

Counseling Couples Contemplating Divorce

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I.

It must have been an atheist who coined the saying (with respect to cheating mates in a marriage), that "the wife and/or husband is the last to know." Obviously, the author of that cynical little observation never heard of a Christian pastor. More often than not, *he* is the *very last to know!* This very thing, the comparatively late entrance of the pastor into most discordant domestic situations, makes this type of counseling one of the most difficult areas of pastoral activity.

Unfortunately, this fact also complicates the hopeful disposition of these situations of marital stress in a manner pleasing to our Savior, Simply stated, it is an unhappy reality in the pastoral counselor's life that "lateness complicates reconciliation.

The second unhappy reality is that contemplated divorce actions are never the product of a single act. By the time pastoral contact is made with the disturbed couple, all manner of grievances have been accumulated. When divorce enters the scene, the refreshing waters of blissful matrimony look like mud and are about as unpalatable to the people directly involved.

This leads us to the final unhappy reality. In all too many instances, by the time the pastor becomes aware of the status of imperiled marriages, the situation has deteriorated to such a degree that solutions are virtually impossible. To untangle the web of deceit, deception, evasion, hostility, bitterness and hatred is about as easy as trying to untie the proverbial Gordian knot. This is particularly true when the pastor enters the picture unbidden and has discovered the domestic discord more or less by accident.

Conversely, where both parties have, of their own initiative, sought out the services of their spiritual advisor, the chances of resolution of difficulties and a God-pleasing reconciliation of the estranged couple are markedly improved.

The success factor is also somewhat determined by the "type" of couple who seek pastoral aid. Generally speaking, they will fall into four classifications:

1. The Lutheran home: i.e., both are members
2. The religiously split home: i.e., Lutheran - R.C.C.; Lutheran - Protestant", etc. . .
3. The Christian-non-Christian home: i.e., Lutheran-Agnostic; Lutheran-Jehovah's Witness; Lutheran-Atheist; Lutheran – non-practicing "whatever".
4. The "Street Trade": i.e., neither are members, not of your flock nor anyone else's.

Quite frankly, the degree of practicing Christianity, or to state it another way, to the extent that the couple is willing to place their lives under the it subjection of the Word, will either enhance or detract from the success factor. The principles of reconciliation are effective in direct proportion to the maturity of Christianity present in the couple.

There is yet another factor which deserves mention and that is that in all the above categories, we are working under the assumption that *both* parties, of their *own volition*, have sought a cure for their sick marriage. When both husband and wife have indicated that they are more or less willing to counsel with the pastor, the success factor is again much improved. Where only one is willing to speak to you, all "bets are off". To attempt reconciliation when working with but one half of the problem is virtually as futile as trying to teach old parents new math. It can be done, but certainly not easily. The failure syndrome hangs heavy in these discouraging circumstances.

Much of what has been stated, thus far, has been somewhat negative. This is not done because nearly two decades of pastoral counseling has left an indelible impression of defeatist pessimism. On the contrary,

today's Christian pastors are in a rather enviable position as marriage counselors. We have what can amount to an unbeatable combination; the Word of God and the practical expertise to apply both Law and Gospel in order to ameliorate the specific situation. To be sure, the Word does not contain specific answers to every *specific problem* which can and does cause marital discord. However, the *general principle* enunciated in the Word are a treasure-trove from which practical suggestions can be drawn in keeping with the principles and applying to the situation at hand.

To complete the picture, it is necessary to confess that there are those instances in which all the pastor can do is to arrive at the depressingly difficult ecclesiastical judgement with reference to the "innocence" and "guilt" of the parties in question. In spite of every effort, in spite of encyclopedic Biblical knowledge, in spite of hours of wise and patient counseling, there are those who will not be reconciled; who refuse either the admonition or the direction indicated in the Word; who stop their hearts and ears to any flow of healing balm for their fractured marriage. This in no wise reflects poorly upon either the power of the Spirit in the Word or the lack of competence to be found in the counselor. It simply is a recognition that there are those who remain obdurate to whatever advise is given from whatever source. The sorrowful judgement of Jesus over stubborn Jerusalem, "ye would not!" also applies to the attitudes exhibited by some in counseling situations.

II.

What are the causes of marital discord? Why do couples find themselves on the verge of admitting total failure in the area of close human relations? It is almost inconceivable that two normal people would deliberately begin a marriage relationship with a "let's try it for awhile" attitude. If it doesn't work out after a few months or years, let's break it up and try over again with someone else".

It is a reasonably safe assumption that most normal couples repeat their vows with deep meaning and total sincerity " . . . till death us do part". They meet with you in pre-marriage counseling sessions with stars in their eyes and the smell of romantic orange blossoms filling the study. Surely, theirs is the greatest romance in all history rivaling such fabled liaisons as Romeo and Juliet, Heloise and Abelard, to say nothing of Frankie and Johnnie. But then, in nearly one half of all marriages performed In the United States, in something under five years, the sweetest thing they can say to each other is, "drop dead!".

Why? ? ? What went wrong? What were the causes of marital dissension which led some marriages into a state of serious deterioration and others into total disintegration? It would seem that there are two answers to these questions. The answers, in themselves, are rather broad generalities and, for that matter, must be such. To list specifics at this point would be both pointless and fruitless.

The reasons couples contemplate divorce are:

1. The failure to apply Christian principles to one or more of the four major areas of marriage; and
2. A virtual breakdown of communications between the couple with respect to one or more of these categories.

From both personal experience and from all that has been read on this subject, it would appear that there are four major categories or areas of marriage. Whatever friction develops seems to fall into one of these major divisions. The areas are (not necessarily in the order of their importance):

1. Financial
2. Social
3. Physical
4. Spiritual

Perhaps a few examples should be cited under each division to illustrate some of the more common causes of marriage breakdowns and also listing the general Christian principles which may apply.

Financial Stress

- a. Arguments about money.
- b. Failure to budget funds so that marriage goes from one financial crisis to the next.
- c. Failure to separate *needs* from *wants*; inability to recognize the difference between *essentials* and *luxuries*.
- d. Incompetent management by the person in charge of the family's finances.
- e. One or the other is put into the degrading position of having to beg for funds.
- f. Inability to recognize that cash (although somewhat suspect by some segments of our society) is still a tremendous "credit card". Unwise and short-sighted credit purchases drive the family into "hopeless" debt.

If the root cause of the problem does indeed fall into this area, the basic principles of Christian stewardship should be gently reviewed by the counselor. The couple should be reminded that God is the owner of everything and that we are expected to be good managers. Financial responsibility is a must in marriage simply because every Christian is accountable for his stewardship. Our Savior *expect* us to use His funds wisely in the best interests of His kingdom. At times, couples will lose sight of this and will be shocked to learn that their God has a stake in their family finances.

Here, positive results will be forthcoming if the Christian pastor touches a responsive "faith cord" in the hearts of the couple and is able to offer constructive practical suggestions for good family financial management. An excellent little book that can be most helpful to both pastors and financially troubled couples is: "Where Does The Money Go?"; "The Christian Philosophy of Money and a Practical Approach for Christian Family Budgeting" (Publ.: - Church Craft)

Social Strains:

- a. A failure to recognize the Biblical principle of the husband being given the responsibility of family "headship" and the wife assigned her. God given responsibility as his helpmate.
- b. Unhealthy possessiveness and jealousy.
- c. Dissension caused by personal friends, the husband, a male friend; the wife, female friend; neither one of which is a "family" friend.
- d. Interfering relatives, in-laws, uncles, aunts, etc.
- e. Disagreements with reference to the disciplining of children (too lenient; too harsh; inconsistent; or varying widely with each member of the family leadership structure).

If it has become somewhat evident that there has been a breakdown in the social area of the marriage, no better "book" has ever been written than God's advise to husbands and wives through St. Paul in Ephesians 5: ". husbands love your wives as Christ also loved the Church and gave Himself for it. The totally unselfish act of the Savior who loved and therefore He gave, is an excellent place to begin personal reconciliation between battling mates.

A reminder also may be in order here to the wife that she married a *man* therefore she should not rob him of his manhood by stripping him of his leadership potential and dignity. Each one in the marriage complements and completes the other and each segment lacks something if it does not carry out its God-assigned role.

Physical Failure

Before we go on to list a few specific items here, it should be stated that the Christian pastor should not "cop out" by simply avoiding this sensitive area as he would the bubonic plague. We do not face up to our responsibilities as Christian counselors by saying, "Ahh, yes, well ahh, (blush), see your family doctor".

We certainly recognize that when our God created male and female, He automatically created a physical side to marriage. It is to be received as His gift and with thanksgiving. It also is a sad fact that in this "enlightened" age when all the biological processes are supposedly so well understood by most junior high students and some grade school pupils, that there is such an abominable lack of appreciation for and understanding of the Christian approach to a God-pleasing sexual life in marriage.

Should we, by default, shirk our responsibilities and let it up to Doctor Whozits, who may or may not present a sensible Christian overview of the physical aspects of marriage, or do *we* supply whatever help we can to troubled couples who have almost decided to call it quits because of "incompatibility" in the undefiled marriage bed?

It must be remembered that God has instructed us that the gift of sex has been given man in order to "help Him produce children" (Gen. 1: 28), express mutual love, receive the benefits of close companionship, and for mutual enjoyment. (Gen. 2: 18-24).

Now for some of the "problems":

- a. Infidelity (Here, by probing into the "why", the counselor may be able to offer some constructive advise to obviate the "need" for "outside interests").
- b. A lack of understanding with reference to the emotional, physiological and biological differences between male and female
- c. An unhealthy attitude toward sex ("it's dirty")
- d. Irritating habits which have not been talked out.
- e. The use of sex as a club, thus degrading marriage and putting it on the level of a cash and carry transaction.
- f. A complete misunderstanding as to the roles each are to play, the "pursuer" and the "pursued"; that reversal of the roles is not unusual or displeasing; that only one is active while the other is totally passive.

The most troublesome problem develops where one or the other has broken the vow through infidelity. How to use the Law, to what extent or degree; when to apply the Gospel and then when and how to suggest possible complete fulfillment "at home", -- this takes hard work, sanctified common sense, and complete openness without any hint of embarrassment.

It is precisely in this area that it has been found to be beneficial to suggest that marriage is not a 50/50 proposition since this amounts to a nose to nose standoff, each unwilling to "go the extra mile" because each claims to have come "halfway". Marriage is a 60/40 arrangement—*for each party!!* Each must be willing to cross the imaginary, and oft time arbitrary, "halfway line". Each must be willing to mentally assume the other's role and position so as to gain a more complete understanding of the mates point of view.

Nowhere does this formula apply more practically than in the sexual aspects of marriage. Here each partner in the marriage "works" diligently for the complete emotional, physiological and biological satisfaction of the other.

Who can understand this total concern for someone else better than a Christian? ? ? Who, with the help of God and with the love of Christ in the heart, can be completely committed to the happiness and fulfillment of someone else better than a Christian couple? The answer is obvious, and very frequently the Christian counselor having determined that the root cause of discontent is physical failure will be happily surprised with the reconciliation results having applied the Christian principles of "and they twain shall be one flesh".

Spiritual Factors

It should be stated at the outset that spiritual factors do not exist in a vacuum. They never stand in isolation to the lives of people divorced from any other area of marriage. It isn't really a separate area at all but rather pervades and controls, to the degree it is practiced, the whole marriage scene. To the extent that there is a willingness to be guided by the Word, to that extent will a Christian counselor's success factor be measured.

In spite of the foregoing, there are a few items which do logically fall into this "area".

- a. The failure of the couple to make the Savior who united them an integral part of their home and life.
- b. Disagreements that have degenerated into senseless arguments not taking into account that the mate is not "the old battle-ax" or "that miserable bullhead" but rather, a fellow *Christian*, a *precious redeemed soul* of the Master, a *co-heir* of heaven through Christ.
- c. A failure to appreciate that immediate application of The Lord's Prayer, particularly the Fifth Petition ("Forgive us ... *as we forgive...*")
- d. A religiously split home where doctrinal differences of church bodies which have existed for centuries are battled through rather than the Christian, who used poor judgment to begin with, quietly witnessing to both the truth and the power of the Gospel by a Godly example.

III

Perhaps this paper should close with a brief review of some counseling principles which have proven themselves to be reasonably productive.

1. The pastor as a counselor is there to help the individuals remove their problems. We are there to re-educate and guide, -- not to be their stern judge primarily concerned about fixing guilt or blame. In many cases, the couple come to their pastor seeking impartial advice. They should be made to realize that the pastor's primary purpose is the preservation of the family unit and the restoration of Christian tranquility to the home and family, not to give one or the other a "good chewing out" for ridiculous stupidity.
2. Beware of a quick "cure". The marriage took some time to get "sick"; the pastor isn't going to be able to make it "all better" in one hour of review of the 6th Commandment and all the Bible passages listed under it in the catechism.
3. Avoid being an umpire, referee, or the one suddenly placed in the middle. Remember the ancient adage, "he who is the piece of baloney between two pieces of bread gets chewed up".
4. Be a patient listener. Try to draw them out with leading questions if necessary. But in the beginning, particularly, let them do most of the talking.
5. Distinguish symptom from causes!!! Scores of petty complaints may be aired first without actually ever once touching on the root cause or causes of the problem.
6. Try to see the problem through their eyes. Find the balance between emotional involvement and unfeeling detachment. Couples should be aware of Christian empathy and thoughtful concern.
7. Never treat trouble as trivia. If in their mind it was serious enough to cause them to teeter on the brink of divorce, then we do not help them with an airy dismissal and a flip comment as to the seriousness of the crisis.
8. A compassionate heart accomplishes more than censure. Before applying the Law with all of its severity, make sure that the object of God's wrath is indeed "secure" in his sin.
9. Let the love of Christ permeate the discussion. Show that God is indeed concerned about people and their problems. His Book is filled with "practical" advice for people and the Savior's invitation to call in the time of trouble is an open invitation to look confidently to Him for "practical" solutions. One note of caution here, however, avoid sermonizing. It isn't the best route to marriage reconciliation.

10. Do not manifest surprise, shock, revulsion, anger, disgust, etc. Be shockproof. This does not mean that we allow things to pass by, items which are worthy of censure, without comment. By the same token, if we expect honesty and openness, things we must have in order to help remove the causes of friction, then we must not set the scene for censorship, namely, that they filter out that which "the pastor won't like".
11. When the Word does not speak directly, be prepared to offer constructive alternatives to the problem at hand. Compromise and adjustment are the practical meat and potatoes of marriage.
12. Patiently and realistically paint the problems of divorce. Divorce rarely, if ever, solves any problems but rather, raises a whole host of new problems which people are ill prepared to cope with.

Brethren, marriage counseling is occupying a larger place in our schedule and more and more, people are turning to the Christian pastor to assist them in extricating themselves from their difficulties into which an incredibly complex age has cast them. May God the Holy Spirit aid us in our study, contemplation, and discussion so that we are truly Christ's able ministers who need not be ashamed in declaring the whole counsel of God as it pertains to this part of our calling.

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