Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity

A Marriage Education Program to Address an Education Gap Affecting Those

Not Participating in Premarital Education.

A Thesis Project Report Submitted to

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by

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THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY THESIS PROJECT ABSTRACT
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   The importance of developing tools and programs within the local congregation to strengthen marriages is of the highest necessity. With an increasing movement away in society from the truths and purposes of God, marriages are under increased stress in modern culture. This societal stress is on all marriages, including those of Christians. This project creates a curriculum and education program to teach married couples and individuals that may or may not have had premarital education. The project is designed in part to meet an observed gap in marriage education at the local level. The project showed a considerable success rate in its ability to strengthen awareness in key areas of marriage understanding. The Three Forks Church of Christ's current ministry and those within the congregation have greatly benefitted by the research done within this project, and the anticipation is that additional families will be strengthened by the efforts that extend from this project in the future.

Abstract length: 156 words.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The Millers meet their minister in his office with an often-heard cry for help: "Our marriage is in crisis; we are thinking of getting divorced." For the Millers, it has been a struggle for many years to build a marriage. All along, they never quite learned how to communicate, nor even grasped entirely what it was God wanted them to experience in their marriage. They had attended services reasonably regularly for five years but were married before they became devoted Christians and did not participate in any premarital education. Now, they pursue marriage counseling in hopes of salvaging their marriage, but what if the church could have done more along the way to help them before they reached this point of crisis? What if this crisis could even have been avoided?

The church faces the real difficulties of struggling and failing marriages. Divorce (and its repercussions on its members and the community) reveals the high cost of unhealthy marriages. Divorce rates are high in the United States, but accurate statistics are challenging to ascertain. Some researchers have claimed a 42% divorce rate and a declining trend. In contrast, others believe this figure does not correctly factor in crucial details such as couples getting married at older ages than in previous decades.[1]

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[1] Sheela Kennedy and Steven Ruggles, "Breaking Up Is Hard to Count: The Rise of Divorce in the United States, 1980–2010," *Demography* 51, no. 2 (January 2014): 588, http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s13524-013-0270-9.

Those counted as Christians are not immune to the overall trend of frequent divorce in the United States. According to a 2008 study, Catholics reported a 28% divorce rate, evangelicals a 26% rate, and those of a Christian faith (but not identifying as Catholic or evangelical) reported a 33% divorce rate. This rate is identical to the rate among nonreligious-reporting individuals.[2] These statistics paint an alarming picture for church leaders. They should be a catalyst for consideration of what the church is doing to educate its membership on marriage and how to have a healthy relationship within the marriage.

This introductory chapter examines how one Kentucky church—the Three Forks Church of Christ—is currently engaging in marriage education. It provides the thesis statement that governed the approach and direction of the research herein. Next, the section explores some of the ways the church is currently addressing the need to educate its members on marriage and its importance. A perceived problem or lacking in the approach now being administered is identified. The chapter addresses the purpose of exploring the problem and a potential step toward a solution. Finally, the chapter lays out the limitations and boundaries associated with this project.

Thesis Statement

For the purposes of this project, it was expected that implementing a well-developed marriage-education curriculum/program would help to strengthen families in the Three Forks congregation by addressing a lack in the current education program. That lack or gap in the current offering is the absent of a structured education program to address those who had not taken premarital education or counseling prior to entering marriage. That gap was primarily seen in those married couples who did not participate in a premarital education program; however, the

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[2] "New Marriage and Divorce Statistics Released," Barna, Family & Kids (March 31, 2008): https://www.barna.com/research/new-marriage-and-divorce-statistics-released/.

program was offered to all married couples to help address misunderstandings that might have still existed even for those who had premarital education in some form prior to marriage. Including all married couples also helped create a reference from which to draw an analysis of the effectiveness of the program through an analysis of the benefit perceived by those participating in the program who had not participated in premarital counseling versus those in the program who had participated in premarital counseling or education.

Ministry Context

One of the foundations of the church is the Great Commission given by Jesus Himself: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt 28:19–20 NKJV).[3] It is this charge to make disciples and teach all the ways of Jesus that sets the ministry context for the church as a whole and, more specifically, for the Three Forks Church of Christ.

The Great Commission and Education

What can be concluded from the Great Commission is that a primary function of the church is to educate and to edify. As one Bible scholar put it, "The church also edifies its members through instruction or teaching. This is part of the broad task of discipling."[4] This conclusion can be drawn from other passages as well. As an example, Paul makes the argument that the church is to make known (hence, to teach) the mystery of God to the powers of the world, "to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places" (Eph 2:10).

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[3] Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references in this thesis project will be from the King James Version of the Bible.

[4] Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998), 1064.

Even the singing of a Christian, or a group of Christians, is to have a focus on teaching: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord" (Col. 3:16). Commenting on this passage, Anthony Ash wrote, "Teaching and admonishing are activities of those who love one another, and who wish to help others grow in Christ. No view of the corporate activities of Christians can afford to neglect this."[5] Teaching is then not simply a prerogative of the church; it is an essential part of its fabric and fundamental purpose.

The biblical view of the church as a teaching body helps to form the church's intent, structure, and purpose. It is important for the church to take the responsibility to teach seriously and make every opportunity to teach the doctrine that Christ delivered. This includes God's created intent for marriage, as well as the godly attitudes and communication that make a marriage healthy. This is a responsibility that Three Forks must fulfill throughout and within its ministries.

The Three Forks Church of Christ

The Three Forks Church of Christ is a rural congregation of 140 located in south-central Kentucky. The congregation was established in 1907 as the Three Forks Christian Church. It has been held in the same location ever since, constructing a new building in 2010. The congregation has served the rural area of mostly farming families for over a century.

Over the last twenty years (and especially over the past twelve years), church demographics have changed to include more of a mix of professionals, schoolteachers, factory workers, and tradespeople while maintaining a significant farming membership base, though today most of the farmers are bi-vocational. The congregation is multigenerational. It primarily

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[5] Anthony Lee Ash, *Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1994), 207.

consists of middle-class, Caucasian families. Within the 140 who regularly attend Three Forks, there are around forty married couples. Twenty-one of those couples have school-aged children or are in the age group to have such.

With such a large portion of the congregation made up of married couples, the need to address the reality of marriage education is apparent. The observed reality of high divorce rates (mentioned earlier in the chapter) emphasizes the need for marriage education and the sense of urgency in which the church needs to act.

Currently, Three Forks is employing a few different ministries to help educate its members concerning marriage. The primary source of such education has been premarital education programs. Premarital education and counseling programs are quite popular among churches and other community organizations, as they are seen as a useful tool in promoting healthier marriages. Premarital counseling is seen generally as a positive influence on marriage, and it is a practice in which ministers should be engaged. Yet, often the specific details of that premarital counseling differ drastically among ministers. Several studies have shown support for the effectiveness of premarital counseling in increasing marital satisfaction.

In a 2003 meta-analysis by Carroll and Doherty, an evaluation of research on the effectiveness of premarital preventive programs, including counseling and education programs, was undertaken. The researchers reviewed the results of thirteen experimental studies on premarital counseling and education programs. According to these published findings, "Results revealed that the mean effect size for premarital programs was .80, which means that the average person who participated in a premarital prevention program was significantly better off afterward than 79% of people who did not participate."[6] These findings bolster the view that premarital

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[6] Jason S. Carroll and William J. Doherty, "Evaluating the Effectiveness of Premarital Prevention Programs: A Meta-Analytic Review of Outcome Research," *Family Relations* 52, no. 2 (April 2003): 105–18.

programs do have a positive effect on those who participate in them and that the Three Forks Church's ministry has been correct.

For the Three Forks congregation, the implementation of these programs has been erratic and inconsistent throughout recent history. Premarital education programs have taken place in two primary areas prior to 2018 at Three Forks. The first is premarital counseling offered by its ministers. Over the past twelve years, premarital counseling has been provided to those who request to be married by the minister at Three Forks as well as on occasion when the minister was not officiating but was still called on for premarital counseling.

The program generally used by the minister for engaged couples entails a program of six to eight sessions, each lasting one to two hours. The session includes a review of important topics such as the biblical definition of marriage and the biblical role of husbands and wives. It also looks at practical issues such as communication, expectations, and finances. Prior to the last twelve years, the extent of premarital counseling provided is difficult to define as no records were kept, and members have limited memory of what was offered.

Second, marriage education has focused on teens or high school-aged youth. These teachings have been channeled through programs on morality and the importance of marriage. There have been designated classroom studies over the years on related topics; however, these have not been well researched, and the teachers were left to create the curriculum for their class. They also have not been consistently offered or attended. With so many youths involved in school, sports, and jobs, the unfortunate result is a strain on church attendance in general and participation in studies like these. These studies have only occurred a handful of times over the past twelve years.

In 2018, as part of a research project conducted by this writer, a survey of married couples was taken at the Three Forks Church of Christ. The results indicated that 30% of the married couples surveyed were attending the Three Forks congregation at the time of their wedding, but only 14% were involved in any premarital counseling. From these findings, it was concluded that the church needed to address its premarital education program.[7] These premarital education improvements are expected to help close the gap of members at Three Forks going through comprehensive premarital education program. Only time (and potential future studies) will show the extent of how these new premarital education strategies might fill the gap in the education of those who marry while attending the Three Forks Church of Christ. However, even if the steps in that previous study prove ultimately fruitful, there remains a large gap yet to be addressed.

The same survey found that 70% of the participants had no connection to Three Forks at the time of their wedding. These participants may or may not have been members elsewhere at that time. Roughly half of these respondents did not participate in any premarital counseling. This means that premarital education programs cannot alone close the education gap. This is due to member movement in the community and the active role the church must take in evangelizing the lost. These factors indicate that there will always be church attendees who do not participate in premarital counseling or education prior to marriage and/or prior to becoming a part of the Three Forks Church of Christ. Furthermore, there will be occasions where even members do not participate in these programs due to lack of involvement, consistency, or interest.

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[7] Nikolaus Secula, "A Premarital Congregation-Based Education Program: Towards Addressing A Gap in Premarital Preparation in the Three Forks Church of Christ, South-Central Kentucky, USA" (master's thesis, South African Theological Seminary, 2018), 34, https://www.sats.edu.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Thesis_MThmini_2019_SeculaN.pdf.

As an example, one young couple from the Three Forks congregation got married this past December. The wife grew up in the Three Forks Church of Christ, but the couple sought to be married by another officiant not affiliated with the Three Forks Church. Moreover, they did not participate in the church's offering of premarital counseling, nor did they participate in the young adult classes that were being offered that also addressed some issues pertinent to marriage. The officiant of the wedding did not offer them any form of premarital counseling, either. So, while both of these individuals were raised in the church (the wife being raised and active at Three Forks), they did not participate in the premarital education and counseling programs that the church offered. This example does not serve as a definitive projection of future cases, but it does serve as a representation of the complications that the church might have in educating couples prior to marriage. Studies have confirmed this reality is not a concern simply for the Three Forks Church of Christ.

Despite the improvements seen in marriages between couples who participate in premarital education and counseling, the utilization of such programs remains low.[8] Low participation in premarital counseling is seen across demographics, but some segments of the population do appear to participate less frequently. Most of demographics have either cultural or economic connections. For instance, poorer populations are generally not as likely to participate in premarital counseling. However, it has also been observed that those with greater religious connections are more likely to partake in premarital programs.[9]

These observations indicate that there is a continued possibility that a significant number of married couples will feature at least one partner, if not both, who has not been through a

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[8] Shelby C. Borowski and Rachel B. Tambling, "Applying the Health Belief Model to Young Individuals' Beliefs and Preferences about Premarital Counseling," *The Family Journal* 23, no. 4 (October 2015): 417, http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1066480715602221.

[9] Ibid., 417–19.

premarital education or counseling program. The significance of this reality is that many couples are entering into marriage not as well equipped as they could be if they had participated in a premarital program.

It is important to encourage couples to take advantage of premarital counseling and education programs, but since there remains couples who do not, a marriage education program could help to address this gap by educating those who did not participate in these programs previous to marriage. In the Three Forks congregation, this may include those who are married before becoming Christians and/or before becoming a part of the church. Members who have neglected to take advantage of such programs would also be included in this group. These members became a primary focus of the research for this thesis. This section has described the ministry context in which a marriage education program was presented and pursued.

Problem Presented

The problem that prompted this research was that the Three Forks Church of Christ does not offer a marriage education curriculum to help strengthen marriages and families aimed at those already married. Instead, the congregation has relied on premarital counseling, with couples piecing together effective direction from sermons and standard Bible classes along the way. The current process remains ineffective, and a direct and purposeful revamping of curriculum was needed for it to become helpful to congregants.

The problem can be further divided into two compelling directives or realities. First, the negative impacts of high divorce rates and high levels of marital distress suggest the lack of education and preventative care has contributed to this reality. This can be seen in the results of

studies concluding that those who do not participate in premarital education are at a higher risk of divorce in the first five years of their marriage.[10]

Premarital education and counseling programs have shown short-term and long-term improvements in marital satisfaction.[11] One study indicated that 79% of couples who participated in premarital counseling fared better in their marriages than those who did not participate.[12] It is reasonable to conclude that the lack of such educational opportunities and/or the lack of participation in said opportunities has contributed to the current situation.

Second, the affirmation of the role of the church in teaching its congregants about the institution of marriage also must be dealt with within the premises of this research. The combination of these two realities suggests a scenario in which the Three Forks Church must take steps to address gaps and possible areas of weakness within the current teaching program of the church.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this thesis was to identify a framework for a marriage education program through empirical studies and data; to build upon that framework with biblical truths, purpose, and directives; and finally, to adjust the program to the needs of married couples within the specific congregation. The program was then implemented and measured for its effect on the immediate understanding among the participants of elements within the program. The working hypothesis was that the program would increase the understanding of essential areas related to the marriage relationship.

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[10] Alan J. Hawkins, "Marriage Education Can Prevent Divorce," in *Divorce*, ed. Mike Wilson, (Detroit, MI: Greenhaven, 2009), 4, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/EJ3010571215/OVIC?u=vic_liberty&sid=OVIC&xid=5a974faf.

[11] Borowski and Tambling, "Applying the Health Belief Model," 417.

[12] Ryan G. Carlson, Andrew P. Daire, Matthew D. Munyon, and Mark E. Young, "A Comparison of Cohabiting and Noncohabiting Couples Who Participated in Premarital Counseling Using the PREPARE Model," *The Family Journal* 20, no. 2 (April 2012): 123–30, http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1066480712441588.

This project is not able to provide a longitudinal evaluation of the effects on married couples who participate five or ten years down the road. Such an evaluation is beyond the current scope of this project; however, it would be a good investment for the congregation to consider studies in five and possibly ten years to observe the effect this program has over an extended time. This is further addressed in Chapter 5 under the heading of "Further Study."

Three Forks Church needs to do all that it can to help protect and build up its members and families. An important aspect of this responsibility lies in its education efforts. While the Three Forks Church has capable leadership, teachers, and resources, it is not evident that current efforts are satisfactory in the realm of marriage education. While exact numbers for the immediate area surrounding the church cannot be obtained, statistics for the Commonwealth of Kentucky paint a picture of distress.

The general statistics are telling: "Raw numbers suggest that divorce is on the decline. However, with the rise of cohabitation and the decline of the marriage rate from 8.7 in 2007 to 7.2 in 2015, the numbers have maintained steady with total divorces across Kentucky, holding at just over 50% of total marriages."[13] The continued struggles of marriages and families faced by the congregation and by the surrounding community justify both the research efforts proposed and the energy needed to put together a curriculum for these purposes.

Although it would be helpful to know divorce statistics within the Three Forks Church, no records have been kept by the church in regard to divorces or marriages. These have been deemed personal matters that the church has not purposefully sought to track, partly because such information was not deemed necessary (or socially appropriate). Statistics on divorce were not sought in the surveys for this project as they could not be reasonably ascertained from

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[13] "Marriage and Divorce Rates for Kentucky," Kentucky Marriage Movement, accessed December 11, 2019, http://www.kentuckymarriage.org/marriage-in-kentucky/marriage-divorce-rates-by-county/.

outside sources. Gathering information from current members would have revealed personal information to the researcher. The potential good of having these numbers would not have outweighed the privacy concerns the leadership would have in obtaining them. The lack of this information also did not directly affect the researcher's ability to carry out the project as designed.

Programs and curricula already exist in the area of marriage education; however, it is hereafter argued that these programs may teach in a broad sense the needed topics for such a program. Thus, Three Forks was justified in seeking to create a custom program that best meets the needs of the congregation rather than simply trying to adapt a premade program. Heavy emphasis was placed on establishing the most appropriate and beneficial elements (from existing literature and biblical text) to include in the marriage education program.

Basic Presumptions

This thesis rests upon the presupposition that marriage is a God-created institution that must, therefore, be defined by God. This means that marriage is designed and purposed to be a union of one man with one woman for a lifetime (Gen 2:24). This premise has been challenged by modern critics of marriage and even some religious-minded people, but this research will assume the traditional biblical view of the institution.

This research accepts a second premise that doing nothing to address current gaps and weaknesses in the church teaching program dealing with marriage would only further the problem. Inaction is not an acceptable response to the situation. Inaction in the midst of knowledge of the negative impacts on the church from high divorce rates would make the church complicit in the problem of marital dissatisfaction of its members. As one author put it, "Enrichment education in the early years of marriage could prevent little troubles from growing

into long-standing problems that eventually threaten the marriage."[14] Knowing the possibility of good, it would be wise for the church to act upon that knowledge: "Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin" (Jas 4:17).

A third assumption involves the participation and self-reporting of the participants. This research relied on the diligent engagement of those involved in the teaching curriculum. This engagement includes active listening during instruction, diligence in homework, and implementation of the things learned. The research assumes that the participants appropriately engaged the material along the way. This research also relied on honesty and accuracy in the self-reporting portions of the evaluation of the research project. It is possible that participants were less than truthful, but the research assumed the participants were as truthful as they could be in their reporting.

Definitions

Closeness in Marriage: "The product of faith working through love in a marriage. When faith in the relationship and willingness to work are high, they can produce feelings of closeness, which eventually show up as love."[15]

Communication in Marriage: "The ability to verbalize one's thoughts and feelings in a positive yet assertive manner."[16]

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[14] Alan J. Hawkins, Jason S. Carroll, William J. Doherty, and Brian Willoughby, "A Comprehensive Framework for Marriage Education," *Family Relations* 53, no. 5 (2004): 551.

[15] Everett L. Worthington, *Hope-Focused Marriage Counseling: A Guide to Brief Therapy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 213.

[16] Timothy E. Clinton and Ron Hawkins, *The Popular Encyclopedia of Christian Counseling* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2011), 151.

Couple Flexibility: "How open to change couples are in their relationships. It describes the amount of change that occurs, for example, in leadership, role relationships, and relationship rules."[17]

Marriage Education: A form of an intervention designed to develop relationship understanding, skill development, and relationship communication. It also places emphasis on understanding emotions, interpersonal dynamics, and it is intended to act as a preventative measure against marital distress and problems.[18]

Premarital Counseling: "A ministry, helping couples move towards marriages that honor God and one another."[19]

Relationship Education: "The provision of structured education intended to promote healthy couple relationships and prevent future relationship distress."[20]

Limitations and Boundaries

Every project has limits, and this one is no exception. The research of this project is limited to a specific congregation in Kentucky, USA. This research is also limited in economic and social strata, as most participants from the Three Forks congregation were of the same ethnicity and class. There was also be a sample size limitation that resulted from the number of married couples in the church who were also willing to participate in this program. While the effort was made to recruit as many participants as possible, some did not participate for reasons ranging from work obligations to a simple a lack of interest.

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[17] "National Survey of Marital Strengths," PREPARE and ENRICH, accessed January 10, 2020, https://www.prepare-enrich.com/pe_main_site_content/pdf/research/national_survey.pdf.

[18] James J. Ponzetti, *Evidence-Based Approaches to Relationship and Marriage Education* (New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2016), 3.

[19] H. Norman Wright, *The Premarital Counseling Handbook* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1992), 33.

[20] W. Kim Halford and Guy Bodenmann, "Effects of Relationship Education on Maintenance of Couple Relationship Satisfaction," *Clinical Psychology Review* 33, no. 4 (2013): 512, doi:10.1016/j.cpr.2013.02.001.

The research is also limited in observational scope. When observing the application of this study in the form of a curriculum and effects on participants, only the immediate results can be observed. A definitive reflection of the entire life of the marriages involved would be beyond the possible scope of this project. This project is limited in evaluating the participants' perceived gains from the program at the completion of the program. To observe continued benefit or a lack thereof would require subsequent research and studies further down the road by the congregation if it so choices that endeavor.

This project relied on surveys and self-reporting of the participants. This means the results are limited by the honesty of the answers given and also by the circumstances experienced outside of the program that may influence the attention to the details of the program.[21] This can and does include environmental influences such as community events, illness, economics, and outside stressors. A specific occurrence of such outside influence appeared during the conclusion of the project. The United States and the local community began shutting down and issuing stay-at-home protocols due to the COVID-19 outbreak.[22] This could have influenced the perceptions of a participant's marriage.

Factors also include internal influencers such as the mood of participants and the view of participants' own marriage and spouses during the project. For example, a big fight over spending habits could change how a participant views their effectiveness in communication or even intimacy. Conscious bias may also set in. A person may want to present themselves in a

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[21] Jonathan Firth, *The Teacher's Guide to Research: Engaging with, Applying and Conducting Research in the Classroom* (London, England: Routledge, 2020), 125.

[22] "The Official Team Kentucky Source for Information Concerning COVID-19," Team Kentucky, accessed April 15, 2020, https://govstatus.egov.com/kycovid19.

certain favorable light.[23] Despite these possibilities, self-reporting remains the one of the best options for behavioral research, which would include the research pursued in this project.[24]

When discussing boundaries, a few qualifiers need to be made known. First, this research is aimed at married couples, and hence, and hence, not all attendees of the Three Forks Church of Christ were eligible to participate. By virtue of the purpose and scope of this research, singles, widows, and widowers were not part of this program.

Second, the research focused on a base understanding for marriage education, and therefore did not include all aspects that could be developed in follow-up programs designed for different phases of marriage (for example, becoming parents, empty nest, retirement, etc.). Delimitation in the size, material, and scope of the curriculum was the result. The content of the curriculum is laid out in chapter four of this thesis.

Third, this research process was limited in judging effectiveness in the short term as it utilized a reporting window of around eight weeks. It also depended on the results according to the viewpoint of the individuals and couples involved. The psychology of social perception reveals that a person's perception can be influence by many factors. This could cause variances within the perceived results of any given individual within the study.[25] It is not possible to create an objective reporting of results from such a study, but the best results possible were pursued. The research utilized a simple coding program to keep the participants and their answers on the initial survey and the final survey anonymous. The hope is an opportunity was provided for the most honest and forthright answers by all the participants.

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[23] Arthur A. Stone, ed., *The Science of Self-Report: Implications for Research and Practice* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2000), 9.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Hugh Coolican, *Research Methods and Statistics in Psychology*, 6th ed. (London, England: Psychology Press, 2014), 148.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The institution of marriage is one that has been a bedrock of culture from the foundation of the world, as it is the first institution created and implemented by God (Gen 2:21-25). Marriage, as an institution, has a precarious place in modern Western culture. The changes in the societal view of marriage globally have raised concerns about stability in families.[26] Marriage itself has been a hot-button political issue within the cultural wars of the day. This reality, combined with high rates of divorce and marital dissatisfaction, justify a critical examination of the curriculum and/or program implemented to teach married couples about marriage and how to strengthen their marriages.

Prior to this study, the Three Forks Church of Christ did not have a formal program or curriculum to teach its married congregants about marriage and how to maintain and strengthen their marriages. This literature review will explore and synthesize current research on how other researchers and experts in the field have approached the issue of marriage education and what their solutions have been to address the need. It is anticipated that this review will establish a base understanding from which to cultivate and customize a marriage education program for the Three Forks Church of Christ that will address the current needs.

Marriage education has enjoyed a strong level of research and development over the course of the past several decades. Howard Markman and Galena Rhodes published a comprehensive review of thirty studies that involved twenty-one different programs in 2012.

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[26] Angela Abela and Janet Walker, eds., *Contemporary Issues in Family Studies: Global Perspectives on Partnerships, Parenting and Support in a Changing World* (Chichester, England: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 5.

They concluded that relationship education was "successful in improving outcomes from communication to marital satisfaction to individual function."[27]

Marriage education is a broad field that has been applied in varying forms with different end results, creating a large pool of literature. This review will seek to synthesize the current literature that surrounds marriage education with an overall context of what might be helpful in considering a local Christian-based program. This review includes reviewing studies on practical or pragmatic approaches to stronger or better marriages, as well as an emphasis on theological and spiritual truths, to identify what elements are best suited for the development of a curriculum-based marriage education program at the Three Forks Church of Christ.

Developing a Framework

Most programs require a framework to outline goals and purposes and establish an emphasis on implementation. Having noted a lack of a comprehensive framework for marriage education, Carrol, Hawkins, Dougherty, and Willoughby set to fill that gap in the literature with their project "A Comprehensive Framework for Marriage Education."[28] Their research does not provide a formal model for a marriage education program; however, it does establish seven dimensions necessary for a marriage education program framework to address.[29]

Some of these dimensions are not directly applicable to the present study, but three dimensions that are consist of the following: "Content—What is taught?," "Intensity—What is the dosage?," and "Timing—When does it occur?"[30] The framework is well supported in each individual dimension by research findings. The authors themselves believed their work was a

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[27] Howard J. Markman and Galena K. Rhoades, "Relationship Education Research: Current Status and Future Directions," *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 38, no. 1 (2012): 173, doi:10.1111/j.1752-0606.2011.00247.x.

[28] Hawkins et al., "A Comprehensive Framework," 547–58.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid., 547, 548, 549, 550, 552.

starting point, or as they called it, a "catalyst."[31] This work also functions as a guide for this literature review and the research that followed. The review will explore literature that addresses or impacts each of these dimensions listed above.

<center>Marriage Education Content</center>

When it comes to developing a marriage education program, content is a critical point. In keeping with the focus of the projected research, this review will focus on literature that illuminates three equally important sub-points: the practical aspects essential for a healthy marriage, the theological elements involved in marriage, and the end goal of marriage. A review of these three sub-points should establish a robust view of current literature dealing with marriage education.

The Goal of Marriage and the Goal of Marriage Education

One of the more challenging aspects of developing a marriage education program is defining what the end goal of it actually is. Inherently, the goal affects what is taught as well as how and when these things are taught. Unfortunately, there is some discrepancy in the research. Much of the research centers around the concept that the intent of marriage education is to encourage a happy marriage and or to stave off divorce or marital dissatisfaction. In discussing the goals for premarital education, Scott Vail suggested, "The ultimate purpose of any premarital preparation program should be to help prepare couples to remain happily married."[32] Hawkins and his associates suggested a seemingly different goal and defined a healthy marriage as "a generous, respectful, equal partnership free of abuse."[33] These definitions may appear very

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[31] Hawkins et al, "A Comprehensive Framework," 557.

[32] Scott Vail, "Reducing the Divorce Rate among Christians in America: Premarital Counseling a Prerequisite for Marriage" (Dmin diss., Liberty University, 2012). 4.

[33] Hawkins et al., "A Comprehensive Framework," 547.

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similar, yet they can result in drastically different interpretations depending on who or what defines happiness or health in these matters.

This problem is further complicated by the notion that the standard of marriage should be "happiness." It is rather a common reality that most, if not all, couples go through some periods of happiness and unhappiness. A marriage needs to be able to navigate and even overcome such seasons.[34] The point that can be drawn here is that happiness is a fluctuating concept and whether it should be the ultimate standard or goal is debatable.

To examine, from a slightly different point of view, the concept of happiness, the question can be asked, what happens when the main goal of marriage is happiness? Research has found that modern young adults have indeed accepted the notion that happiness is the main goal to be sought in marriage. The result has been an abandonment of traditional purposes and functions within the marriage covenant: "children, religion, and home."[35] The result is an increased emphasis on "individualism."[36] From a worldly point of view, this may be accepted as the simple and inevitable change of time and culture; however, from a Christian point of view, this a departure from Biblical structure and purpose of marriage as designed by God. This stands as a glaring justification for the need of a marriage education program within the Three Forks Church of Christ.

A further examination of the literature reveals a disconnect between available research on marriage education programs and fundamental theological truth. What if the main goal in marriage is neither happiness nor a secular view of health, but rather a godly view of holiness?

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[34] Mark Nimtz, "Satisfaction and Contributing Factors in Satisfying Long-Term Marriage: A Phenomenological Study" (PhD diss., Liberty University, 2011), 98.

[35] Elizabeth Peters and Claire M. Kamp Dush, eds., *Marriage and Family: Perspectives and Complexities* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2009), 414.

[36] Ibid.

This is the central argument in Gary Thomas's book *Sacred Marriage*.[37] The argument is presented that holiness is a concept that transcends every aspect of a Christian's life, and it should be a base principle that defines the purpose of marriage.

Among many observations to reinforce his argument, Thomas pointed out that no Scripture states a crown will be given to the person in life that felt the least amount of pain or felt the most happiness. He argued, "The priority of sacred history is an eternal priority. Marriage is a beautiful and effective reminder of this reality."[38] Marriage from this perspective is an institution that ultimately promotes an eternal priority, not a lesser priority, such as happiness. This is not to suggest happiness is the opposite of the goal, but that it is a result that can be found in pursuing the ultimate priority.

This review of the literature did not find an emphasis placed on the underlying goal of holiness in marriage in any of the other material examined. While it is certainly possible there are pieces of literature that were missed in this review, the complete lack of coverage of the topic in the materials considered suggests it is at least underemphasized in current programs. To be certain, other important spiritual ideas such as love, sacrifice, mercy, and forgiveness do appear in the material. The lack of an emphasis on holiness suggests a hole in the current programs that would need to be considered in forming a marriage education curriculum for the members of the Three Forks Church of Christ.

Theological Elements/Structure of Marriage

While practical and pragmatic matters are important elements of potential marriage education program, theological matters are of the highest importance when considering a

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[37] Gary Thomas, *Sacred Marriage: What If God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy?*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 1.

[38] Ibid., 110.

marriage education program in the local church setting. Congregants must first be taught the concept of marriage and its structure from a biblical perspective. This is often done through sermons and seminars, and it is also the main element of most church-based premarital education programs. However, reinforcing these concepts is essential for a marriage education program involving those already married. Marriage is not a creation of man, but rather a creation of God, and He should always be the starting point for understanding, teaching, and promoting marriage.[39]

The need to teach the biblical view of the structure and elements that define marriage is pressing due to the modern culture's efforts to redefine the institute. There is a movement toward an emphasis on marriage as a civic reality that should be governed and structured by society.[40] Within that movement has been a push to redefine the structure of marriage itself. As an example, support for same-sex marriage has jumped significantly.[41] These trends increase the value and importance of a church teaching its congregants the importance of understanding the biblical view of marriage. Teaching is one of the primary roles of the church, and marriage is a primary institution of God's creation; therefore, it falls to the church to teach God's design for it.[42]

Practical Elements in Marriage Education

Marriages do not just exist; they function. Part of promoting a healthy marriage through education is teaching couples to improve their skill sets in communication and conflict management. The lack of development and growth in these skills can promote dissatisfaction

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[39] Russell Moore and Andrew T. Walker, *The Gospel and Marriage*, Gospel for Life Series (Nashville, TN: B & H, 2017), 7.

[40] Hawkins et al., "A Comprehensive Framework," 553.

[41] Daniel Cox, Juhem Navarro-Rivera, and Robert P. Jones, *A Shifting Landscape: A Decade of Change in American Attitudes about Same-Sex Marriage and LGBT Issues* (Washington, DC: Public Religion Research Institute, 2014), 5.

[42] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1064.

and/or work against the growth and health of the relationship. Scott Vail noted, "One of the main contributors to slow leaks in a relationship is difficulty in communicating, or even the inability to communicate."[43]

Hawkins and his fellow researchers also declared the importance of communication skills being taught as well as those skills being revisited in a marriage education program. The necessity of communication and communication skills for a successful marriage is emphasized in countless books.[44] Gary Thomas also noted the critical role of communication in the more significant idea of developing intimacy.[45] The literature consistently demonstrates the necessity and benefits of communication skills being taught and promoted in marital education.

Another important and practical area of emphasis for marriage education programs is parenting. As Cloud and Townsend put it, "Kids are built-in intruders in a marriage."[46] Cloud and Townsend argued that cultural changes have placed restrictions and burdens upon parents.[47] Learning how to deal with these things helps married couples to function well and promotes a healthier marriage. Cloud and Townsend also emphasized the differing needs, boundaries, and burdens of parenting at different points during the child-rearing years.[48] The importance of understanding the stress that parenting can bring was also noted by Kim Halford and her fellow

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[43] Vail, "Reducing the Divorce Rate," 26.
[44] Richard Helein, "A Church Based Curriculum Providing Marriage and Family Education for Stepfamilies and Ministries" (DMin diss., Liberty University, 2017), 127, https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/doctoral/1519.
[45] Gary Thomas, *The Sacred Search: What If It's Not about Who You Marry, but Why?* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2013), 132.
[46] Henry Cloud and John Sims Townsend, *Boundaries in Marriage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 167.
[47] Ibid., 167.
[48] Hawkins et al., "A Comprehensive Framework," 551.

researchers.[49] Parenting skills or the lack thereof can have a direct effect on the marriage relationship.

Marriage Education Frequency and Timing (Intensity and Timing)

An examination of the literature uncovered a cursory discussion of the topic of timing in marriage education. Most of the literature is focused on premarital education or counseling. This holds especially true for Christian sources. There is a large emphasis in the literature on the effectiveness of premarital education programs. W. Kim Halford stated, "Relationship education holds much promise for reducing the individual, family, and community costs of relationship distress and breakdown."[50] The argument posed in the literature is that education is beneficial to many future marriages, though there are some detractors to its overall effectiveness.

For instance, a 2010 study argued that when unpublished studies were included in a meta-analysis of the efficacy of premarital programs, the results did not show overall success of these programs in improving relationship quality.[51] Despite this respectable research, most researchers and writers still believe that marriage education prior to marriage is a net positive.[52]

The literature is less robust when it comes to the topic of timing for marriage education involving those already married. Some research has suggested that certain aspects of marriage education might best be taught at different intervals that relate to life change points for marriage.

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[49] W. Kim Halford, Howard J. Markman, Galena H. Kline, and Scott M. Stanley, "Best Practice in Couple Relationship Education," *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 29, no. 3 (2003): 388.

[50] W. Kim Halford, "The Future of Couple Relationship Education: Suggestions on How It Can Make a Difference," *Family Relations* 53, no. 5 (2004): 559, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20456773.

[51] Elizabeth B. Fawcett, Alan J. Hawkins, Victoria L. Blanchard, and Jason S. Carroll, "Do Premarital Education Programs Really Work? A Meta-Analytic Study," *Family Relations* 59, no. 3 (July 2010): 234, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40864536.

[52] Allen W. Barton, Ted G. Futris, and Renay C. Bradley, "Changes Following Premarital Education for Couples with Differing Degrees of Future Marital Risk," *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 40, no. 2 (2012): 165–77, http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12006.

These intervals are identified by one set of researchers as: early married, early parental, mid-parental, late, and post-parental years.[53]

Other researchers have arrived at the same conclusion: "Relationship education that assists couples to make these challenging life transitions may help couples sustain relationship satisfaction and commitment."[54] The argument for these intervals is that the married couple will face different challenges within their lives at these intervals that require a customized approach rather than a one-size-fits-all approach to marriage education. Jeffrey Larson also warned against the "shotgun" approach, citing the importance of realizing not all couples have the same needs.[55]

The message to be taken from these researchers is that marriage education needs to be customized for differing times during marriage to meet varying needs. This also suggests that premade marriage programs and curricula may be more effective for certain groups and less effective for others. This furthers the argument that marriage education needs to be customized to meet the needs of a local congregation, such as the Three Forks Church of Christ.

Concluding Discussion

The review of the literature reveals a few important points of emphasis in considering further research on and implementation of a marriage education curriculum for the Three Forks Church of Christ. First, it showed points of significant focus on practical skills that have proven beneficial in marriage that need development and reinforcement. These would include communication skills, parenting skills, and conflict management skills. The review has also revealed the importance of emphasizing marriage, its structure, and its intents from a biblical

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[53] Hawkins et al., "A Comprehensive Framework," 551–52.
[54] Halford et al., "Best Practice in Couple Relationship Education," 388.
[55] Jeffry H. Larson, "Innovations in Marriage Education: Introduction and Challenges," *Family Relations* 53, no. 5 (2004), 423, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20456757.

point of view to educate congregants as well as battle the cultural influences that affect the lives of church families.

The review has also identified at least two disconnects or holes in implementation that should be addressed in developing a marriage education program. First is the underlying emphasis on holiness. From a theological understanding, marriage is intended to promote and help develop holiness. This point appears lacking in materials and research directly related to marriage education programs. The second observation is that not all education programs are, nor should they be, aimed at every married couple.

The research shows that a multifaceted approach in which a program is customized for differing marital intervals would likely be the most beneficial. The research and project involved in this thesis focused on one the basic fundamentals approach. The goal of developing the curriculum was to take a step toward addressing the current gap of a lack of marriage education for some congregants.

Theological Foundations

In order to frame the problem addressed in this thesis, it will be essential to consider two base theological concepts: marriage and education. A discussion of these two sub-points will allow for a rich understanding of the theological foundations that support the need to develop a marriage education program at the Three Forks Church of Christ. This section will conclude with a synthesis of these concepts that will build a theological picture of the stated issue.

Theology of Marriage

Scripture reveals marriage as one of the central pillars of mankind. A good starting point to begin an evaluation of marriage would be its creation or implementation. "Marriage is not a human construct. God created Marriage. Right from the beginning, it was God's divine purpose

that human couples unite in exclusive, indivisible, one-flesh, lifelong covenant relationships."[56]

The origin of marriage and its importance can be seen in Genesis chapter 2. Some important

details can be seen in this first discussion of marriage found in Scripture.

One of these details is that God did not see it as good for man to be alone—"And the

Lord God said, 'It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to

him'" (Gen 2:18). This verse shows that God's purpose for creating woman was for

companionship. The fact that God specifically made women comparable to man and to be his

helpmate (the reciprocal would also be implied) suggests that God purposefully created this

relationship that is popularly known as marriage for the benefit of man and woman. This reveals

that marriage is not a social construct that has been developed over time, but rather a God-

created institution that should be seen first and foremost through the purpose it was created for.

The greatest authority to ever speak to the reality of marriage is Jesus Himself. In

Matthew 19, when questioned on divorce, Jesus called the audience to consider the structure of

marriage as established "in the beginning" (v. 1–10). What needs to be noted here is that Jesus

not only accepted the premise that the marriage design in Genesis two is the original structure,

but He also rejected the notion that it was to be changed to meet the contemporary desires and

thoughts of man. He emphasized the significance of the institution of marriage by proclaiming a

violation of marriage through divorce to be inherently an act of adultery, save for the exception

of sexual immorality. It can be further established that this pattern of one man and one woman

married for life is the intention of the institution as it was established before sin ever entered the

picture.[57] This is to say that the institution was represented in this structure without the

corruption of sin or man's ways.

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[56] Moore Walker, *The Gospel and Marriage*, 7.
[57] Kenneth Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 144.

This base understanding of marriage from the Scriptures forms the foundation for the development of important ideas and concepts such as holiness and God's relationship with His people. God viewed His relationship with Israel in the Old Testament as a marriage.[58] This can be seen in passages such as Jeremiah 31:32, where God rebukes the children of Israel for not being faithful to Him: "My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the Lord." Other passages, such as Ezekiel 16:32, echo this sentiment: "You are an adulterous wife, who takes strangers instead of her husband." Similar thoughts can be found in a variety of other passages such as Ezekiel 16:18–24, 59–60, Jeremiah 2:2, 32, and Isaiah 54:5, and God's marital relationship with Israel is the central theme of the book of Hosea as is demonstrated through the relationship of Hosea and his wife, Gomer. The New Testament builds on this same picture but envisions God's people now as the bride of Christ.

In the book of Ephesians, Paul directed his readers to see the relationship between Jesus and His church through the lens of a husband and a wife (Eph 5:22–34). By approaching the topic with this comparison, Paul not only established the importance of marriage, but he also established marriage as a fundamental concept for mankind to understand. If marriage is not to be comprehended and understood, the comparison to Jesus and His church loses its focus. Hence, the argument to be made is that it is incumbent to understand marriage as God intended it in order to comprehend Jesus and His church.

In the famous passage on husbands and wives in Ephesians 5, Paul uses the figure of the husband and his wife to illustrate the relationship of Jesus and the church, and he also uses it to tie together some of the important theological and spiritual concepts that had been discussed

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[58] Klyne Snodgrass, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 311.

previously in the letter. It is especially true of the topic of sacrifice.[59] As Paul instructed, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her" (Eph 5:25). It is within this dialogue that Paul emphasized a few additional concepts that are inherently important to a marriage and hence would be vital for Christians to understand for their own marriages.

Another key principle appears in what Paul wrote addressing husbands, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her" (Eph 5:25). The charge in the passage is to love. Love is a key concept throughout the New Testament. Jesus proclaimed the greatest command was to, in fact, love (Luke 10:25–28). While it may seem obvious to connect the sacrificial death of Jesus with love in this context, it is also important to see the sacrificial love that Jesus demonstrated in His life as well. Jesus' life was dedicated to sacrificing His own place, position, comfort, sleep, rest, and countless other things in life to serve His people. It is this kind of love that husbands are challenged to give their wives.

One of the greatest illustrations of this form of love is found in John 13. In the first few verses, John set the scene by reminding his readers that Jesus knew who He was, what belonged ultimately to Him, and where His journey was leading, namely back to the Father. It is here that Jesus made a choice to love his disciples by girding Himself with a servant's towel and preparing to wash the disciples' feet (John 13:1–5). This picture may seem a bit odd but unspectacular at first. After all, Jesus had calmed seas, healed lepers, and raised the dead, but the act of washing the disciples' feet is just as powerful for the human family to witness. It was an act of the greatest possible love. Peers did not wash each other's feet. That job fell to the lowly servants of

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[59] Frank Thielman, *Ephesians,* Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 368.

a household. It would have been an act solely of great love to serve another in such a way voluntarily.[60] The point to be drawn from all of this is a spectacular charge to husbands to love their wives with the same sacrificial love that not only drew Jesus to the cross, but to gird himself with a servant's towel.

In addition to sacrifice and love, there is one more concept that is worthy of careful consideration from this text. Paul stated a clear purpose in both the actions of Jesus toward the church and husbands toward their wives; that purpose is holiness. While modern views of marriage may center around happiness, inclusion, or even arguments over rights, Paul stated that a husband was to love his wife as to present her holy and without blemish just as the example of how Christ loved the church (Eph 5:27-28). Gary Thomas made a profound statement about holiness being a main goal or purpose of marriage: "I believe that God designed marriage in part to make us holy even more than happy."[61] In light of such a strong example and declaration by Paul, this comment appears to capture the main tenet that Christians need to understand and be taught regarding marriage from God's view.

Marriage is a deeply important and profound institution both in human relationships and as a picture of the union between man and God. The importance of accurate and godly understanding of marriage cannot be overstated. Christians must seek to understand this precious institution, and the church must make it a priority to instruct those willing to hear in the related concepts and theological truths found within it.

Theology of Education

The Christian faith is a faith that relies on education as one of its main modes of direction. This is true from the Old Testament through the New Testament. God has consistently

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[60] D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester, England: InterVarsity, 1991), 462.

[61] Thomas, *The Sacred Search,* 152.

called on His people to teach one another and to teach others His truths, ways, statutes, and laws. God charged Aaron to "teach the children of Israel all the statutes which the Lord has spoken to them by the hand of Moses" (Lev 10:11). It is vital to see the emphasis that God placed on teaching His ways. This can be seen in a constantly repeated command for the Israelites to teach God's ways to their children and grandchildren (Deuteronomy 4:9,10; 6:7; 11:19; 31:19). God wanted them to know His ways that they might walk and live in them.

This same emphasis on familial training can be seen in passages such as Ephesians 6:4, "And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord." This passage carries the same point of responsibility as the Old Testament passages: to teach the children. The two terms *training* and *admonition* both relate to the education process. Some have argued that training has to do with education in the form of activity and discipline, while admonition refers to education that is spoken, such as instruction and reproof.[62] While these things can be debated among Greek scholars, the emphasis on teaching is undeniable.

The New Testament goes far beyond the teaching requirements of fathers for their children and places emphasis on teaching as a central means of sharing the gospel. The pivotal charge of the Great Commission is to "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt 28:19–20). It is the importance placed on teaching is evident in this charge.

Millard Erickson identified teaching as a primary means by which the church can fulfill its godly duty of edification: "The church also edifies its members through instruction or

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[62] Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 557.

teaching. This is part of the broad task of discipling."[63] This observation is well evidenced in

Scripture. Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus stresses the role of the church in edification "to

the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the

principalities and powers in the heavenly places" (Eph 3:10). This passage adds to the argument

by establishing this role as part of God's wisdom and intent.

The act of teaching can also be seen throughout the New Testament. In his letter to the

Colossians, Paul reminded them of what they had "learned" (Col 1:7). According to Paul, they

had been taught already by Epaphras, and Paul wanted them to take ownership of what they had

been instructed. He would again make the same exhortation in Colossians 2:7, but this time

referred to what they had been taught in Jesus. He even noted gratitude that they once had been

taught these things.[64] The fact that teaching was something paramount to the early church can be

demonstrated in many passages like these, but the very existence of these passages suggests God

wanted His word preserved so that it could be taught to future generations.

The extent to which Christians are to engage in teaching can be viewed in the charge to

sing: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one

another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord"

(Col 3:16). Anthony Ash wrote: "Teaching and admonishing are activities of those who love one

another, and who wish to help others grow in Christ. No view of the corporate activities of

Christians can afford to neglect this."[65] Ash's point is that teaching is part of the very fabric of

the church, her purpose, and her function as the body of Jesus.

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[63] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1046.
[64] G. K. Beale, *Colossians and Philemon,* Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 194.
[65] Ash, *Philippians, Colossians, and Ephesians*, 207.

This emphasis on teaching can also be seen from the scriptural descriptions of Christians as students that need to grow in their knowledge. For example, 2 Peter 1:5 states, "But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge." Another example can be seen in 2 Peter 3:8: "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." Guy Woods stated that the instruction in these verses is to "become more informed in the doctrine of Christ."[66] So, Christians are not only charged to teach, but to learn.

Paul further developed the idea that teaching is an ongoing work of the church. He told Timothy, "And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim 2:2). In this passage, Paul was encouraging Timothy in his church as a minister of the Word. Part of that charge is not only teaching others but to so teach them that they are able to then teach more people those same important truths. This is how the truth of God is spread, but it is also how the church continues to educate itself. As one learns, he or she is able to instruct another, or even sometimes, to help fill in areas where understanding is missing.

Education becomes an opportunity to fill in gaps in knowledge. An example of this can be seen in the book of Acts. In Acts 18:24–28, the reader is introduced to a talented speaker and preacher named Apollos. He was reasoning in the synagogues and teaching about Jesus. However, he only knew the baptism of John. In keeping with this concept that education is designed not just to inform but also to fill in gaps of understanding, the text demonstrates that this exactly what Aquilla and Priscilla did. "So, he began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Aquila and Priscilla heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately" (Acts 18:26). In the case of Apollos, who might have seemed a well-educated

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[66] Guy N. Woods, *A Commentary on the New Testament Epistles of Peter, John, and Jude* (Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate, 1991), 193.

man, possibly even more educated then Aquilla and Priscilla, the two were still able to educate this man as they knew something he did not. The result was an education gap that was filled by their effort.

The purpose of education can be further seen in the descriptive comments given by Paul in the Ephesian letter. Paul said that Jesus gave teachers to the church: "And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ" (Eph 4:11–12). This statement declares quite plainly not only that God desires His church to have teachers, but that He has given teachers for the specific purpose of equipping and edifying the body.

With these truths in mind, "It is incumbent upon the church to utilize all legitimate means and technologies available today."[67] The education of Christians should be a high priority for the church. The church has been called to carry out the charge of teaching all that Jesus commanded. This is a responsibility the church should seek every opportunity to uphold.

Theoretical Foundation

The Lord's church has been blessed and tasked with great responsibility to teach the ways of Jesus unto the world (Eph 3:10–11). The mandate includes teaching the Gospel to the lost but also the charge of Jesus to teach all that He has commanded (Matt 28:19–20). That means no aspect of the teaching and purposes of God should go underserved, nor should any child of God go without being taught the totality of the doctrine of Jesus. Such a mandate includes teaching members not only to understand what constitutes marriage as far as structure and roles but how to have a spiritually healthy marriage.

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[67] Erickson, *Christian Theology,* 1065.

Taking this charge to teach the doctrine of Jesus beyond direct scriptural quotes, it must be understood that the church is also charged to love, to put others before itself, and to do good works. This duty becomes even weightier when considering the importance of marriage in the community and the present state of marriage through Western culture, including in Kentucky. As discussed in Chapter 1, the current rate of divorce and dissatisfaction among married couples adds an additional practical reason for the church to take steps to teach couples important aspects that may lead to healthier marriages. The combination of these practical and spiritual truths creates a theoretical foundation for developing a marital education program. This task does not stand without contribution. Several individuals and groups have sought to take on the task of producing a marital education program and/or curriculum. The greater emphasis seems to be on premarital education.

Premarital counseling is an important preventative measure. Since most premarital counseling is conducted by ministers or the clergy, it is important not to undervalue this important contribution. One of the most beneficial aspects of premarital education is its timing, as it focuses on prevention rather than trying to rescue families after they become distressed.[68] While premarital counseling is both a needed and profitable ministry to the church and its congregants, as noted in the previous chapter, it is difficult to reach all couples prior to marriage.

Equal importance, then, needs to be placed on teaching congregants that did not receive premarital education or received minimal education prior to marriage. A popular program that seeks to reach couples beyond the premarital window is called SYMBIS.[69] This program was

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[68] D. Michael Bruhn and Rhonda Hill, "Designing a Premarital Counseling Program," *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families* 12, no. 4 (October 2004): 389.

[69] Les Parrott and Leslie L. Parrott, *Saving Your Marriage before It Starts: Seven Questions to Ask before— and after—Your Marriage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 1–5.

designed by the Parrotts (Les and Leslie) to teach couples regarding some important basic elements of marriage and communication.

The first point to note regarding the SYMBIS program is that it targets couples that are "engaged, about to be engaged, and newly married."[70] The program focuses mostly on those preparing to enter marriage or those who have just entered marriage. This makes the program a suitable program to examine as part of this thesis, as the Drs. Parrott considered those already married, at least in part, in their program design. This sets it apart from many programs that are built solely on a premarital counseling platform.

SYMBIS centers around seven questions that are explored with a couple. The questions are:

1. Have you faced the myths of marriage with honesty?[71]

2. Can you identify your love style?[72]

3. Have you developed the habit of happiness?[73]

4. Can you say what you mean and understand what you hear?[74]

5. Have you bridged the gender gap?[75]

6. Do you know how to fight a good fight?[76]

7. Are you and your partner soul mates?[77]

SYMBIS is a tremendous system built on solid research and theory. Most important to this thesis are the questions it explores with couples, which provide a springboard from which to

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[70] David K. Carson and Montserrat Casado-Kehoe, eds., *Case Studies in Couples Therapy: Theory-Based Approaches*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), 22.

[71] Parrott and Parrott, *Saving Your Marriage,* 19.

[72] Ibid., 41.

[73] Ibid., 67.

[74] Ibid., 87.

[75] Ibid., 111.

[76] Ibid., 133.

[77] Ibid., 155.

begin creating a custom curriculum for this project. However, it is not entirely geared directly to the education gap this thesis and the corresponding project seeks to address.[78] The main difference lies in the audience in which the project is focused—those already married.

SYMBIS and the many premarital education programs available provide the theoretical foundations of this project. Based on the success of these systems, it stands as a reasonable conclusion that a proper education program can have a positive effect on marriages at the Three Forks Church of Christ.

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[78] Carson and Casado-Kehoe, eds., *Case Studies in Couples*, 14.

Chapter 3

Intervention Design

This project was founded on the idea that the church can intervene to address the current perceived gap in marital education by designing a marital education program (curriculum) that can be taught to all married couples on a regular basis, such as once every three years. Such a program can help to reduce the number of married couples in the congregation that do not or would not receive marital education. This intervention was not intended to completely address all potential needs for marital education within the congregation, but it establishes a baseline for education in this important area of family life and Christian living. Additional research, planning, and implementation will be required beyond this project to continue to address the broader needs of the congregation in this area.

The intervention was designed with three main goals in mind: 1) to confirm the gap in, and, therefore, the need for marital education; 2) to create a curriculum to address the need and to deliver said curriculum successfully; and 3) to assess the effectiveness of the curriculum in addressing the gap. The chapter will explain the design of the program, the curriculum that was used in the education program, and the implementation of the program, including details of how the project was conducted.

Design of the Program

The plan was implemented in three main stages. In the preliminary stage, there were two objectives. The first objective was to establish a sample group from among the members at the Three Forks Church of Christ and to create the curriculum for the program. An emphasis was placed on involving as many married individuals as possible. The original plan was to get at least ten couples (or twenty married individuals) involved in this project.

The implementation and results section will show that this goal was met and exceeded. It was also desirable to have couples that are in different phases of marriage: newlyweds, empty nesters, and so on. This was intended to make the classes more informative by allowing differing questions and comments during the discussion portion of the class, but more importantly, to add context to the results of the research. Responses on the posttest were analyzed to determine whether the program helped the target group, which are those who did not receive premarital counseling or only limited premarital counseling. The results were also examined for any unexpected results, such as changes in different group than the target group. Including a diverse group of married couples also allowed for comparison between groups in order to determine whether any changes were limited to the target group of those having no or limited premarital counseling.

The second objective of the preliminary stage of this project was to handle all administrative matters for preparing the research, such as explain to the protentional participant group the process, securing permissions, and designing the initial survey. The survey was designed to take an inventory of any marital counseling the participants have previously engaged in, including premarital counseling. The survey also sought a self-report evaluation of crucial areas in each participant's marriage relationship, including communication, conflict resolution, and a biblical understanding of design and purpose.

Since it is important for the research to be as transparent as possible and to have the full consent of the participants, all potential participants were gathered for a group meeting. During this time, the scope, purpose, and process of the study were explained to the group. After an explanation and an opportunity for any questions and concerns to be addressed, those in

attendance were asked to participate in the marital education program, consisting of six lessons on key areas for marriages. They were then given the initial survey to fill out.

The second phase of this intervention plan was the implementation of the marriage education program itself. The curriculum contained six lessons, with one lesson delivered per week. These lessons presented the curriculum that was developed for the research and was intended to cover material beneficial to understanding, relationship skills, spiritual health within the marriage.

The third phase was the evaluation phase. In this phase, a second survey was issued and returned by participants to ascertain the results and/or effects of the marriage education program on participants' overall understanding of key areas of marriage (which is more fully explored in the curriculum in the next chapter). It was expected that this program would have a primary result of improvement in the key areas for those couples who had not been through premarital counseling. It was also anticipated that married couples who did go through premarital counseling would also have a positive result, seen mostly through renewal or reinforcement in areas their premarital counseling did not cover. This result was expected to be less significant than the primary result.

The assumption entertained—the working hypothesis—was that there is a primary and secondary issue with the lack of marital education within the congregation that needed to be addressed. It was projected that the program would address the gap that had been observed in the current ministry of the church. To be more specific, the program was expected to provide a fundamental level of biblical understanding, education, and relationship skills for those who were married without receiving premarital counseling. The secondary issue was addressed

through the provision of another layer and/or reinforcement of marital education for those who had previously received at least some premarital counseling.

This project had the intended purpose of furthering steps that had been made to improve the church's ministry in the area of marriage. The congregation at Three Forks has made steps in recent years to improve what the church offers its congregants in the form of premarital education. What is equally true, though, is that the current ministry offerings have not presented enough to aid families in this area. This project was not presented as the sole answer to the issue, but as a step in a continuing process of addressing the issue for the betterment of the congregation and especially current and future families.

Target Group

This project was open to all married individuals who attended the Three Forks Church of Christ and willing to participate, but one group was the primary focus of the research. That group is those who did not participate in premarital counseling, including those who are deemed to have participated in minimal premarital counseling as represented by two sessions or less. While the effect of participating in the curriculum developed for this project was evaluated among all participants, the curriculum was written for this target group. The results presented in Chapter 4 demonstrate that the majority of participants in the total sample group benefitted from the program, but the largest positive effect was seen for the target group.

Self-Reporting Questionnaires

To facilitate the research, a data instrument had to be devised in order to measure the results of the intervention. Self-reporting questionnaires were created to accomplish this purpose.[79] Self-reporting instruments are commonly used in behavioral studies. As discussed in

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[79] See Appendixes B and C for questionnaires.

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Chapter 1, there are some limitations to the use of such an instrument, but the benefits are deemed to outweigh the potential variances in their use.[80]

Five main topics of education were selected for this project. These topics were chosen after a review studies and programs that have shown success in premarital and martial education. The programs examined were the SYMBIS program,[81] a national survey by PREPARE and ENRICH,[82] a study from Halford,[83] and a study from Hawkins.[84] The five topics deemed most likely to be beneficial to all participants were chosen from many potential topic. Subjects such as parenting and other specific topics were not covered. The five topics chosen were communication, flexibility, conflict resolution, compatibility, and closeness. These topics were deemed important in all of the aforementioned studies and demonstrated importance in marital satisfaction.

<div align="center">Initial and Concluding Questionnaires</div>

The initial questionnaire asked a series of questions directly related to the purpose of this project. This included some base information questions related to the participant being male or female, as well as information regarding to the participant's involvement in premarital counseling. These questions asked whether they had participated in premarital counseling as well as how many sessions they were involved a part of. These questions were very important to help identify the target group from the main sample group when analyzing the data.

The questionnaire also asked a series of questions that would be used to measure the self-reporting of where the participant felt they were in understanding the key areas addressed in the

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[80] Coolican, *Research Methods,* 148.
[81] Parrott and Parrott, *Saving Your Marriage,* 1–15.
[82] "National Survey of Marital Strengths," PREPARE and ENRICH.
[83] Hawkins et al., "A Comprehensive Framework," 551.
[84] Halford et al., "Best Practice in Couple Relationship Education," 388.

curriculum. This initial survey in this project had fifty-two volunteer participants: twenty-eight were female, and twenty-four male.

The concluding questionnaire presented the opportunity to evaluate the program and its ability to change the participants' level of reported understanding of the important aspects and concepts for marriages. One underlying question needed to be addressed—was this project successful? Two factors were examined to answer this question:

The first factor examined to determine the effectiveness of the program was the self-reporting of the participants. They were asked in the concluding questionnaire whether they believed the program was beneficial to them. Three questions were asked about the participants' beliefs about the benefits of the program: "Do you believe this marriage education curriculum was helpful to you?" "Do you believe this program has improved your understanding in key areas related to your marriage?" and "Do you believe your marriage will benefit from being a part of this program?" The questions provided an opportunity for the participants to evaluate the program and its helpfulness.

The second factor examined to establish the success of the program was the change in response from the initial questionnaire to the concluding questionnaire. Since the program was six weeks long, it would not be as likely for the participant to remember the exact number they reported in the first questionnaire for each question. The assumption was that the time elapsed between completing the questionnaires would create more authentic responses on the final questionnaire, making it less likely the participants would answer based on what they remembered from first or initial questionnaire. The movement in answers provided a second way to evaluate the program and what areas of the program were most effective.

Design of the Curriculum

Designing the curriculum was one of the three main goals of the project. The curriculum incorporates five main topics mentioned previously as well as two more topics that the researcher found to be important from a biblical point of view and felt necessary to be included in the program.

One of the two topics added by the researcher was based on observation made during the literature review process for this project. While religion and spirituality were mentioned in studies, a lack of attention was placed on the importance of holiness within the marriage. The decision to include holiness in the curriculum was based primarily on the arguments of Gary Thomas in his two volumes, *Sacred Marriage*[85] and *The Sacred Search.*[86] An emphasis on the eternal concept of holiness is an appropriate and important part of a biblically based and church-delivered marriage education program.

The last topic added this curriculum was a basic conversation on the biblical view of marriage. Though this topic was not evaluated in the questionnaires, it was added to provide a starting point for the conversation within the curriculum. The seven total topics were presented in six lessons. These are the Bible and marriage, communication, flexibility, conflict resolution, compatibility, closeness, and holiness.

The lessons were written with a few points of emphasis. First, the concepts included in the curriculum have been shown to be important to marital satisfaction in previous studies. Second, the concepts in the lessons have a strong biblical basis. Third, the program was intended to build awareness and understanding in the participants. The lessons were designed to flow from one topic into the next. The goal of this format is for the lessons to be cohesive teaching material for marriage and not just individual topics to be checked off a list.

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[85] Thomas, *Sacred Marriage,* 1.
[86] Thomas, *The Sacred Search,* 152.

Implementation of the Intervention Design

After receiving approval of the project from the Institutional Review Board, invitations were extended to potential participants from the Three Forks Church of Christ. Personal invitations were issued to all married couples in the congregation to participate in this project.[87] This invitation was extended as a letter as well as through the public announcements to the congregation.

An initial meeting was conducted to explain to all potential participants the reason behind the project, the scope of the project, and what to expect while being involved in the project. Some of the main details shared were that the marriage education curriculum was being explored as potential means to intervene and help build a biblical and practical understanding of marriage as well as relationship skills that will benefit marriages. It was explained to participants how to fill out the initial self-report questionnaire on key aspects of understanding they currently held in regard to marriage and relationship skills.

Participants were instructed that they would participate in a six-week education program that would consist of one class per week that would take about forty-five minutes to an hour. The classes would be mostly instruction- or lecture-based, but opportunities for discussion would be provided during and at the close of each lesson. The participants were informed that after the six-week teaching period, they were to complete the second anonymous questionnaire.

Participants were told the questionnaires would be anonymous to help facilitate the most accurate and forthright answers by the participants (see the previous earlier discussion on self-reporting questionnaires). Since the program was to feature anonymous questionnaires, a system was devised to allow the questionnaires to be linked without being linked to a specific person.

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[87] See Appendix A for invitation letter.

The materials were distributed in three-ring binders. In the front cover was the initial questionnaire, and in the back cover was the final questionnaire. Each questionnaire within a folder had a unique, matching identification number. The folders were distributed randomly. Participants were told to keep their folder and not to switch folders with anyone else. They were also instructed not to write any names or other identifying details on the questionnaires.

The system not only provided the participants with a way to provide responses anonymously, but it also offered a way to connect pretests to posttests to the researcher. This allowed the initial and final questionnaires to be linked; the researcher knew the same person filled out both but did not know who that person was. This allowed the information to be analyzed for changes in response from initial to final on an individual level.

During the first week of the project, all materials were distributed, and the process that would be followed for the implementation of the project was explained. It was decided, in conjunction with the church leadership, to offer the program during the Sunday evening service to allow as many people as possible to join the program. The program was open to any married individual, even if their spouse was not able to participate. Participation was far above what was originally projected, with fifty-two people participating.

All participants also filled out the initial or preliminary questionnaire during week one. A basket was placed in the foyer of the building so that participants could place their questionnaires in the basket at their convenience. The researcher did not collect the basket until all initial questionnaires had been returned in order to reinforce the idea of anonymity among the participants so that faces could not be associated with where in the stack someone's questionnaire may appear.

Weeks two through seven went smoothly. Classes were conducted during Sunday

evening worship services at the building and recorded through the regular live feed. This is the

normal procedure of the church; however, the recording also served as a backup source for

anyone who had to miss a class. They were able to watch the recording at their own convenience.

It should be noted here that the camera was trained on the teacher and not the audience. The

classes all contained more than the participants, as all members attending the regular Sunday

evening service attended the classes.

Week eight posed some complications to the implementation of the project. During week

eight, services were dismissed by request of the Commonwealth of Kentucky to slow the spread

of COVID-19.[88] To work around this complication, lesson eight, the final lesson in the program,

was given online for all to watch. Since the participants already had the last questionnaire in their

folders, they were instructed to fill them out and return them to the basket in the foyer of the

church over the next week. At the close of the week, all questionnaires were retrieved.

The project then moved into the data entry and analysis phase. Fifty-two questionnaires

were turned in, with all matching numbers to the initial questionnaires. This means there were no

participants that dropped out. All questions were answered, minus one question that was missed

on the initial survey by one participant. The information was then transmitted into a spreadsheet

for analysis and comparison. The results are discussed in the next chapter.

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[88] "The Official Team Kentucky Source for Information Concerning COVID-19," Team Kentucky.

Chapter 4

Results

This chapter presents the results of the action research conducted for this thesis, as well as the curriculum and the questionnaires developed for this project. The project began with the administration of a questionnaire and ended with a final comparative questionnaire that allowed the researcher to judge whether the curriculum and the implementation of that curriculum effectively closed the perceived gap in marital education that was the genesis for this project. The chapter will seek to present the data in a such fashion as to present relevant observations from the project. The results of the study were positive, as will be presented in this chapter.

The Curriculum

The following sections present the curriculum as written for this project. The curriculum represents the exact lessons the participants received. The lessons are designed with the intention of expanding understanding in the areas surveyed in the questionnaires.

Lesson 1: Introduction and Communication in Marriage

Introduction: The Bible and Marriage

A beautiful day, often planned for months, if not years, in advance, has finally arrived. The groom is anxiously waiting to see his beautiful bride as she comes down the aisle. They will soon make a commitment to love and to cherish one another as they begin a new journey in life as a husband and wife. While this picture remains one that most can quickly relate to, the picture of marriage has been changing quickly in the secularized Western world.

It is argued that seeds of instability have been planted going back decades, if not centuries, leading to the instability seen today in the understanding of the institution of

marriage.[89] This instability can be seen in the current political climate, where arguments over the content and context of marriage are frequent. For many, marriage is simply a civil union that should be extended to anyone wishing to join themselves regardless of sex, gender, or orientation.

Scripture views marriage in an entirely different way. Marriage is a directed union between a man and wife in which they are bound together—to cleave to one another: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Gen 2:24). A good starting point to begin an evaluation of marriage would be with its creation and implementation. "Marriage is not a human construct. God created marriage. Right from the beginning, it was God's divine purpose that human couples unite in exclusive, indivisible, one-flesh, lifelong covenant relationships."[90]

The origin of marriage and its importance is revealed in the second chapter of Genesis. Some important factors can be seen in this first discussion of marriage found in Scripture. One of these factors is that God did not see it as good for man to be alone—"And the Lord God said, 'It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him'" (Gen 2:18).

This shows that God's purpose for creating a woman was for companionship. The fact that God specifically makes women comparable to man and to be his helpmate (the reciprocal would also be implied) suggests that God purposefully created this relationship that is popularly known as marriage for the benefit of man and woman. This reveals that marriage is not a social construct that has been developed over time, but rather, it is a God-created institution that should be seen first and foremost through and for the purpose it was created.

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[89] Melanie Heath, *One Marriage under God: The Campaign to Promote Marriage in America*, Intersections (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2012), 4.

[90] Moore and Walker, *The Gospel and Marriage*, 7.

The most significant authority to ever speak on the reality of marriage is Jesus Himself. In Matthew 19, when questioned on divorce, Jesus called the audience to consider the structure of marriage as established "in the beginning" (v. 1–10). Note that Jesus not only accepted the premise that the structure was ordained from the beginning; He also rejected the notion that it was to be changed to meet the contemporary desires and thoughts of man. He emphasized this in proclaiming a violation of marriage through divorce is inherently an act of adultery, save for the exception of sexual immorality. It can be further established that this pattern of one man and one woman married for life is the original intention of the institution as it was created before sin ever entered the picture.[91] This is to say, that the institution was represented in this structure without the corruption of sin or man's ways.

One of the most obvious areas of importance in any relationship is communication. Marriage embodies this reality. This is not simply a perception or perceived observation, but according to a national survey conducted by the researchers for PREPARE and ENRICH program, the number one area which couples identified as important to strong marriage was communication. According to their research, some 93% of the respondents who said they were happy stated that they were pleased with their communication with each other. Only 15% of unhappy couples also reported they were pleased with their communication.[92] While this correlation does not make the case that strong communication guarantees a strong marriage, it does emphasize that it is an important aspect for those who report having a strong marriage.

Communication, essentially, is the passing or transmitting of an idea, emotions, thoughts between one person and someone else. It is as simple as talking and listening, but it is a crucial

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[91] Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26,* 144.
[92] "National Survey of Marital Strengths," PREPARE and ENRICH.

aspect of healthy relationships.[93] Scripture presents strong evidence of the importance of good communication throughout its pages. The following examples can be considered from two complementary vantage points: Scripture verses speaking directly to communication in marriage and verses speaking to the communication of a Christian in a general way.

One of the more powerful Scriptures that speaks to communication in marriage is found in 1 Peter 3:7—"Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered." This text describes both the act of communication and the importance of it by instructing husbands to dwell with their wives with understanding.

This is the heart of communication in a marriage relationship, and the understanding should extend both ways. Communication is only valuable if it truly conveys or results in understanding. So many problems arise in relationships when communication is faulty, and the goal of "understanding" is neglected and exchanged for a less-than-ideal standard of just wanting to be heard, having one's own way, or some other form of unhealthy communication discussed below.

Another Scripture that can be considered is Colossians 3:19— "Husbands, love your wives and do not be bitter toward them." Communication is again the focus, though the word itself is not used. Husbands are to love their wives and to not be bitter toward them. This implies a need for healthy communication that includes all aspects of life, including words, deeds, and body language.

These texts need to be combined with other important Scripture passages that generally speak to Christians and their communication. An important verse would be Ephesians 4:29: "Let

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[93] Gary D. Chapman, *Now You're Speaking My Language: Honest Communication and Deeper Intimacy for a Stronger Marriage* (Nashville, TN: B & H, 2014), 10.

no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers." Scripture places an expectation on all Christians to communicate in a way that edifies and that does not contain corrupt words or corrupt influences. This responsibility would apply to communication in the marriage setting as it would apply in any other scenario.

Again, the importance of communication can be seen in Scripture in Paul's words in Colossians 4:6: "Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one." Although this verse speaks of communication between fellow Christians, the implication is that this requirement would be true of a Christian husband and wife.

Scripture places responsibility on the Christian to communicate in a way that is not corrupt, that edifies, and that is seasoned with salt and spoken with grace. This should be the standard sought in the marriage relationship, and any other standard that does not rise to this level should be re-examined in light of the ways and words of God.

Unhealthy Communication

Les and Leslie Parrott identify four ways to "not communicate." They are placating, blaming, computing, and distracting.[94] These forms of communication avoid and deflect issues rather than dealing with problems in a fair and honest way. The placater simply avoids by trying to "placate" their partner to bring an end to whatever uncomfortable situation may be occurring. The blamer shifts the blame to the other spouse and does not take personal responsibility. The "computer" is one that uses over-analyzation to avoid emotions and deflect the feelings of others.

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[94] Parrott and Parrott, *Saving Your Marriage,* 91–93.

Distraction can be a more general term for all of these forms of communication, as well as any other form not mentioned that seeks to avoid the conflict or even the act of communication.

A word of caution seems appropriate regarding "bickering" or even arguing. It may be a temptation to believe that if a couple argues that it is automatically a sign of unhealthy communication or even a bad marriage. This is not necessarily the case. The well-published psychologist John Gottman wrote, "I discovered that the bickering, passionate couples were the only ones to have a romantic marriage after 35 years still."[95] The argument is not that more bickering improves the romance in a marriage; it is a word of caution against making false associations between arguing and the health of a marriage. What is more important is how a couple argues and whether it is fair or not. This will be discussed further in the lesson on conflict management.

To summarize, what should be considered unhealthy communication in marriage is anything that does not seek understanding but instead seeks avoidance, blaming, or distraction. A couple should avoid words that corrupt, as noted in Ephesians 4:29, and should take heed of the wisdom from Proverbs 15:4: "A wholesome tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit." Perverseness breaks the spirit of an individual and breaks the spirit of marriage.

Healthy Communication

Gottman gives a warning that is important for Christians to consider, "The fundamental cause of almost all communication problems is that people do not listen to understand—they listen to reply."[96] Jesus understood this reality very well and challenged His learners by critiquing those who should have understood: "Therefore I speak to them in parables, because

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[95] John Mordechai Gottman, *The Marriage Clinic: A Scientifically Based Marital Therapy* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 1999), 14.

[96] Les Parrott and Leslie L. Parrott, *The Complete Guide to Marriage Mentoring: Connecting Couples to Build Better Marriages* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 139.

seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand" (Matt 13:13). He also made the point with comments like, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" (Matt 11:15, 13:9). The emphasis on listening is obvious beyond the physical concept of recognizing sounds or the words being spoken but on understanding or comprehending the words spoken.

Healthy communication is then achieved when both the husband and wife seek to not only be understood but also to understand their spouse. This requires a higher level of communication than the passing small talk with coworkers or conversations about a favorite sport with an old high school friend.

Gary Chapman identifies five levels of communication: Level 1 is Hallway Talk—"Fine. How are you?" Level 2 is Reporter Talk—"Just give me the facts," Level 3 is Intellectual Talk—"Do you know what I think?" Level 4 is Emotional Talk—"Let me tell you how I feel," and Level 5 is Loving, Genuine Truth Talk—"Let's be honest." While all of these levels of communication will exist in a marriage, level 5 is the goal of truly healthy communication in a marriage. According to Chapman, "This level allows us to speak the truth in love. It is where we are honest but not condemning, open but not demanding."[97] This is the level to which we are called as Christians, according to the Bible, which states, "Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Cor 13:4–7). Healthy communication is necessary for the love in which Jesus desires Christians to walk. Married couples then need to strive for understanding and create an environment that fosters openness, truth, and love.

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[97] Chapman, *Now You're Speaking,* 24–27.

To help couples achieve this level 5 of communication, a few thoughts from some experts might prove beneficial. According to the observations of Les and Leslie Parrott, "To enjoy rich communication and a rock-solid marriage, three personal qualities must be present: warmth, genuineness, and empathy."[98] These concepts again align well with Scriptural instruction, namely, the example of Jesus.

Jesus embodied the demeanor, candor, and personal affection that would, if emulated, enrich any marriage. This is the character that Paul calls Christians to obtain:

> Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection (Col 3:12–14).

Husbands and wives need to submit to one another in love and seek openness and truthfulness in their communication. They need to abound in the character of Jesus. The result should be a Christ-like atmosphere in which a marriage can grow and mature as God would lead it—a marriage in which husband and wife seek to be understood and to understand the other.

Conclusion

Scripture emphasizes the importance of proper communication, as noted earlier in the lesson. To the church at Ephesus, Paul wrote, "Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers" (Eph 4:29). Peter warned of the dangers of destructive speech: "For when they speak great swelling words of emptiness, they allure through the lusts of the flesh" (2 Peter 2:18a). James, as well, remarked on how powerful the tongue can be: "But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. With it, we bless our God and Father, and with it, we curse men, who have been

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[98] Parrott and Parrott, *Saving Your Marriage,* 94.

made in the similitude of God" (Jas 3:8–9). The reality of the power of words and communication is evident. Communication will be a central concept in the remaining lessons in this study.

<center>Lesson 2: Couple Flexibility/Compromise in Marriage</center>

Introduction

The concept of compromise in marriage has long been a perceived necessity. Compromise can be good, or it can be bad. It can be beneficial if a husband compromises his restaurant choice for his wife because they just ate at his favorite restaurant last time. Compromise can be harmful when instead of anyone getting what they actually want, both settle for something else. This can build resentment and create other issues in the long run.

What is important is learning to be flexible and creative in compromise and dealing with the difficulties of change. According to the results of a national survey conducted on the marital assessment tool ENRICH, "Couple flexibility was the second most important category distinguishing happy and unhappy couples. Seventy-eight percent of happily married couples agree that they were creative in how they handle differences, whereas about half (15%) of unhappy couples agree on this item."[99] This is a significant observation and one that provokes a deeper consideration of compromise and flexibility in marriage.

Why Flexibility is Important

Flexibility in marriage is important for several reasons, including that it facilitates the ability to make healthy instead of unhealthy compromises, it helps couples avoid unnecessary conflicts, and because of the inevitability of change. Change is going to happen within the course of a marriage. Even priorities often change through the passing of time.

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[99] "National Survey of Marital Strengths," PREPARE and ENRICH, 4.

An article by Mackey, Diemer, and O'Brien claims, "Interpersonal differences and the accompanying negative feelings appear to have a corrosive effect on the quality of relationships when they remain unresolved."[100] While flexibility is important in resolving conflict (which will be considered in the next lesson), it is also important to keep in mind in just dealing with differences within the regular course of a marriage.

A couple may enter marriage with certain expectations in roles, finances, recreation time, and even intimacy. These expectations can affect the perception of the health or quality of the marriage. A couple may enter marriage with unrealistic expectations, which could create unnecessary difficulties within their marriage. While unrealistic expectations can vary, one major misconception is that everything will remain the same. According to Shanda Yuvette Smith, it is not uncommon for someone to enter marriage believing their love will not change after they get married. She found that "seven out of eight men revealed that the love they had developed for their ex-spouse (while dating) would not change once they were married."[101] These were men now divorced who realized their once-proclaimed love changed drastically.

Not only are feelings of love subject to this misconception, but other areas of a relationship can also fall victim to similar unrealistic expectations. Someone's looks, hobbies, likes, and dislikes will change through the course of a marriage. In the midst of these changes, a couple has the potential to either grow together or grow apart.

The importance of learning to be flexible and make healthy compromises and decisions is essential to a marriage. This is true whether or not expectations were realistic in the beginning.

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[100] Richard A Mackey, Matthew A Diemer, and Bernard A. O'Brien, "Conflict-Management Styles of Spouses in Lasting Marriages," *Psychotherapy* 37, no. 2 (2000): 135.
[101] Shanda Yuvette Smith, "A Phenomenological Study of the Impact of Personal Expectations on Personal Experiences of Marriage and Divorce," (PhD. Diss., Walden University, 2010), 85.

Life does not always unfold exactly how one expects it to.[102] Countless occurrences, from starting a family to unexpected illness of a spouse or even a family member, could bring major changes. A couple then needs to be able to make decisions that involve compromise without either spouse feeling neglected, subservient, or of less value.

Without purposeful attention and energy in the area of flexibility, it can be natural for resentment and or burnout to surface in the relationship. Of course, truthfulness, warmth, and genuineness in communication will be needed (as discussed in the last lesson), but promoting flexibility is also something a couple will need to consider.

How to Promote Flexibility

To promote flexibility there is need to acknowledge differences, "If we genuinely differ on priorities, we must acknowledge this and seek compromise so that a good measure of each of our priorities may be accomplished."[103] This certainly requires flexibility and a heart for compromise, but how does a couple promote this idea in their relationship? The answer is, in great part, the embodiment of the teachings of Jesus.

Most Christians are likely familiar with the Bible's consistent emphasis on love. It is the greatest advice one can receive to improve his or her marriage. It is the principles of life, love, and relationships that Scripture presents through words and examples that can help to promote an environment where healthy flexibility and compromise can be experienced. One in Scripture that expounds on the role of love in life and relationships is 1 Corinthians 13.

1 Corinthians 13 is well known among couples getting married, as it is often quoted in part or in whole in wedding ceremonies. The words are poetic and absolutely beautiful in their

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[102] W. Kim Halford, *Marriage and Relationship Education: What Works and How to Provide It* (New York, NY: Guilford, 2011), 261.

[103] Chapman, *Now You're Speaking,* 91.

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ability to inspire the kind of devoted love that many couples seek in their marriages. However, after the wedding is over, are these concepts of love found in the marriage?

This passage is a powerful reminder to the Christian of the central prominence and reality of love to a fruitful life.[104] There are two verses in 1 Corinthians 13 that especially stick out in regard to not only love in the context of marriage but in discussing the importance of promoting flexibility and compromise. "Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil" (1 Co 13:4–5). This passage speaks of a universal love that should be demonstrated among all and to all.[105] If this is the charge and standard by which Christians should treat one another, it is a reasonable assumption that this is what is desired by God within a marriage as well.

So, what does love have to do with flexibility and compromise? A Christian is to seek to esteem their spouse higher than himself or herself. "Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind, let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests but also for the interests of others" (Phil 2:4-5). This is the attitude of flexibility and compromise. A spouse does not simply seek his or her own way but seeks what is best for his or her spouse. If this is a reciprocal concept within the marriage, not only does love grow, but so does the flexibility to tackle changes and differences along the journey.

Flexibility also helps to build a genuine desire in spouses to see the other succeed and reduces feelings of being robbed while the other spouse succeeds. In this atmosphere, each

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[104] Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights on 1 & 2 Corinthians* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2017), 192.
[105] Kenneth E. Bailey, *Paul through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 352.

spouse is giving and receiving support, lessening the feelings of guilt and abandonment. While this is, of course, great to say, it is difficult to live this way consistently.

A note of caution is appropriate here. Not all compromise is good or healthy. The truth of God should never be compromised. Also, deeply held beliefs or emotions should only be changed after deep consideration, education, and or reasoning. One should not ignore one's feelings about a subject simply for the sake of "compromise." Any and all change should be sought or discussed through good communication where both spouses seek understanding and treat each other respectfully and in a loving manner.

The compromise and flexibility being discussed in this lesson are referring to the everyday changes, decisions, and difficulties that life brings. There are more complicated issues and that surround beliefs and values, and these must be considered with much prayer and humility. The bigger the change or the potential change, the more discussion and honest communication will be needed.

Conclusion

Spouses need to learn healthy compromise and flexibility in their marriage to deal with the difficulties, decisions, and changes that come their way. The heart of Christ needs to be fostered within each spouse and collectively in the relationship. Love is not selfish, nor does it seek its own benefit. This is a truth that must be realized. Such love will foster an atmosphere in which both spouses can grow, and the marriage can flourish.

Lesson 3: Conflict Resolution

Introduction

This third lesson focused on an element that is very popular among premarital and marital education programs: conflict resolution. It has been shown that conflict resolution skills are a

major contributor to marriage satisfaction, especially in the first five years. "Relationship

personality and conflict resolution are substantial contributing factors to the level of satisfaction

couples experience concurrently in their marriage and over the first five years."[106]

Silliman also recognized the importance of good conflict resolution and management

skills to marriage: "Well-adjusted couples consistently demonstrate self-control, empathy, and

constructive conflict resolution in mastering life challenges."[107] The importance once again

seems obvious, and its Scriptural basis is just as strong.

A basis for teaching strong conflict resolution skills can be found through an examination

of Scripture. A great place to start would be by examining the teaching of the most capable

expert on relationships. Jesus emphasized the need to deal with grievances between people in an

appropriate manner. Consider his teaching in Matthew 5:23–24: "Therefore if you bring your gift

to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift

there before the altar, and go your way. First, be reconciled to your brother, and then come and

offer your gift." As has already been noted in the earlier lesson on communication, Peter charged

husbands to "dwell with their wives with understanding" (1 Peter 3:7). Scripture also calls all

Christians to love one another and seek the best for one another (John 13:34, 15:12; Rom 13:8,

etc.).

In commenting on John 13:34–35, Carson observed that there is an "obligation of the

new covenant community to respond to the God who loved and redeemed them by the oblation

of His Son."[108] Jesus's example of selfless love can be seen in his greatest act of bringing back

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[106] Klaus A. Schneewind and Anna-Katharina Gerhard, "Relationship Personality, Conflict Resolution, and Marital Satisfaction in the First 5 Years of Marriage," *Family Relations* 51, no. 1 (2002): 68.

[107] Benjamin Silliman, "Building Healthy Marriages through Early and Extended Outreach with Youth," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 31, no. 3 (2003): 271.

[108] Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 485.

together heaven and earth through the sacrifice of His own self, so "that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him" (Eph 2:10). Jesus is even referred to as a mediator for this work in bringing back together God and man, who were separated due to the conflict of sin and the results of human rebellion: "For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim 2:5).

Conflict Resolution in Marriage

When discussing conflict resolution, it is good to have a point of reference from which to begin the conversation. For the sake of this lesson, it will be what has already been established in the previous lessons, which is a desire for a godly marriage, good communication, and flexibility that promotes healthy compromise. All that has been said thus far regarding proper communication and flexibility needs to be assumed in this discussion on conflict resolution. One of the main components for conflict resolution, then, is an atmosphere of love discussed in the last lesson. Building on the idea of love, a consideration of perfection should be made.

It is common to desire the fairy-tale stories of the perfect marriage. These ideas may have developed in childhood through movies, books, or even in what was seen in one's parents' or grandparents' marriage. However, the pursuit of a perfect marriage can quickly lead to a mountain of unrealistic expectations. Instead of seeking the "perfect," it is far more productive and valuable to learn how to deal with the inevitable conflicts that will arise between two imperfect people.[109] So, the better question is not how to eliminate conflict from the marriage, but rather, how does a couple properly handle conflict in their marriage?

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[109] Tim Muehlhoff, *Marriage Forecasting: Changing the Climate of Your Relationship One Conversation at a Time* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), 104.

The concept of conflict resolution is very broad, and countless contributing factors and scenarios might alter details in one's response to conflict. In this lesson, a few tools will be discussed and presented; however, it would be beneficial for a couple to continue to grow and learn beyond what is presented here.

Godly Resolution

For Christians, the goal of conflict resolution should be a healthier and stronger marriage, but also a godly marriage. The desire for a godly marriage will help to shape the meaning of healthy and strong marriage, as both the husband and wife have a standard, they can hold themselves to (Ephesians 5). One very important, godly aspect a couple should keep in mind when developing conflict resolution skills is the concept of hope.

In 1999, Everett Worthington developed a brief counseling approach he entitled, "Hope-Focused Counseling."[110] In 2007, Patrice Turner and Jennifer Ripley published a case study on implementing this counseling program, which teaches several conflict resolution skills. Their findings present reinforcement of the work by Worthington and serve the purpose in this lesson of providing some key concepts and activities that can help promote hope in marriage by developing good conflict resolution techniques.

Concept 1: Honest evaluation

Often, individuals and couples can see themselves through rose-tinted glasses. The case study referenced above provides a great example of this concept. The couple in the case study believed they had good communication, but they did not. The husband tended to talk over the wife, not enabling her to fully communicate her thoughts.[111]

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[110] Worthington, *Hope-Focused Marriage Counseling,* 1.
[111] Patrice Turner and Jennifer Ripley, "Applying Hope-Focused Marriage Therapy to Conflict Resolution in Marriage: Case Study," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 65.

As such, they had difficulty communicating during conflicts. The wife was raised in a family where getting feelings and thoughts in the open was a valued means to resolving conflicts. The husband was raised in an environment where conflict was avoided. If conflict came up, the husband had learned to try to avoid dealing with it, as that would be better than arguing. The results left the couple struggling to deal with conflict in a healthy way.

What can be learned for the struggles of this couple (which are very common to many marriages) is that an open and honest evaluation is necessary to consider how conflicts are resolved within that marriage. This should be done with a desire to promote the godly aspects of love and hope in the relationship.

Concept 2: Making a plan to deal with conflict

It is important for a couple to develop a plan for how conflicts and arguments are to be resolved in their home. As with the couple in the case study, it may be easy to default to what was demonstrated in the home where each person grew up. It is important for honest communication and flexible compromise to be brought into this process. The couple in the case study sat down and discussed how the conflict was dealt with in both of their families. They decided they did not want to imitate either form of conflict resolution, but the discussion enabled them to identify the negatives and positives they wanted to promote within their own house rules. They then framed the rules in the house so that all who came into the house understood their commitment to their marriage and their love for each other.[112]

This is an example worthy of following. A couple should discuss how they want conflicts to be resolved in their marriage. This conversation should include an honest discussion of current conflict resolution methods, both the positives and negatives, as well as the rules by which

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[112] Turner and Ripley, "Applying Hope-Focused," 67.

conflicts were dealt with in each person's family growing up. This practice will only be as beneficial to the extent that both the husband and wife are willing to communicate.

The point in evaluating these concepts is to raise awareness within married couples of the need to be proactive in building positive conflict resolution skills. In cases where these things cannot be talked about in an honest and productive way, a couple should reach out to a counselor or someone that can be a trusted mentor to help them in these matters.

Even with good communication and a healthy plan to deal with conflicts, fights and arguments can still arise. Do not argue or fight for a win and a loss but rather for a "win-win."[113] The Parrotts give three rules to fight in a good way to promote that win-win scenario. It would be good for couples to consider these rules and try to implement them as they approach a fight and/or to help lessen their occurrences.

Rule 1: Cooperation. To foster a spirit of cooperation, with a goal of fighting for a "win-win," the Parrotts suggest a couple of things. First, they suggest sharing what they refer to as *holdings*. These are the things that one meant to tell one's spouse throughout the week but did not for one reason or another. To facilitate this sharing, they suggest setting aside one day each week where both partners sit down and write down two positive things they meant to say about their spouse that week that they did not say. Each partner can also write down one negative. The spouses then share what they have written with each other, and all each may say in response to the positive is thank you, and the negative cannot be discussed for at least thirty minutes. This promotes responding rather than reacting and opens dialogue, which can lead to countless arguments being avoided.[114]

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[113] Les Parrott and Leslie L. Parrott, *The Good Fight: How Conflict Can Bring You Closer* (Brentwood, TN: Worthy, 2013), 68.
[114] Ibid., 69–70.

Rule 2: Ownership. Ownership is about the husband and wife taking proper ownership of their piece of a conflict. This allows for problems to be resolved or managed. Studies have shown not all problems are resolved in a marriage. Sometimes, couples in healthy marriages simply learn to manage them. The point of ownership is to build responsibility and avoid laying the entire burden on the shoulders of the other spouse.[115]

One way to foster this ownership is to avoid criticizing and instead make an appropriate complaint when necessary. The difference seems subtle, but the results can be powerful. Making a criticism generally starts with a "You" statement. A complaint generally starts with an "I" statement. A criticism may go as follows: "You always treat me unfairly." A complaint in the same situation may sound more like, "I feel I don't get a fair opportunity to voice my opinions." This phrasing allows the complaint to be heard and feelings to be expressed, but it takes the personal attack away, opening the opportunity for a discussion rather than a fight.

Rule 3: Respect. Respecting one's spouse should always be of the utmost priority. The best way to build respect is to promote an environment of appreciation.[116] Spouses should avoid being cruel to each other and diligently seek opportunities to express appreciation for each other. Studies have shown that happy couples have learned to scan any given situation and look for positives and seek out points of appreciation in their relationship.[117] This practice counters a tendency to bring up negatives with too much frequency and promotes a healthier balance in communication.

Rule 4: Empathy. The last rule mentioned here is empathy. It is important for a husband and wife to learn empathy for each other. Empathy takes more than being sympathetic to a bad

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[115] Parrott and Parrott, *The Good Fight*, 72–73.
[116] Ibid., 80.
[117] Ibid.

day, but rather desiring to relate to the other spouse's experiences and feelings. This requires

attention to what is not said as much as what is said. This might be deemed as mind-reading,

which nobody can actually do, but it is not so much mind-reading as it is desiring the best for

one's spouse. This requires an effort to know one's spouse and to grow in that understanding.[118]

A second important activity in this area of empathy is prayer.[119] Prayer is the cornerstone

of a strong relationship with God, and it is a foundation stone of a good marriage. While there

are many things to pray about, constant prayer for your spouse, their experiences, and their

feelings can go a long way to promoting empathy and awareness for one another. Prayer should

be a regular part of the way a husband and wife express their love and emotion to each other and

to God.

Conclusion

Conflict resolution is an important aspect of a strong and healthy marriage. The things

brought up in this lesson are intended to build awareness of and to promote a healthy discussion

on the topic. Spouses should evaluate what they are doing to promote healthy conflict resolution

skills.

<div align="center">Lesson 4: Compatibility in Marriage</div>

Introduction

Marriage is a lifelong commitment. The commitment is not just about faithfulness but

also about a responsibility to share each other's lives. Over the course of time, problems,

conflicts, and change can create distance and compatibility questions. "Some couples who fail to

resolve conflicts over a period of years draw the conclusion that they are not compatible and, in

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[118] Parrott and Parrott, *The Good Fight*, 80–82.
[119] Ibid., 83.

fact, are enemies."[120] As discussed in the previous lessons, conflict resolution, couple flexibility, and communication are all crucial factors for a healthy marriage. It is also essential to know that these areas promote or discourage compatibility and connectedness in marriage.

Compatibility has long been a studied factor in marital satisfaction. Several inventories have been developed to help couples judge their compatibility with one another in premarital counseling settings. These can cover a lot of areas but often focus on personality, problem-solving, and goals. However, this lesson is focused on those who have already entered marriage. In marriage, compatibility becomes a moving target that changes with time as much as the husband and wife both change. The first picture of compatibility that arose before marriage might also fade in and out of focus. This reality requires a husband and wife to grow in this area and their appreciation for one another.

Compatibility and Connectedness

"What people seem to want most of all in a mate is to be connected."[121] While it is important to understand personality inventories that might be explored with a couple in premarital counseling, for those already married, it is essential to explore compatibility through the lens of connectedness.

Connectedness is simply a way of speaking to the feelings a husband and wife have concerning being on the same page. This is seen in the concept of oneness found in the original marriage picture. When God created Eve from Adam, he delivered a profound statement of connection to his wife—"This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen 2:23a).

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[120] Chapman, *Now You're Speaking,* 109.

[121] Scott Stanley, Milt Bryan, Savanna McCain, and Daniel Trathen, *A Lasting Promise: A Christian Guide to Fighting for Your Marriage*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2014), 191.

Adam did not simply confess a material reality but spoke of a bond that most deeply connected him to his wife.

One of the greatest threats to a couple's feeling of being connected is conflict. In the previous lesson, conflict resolution was discussed, but in this lesson, it is vital to consider it from the perspective of personality or personal differences. While the romantic feelings of love may govern the early portion of marriage, eventually, the reality of disagreements and weaknesses will surface. "This presents us with the challenge of loving a person who, at the moment, seems in large part, a stranger."[122] This can create feelings of unease and even a feeling that one or both spouses might not feel like they were ever compatible.[123]

Identifying Differences and Working to Make Them Assets

Chapman advised couples to identify their differences. In a lengthy discussion with supporting illustrations, he noted a fact with which most are familiar: opposites often attract. Whether it is the early bird and the night owl, the neatnik and the slob, or the organized and the spontaneous, it is essential to identify the differences between the spouses and not pretend they do not exist.[124] Being different is not a sign of failure, but it is the ability to manage and work within these differences that determines true compatibility.

Some differences are readily worked out. For instance, one spouse loves to cook and the other does not mind doing the dishes. This is a difference that works within the flow of the marriage and is not a source of conflict or issues. Differences that lead to conflict are the ones that need careful identification and consideration.

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[122] Chapman, *Now You're Speaking,* 104.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Ibid., 108–111.

Once an honest reflection on differences occurs, it is time to focus on turning differences into assets. "Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God" (Rom 15:7). It becomes essential for each spouse to receive each other, including each one's differences. One example in Scripture deals with the church. Ephesians 4:16 states, "From whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love."

The picture that Paul painted for the church is one of cooperative unity, not a homogenous entity. Each member, though ideally sharing the same goal of Christlikeness, does not bring the same set of talents and personality traits to the assembly. However, the differences here work to make the church a whole rather than divide the church into sparring segments. This presents an excellent example for husbands and wives.

It is not enough just to recognize the possibility of differences being good. A process is required to help turn those negatives into points of appreciation. Chapman suggested several steps that should prove helpful for most couples. These steps are represented by questions that should be asked of oneself.

The first question is, "What is it about this difference that disturbs me?" One can identify the actual difference and be honest with the feelings of being bothered by it. This question needs to be followed by another critical question: "Why does this bother me?" It is possible that the difference is triggering a felt need or is bringing up some other emotion, whether directly or indirectly tied to the difference or dispute.

By asking these questions, a person equips himself/herself to be able to communicate with a spouse on the matter honestly.[125] "It is essential that you allow each other to be human—to have differences and to have feelings that arise from those differences."[126] This process is not designed to change the other spouse, but rather to begin a healthy communication process that leads to a resolution. The result could be simply a better appreciation for one's spouse and their differences, or it could be a discussion about a more significant weight that one is carrying and the dispute triggers that important matter.

How Can Connection Be Developed or Strengthened?

What can a couple who feel their compatibility is nonexistent or lacking do to change that course, or what can a couple do to stay on a healthy path in this area? Scott Stanley stated that one of the keys to connection is to promote fun and friendship within the relationship. To this end, he presented a few guidelines:

1. Set aside the time.

2. Protect connection time from conflict.

3. Set aside time for fun activities.

4. Talk as friends.

5. Talk about things you have not talked about before.

6. Talk from the heart.

According to Stanley, building a connection cannot be taken for granted. It must be guarded against the constant barrage of daily activities a marriage might face. Defending against such troubles in marriage is not enough. A couple must work to strengthen the positive aspects of their relationship in these areas of friendship. One significant threat to the development of this

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[125] Chapman, *Now You're Speaking,* 116.
[126] Ibid., 117.

friendship is the excuses that distract a couple from working on this crucial skill. These excuses might be false ideas like "husbands and wives are not supposed to be friends," or "life is too busy; there is no time."[127]

Marriage takes investment and effort, and there are no shortcuts. A couple needs to be careful not to let other important or good things steal the importance of their marriage, robbing the spouses of the growth that they need. Connection is not an element that can be pushed to the side. It should be seen as an important element to fostering healthy growth in the marriage relationship.

Conclusion

Solomon's advice seems well placed here, "Live joyfully with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain life which He has given you under the sun, all your days of vanity; for that is your portion in life, and in the labor which you perform under the sun" (Eccl 9:9). While these words may seem a bit harsh, it is essential to understand the concepts. It is more important to live joyfully with one's spouse than to be overconsumed with the vain pursuit of the material world. Spouses must not let the vain things of life rob their marriage of this great blessing.

Lesson 5: Closeness in Marriage

Introduction

Closeness and intimacy are especially important areas in which spouses should grow in understanding. This lesson will present biblical insights on the topics of love and intimacy. The lesson will also glean from research and experts in the field to present helpful insights that help to promote closeness in marriage. According to John Gottman, some 70% percent of women and men reported the key to closeness in the realms of romance, sex, and passion is actually the

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[127] Stanley et al., *A Lasting Promise,* 196–203.

quality of the couple's friendship.[128] This is a very important observation. As is the case with compatibility, as seen in the last lesson, a strong friendship within the marriage is a key to closeness and intimacy. Scripture presents this same truth about the importance of friendship.

Closeness in Friendship

Most in the church are familiar with the concept of the church being "the bride of Christ" (Eph 5:25). However, Jesus declared his followers were also His friends. He distinguished his friends from simple servants: "No longer do I call you servants, for a servant, does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you" (John 15:15). This picture is powerful in its original context. Jesus desired for those who followed Him to know that He had told them intimate things about His purpose and goals in His ministry. Jesus gave an example of building intimacy in friendship by sharing His knowledge and resources and even goals with them.

Couples can learn from Jesus's example of friendship. Couples need to be willing to share their goals, desires, and knowledge of themselves. These disclosures not only build a powerful friendship but also promote the closeness necessary for a successful marriage. There is research along these lines as well.

In their study, Riediger and Rauers observed that over a sixteen-week period, couples grew in their feelings of closeness as they began to share more of their own goals with each other. They concluded, "Feeling close to one's partner is derived in part from the feeling that one has access to one's partner's resources and perspectives, and from feeling understood and cared

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[128] John Mordechai Gottman and Nan1 Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, second ed. (New York, NY: Harmony, 2015), 31.

for by him or her."[129] This is amazingly similar to the relationship and friendship Jesus sought with His followers.

Since Jesus sought both a bride in His church and a friend, it is reasonable to conclude that He sought a friend in His bride. This should be an example for all of those who seek a Christ-like walk in their marriage.

Closeness Develops through Experiences

Jesus provided another example for couples by showing that closeness develops through experiences. Jesus was introduced to the disciples as being the Messiah (John 1:41), but later in his ministry, He asked the disciples a very pointed question about His identity. Having entered the area of Caesarea, he asked the disciples, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" (Matt 16:13). After they responded that people recognized that He was probably a prophet, He asked the question, "But who you say that I am?" (Matt 16:15). Jesus recognized that the disciples had a different perspective than the people of the area. They had walked with Him, seen His power, His compassion, seen him eat, and drink. They had experienced life with Him.

Living out experiences with another person brings great knowledge and understanding of who someone is. This same concept works in relationships as well. "A couple that stands together and supports each other in the tough times, finds a closeness that is built on the shared experiences unique to that couple."[130] Experiences would include negative things that must be weathered but also positive experiences the couple share that allow them to connect and build the intimacy that is required for closeness.

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[129] Michaela Riediger and Antje Rauers, "The 'I Know You' and the 'You Know Me' of Mutual Goal Knowledge in Partnerships: Differential Associations with Partnership Satisfaction and Sense of Closeness over Time," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 49, no. 3 (September 2010), 654, http://dx.doi.org/10.1348/014466610x494078.

[130] Halford, *Marriage and Relationship Education,* 171.

Building Closeness and Intimacy in Marriage

Everett Worthington presented an acronym to provide some guidelines for building intimacy. The acronym is CLEAVE, and it is derived from Genesis 2:24 in the King James Version, where it says husbands are to "cleave unto their wives." This idea of "cleaving" means being "united to," which implies a "high-level of intimacy."[131] The CLEAVE acronym represents six areas in which spouses can build closeness.

1. Change actions to positive

2. Loving romance

3. Employ a calendar

4. Adjust intimacy elsewhere

5. Value your partner

6. Enjoy yourselves intimately[132]

These areas present a picture of what is involved in building intimacy. A simple question to ask in each of these areas is, what is being done to foster these actions? Some will feel they are doing well in various areas, but not as well in others. It must be seen that all of these areas work together.

Some of these areas have already been discussed in previous lessons. For example, one of the crucial areas in all of these is the idea of "employing a calendar." The idea is for a couple to schedule a time to spend together. This was discussed already as it pertains to building connectedness and intimacy in the previous lesson. The goal of this scheduled time is quality time together.

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[131] Worthington, *Hope-Focused Marriage Counseling,* 218.
[132] Ibid., 219.

Many couples actually spend a lot of time together doing the nitty-gritty of life—working, paying bills, running the kids to all their sports and activities. This time together can provide a false sense of quality time. Quality time is time spent specifically to share in one another's thoughts and life. It is an active rather than passive engagement. Quality time could be a couple lying in bed for thirty minutes after the kids go to sleep to talk about dreams and goals and life. It could be a bike ride together or taking a day off work to hike together or taking a day trip somewhere together.[133] The key word is *together*.

Conclusion

It has been argued that mankind is built with a need for intimate connection. When the external and internal distractions are taken away, the soul longs for someone to share life with.[134] This longing can be seen once again in the first marriage. As Adam was in the garden and had named all the creatures, the Scriptures reveal, "But for Adam, there was not found a helper comparable to him" (Gen 2:20b). This text reveals that Adam was in need of a comparable mate.

It also needs to be noted that when Adam longed for a mate, he was in a place was free from struggles, pains, sin, and any other negative influence. In what is often referred to as a perfect place, the man was in need of a companionship that only a wife could provide. It is this closeness, this intimacy, that should be a reminder of why it is worth the effort to work on strengthening the marriage bonds.

<div align="center">Lesson 6: Holiness in Marriage</div>

Introduction

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[133] Barry W. McCarthy and Emily J. McCarthy, *Getting It Right the First Time: Creating a Healthy Marriage* (New York, NY: Brunner-Routledge, 2004), 134.

[134] Timothy E. Clinton and Gary Sibcy, *Attachments: Why You Love, Feel, and Act the Way You Do* (Brentwood, TN: Integrity, 2002), 208.

This is the final lesson in the program. This lesson seeks to reframe the goal of marriage to a more biblical understanding of the ultimate goal of holiness. The lesson will emphasize the importance and role of holiness within the marriage. It will not be the emphasis of this lesson to cast out a common notion of happiness as an ideal but rather to elevate holiness in marriage.

Over time, especially among younger adults, the more traditional concepts of marriage and its role in society have changed. The ideas around raising children and building families based on religious values that were commonly held in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have changed. These concepts have been replaced by a more self-centered and individualistic view of happiness and finding a "soul mate."[135] It has become a common notion that marriage, or specifically one's spouse, is supposed to make the other spouse happy. If there is no happiness in the marriage, then it is not considered a good marriage, and divorce or some other remedy is often sought.

Holiness in Marriage

What is meant here in the references to holiness in marriage? One might assume that it is the structural ideals that God has given for marriage. For example, one may think of a marriage between one man and one woman, or even the concept of sexual purity. While these concepts are especially important to establishing a holy marriage, one set apart for God, the concept of holiness needs to be developed beyond these basic notions. Holiness in marriage goes beyond establishing who should be married, beyond how to be married, or how to act within a marriage.

Research has revealed that religion is one of the most important factors in "happy" marriages. It is argued that religion gives a couple a shared sense of value and purpose.[136] For a Christian couple, this purpose is the eternal desire of God. Marriage has been given to mankind

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    [135] Peters and Kamp Dush, eds., *Marriage and Family,* 414.
    [136] Parrott and Parrott, *Saving Your Marriage*, 161.

as a part of this grand purpose and plays a role in the development of holiness in those who would submit to the precepts of God.

Holiness is a quality defined by God Himself, for God is holy—"but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct" (1 Pet 1:15). In the throne scene in Revelation chapter four, the "living creatures" that surround the throne call out constantly "holy, holy, holy" (v. 8). It is the picture of the Almighty set apart, set above all, that represents the ultimate definition of holy. He was, is, and is to come to the very nature of holiness and sovereignty.[137] To define this in another way, the ways and concepts of God are what make up holiness.

It is this concept of holiness that presents a more substantial meaning to marriage. Marriage is a place where holiness is matured, and each spouse learns the spiritual realities unto which God has called them. One major way spouses are matured is in confronting pride. Scripture speaks about the dangers of pride in many places.

One profound warning about the danger of pride is extended in Proverbs. "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov 16:18). Marriage requires spouses to confront their own pride in living out the holy prescripts that God has given them.

Husbands and wives have to learn to submit in love and to serve. This means they cannot live from a self-centered perspective but must adopt the same servant spirit of Jesus—"Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matt 20:28). This complementary challenge to grow is inherently present within the marriage and serves to foster the spirit of holiness that God desires.[138]

Since marriage is the most intimate relationship a person can be involved in, other than that which they share with God, it serves the human family well as the ultimate training arena for

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[137] G K. Beale, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2015), 90.
[138] Thomas, *The Sacred Search,* 153.

holiness and maturity. This means the ultimate purpose in marriage is not to make one happy, but rather to make one holy. This gives a deeper meaning to the picture in Ephesians 5:25–27:

> Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish.

While many individuals make a note of the command for husbands to love their wives, Paul went beyond and put an emphasis on sanctification. How does this translate to the husband-and-wife relationship? It is a call to promote holiness in one's spouse.

Finding Happiness by Changing the Goal

Scripture approaches happiness in a different way than the world. This is illustrated well in the great Sermon on the Mount. When Jesus preached the portion of the sermon that is often referred to as the Beatitudes (Matt 5:1–12), He began each statement with "Blessed are." The term *blessed* can mean "happy."[139] Jesus proclaimed that happiness is a fruit of the spiritual Beatitudes to which He was calling His followers. In this presentation of happiness, happiness is a result rather than a pursuit. A couple that desires to be happy will find it as a fruit of a marriage that seeks the attitudes and ways of God.

The simple point to be made here is that happiness is not supposed to be the goal but rather a product of a spiritually healthy marriage. A marriage that pursues God's holiness may, in fact, not experience happiness in every moment but will find happiness along the way. The growth and maturity needed in this pursuit could cause conflict and hard times as spouses challenge, serve, and support one another. A Christian couple can know that there is a promise of happiness waiting at the end of these godly pursuits.

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[139] Craig A. Evans, *Matthew: New Cambridge Bible Commentary* (New York, NY: Cambridge University, 2012), 100.

Conclusion

Holiness is a lifelong pursuit for an individual, and it is likewise a continued pursuit in a marriage. What does this look like for a Christian couple? How does a couple pursue holiness? This pursuit encompasses everything that has been discussed in this program. It requires an understanding of the design and purpose of marriage. It requires the pursuit of love and service in joy and in conflict. It requires couples to learn to dwell with each other in understanding, to develop a plan to handle conflict and healthy communication. It requires a dedication to being connected and building intimacy and friendship. Ultimately, it requires a combined pursuit of God where each spouse encourages the other along the way to maturity in the likeness of Jesus.

Preliminary Questionnaire Results and Observations

This study contained more wives than husbands as some of the husbands, due to work obligations or other reasons, were not able or willing to participate. Twenty-eight out of the fifty-two participants reported not having taken part in premarital counseling or premarital education. Thirteen of the participants reported having minimal premarital counseling of one or two sessions. Six participants reported participating in three to four counseling sessions, and one participant reported in taking part in five to six sessions. Two participants reported taking part in seven or more sessions, while two participants reported they could not remember the extent of the counseling they received though they did participate in premarital counseling of some form.
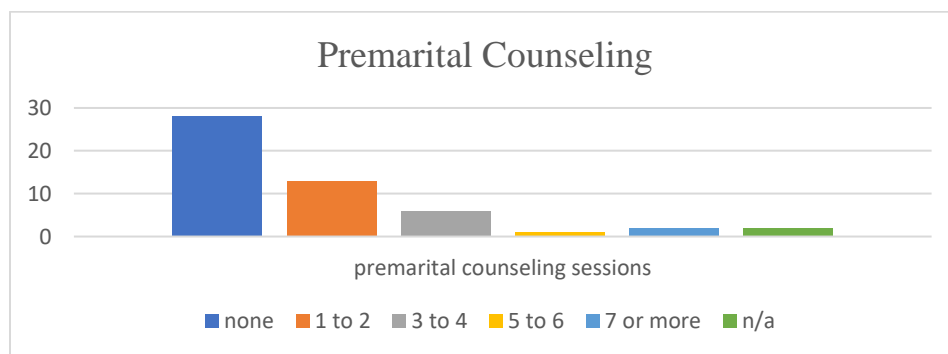
Figure 1. Number of premarital counseling sessions.

Figure 1 shows the participants' attendance at premarital counseling visually. It should be noted that those reporting two or fewer sessions were forty-one participants or 79% of the sample group. This presents evidence confirming that it is reasonable to assert that there is a gap in marital education at the Three Forks Church of Christ. Further evidence can be found from the fact that the project, as devised and implemented, was associated with change in the perception of the participants in nearly every category presented. These changes are addressed later in the chapter.
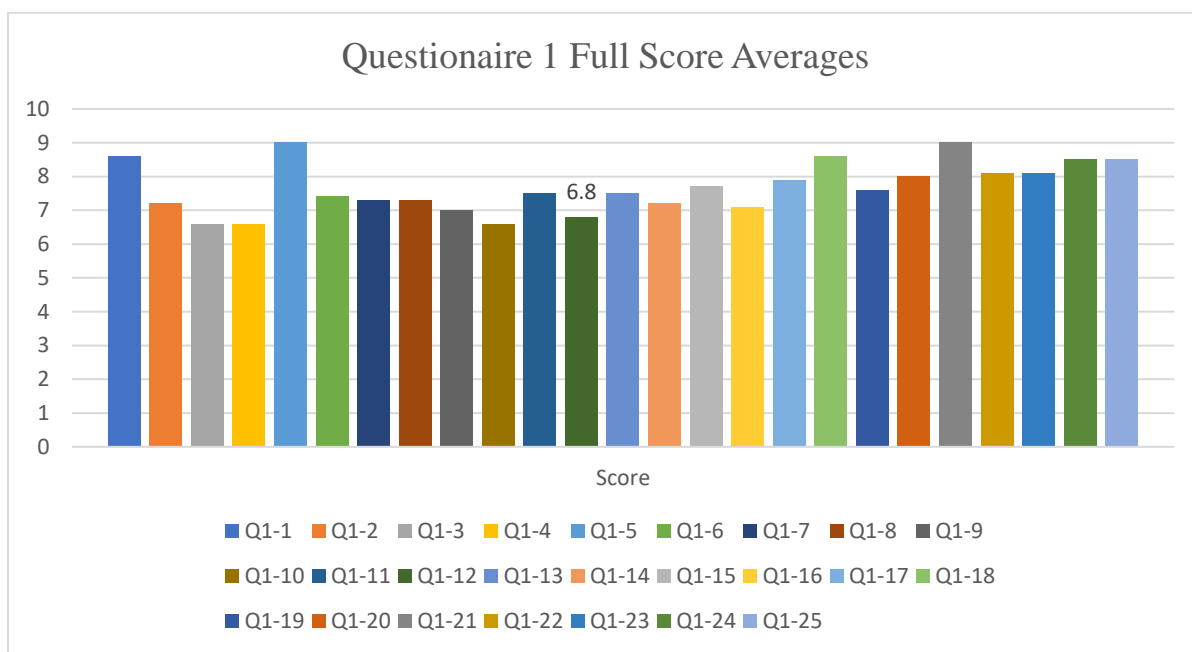
Figure 2. Questionnaire 1 full score averages.

One issue that was observed in this data is the number of participants who answered questions on the first questionnaire with scores of ten. These questions were designed to gauge a participant's understanding in the topics that are covered in the curriculum. In the questionnaire, ten was to represent the feeling that there was nothing more they could learn on the matter. This would suggest that those answering with a ten felt like they had certain issues under control, but

it also did not allow any movement to be shown on the second survey. The chances that an individual had nothing to learn in a given category is highly unlikely. It was decided to leave the numbers in the sample group, as they represented the participants' responses as they themselves reported. It should be noted that such responses have raised the overall averages in these categories.

The information gathered in the initial or preliminary questionnaire established that there was a need for a marital education program by identifying a gap in the current education of the members at Three Forks. This initial questionnaire also established a baseline for the evaluation of the project and its ability to increase the participants' understanding of key factors addressed within the curriculum.

Concluding Questionnaire Results and Observations

The first method of measuring the outcome of this project was the participants' own perceptions. How did they evaluate their perceived benefit from the curriculum and the project? The second method of measuring the outcome was determining whether the participants' responses changed from the preliminary questionnaire to the concluding questionnaire. This second method provides an additional way of answering the same question, but with more precise data on the content involved in the program.

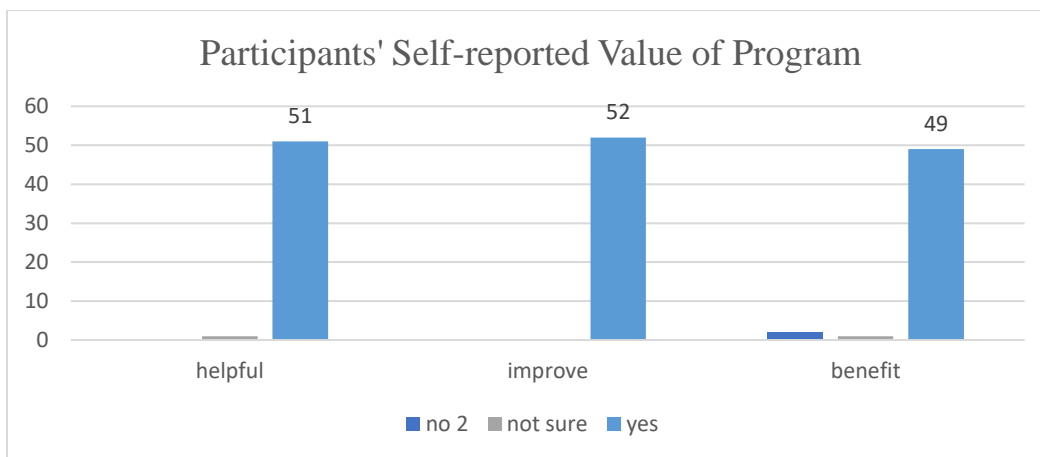Participants' Self-reported Value of Program

Figure 3. Participants' self-reported value of program.

Participants were asked three specific questions on their overall perceptions of the material. They were then asked the same twenty-five questions as they had responded to on the first questionnaire to evaluate changes in perception in a more detailed way. The initial three questions were as follows: "Do you believe this marriage education curriculum was helpful to you?" "Do you believe this program has improved your understanding of key areas related to your marriage?" and "Do you believe your marriage will benefit from being a part of this program?"

The answers given to the three questions were remarkably positive. When asked if the project was helpful, fifty-one of fifty-two answered "yes." Only one participant answered that they were not sure. When asked if the program improved their understanding, all fifty-two participants answered "yes." On the third question, which asked if the program would benefit their marriage, forty-nine answered "yes" while two answered "no," and one was not sure. The self-reported rates of success are 98%, 100%, and 94%, respectively.

To establish some depth to the participants' answers (to help verify their positive answers), an evaluation of their responses on a ten-point scale to twenty-five questions that relate directly to the curriculum created for the project is prudent. As shown in Figure 4, the respondents answered positively.
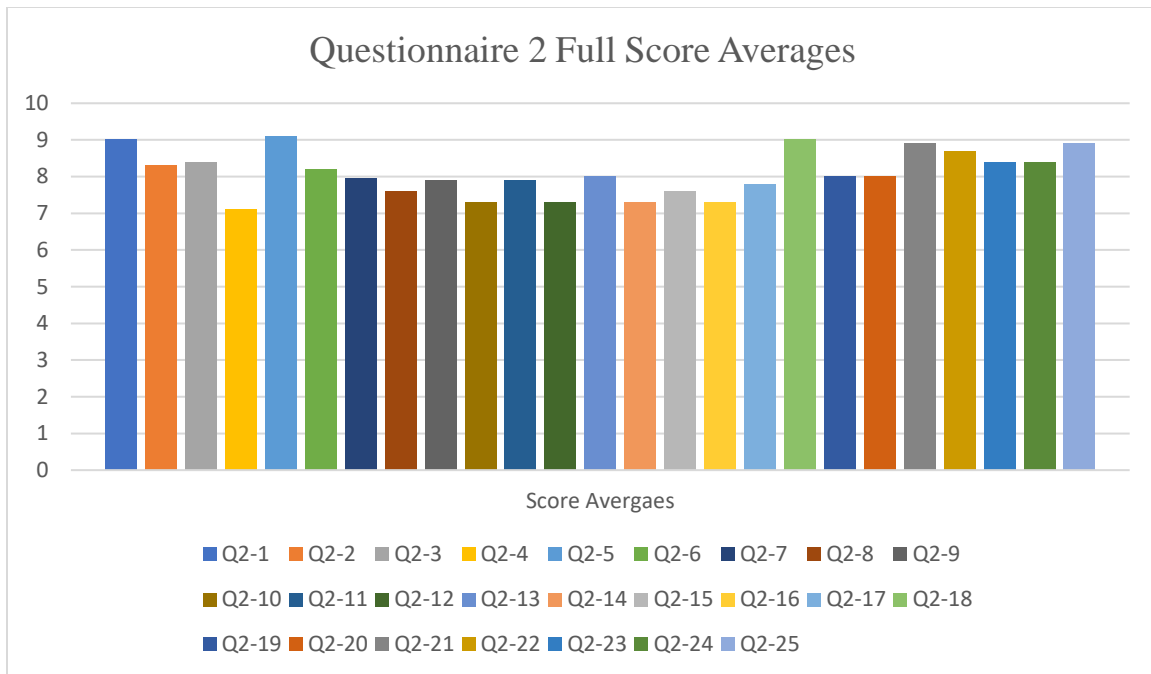
Figure 4. Questionnaire 2 full score averages.

These results seem to suggest that as a group, some confidence already existed in the knowledge of the areas examined by the survey questions. This may be the result of an unchallenged notion that most understand what marriage is, what it is about, and how it should function. While this study was not designed to identify whether these perceptions are indeed correct, the second questionnaire does show some regression on a few questions that might argue in favor of such a view. This possibility is discussed in the next section.

Comparative Results

Comparing the responses to the first and the second questionnaires among all participants reveals some interesting takeaway. An unexpected result was discovered in the data. A total of four questions showed a regression in average score. This indicates, as a group, the participants recorded numbers lower than what they did prior to engaging in the program. The regression was 0.1 points on average for each of these four questions. The four questions, all of which were answered on a scale from one (low/disagree) to ten (high/strongly agree), with the 0.1 regression

were as follows: "My partner is seldom too controlling," "We understand each other's personalities and have learned to work together to meet each other's needs," "How would you rate the importance of closeness to you?" and "How would you rate the following statement: God's eternal purposes are an important determining factor in how we live and make decisions."

Two questions of these are related directly to the concept of "couple connectedness." One of the questions comes out of the section on "couple compatibility." The last question comes out of the section on "holiness in marriage." The significance of the regression on these questions is not easily understood, nor is the regression easily explained. Perhaps the best explanation that can be offered is that it is possible that some respondents believed themselves better equipped in these areas prior to the program and then realized they were less equipped when challenged by the material.

Another possibility could simply be strain on marriages toward the end of the program. As noted in the last chapter, the final lesson and the completion of the final questionnaire happened while stay-at-home orders were being given by the Commonwealth of Kentucky due to the COVID-19 outbreak in the United States. Both could explain the slight regression in scores, but there is nothing conclusive that can be derived from the given data.
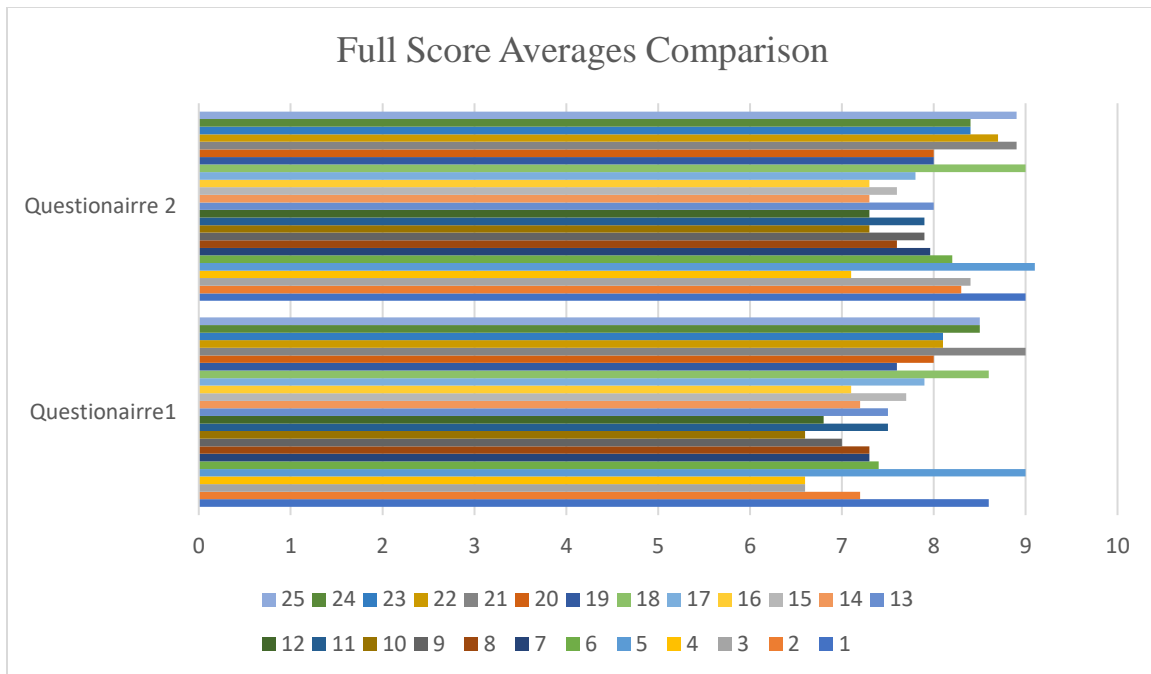
Figure 5. Full score averages comparison.

The questions that showed the biggest gain in average scores were in responses to the following: "On a scale of non-existent (1) to expert (10) how would you rank your understanding of communication mistakes that contribute to dysfunctional communication in marriage?" and "On a scale of non-existent (1) to expert (10) how would you rank your understanding on what constitutes good communication in marriage?" These two questions received a 1.8-point rise in average and a 1.1-point rise, respectively.

What might prove important is that both of these questions rely on respondents' understanding of what makes for good and bad communication. These results seem to reveal the biggest need, at least within this sample group, is more teaching and understanding in the area of communication. This also confirms the need for the program, as current teaching practices have left a gap among married couples in this area. More frequent teaching may be needed in this area, or there may simply be a lack of teaching in this area. This would need further study to

ascertain; however, the positive movement in scores shows this program was successful in this area.
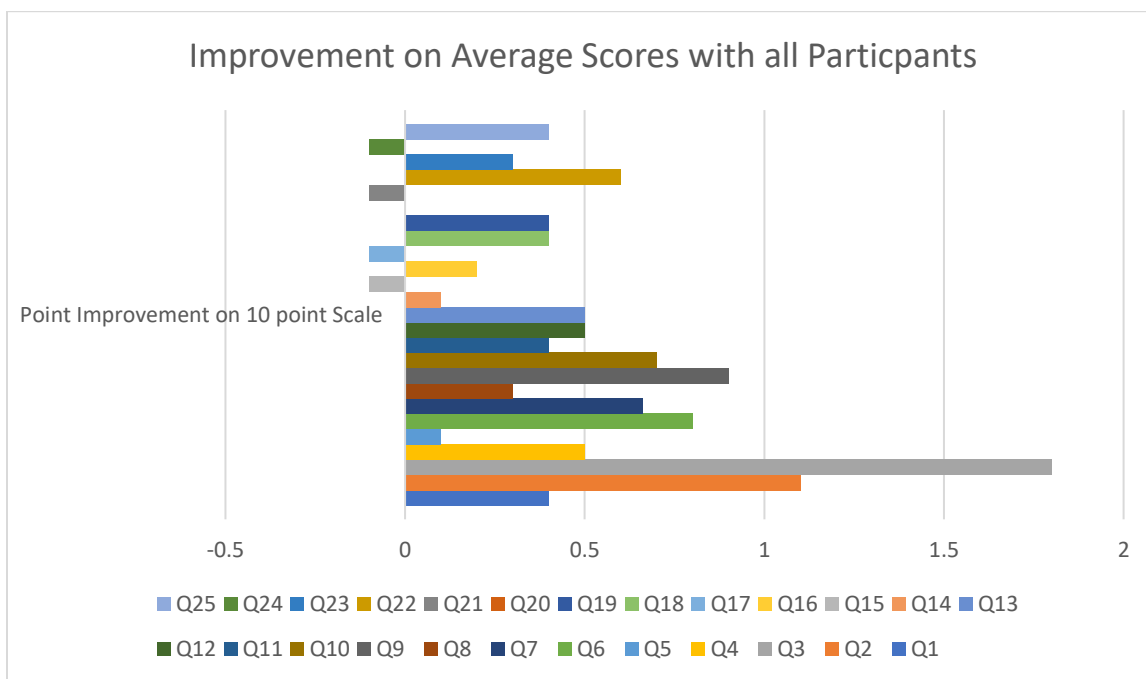
Figure 6. Improvement on average scores for all participants.

The results of these questionnaires suggest the secondary objective in the project, which was to reinforce and/or encourage those who did have prior premarital counseling, has been met. Most of these scores show an improvement, and ten of the twenty-five show at least a 0.5 point positive movement in the average score on a ten-point scale.

Target Group Results

The original target group for this project was those who were married and had received no or limited premarital counseling or education. When evaluating the movement on all twenty-five questions for the target group, the results are distinctly positive. Out of twenty-five questions, twenty-four moved in a positive direction, showing improvement. The lone question that showed a regression was question twenty-one, which asked, "On a scale of low (1) to high (10), how would you rate the importance of closeness to you?" It can be observed in the data that

two respondents lowered their scores from a ten on the preliminary questionnaire on this

question to a nine. As explained when noting this phenomenon in the entire sample group, this

movement down cannot be explained by the data alone here either. Once again, it can be

theorized that some of the respondents overestimated their comfort level with the category before

being challenged with the material. This can only be a theory, as there is no way to confirm this

speculation.
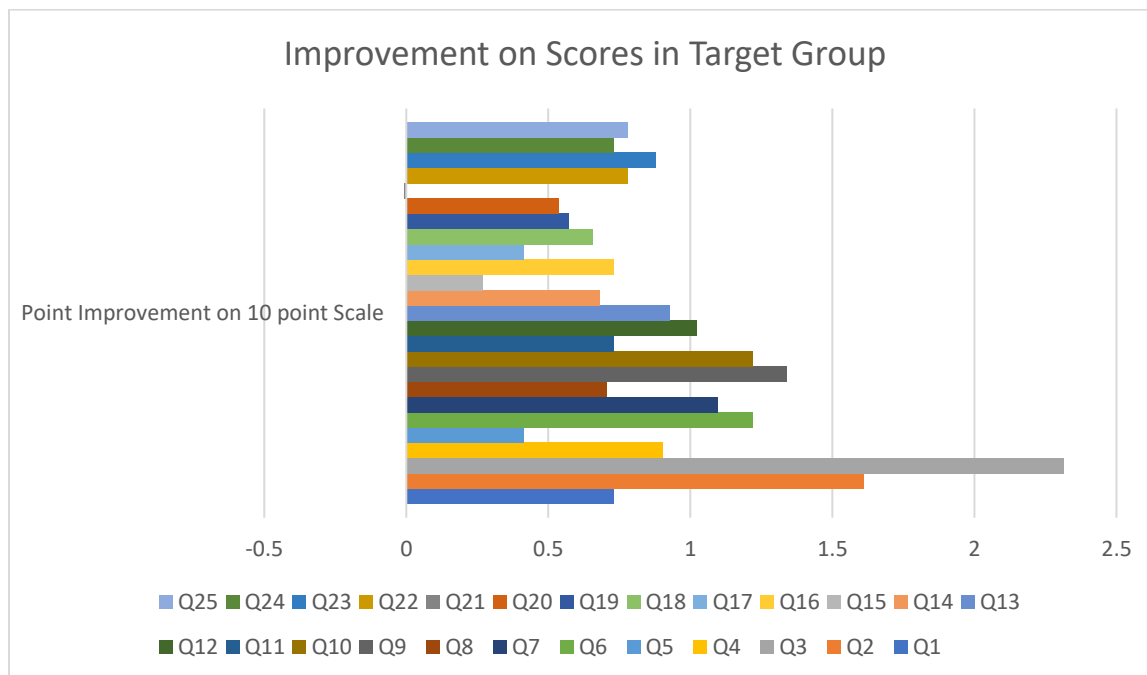
Figure 7. Improvement on scores in target group.

In this same body of data, it can be seen that for the target group, one area recorded a

regression on average; in the sample of total participants, it was four areas. This seems to suggest

that the target group had slightly less regression on these issues. Beyond that, a definitive reason

for the regression is difficult to ascertain.

The upward movement documented in the target group was present in twenty-four of the

twenty-five questions. In seven of the questions, the average of scores went up one full point in

responses from the participants. Fourteen responses showed at least a 0.5-point rise in average

response. These are significant rises on a ten-point scale and show a significant positive response to the curriculum delivered within this project.

The questions that showed the biggest gain in average scores for the target group were the same two questions as in the total sample group: "On a scale of non-existent (1) to expert (10) how would you rank your understanding of communication mistakes that contribute to dysfunctional communication in marriage?" and "On a scale of non-existent (1) to expert (10) how would you rank your understanding on what constitutes good communication in marriage?"

Within the target group, these two questions received a 2.3-point rise in average and a 1.6-point rise, respectively. That represents a significant difference in the responses between the first and second questionnaire on these two questions. It is also a significant increase when compared to the total sample group, which saw 1.8- and 1.1-point rises on these same questions. This further emphasizes the need for more education in regard to communication in marriage, which, at least in part, was delivered in this project. It also supports the argument that such education can prove effective in the short term. Further study would need to be conducted to reveal the benefits of these matters over a longer term.

The next most substantial movement for the target group was observed in a group of four questions that also showed considerable improvement. Two of these questions come out of the category of "couple flexibility." The question, "On a scale of non-existent (1) to expert (10), how would you rank your understanding on what constitutes good couple flexibility?" registered a 1.2-point rise in average score. Also, from this category was prompt, "On a scale of disagree (1) to agree (10) rate this statement: both of us are able to adjust to change when it's necessary." This statement received a 1.1-point rise in average score. This shows a marked improvement in understanding and awareness of flexibility between participants and their spouses.

The other two questions come from the topic of conflict resolution. The first question asked, "On a scale of non-existent (1) to expert (10), how would you rank your understanding of how to properly resolve conflict in our marriage?" The question saw a rise in the average score of 1.3 points. In the same category, a question asked, "On a scale of disagree (1) to strongly agree (10), how would you rate the following statement: When we discuss problems, my partner understands my opinions and ideas?" This question saw a 1.2-point improvement in average response.

A section of five questions, which includes questions from two different categories, couple compatibility and couple closeness, showed more moderate movement in responses. This may show the couples had developed compatibility and closeness more naturally over time or that the program was simply less effective in educating couples in this area. Since there was positive movement in these categories, it is argued that the program was successful in these areas.

Digging a bit deeper into the overall numbers to consider individual participants shows some additional findings of interest. Further study and observation may be appropriate to see if the teaching on conflict resolution, couple compatibility, and couple closeness could be altered and or improved for better results. It also might prove more fruitful to study these topics while breaking down the married couples by age and/or years married. These data points were not collected in this project in order to allow the project to be conducted anonymously.
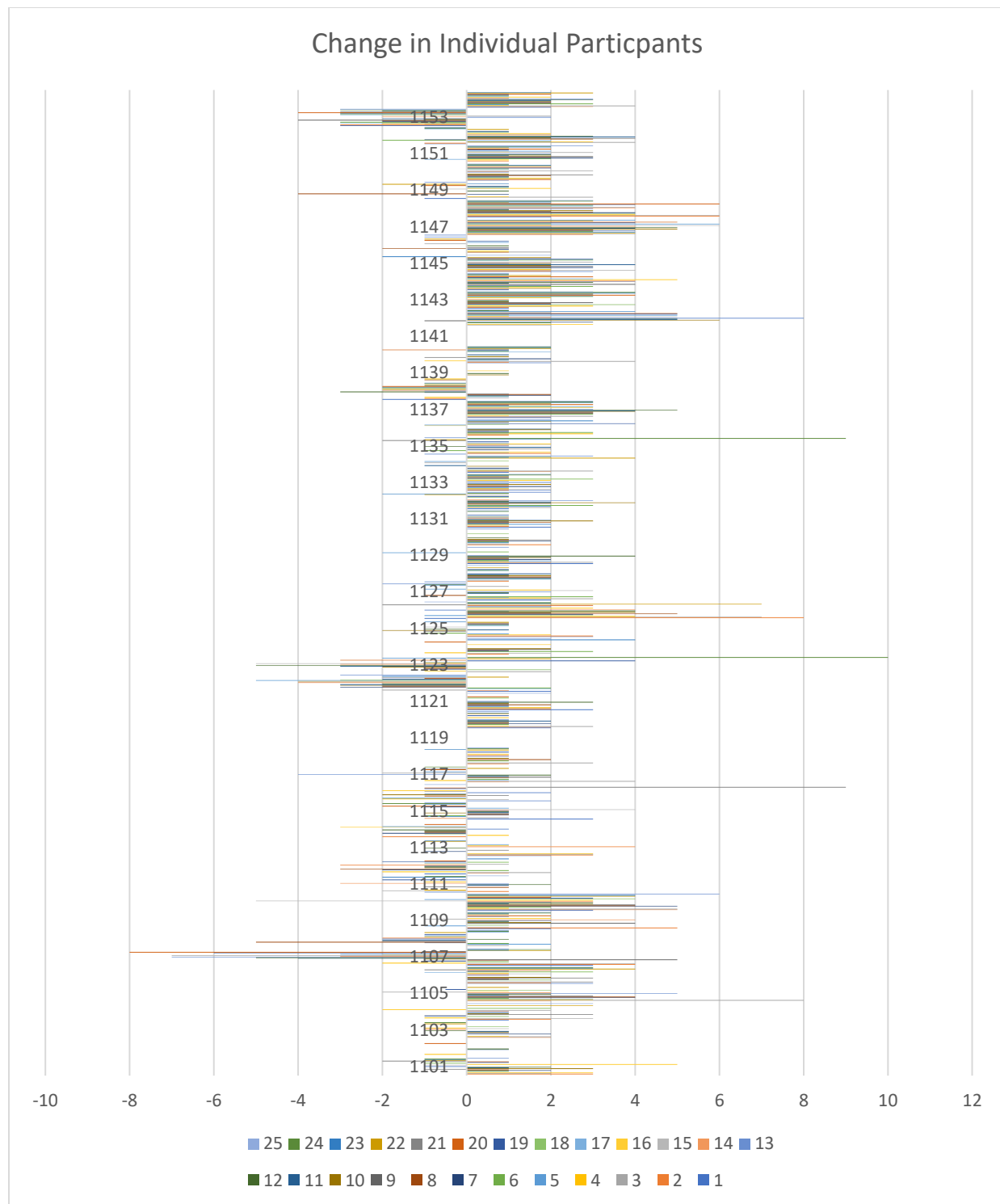
Figure 8. Change in individual participants.

The above chart illustrates the changes of all participants in the study on each question.

Visual observation of the chart reveals two points. First, the number of individuals showing

positive movement in their responses far outnumber those showing regression. The second observation is that there is a lesser but still significant number of participants who showed regression in responses. These regressions require some exploration.

Most of the scores that regressed did so by one point. Many of these regressions are from questionnaires where the original score that was given was a ten. This can be explained as the result of someone believing their initial understanding of a topic was less than they realized. The scores that show greater regression are more difficult to explain.

Five participants seem to have recorded an exceptional amount of regression compared to the other participants, as shown in Figure 9. There is no information within the questionnaires, or anything observed in the study, to definitively explain these regressions. It has been surmised that the regression in position from the previous response may be due to participants' overconfidence in their understanding when filling out the initial questionnaire. However, the dramatic nature of these regressions and the number participants who regressed seemed to suggest this explanation may not be adequate.
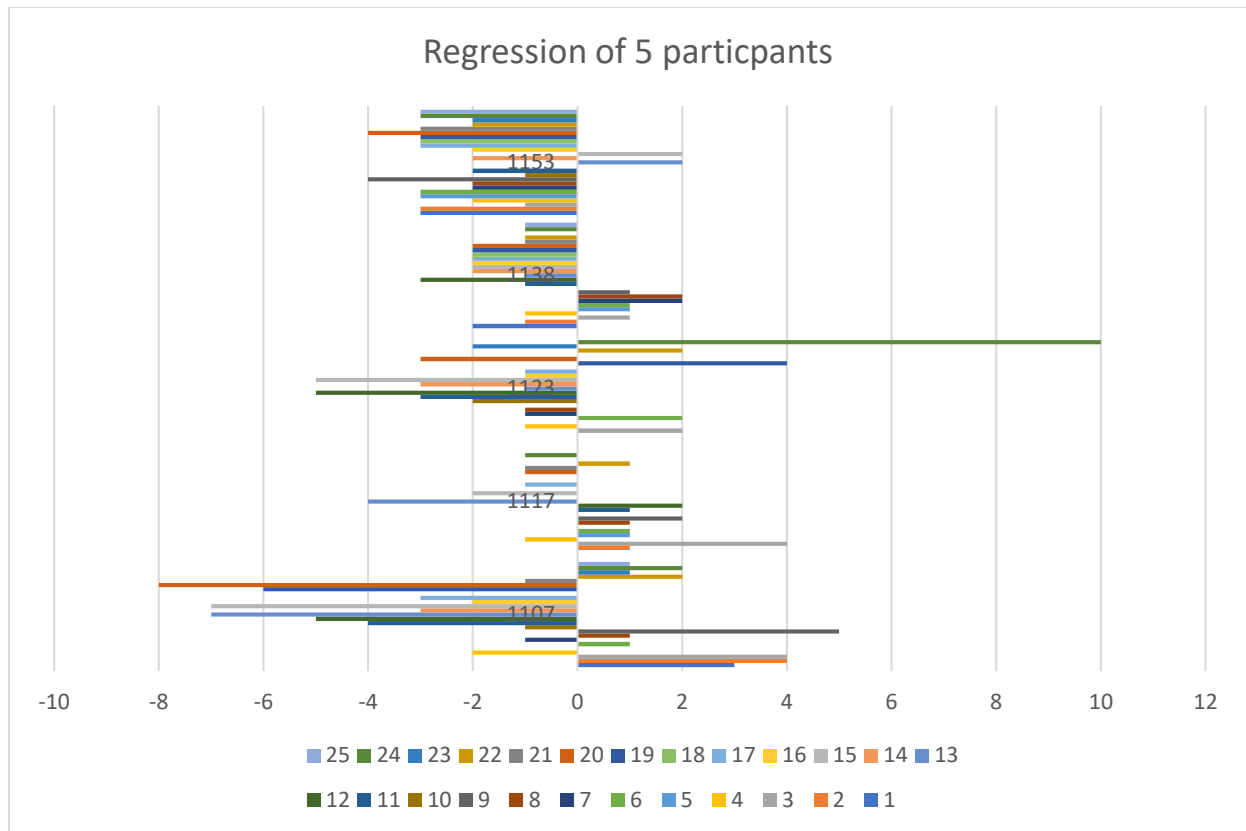
Figure 9. Regression of five participants.

The regression among these five participants is further complicated by their answers to the questions of whether they found the program to be helpful, whether the program improved their understanding, and if it was of benefit to their marriage. Three of these participants answered yes to all these questions. However, two of them had a mixed response. One participant answered yes to the questions regarding whether the program was helpful to them and improved their understanding, but no to the question regarding whether the program would benefit their marriage. The other participant answered that they were unsure if the program was helpful, yes to the program improving their understanding, and again unsure of it benefitting their marriage.

Despite the mixed response of these five participants, the responses of 90% of the participants support the argument that the curriculum, as designed in this project, successfully

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increased understanding and awareness in these key marital concepts as it sought to do. The

target group experienced an even better response than the total sample group.

Summary and Discussion

The graph in Figure 10 illustrates the improvement in participants' responses to the

twenty-five specific questions in the project as delivered. The original hypothesis was that the

program would help to improve self-report scores among the target group. The results have

shown a noticeable movement among most of the participants, whether in the target group or in

the general sample group.
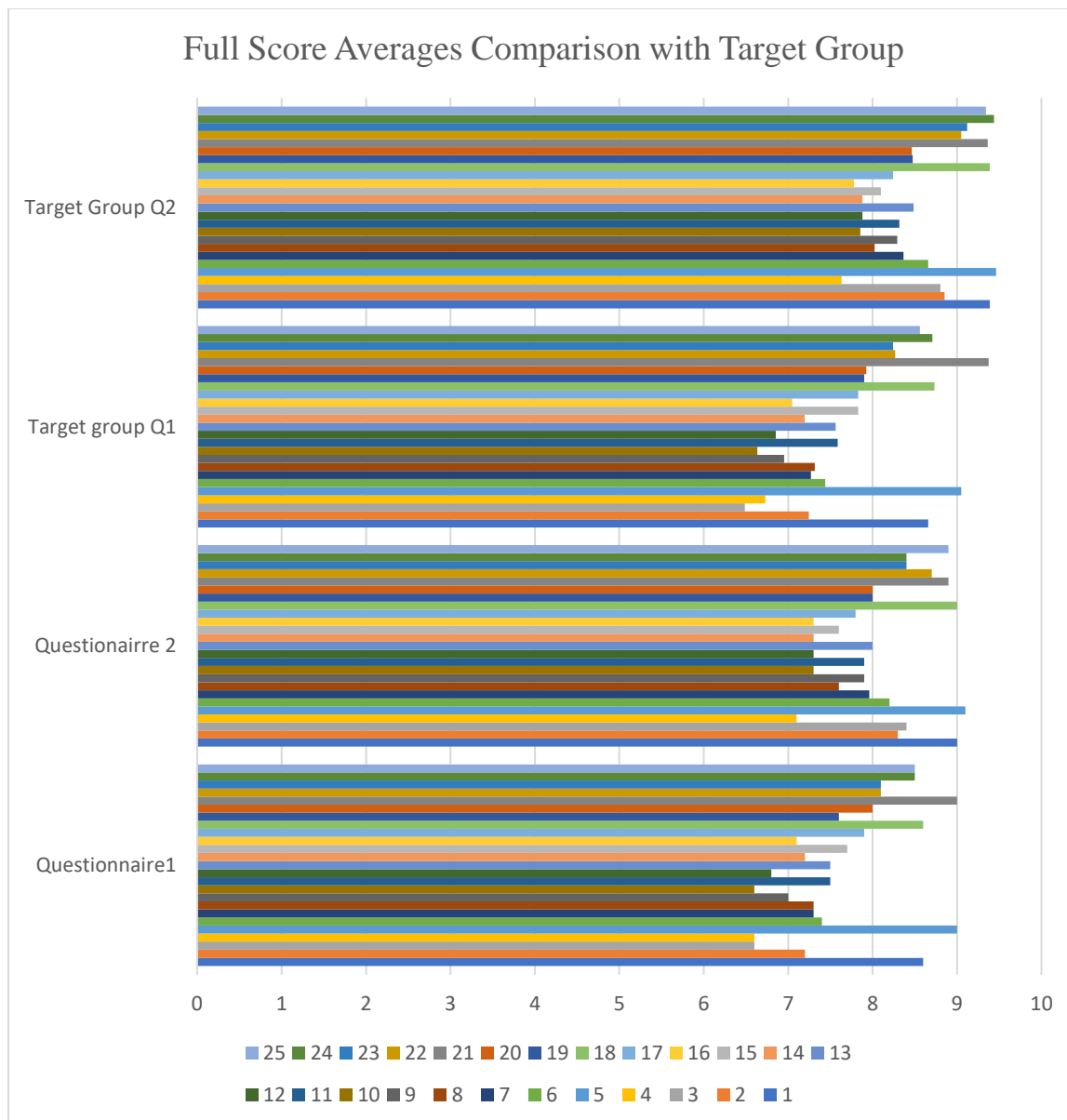
Figure 10. Full score averages comparison with target group.

Project Successes

As has been demonstrated in this chapter, the responses to this curriculum and its delivery within the project have shown favorable outcomes. It is argued that this project has been a success in all three of its main objectives. The project has demonstrated reasonable evidence to conclude there was a gap in the levels of understanding in these key categories of marital education.

The project developed a curriculum purposefully to engage this gap. The movement in responses in a favorable direction supports the claim that the curriculum was successful in its objective. This is further supported by the self-reporting responses by the participants that overwhelmingly showed the material was helpful to the participants, the participants' understanding and awareness in the key categories addressed in the program were improved, and the participants deemed the program beneficial to their marriage. Finally, the analysis of the data did confirm all of this within a reasonable assessment of the data.

It is further believed that the sample group was large enough (fifty-two participants) to provide a reasonable expectation of accuracy in the findings of this project. The information gathered and the conclusions drawn should compel the implementation of such a program into the regular teaching rotation of the local church.

It is further argued by this writer that these findings should be shared with nearby congregations. It would be beneficial for other congregations to examine the results of this program and consider doing a trial run within their own congregation to explore whether it would show similar positive results amidst their congregants.

In informal discussions, most other ministers and preachers from congregations in the area claimed to not have any formal program to teach married couples, although some offer a marriage class from time to time or as a seminar. Sharing the results from this project could encourage congregations to explore the topic themselves. This could lead to additional findings, study, and or alterations that could further benefit Christian marriages in the south-central Kentucky area.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

This project set out with three main goals: 1) to confirm the gap and, therefore, the need for marital education, 2) to create a curriculum to address the need and to successfully deliver said curriculum, and 3) to assess the effectiveness of the curriculum on addressing the gap. The results have shown that all three of these goals were met. The initial questionnaire gathered data on marital education within the current marriages at Three Forks. The results showed that 79% of the participants reported having attended two premarital sessions or fewer. Fifty-four percent of the participants claimed they attended no premarital education or counseling.

These numbers cannot be altered by simply improving premarital counseling offerings. There will remain those who do not take advantage of premarital counseling and those who are converted after they are married. There will likely always remain a need for a marital education program addressed toward those already married.

The results also showed that the program had a positive effect on the vast majority of participants, including those who had previous premarital counseling. While five participants, representing 10% of the sample group, offered a mixed response, 90% presented an overwhelmingly positive response to the program. This reveals that a program, such as the one developed in this thesis, is able to provide a benefit to most Christian marriages at the local level.

The program offers the church leadership a vehicle or tool to positively influence marriages and should be offered in a way that allows as many to participate as possible. It should also be offered in a cycle so it can serve as an encouragement to marriages as well as catch marriages that may have missed other earlier opportunities. The results, though, should be seen as furthering a great and important conversation, not as concluding it. The marriages of

Christians are too important, precious, and beautiful to take for granted. The current efforts may seem fruitful, but it would be irresponsible for leadership to become content and not further the discussion. Ministers need to seek greater or more efficient ways to meet the needs of marriages within the church today.

Further Study

The researcher began this project with the understanding that it would not exhaustively address all needs in marital education. The intent of the project was to take a step in addressing the overall picture of marital education by providing a base education program that could be part of the curriculum rotation at the local level. Those who did not have previous means or take the opportunity to participate in premarital education would be provided a format through which to receive some base education, understanding, and tools. It is argued herein this project has succeeded in what it set out to accomplish in this regard, but more needs to be done.

An area where further study might be considered is communication in marriage. Communication and problem solving-skills appear to be some of the greatest areas of movement in this study. The top two areas of improvement in the target group were related to understanding what makes for healthy and dysfunctional communication in marriage. These categories are also frequently studied in other research, showing their importance for marriages and families.[140] Additional studies on supporting the congregation in this important aspect should be sought.

Further study needs to be undertaken to develop the program beyond these base elements into additional topics and scenarios that would benefit marriages. Such topics might include parenting, financial decisions, boundaries in marriage, and life change events. The project in this work was designed to meet the need for a base or foundational program covering topics that

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[140] Fawcett et al., "Do Premarital Education Programs Really Work?," 235.

would be helpful for most, if not all, marriages. Expanding the program or creating a supplemental program to address these issues might bring forth additional fruit for Christian marriages.

While the subject of parenting was considered for inclusion in this project, it was ultimately not included, as the goal for the project was to meet needs that applied to all participants. Researching how the church could include more teaching in the area of parenting would seem quite responsible and beneficial. As some writers have phrased it, "Kids are built-in intruders in marriage."[141] The demands, and dynamics children bring into a marriage can cause many opportunities for joy, but also many opportunities for struggle.

In Scripture, God provides much instruction and admonition regarding parenting. As an example, pastors often quote, "He who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him promptly" (Prov 13:24). In the New Testament, fathers are also exhorted, "And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord" (Eph 6:4). This is a sampling of what Scripture has to say about parenting. The general takeaway is that there is plenty of "good soil" for research in this area that could further benefit marriages and families within the local church setting.

Preventative care in the form of education can prepare married couples for the transition into parenting.[142] A platform developed for use in the local church would probably need to consist of more than adding a lesson to the program developed in this project. It would likely

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[141] Cloud and Townsend, *Boundaries in Marriage,* 167.

[142] Marc S. Schulz, Carolyn Pape Cowan, and Philip A. Cowan, "Promoting Healthy Beginnings: A Randomized Controlled Trial of a Preventive Intervention to Preserve Marital Quality during the Transition to Parenthood," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 74, no. 1 (2006): 21, http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-006x.74.1.20.

need to be developed into its own program and offered to those preparing to enter or entering this phase of marriage and family life.

The topic of finances and financial decisions is another area that might be helpful to study further. Studies such as the one conducted by Barbara Kerkmann and her associates argue that finances do have an effect on marital satisfaction.[143] Church leadership or curriculum developers would need to study this topic additionally to determine how it could be developed for the benefit of marriages. Many churches, including the Three Forks Church of Christ, currently teach programs such as Dave Ramsey's Financial Peace.[144] Careful consideration should be made to determine whether these efforts are enough or if a specific platform for married couples would need to be developed.

The development of boundaries in marriage and the importance of life transitions are also areas that might warrant more study and further research. These topics are often covered in other formats such as seminars and sermon series but should be researched to see if a program, as presented within this project, would be a suitable format for these topics as well. Further study can answer the question of whether these topics could or should be added as lessons to the program or if they should be developed into another similar program and added to the rotation.

In addition to studies that would explore expanding the program to additional topics or adding an additional program for specific areas like parenting, a continued study on the effects of these teaching measures should be sought. While the results presented in Chapter 4 show a significant positive response from the participants, it does not speak to two important factors: overall depth of impact and impact over time. Some studies have shown that the effects of

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[143] Barbara C. Kerkmann, Thomas R. Lee, Jean M. Lown, and Scot M. Allgood, "Financial Management, Financial Problems and Marital Satisfaction among Recently Married University Students," *Journal of Financial Counseling and Planning* 11, no. 2 (2000): 65.

[144] Dave Ramsey and Sharon Ramsey, *Financial Peace* (New York, NY: Viking, 1997), 1.

premarital education decrease over the time of the marriage.[145] Further studies would be needed to determine whether this would be the case with such a marital education program. It should also be studied whether participation in such a program in a cyclical way (such as every three years) would negate this negative effect observed by some researchers.

This study was constructed to explore if a curriculum could be devised to begin a teaching program that would address the gap in marital education. Due to the focus of the project and its short-term nature, it would not be appropriate to draw conclusions on the depth of the impact of the curriculum. The total sample group and target group both responded overwhelmingly positively on the second questionnaire to the questions of helpfulness, improvement in understanding, and benefit in their marriage by 98%, 94%, and 100%, respectively. These numbers do not answer the question of depth of movement. Was the positive movement a step forward in their relationship or a leap? Further study over time would be the only way to understand the depth of the response to the education given in the program.

A similar observation can be made regarding change over time. How long does the education given in the program remain in the active understanding of the individuals? Is there an erosion of understanding in these key areas over time? As noted above, regression in the positive effect of premarital education has been seen over time in other studies.[146] Further studies could help to answer such a question; however, it is presumed that some level of erosion would be a natural consequence of time. That is why the suggestion to teach this program on a three-year cycle has been made by this writer.

A Challenge to Church Leadership

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145 Halford, *Marriage and Relationship Education,* 60.
146 Ibid.

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The importance of marriage and how to appropriately build it, strengthen it, and protect it in an environment that is increasing in hostility toward Christian values will be a continued point of emphasis for the church going forward. Changes in cultural norms have presented challenges for couples today that may not have been faced by those in the past. For instance, couples have a greater number of serious relationships prior to entering into an engagement and marriage than generations in the past.[147] The church can take steps to adapt to this changing environment and the needs of its people by implementing teaching platforms, tools, and resources that emphasize both the biblical and practical aspects of marriage.

The challenge for leaders is not to be panicked by the changes from outside the church and to not be complacent in stepping up to meet those challenges. Knowledge is power, and this writer believes that knowledge can, in fact, change the course of marriage toward what God intends it to be. This challenge extends to the leaders of the church to constantly redirect the flock back to the wisdom of God: "For the Lord gives wisdom; From His mouth come knowledge and understanding" (Prov 2:6). This applies to all knowledge and teaching but is especially important to the discussion of marriage.

It is the church's responsibility to teach the manifold wisdom of God, "to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places," (Eph 3:10). This must apply to all the wisdom of God and to the effort the church makes toward achieving this goal. If it is the intent of God, then it likewise must be the intent of His church. A reminder of Jesus's words seems appropriate: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I

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[147] Stanley et al., *A Lasting Promise,* 177.

am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt 28:19–20). The emphasis should be placed on Jesus's command to teach the nations "all things I have commanded you." This is a call for the church to teach the whole counsel of God.

This writer believes that the leadership of the Three Forks congregation would be wise to pursue this program and further study additional steps to increase the church's efforts in training and teaching members to improve their understanding of better marriages. It is also this writer's contention that the effort that needs to be placed in this pursuit should be equal to the effort in which programs for the youth and for evangelism are pursued.

Some of the greatest resources the church has are healthy marriages and strong families. These families help to illustrate the reality of the church in its relationship with God.[148] It is worth the effort and resources that might be needed to pursue tools and programs that would help to promote the same throughout the body, beyond the border of the Three Forks congregation.

It is crushing to witness a marriage dissolve, especially when it appears that some intervention may have helped to strengthen the marriage and set it on a different path. Church leaders must not turn their view from these realities but see them and the pain that often afflicts not only the couple but the extended family and friend network around those families.

On many of these occasions, the church has been left asking what it could have done differently. What if they had been taught more? Would it have made a difference? Would it have saved a marriage? Would it have persevered a soul? While it would be far too presumptuous to argue this project would have saved any of those marriages, it is a step that can be taken toward strengthening those under pastoral charge and hopefully make a difference in current and future marriages that are part of the Three Forks family.

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[148] Joseph C. Atkinson, *Biblical and Theological Foundations of the Family: The Domestic Church* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 195.

Closing Thoughts

It is imperative for church leaders to do all that is within their ability to teach and strengthen Christians with understanding and tools for strong marriages. Marriage is a foundational and fundamental aspect of society. Even secular historians recognize the significant place marriage holds in society. One historian remarked that since the Roman Empire, monogamous marriage and the nuclear family has become "the foundation of Western society."[149] For the church, a greater authority established it as the bedrock of human society back in the Garden of Eden—"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Gen 2:24).

More importantly, marriage is a Godly institution where holiness, love, acceptance, and friendship are learned and matured. This information and the many other studies in existence should be used to encourage further steps toward improve efforts in this direction. Every church should consider implementing a program like this as a starting point and continue to seek improvements and additional tools for the good of marriages within the church and for the good of the church itself.

The colloquialism, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," is certainly applicable to the church's efforts to teach married individuals. Programs like these might very well ward off potential issues and problems and foster growth and maturity as well as equip Christians to resolve issues that might arise in marriage. Studies have shown prevention programs to be successful in preventing later distress in marriage.[150]

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[149] William Tucker, *Marriage and Civilization: How Monogamy Made Us Human* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2014), 125.

[150] Howard J. Markman and Lane L. Ritchie, "Couples Relationship Education and Couples Therapy: Healthy Marriage or Strange Bedfellows?," *Family Process* 54, no. 4 (December 2015): 657, http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/famp.12191.

While studies can help to establish this concept, it should be noted that God has long advised on the importance of prevention education. "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Prov 22:6). God understood that people could rely on the education they had received to make decisions and guide their path. Hence, strong emphasis was placed on teaching children, just as most would place the same importance on teaching children today.

God also placed an importance on continued preventative education in marriage. This project presented many Scriptures along these lines in Chapter 2, but another place that can be drawn from is from Paul's letter to Titus.

> The older women likewise, that they be reverent in behavior, not
> slanderers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things— that they
> admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children,
> to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands,
> that the word of God may not be blasphemed (Titus 2:3–5).

In this context, a great emphasis is placed on older women teaching younger women what it means to be a wife and mother. It seems a reasonable conclusion that God desires ongoing teaching of things that will help foster and mature marriages. The church has a role to play in this process and in this directive to teach.

It is important for the church to continue to speak of marriage in the same way that God does. There must be an active effort to offset many of the negative pictures placed before the public eye in the media. These efforts should be from the pulpit, from the pen of writers, and from the heads of families. He has called fathers to shepherd their families in the things of God.[151]

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[151] Voddie Baucham, *Family Shepherds: Calling and Equipping Men to Lead Their Homes* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 33.

This project also provides an effective tool to educate and equip. Marriage should be promoted as a blessed institution meant for good by God. "He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the Lord" (Prov 18:22). It is up to the church to guide the perception of and education for this great institution.

While evangelism is not the main objective of this program, it should be mentioned that there exists an opportunity to use this program for outreach into the community. While the focus of this project has been on the members at Three Forks, it is perfectly reasonable to assume that many families are looking for help and direction in marriage. If they could be presented an opportunity to participate in such a program, it may open doors to further exploration and studies on Jesus, His church, and His teachings.

Epilogue

Personal Reflections

Hopefully, this project will prove to be a foundational step in the formulation of a cohesive response to the needs of marriages within the congregation. In seventeen years of full-time ministry (twelve of those with the Three Forks Church of Christ), I have sat down with numerous couples dealing with marital distress and issues. Many times, it has been apparent that the couple could have benefitted greatly by participating in a premarital education or counseling program. As a minister trying to offer spiritual counsel, I have found myself trying to teach many of the concepts found in this program, including communication skills and conflict resolution, to couples in distress. However, it would seem much more valuable to teach couples these matters prior to distress and conflict.

I am personally a proponent of premarital counseling and offer an eight-session very detailed program to couples entering a marriage. However, I have observed many members in my time of ministry who do not take advantage of such a program. The premarital counseling program is required for a couple to get married at Three Forks, but many have been married by family members, courthouses, and other often quick arrangements.

I have also observed a phenomenon where many of the young people fade from attendance and participation in church activities as they enter the upper years of high school. Some are taken by jobs, others for sports, and a few others just lose interest. There are programs in place at the church to teach young adults many of the concepts that would be beneficial to enter a marriage, but many also missed these opportunities due to lack of participation. The church should continue to encourage members, youth, and families to be involved in these

teaching programs, but the church needs to be prepared with additional programs to meet the future needs of those who do not.

Sometimes in ministry, it is easier to deal with what should be and not prepare as much for what actually is. Preparing to teach those who miss or even skip those premarital programs may appear to some as accepting this behavior, but it would be foolish to connect acceptance of the reality with approval of it.

It is my hope and prayer that this program will be part of the answer to the need at Three Forks and will be an opportunity for other congregations with a similar reality to take advantage of in their congregations. Whether it spurs them into developing their own program, utilizing the program presented here, or building on this program, I am hopeful it may be a catalyst for ministry beyond the Three Forks Church of Christ.

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Appendix A

2/6/2020

Dear Church Family Member:

As a graduate student in the School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Ministry degree. The purpose of my research is to evaluate a marriage education program and its benefit on married couples in the Three Forks Church of Christ, and I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

This study requires that you be a member and/or associated with the Three Forks Church of Christ and are currently married. The project is open to all married individuals, regardless of whether your spouse chooses to participate or not.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to do the following:

1. Fill out an initial questionnaire (approx. 10-15 minutes)
2. Participate in 6 lessons dealing with marriage education in the following categories: communication, flexibility, conflict resolution, compatibility, closeness, and holiness. Each class will be about 45 minutes, and they will be once a week for 6 weeks.
3. Finally, you will be asked to take a second questionnaire at the end of the program. (Approx. 5-10 minutes).

Participation will be completely anonymous, and no personal, identifying information will be collected.

To participate, please contact the researcher, Nikolaus Secula at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ or ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ to verify eligibility for this study. You will be asked to verify that you are currently married and that you understand the involvement related to this project. You will be notified of the first meeting date and time if you are eligible to participate.

A consent document will be given to you during the initial meeting of possible participants. At that time, the research purpose and procedures will be explained. You will also have an opportunity to ask questions or request additional information. The consent document contains additional information about my research, but you will not need to sign and return it to the researcher. If you wish to participate you will be given the proper materials for the program at that time.

Sincerely,

Nikolaus Secula
Doctoral Candidate

Marriage Education
Preliminary   Participant ID _____

Questionnaire

Why This Questionnaire?

This survey is intended to create a snapshot of the perceived understanding level in key marital education categories among participants in this project.

General Information

Please identify your sex.

☐ male   ☐ female

Pre-Marital Counseling and Education

Did you participate in a premarital counseling or education program prior to getting married?

☐ Yes   ☐ No.   *If "NO," proceed to the next section.*

If you answered yes to the above question, what would best summarize the scale of that program?

☐ We attended a counseling program with a licensed counselor

☐ We participated in a church offered education program with other couples.

☐ We participated in pre-marital counseling with a minister

☐ These do not properly explain our experience. Elaborate here :

_____
_____
_____
_____

How many sessions did the program consist of or did you attend?

☐ 1-2 | ☐ 3-4 | ☐ 5-6 | ☐ 7 or more | ☐ I don't' remember

Communication in Marriage

This section is going to ask you to answer based on where you feel you are when it comes to understanding communication in marriage.

On a scale of non-existent (1) to expert (10) how would you rank your understanding of the need for good communication in marriage?

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of non-existent (1) to expert (10) how would you rank your understanding of what constitutes good communication in marriage?

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of non-existent (1) to expert (10) how would you rank your understanding of communication mistakes that contribute to dysfunctional communication in marriage?

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of non-existent (1) to expert (10) how would you rank your current communication level in your marriage?

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

Couple Flexibility

This section is going to ask you to answer based on where you feel you are when it comes to understanding couple flexibility in marriage. Couple flexibility is a measure of how well a couple interacts to creatively manage disagreements, problems, and differences.

On a scale of not important (1) to very important (10) how would you rank the need for couples to be flexible in marriage?

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of non-existent (1) to expert (10) how would you rank your understanding of what constitutes good couple flexibility?

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of disagree (1) to agree (10) rate this statement: "Both of us are able to adjust to change when it's necessary."

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of disagree (1) to agree (10) how would you rate this statement: "We make compromises when making decisions"?

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

Conflict Resolution

This section is going to ask you to answer based on where you feel you are when it comes to understanding conflict resolution in the marriage setting.

On a scale of non-existent (1) to expert (10) how would you rank your understanding of how to properly resolve conflict in your marriage?

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of disagree (1) to strongly agree (10) how would you rate the following statement: "When we discuss problems, my partner understands my opinions and ideas?"

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of disagree (1) to strongly agree (10) rank the following statement: "We are able to resolve our differences."

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of disagree (1) to strongly agree (10) rank the following statement: "We have similar ideas about how to settle disagreements."

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of disagree (1) to strongly agree (10) rank the following statement: "My partner takes our disagreements seriously."

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

Couple Compatibility

This section is going to ask you to answer based on where you feel you are when it comes to understanding compatibility in marriage.

On a scale of disagree (1) to strongly agree (10) how would you rate the following statement: "I am very satisfied with how we talk to each other."

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of disagree (1) to strongly agree (10) how would you rate the following statement: "My partner is seldom too controlling."

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of disagree (1) to strongly agree (10) how would you rate the following statement: "I find it easy to express my true feelings to my partner."

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of disagree (1) to strongly agree (10) how would you rate the following statement: "We understand each other's personalities and have learned to work together to meet each other's needs."

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

Couple Closeness

This section is going to ask you to answer based on where you feel you are when it comes to understanding conflict resolution in marriage.

On a scale of non-existent (1) to expert (10) how would you rank your understanding of the role that closeness plays in marriage?

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of distant (1) to very close (10) how would you rank closeness in your marriage?

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of difficult (1) to it extremely easy (10) how easy is it for you to agree on things to do together?

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of low (1) to high (10) how would you rate the importance of closeness to you?

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

Christian Holiness

This section is going to ask you to answer based on where you feel you are when it comes to understanding holiness in marriage.

On a scale of non-existent (1) to expert (10) how would you rank your understanding of holiness and how it applies to marriage?

    1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of non-existent (1) to highly important (10) how would you rank the priority you place on holiness in your marriage?

    1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of disagree (1) to strongly agree (10) rate the following statement: "God's eternal purposes are an important determining factor in how we live and make decisions."

    1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of disagree (1) to strongly agree (10) rate the following statement: "I understand God's eternal purpose and how they relate to marriage and the promotion of holiness in our lives."

    1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

Additional Comments or Feedback

Marriage Education Concluding Questionnaire

Participant ID _____

Why This Questionnaire?

This survey is intended to evaluate potential changes and improvements in key marriage areas once participants have completed the curriculum. Please answer as accurately as possible.

General Information

Do you believe this marriage education curriculum was helpful to you?
☐ YES   ☐ NO

Do you believe this program has improved your understanding in key areas related to your marriage?
☐ YES   ☐ NO

Do you believe your marriage will benefit from being a part of this program?
☐ YES   ☐ NO

Communication in Marriage

This section is going to ask you to answer based on where you feel you are when it comes to understanding communication in marriage.

_____

On a scale of non-existent (1) to expert (10) how would you rank your understanding of the need for good communication in marriage?

    1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of non-existent (1) to expert (10) how would you rank your understanding of what constitutes good communication in marriage?

    1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of non-existent (1) to expert (10) how would you rank your understanding of communication mistakes that contribute to dysfunctional communication in marriage?

    1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of non-existent (1) to expert (10) how would you rank your current communication level in your marriage?

    1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

Couple Flexibility

This section is going to ask you to answer based on where you feel you are when it comes to understanding couple flexibility in marriage. Couple flexibility is a measure of how well a couple interacts to creatively manage disagreements, problems, and differences.

On a scale of not important (1) to very important (10) how would you rank the need for couples to be flexible in marriage?

    1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of non-existent (1) to expert (10) how would you rank your understanding of what constitutes good couple flexibility?

    1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of disagree (1) to agree (10) rate this statement: "Both of us are able to adjust to change when it's necessary."

    1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of disagree (1) to agree (10) how would you rate this statement: "We make compromises when making decisions?"

    1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

Conflict Resolution

This section is going to ask you to answer based on where you feel you are when it comes to understanding conflict resolution in the marriage setting.

On a scale of non-existent (1) to expert (10) how would you rank your understanding of how to properly resolve conflict in your marriage?

    1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of disagree (1) to strongly agree (10) how would you rate the following statement: "When we discuss problems, my partner understands my opinions and ideas?"

    1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of disagree (1) to strongly agree (10) rank the following statement: "We are able to resolve our differences."

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of disagree (1) to strongly agree (10) rank the following statement: "We have similar ideas about how to settle disagreements."

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of disagree (1) to strongly agree (10) rank the following statement: "My partner takes our disagreements seriously."

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

Couple Compatibility

This section is going to ask you to answer based on where you feel you are when it comes to understanding compatibility in marriage.

On a scale of disagree (1) to strongly agree (10) how would you rate the following statement: "I am very satisfied with how we talk to each other."

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of disagree (1) to strongly agree (10) how would you rate the following statement: "My partner is seldom too controlling."

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of disagree (1) to strongly agree (10) how would you rate the following statement: "I find it easy to express my true feelings to my partner."

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of disagree (1) to strongly agree (10) how would you rate the following statement: "We understand each other's personalities and have learned to work together to meet each other's needs."

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

Couple Closeness

This section is going to ask you to answer based on where you feel you are when it comes to understanding conflict resolution in marriage.

On a scale of non-existent (1) to expert (10) how would you rank your understanding of the role that closeness plays in marriage?

    1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of distant (1) to very close (10) how would you rank closeness in your marriage?

    1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of difficult (1) to it extremely easy (10) how easy is it for you to agree on things to do together?

    1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of low (1) to high (10) how would you rate the importance of closeness to you?

    1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

Christian Holiness

This section is going to ask you to answer based on where you feel you are when it comes to understanding holiness in marriage.

On a scale of non-existent (1) to expert (10) how would you rank your understanding of holiness and how it applies to marriage?

    1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of non-existent (1) to highly important (10) how would you rank the priority you place on holiness in your marriage?

    1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of disagree (1) to strongly agree (10) rate the following statement: "God's eternal purposes are an important determining factor in how we live and make decisions."

    1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

On a scale of disagree (1) to strongly agree (10) rate the following statement: "I understand God's eternal purpose and how they relate to marriage and the promotion of holiness in our lives."

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

Additional Comments or Feedback

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Appendix D

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

February 6, 2020

Nikolaus Secula
IRB Exemption 4132.020620: A Marriage Education Program to Address an Education Gap at the Three Forks Church of Christ, Smiths Grove Kentucky.

Dear Nikolaus Secula,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under exemption category 46.101(b)(2), which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:101(b):

> (2) Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
>
> > (iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any changes to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by submitting a change in protocol form or a new application to the IRB and referencing the above IRB Exemption number.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible changes to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

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Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971

VITA

Nikolaus A. Secula

PERSONAL

Born: November 14, 1978

Married: Tiffany L. Secula, June 19, 1999.

Children: Timothy Secula, born April 10, 2003.

Levi Secula, born April 19, 2006.

Faith Secula, born August 10, 2009.

EDUCATIONAL

B.R.S., Nations University, 2006.

M.T.S., Nations University, 2015.

M.A., American Public University, 2018

MTh., South African Theological Seminary, 2019.

PROFESSIONAL

Pulpit Minister, Oak Hill Church of Christ,

Tompkinsville, Kentucky 42167. 2003-2007.

Pulpit Minister, Three Forks Church of Christ,

Smiths Grove, Kentucky 42171. 2007-Present

Bible Teacher/Educator, Foundation Christian Academy,

Bowling Green, Kentucky 42104. 2019-Present

PROFESSIONAL SOCIETIES

National Christian Counselors Association, Clinical Member, 2008-Present.