

Premarital Pastoral Counseling

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Dear Brothers: Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in him with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms, and who enables us vessels of clay by his Spirit to fulfill the ministry of reconciliation he has entrusted into our hands!

Centuries ago, in a little known place called Cana in Galilee, a couple, probably young, asked Jesus to attend their wedding. He did. He rejoiced with them in their setting out together as one on a new, uncharted course through life, a life sure to hold its problems and crosses as well as his blessings. At their reception he blessed them with an excellent wedding gift, the finest of wine for them and their guests, and revealed his glory, the glory of the only begotten Son of God, so that his disciples and we today would believe in him, and that by believing in him we would have life in his name.

In our ministries couples ask us to attend their weddings, not only to rejoice with them but to join them in marriage as one for their new life together, a life also sure to have its problems and crosses as well as our Lord's blessings. What might we give them for a wedding gift? We might say, as Peter once said to the lame beggar at the temple gate, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you." Then in the name of Jesus Christ we could give them his divine counsel, which can bless them richly for a life in him and in their marriage.

When a couple sits across from me in my office, announcing their intentions to marry, I dearly hope the best for them, while wondering such things as: What is this young man and woman like? What is their relationship like? Do they have the abilities to make a marital relationship work? What personal problems and relational problems do they have? What problems are they likely to have in the future? What could I share with them that would, by God's grace, help them to build a mutually pleasing marriage that would last, would be a blessing to them, and would honor their Lord? What could I teach them that might reduce their future marital problems and enable them to overcome those they would have? I wonder such things, for I earnestly desire to do everything I can to start their marriage off on the right foot and to prevent it from ever falling onto the rocks of marital problems, separation, divorce, and a broken family.

When I first had to plan my premarital counseling, I wondered: Where should I begin? What should I cover? How should I proceed? How can I best conduct premarital counseling for the benefit of the couples whom the Lord would bring to me to marry?"

Over the years I have struggled to answer these questions. By trial and error I gradually assembled the program of materials I am using today. No doubt you have done likewise in your ministries.

And why have we done these things? Because in the richness of God's grace he has entrusted to us his Word of reconciliation to lead others to Christ and as a fruit of their faith to live to the honor of his name. By his gracious calling, we are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us (2 Corinthians 5:20). Thus, by virtue of our call, we have the highest privilege of appealing to sinners like us to be reconciled to God through Christ Jesus and to walk by faith with him in their marriages as in all areas of their lives. Our call gives us the privilege of doing this in counseling, which is but another facet of the pastoral ministry to touch people's hearts with the divine wisdom that can bring about their repentance,

faith, and growth in sanctified living, in this case in their marriages. It is a “cure of souls” (*Seelsorge*), or when referring to individuals, *Privatseelsorge*.ⁱ

Premarital counseling is an art of ministry we would do well to develop in order to better serve our Lord and his sheep. Through sharing our ideas and experiences we can, with God’s help, perfect our skills to make our premarital counseling the best that it can be for their sake. I thank you for inviting me to speak to you on the practical aspects of marriage as they pertain to our counseling ministries.

In this first presentation I will discuss general principles of pastoral counseling and practical aspects and goals of premarital counseling. I will also give you a complete program, together with all its materials, for conducting premarital counseling. In the second presentation I will discuss principles for conducting marital counseling, and the problems we typically encounter in marital counseling. I will also give you materials I have developed for counseling couples of dysfunctional marriages.

My prayer for these presentations has been that our Lord might enable me to share with you something of some substance that will be of some small benefit to you in your service to our Lord and his people.

Pastoral Counseling

Both *The Counseling Shepherd* and *The Shepherd Under Christ* contain thorough definitions of pastoral counseling. Here I will briefly review the definitions of these terms in preparation for discussing premarital and marital pastoral counseling.

Pastoral counseling combines two activities to achieve a God-pleasing end. The word “pastoral” refers to our divine call from Jesus, the Chief Shepherd, to shepherd the flock he has entrusted into our care.ⁱⁱ First Peter 5:2 states,

Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve.

The first aorist imperative, *ποιμάνετε*, means “to herd, tend, pastures, to tend sheep,” and in a figurative sense “to lead and to guide.”ⁱⁱⁱ We ministers of Christ are shepherds, pastors, who willingly (*ἐκουσίως*) care for our Lord’s sheep with an eagerness to serve them. Acts 20:28 also instructs us to “be shepherds of the church of God” of which he has made us “overseers.” This shepherding, we are told, has been associated with the German word “*Seelsorge*,” and “*Privatseelsorge*” when referring to an individual ministration, which has been translated “the cure of souls.”^{iv}

[This German expression] speaks of the deep concern which the pastor shows for the needs of the souls entrusted to his care. It speaks of the healing comfort and strength from God’s Word of grace that the pastor applies to souls in their need.^v

The word “counseling” means to give advise, to exhort, warn, admonish, and instruct. In our ministries the Word of God is the source of wisdom from which instruction and advice are given. We must not ignore, however, the use of reason together with its observations as additional sources of information. The purpose of counseling is to share instruction and advise to promote a change for the better in the counselees that will set them on a new course for their lives.

Combining the terms “pastoral” and “counseling,” the following definition has been arrived at: “Pastoral counseling is that pastoral care (*Seelsorge*) of individuals as they face their problems, troubles, griefs, burdens, fears, and illnesses, which involves not simply giving advice, but assisting them to find help from the Word of God.”^{vi}

Premarital pastoral counseling, then, is the activity of a pastor to instruct and advise those who are about to marry in those divine truths and practical insights in harmony with God’s Word that will direct them in building a life-long marriage that honors their Lord and will benefit them. Marital pastoral counseling is the activity of a pastor to instruct and advise those who have a dysfunctional or disrupted marriage in those divine truths and practical insights in harmony with God’s Word that will, with God’s help, resolve their marital problems through repentance and the fruits of faith to reconcile them to one another and to foster a married life that benefits them and honors their Lord Jesus Christ.

Premarital and Marital Pastoral Counseling are a Part of Our Mission

The mission of the church and its ministry is outreach and nurture. Our Savior commanded these activities be done when he said in Matthew 28:19,20, Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (outreach), and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you (nurture).

Since our premarital and marital pastoral counseling are usually for the members of our flock, they are primarily nurturing activities, in which we are sharing biblically sound counsel for the building of their Christian marriages. Instances arise, however, when we may be counseling a non-member as well as a member, or two non-members. These instances are opportunities for outreach as well as for nurturing. Whether nurturing or outreach opportunities, they are part of our mission as under-shepherds of our Lord.

Tools And Gifts For Premarital And Marital Pastoral Counseling

Our Lord has given us an assortment of tools and gifts for conducting pastoral counseling. First is the power and privilege of prayer. Through prayer we enlist our Lord’s infinite knowledge and wisdom to guide us in counseling. No one knows the guiding principles of his Word, his design for marriage, men and women, the sinful human nature, the couple before us with their personal traits, strengths, weaknesses, and needs—better than our Lord does. Thus we ask for an understanding of the problems and needs of the couples we counsel. We pray for a knowledge of his Word and an insight into what divine truths and principles we should apply to meet those couples’ needs. Only with God’s help can we fulfill what is written in 2 Timothy 2:15: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the Word of truth.” Furthermore, we pray that he will change the hearts and renew the minds of those we counsel. We also ask for his blessing on our counseling that it may succeed. Prayer, then, is our first “tool” for counseling.

Law and gospel, the Word and Sacraments, are our indispensable “tools” for counseling. Sins in one form or another are at the root of all marital problems. In counseling we reprove, rebuke, correct, and encourage with the Word to lead couples to a repentance of their sins, to faith in the redeeming blood of Jesus Christ for their justification, and to the fruits of their faith for a new sanctified living which will build their marriages to the honor of Christ and for the mutual benefit of both the husbands and wives. In counseling couples we rely on the Word because “all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good

work” (2 Timothy 3:16,17). “Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction” (2 Timothy 4:2). Teaching, rebuking, correcting, training in righteousness, exhorting are the very essence of pastoral counseling, and the Scriptures are the equipment for accomplishing these activities.

Faith in the power of God’s Word to bring about the above repentance, faith, and sanctification by which couples will establish God-pleasing marriages is another indispensable “tool” for counseling. A secular counselor has but his own methods, reason, and observations from other counselors before him, together with his appeals to couples’ human reason and his arts of persuasion, to convince couples that his advice for married life is preferable to their past marriages and that it will build better marital relationships. But we pastors have not only the Word of wisdom that does build lives and marriages, but the Word of power that changes couples’ minds to put off the sinful patterns in their relationships to love one another in righteousness. We have the Word, and we trust it will bring about the desired results.

To conduct premarital and marital counseling, the Lord gives us through his Word an understanding of marriage as he designed it from the beginning. This understanding enables us to teach couples what a marriage under Christ is supposed to be like, and to correct their misconceptions that cause dysfunctional marriages.

Our Lord also gives us a general knowledge of his Word that enables us to apply the right Scripture to a couple’s need of the moment. We must know what part of his law to use when as a curb, a mirror, or a guide to counsel correctly. Furthermore, we must know when and how to use the gospel to comfort a couple who have confessed their sins, to strengthen their faith, and—to avoid the error of moralizing with the law—to motivate them to bring forth their fruits of repentance and faith that will restore their marriage.

Our human reason with its ability to make observations, inquiries, and conclusions is a necessary gift and tool for counseling couples. To counsel a couple effectively we must first have an understanding of the man and woman involved, their human natures, their pattern of relating to one another, the kinds of problems they have, what are the underlying causes of those problems, and what will correct their personal weaknesses and the problems in their relationship. By means of our human reasoning we gain this understanding through reading and studying, through our life experiences and marriage, through our counseling experiences, and through observing men and women and marriages in general. Our gift of reason during counseling enables us to assess a couple’s weaknesses, problems and needs, and to conclude what biblical instructions and practical advice will resolve those problems and meet those needs. Our reason then lays out a program of counseling to impart those instructions in an orderly, progressive manner.

Premarital Pastoral Counseling

Our Lord says, “Plans fail for a lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed” (Proverbs 15:22).

Nowhere is this more true than in the planning of a marriage. Without sound, biblical premarital counseling a couple’s marital plans are much more likely to fail and go awry. Beyond a doubt the need for premarital pastoral counseling is tremendous.

On March 13, 1989 the Milwaukee Journal staff published an article entitled “US marriages face long odds: study.” It reported on a study conducted by Teresa Castro Martin, a doctoral candidate in sociology at the University of Wisconsin, and by Larry L. Bumpass,

professor of sociology at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Their study concluded “that 56% of recent first marriages would be likely to disrupt within 40 years of marriage.”^{vii}

This 56% failure rate of all *first* marriages is a conservative figure, based on their study of divorces, for it was reported, “However, studies have found a ‘serious underreporting of divorce and separation in the governments’ current Population Survey, according to their (Martin’s and Bumpass’) study, ‘Recent Trends in Marital Disruption.’”^{viii}

The article then stated, “Taking that into consideration, ‘we conclude that the best estimate based on these data is that about two-thirds of all first marriages are likely to disrupt.’”^{ix}

The study stated that published divorce statistics do not include separations, which amount to an additional 6% disrupted marriages, though these 6% do not divorce. Thus the failure rate of all first marriages is approaching two-thirds, 66%, when we take into account the underreporting of divorces by government agencies and add to that the number of separations.

Not only are the marriages ruined themselves, but the children of those marriages are dearly hurt by them, for 50% of all the nation’s children will grow up with only their mothers, while 75% of the children born to unmarried parents grow up with only one parent. Thus “the future of the nation’s children would appear grim.”^x

The divorce rate among faithful Christians is much lower, but still cause for concern among us who marry them. Roger Kovaciny in an article he wrote (date unknown) entitled “Fifty Ways To Leave Your Lover” referred to a survey done fifteen years earlier by *Christianity Today*. According to it, when the nation’s divorce rate was a “mere” (hyperbole mine) 33%, Christians who attended church weekly had a divorce rate of 1-in-55, or .018%. Christians, however, who also read the Bible daily had a divorce rate of 1-in-300, or .0033%.

Divorces among our WELS families are occurring too. The divorce rate of the WELS is unknown. I have been told no such statistics exist. Whatever the rate is, each WELS divorce is cause for deep concern.

When a couple comes to us to be married, we must recognize the couple’s marriage could end in divorce. One reason for this is: “Too many couples are swept into marriage by *eromania* and never took the time to develop the skills needed to make a relationship work.”^{xi}

By the grace of God our premarital counseling could enable the love-struck couple to develop the skills to make their marriage work.

Couples in marital counseling have impressed on me the need for premarital counseling. From them I have learned:

Many couples never had a good marriage modeled for them by their parents.

Consequently, they have little understanding of what a good marriage is supposed to be like. To make matters worse, they received no premarital counseling to explain to them what a mutually pleasing marriage is like. As a result, they pattern their marriage after the only marriage they have seen close up during their life, that of their parents, bad traits and all.^{xii}

The breakdown of families today necessitates premarital counseling before the wedding. I say this for the following reason:

The high divorce rate in this country is not surprising, nor is it likely to improve significantly in the future. For all of the problem marriages today, all of the single-parent homes created by divorce or unwed motherhood, all of the parents modeling for their children a free-love, live-in life-style are twisting the marriages of tomorrow by distorting the concepts of love and marriage in the youth of today, the future husbands and wives!^{xiii}

As pastors we must do what we can through premarital counseling to correct those distorted concepts of love and marriage in order to give the young couples we marry a start in the right direction.

It is my opinion, as fallible as it can be, that the visible church as a whole in this country, and I am not referring specifically to the WELS—though it is a part of the visible church—is failing to fulfill its responsibility to prepare its members for marriage. I believe it bears some responsibility for the dysfunctional and broken marriages in this land. Due to the fact most first time marriages are performed by a visible church of one denomination or another; due to the fact about sixty-six percent of those first time marriages fail in separation or divorce—I feel compelled to conclude the visible church in our country is failing in its ministry to provide the biblically sound, thorough premarital counseling necessary for the building and preservation of the marriages it performs.

More than one couple seeing me for marital counseling because of their dysfunctional marriage have endorsed the preventative value of premarital counseling, saying they wished they had learned in premarital counseling what they were then learning in marital counseling. If they had, they said, they would have said and done things differently and would have been spared years of marital troubles and unhappiness.

I am not the only one who believes the visible church is failing to provide thorough, effective premarital counseling.

Too much time and money is spent on weddings. What's needed is to increase time planning ways to strengthen the relationship itself. Sadly, couples can't count on the church, where three quarters of them will marry, to provide solid Biblical and practical preparation for marriage. Gallup found that only a sixth of American marriages were preceded by premarital preparation classes. And the preparation fails to cut the divorce rate.^{xiv}

The failure of the visible church to prepare couples for marriage has been recognized for years. John R. Milligan, Jr., Judge, Stark County Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court, Canton, Ohio, wrote an interesting article in April, 1965 about the divorce cases he had handled, many of which were of parents who had children. He wrote:

I saw another marriage on the rocks—and wondered whether more serious pre-marriage counseling would have made a difference.

Most of our cases where children are involved are “shotgun marriages.” The woman sues in 80% of all cases.

The relationship of the Pratts (the couple of the marriage above which was on the rocks) to the church is also predictable. Like 95 percent of the first marriages in our county, they were married by a clergyman. They still belong to a Protestant church and Mrs. Pratt attends. According to a study I made, eighty-two percent of those suing in Stark County, Ohio, belong to a specific church—66 percent Protestant, 15 percent Roman Catholic, less than 1 percent Jew or Orthodox.

A more shocking discovery is that parental divorce is *higher* (emphasis his) among those who claim church membership than among those who belong to no church.

Churches have a grave, unmet responsibility at the beginning of marriage. Mary and Bill Pratt had two premarital interviews with their pastor. Most of the time was spent in discussion of arrangements and procedure. When unanticipated trouble developed, they turned inward, and, as so often happens, the pastor was the last person to hear about the trouble.

Mandatory pre-marriage counseling ...offers a realistic beginning.

There is another compelling reason for mandatory counseling as a prerequisite to church marriage. If the church does not come to grips with this problem, government will ...I can conceive of a time when candidates for marriage will be interviewed, analyzed, and approved or disapproved for marriage, by an agency of government.

My hope is that all churches will come to recognize and answer the need.

Most marriages take place in church, and all churches are interested in what happens to their young people. It is an area in which pious words are no substitute for action. There is no area of family life which offers both greater need and more hope of potential success than mandatory pre-marriage counseling.^{xv}

Judge Milligan bemoaned the failure of the visible church to provide adequate, effective premarital counseling in 1965. In 1993 the cry for such premarital counseling is still being raised. Micheal McManus quoted George Gallup, Jr., who said divorce in this country is a virtually ignored scourge of gigantic proportions. McManus then stated, "What makes me furious is that the church is a silent accomplice of this galloping tragedy. When was the last time you heard a sermon on chastity, cohabitation or divorce? Most pastors sidestep the tough issues..."

In 1981, I began my eighth column with these words, "It is time to acknowledge that the American church is partly responsible for the soaring divorce rate." In this, my 600th weekly column, nothing has changed.

During a generation that divorces tripled, more than three quarters of all marriages were blessed by priests, pastors and rabbis. Sadly, however, most houses of worship are only "blessing machines," preparing couples for weddings, not for lifelong marriages. Gallup Polls reveal less than a fifth of marriages had premarital counseling. And what was given was ineffectual. Divorced couples and those who are still married are equally likely (15 and 18%, respectively) to have had premarital preparation.

But I have seen extraordinary churches that are "marriage savers."^{xvi}

I believe our Wisconsin Synod is a church body dedicated to saving marriages. A committee of our synod's Parish Services has been gathering premarital and marital counseling materials in an effort to help our pastors. Our publishing house has also taken steps to provide printed materials like my book, *Deepening Love—For Marital Happiness*. It is interested in publishing more materials of this type. I am also convinced by the requests I have received for

copies of my marriage seminars and counseling materials that numerous pastors are dedicated to ministries of building and preserving lasting marriages to the honor of our Lord. The very fact the Wisillowa Conference had Professor Valleskey speak on the biblical principles of marriage two years ago and invited me a year ago to deliver these same papers, and the fact this joint conference is discussing premarital and marital counseling, proves our pastors' concern and dedication to being marriage savers.

But I am not convinced that our premarital counseling is so good that it could not be made better, more complete, and more effective than it is. Fallible and imperfect as we are, there is always room for improvement. Permit me, therefore, to encourage all of us to strive for the best program and materials possible. Through conferences such as this one, we can exchange what we have learned and developed to help one another.

The need to improve our premarital counseling is evident. The number of divorces which take place in our congregations, the amount of time we pastors are spending in marital counseling, the number of single parent families in our churches as a result of broken marriages—all reveal the need to better prepare couples for marriage to curtail the number of dysfunctional and disrupted marriages now occurring within our synod. The best premarital counseling programs we can develop, together with a continuous ministry of teaching and preaching God's Word, is the best remedy for lessening the number of dysfunctional and broken marriages in our midst.

Can Our Premarital Pastoral Counseling Be Effective?

I asked some WELS pastors, most of whom have been in the ministry for many years, whether they thought premarital counseling helped the couples they married. One said he thought premarital counseling did no good, for couples were returning a few years after their marriages seeking divorces. Two pastors said the helpfulness of premarital counseling was difficult to gauge, for there was no statistical information to validate it resulted in fewer divorces. Others thought it was helpful, at least to the extent the Lord's principles for marriage were shared, though this did not guarantee couples would not have dysfunctional or disrupted marriages.

All used premarital counseling programs of some kind, ranging from two to six counseling sessions, and varying in depth and thoroughness. The general opinion of those I talked to was that premarital counseling was necessary. As one put it: "What is the alternative?" Yet in their opinion the effectiveness of premarital counseling is uncertain. The thought was even expressed that premarital counseling came too late: the couples had already made their commitments to marry, which had to be recognized as binding. If they were unsuited to be married, premarital counseling could neither prevent their marrying, nor was it likely to prevent their marriages from becoming dysfunctional. If the opinion of these pastors reflects the thoughts of many within our synod, and it might, the effectiveness of premarital counseling is considered questionable at best. And if its effectiveness is questionable at best, then the question arises, "Why bother doing it? Why not skip it altogether?"

In the process of preparing this paper I read some articles about programs being conducted within other denominations or religious groups. None would be acceptable for the lack of biblical teaching or doctrinal purity. Yet it was reported that where couples' strengths and weaknesses were screened and they were counseled accordingly, their relationships were strengthened.

I believe the keys to effective premarital counseling are the Word of God and thoroughness. We should not overlook the power of God's Word. The Word of God is living and

active. Sharper than a double edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart (Hebrews 4:12). (My word) will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it (Isaiah 55:11). If we bring the Word of God to bear in premarital counseling, we have our Lord's promise he will make it effective. If we accept as true that "all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:10,17), and we then use Scripture as the tool for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness—we have the equipment that will make the good work of premarital counseling effective. If the Word of God is present and used in our premarital counseling, the premarital counseling cannot not be effective, for the Lord's Word will make sure that it is. When his Word is used, the Lord's blessings will be on it.

Perhaps we pastors think premarital counseling is questionable because we do not see its immediate results. We see the young, love-struck couples with their youthful immaturity, apparent lack of interest in premarital counseling, and whatever other weaknesses and failures might be named, and when we fail to see the changes we think should result, we question the effectiveness of our counseling with the Word. We feel like asking, "Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" (Isaiah 53:1)

We would do well to remember God's Word is a seed which we plant in the couples' hearts, and God is the one who makes it grow (ref. 1 Corinthians 3:6). He promises his Word will be effective and will accomplish his purpose, but he does not tell us what his time table is for making it grow, nor does he say how many fruits he will make it bear. The couples' fruits from being counseled with the Word might be thirty, sixty, or a hundred fold over a period of time (Matthew 13:23). And we may never see those fruits of our biblical counseling, for we do not live within those couples' marriages to see them. We only see the failures, the divorces. But of those divorcing, how many had a really thorough, biblical premarital counseling? And if they did have it, was it the premarital counseling that failed, or was it the couples' sins and spiritual weaknesses that brought about their divorces?

Thoroughness is, I believe, the other key to effective premarital counseling. Every marriage is made of two human beings—a sinful man and a sinful woman, each having faults, each having personality traits and weaknesses, each having different concepts of married and family life—and all too often erring concepts—as a result of their varied family backgrounds, each having a selfish bias, each reacting to the personality and weaknesses and behavior of the other which can result in relational problems, each generally lacking in communication skills, each capable of anger and resentment, each having a will of their own.

Now if our premarital counseling would only present the principles of marriage found in God's Word, and it would fail to address all these facets of the man and woman involved and their manner of relating to one another so as to apply the Word of God to them to teach, reprove, correct, and train in righteousness—it would neglect the very areas where counseling is most needed. The purpose of all pastoral counseling is to bring about change. But how can our premarital counseling achieve this purpose if it never addresses the sins, the faults, the weaknesses, the misconceptions, the errors of the man and woman involved? To be effective and to help the couple, our premarital counseling must address and discuss all of these facets of the man and the woman and their relationship.

Premarital Counseling Problem

A variety of problems make an effective premarital counseling program difficult. I will point out those I am familiar with from my experience; unfortunately, however, I do not have the remedy for all of them.

Couples lack interest in premarital counseling. This tends to be the case more so with the young couples in their late teens and twenties than with the older couples. This lack of interest may be due to a youthful immaturity that fails to take the important things seriously.

This observation was substantiated in 1993 by a couple who came to me for marital counseling. The husband and wife were both on their second marriage after a previous divorce. In one of our counseling sessions I asked them if they ever had had premarital counseling. They admitted they had had premarital counseling before their first marriages, which, they said, had offered little of substance and was a “requirement for a church wedding.”

Then they both added, “But you know how that is. It is something couples have to go through to be married, but no one takes it seriously.”

Couples often lack the commitment to expend the time and the effort necessary to do the outside assignments that will make the premarital counseling beneficial for them. I sometimes have the impression they proceed with the premarital counseling, not so much because they want to, but because they must if they are to have a church wedding. Thus they go through the motions but their hearts are not in it. They tend to rush through the materials like many children do their homework—to get it over with as quickly as possible. Their answers to questions show they failed to think through the Bible passages or given information. Since their mental involvement is shallow, I suspect what they have learned is superficial.

I have found in young couples a low level of spiritual maturity and a high level of youthful immaturity. Worldly concerns and fancies preoccupy their thoughts, but spiritual concerns and growth are pushed to the back of their minds. Their concerns seem to go no further than the wedding service and celebration. They appear to put little emphasis on planning their life and marriage in Christ.

Couples are preoccupied with the plans and arrangements for making their wedding a spectacle and celebration. Couples expend so much money, time, and effort on wedding preparations that they neglect the premarital counseling assignments. If they only understood their wedding service is but an hour, their wedding celebration is but a day, but their marriage is for life; maybe then they would concentrate on preparing for marriage more so than on arranging for flowers, decorations, attire, transportation in limousines or horse-drawn buggies, and a thousand other details. Perhaps their parents are responsible to some extent, for they also become caught up in making their son’s or daughter’s wedding an extravaganza. I read in 1993 that the New York Times had stated the average wedding cost \$16,000; what I do not know is whether that was in New York or across the nation.

Distance is sometimes an obstacle to premarital counseling. Either the bride or the groom live in another area of the state or the country. Conducting premarital counseling during the weeks or months prior to the wedding is therefore impossible. Special arrangements must be made. In these cases preprinted materials which can be read and filled out in advance of the counseling sessions are invaluable. The premarital counseling packet I will be giving you in a few minutes has worked very well in these instances.

A reoccurring problem is insufficient time or scheduling conflicts. This especially happens when the bride or groom live in a distant area and the counseling sessions must be conducted in the last week before the wedding when he or she is present. Sandwiching the

sessions into one week is a workable solution, but we are faced with trying to get the couple to set aside sufficient time for the counseling at a time when they have a multitude of things to attend to and concentrate on. Couples' conflicting work schedules, coupled with our own jammed schedules, also make scheduling the sessions difficult. I have found starting the sessions several months before the wedding enables us to work them in.

Couples do not know how to locate Bible passages and to read them with understanding. Those who have received a Christian education are much better in this regard than those who did not have a Christian education. Most couples are unable to analyze a passage to glean from it the information being asked for. They miss the point, and their answers are either beside the point or quite vague and beat around the bush. Challenging Bible studies during their school-age years might have prepared them for doing the premarital Bible studies in which they must look up passages and extract the answers for themselves.

Sometimes a bride or groom is unwilling to accept a biblical teaching, such as the role of husband and wife—especially the submissiveness of the wife to her husband, the bearing of children as part of God's plan for marriage, and the principle of fellowship in regard to who may, or may not, serve as an organist or soloist or officiant in the service. What we must overcome in these cases is the influence of secular society and the ecumenism of most of the visible church.

The Objective Of Premarital Pastoral Counseling

The objective is to encourage couples to build permanent marriages according to their Lord's design as a fruit of their faith to honor him, which, in the process, will benefit themselves. To accomplish this objective, the premarital counseling will obviously be instructional in nature. To the greatest extent possible, however, it must also be motivational, to encourage the couples to live out their marriages, not according to their sinful natures, misconceptions, or simple ignorance, but according to God's Word and the instructions given them during their premarital counseling.

To accomplish this objective I have developed the following goals and aims:

- To share law and gospel with each couple by which the Lord can bring about their spiritual growth in repentance, faith, and the fruits of faith (ref. 1 Peter 5:2; 2 Corinthians 5:18-20; 2 Timothy 4:2; 2 Timothy 3:16;). The law is used to show them their sins and faults; the gospel is used to forgive them and to motivate them; the law is again used to guide them in living a Christian life and marriage.
- To encourage and assist each couple in building a marriage and family to the honor of Christ our Lord (ref. Ephesians 5:21f).
- To equip each couple with the knowledge necessary for establishing and, preserving a mutually pleasing Christian marriage. To accomplish this goal, my aim is:
 - To teach what the Lord's design of a mutually pleasing marriage is.
 - To teach what the blessings and purposes of marriage are.
 - To teach the Lord's regulations for marriage and divorce.
 - To alert couples to potential problems they may experience in their marriage and teach them how to deal with them to make their marriage the best it can be with God's help. In other words, to conduct preventative counseling to minimize marital problems and to ward off marital failures, which the following aims are geared to do.
 - To discover the bride's and groom's concept of marriage which they would follow, to correct those concepts when they are in error, and to harmonize their concepts

when they differ due to their varied family backgrounds, parents' marriages, life's experiences, educations, and religious upbringing or the lack of it.

- To discover the bride's and groom's personality traits that will hinder a marital relationship, or which may clash and cause marital problems, to forewarn them of those possible problems, and to advise them how to deal with those personality traits and weaknesses.
- To encourage brides and grooms to discuss unresolved issues and facets of their marriage which they have not considered.
- To discover how brides and grooms relate to one another and what marital personality they have been developing, in order to inform them of its weaknesses and what, with God's help, will minimize them to prevent future marital problems and to make their marriage the best it can be.
- To teach couples to adjust to one another, confronting them with practical issues of their marriage that they must discuss and resolve. Thus they develop the skills to discuss their differences and adjust to one another during their marriage.
- To encourage communication, teaching the pitfalls and the arts of communicating clearly and effectively.
- To encourage an agreement to disagree lovingly and to teach how this can be done with God's help.
- To teach how to clear up misunderstandings and to avoid conflicts.
- To teach how to deal with anger and to dissipate it.
- To reveal the kinds of love in a Christian marriage and what they mean to a couple, and to encourage their nourishment.
- To give biblical instructions on sexual love in marriage, and a source of information that can prevent sexual problems and enhance mutual satisfaction. Also, to warn couples about the dangers of pornography, which can warp the concept of married love, inflame with lust, and ruin souls, lives, and marriages.

These goals and aims strive to bring about the overall objective of counseling—to bring about change. In the case of premarital counseling, the objective is to exchange the sinful behaviors and tendencies, the misconceptions, and the ignorance, for the truth of God's Word, repentance, faith, and the knowledge that will build a lifelong marriage as our Lord designed and planned it.

A Plan For Conducting Premarital Counseling

The program a pastor will conduct will be determined by the materials he has and what his objectives are. In this section I will share with you some guiding principles I have learned.

First, we will reflect a genuine love and concern for the couples we counsel.

The very term *Seelsorge* includes the thought of loving concern for people. However, the love for people that is meant is not only love for such who through their good qualities inspire love. It is rather a love that is inspired by God's love for the sinner, a love that inspires love in the heart of a believer—here the pastor—for fellow-redeemed sinners.^{xvii}

Second, we will conduct our premarital counseling in an evangelical spirit that earnestly desires to lead them to Christ and to a life in him.

The pastor who has an evangelical attitude deals with people not simply out of moralistic and ethical interests, but seeks to help troubled souls through Christ in their relationship to God and to encourage sanctification as a fruit of repentance.^{xviii}

On occasion when beginning premarital counseling, but more often marital counseling, I have read the message from the plaque on my office wall entitled, The Pastor's Study. It says, in part,

Here you will always find a friend and counselor in time of need. He will not be surprised at your sins, nor will he judge you in them, but he invites you to share with him, the wisdom and love of God, the knowledge of forgiveness of sins, and the saving grace of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Reading this lessens couples' fears about how they will be treated and about speaking truthfully about themselves. This reassurance of a pastor's loving, nonjudgmental attitude builds a rapport conducive to counseling. A warmth and friendship result, which promote the trust and communication necessary for counseling. The couples feel they can talk about themselves and their problems like they otherwise could not do if they thought their pastor would spew out fire and brimstone as soon as they honestly confessed their faults and sins and erroneous priorities.

By nonjudgmental attitude, I do not mean a willingness to accept sin, but a willingness to accept the sinner as Jesus himself did.

The pastor can never be nonjudgmental in this sense (of excluding all moral evaluation of the actions, thoughts, or attitudes of the counselee). Sin remains sin, and the pastor dare never give the impression that he does not regard it as such.

But the pastor should be nonjudgmental in the sense in which Jesus was when he told the woman taken in adultery: "Neither do I condemn thee; go, and sin no more" (Jn.8:11). In telling the woman to go and sin no more He was passing a moral judgment on her past action. At the same time He did not condemn her, thus rejecting her for her sin.^{xix}

Third, we will be ourselves. I learned during my professional career before becoming a pastor that a person must be himself and do a task in the way he can best do it, even if no one else might do it exactly as he does. If a person is not himself, he comes across to others as a phony. We must be ourselves, the human beings we are, reflecting our own personalities and manners of speaking, in the process of accepting the couples for whom they are and giving them the counsel of God's Word.

To be genuine means that the pastor must be himself in his relationship to the other person. He must not put on professional airs, nor hide behind a pastoral facade...It means that the acceptance spoken of must be genuine, as indeed it must be if the pastor has fully grasped the gospel.^{xx}

Fourth, we will practice love in our counseling, the love that is kind (1 Corinthians 13:4). In love we will strive to say what must be said in the kindest possible way. This has been referred to as tact. Tact can be defined as the ability to say the right thing at the right time in the right way.

Tact ...involves being sensitive to people's feelings. It involves respect and consideration for other people.^{xxi}

Fifth, we will be good listeners. Not only must we pay attention, we must try to understand an issue as the counselees do. We must listen with empathy to see it as they do, to sense their feelings, to understand their experiences.

Sixth, to counsel couples we will be impartial. I will discuss this during the presentation on marital counseling.

Seventh, we must verify the couples are truly free to be married before God. When a couple asks us to marry them is the appropriate time to verify we can marry them. I ask couples if they have their parents' approval. I have had a young female member talk to me about marrying her when her parents knew nothing about her wedding plans, and later, when they did know about them, they were not in favor of them. Needless to say, we can embroil ourselves in an ocean of hot water if we proceed with plans to marry sons and daughters of our congregations when the parents neither know of those plans nor approve of them. We are obligated to be conscious of the fourth commandment.

In those cases where one of the couple is not a member of mine, I check at our initial meeting if the non-member has been married before and what the circumstances of the divorce were and when it took place. If and when a case may warrant it, I also check whether the couple are living together. A discreet manner of learning this is to ask them for their addresses. If I do not know the couple, I also ask if they have had any children. If the couple are guilty of adultery, I discuss their sin with them.

Eighth, other items I try to take care of at the initial meeting are: the time and date of the wedding to clarify there are no other conflicts; the time and date of the wedding rehearsal; the availability of an organist; an appointment with the organist to make arrangements for the music; the availability of the marriage license before the wedding; the scheduling of the premarital counseling sessions; attending an adult information class if one of the couple is a not a WELS or ELS member.

Ninth, at the initial meeting I give the couples the materials they will need for premarital counseling. I explain to them what the packet of materials include, how we will use them, and what the goals of our premarital counseling will be.

Premarital Counseling Materials

Premarital counseling must cover many aspects of marriage. I will not discuss them here for two reasons: First, I will discuss them in the presentation on marital counseling. Second, they are covered in even greater detail in my book, *Deepening Love—For Marital Happiness*.

At this time I will share with you the program I have developed for premarital counseling in the hope it may be of some benefit for your ministry.

I use my book as a text book for premarital counseling. I have designed around it a premarital counseling program for pastors, entitled *Deepening Love Through Premarital Counseling*. This packaged program was reviewed and recommended for publication by the editorial staff of Northwestern Publishing House; however, due to marketing considerations-namely a new program that had just been put out by Concordia Publishing House, it was not published.

I have been using this program for about three years with excellent results, including cases where the couple has either lived in another state, or about forty miles away, or one of the partners was in the military service.

ⁱ Schuetze, Armin W. and Matzke, Frederick A., *The Counseling Shepherd*, (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Northwestern Publishing House, 1988) ref. p. xi

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- ⁱⁱ Schuetze, Armin W. and Habeck, Irwin J., *The Shepherd Under Christ*, (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Northwestern Publishing House, 1974) ref. p. 179
- ⁱⁱⁱ Gingrich, F. Wilbur, *Shorter Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973) p. 177
- ^{iv} Schuetze, Armin W. and Habeck, Irwin J.: ref. P. 179
- ^v *Ibid.*, p. 179
- ^{vi} *Ibid.*, p. 181
- ^{vii} The Milwaukee Journal Staff, "U.S. marriages face long odds: study," *The Milwaukee Journal*, (Milwaukee, WI, March 13, 1989).
- ^{viii} *Ibid.*
- ^{ix} *Ibid.*
- ^x *Ibid.*
- ^{xi} McManus, Michael, "How to avoid a bad marriage," *Journal of American Family Association*, July 1993
- ^{xii} Schneidervin, John C., *Deepening Love for Marital Happiness*, (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992) p. 65, 66.
- ^{xiii} *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- ^{xiv} McManus, Michael, "How to Avoid a Bad Marriage," *Journal of American Family Association*, July, 1993.
- ^{xv} Milligan, John R., Jr, "Marriage and Divorce—As Seen from the Bench," *American Family Association*, June 1993
- ^{xvi} McManus, Michael, "Church partly responsible for divorces?" *Journal of American Family Association*, June 1993.
- ^{xvii} Schuetze, Armin W. and Habeck, Irwin J.: p. 184-185
- ^{xviii} *Ibid.* p. 184.
- ^{xix} *Ibid.*, p. 185.
- ^{xx} *Ibid.*, p. 186.
- ^{xxi} *Ibid.*, p. 186-187.