they had become educated enough to

elucidate a biblical understanding of sexuality, attraction, servanthood, wholeness, holiness, identity as a child of God and other foundational components of a marriage based on godly principles.

The seminar was also deemed valuable because having a biblical framework for their often unstated, and even latent, desires for a prospective spouse, seemed to free them to more consciously seek for a partner with those characteristics. They could freely pursue a partner with characteristics important to them and to God. This education had reduced the “list” of things deemed necessary in a potential spouse and allowed them to focus with greater specificity on a few characteristics. Several participants expressly stated their list was narrowed down to three basic characteristics: “hot, holy and healthy.”

Outcomes of the Intervention

While the scope of participants limits any large extrapolations, the data certainly suggested the desirability of educating young adults on developing a biblical framework for understanding the characteristics most desirable in a prospective spouse. The data suggests that this education is essential in both affirming the biblical ideals of marriage and in helping to understand the importance of one’s own health as one seeks to become an ideal spouse. Moreover, the education had the desired impact of narrowing the focus of young people to those characteristics most important in a healthy and enduring marriage by providing a biblical framework for understanding those qualities. It also freed the young people to be able to express desires which they were otherwise uncertain they were “allowed” to feel.

The data also affirmed the value of Bible study and theological exploration in this education process. The young people were affirmed in their trust in the Bible as a

sourcebook for what is most important and impactful in making this very major decision in their lives.

Another outcome of this education has been my own heightened commitment to inviting young people into the Bible as a source of wisdom compatible with their feelings and desires and trusting that God will use his authority in a beneficial manner.

In a similar way, the process revealed a desire by young people to understand current research on marriage and to seek further education in the current literature relevant to this topic.

Yet another outcome has been the development of greater opportunities for me to be able to educate other young adults in this area with the potential for writing a book to reach a wider audience.

Summary of Other Conclusions

In addition to the conclusions just summarized from the data relating to the intervention, I will briefly summarize the research in Chapters 2, 3 and 4 relating to the theological, literature review and methodology used. I will use this summary to draw some overall conclusions.

Theological Conclusions – Chapter 2

To understand the characteristics of an ideal spouse I undertook a theological study in the Bible of God as the ideal Being. As man is created in the image of God, and God is in a Trinitarian community of the highest intimacy, I believed understanding God's characteristics in relationship would greatly inform our human relationships. I noted the unity of God and his creation of both male and female in his image, inviting

them to be united as one to find their deepest meaning in Him, and to be united with each other. God describes Himself as a Groom coming for his bride and demonstrates the highest level of commitment to his bride, even in the face of adulterous behavior. God also prepares his bride for their wedding by inviting her to develop in herself His character and holiness. This is not simply an act of love, but of self-care.

In Scripture, I noted the ideal oneness God invites man and woman to, using their own unique characteristics. Some of the specific characteristics, in the Bible relating to relationship associated with godliness, include a willingness to take responsibility and to confess...to give and to receive grace. Grace-giving is directly connected with understanding one's own identity as a child of God. I know I am loved and am offered grace. Thus, I am able to offer grace to another person.

Scripture also points to the importance of sexual attraction and physical intimacy in marriage. This intimacy also emanates from God's ideal of oneness and is strongly linked with God's creation of sex as a means of establishing and maintaining unity. Physical beauty is described as integral to the ideal spouse. A godly spouse also embodies godly wisdom and a pursuit of holiness, culminating in a commitment to unity with another person. This commitment mirrors the unity God himself offers humans.

Finally, an ideal spouse in Scripture is one who understands his or her identity as a child of God. This understanding orients a person to be trustworthy, faithful and able to serve another person unconditionally out of strength, not weakness. Strong identity invites a person to establish biblical boundaries in relationships while offering and experiencing mutual submission rooted in humility. In the wisdom of God, this is experienced as self-care.

Theoretical Conclusions – Chapter 3

A review of literature relating to premarital education, with a particular focus on education centered on choosing a potential spouse and the characteristics of an ideal spouse was also conducted. This allowed the evaluation of the efficacy of premarital education in general and particularly of premarital education aimed at young people who were not yet engaged. This research affirmed the value and the limitations of premarital education. Multiple meta-analyses of the efficacy of premarital education have shown that it is linked quite strongly with longer and healthier marriages. Yet causation is difficult to confirm as almost any form of premarital education appears to positively impact marriages, especially over the short-term. It appears that couples require continued intervention and education in order to experience ongoing and healthier marriages. Healthy couples tend to have chosen to participate in premarital education.

Thus, it is imperative to choose a spouse who is willing to grow as an individual and to participate in growth as a part of being a couple. Yet the literature revealed an absolute dearth of education instructing young people on how to choose a healthy spouse. What little research there is on this topic is limited by the lack of long-term studies, but again has shown the positive fact that being willing to grow presages having a happy marriage.

There is a large body of research showing the value of commonalities and similarity in background as linked with marital health and longevity. Specific factors that are linked with marital health include similar attitudes and beliefs, emotional health and communication.

Yet more recent research implies that these factors are more probably symptoms of other more foundational characteristics, relating to character and spiritual components. These characteristics include forgiveness, commitment and sacrifice.

In short, there are great opportunities for premarital education of young people about the characteristics most important in a spouse. Education has been effective in skills development and conflict resolution and communication, yet appears to have short-term impact. The individual characteristics of the person and willingness to grow as a person and a couple appear to have greater importance for marital longevity and health.

Methodological Conclusions – Chapter 4

After conducting a seminar designed to educate young adults in the Conejo Valley on the most important characteristics in a prospective spouse, I concluded this course was well-designed to accomplish its goal. Additionally, I discovered there was a great necessity and desire for such education among young adults, almost all of whom had received none at all prior to this seminar.

Although the seminar was comprehensive in that it provided more than eight hours of education, this was not sufficient to share in as much detail as I would have desired. There were two areas of instruction that could have received more attention: first, the participants were intrigued by the presentation of current research relating to marriage efficacy and duration; and, second, they were extremely interested in biblical exploration relating to marriage and premarital relationships. This was both surprising and pleasing to me. In the future, I would focus the seminar more specifically using current research and time for biblical exploration more centrally to the framework.

I also concluded there was a greater need for even more numerical and qualitative data from the participants. Although the data was meaningful to my reflection, I could have used it to help the participants understand their own journey relating to their perceptions regarding marriage and relationships.

Finally, I concluded that in future seminars there could be opportunity for both a more detailed and less detailed presentation. There would be great value in taking more time to explore together, especially relating to current research and biblical wisdom. I also discovered that the essence of the seminar could be synthesized into a presentation of 3-4 hours.

Overarching Conclusions

Upon reflection of the conclusions drawn above, there are several overarching conclusions to be drawn from the project as a whole. First, premarital education is essential to young people in understanding the characteristics most important in choosing a potential spouse. But this type of premarital education differs from most premarital education which focuses on skills development and expectations after a person has chosen their potential spouse. While all premarital education is helpful, most young people do not receive any education at all about the type of person they should think about marrying. A focus on educating young people on the basic principles of relationships from biblical wisdom and current sociological research can be effective in assisting young people to make better decisions.

Second, young people desire to understand more about relationships and want to be better educated on the choice they will make in selecting a spouse. There is simply very little education available. When given the opportunity, the participants eagerly

investigated the Bible to discover God's principles of relationships. They also asked many questions about current research relating to a healthy spouse and marriage. They shared their desire for more education and were willing to change their opinions relating to characteristics of a healthy spouse based on the education.

Third, there was a great deal of positive response to the biblical ideal of hot, holy and healthy. These characteristics were understood as those of God himself. Participants were able to understand God's creation of attraction, sexuality and physical intimacy and unity as central to the character of God. Rather than being superfluous, physicality is seen as essential to a godly relationship and attraction is valuable, indeed necessary. Similarly, holiness was revealed as not simply the defining characteristic of God, but an essential characteristic of a healthy spouse. One is not simply seeking a holy partner, but desirous of being holy oneself.

Likewise, health was understood as innate to the character of God. Health, from a biblical perspective, is understood as knowing one's identity as a child of God. This health was seen as the basis of service, humility, boundaries, hope and more. Many participants responded to these characteristics as foundational to a healthy spouse.

Finally, I myself was energized by the process of assisting young people in understanding the value of premarital education in choosing a potential spouse. I was heartened to see their interest in spiritual and biblical thought as wisdom for their lives. It was wonderful to witness their desire to interact with Scripture, current research, and one another in this process. I was motivated to continue this process of educating young adults by continuing to develop this seminar and by writing a book outlining these criteria in further detail. I believe the Seventh-day Adventist Church has a beautiful picture of the

character of God. It is my desire that God's character forms the basis for discipling each young person as an ideal spouse who desires another spouse with a similar godly character.

Recommendations

I would like to offer a number of recommendations for further action and research arising from the seminar and research project.

1. The literature review suggested an already well-recognized lack of research regarding the long-term benefits of premarital education. There is a particular lack of research on the disparate efficacy of this education for couples who are already troubled or, on the contrary, already predisposed to a high level of commitment to the relationship. There is exciting new research focused more specifically on the potential positive impact of spiritual characteristics on marriage health and longevity. I recommend further research on these topics.

2. The literature review also suggested an almost complete lack of research on the long-term impact of premarital education for young people who are not yet contemplating marriage, such as high school or younger. I recommend further research be done on the potential long-term gains for such education.

3. Recognizing that the benefits of premarital education tend to fade over time, it seems appropriate to encourage seminar participants to periodically review their notes and seminar materials. And also, to deepen their understanding of related issues by reading works such as, *That Friday in Eden* by Alberta Mazat (1981) and *Flame of Yahweh* by Richard Davidson (2007).

4. The literature review also indicated an absolute dearth of literature intended to specifically guide young people on the spiritual principles (and very little on non-spiritual principles) for choosing a healthy spouse. While there is much written on characteristics which are important in a spouse, there is very little focused on what is most important among those characteristics, and even less about what research (and Biblical wisdom) has revealed about those characteristics. I have decided to write a book specifically directed at answering this important question, but I would invite others to consider writing on this topic also.

5. In my research I noted very little by way of premarital education classes in religious educational institution which focus on instructing young people on the characteristics most important in choosing a godly spouse (and on being a godly spouse). I recommend that religious institutions of both secondary and under-graduate levels develop and offer a course specifically focused on premarital education from a spiritual and scriptural perspective.

6. Having received enthusiastic feedback from the young adults present in the seminar, it is my intention to continue to offer further seminars both in my own church and in other settings such as other churches or educational institutions. I was particularly excited by the enthusiasm of young people for exploring Scripture as part of this process and thus I would invite others to consider this form of instruction also elsewhere.

7. Given the enthusiasm for this topic, the large number of single young adults, and the lack of educational opportunities currently existing, I recommend that the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary offer a course specifically designed to

instruct pastors, and others involved in religious instruction, on how to conduct premarital education for young adults who have not yet chosen a life partner.

8. Finally, as a result of this project, my wife and I plan to organize and lead a small group in our local church designed specifically for single young adults who are curious about the wisdom of the Bible for their relationships.

A Final Word

I began this project because of my own lack of education regarding what was most important in a potential spouse. Despite having been educated primarily through graduate school in religious educational institutions, I had never been taught anything regarding this topic either at school, church or at home. Indeed, I do not know any young people who have received this form of education. There is a lot written about prospective marriage partners, but I found very little about what was most important in a potential spouse from a spiritual or non-spiritual perspective. It is almost as if a young person is supposed to choose whom to marry, and then we try and help them make it work. I do not believe God intended it to work this way (not taking into account arranged marriages which do have the advantage of at least some practical education by parents from their own marriages).

In fact, God has provided a great deal of wisdom on the characteristics of a healthy spouse (and indeed of a healthy person). There is also substantial research about characteristics linked to healthy marriages (although not so much on their impact over the life-span of marriages). I believe there is a tremendous opportunity among young people to provide education relating to one of the most important decisions of their lives. Indeed, I found them eager to not only receive education relating to this topic, but desirous of

searching the Scriptures to find answers for themselves. It is my hope that educating young adults on the biblical characteristics most important in a potential spouse will become commonplace in churches and educational institutions. This education offers hope to many young people who are uncertain about how to even think about a potential life partner, and also an opportunity to connect them with the wisdom God provides.

APPENDIX A

RESEARCH APPROVAL AND CONSENT FORM

June 5, 2017
Simon Liversidge
Tel. 805-498-2300
Email: simonliversidge@hotmail.com

RE: APPLICATION FOR APPROVAL OF RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

IRB Protocol #: 17-071 **Application Type:** Original **Dept.:** Doctor of Ministry
Review Category: Exempt **Action Taken:** Approved **Advisor:** David Penno
Title: Educating young adults from the Conejo Valley to choose a Godly wife.

Your IRB application for approval of research involving human subjects entitled: *“Educating young adults from the Conejo Valley to choose a Godly wife”* IRB protocol # 17-071 has been evaluated and determined Exempt from IRB review under regulation 46.101 (b) (3). You may now proceed with your research.

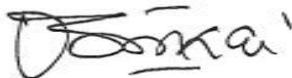
Please note that any future changes (see IRB Handbook pages 11-12) made to the study design and/or informed consent form require prior approval from the IRB before such changes can be implemented. In case you need to make changes please use the attached report form.

While there appears to be no more than minimum risks with your study, should an incidence occur that results in a research-related adverse reaction and/or physical injury, (see IRB Handbook pages 12) this must be reported immediately in writing to the IRB. Any research-related physical injury must also be reported immediately to the University Physician, Dr. Katherine, by calling (269) 473-2222.

We ask that you reference the protocol number in any future correspondence regarding this study for easy retrieval of information.

Best wishes in your research.

Sincerely,



Mordekai Ongo
Research Integrity and Compliance Officer

Institutional Review Board - 4150 Administration Dr Room 322 - Berrien Springs, MI 49104-0355
Tel: (269) 471-6361 Fax: (269) 471-6543 E-mail: irb@andrews.edu

Andrews University

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

EDUCATING YOUNG ADULTS FROM THE CONEJO VALLEY
TO CHOOSE A GODLY SPOUSE

A PROTOCOL of the Seminar
Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Ministry

by

Simon Liversidge

May, 2017

TITLE AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:

The title of this study is “Educating Young Adults from the Conejo Valley to choose a Godly spouse”. The task of this project is to develop, implement and evaluate a seminar to educate young adults in the Conejo Valley about how to choose a Godly spouse. The study will seek to evaluate current attitudes towards the ideal criteria for a spouse among single, mostly Christian or with a Christian background, young adults from the Conejo Valley, in Ventura County, in the outskirts of Los Angeles, CA.

The study will then use a weekend seminar of approximately eight hours in length to educate these single young adults as to a Biblical understanding of an ideal criteria for a spouse from a Biblical worldview. The study will then attempt to measure any changes in attitudes among the participants towards the ideal criteria for a spouse as a result of the seminar.

SUBJECTS:

All participants in the study will meet the following criteria: 1) Aged 18 years or over from the time they volunteer to participate in the seminar; 2) currently single and not otherwise engaged to be married or divorced; 3) willing to participate in the research activities mentioned above; and 4) able to provide informed consent to their participation in the above described activities. Those who are currently married or under the age of 18 will not be allowed to participate in the study. The participants will be volunteers recruited from local Seventh-day Adventists churches and those people who are connected with them. Some of those young adults will be church members at The Place Adventist Fellowship, where I am the Senior Pastor. There will not be any targeting of

vulnerable groups of people. Participants will not be charged for the seminar, nor will they be paid.

The minimum number of participants will be twelve persons to allow for decreased perceived pressure to answer questions. Having a minimum of twelve persons will also preserve the ability to obtain enough of a sample size for meaningful results to be collected regarding changes in attitudes. There will not be sufficient sample size for statistical reliability, but will allow for some preliminary conclusions to be drawn.

RECRUITING:

The participants will be recruited primarily through three methods. The first method will be in bulletin announcements at The Place Adventist Fellowship and other local Seventh-day Adventist churches. This is a general announcement open to any who fit the criteria of being single and over the age of 18 and interested in premarital education regarding choosing a spouse. The second method will be personal invitation to various young adults with whom researcher is friends or connected with personally. The third method will be by a Facebook posting on the researcher's Facebook page inviting anyone who fits the criteria to volunteer. There will be no coercion of any kind, nor any incentive or inducement given. There will be no concealment or deception used in the recruitment process.

CONSENT:

All subjects will give informed consent to participate in the project. A copy of the Informed Consent Form for the protocol is attached as Attachment 2. The consent will be received in writing in advance if possible, or at the commencement of the study at the

latest. The study will be held at The Place Adventist Fellowship on August 4-5 and informed consent will be obtained at that time if not previously given.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION:

All participation in the study will be voluntary. Subjects will be free to leave at will at any time without any penalty of any kind. There is no financial incentive given or cost to participate in the study, thus there will be no forfeiture of any financial incentive.

PROCEDURES:

Participants will be involved in a weekend seminar which the researcher will present regarding biblical education on how to choose a Godly spouse. Participants will be asked to take a pre-seminar survey indicating the characteristics of a prospective spouse they deem most important to marriage. This will be followed by a seminar format interactively presenting material on this topic. There will be several handouts on the topic and an opportunity for questions and answers.

At the conclusion of the seminar, participants will be asked to take a post-seminar survey indicating the characteristics of a prospective spouse they deem most important to marriage; and their perception of the value of the seminar. Participants will also be asked to complete a short post-seminar reflection paper on their experience in the seminar and any self-reported changes in their attitudes towards the characteristics of a prospective spouse they deem most important to marriage and their perception of the value of the seminar. All these activities will occur in Suite 16 at The Place Adventist Fellowship. There will not be any physically invasive procedures or physical activity required.

RISK:

The project involves an extremely minimal level of risk which will be no greater than the normal activities of life.

DATA COLLECTING:

Data will be collected in two forms. First, participants will be asked to take a pre and post-seminar survey indicating the characteristics of a prospective spouse they deem most important to marriage. Second, participants will be asked to complete a short post-seminar reflection paper on their experience in the seminar and any self-reported changes in their attitudes towards the characteristics of a prospective spouse they deem most important to marriage and their perception of the value of the seminar. There will be minimal personal data collected regarding age and gender on the pre and post surveys. There will be no video or audio recording of the subjects.

SECURING OF DATA:

All data collected will be confidential. Names and personal identifiers will be removed for all participants and will be replaced with a code to prevent others from being able to identify individuals who have completed the survey and reflection paper. All personal identifiers will be codified by the researcher prior to the collection of any data. The researcher will maintain the confidentiality of each survey by maintaining all papers associated with the seminar's participants in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's private office. Interview notes will also be kept in the locked filing cabinet. Once the data has been coded all links of identification will be destroyed. No names or personal identifiers will be published or made public.

Andrews University

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

I am conducting a research study as part of my Research project, in partial fulfillment for my Doctor of Ministry in Organizational Leadership at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan. Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated.

Research Title: Educating Young Adults in the Conejo Valley to choose a Godly spouse.

Purpose of Study: The purpose of the study is to educate young adults on a Biblical worldview for choosing a prospective spouse.

Duration of participation in study: The seminar will last approximately 10 hours over the course of one weekend. I understand that I will be required to complete a survey which will take approximately 10 minutes of my time. I will also be required to complete a brief reflection paper on my experience which will take approximately 10 minutes of my time.

Benefits: Expected benefits include the greater understanding of the characteristics most to be desired in a prospective spouse from a Biblical perspective; a greater psychological preparedness for the commitment to a potential spouse; and greater certainty in choosing a prospective spouse.

Risks: There is minimal risk involved in this study.

Voluntary Participation: I have been informed that my participation in this study is completely voluntary. I am aware that there will be no penalty or loss of benefits I'm entitled to if I decide to cancel my participation in this study. And that there will be no cost to me for participating in this study

Confidentiality: Complete confidentiality will be maintained regarding all data collected as part of this study. Participants will be identified by the researcher using a key code and all data will be maintained in a locked file in researcher's private office. I understand that my identity in this study will not be disclosed in any published document. Since researcher may personally know some of the participants, the data will be treated confidentially as anonymity may not be possible.

Contact: I am aware that I can contact the supervisor of Simon Liversidge (Dr. Peter Swanson at swansonp@andrews.edu) or myself at 805-498-2300; simonliversidge@hotmail.com; 149 Cottage Grove Ave., Camarillo, CA 93012) for answers to questions related to this study. I can also contact the Institutional Review Board at Andrews University at (269) 471-6361 or irb@andrews.edu.

I have read the contents of this Consent and received verbal explanations to questions I had. My questions concerning this study have been answered satisfactorily. I hereby give my voluntary consent to participate in this study. I am fully aware that if I have any additional questions I can contact researcher name and contact, or advisor.

Signature (Subject)	Date
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Researcher Signature	Phone	Date
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The Place Adventist Fellowship

2697 Lavery Court
Newbury Park, California 91320

Ron Fausset
Chairman of The Place Adventist Fellowship Board

Institutional Review Board
Andrews University
4150 Administrative Drive, Room 322
Berrien Springs, MI
49104-0355

April 18, 2017

Re: Consent for Simon Liversidge to use Suite 16 at The Place Adventist Fellowship

To whom it may concern:

Consent is hereby given for Simon Liversidge, Senior Pastor at The Place Adventist Fellowship, to use Suite 16 at The Place Adventist Fellowship for a Seminar entitled "Educating Young Adults in the Conejo Valley to choose a Godly spouse". This seminar is understood to be a part of a study for Simon Liversidge's Doctor of Ministry degree at Andrews University. The seminar will be presented on August 4-5, 2017.

If there are any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Ron Fausset
Chairman of The Place Adventist Fellowship Board

APPENDIX B

PRE- AND POST- SURVEYS REGARDING POTENTIAL MATES

Factors in Choosing a Mate

Name _____

Part I: Biographical Data

1. Age: _____
2. Sex: _____ (male or female)
3. Religion: _____
4. Marital status (please circle): single dating engaged married divorced
5. Number of brothers: _____ Number of sisters: _____

Part II: Evaluative Section

1. At what age would you prefer to marry? _____
2. What age difference would you prefer between you and your spouse? _____ years
Whom would you prefer to be older (please circle): self spouse
3. Please evaluate the following factors in choosing a mate. If you consider it:
...indispensable, give it.....3 points
...important, but not indispensable.....2 points
...desirable, but not very important.....1 point
...irrelevant or unimportant.....0 points

- | | |
|--|---|
| _____ (1) Good cook and housekeeper | _____ (13) Similar religious background |
| _____ (2) Pleasing disposition | _____ (14) Ambition & industriousness |
| _____ (3) Sociability | _____ (15) Similar political background |
| _____ (4) Similar educational background | _____ (16) Mutual attraction—love |
| _____ (5) Refinement, neatness | _____ (17) Good health |
| _____ (6) Good financial prospect | _____ (18) Education & intelligence |
| _____ (7) Chastity (no previous experience in
sexual intercourse) | |
| _____ (8) Dependable character | |
| _____ (9) Emotional stability & maturity | |
| _____ (10) Desire for home and children | |
| _____ (11) Favorable social status or rating | |
| _____ (12) Good looks | |

Preferences Concerning Potential Mates

Instructions. Below are listed a set of characteristics that might be present in a potential mate or marriage partner. Please rank them on their desirability in someone you might marry. Give a "1" to the most desirable characteristic in a potential mate; a "2" to the second most desirable characteristic in a potential mate; a "3" to the third most desirable characteristic; and so on down to "15" for the 15th most desired characteristic in a potential mate.

Rank These 15 Characteristics from Most (1) to Least (15) Desired in a Mate:

_____ kind & understanding

_____ religious

_____ spiritual maturity

_____ exciting personality

_____ creative & artistic

_____ good housekeeper

_____ intelligent

_____ good earning capacity/financial stability

_____ desire for children/good parent

_____ easygoing

_____ comes from a good family

_____ college graduate/education

_____ physically attractive

_____ physical health

_____ emotionally healthy

What three factors do you consider most important in your ideal spouse?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

POST- SEMINAR:

REFLECTION PAPER: Did this seminar impact your perspective on the characteristics most important to your choice of an ideal spouse?
If so, how?

How valuable was this seminar to you in shaping your perspective on the characteristics most important to your choice of an ideal spouse?

APPENDIX C

RESULTS OF SURVEYS REGARDING POTENTIAL MATES

SURVEY ONE: FACTORS IN CHOOSING A MATE (Pre-Seminar)

	Person 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	Total	Avg.
Factor 1.	2	1	1	1	3	2	1	2	2	1	1	0	1	18	1.38
2.	3	2	2	1	3	2	3	3	3	3	2	2	3	32	2.46
3.	2	3	3	1	1	2	2	2	3	2	2	1	3	27	2.08
4.	3	1	1	1	2	2	3	1	2	2	2	0	1	21	1.62
5.	3	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	1	2	0	2	23	1.77
6.	3	2	2	1	3	2	3	2	2	2	1	2	2	27	2.08
7.	1	0	1	1	3	0	1	1	2	1	1	0	2	14	1.08
8.	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	39	3
9.	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	3	3	38	2.92
10.	3	3	3	3	2	3	2	2	3	3	3	2	3	35	2.69
11.	2	0	0	0	1	3	0	0	1	2	1	0	1	11	0.85
12.	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	24	1.85
13.	3	2	2	2	2	3	1	3	3	3	3	3	2	32	2.46
14.	2	0	3	3	2	2	3	2	2	3	2	2	3	29	2.23
15.	1	0	1	1	1	3	0	2	0	2	1	1	1	14	1.08
16.	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	33	3
17.	3	2	2	2	1	3	2	2	3	2	2	1	3	28	2.15
18.	3	1	2	2	1	2	3	2	2	2	2	2	2	24	1.85

FACTORS:

1. Good cook and housekeeper
2. Pleasing Disposition
3. Sociability
4. Similar Educational Background
5. Refinement, neatness
6. Good financial prospect
7. Chastity
8. Dependable Character
9. Emotional Stability and maturity
10. Desire for home and children
11. Favorable social status or rating
12. Good looks
13. Similar Religious background
14. Ambition and industriousness
15. Similar political background
16. Mutual attraction
17. Good health
18. Education and intelligence

SURVEY ONE: FACTORS IN CHOOSING A MATE (Post-Seminar)

	Person 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	Total	Avg.
Factor 1.	2	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	1	1	0	2	18	1.38
2.	3	2	2	3	3	3	2	3	2	3	3	3	3	35	2.69
3.	3	2	2	1	2	2	3	2	2	2	2	2	2	27	2.08
4.	2	0	1	1	2	2	3	1	2	1	1	0	1	17	1.31
5.	2	1	2	1	1	2	2	3	2	2	2	0	2	22	1.69
6.	2	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	3	2	2	2	26	2
7.	2	0	1	1	1	1	0	2	0	1	2	0	2	13	1
8.	3	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	38	2.92
9.	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	39	3
10.	3	3	3	2	1	2	3	2	3	3	3	3	2	33	2.54
11.	2	0	1	1	1	1	0	2	2	2	1	0	2	15	1.15
12.	3	2	2	2	3	3	1	3	3	3	2	2	3	32	2.46
13.	3	2	2	1	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	35	2.69
14.	3	0	2	2	2	2	2	3	2	3	2	3	3	29	2.33
15.	1	0	2	1	0	1	3	2	0	2	1	2	2	17	1.31
16.	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	39	3
17.	3	2	2	1	2	0	3	3	3	3	2	1	3	28	2.15
18.	3	2	2	2	3	2	2	2	3	2	2	2	2	29	2.23

FACTORS:

1. Good cook and housekeeper
2. Pleasing Disposition
3. Sociability
4. Similar Educational Background
5. Refinement, neatness
6. Good financial prospect
7. Chastity
8. Dependable Character
9. Emotional Stability and maturity
10. Desire for home and children
11. Favorable social status or rating
12. Good looks
13. Similar Religious background
14. Ambition and industriousness
15. Similar political background
16. Mutual attraction
17. Good health
18. Education and intelligence

SURVEY TWO - CHARACTERISTICS MOST DESIRED IN A MATE
(1 = Most desired; 15= Least Desired). (Pre-Seminar)

	Person 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	Total	Avg.
Character 1.	5	5	11	2	7	1	1	2	8	2	2	3	3	52	4
2.	3	4	1	13	1	2	3	3	1	1	1	4	1	73	5.62
3.	11	1	6	4	8	3	2	1	5	1	3	1	2	57	4.38
4.	8	10	9	7	3	10	1	3	2	7	8	1	1	94	7.23
5.	13	14	1	8	4	9	1	9	9	6	1	1	1	140	10.77
6.	12	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	4	1	1	1	1	159	12.23
7.	2	9	7	3	2	6	1	1	1	8	6	5	7	90	6.92
8.	14	2	1	9	1	1	9	1	5	5	1	1	1	137	10.54
9.	1	8	1	5	9	1	5	8	1	3	9	7	8	98	7.54
10.	9	7	5	1	1	1	8	1	7	1	5	6	9	103	7.92
11.	10	2	1	1	1	8	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	146	11.23
12.	15	1	1	1	6	7	7	1	3	1	1	1	1	146	11.23
13.	4	6	2	1	5	4	1	6	1	9	4	8	6	87	6.63
14.	7	1	8	1	1	1	6	7	6	1	1	9	5	118	9.08
15.	6	3	3	6	1	5	4	8	1	4	7	3	4	64	4.92

1. Kind and understanding
2. Religious
3. Spiritual Maturity
4. Exciting personality
5. Creative and artistic
6. Good housekeeper
7. Intelligent
8. Good earning capacity/Financial stability
9. Desire for children/good parent
10. Easygoing

11. Comes from a good family
12. College graduation/education
13. Physically attractive
14. Physical health
15. Emotionally healthy

SURVEY TWO - CHARACTERISTICS MOST DESIRED IN A MATE
 (1 = Most desired; 15= Least Desired). (Post-Seminar)

	Person 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	Total	Avg.
Charact. 1.	5	2	1	4	4	1	1	4	6	2	2	4	4	39	3
2.	10	4	4	10	13	15	14	12	5	3	1	3	7	101	7.77
3.	4	3	6	2	12	3	2	3	1	1	5	2	2	46	3.54
4.	6	8	12	12	5	10	9	5	11	6	10	11	3	108	8.3
5.	12	14	5	13	9	5	15	8	9	10	12	13	12	137	10.54
6.	15	12	15	11	15	11	10	9	15	14	15	14	14	170	13.08
7.	7	10	10	5	3	6	11	10	10	9	9	7	8	105	8.08
8.	9	11	9	6	10	12	5	14	14	8	8	8	10	124	9.54
9.	13	5	14	8	14	13	6	11	7	5	4	6	9	115	8.55
10.	14	9	8	7	8	7	4	6	12	11	7	10	15	118	9.08
11.	8	1	11	14	11	8	7	13	4	12	14	15	11	129	9.92
12.	11	15	13	15	6	9	13	15	13	15	11	12	13	161	12.38
13.	3	6	3	3	2	2	12	1	3	7	3	5	5	55	4.23
14.	2	13	7	9	7	14	8	7	8	13	13	9	6	116	8.92
15.	1	7	2	1	1	4	3	2	2	14	6	1	1	45	3.46

1. Kind and understanding
2. Religious
3. Spiritual Maturity
4. Exciting personality
5. Creative and artistic
6. Good housekeeper
7. Intelligent
8. Good earning capacity/Financial stability
9. Desire for children/good parent
10. Easygoing
11. Comes from a good family
12. College graduation/education
13. Physically attractive
14. Physical health
15. Emotionally healthy

APPENDIX D

DMIN PROJECT SEMINAR OUTLINE

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Friday – 7:00 p.m. Pre-Seminar Survey

7:15 – 7:30 p.m. Introduction: Hot, Holy and Healthy

Premarital education – about 1/3 of couples do it – much happier and longer lasting marriages – but about 1/3 of couples are compatible to begin with – and those most religious, mature, kind and stable and OPTOMISTIC about marriage are MOST likely to go to premarital education. So, it's best to choose someone from that 1/3!! They are the ones willing to commit to bettering themselves and their marriage. Three most important things: COMMITMENT; COMMUNICATION and COMMONALITIES. But, there is very little out there about HOW to decide WHICH person to choose! List of 3 things I believe BIBLE says are MOST important in a marriage – only need these 3 things. But, need ALL of them. NONE of them is dispensable.

7:30 p.m. Purpose of Marriage – Gen 1-2.

The primary reason marriage is significant to God is because it is part of His ordained plan to provide the world with a picture of His love for men and women. Marriage becomes the means for married couples to demonstrate their love for God. Wilson states: "The wedding ceremony is not an end in itself. In fact, marriage is not an end in itself. Marriage is a means of serving and glorifying God. Young women who view marriage as their chief goal are turning the wedding and the married state into an idol. God planned for marriage to be a blessed state of mutual service to Him."

God established marriage as a covenant, not a contract (Mal 2:14; Prov 2:16-17). It is important to understand the difference between these two. Three important differences exist:

1. A *covenant* is based on trust between parties. A *contract* is based on distrust.
2. A *covenant* is based on unlimited responsibility. A *contract* is based on limited liability.
3. A *covenant* cannot be broken if new circumstances occur. A *contract* can be voided by mutual consent.

GEN 1,2 – What do you learn about God’s PURPOSE for Marriage in:

Gen 1:27 – Marriage is a DIVINE institution given by God as part of his CREATED order. NOT man-made. (Gen 2:22).

Gen 1:27 - TOGETHER man and woman reflect the character of God. There is UNITY in DIVERSITY. Different roles, but ONE in purpose.

Gen 1:28 – God intended PROCREATION from man and woman.

Gen. 1:28 – God intended PURPOSEFUL WORK TOGETHER.

Gen. 2:18 - God intended man and woman to provide COMPANIONSHIP and FRIENDSHIP.

Gen. 2:18 – God intended man and woman to SAVE each other – bring each other to perfection/completion through REAL interaction. HELP MATES.

Gen. 2:21 – Woman comes from man’s SIDE (not RIB!) She is a part of man. They are ONE together. Complete individually, yet lacking without the other.

Gen 2:23 – God intended for individual IDENTITY (Adam is NOT called man until woman is created!) but in relationship to one another.

Gen. 2:24 – God intended full INTIMACY and sexuality – one flesh. Other things get in the way of that oneness (adultery, fornication, etc.)

God’s original creation purpose from Gen 1-3 focusing on the elements of friendship, sexuality, purposeful work together, recreation, procreation, diversity of roles, family and relationship with God.

8:00 p.m. – Love is a Decision:

Love is not enough. It is NOT a feeling. Love is not enough. Discussion of Gary Smalley’s thesis in “Love is a Decision” (Smalley & Trent, 2001) that love is a decision and not a feeling.

NYT Article – Why you will marry the WRONG person!

Imperative need for understanding our feelings. Understanding that emotions are an important key to self-knowledge, but that they must be understood within the context of commitment. There is NOTHING wrong with EMOTIONS – we need them in order to understand ourselves, but they are a TOOL for self-awareness, NOT the goal!

STORY of SAMSON – Judg 14:2-3 – Now get her for me as my wife. Judg 16:4 – he fell in LOVE – with a woman who only wanted to kill him!

David – 2 Sam 11:1-3. Time of War – SHOULD have been doing something else!

8:15 p.m. – I’ve got Issues!

Discussion of the biblical picture of the nature of sin and its impact on people individually and relative to marriage, focusing on Rom 3. Presentation of the understanding of salvation in Jesus, yet the continuing call of God for his followers to live like Him for our blessing and to make life ‘easier’.

Rom 3:10-12 – I SIN! I have sin. I have a sinful nature!

But, God has a PLAN! Rom 3:21-24. God declares us righteous!

God does NOT leave us as SLAVES to sin, Rom 6:5-7. We have overcoming power!

WHY does this matter? Eph 1:4-6: I am a CHILD of GOD. When I KNOW I am a sinner, I can be willing to ACCEPT my weaknesses. I can recognize God loves me for who I am; but know God can GROW me and mature me as HIS CHILD. I can be a WHOLE person...and I am seeking another person like me! Someone who SINS, but can confess and repent and offer and receive forgiveness. We all need GRACE!

But our ability to FORGIVE others is BASED on my ability to see MY need for FORGIVENESS. Matt 6:14-15.

8:40 p.m. – Commitment.

Discussion of the faithfulness of God as seen in the biblical prophet Hosea and God's approach to his unfaithful wife and discussion of the prophet Isaiah and God's continuing wooing of his unfaithful people. Presentation of research regarding the importance of commitment and its central role in the health and longevity of marriage.

Story of HOSEA – Hos 2:14 – God speaks alluringly and woos back his unfaithful bride.

Children of Israel – God never gives up on his bride – although he does change his TACTICS!

COMMITMENT: Research relating to characteristics of a healthy spouse:

Increase in church attendance and spirituality has been linked with lower divorce rates and higher marital satisfaction (Ford, 2010, pp. 31-38).

Background factors with predictive qualities for marital health include health of parents' marriage (Glenn, 1987), divorce, ethnicity, education and external pressures. Individual traits

with predictive qualities of marital health include ‘emotional health’ (Kelly, 1987), depression and dysfunctional beliefs. Character traits such as blaming, victimization and oversimplification have all been linked to unhappiness in marriage (Christensen, 2000). Larson and Holman conclude that individual personality traits are more important to a healthy marriage than background factors, but that background factors have a high impact on personality traits.

Interactional processes with predictive quality include such things as ‘homogamy’ (Kurdek, 1991), (i.e. couples with more in common are more likely to have healthy marriages), similarities in attitudes and beliefs, length of friendship and similar gender roles.

Commitment to the relationship is enormously important. When couples are highly committed, premarital education is more effective than when commitment is lower. So when couples’ satisfaction declines, highly committed couples work on their relationship, whereas lower commitment couples think of ending it (H. J. Markman, & Rhoades, G.K., 2012).

For decades researchers have studied the characteristics of ‘healthy’ marriages to understand the various factors that can impact a marriage. This list includes: love, reciprocity, hopefulness, communication, personal intimacy, patience, personal identity, persistence, congruence and more (Fenell, 1993; Robinson, 1993). More recently, this list has expanded to include spirituality (Hunler, 2005). A 2008 study of Asian Indian Americans lead by George Kallampally found a high predictive ability for spirituality and marital satisfaction. Additionally he found a strong connection between spirituality and positive feelings led to fewer instances of negative feelings (Kallampally, 2008).

Importance of finding someone compatible as it is easy to be misled into a difficult marriage by the pursuit of sexual pleasure, excessive idealization and various subconscious goals (Pines, 1999). Similarly, there is the recognition that the ability to offer and receive intimacy

is vital to a healthy relationship and thus should be a goal in seeking a marriage partner (S. M. Stanley, Markman, H. J., & Whitton, S.W., 2002). Stanley, et al, as with many other researchers, also found higher commitment lead to more marital satisfaction while negative communication patterns were very detrimental to a relationship.

Another important factor for healthy relationships is communication and conflict resolution skills. In this landmark longitudinal study, Gottman, et al, were able to predict eventual six-year marital happiness and stability and eventual divorce from newlywed interactions within the first months of marriage. In looking at various process models they found “the husband's rejecting his wife's influence, negative startup by the wife, a lack of de-escalation of low intensity negative wife affect by the husband, or a lack of de-escalation of high intensity husband negative affect by the wife, and a lack of physiological soothing of the male, all predicting divorce” (p. 5). Gottman called these processes, the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” and saw in them the husband’s unwillingness to accept his wife’s influence and subsequent escalation (p. 6).

While important, other researchers assert this focus has neglected other factors important to marital satisfaction that may be more primary. For example, Sullivan, et al, explored marital satisfaction from a social support perspective, focusing on the importance of friendship and looking at topics that cause couples to fight, rather than their method of fighting (K. T. Sullivan, Pasch, L.A., Eldridge, K.A., & Bradbury, T.N., 1998). Similarly, Fowers sees the foundational values of courage, honesty, generosity and self-restraint at play in couples’ interactions and that developing these values is primary to teaching couples effective communication and conflict resolution (Fowers, 2001). Indeed Fincham, et al, make a compelling argument for seeing conflict resolution as only a sideline in marital health (building on the work of Thomas Bradbury (Bradbury, 2004), despite the acknowledged well-documented impact of conflict on marriages (F. D. Fincham, Stanley, S.M., & Beach,

S.R., 2007). They make their case based on: the results of longitudinal studies showing conflict is only a small part of marital outcomes, data suggesting conflict is not as useful a predictive factor as once thought, and examples of reversal of conflict and healing of marriages (S. R. H. Beach, Fincham, F. D., Amir, N., & Leonard, K.E., 2005).

Fincham, et al, find an increasing trend towards understanding the positive constructs at work in a marriage and that good marriages are a powerful force for meaning in life. As part of this ‘non-linear’ understanding of marriage, they identify three powerful constructs that can alter the future: first, forgiveness (F. D. Fincham, Hall, J., & Beach, S. R. H., 2006); second, commitment and sacrifice (Adams, 1997), which alter the nature of relationship and actually provide a benefit, rather than a net cost; and third, sanctification, the process whereby life is seen to have meaning within the divine context (Pargament, 2005). Karney responds by suggesting research on marital health should not move its focus away from understanding conflict resolution, but needs to narrow its question to understanding the goals of marital education, as most people know what they would like to do, but have difficulty actually doing it (Karney, 2007).

It is precisely because of difficulty in doing what one ‘knows’ that spirituality is important. In 2010, Annette Mahoney published a meta-analysis of 184 studies linking religiosity and spirituality with family and marriage. She found higher ‘sanctification’ of marriage by men and women is related to higher marital quality and that similarities in a couple’s belief about sanctity of marriage is more important than either spouse’s individual belief (Mahoney, 2010). David and Stafford affirmed this relationship, finding religious homogamy has positive effects on marital satisfaction. They found one’s individual relationship with God is important because it results in religious communication between spouses, leading to greater marital quality. They noted greater willingness to forgive oneself and partner are linked to greater marital satisfaction (David, 2013).

This research conforms to the consistent findings of greater ‘religiosity’ of married persons correlated to marital stability and quality (Allgood et al., 2009). This seems reasonable as religions instruct their followers to be loving, patient, forgiving and other traits consistent with positive marital outcomes and that as couples hold marriage as ‘sacred’, marital satisfaction increases (Stafford, 2014). In fact, another 2014 study shows the religious commitment of one’s spouse is strongly correlated toward marital satisfaction if the person is looking for a spiritual spouse, but not otherwise. Indeed, religion was very important when a person chose another person who had the same strong sense of religious fervor, but actually had a negative impact if the person was looking for a strongly religious mate, but chose someone who was not (Perry, 2015).

It seems likely from the current research that people who have internalized their religious beliefs about character and the sacred calling of marriage have stronger and happier marriages.

9:15 p.m. It’s all about me.

Discussion of Gary Thomas’ thesis in *Sacred Marriage* (Gary Thomas, 2000) regarding God’s design for marriage being to challenge an individual to personal growth and holiness, not necessarily for happiness. Discussion about recognizing that marriage presents great opportunities within the context of great challenges.

SO WHAT REALLY MATTERS? Hot, holy and healthy. What do I look for in a spouse?

SATURDAY:

9 a.m. Hot

It’s all about sex. Discussion of the Biblical perspective on the purpose of sex beginning with the story of Adam and Eve. 4 Purposes of Sex: Pro-creational – Gen. 1:28; relational and

social – for companionship – Gen 2:18, 21-24; public good – prevents high cost of marital and familial breakdown – Gen 2:24; offers pleasure and binding together – Gen 2:24.

Counselor Waylon Ward offers an insightful way to understand the problem, which he calls “the Pickle Principle.” In order to make pickles, we put cucumbers in a brine solution of vinegar, spices, and water. After a cucumber soaks in the brine long enough, it is changed into a pickle. Most of us are like pickles. We sit in the brine of a sex-saturated culture, absorbing its values and beliefs, and it changes the way we think. Even most Christians are pickled today, believing and acting exactly like everyone else who has been sitting in the brine of a culture hostile to God and His Word.

The world’s sex-saturated brine includes the belief that sex is the ultimate pleasure. The message of much TV, movies, and music is that there is no greater pleasure available, and that it is the right of every individual, even teenagers, to have this pleasure. Another aspect of this pickling process is the belief that no one has the right to deprive anyone else of this greatest of all human pleasures, that no one has the right to tell anyone else what is right or wrong about the expression of his or her sexuality.

Presentation focusing on the references by Jesus and the Apostle Paul to sexuality and marriage and noting the positive emphasis and benefits. Understanding the power of sexuality and its God-given emotional and physical capacity to bind two people as one flesh. Jesus: Matt 5:28 – don’t lust after another - powerful; Matt 19:5,6 – Jesus adds that what God joined together, man should not separate.

There are 44 prohibitions of *porneia* (sexual expression outside of marriage, usually translated “sexual immorality”) just within the New Testament alone. This is where God

draws the line between sex within marriage and sex outside of marriage, which determines what is considered sin and what is not.

Paul: 1 Cor 6:14-16 – BOND with who we sleep with – God INTENDED sex to bind us; v. 18- impact INSIDE the body.

Heb 13:4 – marriage bed HONORED by all (Paul – 1 Cor 7:5 – don't deprive one another!

Sex is God's idea. He made it not only efficient for making babies, but pleasurable and deeply satisfying. He designed men's and women's body parts to complement each other. He created hormones to make everything work right and make us want to be sexual. Unlike animals, whose mating behavior is purely instinctive for the purpose of reproduction, human sexuality has several wonderful purposes. God means for all of them to be contained within marriage.

In a lifelong covenant of faithfulness between husband and wife, we can express and enjoy God's two major purposes of sex: fruitfulness and intimacy. His first command to Adam and Eve was to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:28); one very foundational purpose of sex is to create new living beings. Fruitfulness is not limited to having children, though. A mutually loving and serving sexual relationship between husband and wife can produce emotional and personal fruitfulness as well. Both people are nurtured to grow, develop, and soar, becoming more of what God means them to be.

The other big purpose for sex - emotional and physical intimacy - is only possible within marriage. In his little gem of a book called *What God Says About Sex*, Eric Elder says that intimacy really means "into-me-see." It is only safe to reveal the fullness of who we are, "warts and all," to someone who loves us and has committed to be faithful and supportive "till death do us part." The fullest experience and freedom of sex is found within the marriage

bed, which God says to keep holy or set apart. God says that we are to use self-control to keep all expressions of sexuality limited to marriage.

Sex also builds oneness, a mystical union of two lives and souls into one life together. The one-flesh union of sex is a picture of the way two souls are joined together into a shared life.

In fact we could say that sex is like solder that is used to fuse two pieces of metal together.

Once they are joined, it is a strong bond that helps keep marriages and families intact, which is God's intention for our lives. Another purpose of sex is the pleasure that comes from being safe in another's love. The entire book of Song of Solomon is gorgeous poetry that glorifies married sexual relations.

God also says that an important purpose of sex is to serve as an earthbound illustration of the mystical but real unity of Christ and the church, where two very different, very *other* beings are joined together as one. This spiritual component to sex is what helps us see more clearly why any and all sex outside of marriage falls far short of God's intention for sex to be holy and sacred—and protected.

10:00 a.m. The power of attraction

Discussion of the biblical perspective on physical attraction and beauty, briefly exploring references in Scripture. Understanding why God created beauty and how it impacts our choice of a partner. Helping participants recognize the importance of physical attraction to a future spouse and having good 'chemistry.' Further discussion of the potential difficulties in not having a physical and emotional connection with a future spouse, including the powerful impact of culture and societal expectations.

Cant 7:10 – his DESIRE is for me

Gen 39:6 – Joseph; Gen 29:17 – Rachel; 1 Sam 9:2 – Saul; Dan 1:4 – Daniel!

Esth 2:7 – Esther; Job 42:15; Job’s daughters

Consider the characteristics that are often considered desirable in a mate—a sense of humor, intelligence, kindness, understanding, a family orientation, good looks. Which would you rank as most important in a romantic partner? Which is least important to you?

Research consistently shows that we rank most or all of these traits as more important than good looks (Apostolou, 2011; Apostolou, 2015; Buss et al., 2001; Perilloux et al., 2011). However consciously ranking traits as more or less important may not reflect the way we make our real-life dating and mating decisions.

Physical attractiveness may serve as a gatekeeper directing us toward partners who are healthy, age-appropriate, and able to reproduce (Weeden and Sabini, 2005). And when we make real-life dating and mating decisions, research indicates that physical appearance dominates: We choose to pursue relationships with those who are attractive to us (see Luo and Zhang, 2009; Kurzban and Weeden, 2005; Thao et al., 2010).

Men (both gay and straight) seem to consciously recognize the importance of physical attractiveness more than women (both straight and lesbian; see Lippa, 2007). However, experimental research, as well as evidence from online dating and speed dating, shows that physical attractiveness is equally important to men and women. Further, attractiveness tends to be a more important factor in our dating decisions than traits like personality, education and intelligence (Eastwick et al., 2011; Eastwick and Finkel, 2008; Luo and Zhang, 2009; Kurzban and Weeden, 2005; Sprecher, 1989; Thao et al., 2010). Physical attractiveness may be so important to us because we associate other positive qualities with a pleasing appearance. For example, attractive individuals are expected to be happier and to have more

rewarding life experiences than unattractive individuals (Dion et al., 1972; Griffin and Langlois, 2006). This tendency to associate attractiveness with positive qualities occurs cross-culturally (Shaffer et al., 2000; Zebrowitz et al., 2012).

10:30 a.m. - It's not all about being hot.

Discussion of the biblical definitions of beauty and health, especially in the Apostle Paul's writings. Understanding that beauty is in the eye of the beholder and the importance of not conforming to cultural standards of physical health, fitness and beauty; particularly focusing on the changes that occur as the body ages and the differences between the sexes in what is attractive. Further discussion regarding the possible obsession with either being 'hot' or finding the 'hottest' person and understanding what level of attraction is necessary or helpful.

Physical Attractiveness is Less Important Than We Think

This is not to say that physical attraction is the most important aspect to be considered when looking for a husband or wife. For one thing beauty should not be defined by the world. That which the world finds beautiful falls well below the standard of beauty described in Scripture. Physical beauty fades with time, but true inner beauty shines forth from a woman who loves God (Prov 31:30). Peter encourages women to develop inner beauty that comes from "the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful" (1 Pet 3:3-5). Outer beauty is fleeting; inner beauty is eternal.

The attractiveness of a man should also be that which comes from within. The most obvious example in Scripture is Jesus, who "had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him" (Isa 53:2). Yet the beauty of His grace, as the

incarnate Son of God, shone forth from within Him to all who truly knew Him. The strength of character displayed in the Son of Man should be modeled by every man on earth.

Outward beauty is fleeting, but men and women whose judgment is impaired by sin place undue importance on it. God's perspective is different. "The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Sam 16:7). A prospective husband or wife should be a genuine, born-again Christian who is growing and maturing in the faith and who is obedient to Christ. Two people having the same purpose in life—to glorify God in all they do—will find that their physical attraction to one another increases daily and lasts for a lifetime.

One reason we may not consciously realize the importance of physical attractiveness is that we don't necessarily want partners who are extremely attractive; we just want partners who are attractive *enough*. In Dion et al.'s (1972) research, both attractive and moderately attractive individuals were viewed more positively than less attractive counterparts. Similarly, in Griffin and Langlois's (2006) research, a lack of attractiveness was associated with negative qualities, but only a moderate level of attractiveness was necessary to make one's associations positive. To interest us, then, potential mates do not need to be exceptionally attractive, only moderately so.

The distinction between *necessities* and *luxuries* (Li et al., 2011) can help us understand the importance of a moderate level of physical attractiveness. According to Li et al., "a necessity is something that is initially extremely desirable...but as more of it is acquired, it diminishes in value. A luxury, in contrast, is not important when necessities are lacking, but becomes more desirable once basic needs have been met" (p. 292).

The research reviewed above suggests that most of us, consciously or not, view a moderate level of physical attractiveness as a "necessity," while a higher level of may be a

“luxury.” When we say that physical attractiveness is not important to us, we are likely referring to the luxury of *exceptional* attractiveness and not the necessity of a minimum level of attractiveness.

But how attractive is "moderately" attractive? We don't need to be supermodels to find a mate, but whom we consider to be “moderately attractive” varies from person to person. More attractive people tend to perceive fewer others as physically attractive while less attractive individuals may consider a broader range of others appealing (Montoya, 2008). And looking for someone who shares a similar level of physical attractiveness to your own can enhance your long-term relationship success (Feingold, 1998; Fugère et al., 2015; more on matching in physical attractiveness in [this post](#)).

But no matter our personal level of attractiveness, or our partner's, as we get to know, like, and respect each other more, our attraction naturally grows and deepens (Kniffin and Wilson, 2004). The longer we know each other, the less important physical attractiveness becomes to beginning and maintaining a long-term relationship (Hunt et al., 2015).

11:00 a.m. It's not all about sex.

Discussion of sexual compatibility and its primarily emotional component. Further discussion of several contemporary issues relating to sexuality including: faithfulness to one's spouse, appropriate boundaries, pornography, and the public good of marriage vs. cohabitation prior to marriage.

Why does GOD invite us to SEX and with only ONE PERSON?!

1. You trust each other.
2. Getting off is important to both of you.
3. You're not afraid to ask for what you want.
4. There's a level of comfort you can't have with casual sex.
5. You know each other's bodies inside out.
6. There's a good level of respect.
7. An emotional

connection sparks more fire. 8. It heightens the physical response. Scientifically speaking, sex releases chemicals in the brain that cause you to have feelings of closeness and pleasure. When you're already emotionally connected outside of sex, this improves the physical connection because of its ability to act as a double release of those chemicals. 9. It gives sex meaning. Sex without love is just sex. On its own, it's still good, but when you give it a sense of meaning, it's that much better. You're expressing your love for one another in the physical way and being able to do that with the person you deeply care about everywhere else in life is amazing. 10. The after-sex cuddling makes you feel truly loved. With casual sex, cuddling is usually off the table, but when you're with someone you love or care about, it's a necessity. This brings you even closer together and makes the overall sexual experience that much more meaningful.

FAITHFULNESS to one's spouse – Do not commit adultery! Why not? Sex is about the emotional connection – being ONE! Every sexual experience outside marriage LESSENS the emotional connection you have with another person.

BOUNDARIES – don't tell a person of the opposite sex something you are not telling your spouse! Not just friends- Dr. Shirley Glass says most affairs start with emotional connection and move to physical when opportunity arises.

Pornography –

1. Porn Breaks Trust

According to numerous studies, prolonged exposure to pornography leads to a diminished trust between intimate couples.

2. Porn Hinders Emotional Intimacy

Pornography leads to objectification rather than a meaningful interaction with another person.

3. Porn Destroys Self-Esteem

When men *and* women were exposed to porn, they were less likely to be pleased with their partner's physical appearance, affection, and sexual performance.

Not only does porn affect how users view others but it also affects how they view themselves. Porn users may find that not only do they see their partners in a less than "satisfying" way, but they start to think that they themselves are less attractive as well.

4. Porn Causes Selfishness

Pornography promotes selfishness. "Seldom did I think of bringing sexual pleasure to my wife. I thought only about getting, not giving."

5. Porn Demeans Women

Results showed that the more porn a man was exposed to, the more likely he was to prefer that women be submissive and subordinate to men.

6. Porn Impairs Your Sex Life

Porn can lead to decreased sexual performance. A recent NoFap survey of pornography users found that 19 percent suffer from premature ejaculation, 25 percent are disinterested in sex with their partner, 31 percent have difficulty reaching orgasm, and 34 percent experience erectile dysfunction. After committing to no masturbation/porn, 60 percent of those on NoFap felt that their sexual functions had improved; 67 percent had an increase in energy levels as well as in productivity.

7. Porn Leads to Marital Dissatisfaction

Research has found that after men are exposed to pornography, they rate themselves as less in love with their partner than men who didn't see any porn.

Here's the thing: not only is porn a fantasy, but it also makes it harder for users to have real loving relationships.

8. Porn is a Gateway to Infidelity

Porn increases marital infidelity by 300%. Watching porn diminishes relationship commitment. The fantasy alternative leads to real-world cheating. Porn-free relationships are stronger, with a lower rate of infidelity. Their rate of infidelity was *at least half* of those who had watched sexual material alone *and* with their partners.

9. Porn is linked to Depression, Stress and Anxiety

Men who have cyber-sex have “alarmingly high” rates of clinical depression, stress, and anxiety. Recovering porn users continue to report a reduction in social anxiety as one of the most common improvements when they stop using Internet porn.

10. Porn Alters Your Brain

Porn physically changes your brain. And here’s the really scary part: the more porn one looks at, the more severe the damage to one’s brain becomes and the more difficult it is to break free.

2:30 p.m. Holy

God as the ideal spouse. Discussion of the biblical picture of God and His characteristics, particularly relating to relationship, intimacy, commitment and connection. Understanding that humans are created in God’s image and thus needful and desirous of God’s characteristics in a potential spouse, yet at the same time recognizing our human limitations in this regard.

God invites us to be holy. Lev 11:45; 1 Pet 2:21

God made us in his image. Gen 1:26. But, we FELL! Sin came into the world. NONE of us is holy. Rom 5:12- sinful nature.

But, God shows us what HOLINESS looks like. God is our IDEAL spouse.

Isa 62:4-5 – God delights in his bride.

Hosea 2:14 – God WOOS his UNFAITHFUL bride. Commitment.

God made us to desire God’s holiness and characteristics in a potential spouse, but also to recognize our human limitations in this regard.

2:45 p.m. So, what am I looking for?

RECOGNIZE that I will have a hard time finding someone DIFFERENT from me! If I want someone to be attracted TO ME, I need to be that kind of person! I cannot expect someone different from me to want ME if I am not like the person I want!

Holiness as a spiritual journey. Discussion of the sanctifying work of God towards his church, as exemplified in Eph 5 and how this relates to marriage. Recognition that no human (including ourselves) will be holy as God is holy, yet understanding the importance of choosing a potential spouse who is seeking to follow God as a high life-priority. Further discussion of the impact of spiritual compatibility and the possible difficulties when it is not present.

Eph 5:18-23 – (ONE sentence in Greek). Spirit-filled life.

v. 21 – MUTUAL submission; verb IMPLIED in v. 22 (hupotasso)

v.23 – husband’s role is to BRING wife to SALVATION- (explicit in v. 31 – referring to creation – oneness

v. 25- counter-cultural for one to submit – call to AGAPE – love.

v. 26-27- GOAL – bring his wife to HOLINESS

v. 28-29 – ONE body – care for ourselves by CARING for the other (HEALTHY)

Another important factor for healthy relationships is communication and conflict resolution skills and much research has focused on these skills, with John Gottman leading the way (J. M. Gottman, Coab, J., Carrere, S., & Swanson, C., 1998). In this landmark longitudinal

study, Gottman, et al, were able to predict eventual six-year marital happiness and stability and eventual divorce from newlywed interactions within the first months of marriage. In looking at various process models they found “the husband's rejecting his wife's influence, negative startup by the wife, a lack of de-escalation of low intensity negative wife affect by the husband, or a lack of de-escalation of high intensity husband negative affect by the wife, and a lack of physiological soothing of the male, all predicting divorce” (p. 5). Gottman called these processes, the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” and saw in them the husband’s unwillingness to accept his wife’s influence and subsequent escalation (p. 6). The premarital education model of focusing on communication skills and conflict resolution as primary comes from this conceptual framework.

While important, other researchers assert this focus has neglected other factors important to marital satisfaction that may be more primary. For example Sullivan, et al, explored marital satisfaction from a social support perspective, focusing on the importance of friendship and looking at topics that cause couples to fight, rather than their method of fighting (K. T. Sullivan, Pasch, L.A., Eldridge, K.A., & Bradbury, T.N., 1998). Similarly, Fowers sees the foundational values of courage, honesty, generosity and self-restraint at play in couples’ interactions and that developing these values is primary to teaching couples effective communication and conflict resolution (Fowers, 2001). Indeed, Fincham, et al, make a compelling argument for seeing conflict resolution as only a sideline in marital health (building on the work of Thomas Bradbury (Bradbury, 2004), despite the acknowledged well-documented impact of conflict on marriages (F. D. Fincham, Stanley, S.M., & Beach, S.R., 2007). They make their case based on: the results of longitudinal studies showing conflict is only a small part of marital outcomes, data suggesting conflict is not as useful a predictive factor as once thought, and examples of reversal of conflict and healing of marriages (S. R. H. Beach, Fincham, F. D., Amir, N., & Leonard, K.E., 2005).

Fincham, et al, find an increasing trend towards understanding the positive constructs at work in a marriage and that good marriages are a powerful force for meaning in life. As part of this 'non-linear' understanding of marriage, they identify three powerful constructs that can alter the future: first, forgiveness (F. D. Fincham, Hall, J., & Beach, S. R. H., 2006); second, commitment and sacrifice (Adams, 1997), which alter the nature of relationship and actually provide a benefit, rather than a net cost; and third, sanctification, the process whereby life is seen to have meaning within the divine context (Pargament, 2005). Karney responds by suggesting research on marital health should not move its focus away from understanding conflict resolution, but needs to narrow its question to understanding the goals of marital education, as most people know what they would like to do, but have difficulty actually doing it (Karney, 2007).

It is precisely because of difficulty in doing what one 'knows' that spirituality is important. In 2010, Annette Mahoney published a meta-analysis of 184 studies linking religiosity and spirituality with family and marriage. She found higher 'sanctification' of marriage by men and women is related to higher marital quality and that similarities in a couple's belief about sanctity of marriage is more important than either spouse's individual belief (Mahoney, 2010). David and Stafford affirmed this relationship, finding religious homogamy has positive effects on marital satisfaction. They found one's individual relationship with God is important because it results in religious communication between spouses, leading to greater marital quality. They noted greater willingness to forgive oneself and partner are linked to greater marital satisfaction (David, 2013).

This research conforms to the consistent findings of greater 'religiosity' of married persons correlated to marital stability and quality (Allgood et al., 2009). This seems reasonable as religions instruct their followers to be loving, patient, forgiving and other traits consistent with positive marital outcomes, and that as couples hold marriage as 'sacred,'

marital satisfaction increases (Stafford, 2014). In fact another 2014 study shows the religious commitment of one's spouse is strongly correlated toward marital satisfaction if the person is looking for a spiritual spouse, but not otherwise. Indeed, religion was very important when a person chose another person who had the same strong sense of religious fervor, but actually had a negative impact if the person was looking for a strongly religious mate, but chose someone who was not (Perry, 2015).

It seems likely from the current research that people who have internalized their religious beliefs about character and the sacred calling of marriage have stronger and happier marriages.

3:30 p.m. The primary importance of the commitment to God.

Discussion of the vicissitudes of life and the biblical insights of the value of having a partner willing to share that journey, particularly as noted in Gen 1-3, the words of Jesus, and the book of Ephesians. Further discussion of the covenantal aspect of marriage and its impact on the promises a spouse makes to the other and the Biblical understanding of divorce.

Discussion regarding specifically understanding how holiness can be understood as self-care in Ephesians 5.

Gen 2:18 – Man was ALONE even in the presence of God. God designed us to need others.

Gen 2:18 – helper – ke neged – ke = like; neged = against, opposite – confrontation and difference. To help is NOT to assist, but to make up the difference when strength is lacking – BOTH need that.

ISH – man – weakness and dependence – yet together are not alone. Isha is NOT subordinate to man. NOT a helper in that sense. Weak, but together they are STRONG.

COMMITMENT: Matt 28:20 – I am with you always. Gen 2:24 – one flesh (NOT used to describe other familial or friendship relationships).

Matt 19:6 – what God has joined together, let no man separate.

Matt 19:7-8 - only sexual unfaithfulness can break the permanent bond

(Although, argue - HONOR, CHERISH and PROTECT – covenant – economic, emotional and sexual faithfulness and covenant)

1 Cor 7:10-14 – no divorce because of ONENESS of the marriage – commitment so strong it SANCTIFIES the unbelieving spouse and children (v. 14); yet, can be broken if an unbeliever leaves (v. 15.)

Specific attributes of holiness. Discussion of various characteristics God desires for humans to possess and their relative importance. Specific attention given to a biblical understanding of the willingness to take personal responsibility and the value of wisdom. Further discussion of ‘body’ life as described in the book of Ephesians with particular note of honesty, speaking the truth in love, building up one another, forgiveness and the role of submission and humility.

Willingness to take personal responsibility – Adam and Eve – she did it. Matt. 3:3- REPENT for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. Speaking the truth in love – Eph 4:15. 4:29 – building up one another.

Wisdom – Prov 31:30 – a woman who fears the Lord

4:00 p.m. Healthy.

Emotional health. Understanding the roots of a ‘healthy’ person and recognizing the primary importance of knowing one’s identity as a child of God as outlined in Ephesians 1.

Understanding that a healthy person is ‘whole’ on their own, but is able to commit to being made ‘one’ with another. Recognizing that an acceptance of God’s unconditional love for a person as the basis of human unconditional love and faithfulness. A healthy person will be

able to submit and serve another from a place of strength and servant leadership. Self-love and self-esteem form the basis of being able to love another.

Eph 1:4-5 – CHOSEN as God's child

Rom 8:15-17 – God's kids – heirs – inheritance of all God has for us. (v. 15 – NO fear!)

I am WHOLE completely on my own, but made to live with ONE ANOTHER. (NOT necessarily have to be married to do that!)

NO fear of being separated from God – Rom 8:38-39

Orientation is positive as see God as faithful and reliable – 2 Cor 1:18; believe God desires to bless them and say yes to them (v. 20-22.)

Because I am healthy, I can now offer YOU love – Phil 2:3-4.

I SERVE because I LOVE God and myself – NOT to ingratiate – Phil 2:5-7. Service based on STRENGTH, not on WEAKNESS

Eph 5:21-25 – MUTUAL submission and love – NOT out of need.

Submission and love is SELF-CARE!

Eph. 5:28-29. Health. Taking care of another person is self-care – taking care of oneself. V. 30-31 – we are all members of one body.

The power of knowing one's spiritual identity. Understanding the benefits of recognizing one's identity as a child of God. These benefits include: maintaining appropriate boundaries, understanding the nature of humility and service, willingness to communicate and receive truth spoken in love, ability to not be jealous, willingness to be assertive in expressing needs, being comfortable with one's own emotions, and ability to engage in meaningful conflict resolution. Each of these characteristics is outlined in the book of Ephesians and understood within the context of spiritual warfare.

BENEFITS of being HEALTHY and knowing my IDENTITY.

Appropriate Boundaries- I don't have to PLEASE you!

Humility and Service – I don't have to be subservient to you!

Ability to communicate and receive truth spoken in love – Eph 4:15, 25 – share emotions.

Ability to be assertive in expressing needs. ASSERTIVE, not passive or aggressive.

Being comfortable with own emotions. RAISING CAIN – alcohol and other addictions are attempts at being able to FEEL close

Ability to engage in real CONFLICT resolution. NOT personal.

4:45 p.m. Family health

Understanding the importance of a person's family background as preparation for marriage and the impact of family history will have on the marriage. Recognizing how God establishes his body on earth (church) as family also and how that body can potentially positively impact individuals and marriage. Understanding the power of having a spiritual community.

Living as ONE ANOTHER in the NT: The 59 "One anothers" of the New Testament

1. "...Be at peace with each other." (Mark 9:50) 2. "...Wash one another's feet." (John 13:14) 3. "...Love one another..." (John 13:34) 4. "...Love one another..." (John 13:34) 5. "...Love one another..." (John 13:35) 6. "...Love one another..." (John 15:12) 7. "...Love one another" (John 15:17) 8. "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love..." (Rom 12:10) 9. "...Honor one another above yourselves. (Rom 12:10) 10. "Live in harmony with one another..." (Rom 12:16) 11. "...Love one another..." (Rom 13:8) 12. "...Stop passing judgment on one another." (Rom 14:13) 13. "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you..." (Rom 15:7) 14. "...Instruct one another." (Rom 15:14) 15. "Greet one another with a holy kiss..." (Rom 16:16) 16. "...When you come together to eat, wait for

each other.” (I Cor 11:33) 17. “...Have equal concern for each other.” (I Cor 12:25) 18. “...Greet one another with a holy kiss.” (I Cor 16:20) 19. “Greet one another with a holy kiss.” (2 Cor 13:12) 20. “...Serve one another in love.” (Gal 5:13) 21. “If you keep on biting and devouring each other...you will be destroyed by each other.” (Gal 5:15) 22. “Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.” (Gal 5:26) 23. “Carry each other’s burdens...” (Gal 6:2) 24. “...Be patient, bearing with one another in love.” (Eph 4:2) 25. “Be kind and compassionate to one another...” (Eph 4:32) 26. “...Forgiving each other...” (Eph 4:32) 27. “Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.” (Eph 5:19) 28. “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (Eph 5:21) 29. “...In humility consider others better than yourselves.” (Phil 2:3) 30. “Do not lie to each other...” (Col 3:9) 31. “Bear with each other...” (Col 3:13) 32. “...Forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another.” (Col 3:13) 33. “Teach...[one another]” (Col 3:16) 34. “...Admonish one another (Col 3:16) 35. “...Make your love increase and overflow for each other.” (I Thess 3:12) 36. “...Love each other.” (I Thess 4:9) 37. “...Encourage each other...” (I Thess 4:18) 38. “...Encourage each other...” (I Thess 5:11) 39. “...Build each other up...” (I Thess 5:11) 40. “Encourage one another daily...” (Heb 3:13) 41. “...Spur one another on toward love and good deeds.” (Heb 10:24) 42. “...Encourage one another.” (Heb 10:25) 43. “...Do not slander one another.” (Jas 4:11) 44. “Don’t grumble against each other...” (Jas 5:9) 45. “Confess your sins to each other...” (Jas 5:16) 46. “...Pray for each other.” (Jas 5:16) 47. “...Love one another deeply, from the heart.” (1 Pet 3:8) 48. “...Live in harmony with one another...” (1 Pet 3:8) 49. “...Love each other deeply...” (1 Pet 4:8) 50. “Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.” (1 Pet 4:9) 51. “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others...” (1 Pet 4:10) 52. “...Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another...” (1 Pet 5:5) 53. “Greet one another with a kiss of love.” (I Pet 5:14) 54. “...Love

one another.” (I John 3:11) 55. “...Love one another.” (I John 3:23) 56. “...Love one another.” (I John 4:7) 57. “...Love one another.” (I John 4:11) 58. “...Love one another.” (I John 4:12) 59. “...Love one another.” (II John 5)

IMPACT of spiritual community on marriage:

Fincham, et al, find an increasing trend towards understanding the positive constructs at work in a marriage and that good marriages are a powerful force for meaning in life. As part of this ‘non-linear’ understanding of marriage, they identify three powerful constructs that can alter the future: first, forgiveness (F. D. Fincham, Hall, J., & Beach, S. R. H., 2006); second, commitment and sacrifice (Adams, 1997), which alter the nature of relationship and actually provide a benefit, rather than a net cost; and third, sanctification, the process whereby life is seen to have meaning within the divine context (Pargament, 2005). Karney responds by suggesting research on marital health should not move its focus away from understanding conflict resolution, but needs to narrow its question to understanding the goals of marital education, as most people know what they would like to do, but have difficulty actually doing it (Karney, 2007).

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spouses, leading to greater marital quality. They noted greater willingness to forgive oneself and partner are linked to greater marital satisfaction (David, 2013).

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5:15 p.m. Compatibility.

Recognizing the value in having compatibility and commonalities with a potential spouse.

Primary components of compatibility include personality, particularly the traits of neuroticism, conscientiousness and agreeableness; leisure interests, religion and a sense of humor. Other secondary compatibility components include similar plans, interests, values and temperament. Recognizing the value in similarities and differences in a potential spouse.

Individuals or couples possess or learn characteristics that impact the health of marriages. For example, increase in church attendance and spirituality has been linked with lower divorce rates and higher marital satisfaction (Ford, 2010, pp. 31-38).

In a 1994 article, Larson and Holman examined the last fifty years of research on premarital education and synthesized the results into three categories of premarital factors

that influence the health and stability of a marriage: 1) background and contextual factors; 2) individual traits and behaviors; and 3) couples' interactional processes (J. H. Larson, & Holman, T. B., 1994). Background factors with predictive qualities for marital health include health of parents' marriage (Glenn, 1987), divorce, ethnicity, education and external pressures. Individual traits with predictive qualities of marital health include 'emotional health' (Kelly, 1987), depression and dysfunctional beliefs. Character traits such as blaming, victimization and oversimplification have all been linked to unhappiness in marriage (Christensen, 2000). Larson and Holman conclude that individual personality traits are more important to a healthy marriage than background factors, but that background factors have a high impact on personality traits.

Interactional processes with predictive quality include such things as 'homogamy' (Kurdek, 1991), (i.e. couples with more in common are more likely to have healthy marriages); similarities in attitudes and beliefs, length of friendship and similar gender roles. Larson and Holman state these are correlatively predictive for groups, but not necessarily for individual couples. Yet it is common sense that premarital factors influence the health of marriages and research confirms it.

In the same vein, commitment to the relationship is enormously important. When couples are highly committed premarital education is more effective than when commitment is lower. So when couples satisfaction declines, highly committed couples work on their relationship, whereas lower commitment couples think of ending it (H. J. Markman, & Rhoades, G.K., 2012).

For decades researchers have studied the characteristics of 'healthy' marriages to understand the various factors that can impact a marriage. This list includes: love, reciprocity, hopefulness, communication, personal intimacy, patience, personal identity, persistence, congruence and more (Fenell, 1993; Robinson, 1993). More recently this list has expanded to

include spirituality (Hunler, 2005). A 2008 study of Asian Indian Americans lead by George Kallampally found a high predictive ability for spirituality and marital satisfaction and a strong connection between spirituality and positive feelings and lesser instances of negative feelings (Kallampally, 2008).

But most young adults are not taught the realities of marriage or the factors that can help make marriage more successful. One attempt at this education which has garnered much media attention is “Marriage 101: Building Loving and Lasting Partnerships.” This is an undergraduate course at Northwestern University begun in 2001 under the direction of Arthur Nielsen (Nielsen, 2004). The course had seven areas of focus: 1) love is not enough; 2) personal maturity and self-understanding; 3) capacity to assess compatibility with prospective partners; 4) intimacy and personal barriers to achieving it; 5) sexual satisfaction and compatibility; 6) conflict resolution and communication skills; and 7) specific marital challenges. These seven foci are based on specific research on marital satisfaction and an understanding that a healthy individual is a necessary component of a healthy marriage and that healthy marriages have a powerful impact on the health of the individual (J. M. Gottman, & Notarius, C. I., 2002).

Marriage 101 is an attempt to educate young people on the importance of finding someone compatible as it is easy to be misled into a difficult marriage by the pursuit of sexual pleasure, excessive idealization and various subconscious goals (Pines, 1999). Similarly, there is the recognition that the ability to offer and receive intimacy is vital to a healthy relationship and thus should be a goal in seeking a marriage partner (S. M. Stanley, Markman, H. J., & Whitton, S.W., 2002). Stanley, et al, as with many other researchers, also found higher commitment led to more marital satisfaction while negative communication patterns were very detrimental to a relationship.

Balance. A healthy person will seek health in the four basic areas of life: spiritual, physical, emotional and intellectual/work. The self-care is essential for loving another person as themselves and as part of their own body as understood in Ephesians 5.

6:00 p.m. Conclusion

Wrap-up and final questions. Instructions for completion of the post-seminar survey and reflection paper.

VERSES regarding a holy spouse:

Genesis:

1: ²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” ²⁷ So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. ²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

2: ¹⁸ The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” ¹⁹ Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. ²⁰ So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals. But for Adam no suitable helper was found. ²¹ So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. ²² Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. ²³ The man said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.” ²⁴ That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. ²⁵ Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

Isaiah 62:

4. No longer will they call you Deserted, or name your land Desolate.

But you will be called Hephzibah, and your land Beulah; for the LORD will take delight in

you, and your land will be married. ⁵ As a young man marries a young woman, so will your Builder marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.

Hosea 2:14 - “Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her.

Matthew 19:

⁴ “Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ ⁵ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? ⁶ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

⁷ “Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?”

⁸ Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. ⁹ I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.”

Romans 8:

¹⁴ For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. ¹⁵ The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “*Abba*, Father.” ¹⁶ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. ¹⁷ Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

1 Corinthians 6:

¹⁵ Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! ¹⁶ Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh." ¹⁷ But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit.

¹⁸ Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. ¹⁹ Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own;²⁰ you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.

1 Corinthians 7:

¹⁰ To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. ¹¹ But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.

¹² To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. ¹³ And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. ¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. ¹⁵ But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. ¹⁶ How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?

Ephesians:

1: ⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will.

4: ¹⁵ Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.

²⁵ Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. ²⁶ “In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, ²⁷ and do not give the devil a foothold. ²⁸ Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.

²⁹ Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

Ephesians 5: ¹⁸ Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, ²⁰ always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²¹ Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

²² Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and

gave himself up for her ²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷ and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. ²⁸ In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church— ³⁰ for we are members of his body. ³¹ “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” ³² This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. ³³ However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

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