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A Marriage Made in Heaven: How the Significance of Marriage Can Be Taught

Can churches teach the significance of marriage? Can churches teach the faithful about marriage and how to live lives of fulfillment that honor Christ in marriage? We believe the answer to this question is yes, but only if churches choose to take up this important ministry. Certainly churches have a powerful basis in the work of building marriages (Stanley, Markman, St. Peters, & Leber, 1995). First, at least in the United States, most couples seek to be married in churches. Second, the church has a formal, theologically based commitment to the institution. Third, churches have a longstanding affinity to education for the improvement of the lives of congregants both spiritually and relationally.

The ongoing connection of people with a local congregation gives churches the ability to reach people at a wide range of developmental stages for meaningful ministry around marriage. These opportunities range from teaching youth about marriage (especially countering myths), helping couples prepare for marriage, helping couples in the transition to parenthood, and strengthening the spiritual and social lives of couples over the adult life span.

To realize its potential, a church needs a theology of marriage and an operational theology of marriage ministry. We focus on those two elements here and then provide a detailed example from our work with the curriculum of CPREP (Christian Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program).

A Theology of the Mission of the Church and Marriage

All matters of the church must ultimately flow from a sound theology. This theological “grid that guides” must be integrated at several levels (Bouma-Prediger, 1990). First, since all truth is God’s truth, our “grid that guides” is ideally interdisciplinary. In other words, while revelation is the preeminent basis for truth and the theology of marriage, the integration of such truth with social science can yield a theology that is fully Christian yet also consistent with current trends and challenges facing couples in marriage today.

The truth of Scripture teaches us that marriage is to be glorifying to God and that it is to be characterized by oneness, permanence, and openness (Genesis 2:24–25). We also see that strong marriages are the foundation for family life and the raising of Godly children (Malachi 2:15). Perhaps most importantly, Scripture teaches that there is some way in which marriage portrays the very essence of the nature of God, providing a powerful theological basis for understanding the importance of marriage in the world (Genesis 1:27).

Upon such a foundation, discovered truth from empirical research on marriages teaches us very specific truths about the obstacles that get in the way of experiencing the biblical model of marriage. Further, insights gleaned from sound science can add detail to the picture of dynamics that damage oneness and undermine respect, thereby enhancing our abilities to teach couples about signs of danger in their own relationships.

A second level of integration for the “grid that guides” is intradisciplinary integration, or integration within a discipline, for example,
within the disciplines of theology and psychology, the “practice” should be guided and driven by theory. A good theology of marriage identifies biblical purpose, principles, and process for marriage that are not naturally consistent with a “worldly” worldview of marriage. Indeed, the current dominant views of marriages as vehicles for personal fulfillment—being all about me—must be directly challenged at various levels by teaching in churches. Therefore, the practice of the church as it instructs and equips people about marriage and couples for marriage should be driven by its theological purpose of marriage, not the popular worldly purposes or practices. In contrast to the world’s model, the underlying purpose of marriage from a “heavenly” worldview is that marriage is ultimately all about God and that marriage partners get to be key participants in something that is greater than themselves (Thomas, 2000).

A third level is intradisciplinary integration, which includes an experiential integration within disciplines. This praxis may be understood as reflective action that is laden with belief (Anderson, 2001). In other words, real and effective theology is that which animates the lives of believers. This experiential integration demands that the church should model living examples of marriages that are “biblical” as opposed to “worldly.” The aim of integration at this level is internal harmony between faith commitment and way of life.

Anderson reports that as he entered ministry directly out of seminary, “...I soon discovered that I was afflicted with PTDS—Practical Theology Deficiency Syndrome. I had a theology that could talk but that would not walk” (Anderson, 2001, p. 12). Experiential integration involves the attempt to live out one’s faith commitment as authentically as possible in everyday life. This is not “just talking the talk, but also walking the walk.” At this level of integration, the church is actually modeling marriages of oneness, permanence, and openness. Such a theology of marriage is in action by the development of ministries that bring younger congregants into regular contact with mature, Godly couples who have developed deeply meaningful and healthy marriages. More broadly, the divorce rates of authentic Christian marriages should be distinct from divorce rates of marriages built upon the worldview that marriage is primarily about me.

The church must exercise its distinctions to accomplish its mission regarding marriages. It must speak up and boldly proclaim its distinct core beliefs regarding marriage. It must clearly explain the whole truth of God regarding marriage and instruct and equip with practices that are consistent with and driven by these core beliefs.

A good theology is a necessary but insufficient component for marriages that are distinctly Christian in practice. It is also necessary that the church function with a good “operational theology” of marriage. This goes beyond good interdisciplinary integration to the praxis or intentional action that is driven by beliefs of good theology. It is especially at this level that the church can greatly benefit from the discovered truths of empirical research on marital relationships and the nature of change. Failures in marriage within the church are more likely due to an insufficient “operational theology” rather than an inadequate theology of marriage. For many, failed marriages in the church reflect a lack of information, skills, structure, and support to facilitate a good theology to translate into a good “operational theology.”

Pathways of Operational Theology

Churches are blessed with many pathways or avenues in which people can be impacted about marriage. There are many specific modalities of teaching in which congregants can be taught principles, values, and skills in accordance with the broader theology of marriage. For example, while most conjure a relatively narrow image of what marriage education is, thinking of a group of couples in a class or a workshop learning some principle, all of the following can be thought of as ways in which churches can effectively teach sound theology about marriage:

- Preaching from the pulpit that teaches the special place of marriage in God’s created order
- Practices that honor marriage such as by honoring couples on Sunday morning when a 50th anniversary is reached
- Youth classes that teach teens accurate information about common myths about marriage, such as that marriage is no different from cohabitation or that living together
prior to marriage improves their odds of marital success
• Premarital education regimens
• Mentoring programs that pair younger couples with older, imperfect, but succeeding couples
• Pastoral (or other) counseling for couples who are struggling
• Parenting classes that also honor marriage but without isolating or ostracizing single parents

There are many other examples, of course, but the key point is simply that there are manifold paths to reaching congregants with messages on various levels that lift up the institution of marriage in general and teach couples specific principles, skills, and attitudes to foster marital fulfillment and meaning. As perhaps a striking example, most churches have ongoing opportunities to affect the thinking of youth as they prepare for life. It has now become very evident that young people believe any number of things that actually undermine their likelihood of marital success in life, all overwhelmingly unsupported by social science: (1) that living together prior to marriage improves their odds; (2) that having a child out of wedlock is no particular problem or risk; (3) that you must find your perfect soul mate for marital bliss to occur; and (4) that you should be fully established financially in your career before you would wisely consider marriage (even though it is true that marrying very young, as in 22 or younger, is risky). Such beliefs increase the likelihood of young people experiencing higher risk, not lower risk marriages, and such beliefs could be directly countered by a balance of teaching that is founded on a Christian vision for marriage as well as current social science demonstrating the destructiveness of such beliefs.

Christian PREP: An Example of a Systematized Model for Teaching an “Operational Theology” of Marriage in Churches

Our view is that a very strong basis for marriage ministry in the church is to be found in the marriage of foundational Christian theology based in Scripture and best practices guided by current advances in social science—a marriage made in heaven, if you will, by the unifying principle that all truth is from God. In the area of educational models for working with existing couples (premarital or marital), Christian PREP (cPREP: The Christian Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program) is a very strong example of this model of “operational theology.” There are undoubtedly many such manifestations, though we use this one to highlight important elements of what we consider to be best practices.

cPREP is a program reflecting a clear commitment to traditional Christianity and Christian truth, which also places a high value on experiential change for marriages to become more authentically Christian as well as more stable and satisfying (Stanley, Trathen, McCain, & Brian, 1998). cPREP is founded on a Christian model and teaching on marriage with an integration of solid research on marriage and relationships. cPREP’s integrated approach is designed to teach couples how to reduce the negatives that tear marriages down and preserve and deepen the positives that allow two to become and stay one.

Goals and Objectives of the “Operational Theology.” The goal of cPREP is to present the strongest program possible for helping couples begin, maintain, or renew a joyous Christian marriage that is characterized by the love and oneness of God. The objectives of cPREP are based in the belief that love and oneness will be cultivated or constricted according to the choices that are made in relational interactions. The "discovered truths" from the empirical research of the cPREP program are highly compatible with Scriptural teaching in terms of choices that we make to cultivate healthy relationships. Being "right with God," having insight, and feeling in love are all wonderful things. However, none of these things guarantees that a person knows how to handle the challenges of marriage on planet earth. Therefore, the operational theology of cPREP does not assume that getting the heart right is sufficient but only that it is necessary.

cPREP starts out by presenting the primary purpose and design of marriage as being sourced in God and not in mankind. Teaching about Adam and Eve in the Garden establishes the essential nature of the deep desire built within the human heart to be naked and
unashamed as it interacts with the dangers of sin and selfishness and the resulting fear of rejection and desire to hide or cover up. From there, CPREP teaches how both Scripture and research clearly suggest certain behaviors are destructive in relationships (e.g., many passages in Proverbs, such as Proverbs 18:13; Matthew 5, 6, and 7; most of the book of James; Galatians 5:13–15) and certain behaviors are constructive (e.g., James 1:19). Despite the vast number of Scriptures that highlight how negative ways of treating one another destroy relationships, we believe that the simple importance of such teachings is too often lost in the teaching about marriage within the church. It provides a great example of how the most important value of research lies at times not in revealing something unknown, but in drawing attention to something plainly known and clearly revealed that has received too little attention.

CPREP takes the position that it is equally valid to stress both insight and behavior. Insight is important when it leads to internal change and commitment to move a new direction (“. . . clean the inside of the cup.” Matthew 23:26). The behavioral strategies taught in CPREP are aimed at changing thought patterns, expectations, and emotion, and are not simply about acquiring new behaviors. For example, one cannot genuinely practice listening carefully to his or her mate about something on which they disagree without some internal change having already taken place—one that will multiply further through the experience of communicating well. Structure (agreed-upon ground rules for handling conflict well, for example) guides behavior and beliefs, and change in one will positively effect change in the other.

**Key Concepts and Principles of the "Operational Theology."** Safety.

Running through all of the teaching of CPREP is the foundational belief that good marriages are basically marriages that have two key types of safety (Stanley, Markman, and Whitton, 2002): (1) Safety in terms of the day-to-day connection as reflected in the way partners treat one another, such as it being safe to say what one really thinks (also including safety from personal harm); and (2) safety in terms of a fundamental sense that the marriage has a secure basis in commitment that underlies a trust in the present and a faith in the future. We have come to believe that safety lies at the core of both a sound, Scripturally based theology of marriage and good relationships, and also that it is one of the most powerful unifying themes that can be found for organizing decades of sound marital research—reflecting the core desire to be naked and unashamed.

Scripture and research demonstrate that various kinds of negative interaction are particularly corrosive to the positive bond between partners over time. In this model, a watershed point on the path to marital failure occurs when one or both partners begin reliably to associate the presence of the other with pain and stress rather than support and safety (Stanley, Blumberg, and Markman, 1999). Hence, reducing negative interaction is not merely a goal in its own right, but most important because of the ways in which negatives can tear down the positive bond over time (see Notarius and Markman, 1993). In fact, a compelling case can be made for the idea that oneness is inherently mysterious (e.g., implied in part of the teaching of Paul in Ephesians 5:32); that it is the positive side of connection where all the interesting and creative variability lies in marriages (Stanley et al., 1998). A couple who is thriving in oneness in marriage can be entirely different from other couples who are also thriving in oneness. In contrast, couples who do not handle conflicts and differences well and with respect look much like other couples who are damaging their relationships. This demonstrates the banality of destructive negativity of the sort that Scripture and research suggest is the death knell for relationships.

**Education and Practice.** Healthy relationships characterized by closeness and oneness will not automatically result in the midst of our inevitable differences and conflicts. While therapy can be extremely helpful in certain situations, much of what goes wrong in loving relationships has to do with never having learned or observed how to think about marriage, how to evaluate and handle expectations, or how to manage conflict without damaging closeness.

**Respect for Truth and Empiricism as One Window.** Numerous factors have been shown to increase the risk of marital dissolution. In
training in cprep or prep, these risks are categorized into dynamic and static dimensions (Figure 1). The hallmarks of couples headed for trouble included negative reciprocity, poor affect management, withdrawal during problem conversations, unrealistic expectations, and diminished commitment. Static variables are also associated with marital distress and divorce, but a foundational belief of cprep (and prep) is that efforts should be concentrated on the dynamic dimensions because the dynamic dimensions are more plausibly changeable (Stanley, 2001; Halford et al., 2003).

**Personal Responsibility.** cprep promotes the key concept and set of principles that all couples must be actively intentional and involved in creating positive impact in two different arenas simultaneously throughout the life of the relationship. If couples are not actively and intentionally countering destructive tendencies, they will find themselves engaging in patterns that erode their positive bond over time. Further, without intention to do otherwise, they may allow the positive side of their bond, such as spiritual and friendship connections within the marriage, to drop by the wayside.

**Building Positive Connection.** Along with the use of cognitive-behavioral techniques to manage negatives better (e.g., Baucom and Epstein, 1990), cprep is designed to teach couples how to preserve and deepen friendship, fun, spiritual connection, and sensuality (e.g., Markman, et al., 2001; Stanley, et al., 1998), consistent with the trend in the field to help couples develop the positive side of their marriages (e.g., Jacobson and Christensen, 1998). In the frame of prevention, such factors are the purely protective factors (Figure 2) designed to give couples an edge in building lasting love. cprep promotes the concept that couples do not fall out of love the way people fall out of trees, but that they are prone over time to automatically erode it away.

Healthy couples are typically characterized by (1) low risk interactions around emerging problems and (2) high relationship enrichment (with...
"I choose us" messages) when they come to the point of saying, "I do" as they consider marriage. Unhealthy couples are typically characterized by the mirror image of (1) high risk interactions around continued problems and (2) low relationship enrichment (with "I choose me" messages) when they come to the point of saying "I don't" want to continue marriage with you. Avoiding this negative combination and promoting this positive combination is the key focus of prevention in the CPREP model of intervention (Figure 3).

A Marriage Made in Heaven: Good Theology and Good "Operational Theology." CPREP is a strong, user-friendly tool for the church to better accomplish its mission of strengthening Christian marriages, and is a sound example of an "operational theology" for change that flows from the valid integration of theology and social science. Congruence of truth claims within a discipline as well as across disciplines becomes highly significant for confirmation of "true truth." The CPREP model strongly affirms that outcomes in all marriages are not so much about finding the right person as about being the right person. The apostle Paul tells husbands and wives in Ephesians 5:21 that they must "... submit one to another out of reverence to Christ." This is particularly demonstrated as individual choices are made about how inevitable differences are handled to achieve mutual understanding and mutually agreed upon resolutions. This cannot be accomplished with worldly power.

CPREP is one of the most powerful examples of an "operational theology" for deeper level personal and relational transformation versus superficial change. It demonstrates that simple tools and strategies can be profound in their impact when they alter the way we automatically make cognitive and behavioral choices. These upper level changes free us up from defenses to work on a different "playing field" of deeper reflections of feelings and connecting core beliefs. As we "speak the truth in love" to others and ourselves and as we disclose and receive feedback, our relationships become "relational working labs" for new levels of transformation—and transformation may have always been God’s ideal for the impact of the vocation of marriage in the life of the believer.

Conclusion

The church has a distinct role and opportunity to counter the myths of the world by bringing together good theology and good "operational theology." As this happens, it is more likely that Christian marriages will become more authentically Christian and the world will witness "out of this world marriages."

References