

MARITAL STABILITY AND SPIRITUAL GROWTH: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY
ON CHRISTIAN PREMARITAL COUNSELING

by

Angie M. Baker

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Community Care and Counseling

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APPROVED BY:

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to examine the impact Christian premarital counseling (CPC) that use the Prepare/Enrich curriculum have on the couple's spiritual growth and overall marital stability. The following chapters emphasized the need to understand the long-term spiritual benefits and marital stability couples receive from attending CPC using the Prepare/Enrich curriculum. In this study, I interviewed ten couples to examine the spiritual benefits and marital stability couples received from attending CPC. This study allowed me to gain knowledge and insight from couples that participated in the CPC sessions. I hope that the results of this study, equip pastors, counselors, lay leaders, marriage and family therapist, and other helping professionals with new knowledge that will help them develop and implement effective CPC programs. I used a qualitative design which allowed me to interpret and gather rich data based on the couple's real-life experiences (Harris, 2015). Overall, the participants reported that their CPC experience enhanced their spiritual foundation, clearly defined their marital roles, and helped them to grow as one.

Keywords: spirituality, Christian, marital stability, premarital counseling, spiritual growth

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this entire project to my dad who is the hardest working man I know. Dad without the work ethics you instilled in all eight of your children at a very young age allowed me to see this project through. Every time I wanted to “throw in the towel” when things got tough, I remembered the “Don’t Quit” poem by John Greenleaf Whittier that you made all of us read several times when we were young children. You posted the crinkled paper on the wall of your home office and made us read it, or you read it at least once a month. Your life mirrored the "Don't Quit" poem. You were able to provide for a household of ten on a single insurance salesman's income. I do not recall asking for something I did not receive. Thank you for raising us up in church and teaching us how to depend on Christ. Thank you for being an excellent example of what a husband, father, and man of God look like. Dad, I love you, and as you can see, I did not quit!

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First and foremost, I want to give honor and thanks to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who is the head of my life and the reason I was able to complete this dissertation successfully. The motivation and purpose for this entire journey was to increase my knowledge in the field of Christian counseling, to be effective, and to bring glory to the name of Jesus Christ.

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List of Abbreviations

American Psychological Association (APA)

Christ Way Baptist Church is (CWBC)

Christian Premarital Counseling (CPC)

Computer Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS)

Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC)

Marital Status Inventory (MSI)

Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP)

Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Examining the lives of married couples that attended Christian premarital counseling (CPC) that used the Prepare/Enrich curriculum will be insightful to discover the key factors that increase longevity. This chapter will present the framework of this study on married couples' spiritual growth and marital stability as it relates to their attendance of CPC. The researcher examined the lives of ten married couples who attended CPC that used the Prepare/Enrich curriculum developed by Olson and Olson (1999). This chapter will also attempt to answer the following two questions: **RQ1:** What impact does Christian premarital counseling have on a couple's overall marital stability? **RQ2:** What impact does Christian premarital counseling have on the individual's spiritual growth? To implement this study, the researcher used a qualitative approach to investigate a subpopulation among couples that have been through CPC that used the Prepare/Enrich curriculum. The Prepare/Enrich is a premarital curriculum developed by Olson and Olson (1999). The theoretical assumption of the Prepare/Enrich program is that the quality of the marital relationship can be predicted from the premarital relationship. Therefore, premarital counselors should identify relationship factors that will improve the quality of marriage to maintain marital stability (Olson & Olson, 1999). Prepare/Enrich is a marriage mentoring program that is used by multiple churches and Christian organizations. The curriculum is comprised of inventories, in-person "marriage facilitator" training, a manual, and a resource kit that can be manipulated to meet the needs of the church or organization that will implement the curriculum. The researchers used participant's interviews to collect data from the couple's personal experience and how CPC impacted their marital stability and spiritual growth.

Background

CPC which includes religious instruction is more useful for religious couples than secular premarital counseling (Marks, 2007). Many couples go through premarital counseling with the notion of another thing to do before getting married. It is imperative that counselors incorporate religion and faith into their counseling process to be effective (Holliman, 2009). Couples often view premarital counseling as a process to help enhance their relationship or a chance to get to know their partner on a different level (Hook & Worthington, 2009). However, couples whose spouses who are “more-religious” report to have positive marital outcomes when they attend CPC (Perry, 2015). Couples who receive premarital counseling with religious influences typically have a higher rate of marital stability if both spouse’s religion is greatly influenced (Perry, 2015). Doherty, Harris, and Wilde (2016), asserted that CPC gives a couple more clarity and confidence before marriage, which may lead to less conflict during their initial stage of marriage.

Traditional premarital counseling programs have risen as an approach to decrease the divorce rate and to help build couple satisfaction once they are married (Hook & Worthington, 2009). Traditional premarital counseling is also designed to give couples the necessary skills to help enhance the couple's communication, limit unhealthy conflict, and provide problem-solving strategies when conflict arises (Moeti, Koloï-Keaikitse, & Mokgolodi, 2017). Traditional premarital counseling has shown to be useful to couples before marriage (Hook & Worthington, 2009); however, traditional premarital counseling usually presents a "one size fits all" way to help couples during a crisis without a foundation to build on. Many couples report that traditional premarital counseling is beneficial to them in the early stage of their marriage but lacks the basic biblical principles to refer to during a conflict (Shahhosseini, Hamzehgardeshi, &

Kardan Souraki, 2014). The Gallup poll reported that 95% of Americans who have a religious identity are Christians (Gallup, 2011). However, there is a lack of literature on CPC. This research attempted to determine the impact CPC have on a couple's overall marital stability and spiritual growth? Counselors that integrate spirituality into their counseling sessions give couples a foundation to build upon (Nelson, Kirk, Ane, & Serres, 2011). Couples who plan to get married must understand that their spiritual walk of life as a married couple is not the work of man, but the hand of God's grace (Weise, 2014); therefore, their marriage should build their spiritual growth.

Religious couples respond in a positive way when their religious values and concerns are incorporated into therapy (Larson, 2007). Couples that include Christ in their marriage may eliminate ambiguous expectations because they both understand their roles according to biblical principles. Couples who plan to marry and allow Christ to be the center of their marriages, report to have fewer unresolved conflicts (Larson, 2007). Ecclesiastes 4:12 states, "And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken" (King James Version). According to this scripture, couples should place God as the third partner in their marriage. According to Nelson et al. (2011), couples that have God as the third and primary partner in their marriage typically stand by His grace especially during difficult times. Couples that have a Christ-centered marriage submit their decisions, emotions, and circumstances to the will of God. Premarital counselors should stress to couples in the initial stage of counseling that they are not in charge of their marriage or their own individual lives (Nelson et al., 2011).

Currently, there is a limited amount of literature that addresses how couples who participate in CPC programs are affected long-term as it relates to their marital stability and

spiritual growth (Marks, 2007; Plumb, 2011). Chapter One of this study gives an overview of the historical, social, and theoretical impact of CPC. This chapter points out a gap in the literature about the effectiveness of CPC on married couples. The purpose of this study is to examine the impact CPC have on couple's marital stability and spiritual growth. This chapter provides the readers with an explanation of the researcher's motivation for conducting this study. The researcher's bias and philosophical assumptions are also clearly discussed in this chapter. The significance of this study is described by using practical, empirical, and theoretical illustrations why the study's findings are significant.

Historical Background

Previous studies have contended that married couples stated that there was some connection between their religious values and the commitment in their marriage (Nelson et al., 2007; Marks, 2007; McGinnis, 2015). Genesis 1 allows one to understand how God orchestrated and ordained the first marriage of Adam and Eve. There were many marriages mentioned in the Bible after the marriage of Adam and Eve. There was a marriage between Priscilla and Aquila, mentioned in the book of Acts. Acts 18 points out that this married couple, who were Christ followers, also worked together in the secular realm as business partners. Priscilla and Aquila supported Paul's ministry and participated in the ministry of teaching and evangelizing (Acts 18:2, 18, 26). Looking at their partnership in the ministry and secular obligations, one can assert that having a partner is beneficial to the family in multiple facets. Over the past decade, premarital counselors have noticed the positive impact of religious values in the couple's marriages; therefore, premarital counselors have instituted scripture during the counseling sessions (Bondi, 2013).

Social Background

With the increasing divorce rates, the best gift a couple can give themselves to help impact their marriage before it starts is to attend premarital counseling (Hook & Worthington, 2009). Couples associated with a particular church are often required by a pastor or minister to get counseling before they consent to administer the service. According to Marks, (2007), couples who attend premarital counseling tend to have lower divorce rates than couples who received no premarital counseling at all. Couples who attend premarital counseling have the chance to examine issues that most couples contend about and frequently lead to divorce or division. Premarital counseling gives couples the opportunity to address critical issues before they get married. Which allow the couples to point out and help them figure out any issues their partner is willing to accept or deny. Premarital counseling has shown to help improve couples' probability for satisfaction because, during premarital counseling, couples can communicate their feelings of fear, values, and wants before getting married (Williams, 2007).

Theoretical

The theoretical framework of this study is motivated by the literature of Nelson et al. (2011), which found that couples reported that their marriage began with a religious focus. Nelson et al. (2011), is a limited quantitative study that examined the untapped resources such as religious and spiritual values in couple's counseling. The researcher used a qualitative design study to extend the research of Nelson et al. (2011) theory that will include couples that attended a CPC program that incorporated the Prepare/Enrich curriculum. Traditional premarital counseling can be considered an integral part of prosperous marriage (Shahhosseini et al, 2014). The counseling discussion encourages people to enhance their relationship by knowing themselves and their future spouse (Shahhosseini et al., 2014). Shahhosseini et al. (2014), also asserted that preparing married couples for the fundamentals things that married couples

experience during a marriage can positively affect their relationship. Although the couples can learn some valuable lessons attending traditional counseling, traditional counseling lacks the Christian values that can withstand the test of time (Holliman, 2009). These abilities are not lasting if they are not built on a strong foundation.

Situation to Self

With this study, it was my goal to understand the phenomenon of married couples who participated in a Christian premarital program that used the Prepare/Enrich (Olson & Olson, 1999), curriculum. As a licensed professional counselor (LPC) and the wife of a pastor, I have counseled many married couples over the last ten years. During their counseling sessions, I observed commonalities when couples were experiencing challenges and dissatisfaction in their marriage. The couples were lacking marital stability and the fundamentals of what it meant to be a married couple in the sight of God. Most of these couples reported that they did not go through any premarital counseling before getting married. The couples that reported receiving premarital counseling stated that it was not with a Christian counselor nor did the counselor use biblical principles. The lack of knowledge and fundamentals that these couples were experiencing during their time of distress compelled me to conduct this study to understand the impact CPC that uses the Prepare/Enrich have on a married couple's marital stability and their spiritual growth. My initial dissertation project was to develop a Christian marriage enrichment program to analyze the impact it had on the couple's spiritual growth and marital stability. However, the Holy Spirit guided me to focus on the current Christian premarital programs to understand its impact on a couple's marital stability and spiritual growth. The themes that presented themselves in the study will allow me to develop an effective program and hone in on the current needs of married couples. It is my hope that this study will equip pastors, lay-leaders, and other helping

professionals with additional knowledge and understanding of the impact CPC have on the couples they counsel, lead, and guide.

In the process of developing the topic for this research study, I depended on the paradigm of constructivism to help guide the research and study. According to Scholnik, Kol, and Abarbenel (2016), constructivism is a hypothesis of learning which states that students learn by effectively developing their insight. This research project has allowed me to develop a deeper understanding which was the initial purpose and the premise of the study. As it relates to marriage, when I was young I constructed in my mind what a "happily ever after" looked like and what I thought it meant. When I received Christ at the age of 8 years old, I begin to understand if a person lives this life without Christ in their life, it is impossible to experience true happiness on any level. Throughout this research project, I begin to construct my theory through this active learning process. I chose to work with a group of people to construct a more in-depth meaning from married couples that attended a CPC class to gain knowledge from their lived experiences. Their lived experiences will provide me with rich data to analyze and generate common themes to understand the specific phenomenon as it relates to CPC. The participants of this study were viewed as agents of experiences (Bandura, 2001), which will place them in the category of the experts of the study. Their expertise will allow me to further construct or deconstruct my theory because of my constructivism throughout this process.

My philosophical assumptions throughout this study relied heavily on the ontological and epistemological assumptions which forced me to examine my own biases. According to Smith and Ceusters (2010), ontology is the study of ideas that identify one's being, specifically with the idea of becoming, existing, and a person's reality. I believe that God created man and the world; therefore, we should incorporate him into our lives in every facet. Because of my strong belief

in Christ, I had to acknowledge my own biases and these assumptions before conducting this research. I also had to accept that a married couple may view their marriage as stable and their spirituality as strong if they are not faithfully practicing Christianity or attended a CPC class.

This qualitative research allowed me the opportunity to tell a story through the real-life experiences of married couples who attended CPC and also analyze the impact it had on their marital stability and spiritual growth. Epistemological assumptions explain how we comprehend what we know. Epistemology is defined as “the theory of knowledge, especially with regard to its methods, validity, scope, and the distinction between justified belief and opinion” (Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary, 1999). I used constructivism to guide this research, which helped to address my epistemological assumptions. I theorized that couple's view of the world and their marriage beliefs are typically developed from their own lived experiences.

During the initial stage of this research study, I had to address my axiological assumptions and beliefs throughout the process. Axiological is the branch of philosophy that considers a person's values, as it relates to ethics, aesthetics, or religion (Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary, 1999). My morals and values rely heavily on my faith belief in God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. My faith and obedience in God was the very reason I decided to pursue a doctorate in the Community Care and Counseling under the Marriage and Family cognate at Liberty University. I purposely chose to attend Liberty University because their beliefs aligned with my beliefs. It was also encouraging to learn that Liberty University is among the top Christian universities in the nation. My axiological assumption also compelled me to further my knowledge in the field of marriage and family Christian counseling because I value the calling that God has placed upon my life as a professional counselor. I am humbled by the opportunity and grateful that God has chosen me to be a vessel to help inspire, encourage,

and give hope to couples and families. I am very grateful that the participants allowed me the opportunity to tap into their married lives to get a better understanding of CPC through their lived experiences.

Problem Statement

Spiritual growth and Biblical principles during premarital counseling have become a lost concept among pastors, lay leaders, and faith-based premarital counseling programs (Holliman, 2009). Couples who have participated in premarital programs do exhibit positive gains in knowledge about a marriage (Larson, 2007). They also report that they are more confident in their relationship, engaged in more positive conflict management behaviors, and experienced marital satisfaction (Larson, 2007). Although these attributes are contributing factors to building overall marital stability, there is limited research on the benefits of incorporating Biblical principles during premarital counseling to help the individual's spiritual growth in Christ and maintain marital stability.

Although there is a plethora of research that focuses on the effects on CPC; the problem is that there is limited research examining the impact of CPC using the research-based Prepare/Enrich curriculum. This qualitative study examined the lives of ten married couples to determine the effects of the CPC that used the Prepare/Enrich curriculum. I used the process of interviewing couples individually to gain insights on their backgrounds, marriage experiences, and spiritual growth as it relates to their attendance of the Prepare/Enrich CPC program.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to analyze the spiritual growth and marital stability of heterosexual married couples who participated in a CPC program that used the research-based curriculum Prepare/Enrich. At this stage in the research, spiritual growth and

marital stability will be generally defined as how close the couple's relationship is with Christ and their spouse. The theory guiding this study is Worthington Jr.'s (1990), study that focused on a Christian approach to counseling couples. Worthington Jr.'s (1990), theory examined how Christian couples counseling help couples grow spiritually and maintain marital stability by helping couples solve their problems from a Christian perspective.

Significance of the Study

Studies on CPC have found that couples exhibit overall marital stability and satisfaction after attending the program (DiBlasio, 2010; Hook, Worthington, Hook, Miller, & Davis, 2011; Jacobi, 2017). It is my hope, that upon the completion of this study, it will equip pastors, counselors, lay leaders, marriage and family therapist, and other helping professionals with new knowledge that will help them develop and implement effective CPC programs that will help couples grow spiritually and maintain marital stability throughout the course of their marriage. As a long-term goal, I hope to gain an in-depth understanding of the effects of CPC and how it can be improved to benefit a couple's marital stability and spiritual growth in Christ.

Research Questions

I will use a semi-structured interview format to maintain this study's focused purpose.

Two primary open-ended questions will drive the research:

RQ1: What impact does Christian premarital counseling have on a couple's overall marital stability?

RQ2: What impact does Christian premarital counseling have on the individual's spiritual growth?

Definitions

1. *Christian premarital counseling (CPC)* - Christian premarital counseling is known as the foundation that is offered through the couple's local church, or through para-church organizations that offer Christian counseling. CPC is designed to teach couples about the truth about marriage according to the Bible. CPC prepares couples who are seeking marriage to enter a relationship based upon the sacrificial love for one another. Christian couples who are seeking to get married are encouraged to invite Jesus Christ to be their personal Savior and the third cord mentioned in Ecclesiastes 4:12 ("Who is God?", n.d.).
2. *Marital Stability* - The probability that the marriage will remain unblemished, without disintegration or separation (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2011).
3. *Prepare/Enrich Curriculum* - A scientifically research-based relationship inventory and couple's assessment tool which is used as a foundational program for premarital counseling, marriage enrichment, couple's therapy, marriage mentoring, and marriage education (Knutson & Olson, 2003).
4. *Spiritual Growth* - Refers to a measurable transformation where a disciple becomes more like Jesus Christ (Goacher, 2017).
5. *Spirituality* – According to the traditional definition, it was the core of what it meant to be religious. The term has been used to describe those individuals who are profoundly religious and live a life dedicated and surrendered to the Divine (Koenig, 2015). The state of being spiritual is defined as the quality of involving deep, often religious, feelings, and beliefs, rather than the physical parts of a person (Koenig, 2015). Worthington et al. (2011), stated that the term *spirituality* is based on the individual and religion in an entity's or group's faith, creed, and beliefs.

Summary

Traditional premarital counseling use techniques and strategies that help couples advance their sexual abilities, help them to make strides toward fundamental abilities, and raise the couple's overall readiness (Shahhosseini et al., 2014). The counseling is limited to a couple's encouragement to help enhance their relationship by getting to know themselves and their future spouse (Shahhosseini et al., 2014). This qualitative study is designed to collect, organize, synthesize, and interpret data from married couples who participated in CPC. This research took a ground theory approach to document the experience of ten married couples who attended CPC that used the Prepare/Enrich curriculum. The data that was collected was used to identify emerging themes in the narratives of the couple's marriage stability and spiritual growth. This study also sought to help Christian premarital counselors, marriage counselors, pastors, and church lay-leaders understand more fully how CPC impact a couple's long-term marital stability and spiritual growth. The data was constructed from the shared phenomenon of the participants.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Marriages have been around from the beginning of time since God created man. The Bible stated in Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning, God created man and called him Adam." This creation was one of many creations in the Judeo-Christian creations in the Bible of the Old Testament. God saw that it was not good for man to be alone; therefore, he created the woman and called her Eve, (Genesis 2:1). The first marriage was created, orchestrated, and sustained by God. The marriage of Adam and Eve was built solely on their faith and trust in God. Despite all the things they had, they still encountered opposition and distraction which caused Eve to disobey God's instructions. One would have to ask, what if Eve would have consulted with God or her husband before her disobedience? Would this simple act have prevented the many problems that marriages face today?

This study was an extension of Nelson et al. (2011), who found that couples who believed their marriage to be sacred or sanctified and those who believed that God is actively involved in their marriage tend to have high marital satisfaction and communicate well. What would be the divorce rate if more couples that are in relationship distress seek out Christian premarital counseling (CPC)? A couple's marital satisfaction significantly predicts their marital stability (Yoo, Bartle-Haring, Day, & Gangamma, 2014). The purpose of this study was to examine the impact CPC that use the Prepare and Enrich (Fowers & Olson, 1992), curriculum may have on a couple's spiritual growth and marital stability. The researcher used a phenomenological design to examine the marital themes and spiritual processes that emerged within the shared experiences of ten couples who participated in CPC that used the Prepare/Enrich. The researcher collected the data through individual and joint couple interviews.

Theoretical Framework

According to Mahmoodi (2016), strengthening marriage relationships includes programs that focus on boosting the couples' universal understanding, honesty, trust, empathy, and coordination. Effective premarital consultation along with the couples' relationship enrichment can result in their enhanced relationship (Shahhosseini et al., 2014). Mahmoodi (2016), noted that healthy marriages and marital satisfaction lead to healthy family development. If performed with proper knowledge, premarital counseling would have a crucial effect on the health of individuals and society. According to the American Psychological Association (APA; 2017), more than 90% of people of the western culture will get married by the age of 50. APA (2017), also contended that a healthy marriage is good for a couple's mental and physical health. A healthy marriage is also good for children because a happy home helps protect children from mental, physical, educational and social problems. APA (2017), reported that between 40% to 50% of married couples in the United States would end in divorced. Therefore, this study is designed to determine the impact CPC have on a couple's marital stability and spiritual growth.

Christian couples can benefit from CPC because of the utilization of scripture which points out the central theme of the Christian faith (DiBlasio, 2010). Patrick, Beckenbach, Sells, and Reardon (2013), noted that relational grace would act as a way for couples to step out of recurring patterns of conflict. According to Patrick et al. (2013), relational grace does play a vital role in aiding processes that can lead to forgiveness and help eliminate recurring patterns of conflict in a marriage. DiBlasio (2010), stated, "The answer for Christian couples is to move towards each other in Christlike love, forgiving each other and thereby reconciling the past and setting into place a plan to prevent the hurtful behavior for the future" (p. 291). A couple's relationship with God is essential and has an indirect effect on their marital quality. Individuals

who can forgive themselves, as it relates to religion, and forgive their spouse, will increase their marital quality because the two are closely related (David & Stafford, 2015). Forgiveness is a deliberate decision to release feelings of resentment or vengeance toward a person that has caused them harm, regardless of whether they deserve to be forgiving. Gaspard (2018), defined forgiveness as a release of toxic hurt and shame that can hold couples back and prevent them from feeling connected to each other. The ability to forgive and release the victim role and allows one to take charge of their life (Gaspard, 2018).

Related Literature

The following review of the literature examines the impact of CPC that uses the Prepare/Enrich curriculum have on the couple's spirituality and overall marital stability.

Premarital Counseling

Premarital counseling has historically occurred in religious establishments, yet an expanding number of non-religious couples have started looking for this kind of direction as well (Hook & Worthington, 2009). Short-term premarital counseling has enormous advantages that can help avert separation or divorce (Schumm et al., 2010). Duncan, Childs, and Larson (2010), contended that during the contemplation stage of getting married, most couples begin to be open to marital feedback and education and spend more time thinking about themselves concerning the target behavior. During the initial stage of marriage, couples are more open to change; therefore, couples are more attracted to more easily accessible premarital interventions such as books and Internet sites rather than attending an eight-week premarital course at the church or an intensive clinical intervention center for premarital counseling (Duncan et al., 2010).

According to Borowski and Tambling (2015), most young adults who are contemplating marriage prefer their premarital counseling close to their home or place of employment that has a maximum of six sessions at the cost of approximately \$150. They acknowledged that couples stated that communication, conflict resolution, and resolving differences are the essential elements to discuss in the counseling session (Borowski & Tambling, 2015). The study results suggested that premarital counseling programs should help eliminate obstacles that can cause tension in a marriage. The purpose and benefits of premarital counseling is to increase marital satisfaction (Borowski and Tambling, 2015). Premarital counseling programs also acknowledge specific populations that might have different counseling preferences and modify the programs accordingly to increase participation (Borowski & Tambling, 2015).

Premarital counseling and education programs is a therapeutic couple intervention that occurs with couples who plan to marry within one to two years. Premarital education is a skills training procedure that provides couples with helpful tools and information on ways they can improve their relationship after they get married. Couples who attend and participate in premarital counseling demonstrate overall positive psychological health and do not demonstrate severe relationship distress (Murray & Murray, 2004). Premarital counseling and education programs can occur in multiple settings, and the services are provided by practitioners from multiple different professions such as clergy, professional and lay counselors, and community agency workers. Couples that receive premarital education are more likely to receive couples counseling later in their marriage (Williamson, Trail, Bradbury, & Karney, 2014), at the time when they begin to experience distress. This is true for all racial groups; however, marital education attendance increases in African Americans later in the marriage more than any other race (Williamson et al., 2014). According to Cade (2010), premarital counseling requirements

should be set at a minimum number of eight hours to complete, and the counseling should provide at set intervals over a preferred six-month period.

History of premarital counseling. Premarital counseling in North America has been around since the 1930s, and most of the earliest interventions were usually administered in a church setting by clergy or pastors (Duncan et al., 2010). Many premarital counseling and education programs services are offered in a religious context which directly or indirectly involves clergy participation (Duncan et al., 2010). However, premarital counseling programs are still administered by a wide range of professionals, such as mental health workers and nurses, in several different settings, such as private counseling practices and community mental health centers (Murray & Murray, 2004). Currently, couples are increasingly preferring self-directed forms of premarital preparation, such as books, Internet sites, and online courses and inventories (Duncan et al., 2010), rather than traditional forms of counseling and education programs that are conducted by a therapist.

Premarital counseling was initially designed to help couples maintain relatively high levels of functioning during the span of the couple's marriage. The counseling sessions were also designed to provide couples who were seeking to strengthen their relationships. During the premarital counseling sessions, the couples are given interventions that are designed as preventative measures to help maintain marital satisfaction during the time of conflict (Green & Miller, 2013). Green and Miller (2013), also proved that premarital counseling prevention efforts could be crucial given the argument that once dysfunctional interaction patterns develop within a marriage, they tend to become more difficult to change. Premarital counseling should be viewed as a similar method of prevention as public health professionals use regarding issues

like influenza, diphtheria, and chicken pox, because premarital counseling programs may confer similar relationship "immunity" for engaged couples (Green & Miller, 2013).

Many counselors have indicated that three-fourths of the couples were seen in Christian couple counseling settings although pastoral counselors indicated that a more significant percentage of their couples are seen for only Christian counseling (Hook & Worthington, 2009). Although the divorce rate is no longer increasing, Williams (2007), pointed out that 43% of first marriages end in divorce or separation within fifteen years. The elevated divorce rate has focused attention on the need to better prepare couples for building and sustaining a healthy marriage (Williams, 2007). To meet this need, Williams contended that a variety of approaches are developed in the premarital counseling field over the last few years (2007). Therefore, it is imperative that premarital counselors and education programs implement adequate premarital counseling for couples to receive optimal results and achieve the goal of marital satisfaction.

Goals and purpose of premarital counseling. The primary goals and purpose of premarital counseling are to decrease the divorce rate, maintain a healthy marriage, and increase the marital satisfaction rate among married couples. Premarital counseling also teaches couples effective strategies on how to discuss and resolve conflict in a healthy manner. Couples that attend premarital counseling may also find that premarital counseling can help them better understand their expectations about marriage. Premarital counseling allows the couple to address any significant differences in a safe and neutral environment.

McGrath (2012), contended that premarital counseling was at its best when talents, personalities, and gifting are examined. Although some divorces are undoubtedly necessary, Green and Miller (2013), pointed out that approximately one-third of marriages that dissolve are usually "average to good marriages. They continued and stated that many marriages can be

saved if the proper tools such as premarital and couples counseling were in place to deal with marital stressors (Green & Miller, 2013). The goal of premarital counseling is to enhance long-term relationship quality and stability of marriages, (Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008), and the counseling should have the proper tools in place to achieve this goal.

Marital therapy is found to be one of the most widely researched methods for alleviating couple's distress and its associated consequences (Williams, 2007). However, there are several challenges associated with effective marital therapy because there are many distressed couples who do not attend premarital counseling or seek therapy (Hook et al., 2011). Consequently, between 80% and 90% of couples who are going through a divorce, usually, have not consulted with a mental health professional and do not seek professional help for a variety of reasons. Many couples have reported they choose not to attend because they think therapy will not work, the cost of is too expensive, too much of their time to invest, and the social stigma associated with psychotherapy (Hook et al., 2011).

Premarital Counseling Positive Impact

According to Mutter, Ande, and Hugo (2010), couples who received the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) from their religious community reported a decrease in their negative interactions with their spouse and an increase in positive interactions compared to couples who received PREP from university clinicians. Despite the lack of training that pastors and clergy receive, they frequently provide front-line care in cases of domestic violence, depression, and suicide, and they receive the same approval ratings as psychologists and psychiatrists (Marks, 2007). Couples who participated in the study of Mutter et al. (2010), sought counsel from more than one source, but the majority received premarital counseling from a pastor and reported positive results.

Stanley (2010), reported that one of the best premarital predictors of a husband's marital sexual satisfaction is their spouses' self-esteem, open communication, and relationship stability. The best predictors of wives' marital sexual satisfaction were their self-esteem, open communication, and their husband's empathic communication. The second-best predictor of husbands' marital sexual satisfaction is the open communication of their spouse which is consistent with the (PREP), can lower their risks for subsequent marital distress or termination (Larson, Anderson, Holman, & Niemann, 1998).

After couples participate in the PREP program, they exhibited positive gains in their knowledge about being married, felt more confident in their relationship, and felt more satisfied with their relationship (Futris, Barton, Aholou, & Seponski, 2011). The results showed no differences between participants who completed a series of conjoint sessions rather than a one-day group workshop (Futris et al., 2011). The robustness of premarital counseling and education suggest group workshops can have similar effects on couples' marital satisfaction as more prevalent conjoint sessions (Futris et al., 2011).

Therefore, one can infer that premarital relationship enrichment programs and counseling can have a positive effect on couples' relationship satisfaction. Premarital relationship development programs include preventive therapy in mental health organizations (Hook et al., 2011; Murray & Murray, 2004). Some states have recognized the positive benefits premarital counseling have on couples' marriages. The states offer couples incentives such as a reduced rate of cost for their marriage license if they attend a marriage preparation education program.

Negative Impact

Perry (2015), contended that a couple's religious influence does not directly predict their relationship satisfaction. It is well documented and noted that marriage is a significant concern to pastoral care because of its centrality and contribution to the life of the congregation (Plumb, 2011); consequently, pastoral counseling for marital and other couple problems can take up a substantial amount of counseling time for pastoral counselors (Hook & Worthington, 2009). If there were mandates placed on premarital counseling, it could have many adverse outcomes and could not result in true marital satisfaction. Couples who voluntarily participated in premarital counseling were more satisfied with their premarital experience than couples who participated involuntarily (Schumm et al., 2010). It is believed that if couples are required to have premarital counseling as a religious institutional requirement may be counterproductive to the couple's marital satisfaction (Schumm et al., 2010).

Although many couples attend church for spiritual growth, Perry (2015), found that a couple's religion influence does not impact their behavior negatively or positively in their marriage. Fawcett, Hawkins, Blanchard, and Carroll (2010), also found that premarital education programs do not necessarily improve relationship quality and marital satisfaction. They also contended that the overall effect of premarital education programs on relationship quality/satisfaction had a small and nonsignificant impact on the couple's relationship and marital satisfaction. According to Cobb and Sullivan (2015), wives that participated in relationship education reported having experienced a decline in marital satisfaction as opposed to wives who did not participate. Furthermore, the more hours of relationship education that couples received, the less their marital satisfaction declined over the years (Fawcett et al., 2010). According to Cobb and Sullivan (2015), a couple's participation in a community-based relationship education program is not guaranteed to prevent a decline in marital satisfaction for

newlywed couples. However, a possible explanation for the results is contributed to the quality of relationship education the couples received. (Cobb & Sullivan, 2015). Couples that receive mediocre premarital services report no benefits in their marital satisfaction (Cobb & Sullivan, 2015).

Types of Premarital Counseling

There are many types of premarital counseling programs that couples benefit from before getting married (Davis, 2015). Although there are several types and approaches to premarital counseling, most of them have a specific focus that helps couples identify areas that are likely to cause conflict during their marriage. The topics that are discussed during premarital counseling are finances, parenting, and family dynamics. According to APA (2017), couples who had participated in some premarital counseling program were 31% less likely to divorce. Couples have reported that they and continue to benefit from their premarital counseling even more after they are married (Shahhosseini et al., 2014). The next sections will focus on three types of premarital counseling which is secular, hope-focused, and faith-based.

Secular premarital counseling. There are many similarities as well as differences of the two empirically based marital enrichment programs known as the PREP and Couple Communication (CC; Jacobi, 2017), because both are known to be traditional, non-faith-based or secular forms of counseling. It is essential to know the most previous research on ethics training has mostly focused on secular training sites rather than those that integrate religious faith and clinical training (Schneller, Swenson III, & Sanders, 2010).

CC is the most researched, relationship education program available (Jakubowski, Milne, Brunner, & Miller, 2004). To date, more than 700,000 couples around the world have

participated in Couple Communication, and the program is translated into seven different languages. According to Jakubowski et al. (2004), the curriculum has yielded outstanding results in both married and unmarried populations because it teaches participants to:

- Be better communicators
- Improve talking and listening skills
- Seek collaborative conflict resolution and manage anger
- Build satisfying relationships with family, friends, and coworkers

CC coursework is comprised of two primary components. The first component of CC is the foundational communications course for couples. The second component is the CC II which builds upon the skills that are taught in the first course. There is also a separate individualized component of the programming called Core Communication, which focuses on other types of relationships.

In each course, the participants learn eleven efficient and highly effective talking and listening skills for better decision-making, conflict resolution, and anger management. These interpersonal skills are essential to help build satisfying and fulfilling relationships in a marriage which in turn increases marital satisfaction among married couples. The PREP approach is also a scientifically-based and empirically-tested method of teaching relationship education. The PREP approach is based on over 30 years of research in the field of relationship health, with a lot of the research conducted at the University of Denver that is sponsored by the National Institutes of Health (Jakubowski et al., 2004). The quality of research guarantees that the PREP's training and workshops outcomes are with a seal of integrity that can be trusted.

The PREP for Strong Bonds program is an adaptation of the general PREP* program. The program is delivered in a flexible format and uses PowerPoint presentations, Calming Skills Relaxation audio CD, lecture, and corresponding activities to reinforce topics broached and discussed. The activities are interactive, and couples are encouraged to apply their newly acquired skills. Curriculum topics include the following:

- Use communication skills, which includes respectful talking and listening;
- Work as a team, which discusses nurturing and being supportive;
- Learn stress management;
- Manage expectations and plan;
- Consider and assess the effect of past experiences on the future;
- Strengthen commitment to enhancing long-term satisfaction;
- Address issues of deployment and re-integration as a team; and
- Establish guidelines for holding productive, respectful conversations.

Hope-focused counseling approach. The Hope-Focused Counseling Approach (HFCA) was developed by Worthington (2007), as a brief 5-12-week intervention with couples that focuses on forgiveness and biblical principles of Christlike love. This approach allows couples to understand the effects of marriage and relationship education (MRE) studies. The HFCA quality of relationship component effects is ranged from .24 to .36. The HFCA communication skills components are between 36% and 54% effective in helping couples to become better communicators (Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008). HFCA couple enrichment is evaluated to be one of four empirically supported approaches to marriage enrichment in the

United States (Worthington Jr., Ripley, Hook, Miller, & Crawford, 2007). The HFCA includes couple therapy and couple enrichment (Worthington Jr. et al., 2007). In the HFCA, therapist aim to help the couples build hope on many different levels. Several approaches that help couples during marriage are educational and focuses on building communication skills (Worthington Jr. et al., 2007). HFCA teach couples problem-solving skills and preventive skill-building qualities. They are beneficial to couples in maintaining a healthy and positive marriage (Worthington Jr. et al., 2007). There are other empirically supported approaches to couples' enrichment that use the same skill-building models as the HCFA model. Ripley & Worthington Jr. (1998), reported that the HFCA approach incorporates the growing research on beneficial and destructive processes in marriage relies on Christian and biblical roots that is also used with non-Christian couples, couples that struggle to find their beliefs, and those of other religions. At the end of their treatment, Ripley & Worthington Jr (1998), contended that couples appeared to understand that they were a team and if one of them wins or loses then they both will win or lose.

Faith-based premarital counseling. Clergy and lay leaders are on the front lines of service delivery in faith-based premarital counseling to couples who are contemplating marriage (Bruhn & Hill, 2004). The rise of faith-based counseling practice is because of the expectations of the emergent educated classes and rising levels of professionalization in pursuing strategies for making relationships successful and lasting (van Dijk, 2013). Christian psychotherapy was institutionalized in the 1940s (Bondi, 2013). Although counseling is viewed as a paradigm of change, according to van Dijk (2013), it is crucial to understand how premarital counseling was adopted and incorporated in a specific socio-religious context. Jacobi (2017), contended that Christian therapist should also consider two spiritually-based marital enrichment programs

known as Couples' Temperament Workshop and Heirs. Therapists are more successful when they consider an eclectic approach versus a rigid one "size fits all" approach.

The Christian PREP program is the pilot ship of PREP, Inc. and represents the core PREP approach to relationship education with a Christian foundation. The program has based its research into the building blocks of satisfying, successful, and long-term marriages based on Christian principals. When a couple has higher levels of religious values and attendance, it has a positive effect on the couple's relationship and their commitment to their spouse and marriage (Allgood, Harris, Skogrand, & Lee, 2008).

Incorporating religion and spirituality can either help or hinder the healing process of the clients (Plumb, 2011). Counselors that use religious and spiritual beliefs as a part of their practice understand that it is beneficial for improving and maintaining good mental and physical health to their clients (Plumb, 2011). According to Plumb (2011), the benefits may include (a) greater strength in coping and decision-making, (b) enhanced social support, and (c) personal coherence or wholeness. Plumb (2011), also contends that incorporating firm religious beliefs that are on sin and guilt may not help patients with mental illness such as depression, delusions, and hallucinations.

Promoting faith during a marriage crisis can be a daunting task for the counselor or therapist because usually at the time when couples decide to embrace counseling, they have typically already lost all faith. A person's faith can be very subjective and consist of multiple levels. When a couple has faith in God through Jesus, it allows them to activate, empower, and guide intervention into their marriage which allows Jesus to make the necessary changes that they could not do with their effort (Worthington Jr. et al., 2007). However, Worthington Jr. et al. (2007), noted that faith also includes faith in their partner's willingness to restore their

relationship. Couples that attend therapy have usually lost their faith. When a couple loses their faith in each other, they tend to place their faith in the counselor and in their ability to improve their relationship by relying on the counselor to help restore their faith to improve their marriage (Worthington Jr. et al., 2007). Mutter, Ande, and Hugo (2010), contended that the therapist should tailor the use of prayer in ways that are acceptable to their clients because clients may view prayer for spiritual benefits rather than psychological benefits.

DiBlasio (2010), found that couples who decide to love and forgive their spouses like Jesus are examples of the beautiful redemptive work of God's Spirit. Husbands and wives that display a Christ-like love and forgiveness in their marriage satisfy God's divine purposes (DiBlasio, 2010), which results in increased intimacy between themselves and increased intimacy with Christ.

Psychotherapy often addresses the client's ultimate issues and concerns (McMinn, Staley, Webb, & Seegobin, 2010); however, there are times some potential psychotherapy clients ask about Christian services. Fortunately, in recent years the APA has been a great source to provide professional psychologists information that will help them become more aware and competent in religious and spiritual counseling issues (2017).

Consequently, the effectiveness of CPC and biblical counseling does not have a plethora of research; therefore, ethical issues of efficacy, competency, and welfare of the client must be considered when clinicians, psychologists, or therapist decide to refer to a biblical or Christian counselor (McMinn et al., 2010). According to McMinn et al. (2010), 80% of Americans report their religion to be Christianity. If a counselor refers a client to a biblical or Christian counselor, it is appropriate to present the client with information about psychotherapy and then allow the client to choose their desired approach (McMinn et al., 2010). According to

Garzon & Tilley (2009), with the current data and research, they argue that researchers cannot say definitively that Christian counseling works or that it is a better form than traditional counseling; however, more randomized efficacy and effectiveness studies are needed to make a clear assessment of the effectiveness of Christian counseling.

Marital Satisfaction

Marital satisfaction is typically assessed using self-report surveys which couples answer a variety of questions about different facets of their marriage. According to Davis (2015), marital satisfaction is a subjective evaluation of a couple's experience in their marriage. Each person can only rate the evaluation of marital satisfaction in response to the question "How satisfied are you?" Anyone else other than the couple cannot determine a couple's level of their satisfaction. Marital satisfaction is not how well the relationship is functioning but is merely a subjective experience and opinion how a couple views their marriage at the time they assess their marriage. According to Blanchard, Hawkins, Baldwin, and Fawcett (2009), they contended that couples who attend a Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE) help couples assess their marital satisfaction higher after they complete the program. MRE programs also have long-term benefits that help couples improve their communication skills. MRE pre-assessments and post-assessment measures the impact MRE had on the couple's perception of their marital satisfaction (Blanchard et al., 2009). Also, observational assessments are shown to produce more substantial effects than self-report assessments, although interpreting the meaning of this difference can be difficult (Blanchard et al., 2009).

Mental and physical health benefits. According to Rosowsky, King, Coolidge, Rhoades, and Segal (2012), married men and women are happier, healthier, and less stressed than those who are not married. Adults who are divorced usually experience mental and physical

health issues than those who remain married (Stanley, Wake, & Gallagher, 2000). Besides, children who experience high levels of conflict between their parents tend to suffer in their adolescent stage and may lack social adjustment (Schumm et al., 2010). Couples that attend premarital counseling classes as a group is less likely to be depressed, irritable, and exhibit fewer anger problems during their session (Duncan, Larson, & McAllister, 2014). Couples that attend premarital counseling in a one-on-one setting exhibit higher anxiety and depression during their sessions (Duncan et al., 2014). Couples who experience physical or mental health should address them before getting married (Stanley, Wake, & Gallagher, 2000). According to Stanley, Wake, and Gallagher (2000), married couples who remain in unsatisfying or conflicted relationships put themselves at risk for compromised physical and mental well-being.

Financial stability. Farley (2011), noted that married couples that end in divorce cost the UK economy over 37 billion dollars a year. Farley (2011), suggested if there was an investment of just 10 million into "couple relationship education" or premarital counseling programs, it could reduce the divorce rate significantly. Therefore, an effective premarital counseling approach is essential to maintaining an economy that is thriving because unnecessary divorces also include an increased risk of poverty among women and children (Farley, 2011). Poverty can also result in behavioral and emotional problems for children in school and at home (Green & Miller, 2013). A couple that has financial stability reports to have good marital quality and satisfaction (Britt & Huston, 2012).

According to Halley, Durband, Bailey, and Gustafson (2011), it is crucial that couples manage their finances successfully within their marriage because this too can either strengthen their marriage and relationship or be detrimental to their marital satisfaction. They also contend that financial crises along with poor communication about financial issues can be devastating to

a marriage. Britt and Huston (2012), suggested that money arguments are essential indicators of relationship satisfaction in marriage. Although money is the key indicator, it does not predict the divorce rate or the relationship outcome (Britt & Huston, 2012).

Premarital Counseling Topics

Research shows that the earlier a couple gets premarital counseling in their relationship, the more pain, agony they can avoid (Davis, 2015). Early premarital counseling exposure also helps prevent the formation of bad relationship habits (Schmidt, Luquet, & Gehlert, 2016). The guidance from a trained relationship therapist teaches couples an effective way to communicate better, resolve conflicts, and deepen intimacy (Schmidt, Luquet, & Gehlert, 2016). Individuals in a relationship enter a marriage with some different expectations of what life is supposed to look like as a married couple (David, & Stafford, 2015). Too often their expectations only come to light in the face of disappointment when things do not turn out the way they envisioned. It is essential for couples to discuss their expectations as it relates to their future lifestyle and how it compares with their fiancé's vision. Topics such as intimacy, communication, family, and finances are all essential topics that couples can freely discuss during premarital counseling (Schmidt, Luquet, & Gehlert, 2016).

Intimacy. Intimacy was developed through the perception of a partner's responsiveness which leads to the partner feeling validated, cared for, and understanding resulting in a mutual feeling of intimacy (Hawkins II, 2016). Additionally, intimacy is related to the individual psychological health of each partner, and the couple's relationship satisfaction (Mitchell, Castellani, Herrington, Joseph, Doss & Snyder, 2008). While sexual satisfaction has been defined as both "an effective response arising from one's subjective evaluation of the positive and negative dimensions associated with one's sexual relationship" and "the degree to which an

individual is satisfied or happy with the sexual aspect of his or her relationship" (Delamater, Hyde & Fong, 2008, p. 441). Research also shows that a satisfying relationship provides a context for more satisfying sexual encounters (Theiss, 2011). Previous studies have been unable to prove differences in sexual satisfaction between men and women (Holmberg & Blair, 2009; Theiss, 2011; Birnie-Porter & Lydon 2013); however, men's physical and emotional satisfaction with their sex lives were slightly higher in comparison to women (Holmberg & Blair, 2009). According to Birnie-Porter and Lydon (2013), the most common motivation for engaging in sexual activity is to seek intimacy and emotional closeness. This tenet is what has led several researchers to explore the factors that contribute to increased sexual experiences (Holmberg & Blair, 2009; Theiss, 2011; Birnie-Porter & Lydon 2013). Schmiedeberg (2016), points out that the quality of the relationship that is measured by negative communication styles and intimacy in couple communication plays a significant role in sexual satisfaction.

Intimacy is an integral part of keeping the marital love vibrant and healthy for a newly married couple (Hawkins II, 2016). Spousal intimacy is physical, emotional, experiential, intellectual, and spiritual closeness that is mutually satisfying to the husband and wife. Intimacy is considered a place where two souls meet after marriage. It means that spouses collectively express and experience the love, care, and affection of one another. Married couples should express genuine warmth, closeness, and a connection between each other (Hawkins II, 2016). Intimacy is more than sex; according to Alea and Vick (2010), sexual restraint before marriage yields better relationship outcomes. Intimacy with God through His Son Jesus is the most rewarding and life-changing thing a person will ever experience (Kusner, Mahoney, Pargament, & DeMaris, 2014). Married couples that experience the joy that comes from having an intimate relationship with God first will ultimately find intimacy with each other (Kusner et al., 2014).

Intimacy shows in many different forms in a marriage or relationship. Couples that attend CPC are instructed as Christians to honor God as they "prefer" one another which is to "show deference to" one another (Romans 12:10.). During CPC engaged couples are encouraged to save their sexual affections as a gift for only their future marriage partner. When a couple decides to forgive like Jesus, they display the redemptive work of God's Spirit of loving their souls (DiBlasio, 2010). This Christ-like love and forgiveness conciliate God's divine purpose for marriages and brings an increased intimacy between the husband and wife which ultimately bring an increase of intimacy with Christ (DiBlasio, 2010).

Communication. Couples who are considering marriage must exhibit effective communication skills to build a vibrant and healthy marriage (Futris et al., 2011). Effective communication connects the individual through their shared thoughts, feelings, and experiences through their verbal and nonverbal cues. Communication is effective when interactions between a couple are open and honest, verbally and nonverbally. Couples who verbally express what they think and feel without any ambiguity, typically resolve conflicts sooner and in a healthy manner (Futris et al., 2011). During premarital counseling, couples are encouraged to listen to one another and ensure that each person is heard, understood, and respected by each other. Effective communication also requires each person in a relationship to have good intentions when they are communicating to resolve conflict or to convey a message (Nicholson, 2014). Good intentions during communication are expressed when couples intend to understand, connect, encourage, empower, or explain. Bad intentions in communication are expressed when one intends to control, manipulate, win an argument, or insult. When a couple develops strong communication skills, it can be the cornerstone of their marriage (Nicholson, 2014). Communication is far more than verbally speaking. Verbal communication, nonverbal

communication, and physical acts are the three primary forms of communication. Couples that express love, trust, and honesty towards each other gives their marriage life and keeps it vibrant and healthy (Davis, 2015). The display of love will showcase the couple's trust and build a strong foundation in the marriage that will withstand the test of time (Nicholson, 2014). If a couple can communicate how much their spouse means to them, this will help catapult a marriage from good to great (Hahlweg & Richter, 2010).

Verbal communication during premarital counseling is a form of communication where a couple expresses how they feel about each other and things that are important to them through the words they speak, which is essential to the start of a healthy marriage. Couples learn during premarital counseling that is love never expressed verbally could negatively impact the relationship because of their spouse (Schmidt, Luquet, & Gehlert, 2016). The reason is that a spouse may perceive their interpretation of how their spouse feel and could never understand how deeply they are loved (Schmidt, Luquet, & Gehlert, 2016). Couples that openly address tension within the relationship during premarital counseling class has a more stable over the first year of marriage (Sullivan, Pasch, Johnson, & Bradbury, 2010).

Nonverbal communication is a form of communication that conveys a message just like verbal communication (Schmidt et al., 2016). Couples in a relationship tend to self-consciously say things to each other that is met with an unpleasant facial expression(Schmidt et al., 2016). When this happens, typically the individual does not have to say a word because they tell the story with their facial expression(Schmidt et al., 2016). However, facial expressions are not the only form of nonverbal communication (Schmidt et al., 2016). Couples are informed during premarital counseling that they should be aware of how their body language is communicating with each other during their relationship as husband and wife (Schmidt et al., 2016). If an

individual is hunched over and closed off while their spouse is trying to have a meaningful conversation, this will cause the one who is trying to communicate to feel disregarded and disrespected subconsciously. When a person feels disrespected, they may attempt to stonewall or remain silent for an extended amount of time which becomes their way of communicating. According to Gottman and Silver (2007), stonewalling is the fourth horseman of the apocalypse. Gottman and Silver (2007), pointed out that stonewalling happens while one partner is talking, and the other partner is the "stone-waller" which mean he or she ignores or removes them self by turning into a stone wall.

Physical acts are another form of non-verbal communication that is considered to have a positive impact on a couple's marriages if it is done in conjunction with verbal communication. Couples learn during premarital counseling that physical acts are done by making dinner, going to the grocery store, or taking out the garbage without the demand of their spouse. Physical acts are not things that individuals say, but they are things that a person does to show their spouse that they care about them. When a spouse does these small and thoughtful acts, they are communicating their love without verbally saying anything at all.

Conflict Resolution. When couples attend premarital counseling, couples learn that conflict in marriages are inevitable and most time conflict is healthy at times if it is adequately resolved (Savage, 2015). Couples also learn during premarital counseling on how to manage their conflict because it will help their marriage thrive (Davis, 2015). Conflict resolution is managed well when there is an overall goal of the married couple to resolve the conflicts and solve problems in a way that is mutually respectful and satisfying for both individuals in the (Savage, 2015). If the married couple cannot effectively manage conflict, it will cause a strain

on their relationship that eventually causes the marriage to deteriorate over time as the sore of the unresolved conflict continue to go unhealed (Davis, 2015).

The counselor advises couples during premarital counseling that they must be committed to their marriage and have a long-term perspective or view of the relationship and a willingness to make sacrifices (Savage, 2015). Counselors also advise couples in premarital counseling that compromise, and change consist of changes in their behaviors for the long-term stability of the relationship (Davis, 2015). Premarital counselors ensure that couples understand the magnitude of their commitments by stressing that they have decided to stay in a committed marriage, in sickness, and in health, and trust that their spouse will be just as committed to the marriage (Schmidt et al., 2016).

Parenting. Although there is no one universal right way to parent and raise children, premarital counselors help married couples understand what their parenting styles are. If married couples have different parenting styles, premarital counselors ensure that the parenting styles of each parent are not in direct conflict with each other's parenting style. According to Balswick (2014), there are four types of socio-emotional types of parenting styles. The four types of socio-emotional parenting styles are known as neglectful, permissive, authoritarian, and authoritative (Balswick, 2014). Although people often swiftly judge the neglectful style of parenting, the reality is that most homes consist of single-parent working moms that prevents them from being more hands-on which could be considered a neglectful parenting style (Balswick, 2014). Couples during premarital counseling show that their parenting style could be in the form of any of these four types. Couples typically understand that the permissive style of parenting is known as parents that have a high level of support but a low level of control. The authoritarian style of parenting is more like a dictatorship because parents typically have a high

level of control and low-level support that allow children to have no bonding or an intimate relationship with them as their parents (Balswick, 2014). Most premarital counselors consider the ideal style of parenting is the authoritative style. The authoritative style of parenting is when parents have a high level of support and control, allowing their children to bond with them and make significant decisions on their own (Balswick, 2014).

According to the Ephesians 6:1-3, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother"—which is the first commandment with a promise— so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth (New International Version).” Couples are taught during premarital counseling that their parenting style should reflect Christ empower their children which will allow them to learn, grow, and become all that God intended for them to be in his perfect plan (Turansky & Miller, 2013). According to Balswick (2014):

Parents who empower their children to help them become competent and capable people who will, in turn, empower others. Empowering parents are actively and intentionally engaged in various pursuits—telling, teaching, modeling, delegating—that equip their children to become confident individuals able to relate to others. Parents who empower help their children recognize their inner strengths and potentials and find ways to enhance these qualities (p. 118-119).

According to Balswick (2014), the topic of parenting styles is one of the most challenging topics that most couples rarely address before premarital counseling. Married couples who disagree with each other about their parenting-styles, could create conflict to the parent-child relationship and their relationship as a married couple (Fentz, & Trillingsgaard, 2017). Couples learn during premarital counseling that when their parenting styles are in sync,

they not only build a healthy relationship with their children but also result in great parenting when conflict arises (Balswick, 2014).

Finances. A couple's financial state and view on budgeting is an essential topic during premarital counseling. Money can cause much stress in a family, and a study shows that finances are one of the leading causes of divorce (Dobson, 2012). The financial session portion with the premarital counselor typically cover topics such as financial goals, debt, and setting a joint budget among other topics commonly resulting in financial stress and tension in the marriage. It is not uncommon that tension and feelings develop when couples discuss finances during their premarital counseling session. The average couple does not know what to expect out of a marriage, especially when it comes to how they manage their finances as a married couple.

Premarital financial counseling help couples understand, organize, and resolve and current financial issues before getting married (Tambling & Glebova, 2013). Finances are an essential component and are considered important in strengthening marital bonds and stability. Many clergies are including financial counseling in their premarital counseling sessions. According to Wilmoth (2015), married couples who consulted their faith leader about marital issues, 60% claimed money management difficulties was the root cause of their problems. During the financial part of premarital counseling, couples are often surprised by how different their views about finances are (Tambling & Glebova, 2013). Couples who are considering marriage should equally value their financial stability; otherwise, this could cause a strain in their marriage.

Premarital counselors allow couples to understand they will not necessarily have to agree on everything. They also understand which one of them is better at certain aspects of the

relationship than the other and build on each other's strength. Couples recognize during premarital counseling that they are entering a financial partnership. It is essential for couples also to understand that building their financial future together and understanding short-and long-term goals before getting married is a wise move (Tambling & Glebova, 2013).

Roles in Marriage. McGoldrick, Carter, and Garcia-Preto (2016), stated that women feel they are expected to change their way of living more than their spouse once they are married. They continued by contending that women are more defenseless against life cycle stresses, due to their more emotional involvement in the lives of everyone around them (McGoldrick, Carter, and Garcia-Preto (2016). Currently, women take on many responsibilities and work outside the home which leaves them feeling stressed; therefore, it puts a strain on a marriage, and unpredictable stressors like divorce, financial crises, and illness can occur (McGoldrick, Carter, & Garcia-Preto, 2016). Although women and men have specific roles in the marriage, stable marriage is one that is better able to support and nurture all the members of the family.

According to McGoldrick, Carter, and Garcia-Preto (2016), it is vital for family therapist and counselors to understand the nature of men and how they relate to the family cycle. It is important also to help men understand and learn how to love and acknowledge all that they are, to see the quality in defenselessness, and the energy of association (McGoldrick, Carter, and Garcia-Preto (2016). McGoldrick, Carter, and Garcia-Preto (2016), espoused that family therapists should inform men that they have more to gain than to lose by exhibiting more dangerous behavior. When men develop a defenseless type of behavior toward their spouse, it helps them get more in tune with their emotional side which allows them to be sensitive to their wife's emotional needs (McGoldrick, Carter, & Garcia-Preto, 2016).

Divorce and Remarriage. According to Sweeney (2010), 69% of women remarry after a divorce, and 78% of men remarry after a divorce. Premarital counselors and family therapist understand that divorce has a significant impact on the entire family. However, it is not the responsibility of the therapist to convince the couples to stay in the marriage. Compared to other countries, currently the United States has the highest divorce rate, and it continues to rise each year (Sweeney, 2010). According to Balswick (2014), since the year 1980, there have been approximately 1.2 million divorces each year. When couples are considering divorce, they are typically conflicted and have ambiguous feelings towards divorce (Balswick, 2014). Couples generally wonder if divorce is the appropriate option to make for the sake of the children. Married couples typically do not consider the immense consequences, and effect divorce has on them as well as other family members (Sweeney, 2010). Couples will legitimize many reasons to end the marriage, while not considering the undeniable pain it could cause on others in the family (Balswick, 2014).

According to Balswick (2014), there are various elements at the socio-cultural level that can add to a culture of separation and a divorce-prone society. Balswick (2014), also contended that other factors such as the standardization of separation and the liberation of women are a contributing factor to the incline of the divorce rate. In addition to relationship problems, many other different elements add to a culture of separation and divorce and unrestricted responsibility of loyalty to the marriage (Balswick, 2014). McGoldrick, Carter, and Garcia-Preto (2016), expounded on similar contributing factors as Balswick (2014), they noted how different the lack of conflict resolution could impact the divorce rate. The also pointed out ways clinicians can viably utilize models of individual or family interventions to help families effectively use conflict resolution strategies. Clinicians, marriage counselors, and family therapist should

balance these negative issues by highlighting the positive elements that contribute to healthy prosperous single-parent households (Balswick, 2014). Köstenberger (2010), pointed out that divorce is inevitable because of our fallen sin-tainted world.

Summary

Premarital counseling is a specialized type of therapy usually provided by marriage and family therapists. There are multiple therapeutic strategies that therapist use during their counseling sessions. The premarital counseling sessions are designed to offer a benefit to all couples who are considering a long-term commitment such as marriage. The therapist goal of premarital counseling is to identify and address any potential areas of conflict in the couple's relationship before marriage. This proactive approach allows the couples to discuss and work out any differences of opinions before those issues become serious concerns. Based on the current literature, there are a plethora of premarital counseling programs that offer significant benefits to couples who are preparing for marriage. However, there is limited research on CPC and how it impacts couples. This study seeks to describe the impact CPC have on couple's marital stability and spiritual growth, and the results could inform all who provide premarital counseling services.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The previous chapters detailed the purpose of this phenomenological research as it relates to Christian premarital counseling (CPC) and how it impacts spiritual growth and marital stability. After conducting personal interviews, it allowed the researcher to carefully examine the impact CPC has on the couple's spiritual growth and marital stability. It is the hope that this research will provide marriage counselors, therapist, pastors, lay-leaders, and other premarital professionals additional information that will enhance their Christian premarital programs and counseling sessions.

Researchers suggested that the qualitative approach to research is a more effective and efficient method when analyzing a person's spirituality and or spiritual growth (Goodman & Dollahite, 2006). They also pointed out that a person's spiritual experience can be subjective; therefore, it requires personal interviews to gather detailed real-life experiences from the one that experienced the spiritual phenomenon (Goodman & Dollahite, 2006). The qualitative method also provided a rich, in-depth view of the couples' marital stability and spiritual growth. There is limited research on CPC and its effects on couples' spiritual growth and marital stability.

This chapter outlines all the components used to complete this phenomenological study. The research process is defined in detail explaining the selection of the participants, the data collection, the interview process, interview guides, data recording, and how the data was analyzed. The procedures that are used to maintain the authenticity and trustworthiness of the research study are described.

In this study, ten couples, (six couples - six husbands separately, six wives separately, and four couples with their spouses present) were interviewed to examine their spiritual growth and marital stability after they received CPC that incorporated the Prepare/Enrich curriculum. A qualitative design was used which allowed the researcher to interpret and gather rich data based on each couple's real-life experiences (Harris, 2015), they believed they received from attending CPC.

Design

This qualitative study is designed using the hermeneutic phenomenological approach because it allowed the researcher greater thoroughness and a deeper understanding of a paradigm's epistemological assumptions (Armour, Rivaux, & Bell, 2009). The purpose of this methodology is to go beyond describing participants' stories to generate a theory or common themes about the basic social processes of the shared phenomenon of their experiences with their CPC experience (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). The qualitative study guided by a phenomenological design method enabled the researcher to gather and analyze any marital themes and spiritual processes that emerge within the shared experiences of the ten couples who attended and participated in a certified Prepare/Enrich CPC. The phenomenological method is a specific phenomenon of several individuals' lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). A couple's experience is unique for each couple; therefore, a phenomenological design using a narrative methodology will be the most compatible for the current study. The couple interview approach allows couples to interact around a question and create meaning or supplement one another's answering (Beitin, 2008). Participants were selected based on their experience of the phenomenon in which they acted as co-researchers to this study (Beitin, 2008).

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a qualitative research method that is utilized to depict how people encounter a specific phenomenon. A phenomenological study endeavors to set aside predispositions and biased assumptions about human encounters, sentiments, and reactions to a specific circumstance. The researcher gathered narratives from participants who have experienced the phenomenon and develop a representation of the couples using themes and commonalities in the narratives from the couple's interview (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenology studies investigates the "lived experiences" beliefs, opinions, feelings, and the phenomenologist's interest are in the essences of each couple's cognitive processes (Percy, Kostere, & Kostere, 2015).

Researchers using the phenomenological approach should be aware of the problems they may encounter. De Felice and Janesick (2015), cautioned researchers who use the phenomenological approach and gather data from traditions heavily rooted in the work of Moustakas (1994), and Giorgi (2009), often encounter a couple of challenging points during the collection and the analysis of the text. Researchers using the phenomenological approach should understand using specific techniques to enhance the study's rigor in a qualitative study can be problematic (De Felice & Janesick, 2015). An example of a specific technique is known as respondents screening which helps eliminate any possible researcher bias. The phenomenological researcher understands that it may be complicated to determine the authenticity of the respondent's text due to biases, agendas, social constraints, and a desire to see themselves in a positive light (De Felice & Janesick, 2015). The interviewer/researcher must use their knowledge and expertise to analyze and distinguish between the erroneous text and accurate authentic text to compose rich valid data.

Religion Phenomenologist

To study a couple's religious aspects using the phenomenological approach, the phenomenologist's must describe and interpret the couple's perspective of the individual, or the experience that the individuals regard as real or salvific (Blum, 2012). Phenomenologists studying the religious aspects of a couple's relationships are interested in the life experience of the individual. Blum (2012), described the phenomenologist as the one who is "concerned with what appears in consciousness" and the ones "immanent experience" (p. 133). It is also important to understand when interviewing couples about their religion that the researcher does not ask whether God exists, or whether scripture represents the divinely revealed will of God but should ask how their CPC experience impacted their religious beliefs regarding this phenomenon (Blum, 2012).

Research Questions

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to determine the impact CPC using Prepare/Enrich has on a couple's marital stability and spiritual growth; therefore, the following central questions were used to analyze the collected data from their interviews:

RQ1: What impact does Christian premarital counseling (CPC) have on a couple's overall marital stability?

RQ2: What impact does Christian premarital counseling (CPC) have on the individual's spiritual growth?

Setting

Christ Way Baptist Church (CWBC) is a pseudonym that was used for the location where most of the interviews were conducted. CWBC was used as a pseudonym to keep the location and the participants anonymous. CWBC is located in the southern sector of Dallas, Texas. The

ethnic group in the southern sector of Dallas, Texas is predominately African American (60%) and approximately 20% Hispanic (Census Bureau, 2017). CWBC provided a quiet and comfortable church office space to conduct the interviews. Creswell (2008), suggests that the interview setting be a quiet and appropriate to conduct an effective interview, but it should also be natural to the participants. The church is in a predominately African-American area; therefore, the CWBC membership is primarily African-American. CWBC membership capacity is approximately two hundred fifty parishioners including children. Although the interviews took place in a predominately African-American area, the participants were recruited from various areas to attract multiple ethnicities. If the participants were not comfortable with the meeting space provided, the researcher allowed them the option to Skype, Facetime, or choose an environment they deem more comfortable and appropriate. Providing multiple interview options, increased the participant's willingness to participate due to their lack of time and availability. Four of the ten couples chose to be interviewed via Skype or Face Time for convenience and time availability. This method produced a larger pool of participants that covered multiple areas in Dallas, Texas.

Participants

This study focused on a specific phenomenon relating to the spiritual growth and marital stability couples experienced when they participated in a CPC session. It was important that each participant was knowledgeable of the phenomenon and open to nature and its meaning (Creswell, 2013). Participants were recruited using a purposeful, convenient, and non-randomized sampling method. The purposeful sampling process involves seeking out participants who have specific experiences and can provide insight into their experience (Creswell, 2013). One recruitment method involved the researcher reaching out to therapists and

churches in the Dallas area to inform them about the purpose of the qualitative study. The researcher asked if they would post flyers in their office or foyer to inform their current or previous clients about the study. Information about the research study was also advertised in the local paper. The researcher offered all couples who participated a \$25 Visa gift card as an appreciation gift for their time and participation. The participants were chosen using purposeful sampling, followed by a snowball sampling technique. A snowball sampling involves asking participants to recommend other participants who meet the qualifications to participate in the interview (Litchman, 2006).

The participants who were recruited for this study, share mutual characteristics that create homogeneity and commonalities within the participant group. One commonality each couple shared was their Prepare/Enrich premarital counseling experience. Creswell (2007), recommended a homogenous sample of five to 25 participants. The theory behind Creswell's (2007), recommendation is that interviewing more than 25 participants could result in the researcher not gaining any new information. A participant's characteristics for this study were having participated in a CPC session where the facilitator used the Prepare/Enrich curriculum. Each couple met the following criteria to be a participant in this study: 1) married only once; 2) married to a member of the opposite sex; 3) have a vivid memory of their CPC sessions; and 4) willing to communicate in-depth about the influence CPC sessions have had on their spiritual beliefs and marriage stability. It was the goal of the researcher to interview twelve couples from a list of respondents; however, the researcher only interviewed ten couples due to lack of response, cancelations, and non-qualifying respondents.

The couples who were chosen were asked to complete the Weiss-Cerreto Relationship Status Inventory (Weiss & Cerreto, 1980), after they signed the consent form before their

interview. The researcher used the Weiss-Cerreto Marital Status Inventory (MSI) for added support to understand the couple's current marital status. The Weiss-Cerreto (MSI) is a brief instrument that was developed by Weiss and Cerreto (1980). The instrument is used to provide clinicians with an indication of a couple's current marital stability. The term marital stability refers to the resiliency of a couple's marriage relationship. The Weiss-Cerreto (MSI) is a conventional method used by a marital therapist to distinguish a spouse's level of distress. It measures severe marital distress in terms that it determines the acts that have been taken towards ending the marriage. The Weiss-Cerreto (MSI) is a 14 true-false questionnaire to determine the accumulation of the steps already taken toward the dissolution of a couple's marriage. The scores on the Weiss-Cerreto (MSI) can range from 0 to 14. The couples who were interviewed in person were administered the Weiss-Cerreto (MSI) using the paper-and-pencil method prior to the start of their interview. The couples who were interviewed via Face Time were asked to complete the Weiss-Cerreto MSI and email back to the researcher prior to their interview. The researcher used the standard scoring method of the Weiss-Cerreto (MSI) to determine the marital stability of each couple. Every true question is given one point. A couple with a score of four or above is considered a representation of severe marital distress and instability. The Weiss-Cerreto (MSI) includes questions involving a couple's marital status which include questions that are related to the couple's discussion about divorce and any recent talk about separation. An example Weiss-Cerreto (MSI) is referenced in Appendix D.

Criteria of Participants

Before the study's interview questions, all participants were asked ten questions related to demographics about themselves, their family, and marital status. If the participant did not meet the qualifications from the demographic questions, the participant was thanked and informed that

they did not meet the qualifications to further participate in the study per the recruitment letter and consent form. The participants' demographic data is displayed in Appendix F. The defined criteria for the participants in the study included:

1. The participant must be at least 18 years of age
2. The participant is in a heterosexual marriage
3. The participant attended a CPC that used the Prepare/Enrich curriculum

Procedures

All students who attend Liberty University and conduct a research study must obtain approval from Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) before starting the study. Therefore, the initial process of this study was to obtain approval from Liberty University's IRB, (see Appendix A). Once the approval letter was received, the recruiting process began. The procedures for this study will be described in detail for replication to be achieved. The given detailed information will also enhance the trustworthiness of this research study. To ensure the researcher included an adequate number of participants, the participants were recruited using a purposeful sampling method. Purposeful sampling involves seeking out participants who have specific experiences who can provide insight into the experience (Creswell, 2013). The researcher contacted therapists and churches in the Dallas area to inform them about the purpose of the qualitative study. The researcher asked the therapist and churches to post flyers in their office or foyer to inform their current or previous clients about the study. Information about the research study was also advertised in the local paper. The researcher offered all couples who participated a \$25 Visa gift card as an appreciation gift for their time and participation. The participants were chosen using purposeful sampling, followed by a snowball sampling technique.

A snowball sampling involves asking participants to recommend other participants who meet the qualifications to participate in the interview (Litchman, 2006).

When potential participants contacted the researcher via phone or email, the researcher ensured that the respondents met the criteria before setting up a date and time to be interviewed. The participants were asked the criteria questions. If the respondent met the research criteria, the researcher obtained a signed consent form before interviewing the participant. Respondents had access to a copy of the consent form using the QR code located at the bottom of the recruitment letter. If the respondents were local or were informed by the snowball sampling technique, they had the option to sign the consent form at the time of the scheduled interview. If the respondents were not local, they were required to sign and email the consent form back to the researcher before participating in the study. The goal was to interview twelve couples from a list of respondents; however, the researcher only interviewed ten couples due to lack of response, cancelations, and non-qualifying respondents.

After the researcher obtained consent from a respondent or the respondent agreed to sign the consent, the researcher scheduled the date and time to interview the participants. It is important to note that the researcher scheduled the interviews as soon as the qualified participants were available to interview. When the researcher obtained consent, each participant was asked to complete a Weiss-Cerreto MSI to give the researcher an idea of the current stability of the marriage. After each participant completed the Weiss-Cerreto MSI, the researcher asked the couple some necessary demographic information. The couples' demographic information is displayed in a table (see Appendix F).

The interviews begin with the couples together by asking them some preliminary demographic questions that allowed the researcher to get a brief biography of each participant.

This process helped the researcher understand the couple's status and their overall background (Creswell, 2008). After the researcher obtained the necessary demographic information from the couples, the researcher then suggested that the next seven questions be answered individually. The researcher suggested this technique to get accurate and authentic answers from each spouse.

According to De Felice and Janesick (2015), couples that are interviewed together will not respond to questions in truth because they do not want to offend their spouse. This type of interviewing technique also allowed couples to provide information about individual behavior not seen in joint interviews (Beitin, 2008). The researcher found this technique beneficial because the participants responded to the questions that were asked and did not ramble off-topic because they were sensitive to the time their spouse had to wait. The waiting spouse was offered refreshments and seated in a comfortable room with a television and reading materials. The researcher interviewed couples separately which allowed for them to be open and honest and not influence the response of their spouse.

It was the goal of the researcher to interview twelve couples individually without their spouse. However, the researcher was able to interview only ten couples because there was a consistent scheduling conflict with the other two couples. Six couples agreed to interview separately without their spouse. The other four couples chose to be interviewed as a couple via FaceTime. Although it was not planned, it allowed the researcher to see if there was a difference in response to the questions when couples were together. The researcher observed that the couples that interviewed together had similar experiences to the CPC as their spouse and their answers to the questions typically validated or "piggy-backed" off of their spouse's answers. Although, the four couples who chose the alternate form of the interview, their experiences of

the CPC experience were similar to the experience of the participants who were interviewed individually.

Each interview started with a warm welcome to ensure that all the participants were comfortable and felt safe in the provided environment (Creswell, 2008). The researcher began recording after the participants were informed that recording was starting. The data that was collected will be the participant's personal experience as it relates to their CPC. Creswell (2009), contended that in phenomenological research, the primary method for data collection is through personal interviews using open-ended questions. The researcher collected the data using a semi-structured, conversational, recorded, and transcribed interview (Nimtz, 2011).

Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes per couple. The wife's interview was approximately 30 minutes without the husband present. The husband's interview was approximately 30 minutes without the wife present. The interview questions were open-ended which allowed the participants to share their full thoughts and not restrict their responses (Creswell, 2008). The researcher used probing questions to follow up on areas of interest or to gather more in-depth information (Creswell, 2008), if the participants responded with a vague or unclear response. The interview questions were used as a guide to engage each participant in response and prompt a discussion on their experience attending CPC. The framework of the interview questions is designed to understand the impact CPC had on their marital stability and spiritual growth.

Researcher's Role

The role of the researcher is an essential element of a phenomenological study. In this qualitative study, as the researcher, I was an active participant and served as the interviewer and

positioned myself in a natural setting with the participants. I was self-aware of the important nature of the information gathered in the study and admitted there were several biases that I conceptualized when the participants responded to the questions (Creswell, 2013; Van Manen, 1990). A phenomenon typically has different meanings to various groups of people involved. However, all of my participating couples stated that their religious affiliation was Christian which is my religious affiliation.

As a licensed professional counselor (LPC) and the wife of a pastor, I have counseled many married couples and couples considering marriage. The couples counseling experience has afforded me the privilege to gain first-hand knowledge of the different issues couples struggle with before and after marriage. With this knowledge, my husband and I have begun to be proactive and help couples address specific topics before they become problems in their marriage. The proactive measures consist of couples retreats and bible studies. One of my motivations for this study is to develop a deeper understanding of what couples need and view beneficial from attending a CPC. I used a phenomenological approach to analyze marital themes from the couples who were interviewed. The information and outcome are beneficial to me and anyone who is looking into developing a CPC session or developing a Christian marriage enrichment program for married couples.

The setting and the research site location is CWBC where my husband has been the pastor there for seventeen years. However, none of our parishioners participated in this study. Most of my participants were recruited from local surrounding churches that conduct CPC classes that use the Prepare/Enrich curriculum. The surrounding churches allowed me the opportunity to advertise my recruitment flyers in their church because they knew me personally

and trusted my intentions and integrity. The churches also had a direct interest in the conclusion of this study because it could be beneficial to them to help improve their current CPC classes.

Data Collection

This qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study used individual interviews, demographic surveys, and the Weiss-Cerreto (MSI) to collect the data. The primary source of data collection was the individual interviews. Six of the ten couples participated in the interview separate from their spouse to answer seven questions about their CPC experience. Four of the ten couples chose to participate in the interview with their spouse via Face Time to answer the seven questions about their CPC experience. The interviews acted as a tool to explore and gather a narrative of information on the study's phenomenon. The researcher preferred to interview married couples individually because the husband and wife tend to be open and honest when speaking about their relationship when their spouse is not present (Litchman, 2006). The researcher used a recording device that was password protected and only assessable to the researcher. The researcher used an audio recording device to transcribe the data accurately.

Researcher's Personal Notes

The researcher also created anecdotal log notes to capture significant observations and behaviors of the participants during their interview. Creswell (2007), contended that the use of a personal journal of the researcher is a type of document that can be used in addition to other forms of data collection methods. The primary source of data collection for this study were individual interviews. After the completion of each interview, the researcher journaled significant thoughts and recorded any related behaviors observed during the interview. The

researcher's notes allowed her to think through the data and helped connect emerging themes that were relevant to answering the research questions.

Interviews

Ethical considerations were considered by the researcher when data was collected during the interviews. The researcher used pseudonyms to protect and maintain the anonymity of all the participants (Creswell, 2013). The participants were provided informed consent before their participation in the research study. The informed consent was approved by the Liberty University's IRB which reviewed all ethical considerations before their approval. The IRB of Liberty University ensured that the research data collection met all the federal confidentiality regulations that protect the participants.

The interview process was a mechanism that allowed the participants to give a narrative that granted them the opportunity to give meaning to their statements or answers to the questions of the researcher. The interaction between the researcher and the interviewee allowed the researcher to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Beitin, 2008). According to Creswell (2007), the interviewer should remain within the scope of the following interview questions when interviewing participants using the phenomenological approach:

The participants were asked two broad questions: What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon? Other open-ended questions may also be asked, but these two, especially, focus attention on gathering data that will lead to a textual description and a structural description of the experiences and ultimately provide an understanding of the shared experiences of the participants (p. 61).

Each interview started with a warm welcome to ensure that all the participants were comfortable and felt safe in the provided environment (Creswell, 2008). The recording began after the participants were informed the recording would start. The data that was collected was the participant's personal experience from attending CPC. Creswell (2009), contended that in phenomenological research, the primary method for data collection is through personal interviews using open-ended questions. The data was collected using a semi-structured, conversational, recorded, transcribed and interviews (Nimtz, 2011).

The researcher asked the demographic questions first to get background information about the couples. Each participant was asked a total of six structured questions along with one unstructured question which allowed each participant a chance to share a personal experience they deemed significant.

Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes per couple or 30 minutes per individual. The wife's interview was approximately 30 minutes without the husband present. The husband's interview was approximately 30 minutes without the wife present. The researcher begins the recorded discussion by asking the participants some preliminary demographics questions that allowed the researcher to get brief demographic background information of each participant. The demographic background gives the researcher the opportunity to further understand the participants status and overall experience (Creswell, 2008), without making any assumptions. The interview questions are open-ended which allowed the participants to share their full thoughts and not restrict their responses (Creswell, 2008). The researcher also used probes to follow up on areas of interest or to gather more in-depth information (Creswell, 2008).

It was important for the researcher that the interview process had a clear direction; therefore, the researcher developed a rapport with each participant to gain trust. When

participants trust the researcher, the researcher will have a greater chance to receive authentic and accurate information from each of the participants (Creswell, 2008). It was important that the interviewer familiarized herself with all the interview questions before the interview. This process helped avoid ambivalent and irrelevant conversations during the interview process. The researcher ensured the interview questions were easy to understand and the flow was fluid (Creswell, 2008).

Interview questions for participants of CPC:

Demographic Information:

1. Your age?
2. Your ethnicity?
3. The number of marriages?
4. Religious affiliation?
5. How long have you been married?
6. In what year did you marry?
7. When did you participate in the Pre-Marital Prepare/Enrich class?
8. Did you have options for Pre-Marital classes?
9. Have you ever been separated formally and/or legally in your marriage?
10. How many children do you have together and/or separate from the marriage?

Interview Questions:

11. Why did you choose to participate in the Pre-Marital Prepare/Enrich class for your marriage preparation and how would you describe your attitude and expectations going into the class?

12. How did your participation in the Pre-Marital Prepare/Enrich class help you prepare for marriage?
13. What skills, tools or resources have you used in your marriage that you gained from the Pre-Marital Prepare/Enrich class?
14. How did your participation in the Pre-Marital Prepare/Enrich class help you to grow spiritually?
15. In what ways has your spirituality strengthened and supported your marriage?
16. How would your marriage be different if you had not participated in the Pre-Marital Prepare/Enrich class?
17. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience in the Pre-Marital Prepare/Enrich class?

Demographic questions one through ten are questions that are intended to be non-threatening and straightforward that are used to get to know the participant and develop a rapport between the researcher and participant (Patton, 2015). It was imperative to start the interview with questions that were not undermining to the members and helped them feel comfortable with the questions that were asked of them. Patton (2015), noted that these questions help evoke meaningful answers that are important and valuable to understand the interviewee's personal background. Demographic questions are fundamentally what the start of the interview is about (Patton, 2015). This essential background data gave the foundation to the accompanying interview questions and were the reason for the seven research questions. These seven demographic questions are standard questions that were asked to all the participants.

Interview questions eleven through sixteen are questions designed to understand the personal experience the participants received when they attended CPC. Interview questions

eleven through sixteen are also intended to understand what a person has experienced, and the participant can retell the experience as if the researcher was there to observe their experience (Patton, 2015). Question seventeen is the final one-shot question (Patton, 2015), designed to give the participant one last chance to summarize his/her experience as they remembered it. It also allows the participant an opportunity to offer any information they deemed necessary that the researcher did not ask them. Question seventeen also allowed the participant's freedom to add any additional information that was not asked during the interview. Patton (2015), contended that it is essential to allow the interviewee a chance to have the final say during a qualitative interview. Patton (2015), proposed that interviews are where the most valuable data is collected.

Data Analysis

After all the interviews were completed, the data was transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. As stated in the IRB application, the transcriptionist signed a confidentiality agreement form before transcribing the recorded interviews, see Appendix G. After the transcription was complete, the researcher reviewed the transcribed data to cross-check the text data. The researcher also allowed the participants a chance to review their transcribed data, known as member-checking, to check for accuracy (Creswell, 2013). Once the participants and the researcher approved the transcribed data, the data was uploaded into the qualitative research software known as NVIVO to develop a thematic analysis (QRS, International, 2009). NVIVO is a Computer-Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS; Fielding & Lee, 1998), designed to improve the accessibility of qualitative data by eliminating the limitations of paper data accumulation (Wickham and Woods, 2005). NVIVO enhances the researcher's capacity to arrange expansive volumes of raw qualitative transcribed data into collectible data that guides in

directing dependable research. Overall, NVIVO helps qualitative researchers in four major areas: 1) it helps the researcher create meticulousness and unwavering quality as it acts as a guide in the qualitative research forms; 2) it manages the overall transcribed data; 3) it increase the efficiency of the data analysis by eliminating the chance of "human error" when using multiple software applications; 4) allows the researcher to organize common words and phrases from the participant's transcribed data to help formulate themes and categories (Wickham & Woods, 2005). This combination of process and procedures and the utilization of NVIVO, participant's "member-checking," and the researcher's thorough evaluation of the transcribed data, enhanced the dependability of the findings from the participant's interviews (QRS International, 2009).

After all the data was uploaded into NVIVO, the researcher then carefully analyzed the data to look for commonalities and begin the construction of clustering the data into themes. It is essential to group themes because “clustering the data allows the researcher to avoid repetitive statements” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 118). The NVIVO software assisted the researcher who allowed her to construct a more in-depth meaning from participant's interviews that attended a CPC class. The researcher was able to gain knowledge from the participants lived experiences. The participants lived experiences provided rich data to analyze and generate common themes to understand the specific phenomenon as it relates to CPC. The couple interview approach allowed couples to interact around a question and create meaning or supplement their spouse answers (Beitin, 2008). Participants acted as co-researchers based on their lived experience of the phenomenon (Beitin, 2008).

Trustworthiness

Qualitative researchers have to clarify biases before starting their research study because the readers must understand any assumptions the researcher bring to the research (Creswell, 2008). Clarification of biases establishes an authentic relationship between the researcher and the readers, and it shows that the researcher is transparent about his or her own biases (Creswell, 2008). Qualitative researchers should illuminate any biases at the start of their research study because the reader must understand the angle and the assumptions the researcher have before conducting the research study (Creswell, 2008). The biases of this research were pointed out in the "The Researcher's Role" section. Methods that were used to increase trustworthiness included, but are limited to, direct quotes, triangulation, member-checking, and understanding of the researcher's bias, the use of CAQDAS, and obtaining rich data from peer-review articles before and throughout the study. The researcher's study was also reviewed by a dissertation committee that consisted of a reader and a chairperson. A chairperson and a reader must hold a doctoral degree and be employed by Liberty University. The committee asked questions to ensure the researcher's understanding of the research was beyond her biases (Creswell, 2008). The level of trustworthiness is outlined through the research's credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability.

Credibility

According to Schwandt (2015), credibility "addresses the issue of the inquirer providing assurances of the fit between the respondents' views of their lifeways and the inquirer's reconstruction and representation of the same" (p. 309). Creswell (2007), contended that triangulation "involves corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective" (p. 208). Creswell (2007), also contended that the researcher should clarify any bias to obtain credibility. Therefore, the researcher pointed out personal experiences and biases

that may influence how the study's data was interpreted and analyzed. The researcher implementation of member checking was also to ensure credibility and validity. Creswell (2007), suggested that the participants should have a chance to check the accuracy of information by proofing the "preliminary analyses consisting of description or themes" (p. 209).

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability centers around the procedure of the request and the inquirer's obligation regarding guaranteeing that the procedure was logical, recognizable, and reported (Schwandt, 2015). Future studies similar to this study may not yield similar outcomes. Therefore, the researcher stated step-by-step details to give the reader explicit details about how the study was conducted (Creswell, 2013). Confirmability is to ensure that the information and understandings of the research were not simply the researcher's imagination (Schwandt, 2015). To alleviate this, the researcher used the member checking strategy to establish both dependability and confirmability.

Transferability

Transferability is "the inquirer's responsibility for providing readers with sufficient information on the case studied such that readers could establish the degree of similarity between the case studied and the case to which findings might be transferred" (Schwandt, 2015, p. 309). Data collection included personal interviews and the researcher's notes. These strategies for data collection, along with a rich depiction of the participants and their personal experience from CPC, allowed the research to be valuable to future research studies. Creswell (2013), stated;

Rich, thick description allows readers to make decisions regarding transferability because the writer describes in detail the participants or setting under study. Thick description

means that the researcher provides details when describing a case or when writing about a theme (p. 252).

The researcher also used NVIVO a CAQDAS to improve data management and coding processes to ensure internal validity.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations for this study was ensured and approved by Liberty University's IRB prior to the research study. The researcher submitted the purpose of the study, the use of participants, obtaining informed consent, and how and where the participant's interviews and information will be secured. The researcher kept the participants information in a locked file on the computer that was password protected. The researcher also used pseudonyms to protect the identity of all the participants.

Summary

Chapter three outlined the particular structural components utilized in this phenomenological study. The purpose and goal of this study were to analyze the lived experiences of couples who attended a CPC to determine the impact it had on their spiritual growth and marital stability. The interview process and the researcher's role created the framework and developed the premise of the study. The following chapter will discuss the details of the research findings and the themes that were developed from the phenomenological analysis of the collected data from the participants' interviews.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to analyze a couple's spiritual growth and marital stability further after they attended Christian premarital counseling (CPC) that used the research-based Prepare/Enrich curriculum. The two research questions that initiated this study of research was; **RQ1:** What impact does Christian premarital counseling have on a couple's overall marital stability? **RQ2:** What impact does Christian premarital counseling have on the individual's spiritual growth? This research was specifically looking for unique themes, sub-themes, commonalities, processes, and factors that contributed to a couple's spiritual growth and marital stability after they attended CPC.

This chapter will begin by giving a brief description of all the participants in the study. To keep the identities of all participants anonymous, and in compliance with IRB, each participant was assigned a culturally appropriate pseudonym. The chapter will continue by describing in detail the major themes and sub-themes that were derived from the couple's feedback from their interviews. The researcher hired a transcriptionist to transcribe the participants' interview responses for accuracy professionally and to help eliminate the researcher's biases and additions. The transcriptionist signed an oath to maintain confidentiality and handled transcripts with the utmost respect and competency. The researcher provided a copy of the transcribed data to each couple to check for accuracy. This process helps increase the trustworthiness of the research and the researcher. After each couple approved their transcript, the transcripts were uploaded into the NVIVO software that generated the themes and sub-themes. The first primary theme that emerged was spiritual foundation that had the sub-themes of commitment, communication, and Christ-centeredness. The second theme of the idea of

oneness emerged from interviewing the individuals with the sub-themes of external factors, finance, and faith that impacted their idea of becoming one. Also, the third theme of marital roles emerged from the interviews. The sub-theme of Biblical responsibility of marital roles as the individuals mentioned their roles and the roles of their children in the marriage.

Participants

The participants were couples who reside in Dallas, Texas that are married for the first time and attended a CPC that used the Prepare/Enrich curriculum. Majority of the couples are African- American, one Caucasian couple, and one Hispanic male whose wife is mixed-raced with Hispanic and African American (See Appendix D). The couple's length of marriage ranged between 6 months to 15 years (See Figure 1). All of the couples stated that their religious affiliation is Christian. The researcher used pseudonyms throughout this study in place of the participants' real names to protect the participant's identities.

David and Felicia

David and Felicia are African-Americans who have been married for five years. They attended the Prepare/Enrich CPC class in June 2013 at their local church in Dallas, Texas. They both are Christians and attend church frequently. Felicia has been a member of the church for sixteen years, and David joined a few months after they got married. David is 33 years of age and Felicia is 28 years of age. They have known each other for eight years, and this is the first marriage for both. David and Felicia have two children together, Mae 6 years old and John 2 years old. David works as a software engineer for a small Information Technology company. Felicia is a former teacher who is currently a stay-at-home mom. Felicia volunteer every Sunday at their church to teach a Sunday school class ages six thru twelve years of age.

According to the Weiss-Cerreto MSI, the couple's marital status is stable, and they have not recently considered divorce.

Michael and Tamara

Michael and Tamara are African-Americans who have been married for ten years. They attended the Prepare/Enrich CPC session in February 2009 from a Christian licensed professional counselor in Arlington, Texas. Michael is 43 years of age and Tamara is 42 years of age. They have known each other for fifteen years. They have two children Michelle 9 and Michael Jr. 7. They both are Christians and attend church frequently. They have been members of their church for over nine years. They are very active in their church. Michael is an active deacon, and Tamara sings in the choir. Michael works as a high school principal, and Tamara works as an accountant for a large accounting firm. According to the Weiss-Cerreto MSI, the couple's marital status is stable and have not recently considered divorce.

Eric and Tracy

Eric and Tracey are African-Americans that have been married for two years. They attended the Prepare/Enrich CPC class in January 2017 at their local church in Dallas, Texas. Eric and Tracey both are Christians. Eric is 29 years of age and Tracey is 26. They have known each other for eight years. They have two children together-April one year of age and Asher- 6 months. Eric has a child Kara, seven years of age. Tracey attends church frequently; however, Eric attends an average of once a month because of his work schedule. They have been members of the same church over six years. Eric works as a truck driver that travels out of state and Tracey works at a bank as a bank teller. They are not active members of the church because of their limited time and commitment. According to the Weiss-Cerreto MSI, the couple's marital status is stable, and they have not recently considered divorce.

Jason and Kim

Jason is African-American, and Kim is Caucasian, and they have been married for six years. They attended the Prepare/Enrich CPC class in June 2013 at a local church in Dallas, Texas. Jason and Kim both are Christians and attend church frequently. Kim has been a member of their church for ten years, and Jason recently joined the church three years ago. Jason is 31 years of age and Kim is 30 years of age. They have known each other over twelve years and dated while in college. They have three children Kyle 5 years of age, Kaylee 4 years of age, and Kamron 3 years of age. Jason works as an emergency room surgeon in the county hospital, and Kim works as a part-time nurse. Kim volunteers in the children's ministry at church and sings in the choir. According to the Weiss-Cerreto MSI, the couple's marital status is stable, and they have not recently considered divorce.

Chris and Kiesha

Chris and Kiesha are African-Americans who have been married for thirteen years. They attended a private Prepare/Enrich CPC class in October 2006 from a Christian licensed professional counselor in Arlington, Texas. They both are Christians and attend church frequently. Chris and Kiesha have been members of their church for over seventeen years. Chris is 46 years of age and Kiesha is 42 years of age. They have known each other for seventeen years, and this is the first marriage for both. Chris and Kiesha have four children, Jackson 12 years of age, Sean 10 years of age, Jana 9 years of age, and Jacob 7 years of age. Chris works as a high-school math teacher, and Kiesha works as an elementary teacher. They are active members of their church. Chris serves as a deacon on the church deacon board, and Kiesha sings in the choir and volunteer with the youth ministry. According to the Weiss-Cerreto MSI, the couple's marital status is stable, and they have not recently considered divorce.

Travis and Shelly

Travis and Shelly are Caucasians who have been married for one year. They attended the Prepare/Enrich CPC class in January 2017 at their local church in Dallas, Texas. They are Christians and attend church frequently. They have been members of their church for two years. Travis is 25 years of age and Shelly is 23 years of age. Travis and Shelly have known each other for four years, and this is the first marriage for both. They currently have no children. Travis is a manager at a local fast food chain and Shelly works as a teacher assistant at a local school and is also a part-time student at a community college. Travis and Shelly are not active members of their church. According to the Weiss-Cerreto MSI, the couple's marital status is stable, and they have not recently considered divorce.

Rod and Shannon

Rod and Shannon are African-Americans who have been married for two years. They attended the Prepare/Enrich CPC class in January 2017 at their local church in Dallas, Texas. They are Christians and attend church frequently. Rod has been a member of the church his entire life. Shannon joined in 2015, shortly after they got engaged. Rod is 27 years of age and Shannon is 26 years of age. They dated in high-school and have known each other eleven years. This marriage is the first marriage for each of them. Rod and Shannon have one child Rod Jr. 10 months old. Rod works as an insurance adjuster, and Shannon works as a middle-school counselor. Rod also serves as a youth minister at his church. Shannon currently is not active in their church. According to the Weiss-Cerreto MSI, the couple's marital status is stable, and they have not recently considered divorce.

Jorge and Elizabeth

Jorge is Hispanic, and Elizabeth is multi-racial African-American and Hispanic. They have been married for seven years. They attended the Prepare/Enrich CPC class in June 2013 at a local church in Dallas, Texas. Jorge and Elizabeth are Christians and attend church frequently. They have been a member of their church for 13 years. Jorge is 35 years of age and Elizabeth is 33 years of age. Jorge and Elizabeth have known each other fifteen years, and this marriage is the first for both. They have five children Grace 14 years of age, Maddy 12 years of age, Max 12 years of age, Catherine 6 years of age, and Nathan 5 years of age. Jorge works as a financial advisor, and Elizabeth is a real-estate agent. Jorge and Elizabeth are active members of their church. According to the Weiss-Cerreto MSI, the couple's marital status is stable, and they have not recently considered divorce.

Darrell and Michelle

Darrell and Michelle are African-Americans who have been married for fifteen years. They attended the Prepare/Enrich CPC class in April 2003 at a local church in Dallas, Texas. They are Christians and attend church frequently. They have been members of their church for sixteen years. Darrell and Michelle are both 40 years of age. They have known each other for 19 years, and this marriage is the first marriage for both. Darrell and Michelle have two children Trevor 13 years of age and Chanelle 11 years of age. Darrell works as a high-school basketball coach, and Michelle owns a daycare. Darrell serves as a minister in his church. Michelle serves as a guest greeter in the church. They are also group leaders at their church that host monthly Bible studies in their home. According to the Weiss-Cerreto MSI, the couple's marital status is stable, and they have not recently considered divorce.

Robert and Krystal

Robert and Krystal are African-Americans who have been married for six months. They attended the Prepare/Enrich CPC class in January 2017 at a local church in Dallas, Texas. They are Christians but currently are not members of a local church. Krystal noted that they watch church online on Sunday and visit local churches if she mentions it. Robert is 27 years of age and Krystal is 24 years of age. They have known each other for three years, and this marriage is the first marriage for both. They have one child Jasmine 2 years of age. Robert works as an auto-mechanic and Krystal is a hair-stylist. Krystal organizes food-drives for the local food bank and volunteers at local charities. According to the Weiss-Cerreto MSI, the couple's marital status is stable, and they have not recently considered divorce.

Results

The results are detailed in this section which represents significant statements and commonalities that were thoroughly processed and analyzed from the interviews of ten couples. The interviews were transcribed and uploaded in the NVIVO system. After the data was uploaded in the NVIVO system, the researcher was able to generate reports that allowed her to see frequently used words, statements, and phrases. NVIVO allowed the researcher to create a list of common statements, code the statements into themes, and used those themes to analyze all the data collected. Below the research questions are addressed by the summarized themes, sub-themes, and participant's common statements.

Demographic Questions

Before interviewing the participants about their CPC experience, the researcher asked the couples some general demographic questions. One of the questions was how long each couple had been married. This question allowed the researcher to get an idea of the participant's married experience and the period they all experienced the shared phenomenon. Figure 1 shows the

percentage of the participants' number of years married or the time that has passed since they attended CPC.

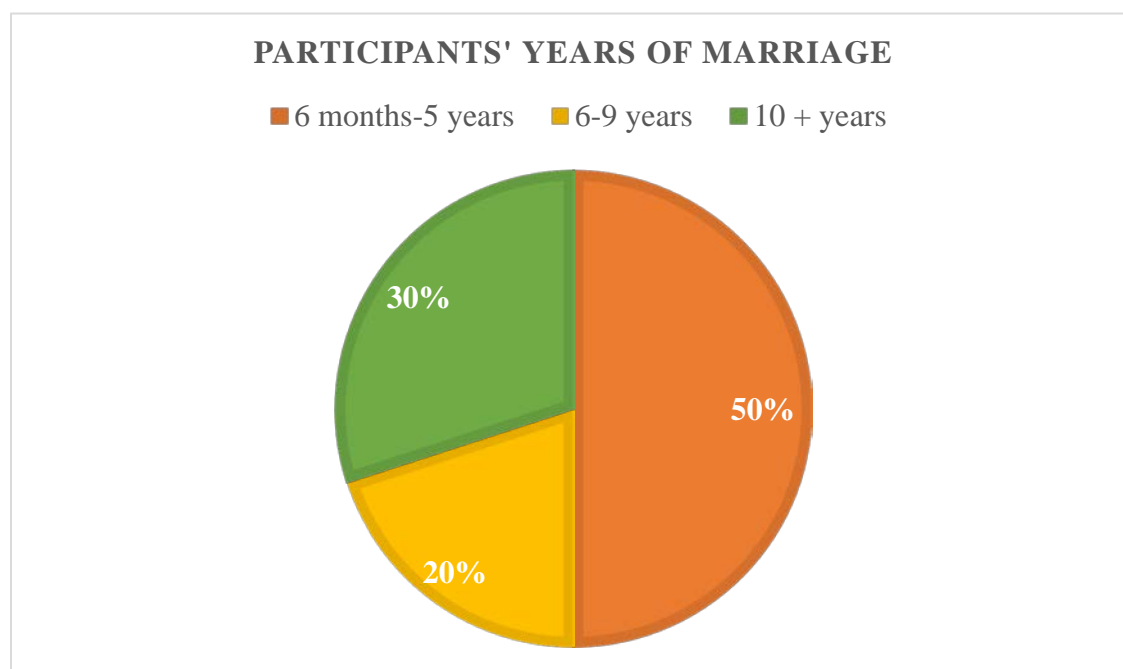


Figure 1. Participants' years of marriage

Interview Questions

There was a total of twenty participants (ten couples) who were interviewed. Four of the ten couples chose to be interviewed via FaceTime, and the other six couples were interviewed in a private office provided by the researcher. Once the researcher obtained consent (Appendix B) from each of the participants, the researcher informed the participants that the interviews would be recorded. The researcher recorded each interview using a digital recording device. The digital recording device allowed the data to be sent to the transcriptionist electronically to be transcribed. Each interview lasted approximately 30-60 minutes. During the interview, the researcher used a laptop to record notes such as gestures, body language, or any significant cues the participants gave that the audio recording could not detect. The researcher jotted down any

emotions she encountered after each interview. The notes were titled and saved on the researcher's password protected hard-drive.

After the last couple was interviewed, the audio data was sent to a professional transcriptionist who signed a confidentiality agreement (Appendix G). At the request of the researcher, the transcriptionist transcribed all the data within a couple of days. After all the data was transcribed, the researcher sent each participant their transcribed data via email to check for accuracy and any errors. This method is known as member-checking to ensure all the data collected from an individual participant is correct. All the participants agreed that the data was accurate and stated that there were no changes needed.

After the participants and the researcher approved the transcribed data, the data was uploaded into the qualitative research software known as NVIVO. This system allowed the researcher to organize the data to develop a thematic analysis (QRS, International, 2009). NVIVO is a CAQDAS (Computer-Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software) designed to improve the accessibility of qualitative data by eliminating the limitations of paper data accumulation (Wickham and Woods, 2005). NVIVO enhanced the researcher's capacity to arrange expansive volumes of raw qualitative transcribed data into collectible data that guides in directing dependable research. The CAQDAS allowed the researcher to begin coding and collecting themes from the participants' data. The CAQDAS helped the researcher to access data by typing in words or phrases to check for frequency and common usage. The CAQDAS allowed the researcher to obtain a large amount of data at the click of a button, rather than sorting through the data by hand and eye. This method allowed the researcher to focus solely on the coding and analyzing the themes from the collected data. The researcher noticed that the majority of the participants had an ample amount of similar responses to the questions that were

asked. The researcher narrowed the significant similarities, coded them, and generated three significant themes and nine sub-themes.

Themes

After interviewing all twenty individuals as they shared their experience from the Prepare/Enrich CPC, three primary themes emerged when the individuals were asked about how the class impacted their spiritual growth and marital stability. The first theme focused was based on the individuals' spiritual foundation that had the sub-themes of commitment, communication, and Christ-centeredness emerged. According to Nelson, Kirk, Ane, and Serres (2011), a couple's perception of commitment is closely related to their spiritual foundation and religious beliefs. Married couples that exhibit spiritual growth in their marriage has a Christ-like forgiveness and communicate effectively (DiBlasio, 2010). The second theme of the idea of oneness emerged from interviewing the individuals with the sub-themes of external factors, finance, and faith that impacted their idea of becoming one. Also, the third theme of marital roles emerged from the interviews. The sub-theme of Biblical responsibility the husband's role, wife's role, and children's role all emerged under the theme of marital roles as the individuals mentioned their roles in the marriage (see Table 1). Throughout the interviews, the individuals used Christian language such as the power of prayer, including God in their marriage, husbands should love their wives, and wives should submit to her husband.

Most of the individuals mentioned they attended the Prepare/Enrich CPC because it was vital for them to build their marriage on a solid foundation which is God and His will for their lives. They understood that a healthy marriage should include three people: the husband, the wife, and God. Each of them wanted to begin a new life together and commit their marriage to Jesus Christ. Everyone interviewed was not ambivalent about the Christian spiritual aspect of

marriage. They understood that marriage is ordained by God, which is one of his greatest gifts to mankind. They also stated that CPC helped them realize that they made their wedding vows not only to each other but also to God. The individuals quoted the Bible verse “Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Mark 10:9). In addition to biblical quotes, numerous quotes included, “keep Christ in your lives every day,” “Pray together regularly every day,” “read God’s Word together,” and “find a church where you can grow in your relationship with each other and with Christ.”

It is important to point out during the interviews, many couples mentioned about becoming and being one. They pointed out that selfishness can be toxic to any relationship. The individuals defined self-interest as putting oneself first instead of the needs of others, especially their spouse. According to 1 Corinthians 13:4,7 “This is the kind of love God has for us—and the kind we should have for each other” (King James Version).

It is also important to note that although the content of the Prepare/Enrich CPC curriculum is standard, facilitators may vary in how they choose to implement the session content. The variations could include, for example, number and length of the sessions. For this reason, before the interview, the researcher asked participants to briefly comment on the structure and format of their Prepare/Enrich CPC experience. Seven of the ten couples attended the same CPC. The researcher used the seven couples from this group; therefore, their experience was similar in nature and content. According to C1, C3, C4, C6, C7, C8, and C10: they were given a Prepare/Enrich pre-assessment before attending the CPC. The format consisted of a facilitator leading the couples through the material that offered shared personal examples from his or her marriage with the class. The CPC was a total of six sessions in a local church. They had to read and complete weekly assignments assigned for homework. The other

three couples attended three different Prepare/Enrich CPC sessions from various organizations; however, their session's time and content were similar to the other seven couples. All the couples attended at least six sessions and covered all the Prepare/Enrich topics.

Table 1

 Themes and Codes from Frequent Statements and Data Aggregation

Data Source	Frequent Statements	Code	Theme Type
Interview	Spiritual Foundation	SF	Major
Interview	Commitment	CMT	Sub
Interview	Communication	COM	Sub
Interview	Christ-Centered	CC	Sub
Interview	Becoming One	BO	Major
Interview	Family	FAM	Sub
Interview	Finance	FIN	Sub
Interview	Faith	FAI	Sub
Interview	Christian Marital Roles	CMR	Major
Interview	Children	CH	Sub
Interview	Husband	HUS	Sub
Interview	Wife	WIF	Sub

Themes Developed -Table 2

Spiritual Foundation Theme, Open Codes, & Frequency

Theme	Open Code	Frequency
Spiritual Foundation=SF	Became closer to God	12
	Learned more about Biblical view on marriage	28
	Learned how to be a communicator	43
	Become more committed to God and my spouse	31
	Allowed Christ to be the center of the marriage	14
	Developed a deeper understanding of how God viewed marriages	30

Spiritual Foundation. All of the participants believed that marriage is a spiritual institution created and ordained by God. According to Genesis 2:18, 21-24, “And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh instead thereof; and the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. Moreover, Adam said, this is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore, shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.” Consequently, since the participants believed that marriage is a spiritual institution, they all stated that this was the reason why they decided to attend a Prepare/Enrich CPC which included a thematic discussion on the spiritual foundations in a marriage.

For this study, an individual's spiritual foundation is defined as having a Christlike lifestyle that is led by the Holy Spirit (Tan, 2011). The combination of the Word and the Holy Spirit will give strength to the spiritual foundation and produce a relational environment that helps make a marriage a source of enrichment and joy throughout their marriage (Hawkins, 2002). Some individuals stated that they acquired the knowledge about what it means to have a spiritual foundation in their marriage during their Prepare/Enrich class. Twenty participants indicated that their spiritual foundation helped them to become better communicators and more committed to their spouse. Thirteen individuals reported that the spiritual foundation that was taught during their CPC Prepare/Enrich class compelled them to maintain a Christ-Centered marriage. All thirteen individuals pointed out the importance of a Christ-centered marriage to maintain marital stability and their personal spiritual growth. Kim who is married to Jason expressed CPC has helped them grow spiritually and the impact it has had on their marriage. During her interview Kim stated:

The day Jason and I got engaged, we knew we wanted to do a Christian pre-marriage counseling program that incorporated Prepare/Enrich, but we never imagined how much we would get out of it. After one session with Pastor John and Amy, our relationship as a couple grew immensely. We learned to communicate better, understood our commitment to each other and God, and appreciated each other so much more. The facilitators were so diligent in getting to know us and who we were as a couple. They challenged us to learn more about each other and how to function not only in relationship with each other but in our relationships with God as well. We were so blessed and thankful that each time we had an issue or something to discuss, we were constantly pointed back to the Bible. I am so glad that we chose to do our pre-marriage counseling from a Christian perspective. It has truly strengthened our marriage over the years.

The following couples capture the essence of how CPC impacted them on a spiritual level. Jason who is married to Kim also asserted how his premarital counseling impacted him as a man and throughout his marriage to Kim. When the question was posed to Jason about the skills, tools, or resources he gained from attending premarital counseling, he stated:

I believe my premarital counseling experience not only prepared me as a man, but as a husband. I didn't have a father in my life to give me an example of what a great husband looks like; so, I felt obligated to attend a premarital class. It changed my perspective, and now I see the importance of giving up my wants, needs, and the way I speak, to see God glorified through us. It's my honor to reflect Christ to my wife. I felt like I went into marriage prepared with wisdom, backed by the word of God. I know that every day won't be sunshine, but I am confident that we are not in this alone because God is with us.

Shannon response gives the essence of spiritual growth by referencing the immediate impact the Christian counseling session had on her and Rod's relationship prior to getting married. She stated:

My husband and I have been married for a little over two years now. Although Christ is the center of our marriage, we still find it hard to compromise when we disagree with one another. We attended premarital counseling as a requirement for the minister to marry us, and it was nothing but a miracle from God. Our first session was very eye-opening. Rod was even happy and excited to attend the next session. I would recommend that all couples that's considering marriage to attend a Christian premarital class. It has changed how we communicate, and we respect one another especially when we disagree with one another.

Rod experienced spiritual growth as well. He stated:

I loved how every session started with a prayer, and the presence of God was always invited. It was all about Jesus and how he sees marriage. I felt like the sessions increased my knowledge and understanding of my role as a husband. When we had questions, the facilitator led us to the word of God to see what the Word had to say about it. As a minister myself, I appreciated this concept because it was not based on someone personal opinion of what marriage should look like. I left each session feeling better, wiser, encouraged, and prepared for what was ahead. Not only did I leave better prepared for marriage, I felt stronger in my faith because we were encouraged to develop a deeper intimacy with one another and also with God. I am grateful we were required to attend premarital counseling and I'm thankful that my wife chose one with a Biblical foundation. It gave us a stronger foundation for our marriage.

Felicia and David statements from their interview also captured the essence of the spiritual growth they received after attending CPC sessions. The following are the statements from Felicia and David during their interview:

Felicia stated:

Before getting married, we both knew we wanted to do a Christian premarital class and learn more about what God's Word said about marriage, and ways to help our relationship grow. Many of our married friends recommended the Prepare/Enrich class that is offered at Grace Way Baptist church twice a year. Our initial meeting Michael and I both had a mixture of feelings about the class setting because we didn't know what to expect. But after our first session, we were sold. Even though it was a class setting, the sessions were very intimate, and the facilitators were very hands-on. I personally loved how we were able to be so transparent with the facilitators because they made us feel so comfortable. I can definitely say we became closer to each other and also grew in our relationship with God.

David stated:

Attending the premarital class literally helped change my whole perspective on marriage, and how I would approach it as a man of God to my wife and family. I didn't have the best example from my parents on what God intended for marriage to be like. After our first session, I noticed a major difference in how Felicia and I responded to one another, and that made me want even more for my marriage. The sessions helped me to grow so much in my communication towards Felicia and the way I now express my love to her. Every session was valuable and taught with God's love that compelled me to seek a godly marriage.

Commitment. Making a commitment involves dedicating yourself to something, like a person or a cause. According to Dobson (2012), the foundation of commitment in the marital relationship is defined when married couples commit themselves to Christ and commit themselves to each other. The commitment to the marriage relationship has distinctions from the secular definition of commitment (Dobson, 2012). For instance, the marital version of commitment is more sacred than spiritual. The foundation of marital commitment is to serve. The married couple must be committed to serving. First, there is a commitment to serve Christ. The married couple will serve Christ primarily through a membership through a local church.

Christian premarital counselors know that God initiated the very first marriage in the Garden of Eden. The counseling sessions are built on the premises by informing their clients that marriage comes from God. It is essential to the Christian premarital counselor that God's union of Adam and Eve illustrates God's ideal for marriage—one man and one woman joined together in a life-long commitment to each other. Considering the current divorce rate, it is evident that many married couples are not following God's ideal for marriage. During premarital counseling, couples are taught that the essence of making a permanent commitment. Couples realize that it is much more than just a decision not to divorce but a commitment to God. They are encouraged the commitment is when they do the daily work of keeping the commitment alive. Christians might reflect on the scripture, "take up your cross every day and follow me" (Luke 9:23). When the question "How did your participation in the Pre-Marital Prepare/Enrich class help prepare you for marriage" was posed to the individuals the following statements capture the essence of the sub-theme commitment that emerged from the major theme spiritual foundation.

Michael stated:

Premarital counseling was life-changing for me. We had an amazing facilitator, and he focused on teaching how first to live the abundant life God wants us to live separate from being married. I learned so much about God's love, forgiveness, faithfulness and so much more. I realized I had to fully commit my life to God first to fully commit to my wife. So half-way through the sessions, I dedicated to making the most important changes God wanted for me that helped my mind, thoughts, and actions ...

Michael's wife Tamara also reference commitment by saying;

When the facilitators constantly related scripture to real-life scenarios or where even just talking about life in general, it was a crucial part that developed my relationship with Christ and to fully commit my life to him. I remember this being a big part of my personal development on a spiritual level.

Darrell stated:

Keeping Christ at the center of our marriage is a daily choice for us. It's a daily commitment to die to self and strive to become more like Him in every way.

Michelle continued:

We both chose to decide to make our relationship with God to be our highest priority, above everyone and everything else in our life. Despite what happens from this point on, we remind our self of our decision, and then we avoid wasting time and energy on things that don't really matter. This allows us to experience the fullness of God's blessings for our life and marriage.

Shelly stated:

We make time, no matter what, every single day to pray together to show our commitment to God.

Kiesha stated, and Chris agreed by nodding:

The class helped my husband and I grow together as a couple and prepared us for what is ahead in our future as a married couple. We both really enjoyed taking the class, the topics we covered were interesting topics to discuss, and most importantly it helped us learn a little more about each other. It also helped us to understand the commitment we were making to each other.

Tracey stated:

We believe that the class taught us more than just how to have a successful marriage but also showed us what it means to commit to each other and to God. We learned how to implement the building blocks to help us succeed in our marriage.

Communication. The second sub-theme that was derived under the major theme spiritual foundation was communication. The marital couples thought attention to communicating effectively would lead to longevity in the marriage. Most married couples also stated that CPC helped them realize the most important aspect of communicating was not just hearing their spouse but also listening to their spouse. Moreover, they were taught attentive listening was the preferred mode of listening. Jorge mentioned one thing he remembered about the CPC class is that “attentive listening is listening without preparing an answer while listening.” According to Peterson (2012), “ritual listening looks like friendly listening, but it’s not. While we’re quiet and watching the speaker, what we’re really doing is waiting for him/her to shut up or take a breath, so we can tell our story or make our point” (p. 149).

Consequently, to avoid ritual listening, the couples believed some of the responsibility would be on the one who is speaking. Many couples stated that communication is more effective when their spouse communicates without judging, labeling, attacking, or accusing. When these

are avoided, the dialogue is most likely to be done in a peaceful and respectful tone. Effective communication helps the listener understand and allows the speaker to clarify what they are saying (Peterson, 2102).

Also, couples stated communication in the marriage should be a building up process, as opposed to "tearing down." This communicative philosophy is mentioned in several scriptures throughout the Bible. "Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers" (Ephesians 4:29). "A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger" (Proverbs 15:1). "Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man" (Galatians 4:6). Through the interviews, it was discovered the wives valued tone of voice, body language, and facial expression more than the husbands. These appropriate gesticulations were viewed as building up or tearing down mechanisms for positive communication.

On the other hand, these were less important to husbands when communicating. Throughout the interviews, it became ostensible that husbands and wives communicate differently. As a result, most of the husbands and wives sought communication that would go far deeper than words. They all stated CPC emphasized the importance of healthy communication because it is instrumental in producing a healthy and satisfying marriage. Many expressed that the CPC sessions stressed if successful communication is achieved the spirit of oneness is imminent.

The book of Proverbs 15: 23 states, "A man finds joy in giving an apt reply—and how good is a timely word." Communication is one of the most important parts of a delightful marriage. Most marriages experience unpleasant occasions, which can change the way companions speak with one another. Many couples grow negative behavior patterns and make

wrong choices when things are not going well. Although only a few couples specifically stated the counseling sessions impacted their spiritual growth, many of the individuals in this study expressed how the spiritual foundation they obtained during premarital counseling impacted how they communicated better with their spouse. All twenty of the individuals stated how CPC helped them to become better communicators during disagreements. They each expressed that being able to communicate effectively has helped them throughout their marriage. The word communication was referenced forty-three times after all twenty individuals were interviewed. Each individual high-lighted how communication plays a vital role in their marriage. They all referenced how proper communication helps them build a strong spiritual foundation. Communication is much more perplexing than the majority accept. It may be difficult to juggle all the information coming at you when you are in a relationship.

Michael who is married to Tamara expressed his struggles in the heat of the moment but also acknowledged that his struggles have allowed him an opportunity to grow and become a better communicator overall. Michael said:

I'm not going to lie, I'm still working on communicating better to meet my wife standards of communicating, but I've gotten a whole lot better from the beginning of our marriage. I had to get comfortable talking about feelings, emotions, and all that stuff. Because I was raised in a family where we didn't do all that. My family is not "touchy-feely" like Tamara's family. I come from a family of hard-workers and not sweating the small stuff. I had to learn that things that are small to me could be a big deal to her. So now I hear her out to understand her view.

Michael's statement showed the essence of the impact that premarital counseling had on him as a person as it is related to communication. He explained that communication was not his strength

because he did not experience it as a child growing up. His wife Tamara validated his point by acknowledging that Michael is not the best communicator at times especially when they have disagreements.

Tamara stated:

We have gotten a lot better in the communication department just over the past few years. We are still working on being better communicators when we have disagreements. Michael tends to shut down and shut everyone out when he gets upset. I used to nag and try to get him to talk, but after ten years of marriage, I've learned that it makes things worse. So now what I do is allow him to calm and cool down and write down my thoughts about the issue. This seems to work for both of us because I'm not nagging and he's not ignoring me.

I probed:

“Where did you learn the technique to write your thoughts down on paper and how long have you been using that strategy?”

Tamara responded:

It was recommended to me by an older couple from our church who are like mentors to us. When we first got married, we had a lot of deep issues that were unresolved. This is how we linked up with the mentor couple that helps us out a lot. We ended up going through the premarital counseling program shortly after we got married at the recommendation of our mentors. This helped our relationship tremendously. We begin to pray together, this helped us to become closer to each other and God. In our premarital class, the facilitators encouraged us to pray together and to never go to bed upset with each other. We learned how to communicate much better when disagreements arose."

Many of the couples expressed how they contributed their communication successes and strategies to the attendance of their premarital counseling class that was scripturally based. Chris and Kiesha who opted to be interviewed together because of the time constraints and availability.

Kiesha started the interview by acknowledging:

To be honest, I don't really remember much about our premarital counseling and everything that was covered. But one thing I do remember, the counselor told us that healthy communication is the key to a successful marriage. We really don't have a problem communicating. We were friends first before we got married so I think that has helped us grow as a couple.

Chris interjected:

Yea, we both like to talk, so communication is definitely not a problem. We both left our premarital counseling session saying "we are going to have a really successful marriage if it's depended on communication" because that is not a problem for us. But one thing I remember about our sessions was the incorporation of prayer and scripture each time. Each topic we discussed and covered he backed it up by a scripture in the Bible. He gave detailed reasons why our marriage was not only a commitment to each other but a covenant to God. I always knew this, but when it was explained in detail, I had new found respect for marriage.

Kiesha interjected:

I would recommend every couple to do some type of premarital counseling especially a Christian-based type. I do remember that the sessions gave us a strong foundation to build on. Chris and I are both believers and are strong in our faith. We are very active members in our church so having a Christian premarital counselor was very important to

both of us. The sessions prepared us for the unknown, and the things we didn't think would be an issue in the long run if we hadn't talked about it. I was so grateful we discussed family and finances before marriage because I remember we were on two different pages about those two things.

Chris stated:

Yes, we were, and thank God our first serious disagreement occurred when we had a mediator to intervene. He showed us how to compromise and come to a mutual agreement. During friendship and courtship, we never dealt with any serious issues, so we did not know how to deal with any conflicts. The first thing the counselor told us was to pray about it separately and then pray about it together. Doing these two things changed both of our perspectives and God showed us ourselves and our selfishness. The next time we met, we both listened more to each other and heard each other out. I understood why she felt the way she did. It was intense and something that stemmed from her childhood. I would have never known if God had not spoken to me during prayer and instructed me to listen and hear Kiesha out. This one incident changed and has helped me in many other relationships."

Kiesha agreed:

I too was amazed how quickly things changed after when we were told to pray together. I remember being so upset that I did not want to hold your hand to pray. But the minute you begin to pray, I felt a sense of relief and all those negative feelings went away. To this day, prayer has helped our marriage through the storms of life. God has been the glue to the marriage.

Although most of the individuals that were interviewed, most of them were active members in their church. The individuals expressed that their continuation to be involved in the

church has helped them build their marriage on the spiritual foundation that was received during their premarital counseling sessions. However, Eric and Tracey gave a different perspective on how they were impacted. It was mandatory by the minister for them to attend premarital counseling before getting married. Tracey's parents suggested they attend the Christian premarital class offered at their church. Tracey's parents also offered to pay for the counseling sessions as a pre-wedding gift.

Eric stated:

Well, I really didn't understand why we had to do a six-weeks class before we could get married. My parents been married for over twenty years and took no classes. My daddy said marriage is on the job training. I feel like every marriage is different. What works for us, probably won't work for another relationship. We talked about everything.

I probed:

Did your premarital counseling experience impact you or your marriage in any way?

Eric stated:

The only thing I can say changed for me was I listened to Tracey more. I also started to pray more for Tracey and my daughters. I make sure we talk every day even when I'm on the road. I read my Bible every day, but I was doing that before we went to class. I would go to church more if my work schedule weren't so hectic.

Tracey who is married to Eric stated:

Eric and I have come a long way in our marriage because of the premarital classes. He will not admit how much it has positively impacted our marriage. Eric was reluctant to do it because it was my parent's idea to attend the Christian premarital class. I feel like he thought this will be the start of my parents dictating our future decisions. Our

communication and understanding of each other's needs definitely have improved over time. I can also see a change in how we both looked at our relationship. We seem not to take each other for granted.

Travis and Shelly are the youngest of all the couples that participated in the study.

Shelly' experience from the premarital counseling sessions is an example of the sub-theme of communication that originated from the major theme of spiritual growth. Shelly stated during her interview:

From the beginning, our premarital counseling facilitator was straight to the point, concise, objective, more importantly, put God first throughout every topic she counseled us on. The sessions allowed us to identify our flaws and weaknesses as she provided us with biblically based solutions and real-life examples to address issues along the way. The Prepare/Enrich pre-marital counseling sessions was also a fun and eye-opening experience for us. Our favorite sessions were discussing our compatibility assessments and learning the purpose of marriage. Discussing the assessments each session allowed our communication skills to really improve. We were able to discuss unrealistic expectations that we both didn't know existed and openly communicate them through the topics we hadn't thought about before attending pre-marital counseling. We just wrapped up our first year of marriage and is very excited that our facilitator is still a resource to us if we ever need spiritual counsel within our marriage and/or prayer.

Travis was not as verbal as his wife. However, his statement about communication captured the essence of the impact of premarital counseling. Travis stated that he appreciated how the class helped them to talk about their future. Travis said, "things we discussed was never brought up before while we were dating."

Jorge and Elizabeth dialogued about how they both grew spiritually as individuals and as a married couple that emerged through the theme of spiritual foundation. They both spoke about their lack of communication before attending the premarital class which is the essence of the sub-theme of communication that was captured during each of their interviews.

Jorge stated:

After we got married, I remember we begin applying everything we were taught in the class and put God first in our marriage. I know it hasn't been that long since we got married, but I have never been happier, and Elizabeth feels the same way. Like I have said before, God put us together for a purpose...The class helped us and guided us to be better communicators best of all it was all from the Bible.

Elizabeth confirmed Jorge's statement by saying:

Our premarital counseling class experience was a great experience, and we both learned so much about each other. After talking with other Christians about their premarital counseling experiences, we realized that the Christian approach to Prepare/Enrich was a very substantial, comprehensive program, that gave us a solid Biblical plan for entering our marriage. The sound, Bible-based approach gave us the tools we needed to properly bond, communicate, and respect each other individual differences. We still refer to the things we learned from our premarital counseling experience as we continue to grow together in Christ. I recommend all engaged couples who are searching for a premarital counseling experience that will positively impact their marriage long after the honeymoon is over, to attend the premarital counseling Jorge and I attended.

Darrell and Michelle would be considered the primary poster couple for expressing the spiritual foundation that the CPC sessions had on their marriage. They both revealed their

marital success is contributed to their prayer life and their strong faith and belief. Darrell and Michelle interview responses capture the essence of the major theme of spiritual foundation and sub-theme communication. Darrell responded when asked about how the Prepare/Enrich premarital counseling class helped him grow spiritually:

The premarital counseling class was a huge step in my life because it began the process of obtaining a strong, solid Biblical foundation for me as a person which helped me as a man and husband throughout our marriage. Michelle and I were two Christians that fell in love. After I proposed to Michelle, we decided we wanted to go through an in-depth pre-marital counseling class within a spiritual environment. The course turned out to be a blessing. We addressed so many significant issues, and we found it amazing how the facilitator guided us to concrete resolutions and effective communication strategies using scripture. The sessions were extremely valuable to me in obtaining the firm foundations necessary for my growth. The sessions were also lots of fun. We thoroughly enjoyed them... The confidence I gained after I attended the class is in part a tribute to the Bible-based knowledge about marriage.

Michelle responded when asked about how the Prepare/Enrich class helped her grow spiritually:

Darrell and I found that our premarital counseling experience was a great benefit to our relationship as a married couple and spiritual leaders at our church. I learned to be more open with my husband. Darrell has begun to communicate more freely with me. Over the years we have really bonded. I can honestly now call him my best friend. We share an amazing connection that no one can hinder.

Felicia said:

David and I both had a great time attending the premarital class. I would definitely recommend premarital counseling to everyone who wants to understand more about their partner healthy and productive way.

Christ-Centeredness. The final sub-theme of the major theme spiritual foundation is Christ-centeredness that was generated from the interviews. The marital couple should have goals, priorities, and future plans for the marriage. Nevertheless, all of those matters should be ancillary in the marriage. Married couple's first priority should be their relationship with Christ. The Bible tells us to "seek ye first the kingdom of God and all these other things shall be added" (Mathew 6:33). When the marital couple places emphasis on Christ in the relationship goals, priorities and future plans will be a part of the other things that shall be added. It is important to note that when a couple's lifestyles are led by Christ, they will have a Christ-centered marital relationship. A Christ-centered marriage involves a couple that prays together. In prayer, the couple is seeking the Lord's will for their marriage and for their life. Prayer alleviates individual agendas and pursues a religious, corporate agenda for both husband and wife.

Furthermore, praying together creates a dual intimacy outcome. When married couples pray together, they become closer to one another. Also, a deep and intimate relationship is discovered with God through a consistent prayer life. When couples get married, it creates a union between the couple. However, a consistent prayer life establishes a communion between the couple and God.

In addition, Christ-centeredness is achieved when the marital couple pursues and practices Christian principles. These Christian principles are discovered when the marital couple practices devotions by reading the Bible in a systematic format. The systematic studying of the Bible can be enhanced when the couple finds a place of worship where they regularly attend.

The Word of God is a spiritual foundation that will lead the marital couple to maturity in Christ and maturity in their relationship. A marriage is only as strong as its foundation. Strong marriages make Christ the priority in their relationship. The theme Christ-centered was referenced 14 times in different forms (Appendix H). The following couples captured the essence of a Christ-centered marriage.

Table 3
Idea of Oneness Theme, Open Codes, & Frequency

Theme	Open Code	Frequency
Idea of Oneness=IO	Helped eliminate the negative impact of strong family influence	21
	Learned how to avoid financial crisis and pitfalls early	14
	Encouraged to be one in the eyesight of God regardless of religious background	29
	Developed a more in-depth understanding of finances from a Biblical perspective	30
	Learned to rely on God more than money	14
	Understood the notion of “leave and cleave” according to Genesis 2:24	10

Becoming One. The second major theme that was derived from interviewing the participants was the idea of becoming one and the external factors that can hinder this process. When the last opened-ended question was asked to the participants “is there anything else you would like to share about your CPC experience,” many couples pointed out three major external factors that could have potentially divided them as a couple if they had not adequately addressed them during CPC. The frequently common mentioned external factors were family, finance, and

faith. They stated these external factors could have impacted their inward focus which has an insidious means if entering their marital relationship if not careful.

Family. The first sub-theme of “Becoming One” was how the external factor of the couple’s family can have a negative impact on a marriage. The couples who interviewed together were reluctant to mention anything negative about their spouse, but individually there was an overall concern for the extended family being too involved in their marriage early on. Eric stated that his fiancé’s family involvement was a major issue when they were dating.

Robert stated;

I was so happy when we attended the premarital class. The facilitator said you can't allow your family to be in the business of your new family....this was the best part of the class."

Extended families that express their opinions and preferences typically differ from the married couple. When married couples reach a decision on a particular subject or issue, it is dangerous when extended family members interject their opinion and change one of the spouse's view within the marriage. “Sometimes parents are so reluctant to lose their son or daughter to the new spouse that they try to control the couples lives thereby creating stress and conflict for the new marriage” (Doherty, 2013, p. 74). Moreover, “Unless loyalty issues between the spouse and parents are dealt with early in the marriage, parents and other family members can undermine a marriage for the long haul” (Doherty, 2013, p. 76). These factors can cause a couple not to experience the "oneness" that a married couple should have. It is not the intent to discount their spouse's family opinion, but the couple wants to forge their own identity within their marriage. This was expressed when David stated, "I value my wife's parent's opinions, but

they should not expect me to do everything they say just because it worked for them...." The couples expressed that they were taught in CPC that Christian couples should lean heavily on the biblical principle of "leaving and cleaving" when it comes to the marriage and the family.

"Therefore, shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). Most of the couples agreed that this was an essential factor to help them grow together as one.

Finance. Also, the couples agreed that their work/labor/employment is a part of their marriage. However, it is also an external factor that must be guarded against. Kim's statement captures the essence of how the sub-theme finance impacted her husband

Kim stated;

My husband was a workaholic before we got married. During our CPC, the facilitators expressed the importance of quality time in a marriage... I think this changed how he approached his work.

According to Doherty (2013), it is a challenge for married couples to balance the demands of work and the demands of spending quality time together. Although the couple's work is an external factor that can hinder their marriage, many couples pointed out that addressing their finances during CPC was more beneficial than all the other topics. Michelle captured the essence of this when she stated, "no finance, no romance" in a seemingly joking but serious manner. According to Britt and Huston (2012), the number one reason for the rise in divorces in American culture has been connected to money. The misunderstanding and the mismanagement of finances have derailed many marriages. Many of the participants that were interviewed expressed how the topic of finances was a significant part of the CPC.

Kiesha stated;

“I had no idea how disconnected we were about our finances before our counseling session.”

MacArthur (2000), contended;

By God's providence, people are in varying financial situations, but we all have to deal with the same questions: What do we do with our resources? How should we spend our money? How much should we save and invest? Those questions constantly test the strength of a marriage (p. 3).

The sub-theme about finances was referenced 14 times by 10 different individuals. The consensus among these individuals was not a question of how much money they make but how they would manage the finances they had. Several of the couples also mentioned that they appreciated how CPC incorporate a biblical perspective regarding finances. MacArthur (2000) stated, that materialism can be eliminated if couples have “biblical motives and balanced practices regarding money” (p. 8). However, the participants' interviews were divided down the middle stating how money impacts a marriage. Half of the participants that referenced money reported that money is a crucial factor in sustaining the marriage. The other half indicated that they place less emphasis on their money and put a greater focus on trusting God to meet their needs. The following two statements capture the essence of how the participants view the impact money has on their marriage after they attended CPC.

Michael stated:

employment, economy, and income can be fickle, but God is an absolute that we can depend on to meet our needs.

On the contrary,

Rod stated:

I believe we should put our faith in God and not our treasure; however, God teaches us wisdom on how to be better stewards over our finances...

The couples understood the biblical principal and the scripture "But my God shall supply all your needs according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19). According to MacArthur (2000), the world stresses and scrambles and frequently works to the point of weariness to ensure it has enough riches. However, that is so pointless because our heavenly Father knows our needs and guarantees to meet them every day (MacArthur, 2000). In addition to family and finances as external factors that can hinder a marriage, some of the couples stated that faith or religious background as an external factor that could impede the oneness in a marriage.

Faith. The sub-theme of faith emerged from the interviews as an external factor that impacts the idea of being one. The couples stated they addressed this immensely during their CPC sessions. When considering faith as a possible hindrance to oneness in the marriage, all of the married couples considered themselves Christians; therefore, they were not speaking concerning their belief systems when they referred to faith as a possible hindrance to becoming one. The individuals were talking in terms of their personal denominations and religious backgrounds. For example, Elizabeth spent the majority of her life worshiping from the charismatic persuasion of faith and Jorge worshiped from non-charismatic persuasion. They both stated that if this was not discussed adequately during their CPC, this could have been a

stumbling block in their marriage. The problematic position they would have been in is the attempt to find a church that they could mutually agree to attend to worship.

Nevertheless, from the interviews, most of the married couples searched diligently to find a church they both felt comfortable joining to alleviate future problems in their marriage. Furthermore, they realized a connection to their faith background is a connection to their cultural background. From the marital couple's perspective, many of the cultural trends in the individual's personal paradigms were derived from their religious experiences. This was a preemptive measure for the next emerging major theme, the marital role for the couples.

Table 4

Marital Roles Theme, Open Codes, & Frequency

Theme	Open Codes	Frequency
Marital Roles=MR	Helped understand my role as a husband	17
	Helped understand my role as a wife	20
	Learned my spouse parenting style	12
	Understood the role of the children	9
	Obtained a biblical perspective on the role of the family	15

Marital Roles. Many individuals who were interviewed stated they did not fully understand their marital role from a biblical perspective prior to CPC. Therefore, the subject of marital roles was a novice idea for most of the couples. During CPC, the couples stated they were introduced to the notion that there are distinct roles that each spouse must play to increase the chance for success in the marriage.

Jason stated:

I was interested in the definition of the husband's role because I grew up in a single parent home, I did not see the husband's role "play out in my household.

This section outlines and discusses the sub-themes that emerged from the major theme of marital roles during the interviews. The first sub-theme discussed is the husband's role in the marriage. Some individuals stated they were informed during CPC that their marital roles and principles would primarily come from the Holy Bible. Six of the females mentioned that they did not like the word submission prior to attending CPC. However, they all expressed when they understood the biblical term submission during their CPC session, they learned to accept and appreciated the true meaning of submitting to their husbands. After interviewing the couples that mentioned submission, it was apparent the husbands and wives had a misconception of what biblical submission was. They reported their CPC facilitators addressed this topic with careful examination of the term and concept of submission. Wiersbe (2019), asserted that couples must understand "submission has nothing to do with the order of authority, but rather governs the operation of authority, how it is given and how it is received" (p. 141).

The most important reason for the sanctity of marriage is that marriage was ordained and approved by God. From the beginning of time, it has been considered as the most sacred and holy institution. In a Christian marriage ordained by God, the husband's and wife's duties in the area of functionality are designed to be different. Not only do these biblical roles follow a divine command, but it also helps individuals perfect their role in the marriage. Fifteen individuals reported they received an explanation regarding this divine design of marital roles which helped them as newly married couples. Andelin (1994), suggested every person in a marriage should learn their role to avoid chaos.

Husband's Role. According to Andelin (1994), a husband's primary role in the marriage is to provide and protect for his family. "A man's most important responsibility in life is to be a guide, protector, and provider for his wife and children. This role is not merely a result of custom or tradition but is of divine origin" (Andelin, 1994, p. 31). Eight of the male participants stated they viewed scriptures in the Bible in CPC that supported this divine origin of a man's responsibility to provide and protect. They also stated that they were provided with multiple scriptures that showed them with evidence that the man is designated as the head of the family. The Bible states in Genesis 3:16 to the woman, "Thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee." Besides, the Apostle Paul reiterated in Ephesians 5:23 which states, "The husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church; therefore, as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything." The Bible instructs women to "reverence" their husbands (Ephesians 5:33). Although this is considered as a divine ordinance for the marriage, some of the husbands admitted this principle caused some tension in their CPC class with the majority of the couples. To address the tension, Chris recalled their CPC sessions involved defining some of the key terms from multiple verses in an attempt to gain a better understanding of what their roles in the marriage are in the eyesight of God. He continued and stated;

After each couple had a real knowledge of the scriptures from the Bible that defined their roles as the husband, the men and women understood their roles and were on board to go with it.

Travis stated his wife had a variety of questions during their CPC class regarding the headship concept of the husband. Currently, the contemporary feminist movement seems to be an antithesis to the divine role of the husband. MacArthur (2010), purports that marriages are in

danger because of the rise in the feminist movement. Due to a lack of understanding of the biblical principles regarding marriage, many radical feminists called for the end of marriage as an institution. Consequently, during the CPC sessions, this principle of the husband's divine role was succinctly explored and explained. Krystal who has a limited religious background stated she initially thought the husband headship concept was chauvinistic. Nevertheless, after clear explanations were given during CPC, she was able to see the logic in her husband being the head, performing the roles of protector and provider. The acceptance of this concept would be crucial for the couples because the role of the wife would definitely appear to be antiquated in her modern and millennium mindset.

According to one of the interview questions, all of the couples currently have children. Seven of the ten couples did not have children prior to getting married. During CPC, nine individuals stated that a portion of the counseling session was dedicated to the husband's role in raising children. Jason said CPC taught him that the father's role in raising children is teaching them by creating an atmosphere of obedience by exemplifying their behavior through his obedience to Christ. This point is made in scripture, "And you fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4). The same commandment is echoed in Colossians 3:21, "Fathers provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged." Also, the father must teach and train his children in the ways of the Lord. The couples were taught in CPC that this task is accomplished when the Father takes the role as a spiritual leader for his children.

Wife's Role. CPC teaches according to the Bible, much like the husband's role as a divine origin, the wife's role has a divine origin as well. In referencing the wife's role, the individuals used descriptive words to explain what they were taught during CPC. They stated

they were taught according to the Bible, the woman's primary role is to be the wife, mother, and homemaker. This foundation of the wife's role is indicated by the following scripture: When God made man, he said, "It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helpmeet for him" (Genesis 2:18). Therefore, she was given to him to be a wife and a supporting companion. The wife's position as a mother was established when God blessed her with the function of childbearing. Nine individuals stated this portion of role identification in the CPC session was difficult for them to comprehend at first.

Tamara stated she had multiple questions when this topic of her role as a helpmeet. She asked;

What if the wife works, does her role as the homemaker change? What if the wife makes more money than the husband, is she now considered the provider? What if the wife has more education than the husband, is he still to be the leader?

In the post-modern contemporary environment, the lines are blurred when the roles in a marriage is discussed. Nonetheless, the CPC sessions attempted to explain the functionality of roles without lessening the identity of the husband or the wife. All the couples noted when they attended CPC, they all planned on having children. The role of the child was part of the CPC session. Once again, the couples had differing opinions on the role of the children based upon their backgrounds.

Children's Role. Nonetheless, all the couples agreed the primary role of the child is to obey their parents. The biblical commandment about honoring your father and mother was a consensus with all the couples. In every child's life, this is the first important moral principle to be learned regarding behavior toward others. Nine couples pointed out in several different ways that the discussion of parenting styles prior to marriage allowed them to "iron out" their

difference before getting married. Felicia stated if this topic was not discussed, this could have caused significant issues in their marriage. She said;

David parents were very liberal almost to a fault. He didn't have a curfew and could have an opinion and question his parents about things he didn't agree with. I come from a strict household where kids didn't have an opinion, you were told what to do and did not ask questions why. We had to have a real come to Jesus meeting about how we raise our kids. The counseling sessions allowed us to work through our differences of opinions.

This exchange along with others is what the essence of the sub-theme children's roles that was generated under the major theme of marital roles from the interviews. Although most of the couples did not have children at the time of their attendance of CPC, their CPC sessions impacted their marital stability by allowing the couples to work through their misconceptions, differences, and different opinions before they became an issue in their marriage.

Summary

Chapter Four outlined the results of the data collection that sought to explain the lived experiences of married couples that participated in a CPC class that used the Prepare/Enrich curriculum. Through structured interviews, the participants retold their CPC experiences. From the interviews, three major themes emerged during the analysis of the data. The first theme focused was based on the individuals' spiritual foundation that had the sub-themes of commitment, communication, and Christ-centeredness emerged. The second theme of idea of oneness emerged from interviewing the individuals with the sub-themes of external factors, finance, and faith that impacted their idea of becoming one. And the third theme of marital roles emerged from the interviews. The sub-theme of Biblical responsibility, the husband's role, wife's

role, and children's role all emerged under the theme of marital roles as the individuals mentioned their roles in the marriage

The researcher attempted to answer the two central research questions; does CPC impact a couple's marital stability and spiritual growth? After reviewing the data, the two central research questions were answered with evidence provided from the structured interviews. Overall, the participants described topics that were taught during the CPC that impacted their spiritual growth and marital stability. Each participant expressed that communication was the most insightful topic they discussed in CPC. All of the participants stated that CPC helped them in some way and would recommend that all couples who are considering marriage attend a CPC.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to analyze the couple's spiritual growth and marital stability further after they attended Christian premarital counseling (CPC) that used the research-based Prepare/Enrich curriculum. The researcher used interviews from individuals and couples that attended CPC that used the Prepare/Enrich curriculum to collect the data for this research. The researcher chose this data collection method because it provided the researcher with rich data from the lived experience of the individuals (Creswell, 2013). A couple's experience is unique for each individual and each couple; therefore, a phenomenological design using a narrative methodology will be the most compatible for the current study. The following chapter consists of (a) an overview of the chapter, (b) a summary of the findings, (c) a discussion of the findings and the implications in light of the relevant literature and theory, (d) an implications section (methodological and practical), (e) an outline of the study delimitations and limitations, and (f) recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

The reason and purpose of this phenomenological study were to determine the impact CPC that uses the Prepare/Enrich curriculum have on a couple's marital stability and spiritual growth. The researcher used structured recorded interviews that were professionally transcribed then uploaded in the NVIVO software. The NVIVO system is a Computer-Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) that enables the researcher to carefully and quickly organize the transcribed data. The following questions guided this research:

RQ1: What impact does Christian premarital counseling have on a couple's overall marital stability?

RQ2: What impact does Christian premarital counseling have on the individual's spiritual growth?

After the participants confirmed all the transcribed data, the researcher began the meticulous process of analyzing the data. There were three major themes that emerged from the analyzed data. The first theme focused was based on the individuals' spiritual foundation that had the sub-themes of commitment, communication, and Christ-centeredness that emerged from the data. The second theme of the idea of oneness emerged from interviewing the individuals with the sub-themes of external factors, finance, and faith that impacts their idea of becoming one. Finally, the third theme of marital roles emerged from the interviews. The sub-theme of Biblical responsibility emerged under the theme of marital roles as the individuals mentioned their roles in the marriage and also the role of their children.

The researcher used structured interview questions to get answers from the participants to answer the two research questions. The interview questions sought to get the lived-experiences of the participants' experience of attending a CPC. Overwhelmingly, the participants stated that their attendance in CPC gave them a stronger spiritual foundation as it related to their marriage and helped their marriage to maintain stability.

Research question one (RQ1) was answered through the emerged themes of the idea of oneness and marital roles. The participants stated that CPC gave them the knowledge and understanding how to become one and help understand their role according to God in the marriage. The greater understanding of these two themes from attending CPC impacted their marriage and helped their marriage maintain stability.

The participants stated that after attending CPC, they understood what it meant to effectively communicate, be committed to God first and one another, and to have a Christ-

centered marriage in the eyesight of God. The participants acknowledged that their better understanding of these sub-themes in the eyesight of God gave them a stronger spiritual foundation. Therefore, the research question number two (RQ2) was definitely answered by all the participants in some form because they acknowledged CPC had an impact on their spiritual growth through these emerged sub-themes.

Discussion

This study was empirically motivated because of the lack of research CPC have on couples' spiritual growth and marital stability that use the Prepare/Enrich curriculum. Several studies have focused on CPC programs that use a variety of resources and toolkits (DiBlasio, 2010; Hook & Worthington, 2009; Marks, 2007; Plumb, 2011); however, there are limited studies that have used a standard curriculum to test their results. The researcher used a narrow focus of the Prepare/Enrich curriculum to provide a wide perspective on how CPC programs impact a couple's spiritual growth and overall marital stability. According to Worthington et al. (2011), eighty percent of couples who received eight to ten hours of quality Christian premarital education stay together.

The study of Nelson et al. (2011), and Worthington Jr. (1990), are the two studies that guided and inspired the researcher to conduct this study. The following section contains an analysis of the two studies along with themes from chapter two to confirm and provide insight on why participants' CPC experience was very similar. This section will elaborate on the commonalities between the themes generated from the interviews and the themes from chapter two.

Empirical

Worthington Jr.'s (1990), study focused on a Christian approach to counseling couples. Although this study focused on a Christian approach to counseling couples who are planning to be married, there similar benefits that the couples received from this study and Worthington Jr.'s (1990) study. Worthington Jr.'s (1990), study examined how Christian couple's counseling help couples grow spiritually and maintain marital stability by helping couples solve their problems from a Christian perspective. This study examined couples premarital counseling experience and determined the impact on their marital stability and spiritual growth before they encountered marital problems. This study looks at the proactive approach to CPC, and the study of Worthington (1990), look at the reactive approach to Christian counseling. The two approaches yielded similar results as it relates to the couples' spiritual growth and marital stability.

Theoretical

Nelson et al. (2011), theorized that couples who believed their marriage to be sacred or sanctified and those who believed that God is actively involved in their marriage tend to have high marital satisfaction and communicate well. The findings of Nelson et al. (2011), confirmed the findings of the current which found that all the couples mentioned that healthy communication is one of the most important elements that help them maintain marital stability. Nelson et al. (2011), study indicated that there is a connection between religious values and commitment to their marriage. According to Nelson et al. (2011), more than half of the 75 participants (n=39, 52%) categorized their religious affiliations as Christian (n=14), Baptist (n=12), or Catholic (n=10). The Nelson et al. (2011), study findings were consistent with past findings that acknowledged that most couples do attribute at least some of their marital health to their religious beliefs.

The majority of the couple's religious beliefs in the Nelson et al. (2011), are Christ-based; this confirms the results of this study stating Christian counseling impacts how couples communicate and honor their commitment. Nelson et al. (2011), research examined individuals' perceptions of moral commitment in their marriage and how their religious and spiritual values influence those perceptions. This study extended the research of Nelson et al. (2011) and examined the individuals' perceptions of how CPC impacted their spiritual foundation and spiritual growth. The results of the two studies were astonishing because of the commonalities of the participant's experience. The common results could be that Christ is the major common denominator in the two studies.

Implications

The purpose of this section was to address the theoretical literature of Nelson et al. (2011), which found that couples reported that their marriage began with a religious focus. This section will also address the empirical research of Worthington Jr.'s (1990), study that focused on a Christian approach to counseling couples. The practical implications will inform marriage counselors, pastors, lay leaders, and other marriage helping professionals about the impact CPC have on couples throughout their marriage. Chapter two presented several main topics in the review of literature that later emerged three themes and nine sub-themes after the collected data from the interviews were analyzed. The following themes and sub-themes emerged from the data: a) spiritual foundation that had the sub-themes of commitment, communication, and Christ-centeredness emerged, b) idea of oneness emerged from interviewing the individuals with the sub-themes of external factors, finance, and faith that impacted their idea of becoming one, and c) marital roles emerged from the interviews with the sub-themes of the role of the husband,

wife, and children. The following sections will discuss and compare the relationship between the review of literature in Chapter Two and the emerged themes and sub-themes.

Theoretical Implications

The theoretical implications of this study focus on the impact CPC have on a couple's marital stability and spiritual growth. The researcher hopes that the study's results will give premarital counselors, pastors, family therapist, and other helping professionals an overall understanding of the impact Prepare/Enrich CPC have on marital stability and spiritual growth. The study and its findings are confirmed through the study of Nelson et al. (2011), which found that couples reported that their marriage began with a religious focus. The participants of this study reported that they chose to attend CPC because traditional or secular premarital counseling lack the biblical principles that CPC embed in the sessions. The participants of this study realized the benefits their CPC experience afforded them by teaching them their biblical responsibility in the marriage. The knowledge gave the couples a more in-depth understanding of how God views their marriages. The biblical perspective and informed revelation of CPC offered the participants a strong foundation to build their marriage. Three of the participants reported that their CPC experience helped them understand that each person in the marriage must have mutual respect for their spouse.

Empirical Implications

There are published articles that focus on the effects of CPC (DiBlasio, 2010; Hook & Worthington, 2009; Marks, 2007; Plumb, 2011). However, there is limited research examining the impact of CPC using the research-based Prepare/Enrich curriculum. This qualitative study has examined the CPC experience of ten married couples to determine the effects of CPC that used the Prepare/Enrich curriculum. The researcher used the interview process to gain insights

from couples on their backgrounds, marriage experiences, and spiritual growth as it related to them attending the Prepare/Enrich CPC program. The emerged themes that generated from the interviews were insightful and could add value to anyone who offers premarital counseling. The emerged themes from this study will positively contribute to an extensive database of research on premarital counseling. It is the hope that pastors, lay leaders, and Christian premarital counselors help couples build their marriage on a solid foundation of Christ while incorporating a structured curriculum like the Prepare/Enrich. When these two components are both incorporated simultaneously during CPC, this will give the couples valuable marital information and the Godly inspiration about their marriage.

Practical Implications

The practical implications of this study rely heavily on the information that was provided by the individuals' CPC experience as they remembered it. It is evident that Prepare/Enrich CPC have a positive impact on a couple's marital stability and spiritual growth. This study will be an asset to premarital counselors, pastoral counselors, marriage therapist, lay leaders, and other marital helping professionals. This study will also help organizations, churches, and all others that would like to develop a premarital or post-marital program that would positively benefit married couples. The couples offered some valuable information about how their CPC experience brought value to their lives as a person. The couples were amazed about crucial elements of being married that they learned in their CPC class. The couples reported that their CPC experience provided them with the tools they needed to begin their marriage as a couple. Their CPC experience also gave them a perspective and an understanding of their role in the marriage according to the Bible.

The themes that were generated from this study will encourage those who will counsel couples that are considering marriage to use the CPC approach and use the research-based Prepare/Enrich curriculum or something similar. Currently, premarital counselors use structured curriculums to conduct their premarital sessions which allow the couples to understand all the elements that could be problematic during marriage if they are not addressed before getting married. The additional element of including Christ in these sessions gives the couples a stable foundation to build their marriage. This study will not only benefit premarital counselors, but it will help couples who are married that did not attend CPC. Many couples decide to attend CPC after marriage to gain knowledge about being married because they realize that being married can be a challenge if certain elements are not adequately addressed. The findings of this study could be debated that the results will only impact couples who are Christians and believe in the Christian faith.

Delimitations and Limitations

The results of this study are limited because this study only focused on a specific group of participants that attended a Prepare/Enrich CPC. The results may vary to CPC that uses a curriculum other than the Prepare/Enrich. The Prepare/Enrich curriculum and all the participants live in the Dallas, County area located in Texas was the clear delimitations.

The researcher used a purposeful, convenient, and non-randomized sampling method. A limitation of this study is the race and ethnic background of the participants. Most of the participants are of African American descent. An ideal racial breakdown would be a more diverse group of participants. Although the recruitment letters were posted in multiple offices of Christian counselors, churches, and advertised in the local paper, the majority of respondents were African Americans.

The sample size of the participants is another possible limitation of this study. Initially, the goal was to interview twelve couples individually. However, the researcher only interviewed ten couples due to scheduling conflicts and cancellations. Six of the couples were interviewed individually separate from their spouse, and four couples were interviewed together with their spouses present. Although the plan was to interview all the couples individually separate from their spouse, this unintentional deviation, allowed the researcher to see if there was a change in the way the couples responded to the interview questions. The researcher observed no significant differences the way couples responded to the answers with or without their spouse present. The couples appeared to be open and honest about their CPC experience and were willing to share their experience freely even outside the scope of the questions. The researcher had to redirect the participants to the structured interview questions continually.

The researcher used a qualitative design study to extend the research of Nelson et al. (2011), theory that will include couples that attended a CPC program that incorporated the Prepare/Enrich curriculum. Further research might be warranted to seek to determine the effects of CPC using a different curriculum. The research study was conducted under the premise to answer the following questions:

- What impact does Christian premarital counseling have on a couple's overall marital stability?
- What impact does Christian premarital counseling have on the individual's spiritual growth?

However, it will take decades of more research to answer such questions. Do we wait to have all the answers before we act on what is already known? The researcher thought otherwise because there is current literature that researchers can explore to determine marriage stability

among married couples (Davis, 2015; Shahhosseini, Hamzehgardeshi, & Kardan Souraki, 2014; Hahlweg & Richter, 2010). There are also research articles that have data on premarital programs that help couples increase marital satisfaction (Cobb & Sullivan, 2015; David & Stafford, 2015). However, there are very few studies that compare premarital programs among Christian and traditional premarital counseling that will yield the marital stability and spiritual growth in married couples. Among those who study marriages and marital distress, there is always the argument that we need to know more about the nature of marital distress and marital dissatisfaction and what couples can do to prevent it. There is no reasonable disagreement on that because this will always be the case that one can know more than what is known now. In another decade, there will be more information about factors that contribute to marital distress and dissatisfaction as well as practical strategies for reducing it. Stanley (2010), pointed out that there is a societal need to strengthen marriages; therefore, counselors and therapist should act now on what we know because we can refine our efforts once new knowledge is gained.

Finally, many questions are still up for debate as it relates to the number of hours of premarital counseling a couple should receive to determine the effectiveness. Although most couples participate in four or five sessions, Futris et al. (2011), noted that couples who participated in less than four sessions rated the value of their marriage preparation lower than the couples who participate in eight or nine sessions. Also, the study of Wilmoth and Smyser (2012), revealed that couples that attended four or more education sessions rated their marriage preparation significantly higher than those who attended zero to one session of premarital education. On the contrary, the study of Futris et al. (2011), was not able to find adequate research that tested for variations in the effects of marriage preparation based on the number of

sessions that was offered. Although the research and practice of premarital counseling have been established, further attention to theoretical frameworks to guide premarital counseling is needed.

Recommendations for Future Research

This research study was intended to answer two questions on the phenomenon of the impact Christian premarital counseling have on couple's marital stability and spiritual growth. The researcher found that all the participants acknowledged that their CPC experience contributed to their spiritual growth because of the biblical perspective they were taught each session. However, the participants' number of years married ranged from 6 months to 15 years. This wide-range of the length of time that the participants have been married, limited the researcher to analyze their marital stability truly. It is recommended that this study is replicated using a qualitative design to get a larger sample size and a more diverse population. This study could be simplified and replicated using the data from a questionnaire with the questions the participants were asked. The researcher could run the collected data through the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) system. The researcher would also recommend the researcher that replicate this study, only use participants who have been married ten or more years to analyze marital stability based on their years of experience in their marriage.

In addition to the recommendations, it would be expedient that a future researcher conduct a quantitative research study to analyze the divorce rate of couples that attended CPC that used the Prepare/Enrich curriculum or a curriculum that is similar. The results will allow the researcher to measure multiple areas CPC impacted the couples including marital stability.

Summary

Incorporating Christ in marriage counseling or premarital counseling has shown to be a great benefit to a couple's marital stability and spiritual growth. Professionals that counsel

couples that are planning to get married must understand that counseling couples without including Christ will do the couples a disservice. As previously stated, marriage is a spiritual institution created and ordained by God. Therefore, a component of a successful premarital counseling program must include a thematic discussion based on the foundations of Christ. The couples in this study reported that their CPC experience impacted their spiritual foundation, their idea of oneness, and marital roles. It was evident from the first interview the positive impact CPC had on the individual as a person and their marriage as a whole. It seems rather obvious to incorporate some religious aspect during premarital counseling because most weddings take place in a church setting.

There are several premarital counseling programs, classes, and sessions that attempt to prepare couples by giving them the fundamentals of what to expect when they get married. Couples that attend premarital counseling desire more than the fundamentals and want something that is long-lasting. Counselors who do not provide couples with the Biblical principles of marriage during their premarital counseling is similar to patients going to the doctor and not receiving proper advice and prescriptions they need to live a healthy life. Counselors should inform couples that their priority should be their relationship with Christ.

In addition to the couple's service to Christ, the married couples in the study also emphasized service to each other. The married couples universally thought it was essential to serve each other the way God intended. The general thought from the study was that many couples thought it was important to "out serve" each other. When couples practice the ideas of out serving each other, everyone's needs will be met. It is important to note that the out serving idea is not a competition, but it is utilized to enhance companionship. The general benefit from

this study is that a structured curriculum and Christ should be incorporated in premarital counseling.

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APPENDIX A
IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

January 15, 2019

Angie M. Baker

IRB Approval 3615.011519: Marital Stability and Spiritual Growth: A Phenomenological Study on Christian Premarital Counseling

Dear Angie M. Baker,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases are attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
The Graduate School

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APPENDIX B
CONSENT FORM

**MARITAL STABILITY AND SPIRITUAL GROWTH: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY
ON CHRISTIAN PREMARITAL COUNSELING**

Angie M. Baker
Liberty University
Community Care and Counseling

You are invited to be in a research study about your experience when you attended Christian Premarital Counseling that used the Prepare and Enrich curriculum. You were selected as a possible participant because you are 18 years of age or older, married in a heterosexual relationship, and attended Christian Prepare and Enrich premarital counseling session. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Angie Baker, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Community Care and Counseling at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this phenomenological, qualitative study is to examine the impact Christian premarital counseling (CPC), that uses the Prepare and Enrich curriculum, has on the couple's spiritual growth and marital stability. I will attempt to answer the following two questions; **RQ1:** What impact does Christian premarital counseling have on a couple's overall marital stability? **RQ2:** What impact does Christian premarital counseling have on the individual's spiritual growth?

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Complete in person or virtually, a private, audio-recorded interview about your CPC experience. You and your spouse will be interviewed separately. Each interview will take approximately 30 minutes to complete.
2. Complete a 14 question True/False questionnaire called the Weiss-Cerreto Relationship Status Inventory. This will take approximately 5 minutes to complete.

Risks: The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Benefits: Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Compensation: For couples who choose to participate and complete the interview process, each couple will receive one \$25 Visa gift card.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report, I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participants will be assigned a pseudonym.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and/or a locked filing cabinet and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all records will be destroyed.

APPENDIX B (Cont.)

- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and will then be erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study: If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Angie M. Baker. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her 214-537-8133 and/or email abaker42@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty chair, Dr. Timothy Heck at tim@fcahelp.com.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

APPENDIX C

Interview Questions for Research Study Participants

Thank you for your participation in this study being conducted as part of my doctoral research at Liberty University. In this interview I will be asking you some questions about your participation in the Pre-Marital Prepare/Enrich Class, your marriage, and your spirituality. Please take your time to think through the questions and respond openly, sharing as much as you would like. I will be recording the interview and your responses will be analyzed and used anonymously in my dissertation, a copy of which you will be offered upon publication.

Demographic Information:

1. Your age?
2. Your ethnicity?
3. Number of marriages?
4. Religious affiliation?
5. How long have you been married?
6. In what year did you marry?
7. When did you participate in the Pre-Marital Prepare/Enrich Class?
8. Did you have options for Pre-Marital Classes?
9. Have you ever been separated formally and/or legally in your marriage?
10. How many children do you have together and/or separate from the marriage?

Interview Questions:

11. Why did you choose to participate in the Pre-Marital Prepare/Enrich Class for your marriage preparation and how would you describe your attitude and expectations going into the class?
12. How did your participation in the Pre-Marital Prepare/Enrich Class help you prepare for marriage?
13. What skills, tools or resources have you used in your marriage that you gained from the Pre-Marital Prepare/Enrich Class?
14. How did your participation in the Pre-Marital Prepare/Enrich Class help you to grow spiritually?
15. In what ways has your spirituality strengthened and supported your marriage?
16. How would your marriage be different if you had not participated in the Pre-Marital Prepare/Enrich Class?
17. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience in the Christian Pre-Marital Prepare/Enrich Class?

APPENDIX D

Weiss-Cerreto Marital Relationship Status Inventory

This scale has been removed from this dissertation because the researcher does not own the rights to publish this scale. To access a copy, click on the provided link to request a copy.

<https://www.gottman.com/>

APPENDIX E

Recruitment Letter

Dear Participant,

As a graduate student in the Department of Community Care and Counseling at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of this phenomenological, qualitative study is to examine the impact Christian premarital counseling (CPC), that uses the Prepare and Enrich curriculum, has on the couple's spiritual growth and marital stability. I am writing to invite you and your spouse to participate in my study.

The requirements for participation are the following: you must be 18 years of age or older, married in a heterosexual relationship, and have participated in a Christian Prepare and Enrich premarital counseling session. If you agree to participate, you and your spouse will be asked to complete a 14-item relationship status checklist and meet for a private interview about your CPC experience. You and your spouse will be interviewed separately. Each interview will take approximately 30 minutes to complete. Your names and other identifying information will be requested as part of your participation, but the information will remain confidential.

To sign up to participate, using a QR code reader, scan the QR code located at the bottom of the page. A consent document will populate after you scan the QR code. Print, sign, and email the consent form to abaker42@liberty.edu. Local participants will have the option to sign the consent at the time of the interview.

If you and your spouse are chosen to participate and both complete the interview process, each couple will receive a \$25 Visa gift card.

Sincerely,

Angie Baker, M.Ed., LPC

Scan QR Code



(QR Code Deleted)

APPENDIX F

Participants Demographics

	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	C8	C9	C10
Husband Age	33	43	29	31	46	25	27	35	40	27
Wife Age	28	42	26	30	42	23	26	33	40	24
Husband Race	African American	African American	African American	African American	African American	Caucasian	African American	Hispanic	African American	African American
Wife Race	African American	African American	African American	Caucasian	African American	Caucasian	African American	Hispanic & African American	African American	African American
1st Marriage	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year Attended CPC	2013 June	2009 Feb	2017 Jan	2013 June	2006 Oct	2017 Jan	2017 Jan	2013 June	2003 April	2017 Jan
Year of Marriage	2014	2009	2017	2013	2006	2018	2017	2012	2004	2018
Length of Marriage	5 years	10 years	2 years	5.5 years	12.5 years	1 year	2 years	5 years	15 years	6 months
Number of Children	2	2	3	3	4	0	1	5	2	1
State of Residence	Texas	Texas	Texas	Texas	Texas	Texas	Texas	Texas	Texas	Texas
Religious Affiliation	Christian	Christian	Christian	Christian	Christian	Christian	Christian	Christian	Christian	Christian
Couples	David Felicia	Michael Tamara	Eric Tracey	Jason Kim	Chris Kiesha	Travis Shelly	Rod Shannon	Jorge Elizabeth	Darrell Michelle	Robert Krystal

APPENDIX G**Transcriptionist Confidentially Agreement**

I _____ will keep all information obtained from the research study in strict confidence. I understand and acknowledge I can be held legally responsible if confidentiality is breached on my behalf.

Transcriptionist Signature

Date

Researcher Signature

Date

APPENDIX H

Impact of CPC

Impact of CPC	Marital Themes	Marital Sub-Themes	Number Marital Stability Impacted	Number Spiritual Growth Impacted	Number of Individuals Mentioned	Total Times Referenced
Marital Stability and Spiritual Growth	SF	Communication	15	12	20	43
		Commitment	17	14	20	31
		Christ-Centered	13	17	13	14
	MR	Husband	11	11	15	17
		Wife	15	15	15	20
		Children	11	11	9	9
	IO	Family	18	15	16	21
		Finance	12	17	10	14
		Faith	14	15	20	29

Note: A total of 10 couples were interviewed. Six couples were interviewed separately, and 4 couples were interviewed together.

APPENDIX I**Permission to Use Weiss-Cerreto Relationship Inventory Scale**

Hello Angie Baker,

Thank you for contacting The Gottman Institute.

Thank you also for reaching out and asking for permission to use our resources!

You're free to use the resources in this capacity as long as The Gottman Institute is appropriately credited for the content.

Please avoid printing/copying materials and/or distributing them as that would be directly against copyright law.

Please let me know if I may be of further assistance.

Walter Guity

Customer Service Manager

The Gottman Institute

2101 4th Ave Suite 1750

Seattle, WA 98121

206-523-9042x104

Your request (**14115**) has been updated. To add additional comments, reply to this email.

Walter (The Gottman Institute) <customerservice@gottman.com>