

EFFECTIVE BLENDED FAMILY MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY CHURCH

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

So whose idea was the family anyway? The family unit was not man's idea or creation; rather, it was God's idea as can be easily and clearly seen in the book of Genesis. Listen to what the author of Genesis says: "God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them; and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth'"¹ The author of Genesis continues to give us the specific account of the creation of the first family in the following words, "The man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field, but for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. The LORD God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. The man said, 'This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, Because she was taken out of Man.' For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh."² So, the very first family was custom created by God, and then every subsequent family would

¹ Gen. 1:27-28 NASU (New American Standard Updated Version).

² Gen. 2:20-24 NASU (New American Standard Updated Version).

be formed as men and women left their biological parents and joined each other to become one flesh. In the New Testament, one can see just how serious God is about the family unit. The writer of Matthew's gospel quoting Jesus Christ said the following about the family unit, "So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, **let no man separate.**"³ Long before divorce rates began to escalate around the world God addressed the issue by giving the above mentioned strong prohibition, ". . . **let no man separate.**" These words illustrate the heart of God. His desire is that no marriage would ever end in divorce. He tells us on another occasion how He feels about divorce when He said, "For I hate divorce," says the LORD, the God of Israel . . ."⁴ Even though God's desire for marriage is that it would last until the death of one or both of the spouses; one can easily see that His desire is not being lived out by many who are created in His image. The bottom line is simple: we are very proud and selfish creatures. As a result of our pride and selfishness, divorce is at an all time high. John Gottman in his book, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail* said, ". . . more than half of all first marriages end in divorce. Second marriages do worse, failing at a rate of about sixty percent."⁵ In painting a picture of the "divorce dilemma" Gottman goes on to say, ". . . it is like some hidden, evil force is loose in America that is making marriages fall apart."⁶ Yes, Gottman, you are right, and the hidden evil force is the Prince of the Power

³ Matt. 19:6 NASU (New American Standard Updated Version).

⁴ Mal. 2:16 NASU (New American Standard Updated Version).

⁵ John Gottman, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1994), 16.

⁶ Ibid.

of the air, Satan himself, who hates everything God loves, including the family unit. Peter summed up what Satan desires when he said, “Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”⁷ That “someone,” sad to say, is often a husband, wife, or both.

The reality of these facts did not hit home to me until one of my own daughters went through an ugly divorce. It is one thing to stand before a flock of church members and teach and preach against divorce, and another thing to walk through those deep waters with one of your own children. During that difficult time both my wife and I experienced some of the hurt that families experience as they walk through the break up of a marriage. The couple gets hurt, children, if present, get hurt, in-laws get hurt, grandparents get hurt, and even the siblings of the couple experience the pain that comes with divorce. No one wins in divorce. Divorce is a lose/lose situation. When the dust settles after a divorce all you have left are a bunch of “X’s”. You have an x-spouse, x-in-laws, an x-son-n-law or x-daughter-n-law, an x-brother-n-law, an x-sister-n-law, and x-grandparents. The point is simply this; when a couple gets divorced, it affects not only the couple, but it affects two entire families. So, after my wife and I watched our own daughter get divorced, we could see divorce with a totally new perspective.

Most of the men and women who divorce do end up remarrying thus forming a blended or stepfamily. Since these two terms are synonymous, the author of this thesis will use both of them interchangeably throughout this thesis. Eric Gorski in *The Gazette* makes the following observation about the terms, “blended” and “stepfamily.” “Does ‘stepfamily sound negative or out of date? Does ‘blended family’ confuse or mislead?”

⁷ 1 Pet. 5:8 NASU (New American Standard Updated Version).

The questions divide professionals who help couples with children from past relationships.”⁸ Margorie Engel is in the stepfamily camp. She’s the president and chief executive officer of the Stepfamilies Association of America, a nonprofit advocacy and education group. She says the concept of blending two families tells the child there’s one new family, and the past isn’t important. She argues not everyone knows the term ‘blended.’ They might think it refers to a racially mixed family. Engel said the ‘step’ prefix doesn’t have those negative connotations anymore. She said, cancer used to be called ‘the c-word,’ but the word is no longer whispered. She sees ‘stepfamilies’ as being accepted in the same way. The newer ‘blended family’ was coined in part because of the evil stepmother connotation imparted to us through the fairy tale, “Cinderella.” The term, (blended family), supporters say, better captures what’s happening—the meshing of members of two, sometimes more, families. Donald Partridge, a conference speaker offering one day conferences on the subject, came up with a new term, ‘blending families,’ to emphasize the ongoing process.”⁹ Dr. Kevin Leman, author of *Living in a Stepfamily without Getting Stepped On* makes this sobering observation; “In America alone, it was estimated in 1994 that more than 1300 new families formed every day. Those figures have surely risen, since the blended family has become the most common form of family in the twenty-first century.”¹⁰ In addition to Leman’s observation, “According to the Stepfamily Association of America, about 43% of all marriages now

⁸ Eric Gorski, “Professionals contest use of ‘stepfamily’ vs. ‘blended family,’” *The Gazette*, October 26, 2002, <http://www.highbeam.com>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Kevin Leman, *Living in a Stepfamily without Getting Stepped On* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1994), 8-9.

are remarriages for at least one of the adults. About 65% of remarriages involve children from previous marriages, and thus form stepfamilies. An estimated 15-20 million stepfamilies existed in 1998, and it was projected that one out of every three children in the U.S. will live in a stepfamily before they reach eighteen.”¹¹ It is important to point out that these statistics were taken over a decade ago, so it is safe to say the numbers have increased. More recently, Natalie Nichols Gillespie in her article, *Portraits of a Stepfamily* said, “. . . it is predicted that by 2010 there will be more stepfamilies in the U.S. than any other family type.”¹²

The rationale for choosing this topic includes several reasons. First, the fact that the blended family is a growing entity, not only in our society, but also in our churches as well is reason enough for exploring this topic. Second, the issues and problems that are experienced in the nuclear family are most often exacerbated within the blended family unit. For example; the question of where are we going to spend Christmas for the nuclear family is easy compared to the same question applied to a stepfamily. Both parents want little Johnny for the holiday, so oftentimes tempers flair, threats are made, and the season is everything but “jolly.” Although I have been an ordained minister for over twenty-eight years, it wasn’t until we went through our daughter’s divorce that I could see firsthand the urgent need to become equipped to minister to the many families who have experienced the break up of their marriages and their attempts to form blended families.

¹¹ Ibid., 8.

¹² Natalie Nichols Gillespie, “Portraits of a Stepfamily,” *troubledwith*, 2004, <http://www.troubledwith.com>.

The spiritual rationale for delving into this needy area of ministry has already been mentioned at the beginning of the introduction. The enemy of God, Satan, hates the family because it was God's idea in the first place. Therefore, there is no doubt that the enemy is doing everything in his power to disrupt and destroy the family unit God created back in the Garden of Eden. Satan's ongoing attempt to destroy the family is defined by the apostle Paul as spiritual warfare. In his letter to the Ephesian church he briefly describes the struggle we are all in when he says, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places."¹³

In his book, *From Culture Wars to Common Ground* Don Browning says, "Churches must develop a theology, rhetoric, and a pastoral strategy that adequately addresses both the ideal values of the Christian faith and the realities of modern and postmodern life."¹⁴ Since one of the "realities of modern and postmodern life" is the creation of stepfamilies, it will be the goal of this thesis to inform the twenty-first century church of the growing numbers of blended families in our communities and to present some advice that may prove helpful in effectively ministering to this rapidly growing family unit.

The Statement of the Problem

Seeing that effective blended family ministry is lacking in most twenty-first century churches, this project will attempt to uncover the different ways the church can

¹³ Eph. 6:12 NASU (New American Standard Updated Version).

¹⁴ Don Browning, *From Culture Wars to Common Ground* (n.p. n.d.).

reach out and minister specifically and more effectively to blended families. First, let's define the various terms which will be used throughout this thesis. When the following terms are used throughout this thesis the given definitions will be assumed.

Nuclear or Biological family – Husband, wife, and all the children belonging to that marriage or relationship.

Blended family or Stepfamily – Family whose members are linked by combinations of relationships, marriage, divorce, death, and remarriage. Blended families always include children.

Biological father, mother, or relative – A person related through blood.

Bonding – Special emotional tie to another person.

Alimony – Money paid to a former spouse for the purchase of basic necessities such as food, clothing, and shelter.

Child Support – Money ordered by the court to be paid to the custodial parent by the other parent to maintain a child's well-being after his or her parents' divorce.

Custodial parent – The parent who has legal responsibility for raising the child or children after a divorce.

Custody – Possession, control, and assumption of legal responsibility of a minor child by a parent.

Joint Custody – Possession, control, and assumption of legal responsibility for a minor child by two non-married adults.

Divorce – The legally declared end of a marriage between husband and wife.¹⁵

This thesis will propose answers to the following questions concerning effective blended family ministry in the twenty-first century church. The first question to answer is simply "Does a blended family problem really exist?" In other words, is the number of blended families growing in our society or is the nuclear family holding its own? The second question we are going to attempt to answer is "What are the issues faced by blended families today?" Every family unit, nuclear or blended has issues and problems because we are all imperfect human beings. The issues and problems, however that may be present in a given nuclear family are often exacerbated in a typical blended family.

¹⁵ Jane Hurwitz, *Coping in a Blended Family* (New York: New York Rosen Publishing Group, 1997), 92-94, <http://liberty.edu/information-services/ilrc/library/index.cfm?PID=796>.

Nancy Hoffmann, author of the article, *Don't Go Nuclear: The Cycles of a Stepfamily* offers the following challenges a stepfamily faces: “The first is what do we call each other. Most stepfamilies call the new parent by their first name especially if the biological parent is still involved in the child’s life or if the child is older. Grandparents have to be renamed. Houses have to be renamed—there is Dad’s house, Mom’s house, and sometimes there is the old house, the new house. This is a very confusing time for all.”¹⁶ This thesis will produce evidence demonstrating the blended family to be the dominant family unit in our society and will propose solutions to six of the most prevalent issues facing blended families today.

The first issue examined will be the couple relationship. How should one deal with the couple issues within the blended family?” Most experts agree that with blended families the couple needs to blend first. In his chapter entitled *Men Are Microwaves, Women are Crock-pots* Dr. Kevin Leman says, “Meeting each other’s needs is difficult enough in a first marriage, but in a second or third marriage it becomes even harder. Why? Because the partners are so busy trying to cope with all the needs of the children in their newly blended family, it’s too easy to overlook the most important needs of all—*their own*.”¹⁷ Leman makes a real point of demonstrating that the worst enemy of the couple relationship itself happens to be the stepfamily as each member vies for the attention of their biological parent often pitting parents against each other. Leman insists, “. . . but I still maintain that your needs and your mate’s are absolutely primary. Be

¹⁶ Nancy Hoffman, “Don’t Go Nuclear: The Cycles of a StepFamily,” <http://www.successfulstepfamilies.com>.

¹⁷ Leman, 173.

aware; in fact *beware*: The typical stepfamily is a mortal enemy of a second marriage.” He concludes, “But what you must try to do with every tool and weapon at your disposal is to bond with your spouse and make your marriage as strong and impregnable as possible. And if they find they can’t break you down, a strange thing usually happens. They feel more secure and settle down to blend into a family as well as they can.”¹⁸ When we travel by airplane, we all carry baggage with us that we either “check-in,” or “carry-on.” Using this imagery, we are going to look into several pieces of baggage one needs to “check-in” to as they enter the blending process so that their “carry-on” baggage is small. The baggage this thesis will “check-in” to will be the baggage of spiritual issues, emotional issues, sexual issues, and conflict resolution.

Second, another issue that begs our attention is step parenting in a blended family. How can a parent become a successful stepparent in his/her new blended family? Since many adults find themselves in this new parenting role after remarriage, strong consideration must be given to the kind of relationship to be developed with the step children in this new role. Will they attempt to become the step child’s father/mother replacing their biological parent? Will they just attempt to become friends? Will they make no attempt to develop a relationship with their step children? Lisa Cohn of *The Christian Science Monitor* makes this observation about the step parenting issue; “When divorce parents remarry, they may hope their new family will be similar to the one on the ‘Brady Bunch,’ a 1960s-‘70s sitcom in which a man with three sons marries a woman with three daughters. They all go on a honeymoon together and ‘live happily ever after.’ In real life, it doesn’t often happen that way—at least not initially. Children in a new

¹⁸ Ibid., 174-175.

stepfamily may not be as pleased about the situation as their parents are. They generally don't spend most of their days happily joking with their new stepbrothers and stepsisters. In fact, they often resist closer relationships with their stepparents and stepsiblings. They long for their biological parents to remarry.”¹⁹ One question to investigate under step parenting is, “How should discipline be handled within the blended family?” In his book, *Living in a Step Family without Getting Stepped On*, Dr. Kevin Leman makes this observation, “. . . discipline of the children is the number one issue in the blended family. If there is anything the two of you need to work through and agree upon it's, ‘Who will discipline the kids and how will it be done,’”²⁰ A very sensitive issue prevalent within stepfamilies is that of the stepparents' proclivity towards favoritism in their treatment of the children in their blended home. Some of the biggest arguments among husbands and wives center around what their children are allowed to do or not to do. If this is true in a nuclear family, then one can multiply this a hundred times within a stepfamily where two sets of children have been thrust together, oftentimes with different rules and regulations on matters as simple as what they can or cannot watch on TV. Issues like, what can a teenage girl wear in a nuclear family is taxing, and sometimes volatile, but within a stepfamily it becomes world war three! When Susie is allowed to wear this, but Sally isn't, tempers flair, voices are raised, accusations are made, and strife surfaces between the husband and wife. In an article in *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Marguerite Kelly

¹⁹ Lisa Cohn, “The good news about stepfamilies: Children can find nurturing homes in blended families,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 3, 2002, <http://www.highbeam.com>.

²⁰ Leman, 208.

states emphatically, “a blended family must avoid favoritism.”²¹ Suggestions will be given to help stepparents avoid demonstrating favoritism as they adjust to their new role as stepparent.

Third, an area of concern which is minimal in nuclear families is the question, “How will birth order issues be handled within the blended home?” The nuclear family doesn’t have to give this issue as much consideration as a blended family as there normally is not two firstborns, middle age children, or last born children within their ranks. The exception, of course would be in the case of twins, triplets, etc. Dr. Kevin Leman, author of *Living in a Stepfamily Without Getting Stepped On* says, “You’re bringing together two sets of birth orders, and birth order has a lot to do with why family members look at things so differently from one another. Call it *different personalities*, if you please, but if there is anything a blended family needs to understand, it’s *who is who and why each person is the way he or she is*. When children from two different families are brought together by the marriage of their parents, all of them are plunged into the birth order blender.”²² This thesis will examine some stepsibling hurdles that must be understood by the parents and cleared by the children. Birth order characteristics will be revealed to help parents understand their children better. Finally, birth order collisions which are likely during the blending process will be disclosed. Birth order waters are challenging to navigate in the blended family, but it can be done with the right approach.

²¹ Marguerite Kelly, “Blended Family must avoid favoritism,” *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, March 28, 2003, <http://www.highbeam.com>.

²² Leman, 17-18.

Fourth, another question involving problems and issues within blended families is “How will the finances be handled within the blended family?” Although discipline of the children within the stepfamily is often called the biggest issue, finances within the stepfamily must run a close second. Noted expert in stepfamily finances and president of Stepfamily Association of America, Dr. Margorie Engel infers the importance of this issue by saying, “Before saying ‘I do’ to a new mate and new family responsibilities and risks, it is a good idea to know if the two of you see eye to eye on finances. If you are feeling intimidated and embarrassed by the thought of talking about how you will handle finances after the wedding, you’re not alone. Money conflicts are a major contributor to re-divorce. Indications are that money should be near the top of the list of things to be concerned about.”²³ This thesis will cover three important issues under this crucial topic. The first financial question to answer when remarrying is simply, “Where will we put the money?” Will we put everything in an “our” account? Will we create two accounts labeled, “mine” and “yours?” Will we have three accounts tagged as “mine,” “yours,” and “ours?” The second financial issue that sometimes becomes a very sore spot in blended families is stepchild support. How much should a stepparent support his/her stepchildren? A final consideration under blended family finances will be debt retirement. A financial plan will be suggested to help blended couples retire their financial debt.

Fifth, an issue one is forced to address when blending a family is that of ex-spouse relationships. How can one effectively co-parent with one’s ex-partner? In her

²³ Margorie Engel, Ph.D., “Wedding Bells and Dollar Bills,” 1999, <http://www.stepfamilies.info/education>.

book, *I'm Not Your Kid: A Christian's Guide to a Healthy Stepfamily* Kay Adkins says, "Imagine being a child of divorce, needing stability, needing to feel loved, supported, and protected by both parents, yet one or both perpetuate the tug-of-war they started when the family was together. But now it's worse. Mom is always making Dad change his plan in order to see you. Or maybe Dad criticizes Mom to his new wife, in front of you, and clearly he wants you to side with him. Or maybe Mom is always offering to buy you things, which would be great, except you can tell she does it just so you'll want to be with her instead of Dad."²⁴ So here's the deal . . . how can you do it? How can you co-parent this child or children effectively even though you are no longer married to each other? Is it possible? Is it impossible? Experts in the field of co-parenting seem to think that it can be done, and done effectively. This thesis will suggest a spiritual approach to co-parenting as this thesis is being developed into curriculum to be used in Christian circles. How can I co-parent with an ex-spouse who is uncooperative? Good question. This important issue will be investigated as well.

Last, but certainly not least, yet another question that nuclear families only deal with slightly but is oftentimes very volatile within blended families is, "How will the holidays be handled?" After a couple gets married for the first time there can be issues like where are we going to spend Christmas? Sometimes the pull from both sides of this newly formed nuclear family can be strenuous. In-laws can easily get offended and feelings on both sides can get hurt. Imagine, however, the turmoil that takes place concerning holidays and family traditions within the stepfamily. Within the blended

²⁴ Kay Adkins, "From Eggshells to Empathy," Excerpted from: *I'm Not Your Kid: A Christian's Guide to a Healthy Stepfamily* (n.p.: Baker Publishing Group, 2004), <http://www.successfulstepfamilies.com/view/123>.

family you have extra sets of in-laws, grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc. so that deciding where to celebrate Thanksgiving may be an excruciating decision, to say the least. In his book, *The Smart Step-Family*, Ron Deal gives the following definition along with some insight; “Traditions—sometimes called rituals—refer to the activities and patterns of interaction that we repeat on a daily, weekly, or even annual basis. How you greet one another at the end of the day is a valuable ritual and just as important over time as your twenty-year tradition of eating Thanksgiving dinner at Grandma’s house. Traditions are important because they communicate our identity as family, and their predictability provides security to our lives.”²⁵ This thesis will be suggesting “ex-etiquette” for both the holidays and family traditions. It takes both sides of the family to effectively work out the “holiday kinks” experienced by every stepfamily. Solutions will be given to help cope with holiday stress, and how to form traditions for the blended family.

The Statement of Limitations

The topic of the blended family cannot be covered fully and exhaustively under the parameters set forth for this project. Therefore, there are some areas which this project will leave on the table for another to pursue. The focus of this project is the blended family when minor children are included, but there are other blended family examples to be considered.

I came across a new book recently which puts forth a totally new area of issues concerning the blended family. The book is entitled, *When Your Parent Remarries Late*

²⁵ Ron Deal, *The Smart Step-Family* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishing, 2002), 179.

in Life. The title itself gives away the issue. The author of the book, Terri P. Smith delves into the entirely new arena of the blended family and issues related to adult offspring. Smith quotes Hara Estroff Marano, a contributor for *Psychology Today* magazine by saying, “. . . an estimated 500,000 people over the age of 65 remarry each year in the U.S., and many more between 45 and 64.”²⁶ The author continues, “According to psychologist Deborah Carr, only 2 percent of older widows and 20 percent of older widowers remarry. While this is not a substantial percentage, when you consider that these adults may have several children, a significant number of adults grapple with the realities of remarriage of one or both parents.”²⁷ One may think, what’s the big deal? If the children are adults why would it even bother them? Smith goes on to make this startling comment, “Blending families is challenging when children are young; the remarriage of a parent can verge on disastrous when the children are adults. Communications could grow strained or stop completely. The family relationships you thought you could count on shift and you could end up feeling more adrift than ever.”²⁸ So, this thesis will not deal with the blended family issues that are prevalent among adults whose parents remarry.

Another area of growing concern among stepfamilies is that of education. In the *U.S. Newswire* issue dated January 31, 2005 there is an article titled, *School Achievement Higher for Children in Nuclear Families Than for Children in Blended or Single-Parent*

²⁶ Terri P. Smith, *When Your Parent Remarries Late in Life* (Avon: Adams Media, 2007), xix.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, xx.

Families. The article states, “Educational outcomes of children in stable blended families are substantially worse than those of children reared in traditional nuclear families, according to a study published in the most recent issue of the journal *Demography*. Both stepchildren and their half-siblings who are the joint children of both parents achieved at similar levels, well below children from traditional nuclear families, according to economists Donna Ginther of the University of Kansas and Robert Pollak of Washington University of St. Louis.”²⁹ So, although education within a blended family is an obvious issue, for lack of space, this thesis will not address the topic.

Adolescent health is another issue which this thesis will not attempt to address within the confines of the limited space given for this project. Is the general health of the children better in nuclear families or in stepfamilies? Are there any differences at all that can be attributed to family composition? In the article, *Adolescents with Diabetes from Single-Parent, Blended, and Intact Families: Health-Related and Family Functioning* the writer states, “Combining INT (*Intact families*) and BLND (*Blended families*) family data revealed that adolescents from two-parent (TP) families were in significantly better metabolic control than adolescents from SP (*Single Parent*) families.”³⁰ The question that would have to be researched is of the 119 adolescents examined, how many came from two-parent homes which were blended families rather than nuclear ones.

²⁹ Donna Ginther, and Robert A. Pollak, “Family Structure and Children’s Educational Outcomes: Blended Families, Stylized Facts, and Descriptive Regressions,” *Demography*, November 1, 2004, <http://www.highbeam.com>.

³⁰ Michael A. Harris, Peggy Greco, Tim Wysocki, Caroline Elder-Danda, and Neil H. White, “Adolescents with Diabetes from Single-Parent, Blended, and Intact Families: Health-Related and Family Functioning,” *Families, Systems & Health*, June 22, 1999, <http://www.highbeam.com>.

A final area that will not be addressed in this thesis is the element of child abuse within blended families. When does discipline become abuse? Is child abuse more common in stepfamilies than in nuclear families? Although these are questions that demand investigation and some answers, this thesis will not address them.

Theoretical Basis for the Project

Remarrying is a challenge to say the least. Remarrying when there are children involved from previous relationships and attempting to “blend” all the individuals from both sides is like being the worst batter in the league and stepping up to the plate against the best pitcher in the league and the count is 0-2 (Zero balls and two strikes). The odds are against that batter. It isn’t impossible to get on base, but he/she will have their work cut out for them. Dr. Bill Maier puts it this way, “Entering a second marriage which involves ‘blending’ a family isn’t easy. In fact, most remarriages involving children don’t last. Research indicates that 60-73 percent of these marriages end in divorce. Blended families present a whole set of parenting challenges that must be navigated with extreme care.”³¹

The theoretical basis for this project is that the average church in our country is not attempting to address the issues that are prevalent among stepfamilies. The average church develops its programs, classes, events, and curriculum without considering the unique challenges and chemistry found only in blended families. For example, most Parenting class curriculum I have taught in church approaches discipline from a nuclear

³¹ Bill Maier, Ph.D. *Focus on the Family*, 2002. Internet. Available from <http://www.troubledwith.com>. Accessed June 9, 2006.

family point of view. We use verses like “He who withholds his rod hates his son, But he who loves him disciplines him diligently.”³² This verse is wonderful for a biological dad who is attempting to discipline his biological son/daughter, but what about discipline between the step parent and the step child? Who should discipline him/her? If disciplining of the children is the number one issue in blended families like has already been stated, then shouldn’t the twenty-first century church strive to effectively teach our church members how to accomplish it from a biblical standpoint?

The second most common issue dealt with in blended families, and has now become the number one reason for divorce the second time around is that of finances. Yet, classes offered on finance in the average twenty-first century church deal with the topic from a nuclear family point of view, but what about the family that has his money, her money, and their money? What about the stepfamily which has his debt, her debt, and their debt? What about the family that has his kids’ needs, her kids’ needs, and their kids’ needs? A blended families financial picture sheds a whole new light on the phrase, “financial planning.” The typical finance class just touches the tip of the “blended family ice berg” when it comes to budgeting, paying the bills, child support payments, and, oh, let’s not forget alimony. Another area of financial concern is that of estate planning. In a nuclear family estate planning can be complicated at times, but estate planning in a blended family can be a nightmare. When a church brings in an Estate Planner to talk to their “Senior church members,” how many times is the stepfamily mentioned?

Another basis for this project is the seeming lack of teaching available in our churches in the area of birth order issues. In a nuclear family you only have one first

³² Prov. 13:24 NASU (New American Standard Updated Version).

born, one middle born, and one last born, but not so in the stepfamily. Can you imagine the fireworks in a family where there are two last born three year olds who are always used to getting their way and having the attention focused on them? The author suggests that the New Testament twenty-first century church can do a better job teaching and ministering to blended families who are all dealing with birth order issues.

When's the last time you signed up for a family class at your church and the teacher effectively dealt with the topic of holidays and family traditions? I have been in Bible preaching and teaching churches for over fifty years and I have yet to be in a church that offered timely advice, counseling, and teaching on helping blended families get through the holidays without having WWII; or how to effectively start family traditions in your new family. What's the big deal you say? What's so important about holidays and family traditions you ask? When you think of the good times you have had with your family where does your mind go? If you were to list the three most memorable occasions you experienced in your family while growing up what would you list? Most likely you will remember at least one experience that centered on a holiday, or list one experience that happened to be an annual family tradition. Holidays and traditions are where we make memories. Whether it is Christmas, Fourth of July, or how we celebrate birthdays, holidays and family traditions are some of the most important elements within any family unit. This author suggests that the church in America is doing an ineffective job ministering to our families in this area.

Many churches today plan couple's retreats for those married in their congregations. Although a lot of good information is given out at these events, it is easy to overlook the needs of the couples present that are in second, third, and fourth

marriages. All would agree that the relationship of a couple in a first marriage is difficult, what about the couple who is in their second, third, or fourth marriage? These couples have issues that are magnified when compared to the couple just in their “first time around” marriage. Effective ministry to these couples is necessary to reduce the growing rate of divorce in subsequent marriages.

Co-parenting is another basis for this project. It is hard enough for two adults living under the same roof to always agree on discipline, TV viewing, clothing, bed time, and other rules and regulations for little Johnny; but when the “co-parent” is living with someone else in another house, sometimes in another state, one has the recipe for mass confusion. The problem is that most parenting classes and studies taken at church don’t approach the issue from the child spending fifty percent of his/her time with Mom and fifty percent of his/her time with Dad. Step kids often have two bedrooms, two sets of rules, two sets of clothes, two computers, two sets of school books, and sad to say, two biological parents who have difficulty cooperating with each other when it comes to raising little Susie. What co-parenting skills do our churches offer these congregants?

Finally, an issue that is sometimes present in nuclear homes but is most of the time exacerbated within blended homes is favoritism in the treatment of the children. A good biblical example of this is the story in Genesis of Esau and Jacob. When they were growing up their father Isaac favored Esau, but their mother Rachel favored Jacob. One can easily see the family tension as a result of this favoritism. Another biblical example that demonstrates this within the blended family is the life story of Joseph and how he was treated by his father Jacob as compared to how his stepbrothers were treated. Jacob gave Joseph the special gift of a coat that his other siblings did not receive. From the

very start one can feel the animosity Joseph's brothers had towards him because of this favoritism. The story of this blended family has all the ingredients of a TV miniseries with action, deceit, greed, and even some jail time. The New Testament church most often limits herself to teaching and counseling against favoritism within the nuclear family with no advice, counsel, or materials for effectively ministering to the step parents in blended families.

The overall theoretical basis, then, for this project is simply this: Most of our ministry in churches today is developed and geared toward the nuclear family. Since the blended family has become the most common family unit in our country, why shouldn't more of the teaching, counseling, and outreach be developed for the blended family unit? When one walks into the local Christian Book Store why are most of the ministry and teaching material on family life for nuclear families and only a small amount for blended families? If the twenty-first century church is to become more effective in ministering to blended families in our communities, she will have to step up to the plate and focus on developing more ministry, events, and curriculum aimed at helping the stepfamilies in our communities.

The Statement of Methodology

During His life and ministry Jesus was constantly doing things "outside of the box," and the story recorded for us in John 4:1-30 is no exception. Experts tell us that whenever orthodox Jews in that day had to travel north from Judea to Galilee or vice versa, they would always go the long way around the barn so as not to pass through the geographic area known as Samaria. Why? The simple answer was because Samaritans lived there. What's wrong with Samaritans you ask? They were half Jew and half

Gentile and therefore the Jews loathed the Samaritans. They were unclean and no good law abiding Jew would ever touch, much less talk to a Samaritan person. That's what makes verse four so significant, "And He **had** to pass through Samaria."³³ Whenever Jesus "had" to do something usually it was something outside of the box. I have often thought about what his disciples must have thought as He sent them into the city of Sychar, (a Samaritan city) to get some lunch. Was Jesus hungry, or was the reason He sent them to the city deeper than hunger? Maybe He sent them in to get them out of the way? Maybe He sent them away because they were still too steeped in their traditions to be of any help to the woman He was about to meet at the well. Maybe He sent them into the city because they would pass by her, and He was giving them the opportunity to minister to her needs. We may never know the reason Jesus sent them away. What we do know, however, is what happened next. She showed up at the well where He was sitting at a time that the women of the city did not normally come to the well. Verse six tells us it was noon, but women typically came to the wells early in the morning and just before sunset. Maybe she came at a time no one else would be there because she was an outcast of her city and society. You see, being married five times and currently living with someone she wasn't married to was not socially accepted in her day. Knowing that she had been married and divorced several times, and was now living in adultery, Jesus reached out and touched her life and changed her from the inside out. At first she wanted to argue about religion, but Jesus wanted to introduce her to a new relationship. Using water as a metaphor, Jesus offered her "living water." She drank and she was changed. We near the end of the story and the disciples showed up with carry-out from McDonalds

³³ John 4:4 NASB (New American Standard Bible).

and all their mouths dropped open because Jesus was talking to this unclean Samaritan woman. Listen to what verse twenty-seven says, “At this point His disciples came, and they were **amazed** that He had been speaking with a woman”³⁴ They still didn’t “get it.” Don’t miss the point . . . the average New Testament Church doesn’t “get it” either. How was this woman, who had made some wrong choices in her past relationships, going to be helped unless someone stepped away from tradition and stepped outside of the box and touched her life?

The simple answer to the question, “How is the church going to effectively minister to blended families in the twenty-first century,” is that we must step away from traditions of the past and touch the lives of individuals who are struggling with blended family issues. If we condemn someone, like the disciples did the woman at the well, we will never effectively minister to blended families in our communities. Let’s look at each of the issues covered in this project and summarize how we propose for the church to become more effective in ministering to blended families.

Chapter 2 will be entitled, “*The Honeymoon is Over*”- *The Couple Relationship*, and will address couple issues related to the blended family. In her book, *The Stepfamily Survival Guide*, Natalie Nichols Gillespie shares the following couple scenario:

“Dear Been There, Done That, Helppppp!!! I married this great guy with these really great kids. At least, I thought they were these really great kids when I met him. But now, after only a few months of marriage, they seem to be pulling us apart. Or maybe it’s his ex-wife that is doing all the pulling. Maybe we are pulling each other. Whatever—the honeymoon’s over! It seems like all we do is fight,

³⁴ John 4:27 NASB (New American Standard Bible).

fight, fight. I want us to all get along, but that seems next to impossible! Can you help? Sincerely, Dazed and Confused.”³⁵

Many couples preparing to enter a second marriage and blend a family have preconceived thoughts and ideas of how it will be. Some believe the myth that their new family will be like living in Camelot where everything is perfect all the time. Then, like Gillespie suggests, the honeymoon is over and the couple wakes up to the real world. It is most often a world of stepsiblings fussing, fighting, and vying for the attention of their biological parent. It’s a world of having to deal with the ex-spouses. It’s a world where the couple still has to work, so the area that suffers is their couple relationship. Their relationship gets put on the back shelf while they are working on blending the family, thus contributing to the high divorce rate of second, third, and subsequent marriages. How can the twenty-first century church effectively minister to these couples? This project will suggest that developing materials that can be used in “Blended Couples Retreats,” Small Group Bible Studies, and Counseling blended couples may help to slow down the break up of blended couples. This project will provide information that will help to dispel some of the common myths with which blended couples come into their new marriage. Advice and tips will also be given to aid blended couples in making their marriage a priority, give it significance, and to help them with the art of repair attempt in their marriage.

Chapter 3 will be entitled, “*Riding the Rollercoaster*”- *Stepparenting*, and will address the many issues faced by stepparents during the blending process. In his article, *Smart Stepparenting* Ron Deal says, “Parenting in stepfamilies is a two, three, or four-

³⁵ Natalie Nichols Gillespie, *The Stepfamily Survival Guide* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 2004), 38-39.

person (sometimes more!) dance. Parent-stepparent harmony is the crux of successful parenting within your home. The two most critical relationships in any stepfamily home are the marriage and the stepparent-stepchildren relationships.”³⁶ There are two types of parenting going on in the typical blended family. First, there is the step parenting where a stepparent is working on his/her relationship with their stepchildren. Second, there is the co-parenting that is going on between two biological parents who no longer live together and their biological children. Both types of parenting offer a unique set of issues and challenges. This project will save the co-parenting issues to be discussed under the ex-spouse relationship section of this project in chapter six. It will be the goal of the project for this section to teach some skills that will better equip the blended couple in their step parenting roles. Cinderella’s wicked stepmother is often the image we have of this parenting role, but it doesn’t have to be that way. This project will attempt to help stepparents find the answers to questions like, “What do you do to change how you feel about your step kids?” Gillespie puts her finger on the challenge when she says, “Stepparents may find themselves disillusioned quickly in a new marriage when children who started out as loving angels, as friends, quickly become the enemy after they officially become your stepchildren.”³⁷ In the chapters to come we will give some suggested solutions to this step parenting setback. What do you do when a step child doesn’t want to have a relationship with you as the stepparent? How can a stepparent proactively build bridges between themselves and step kids? The twenty-first century

³⁶ Ron Deal, *Smart Stepparenting*; Available from <http://www.focusonyourchild.com/relation/art1/A0000342.html>; Accessed June 6, 2006.

³⁷ Natalie Nichols Gillespie, *Stepfamily Success: Practical Solutions for Common Challenges* (Grand Rapids: Revell Books, 2004), 98.

church must have the answer to these questions if she is to effectively minister to blended families in our communities.

Imagine a wife writing her husband the following letter:

Dear Honey,

When we got married, I thought you said we were going to share everything. We do share our time, our money, and our love; but often I feel like we do not share the most important thing we have—our children. It seems like every time they act up for me, you throw your hands up and say that you are not getting in the middle of it. When I think the kids are running out of control, you think I am being too hard on them. When I say no, you wait until I turn my head and then say yes. I feel like I am always the bad guy, having to restore some order to the chaos created by overindulgence. You probably think I am rigid and no fun, which is what everyone else in this family thinks. We are a house divided against itself, and I am afraid we might not be able to remain standing in the long run. How can we get on the same page before we tear this family apart?

I love you.

Love,

Your Wife, the Wicked Stepmother³⁸

This letter is an all-too-common event in the typical blended family. Solutions to the problem of disciplining the children within the blended family will be reached as we develop a curriculum that will give parents the tools they need to effectively discipline their children and step children. Sometimes the greatest deterrent is a lack of knowledge, and when it comes to disciplining children many blended couples just don't know what to do. Frustration sets in, arguments break out, and sometimes marriages break up over this family issue. Gillespie makes another astute observation about this issue when she says, "discipline in stepfamilies is tricky, the difficulty compounded by the former spouse who is the other parent in the family unit."³⁹ This project will identify the process by which a stepparent can grow into a healthy parenting role with his/her stepchildren.

³⁸ Ibid., 107-108.

³⁹ Ibid., 109.

Then there is the issue of favoritism. Consider the following scenario. . . “My 18-year old daughter and my 16-year old son are really good kids but my soon-to-be husband lives with us and he says that ‘kids are just kids’ and that they have no right to anything in their home. Now that my daughter is in college, he says that she can’t come home on weekends and that my son has to leave home at 18 the way he did. (Actually, he was kicked out.) When my boyfriend’s 6-year old visits us, however, no rules apply, because he loves her, he says, and wants her to feel comfortable in ‘our’ home. Fine. But shouldn’t my children feel comfortable too? I wouldn’t want to have them hanging around when they’re 30, but this house has been their home since they were born and I want them to know that it always will be. My boyfriend says that I’m wrong. But am I?”⁴⁰

This true story points to yet another critical issue found in all families, but more emphatically in blended families—favoritism. Once again the solutions to the problem of showing favoritism within blended homes must center on opening the eyes of blended couples by educating them in this area. We all have blind spots in our lives, and one prominent blind spot can be how we treat our children versus how we are treating other children, namely our step kids. Favoritism can destroy a blended family if it is not nipped in the bud. Just remember the life story of Joseph in Genesis and how the favoritism affected the relationship he had with his step brothers. It caused them to hate him so much they contemplated killing him, but ended up selling him into slavery. Not exactly a “warm and fuzzy” relationship between him and his brothers to say the least.

⁴⁰ Marguerite Kelly, “Blended families need give and take,” *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, April 12, 2002, <http://www.highbeam.com>.

This project will attempt to educate blended couples on how to avoid favoritism in their home. It will further advise on how to safely discontinue favoritism that may already be present in a blended family home.

Chapter 4 will be entitled, “*Surviving the Blender*” – *Stepfamily Birth Order*, and will investigate the many issues experienced by two families attempting to blend two sets of kids. I read the following story in Kevin Leman’s book, *Living in a Step family without Getting Stepped on: Helping Your Children Survive The Birth Order Blender*. “A woman who remarried and wound up with five children instead of her original two told me, ‘we went through months of premarital counseling, but it didn’t prepare us for being a blended family. Until you live with someone every day, you and your children with him and his children, all together under the same roof, you don’t know what you’re going to cope with.’”⁴¹ Birth order is a major issue in blended families. It is an issue in which nuclear families have only limited experience. Imagine, though, when two families come together and there are two last born children, one five and one four. Each of them has been used to getting the “youngest child attention,” but now he/she has to share that attention with a step sibling. Think of the same family now with two first born children, one sixteen, and one eighteen. Both are perfectionists but now they have been asked to share the same bed room. These are just some of the birth order issues that materialize when two people come together to form a blended family. Leman stresses the importance of the birth order issue in blended families by saying, “Unless children are very young, their birth orders don’t change, they collide.”⁴² I have been doing pre-

⁴¹ Leman, 8.

⁴² Leman, 23.

marital counseling for almost twenty-eight years and have found that most pre-marital counseling materials are written for “first timers” when it comes to marriage. If our churches are going to effectively minister to blended families, we must provide for them pre-marital counseling materials that address issues like birth order which will have a major impact on the marriage and the new family. It will be the focus of this project to provide counseling materials that can be used in preparing couples entering their second, third, and subsequent marriages. These will be the tools they need to understand and address the birth order blender their kids will be entering. This project will provide information about the traits of each birth order that will help parents understand the chemistry that is being formed by bringing their children together. Knowing how their children may act and react toward each other is critical in planning for the blending of a new family. The project will also provide tips and advice from the experts on what to expect from the union of one’s own birth order with one’s partner’s birth order. For example, what can one expect when two firstborns marry? What about a first born and a middle born? What about a first born and a last born? What can two middle born children expect if they get married? What about a middle born who marries a last born? Finally, what if two last born children marry? Leman gives the following closing thought, “Whatever your birth order and that of your spouse, it’s what you make of your particular birth order strengths and how you modify and deal with your particular birth order weaknesses that will decide what kind of marriage you will have.”⁴³

Chapter 5 will be entitled, “*Mine, Yours, & Ours*” – *Stepfamily Finances*, and will delve into the very complicated area of finances in the stepfamily. We all need

⁴³ Leman, 172.

money! That doesn't change when one gets married for a second time; rather the need for money usually increases. That's why some say finances are the number one reason that second marriages don't survive. Once again we are faced with the "how" question. How is the church going to get better at effectively ministering to blended families in the area of finances? This project will propose that a step in the right direction will be to develop materials that can be used in classes, seminars, and retreats which will help teach blended couples financial principles that can help them blend successfully in this important area of their new family's life. When it comes to finances in the stepfamily, Gordon and Carri Taylor say, "the traditional model and assumption is that we will put all of our money into one pot—an 'Ours'. One problem that can arise is when the new wife is writing the alimony or child support checks to the ex-wife. Even though she signed on to all these pre-existing relationships and legal agreements, resentment can surface."⁴⁴ This project will strive to disclose solutions to the financial frenzy within blended families by investigating such questions as how should you handle assets and debts? What should you do with his assets and her assets? How should you address his debts and her debts? Next, what about material possessions? Whose furniture and home decor are you going to use in which house? Another important question pertaining to finances is what about the financial needs of the children? What about their clothing needs, medical needs, educational needs? If these questions seem trite consider the following true story as told by the Carri & Gordon Taylor. Ana Lopez developed some real resentment in her second marriage because of finances. She said, "I was divorced and

⁴⁴ Carri & Gordon Taylor, "\$tepfamily Finance\$: Money & Stuff – Part 2," 2005, <http://www.successfulstepfamilies.com/view/259>.

single for five and a half years. I had money then and didn't have a worry. When I married Joe, I handed my paycheck over to him, and all of a sudden, I had no money. We were living paycheck to paycheck, and that was a rude awakening for me. I also became bothered with our joint checking account because Joe was paying a tremendous amount of alimony and child support, and here I was, handing my check over to him. He was also paying for his ex's phone bills, her AAA card, and I didn't understand why. According to Joe, 'I did pay for those things. I thought if I did that, it would keep the peace with my ex-wife and I would have access to my kids. I didn't see it as a very big deal.'"⁴⁵ Our communities are filled with couples just like Ana and Joe. This project's purpose will be to help our churches provide some encouragement, education and empowerment to blended couples in the area of their finances.

Chapter 6 will be entitled, "*Joint Custody with a Gem or a Jerk*" – *Ex-Spouse Co-Parenting*, and will approach suggested solutions to the tremendous challenge ex-spouses face as they co-parent their children. Although there are a number of issues within the ex-spouse relationship, the biggest issue must be that of co-parenting with the ex-spouse. Imagine the challenge of successfully co-parenting with someone who doesn't live where you live, possibly doesn't live like you live, and very possibly doesn't even like you any more. One cannot take the "Brady Bunch" approach and totally ignore the ex-spouse relationships which are present in blended families. In his article, *Dealing with a Difficult Ex-Spouse: 10 Tips to Help You Cope*, noted author Ron Deal says, "Wouldn't it be nice if adults could remember that parenting is not about them, and that it is about the children? Wouldn't it be wonderful if the pain of the broken personal relationships of

⁴⁵ Ibid.

the past could be kept separate from the practical parental concerns of the present? Wouldn't it be nice . . .? Yes it would. But sometimes people aren't nice. Dealing with a difficult ex-spouse can be very discouraging and defeating. Yet, we are called to continue trying to pursue good, to 'turn the other cheek', and to 'walk the extra mile.'"⁴⁶

How is the church today to effectively minister to blended families and couples who struggle in their ex-spouse relationships? This project will seek to lay the ground work for helping these couples by giving tips and advice on coping with that relationship, and how to be better co-parents. This project will also seek to answer the question, How do you handle an ex-spouse who doesn't have the same rules, regulations, and even the Christian values you have for your children and is uncooperative in the co-parenting process?

Chapter 7 will be entitled, "*Ex-Etiquette for Holidays and Traditions*" – *Stepfamily Celebrations*, and will attempt a solution to the many dilemma's faced annually by blended families as they address what to do with the holidays. My family has learned from experience just how sensitive a topic the holidays can be in the blended family arena. Christmas of 2007 was my grandson Landon's first major holiday since his dad and mom's divorce. Landon spent the holiday with his Dad in Arkansas. There were some pretty tense moments during that whole period of time when he was not at home spending Christmas with his mom. In her article, *Soothing Holiday Stresses*, Jean McBride begins, "Holidays can be particularly stressful for divorced families. Expectations of family get-togethers when you no longer feel like a family, hectic

⁴⁶ Ron Deal, "Dealing with a Difficult Ex-Spouse: 10 Tips to Help You Cope," *n.d.*, <http://www.successfulstepfamilies.com/view/117>.

schedules and visitation agreements, school and religious events where you are likely to come face to face with the other parent all contribute to STRESS. Adults feel overwhelmed and exhausted while children feel like the turkey wishbone, pulled between parents.”⁴⁷ Leading stepfamily expert, Ron Deal in his article *Combining Holiday and Family Traditions* makes this perceptive observation about the holiday issue; “Holiday traditions in particular put co-parent (or ex-spouse) relationships to the test. If your ex-spouse relationship is rocky at best, don’t expect the holidays to work out just as you hoped. Yet even the best co-parent relationship characterized by considerate negotiation regarding time with the children still can’t erase sadness over traditions lost and memories from previous family holidays. Getting used to new traditions, different food, and being with strangers in unfamiliar homes is awkward at best.”⁴⁸ Do you relate to this picture: Christmas is coming and your church is decorated to the hilt! There’s garland, lights, a manger scene, and even a huge Christmas tree in the foyer. Christmas carols are being sung in every service. Everything is gorgeous and everyone is excited about America’s favorite holiday just days from now—everyone except the couple who just got married and not all of the family will be together for the holiday because it’s the ex-spouse’s turn to have the kids this Christmas. As a church we have to remember that what is exciting and wonderful for the nuclear family is depressing and even painful for the blended family. This project will strive to give some action steps that blended families can take to help them cope with their holiday stress. This project will also

⁴⁷ Jean McBride, “Soothing Holiday Stresses,” *n.d.*, <http://www.successfulstepfamilies.com/view/84>.

⁴⁸ Ron Deal, “Combining Holiday and Family Traditions,” *n.d.*, <http://www.successfulstepfamilies.com/view/92>.

attempt to provide some strategies that may help couples begin to combine their holiday and family traditions.

The Review of the Literature

The following is a summary of the major current literature related to the topic of the blended family.

Internet Websites/Magazines/Newspaper Articles

One can get a subscription to a research site called High Beam Research which is available from <http://www.highbeam.com>. High Beam pulls resources from all around the country. Some resources are secular and others are faith-based. Thousands of magazine articles, newspaper clippings, and news releases can be found dealing with stepfamilies. Some of those articles have been chosen for use in this project based on the eight issues this project will cover.

There are a number of websites offering advice, tips, coaching, education, and encouragement to stepfamilies. The following is a partial list of such websites:

1. Ron Deal – <http://www.successfulstepfamilies.com>. Ron's site is a Christian based one for stepfamilies and offers help to every member of a stepfamily. A number of articles will be used from this website since it does have a faith-based approach to the subject and the goal of this project is to help churches become more effective in their ministry to blended families.
2. Sandy Williams – <http://www.stepfamilysuccess.com>. Sandy's site is secular based rather than faith based. She offers coaching to stepparents like herself in being more successful in their stepparenting role. Since Sandy approaches blended family issues

from a secular standpoint very little of her material will be used in the project, but it is import to see and know what the secular approach is.

3. Rachelle Katz – <http://www.stepsforstepmothers.com>. Rachelle is a psychotherapist and therefore approaches the stepfamily subject from a secular point of view as well. Her focus is specifically on the stepmother in blended families. She offers Stepmother Conferences and dialogue between stepmothers to encourage peers to help each other. Like the previous site, very little will be used from this site.

4. Adele Cornish – <http://www.blendedfamilyfocus.com>. Adele has a degree in Social Work but says she has been called by God to work with and attempt to help blended families. She offers a program called Comprehensive Blending Lives Program which she uses to assist families in the blending process.

5. Moe & Paige Becnel – <http://www.blendingfamily.com>. Moe & Paige are the founders of the ministry “Blending a Family” stationed out of Baton Rouge, LA. They also serve as the Singles Pastors for Healing Place Church also located in Baton Rouge. They have co-authored a book entitled *God Breathes on Blended Families*. The book comes with a workbook so it can be done as a Small Group study or classroom environment.

6. James Dobson – <http://www.focusonthefamily.com>. Noted author and family expert, James Dobson has had this website for years and although his site is mainly aimed at nuclear family issues, it occasionally has articles and helps for blended families. Several articles have been used in this project from this site.

All of the aforementioned websites offer articles from authors, magazines and books on various blended family issues. It will be the focus of this project to use mostly faith-

based literature since the goal of the project is to help the twenty-first century church effectively minister to the blended families of our communities.

Books on Blended Family & Related Issues

There are a number of books that have been written over the past twenty to thirty years on blended family or related issues. The following is a partial list of these works:

1. John Gottman – *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*. The author does an excellent job is showing married couples where their strengths and weaknesses are in their relationship, along with actions they can take to improve their marriage.
2. David Clarke – *A Marriage After God's own Heart*. The author shows how two people need God to help make their marriage work. He gives insight on how couples can have more fun, excitement, and intimacy with God at the center of their relationship.
3. Robert S. Paul – *Finding Ever After*. The author addresses men's and women's needs within the marriage relationship and gives advice on how to make a marriage fun, fascinating and free.
4. Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher – *The Case for Marriage*. The authors have some good insight on the myths about marriage in our society. The authors do a good job showing how cohabiting is not more desirable than being married. The link the authors make between being healthier when married is interesting as well. The authors' position on same-sex marriages, however, is not the biblical position.
5. Ron L. Deal – *The Smart Step-Family*. The author gives seven steps to a healthy family as follows: First, Step Up! – Discover a redemptive God who loves, forgives, and provides strength and direction for the journey. Second, Step Down – Adjust your expectations and learn how to cook a stepfamily. Third, Two-Step – Your marriage must

be top priority. Fourth, Step in Line (Part 1) – With the parenting team. Fifth, Step in Line (Part 2) – Parent and Stepparent roles. Sixth, Step Through – The wilderness: overcoming special challenges. Seventh, Step Over – Into the Promised Land: Stories of those who are making it.

6. Natalie Nichols Gillespie – *Stepfamily Success*. The author deals with a number of the typical stepfamily issues like the couples relationship, (chapters 1-4), children issues, (chapters 5-9), ex-spouse issues, (chapters 10-12), authorities, (chapters 13-15), and support, (chapters 16-17). The author is a frequent contributor to Ron Deal's website, successfulstepfamilies.com.

7. Maxine Marsolini – *Raising Children in Blended Families*. The author focuses on the children issues found in blended families. The author attempts to give answers to some of the most common questions faced by children who find themselves in blended families.

8. Terri P. Smith with James M. Harper PH.D. – *When Your Parent Remarries Late in Life*. The authors in this book deal with issues prevalent among adults whose parents remarry. As people are living longer this situation is becoming more frequent, and according to the authors is more serious than one might think.

9. Kevin Leman – *Living in a Step Family without Getting Stepped On*. This author is the birth order guru and approaches the stepfamily from the aspect of bringing multiple numbers of birth orders together in the same family. He offers guidance on what to expect and how to make it work.

10. Maxine Marsolini – *Blended Families: Creating Harmony as You Build a New Home Life*. The author deals with the common issues blended families experience using stories and scripture to offer advice and counsel to blended families.
11. Jann Blackstone-Ford and Sharyl Jupe. *Ex-Etiquette for Holidays and Other Family Celebrations*. The authors focus on the important issues of holidays and family traditions experienced by blended families. They give timely advice and suggestions for laying the groundwork for family gatherings, holidays, birthdays, events, etc.
12. Elizabeth S. Thayer, Ph.D. and Jeffrey Zimmerman, Ph.D. – *The Co-Parenting Survival Guide*. The author deals with the important issue of co-parenting with the ex-spouse. The first four chapters deal with conflicts and conflict resolution while the last seven chapters address some specific co-parenting guidelines.
13. Susan J. Hetrick – *Advice from the Blender*. The author gives eight ingredients to successfully blending a family as follows: Realistic expectations, a strong marriage, a united parenting front, TLC – Time, Love, Consistency, Exceptional communication skills, a common goal: What’s best for the children, flexibility, and prayer.
14. James Bray and John Kelly – *Stepfamilies*. The author deals with the following issues: Chapter one he addresses what he calls “the neotraditionalist stepfamily.” Chapter two he writes about “the matriarchal stepfamily.” In chapter three he considers “the romantic stepfamily.” Next, in chapters four, five, and six he discusses what he calls the first of three cycles in stepfamily lives. He defines the first cycle as “Hope and Expectation: the turbulent first two years. Then, he calls cycle two, “The Romantic Stepfamily: Waking from the Dream,” and discusses it in chapter seven and eight.

Finally, he refers to cycle three as “The Passage to Adolescence,” and covers it in chapter nine.

15. Melinda Blau – *Families Apart: Ten Keys to Successful Co-Parenting*. Blau’s book is based on what she calls ten keys to successful co-parenting. She lists them as follows:

- Key #1 – Heal Yourself after Divorce
- Key #2 – Act Maturely
- Key #3 – Listen to Your Children
- Key #4 – Respect Each Other as Parents
- Key #5 – Divide Parenting Time
- Key #6 – Accept Each Other’s Differences
- Key #7 – Communicate about (and with) the Children
- Key #8 – Step Outside Traditional Gender Rules
- Key #9 – Anticipate and Accept Change
- Key #10 – Know that Co-Parenting is Forever⁴⁹

16. Isolina Ricci, Ph.D. – *Mom’s House, Dad’s House: Making Two Homes for Your Child*. Ricci breaks her book into four major parts. In part one she deals with how to have two homes with no fighting. In these first five chapters she deals with such topics as building a new family life, believe in your family, the map of how to get there, watching your language around the children, and increasing your resources for coping with stress. In chapters six-ten Ricci addresses how to make tough times work for you in the new family. In these chapters she deals with emotions, how to relate to the ex-spouse, how the co-parents should conduct themselves, how to make both houses homes, and how to give the children a sense of security. In part three she covers the legal side of stepfamilies. In chapters eleven through fifteen Ricci answers questions like how to make major decisions, how to make plans and agreements with the other co-parent, how to work out agreements on you own with attorneys, and how to stay out of court. In her

⁴⁹ Melinda Blau, *Families Apart: Ten Keys to Successful Co-Parenting*, (New York: Berkley Publishing Group, 1993), 11-12.

part four covering chapters sixteen-twenty, the author addresses your family and future. She talks about how to build family strength, how to feel close when you are far apart, what to consider when an absent parent returns, and how to move on with your life.

17. Jann Blackstone-Ford and Sharyl Jupe. *Ex-Etiquette for the Parents: Good Behavior after Divorce or Separation*. The authors break this book into three parts as follows:

Part 1: Basic Ex-Etiquette – Defining and Practicing Good Behavior after Divorce or Separation.

Part 2: Intermediate Ex-Etiquette – Parenting and Family Building

Part 3: Advanced Ex-Etiquette – Managing the Formalities⁵⁰

18. Jeffrey P. Wittmann, Ph.D. – *Custody Chaos, Personal Peace: Sharing Custody with an Ex who Drives You Crazy*. The author divides his book into three parts as follows:

Part 1: Working On Yourself – The author deals with the mind and gives seven strategies for your head.

Part 2: Whose Problem is this? – The author deals with the unnecessary burdens couples take on when they shouldn't.

Part 3: Nudging Your Ex to Change – The author deals with showing respect to one another and thinking before you speak.⁵¹

19. Julie A. Ross and Judy Corcoran – *Joint Custody with a Jerk: Raising a Child with an Uncooperative Ex*. This is a book on the topic of co-parenting with one who is hard to get along with. The authors address issues like how to identify the problems between you and your ex-spouse, focusing on important problems, how to cooperate with your ex-spouse, what to do when the child/children are the center of the problem, and how to handle it when your ex-spouse is the main problem.

⁵⁰ Jann Blackstone-Ford and Sharyl Jupe. *Ex-Etiquette for the Parents: Good Behavior after the Divorce or Separation* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2004), v-vi.

⁵¹ Jeffrey P. Wittmann, Ph.D. *Custody Chaos, Personal Peace: Sharing Custody with an Ex who Drives You Crazy* (New York: Berkley Publishing House, 2001), n.p.

20. Suzen J. Ziegahn, Ph.D. – *The Stepparents Survival Guide: A Workbook for*

Creating a Happy Blended Family. The author breaks her book into two parts as follows:

Part 1: The Stepfamily Dynamic – The first four chapters of the book are where the author answers questions such as how does your stepfamily measure up?, stepparenting myths and realities, stepparent beliefs, and the real story about conflict within the stepfamily.

Part 2: Building and Maintaining Your Stepfamily Plan – 8 stages:

Stage 1 – Make Peace with Your Stepfamilies' Past.

Stage 2 – Observe, Listen, and Learn.

Stage 3 – Assert Your Role in the Family.

Stage 4 – Navigate the Extended Family Circuit.

Stage 5 – Will My Marriage Survive?

Stage 6 – Where Do We Still Need Work?

Stage 7 – Create Your Stepfamily Traditions

Stage 8 -- How Do I Maintain My Stepfamily Plan?⁵²

21. Jeannette Lofas, CSW – *Family Rules: Helping Stepfamilies & Single Parents Build Happy Homes*. Jeannette is the founder and president of The Stepfamily Foundation.

The author divides her book into six parts and covers fifty-three rules which she applies to the stepfamily.

Part 1: Quality Parenting.

Rule #1 – Face What You're Up Against: Parenting Today Is Tough!

Rule #2 – Don't Let Guilt Run the Way You Parent.

Rule #3 – Know That Love Is Not About Things or Expensive Outings. It's About Close Talk and Being Together.

Rule #4 – Don't Be A Pushover Parent.

Rule #5 – Discipline!

Part 2: Rules for Success as a Parent.

Rule #6 – Remember That Parents Must Act Like Parents. Adults Must Run the Household.

Rule #7 – Manage Your Home with the Same Close Attention You Give Your Career.

Rule #8 – Learn The New Partnering. It's the Secret Key to Success.

Rule #9 – Manage Your Money. Don't Just Expect That "It Will All Work Out."

Rule #10 – Don't Fight In Front of The Children.

Rule #11 – Time: Use It Well.

Rule #12 – Be Aware That Television Can Be an Abused Substance.

Rule #13 – Interact as a Family. Play Board Games and Sports Together.

Part 3: The Basics: Setting Up Family Rules.

⁵² Suzen J. Ziegahn, *The Stepparents Survival Guide: A Workbook for Creating a Happy Blended Family*, (Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, Inc., 2002), *n.p.*

- Rule #14 – Remember That You Are a Team.
- Rule #15 – Give the Gift of Structure to Your Family.
- Rule #16 – Have a Vision of How You Would Like Your Family to Work and Behave Together.
- Rule #17 – Have Family Meetings Where You Present House Rules Positively and in Written Form.
- Rule #18 – Give Children an Allowance to Teach Them the Value of Money.
- Rule #19 – Use Rewards and Punishments to Underscore the Lesson That Actions Have Consequences.
- Rule #20 – Be Predictable and Consistent.
- Rule #21 – Be Aware that the Tone of Voice You Use is Vital in any Communication.
- Rule #22 – Don't Forget Manners. Manners are about Intimacy, Not Forks.
- Rule #23 – Remember That Kids Like Rules.
- Rule #24 – Use the Pilot's Checklist.
- Rule #25 – Learn from Your Mistakes. They Are Your Teachers.
- Rule #26 – Don't Encourage Excuses.
- Rule #27 – Do Not Abuse, and Do Not Be Abused.
- Rule #28 – Keep Your Word.
- Rule #29 – Use the Family Rules Chart.
- Part 4: Rituals**
- Rule #30 – Create Family Rituals. They Will Be Times Remembered.
- Rule #31 – Know That Family Meals Are a Basic Ritual.
- Rule #32 – Make Bedtime a Predictable Routine and a Ritual.
- Rule #33 – Create Family Rituals for Holidays and Special Events.
- Rule #34 – Know the Rituals Surrounding Gift Giving and Thank-You's.
- Part 5: Negotiating Family 2000.**
- Rule #35 – Recognize That Biological and Sexual Bonds Are in Conflict in Family 2000.
- Rule #36 – Take Your Place as Head of the Household.
- Rule #37 – The Rules for Visitation Must Be Clear, Predictable, and Consistent.
- Rule #38 – Learn to Co-Parent. It's Good for Your Kids.
- Rule #39 – Don't Bad-Mouth Your Former Spouse.
- Rule #40 – Explain the Divorce. Give Kids the Reasons.
- Rule #41 – When Dating as a Single Parent, Be a Parent First.
- Rule #42 – Be Clear About Who Comes First and When: Your Partner or Your Kids?
- Rule #43 – Be Aware That Recoupling Can Be Hazardous to Your Sex Life.
- Rule #44 – Establish the Adults' Bedroom-Door Rule.
- Rule #45 – Understand the Kids' Conflict of Loyalties.
- Rule #46 – Recognize That Becoming "One Big Happy Family" Is Highly Unlikely.
- Rule #47 – Have Realistic Expectations.
- Rule #48 – Blame the Step Situation, Not the People Involved.
- Rule #49 – Remember That There Are No Ex-Parents, Only Ex-Spouses.
- Rule #50 – Learn How to Exorcise Ghosts . . . Delicately.

Rule #51 – Know the Stepparent’s Role in Discipline.

Rule #52 – Give Special Thanks to Stepparents.

Step #53 – Remember That Grandparents Have a Special Role.

Part 6: Tools For Family 2000.

Tool #1 -- Tools for Partnering.

Tool #2 – Tools for Money Management.

Tool #3 – Tools for Constructing Your Vision of the Family.

Tool #4 – Tools for Setting Up Your Family Rules Chart.⁵³

22. Elaine Fantle Shimberg. *Blending Families*. The author addresses all the typical stepfamily issues. Two areas which Shimberg covers which others overlook are school issues and religious issues.

23. Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott. *Saving Your Second Marriage Before It Starts*. In this book the authors address nine keys to success in a second marriage. The authors list the nine keys as follows:

Key #1 – Know whether you’re ready to marry again.

Key #2 – Identify and meld your love styles.

Key #3 – Say what you mean and understand what you hear.

Key #4 – Fight a good fight.

Key #5 – Become soul mates.

Key #6 – Face the myths of remarriage honestly.

Key #7 – Develop the habit of happiness.

Key #8 – Bridge the gender gap.

Key #9 – Combine a family.⁵⁴

24. Susan Wisdom and Jennifer Green, *Stepcoupling*. This book focuses on creating and sustaining a strong marriage in today’s blended family.

25. Mary Susan Miller. *No Visible Wounds*. This book focuses on identifying nonphysical abuse of women by their men.

⁵³ Jeannette Lofas, *Family Rules: Helping Stepfamilies and Single Parents Build Happy Homes* (New York: Kensington Publishing Corp., 1998), v-xiv.

⁵⁴ Les and Leslie Parrott, *Saving Your Second Marriage Before It Starts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 7.

26. Catherine Clark Kroeger and James R. Beck. *Women, Abuse, and the Bible*. This book suggests how Scripture can be used to hurt and heal.

27. Don and Jan Frank. *When Victims Marry*. This book focuses on building a stronger marriage by breaking destructive cycles.

Theses/Curriculum/Miscellaneous Literature

A professor, Dennis Cox, wrote his Master of Arts thesis in 1986 and titled it *Building a Fire in the Rain: Managing the Dialectic of Marital and Parental Relationships within the Stepfamily*. The author addresses the following research question: “How does the couple within the stepfamily balance the “relationship dialectic” between their relationship to each other and to their children and/or stepchildren?” His thesis took the secular approach rather than a faith-based one. So, in a nutshell his thesis attempted to show how to balance the couple relationship with the parent relationships within the stepfamily.

Susan Anne Caldwell wrote a thesis titled *Stepfamilies with Adolescents: An Intervention Matrix Model for Middle School Counselors* in 1991. Susan’s report examines the stepfamily phenomenon and how stepfamilies are treated. Her abstract reads as follows:

After the introductory first chapter the second chapter provides a clear definition of what constitutes a "stepfamily" and explores some of the demographics regarding stepfamilies. Next the report examines the major issues with which stepfamilies deal. How these issues distinguish them from nuclear families is discussed. The third chapter examines the structural differences between stepfamilies and intact families. These issues include the biological parent living elsewhere, boundary issues, complex extended family structures, and stepfamily happiness. The fourth chapter explores the stepfamily issues which deal with emotional, or affective areas. The fifth chapter examines parenting in stepfamilies, including parenting arrangements, adolescence, custodial versus non-custodial parents, and guidelines for effective step parenting. Finally the sixth chapter presents recommendations and

suggestions to enable middle school counselors, or other professionals who work with stepfamilies, to provide the best educational information, most appropriate emotional support, and most useful guidance, to best meet the needs of the stepparents, the stepchildren, and the school personnel who interact with them.⁵⁵

Julia B. Sayre wrote a thesis entitled *An Outsider in My Own Home: Women's Perceptions of the Markers of Attachment Injury in Stepcouple Relationships*. Her abstract reads as follows:

This study examined step couple relationships through the framework of attachment injury. Specifically, this inquiry explored whether or not individuals who are part of a step couple describe relational experiences that are similar to the patterns of attachment injury; and if so, whether or not these experiences are directly attributable to stepfamily formation and maintenance. Attachment theory and existing research regarding both attachment injury and stepfamily formation contributed to the development of core interview questions. Using a multiple-case qualitative research design, interviews were conducted with five women who were both biological and stepmothers in a step couple relationship. The pattern matching method of data analysis was used to explore for markers of attachment injury in the step couple relationships. The context of the women's stories, as well as direct questions, enabled consideration of the attribution of the attachment injury markers to stepfamily formation. The respondents in this study described experiences that matched the patterns of attachment injury. In each case, at least some of the markers for attachment injury were directly attributable to the relationship difficulties these women encountered in forming and maintaining their stepfamily. Patterns of attachment injury were identified that would not have occurred had the respondents not been part of a step couple. These findings hold implications for continued exploration of step couples and the mitigation of stepfamily problems through the theoretical framework of attachment and attachment injury.⁵⁶

A curriculum for church ministry was written in 2006 and published by InStep Ministries entitled *Thirsty People Sitting at Wells: Developing a Stepfamily Ministry in Your Local Church*. The authors are Jeff Parziale and Judi Babcock-Parziale of the

⁵⁵ Susan Anne Caldwell, "Stepfamilies with Adolescents: An Intervention Matrix Model for Middle School Counselors, 1991, <http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/recordDetail?accno=ED346390>.

⁵⁶ Julia B. Sayre, "An Outsider in My Own Home": Women's Perceptions of the Markers of Attachment Injury in Stepcouple Relationships," January 23, 2003.

InStep Ministries staff. The title is taken from the story shared earlier in John 4 when Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well. The course is a twelve week instructional study to help local churches develop stepfamily ministries in their churches. The course covers the following topics:

- Chapter One: Introduction to the Stepfamily Ministry.
- Chapter Two: Review of Stepfamily Ministry.
- Chapter Three: Ministry Development Overview.
- Chapter Four: Identifying and Understanding the Need.
- Chapter Five: Non-traditional Family Continuum of Care.
- Chapter Six: Ministry Suggestions.
- Chapter Seven: Asking Key Questions.
- Chapter Eight: Leadership.
- Chapter Nine: Developing a Leadership Team.
- Chapter Ten: Goal Setting.
- Chapter Eleven: How Do We Start?
- Chapter Twelve: Conclusions.⁵⁷

In conclusion, reviewing the above mentioned materials has allowed me to gain a clearer understanding of the complexity and extent of stepfamily issues. In reviewing all the material available on the subject of stepfamilies I have been able to better narrow down the topics to six creating a chapter for each topic. The intention of this candidate is that this thesis will be translated into a curriculum that can be used in the twenty-first century church to help minister more effectively to families in the process of blending.

⁵⁷ Jeff Parziale and Judi Babcock-Parziale, “Thirsty People Sitting at Wells: Developing a Stepfamily Ministry in Your Local Church,” (Tucson: InStep Ministries, 2006), iv.

CHAPTER II -- "THE HONEYMOON IS OVER"

THE COUPLE RELATIONSHIP

The most critical element in the blended family or in the process of blending a family is without a doubt the couple relationship. If a couple fails here, it would be like knocking over the first of several dominoes with the remaining dominoes, (areas of the family) likely to tumble down as well. One of the first things a couple needs to realize is that both of them are bringing "baggage" into their relationship. Susan Hetrick, in her book, *Advice from the Blender* puts it this way, "We carry baggage from the past with us, no matter how desperately we'd like to leave it behind. Despite the obvious negatives (the extra weight, the drag on us, and the dysfunction baggage can produce), our inability to shake the past is a good thing in many respects. God uses the experiences, disappointments, and the heartaches of the past to take us deeper in our relationship with Him. In the process, we gain wisdom and become more sensitive to the struggles of others."⁵⁸ Hetricks goes on to quote Rance Meyers by saying, "It's true we all have baggage, but if you are getting remarried you'd better make sure your baggage is one of those tiny little carry-ons, not a huge steamer trunk."⁵⁹ When we go to the airport, we check-in our baggage before we get on the plane. When we attempt to blend as a couple,

⁵⁸ Susan J. Hetrick, *Advice from the Blender* (United States: Xulon Press, 2007), 36.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

the baggage needs to be “checked-in” before we get on the “marriage plane” so-to-speak. In other words, there is baggage that needs “checking-into” before the couple says “I do” at the marriage altar. There are a number of different pieces of baggage that need checking into before a couple can blend adequately.

The Baggage of Spiritual Issues

The priority in this life is one’s relationship to God. It is more important than your relationship with your mate, your children, or anyone else. Jesus, in Mark 8:34-35 sums up a discipleship relationship with Him by saying, “. . . If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it.” Any couple attempting to blend should openly discuss their personal relationships with God. This becomes increasingly important, especially if the couple is from different religious or denominational backgrounds. Hetrick adds, “Agreement in the spiritual department is vital, especially when children are involved. This is not simply a matter of if you will attend church and if so which one. Spiritual issues can undermine a marriage, and the enemy of our souls would like nothing better than to disrupt your marriage before it even begins.”⁶⁰ The most important spiritual issue for the couple to realize, understand, and grasp (assuming the couple are both professing believers), is the issue of their identity in Christ. Listen to the words Paul had for Titus in Titus 3:4-7, “But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness,

⁶⁰ Ibid., 39.

but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”

Allow those verses to sink in a moment . . . OK, did you grasp it? Our identity is in God through Christ. We are children of the King of the Universe! If every believing couple getting remarried would remember where their identity lies, it would strengthen them through the blending process. But what if one or both individuals in the couple relationship are not believers in Jesus Christ? God has some hope for them as well. He desires to adopt each and every one of us into His family and to give us a new nature. When a person becomes a Christian by receiving Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, he/she receives a new identity. Paul explained this new identity to the church at Corinth this way, “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.”⁶¹

The Baggage of Emotional Traumas

A second area that demands evaluation before a couple remarries involves the emotional baggage of the past for both individuals. Hetrick proposes several questions for discussion between the couple: “Have you fully recovered from your divorce? Have you survived any abuse, addictions, disasters or other traumas? How do you cope with painful emotions?”⁶² Ignoring emotional traumas could spell disaster and divorce for the couple attempting to remarry and blend. Let’s consider these questions more closely. In

⁶¹ 2 Cor. 5:17 NASU (New American Standard Updated Version).

⁶² Hetrick, 35.

her book, *The Stepfamily Survival Guide* Natalie Nichols Gillespie says, “After every divorce or the death of a spouse, it is crucial that the newly single parents take time alone to heal. They need time to grieve over their lost partner, time to be angry over the unfairness of life, time to learn to forgive themselves for their mistakes, time to comfort and reassure their children, time to get their relationship straightened out with the Lord, and time to allow Him to bathe them in His love and reassurance before they run into the waiting arms of anyone who will help share their load.”⁶³ Gillespie continues, “Taking time alone, even though you will inevitably experience tremendous feelings of loneliness, can help ensure that you will see clearly when you begin taking steps to build a new life with a new partner.”⁶⁴ When Gillespie suggests spending time alone after a divorce she does not mean isolating yourself from your family and friends. She means, however, alone from romantic or potentially romantic relationships. She makes several suggestions that will help an individual get through the emotional trauma of a divorce. “First, don’t jump on the dating merry-go-round too soon. Second, set aside specific portions of each day to spend time alone with the Lord, searching His Word daily for comfort, allowing Him to truly be your spouse by welcoming His love for you. Be still in His presence. Run to Him with your pain and anger, and let Him deal with it. Third, don’t withdraw from those who love you. Surround yourself with accountability partners, friends, and family who can let you cry on their shoulders, relieve some of your responsibilities, and give you a much needed break from time to time.”⁶⁵

⁶³ Gillespie, *The Stepfamily Survival Guide*, 31.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 33.

Many times individuals will enter a second marriage before they have adequately dealt with the emotional wounds and issues experienced in their previous relationship. When issues are not properly identified and dealt with in one relationship, they will resurface in a new relationship. No couple wants the reappearance of an old issue in their new relationship, thus hindering the blending process. For example, if anger was an issue in a past relationship, it will, most likely resurface in a new one if it hasn't been identified and properly resolved. "What are the symptoms of unresolved anger?" June Hunt, founder of *Hope for the Heart* ministries has some timely advice for those dealing with unresolved anger. "The emotion of anger is not a problem in itself, but anger becomes a problem when it is unresolved and, therefore, leads to bitterness and unforgiveness. One way you can choose to harbor anger is by refusing to face your feelings in a healthy way. This anger not only creates a rift between God and you, but also damages your body, destroys your emotions, and demoralizes your relationships. Whether you recognize it or not, unresolved anger will cause immeasurable physical, emotional, and spiritual problems in your life."⁶⁶ Paul told the Ephesian church,

BE ANGRY, AND yet DO NOT SIN; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity. Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear. Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ June Hunt, "Anger," *Hope for the Heart Biblical Counseling Library*, Vol. I (Dallas: Hope for the Heart, 2003), 6.

⁶⁷ Eph. 4:26-27, 29-32 NASU (New American Standard Updated Version).

Anytime we do not resolve anger between us and our spouse, we give the enemy, Satan, an opportunity. The word “opportunity” means a place, spot, or foothold in our relationship. The last thing any couple needs is for the devil to have any place in their marriage. Hunt goes on to say that unresolved anger in a person will produce some of the following physical, emotional, and spiritual symptoms:

1. Physical Symptoms: high blood pressure, headaches, heart disease, blurred vision, stomach disorders, insomnia, intestinal disorders, and compulsive eating.

2. Emotional Symptoms: anxiety, fear, bitterness, insecurity, compulsions, phobias, depression, and worry.

3. Spiritual Symptoms: a. Loss of Perspective – You allow your emotions to distort your thinking. b. Loss of Vision – You lose your sense of purpose in life. c. Loss of Freedom -- You become a prisoner of your circumstances. d. Loss of Energy -- You lose strength to serve God and others. e. Loss of Confidence -- You feel insecure in responding to difficulty. f. Loss of Faith -- You lack trust that God is working in your life. g. Loss of Sensitivity -- You cannot hear the Spirit of God speaking to your heart. h. Loss of Identity -- You become like the person toward whom you are bitter.⁶⁸

Unresolved anger produces bitterness. The author of Hebrews tells us what bitterness produces, “See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled.”⁶⁹ Hunt goes on to give some helpful counsel for resolving anger in a person’s past. She says, “Unresolved anger is a bed of hidden coals burning deep wounds into your relationship with God and with others. This powerful emotion robs your heart of peace and steals contentment from your spirit.”⁷⁰ She shares the following seven steps one can take to help resolve past unresolved anger.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Heb. 12:15 NASU (New American Standard Updated Version).

⁷⁰ Hunt, Anger, 10.

- 1. Realize your inappropriate anger**—Be willing to admit that you have unresolved anger. Ask God to reveal the buried anger in your heart. Seek to determine the primary reasons for your past anger. Talk out your anger with God and with a friend or counselor, Proverbs 21:2.
- 2. Revisit Your Root Feelings**—Did you feel hurt (rejected, betrayed, unloved, ignored)? Did you feel treated unjustly (cheated, wronged, maligned, attacked)? Did you feel fearful (threatened, insecure, out-of-control, powerless)? Did you feel frustrated (inadequate, inferior, hindered, controlled)? Ps 139:23-24.
- 3. Receive God's Love**—Meditate on and memorize Scripture revealing God's love for you: Jer 31:3; Ps 32:10; Lam 3:22-23; Ps 89:1; Ps 13:5-6; Ps 103:17. Read five psalms daily for one month. Rest in the acceptance of God, not in the acceptance of others. Rely on the Lord to meet your inner needs for love, for significance, and for security, 1 John 3:1.
- 4. Release Your Rights**—Confess that harboring anger in your heart is sin. Give your desire for revenge to God. Refuse to hold on to your past hurts by releasing them to God. Pray for God to work in the life of the one who has wronged you and to change your heart toward that person. Release the one who hurt you into the hands of God—forgive as God forgave you! Col 3:13.
- 5. Rejoice in God's Purpose**—Thank God for the ways He will use this trial in your life. Know that God can use your resolved anger for your good and for the good of those around you. Praise God for His commitment to use all the circumstances in your life to develop Christ's character within you. Rom 8:28-29.
- 6. Restore the Relationship, When Appropriate**—Even if reconciliation is not appropriate (after adultery) or not possible (after a death), you must always confess your own sin. Realize that when someone sins against you and you hold on to anger because of that offense, you are sinning against that individual. Confess the anger in your heart and ask the person to forgive you. Write out the confession first to get the wording correct: "I realize I've been wrong in holding on to my anger against you. I'm deeply sorry. Will you forgive me?" Be sure the confession is free of anger and accusatory statements. Matt 5:21-24.
- 7. Reflect Christ's Love**—Actively seek to reflect the love of God toward the person who hurt you. Pray in your heart . . . "Lord, help me to submit to Your control." "Lord, I want Your mind to direct my mind." "Lord, reflect Your attitudes in my actions." "Lord, guide my words to express Your love." John 13:34-35.⁷¹

Another example of emotional trauma that some experience leading up to, during, and after divorce is the painful emotion of depression. Every divorce is a loss and whenever we suffer a loss in our lives we need time to grieve over that loss. Some individuals after going through a divorce, however, are so overwhelmed by grief that it

⁷¹ Hunt, Anger, 10.

drives them into depression. Entering another marriage before addressing one's depression could be deadly to the new relationship. Once again, June Hunt gives some valuable insight for "checking in-to" this baggage called depression. Hunt says, "Depression literally means a condition of being "pressed down" to a lower position (as in a footprint). Depression can refer to a state of decline and reduced activity (as in an "economic depression"). Depression can describe an emotional heaviness that weighs down the heart. The apostle Paul used the Greek word *bareo*, which means "pressed or weighed down," to describe the immense emotional pressure and severe hardships that he and Timothy suffered at the hands of those who opposed Christ.⁷² Note what Paul said to the Corinthian believers, "For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we **despaired even of life**; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead."⁷³ Hunt suggests three steps people can take to release the "baggage" of depression in their own lives.

Step One: Memorize a Key Verse, Psalm 27:13, "I would have despaired unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living," NASU. When you are walking through the valley of the shadow of depression, recall God's heart and repeat this truth to yourself each day.

Step Two: Read and Reread a Key Passage, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24. While we can't choose what we inherit genetically, we can choose what we dwell on cognitively. In the medical world, brain scans of those suffering with depression often show marked improvement when words of hope, affirmation, and purpose are continually reinforced. In this respect, life is a series of choices. You can choose today to put the Word of God into action. Choose to write down and continue to

⁷² Hunt, "Depression," *Hope for the Heart Biblical Counseling Library*, Vol. II (Dallas: Hope for the Heart, 2003), 1.

⁷³ 2 Cor. 1:8-9 NASU (New American Standard Updated Version).

focus on the positives in your life.—1 Thess 5:16. Choose to talk to God about everything.—1 Thess 5:17. Choose to thank God for what you are learning right now.—1 Thess 5:18. Choose to change when God's Spirit convicts you to change.—1 Thess 5:19. Choose to take God's Word seriously.—1 Thess 5:20. Choose to ask, "Is this right in God's sight?"—1 Thess 5:21. Choose to do right, even when you are tempted to do wrong.—1 Thess 5:21. Choose to turn immediately from temptation.—1 Thess 5:22. Choose to see how God has "set you apart" (sanctified you) to be what He intended you to be.—1 Thess 5:23. Choose to commit your whole being to doing what God created you to do.—1 Thess 5:23. Choose to rely on God's power to do what you are called to do.—1 Thess 5:24.

Step Three: Take Off the Masks. As we go through painful events in our lives, we can "sweep them under the rug" and ignore them. However, in doing so, we fail to grieve over our hurts and losses. By "masking" our depression, we try to protect our hearts and hide who we really are and what we don't want to face. But this kind of masquerade blocks our maturity and our ability to have intimacy with God and others. Don't ever fear admitting the truth about your life directly to God. Allow Him to help you see the reality of your pain. He will reveal how He has been working through your pain to give you wisdom about life and true depths of understanding. As David said to God, 'Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being, And in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom,' (Ps 51:6 NASU).⁷⁴

A third emotional trauma that some experience and can easily take, like baggage, into a new marriage is that of abuse. When one hears the word "abuse" the most common picture is of a husband beating his wife—physical abuse. June Hunt reminds us, "While abusive acts are committed by both husbands and wives, in cases of domestic violence, approximately 95% of the victims are women."⁷⁵ A lot of abuse in relationships and marriages is nonphysical. The unwritten goal of nonphysical abuse is domination and control. The list of nonphysical abuses includes emotional, psychological, social, and economic abuse. A brief examination of each type of nonphysical abuse is in order.

⁷⁴ Hunt, *Depression*, 4-5.

⁷⁵ Hunt, "Wife Abuse," *Hope for the Heart Biblical Counseling Library*, Vol. IV (Dallas: Hope for the Heart, 2003), 1.

Author Mary Susan Miller in her book, *No Visible Wounds*, sheds some light on how emotional abuse begins. “A man may begin with a complaint and slide into constant criticizing and name-calling before she even senses a problem. He may embarrass her in public by putting her down or screaming. He may accuse her of having lovers and begin watching her every move, stalking her when she meets a friend. He may walk away when she tries to talk to him or pout and not speak to her for days at a time. He may throw accusations and curses at her parents and other relatives with whom she is close. He may forbid her to make decisions or offer an opinion in family matters and even in her own affairs.”⁷⁶ Emotionally abused women live in a state of constant fear never knowing what their partner is going to do next. Miller concludes, “Emotional battering, then, runs the gamut from a steady grinding down of a woman to emotional trauma. While her bones are never broken, her flesh never bruised, her blood never spilled, she is wounded nonetheless.”⁷⁷

A second type of nonphysical abuse is psychological. This type of abuse involves, according to Miller, a form of “*Gaslighting*—the planned process of steadily convincing someone she is crazy.”⁷⁸ Miller continues, “Gaslighting . . . is a subtle way to corrode the foundations of logic on which a person has learned to make decisions and take action.”⁷⁹ When a partner uses “gaslighting” on their spouse they play mind games with them like

⁷⁶ Mary Susan Miller, *No Visible Wounds* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), 25.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

saying they called when they didn't, or calling them and then denying they did. Another form of psychological abuse is the use of brainwashing. Miller defines brainwashing as "the method by which a captor, through coercive control, bends the mind of his captives to his will."⁸⁰

The third type of nonphysical abuse is social abuse. This type of abuse entails isolating one from family and friends. Social abuse can also escalate to verbal depreciation of the partner's family and friends. Another sign of social abuse is not allowing the partner to get a job. The abuser disallows working under the guise of protection or caretaking. Some abusers even go to the point of not allowing their spouse to go to school. Miller explains, "One reason is that it affords her an opportunity to make friends and exchange ideas that break down the wall of isolation her husband has built. Another reason is that it offers her a way over the wall: with the acquiring of skills, she becomes capable of getting a job and supporting herself and her children. Education means independence, a state her abuser will not allow."⁸¹ The most emotionally traumatic tool, however, in the arsenal of the social abuser is that of locking her out—or in according to Miller. She puts it this way, "Perhaps the strongest weapon of isolation a social abuser has at hand—and *in* his hand—is a key. With a key a man can lock a woman out of the house and frequently does if she has broken a rule and visited friends or family. With a key an abuser can also lock her *in* the house or in her bedroom or in the

⁸⁰ Ibid., 39.

⁸¹ Ibid., 59-60.

bathroom or in a closet, and sometimes the lock with which he imprisons her is not tangible—a threat to be carried out should she dare go out.”⁸²

The final type of nonphysical abuse is economic abuse. As the name infers, economic abuse has to do with withholding funds from the partner to keep her under the abuser’s domination and control. Miller explains, “The economic abuser typically doles out money in amounts so small that the woman is forced, like a child, to ask for more. If he grants it, his condescension humiliates her; if he refuses, his stinginess leaves her in need. In contrast to the social abuser, the economic abuser will often “insist that their wife take a job to bring in extra money for their bank account.”⁸³ Miller continues, “An economically abusive man often uses money as a threat. He doesn’t control her through fear of losing her children or receiving a beating; he doesn’t have to. Just letting her know that at any moment he can deprive her of a home and food and clothes keep her in willing submission as an alternative to the streets.”⁸⁴ Verbal abuse is the umbrella that overshadows emotional, psychological, social, and economic abuse. Can one have victory over these forms of verbal abuse? Granted, no magic dust will defuse the dynamic, but with hard consistent work, progress can be made, change can occur, and even victory can be achieved. Once again, June Hunt suggests several steps that are essential to victory in these areas of abuse.

Taking the Following Seven Steps is Essential to Victory:
 #1 – Face the Problem.
 Decide to identify any verbal abuse. Does the other person . . .

⁸² Ibid., 61.

⁸³ Ibid., 72.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 73.

- say things that seem designed to make you feel guilty?
- always claim to be right?
- put you down in humorous or sarcastic ways?
- become your judge and jury?
- bring up the past over and over?

Decide to communicate your position to the abuser.

Decide that you are no longer going to tolerate the abusive behavior.

Decide that you will look at and resolve your own anger from past or present verbal abuse. Ps 139:23-24

#2 -- Understand the Source of the Problem.

Know that many verbal abusers were themselves abused or neglected in one way or another as children. (Some, however, were not abused as children and simply learned abusive behavior later in life.)

Know that verbal abusers lack sympathy and feel justified in their abuse.

Know that uncontrolled outbursts of anger can be triggered by depression, stress, anxiety, worry, frustration, or insecurity.

Know that you are not the cause of the abuse (although you will be blamed).

Prov 18:15

#3 -- Confront the Problem.

Communicate an attitude of caring.

— "I want you to know that I care about you."

Communicate that you have been deeply hurt by the abusive behavior.

— "I feel deeply hurt by your tone of voice when you talk to me."

Communicate your desire for a positive relationship, but make it clear that you will no longer tolerate verbal attacks.

— "I want to support you, but I will no longer tolerate abusive behavior from you."

Communicate truth without condemning.

— "I want our relationship to continue, but if you choose to continue belittling me, I will know that you don't value me, and I will leave." Prov 16:21

#4 -- Take Responsibility for Yourself.

Resist becoming defensive.

Resist retreating into a shell.

Resist the familiar "victim-martyr" role.

Resist retaliation. Rom 12:17-18

#5 -- View the Abusive Person from God's Perspective.

See the person as someone for whom Christ died.

See the person as having God-given worth.

See the person as capable of being changed by Christ.

See the person as having legitimate God-given needs that He is willing to meet.

Phil 4:19

#6 -- Love Unconditionally.

Love is not a feeling, but a commitment to do what is right.

Love looks for ways to meet the needs of another.

Love seeks to do what is in the best interests of another.

Love says, "I care enough about our relationship to work to make it a positive one."

Prov 10:12

#7 -- Practice a Powerful Prayer Life.

Remember that God cares about both of you more than you care about each other.

Remember that prayer is the surest path to healing and wholeness.

Remember that you need to pray for healing for both you and your abuser.

Remember to thank God for all that He is teaching you in the midst of this trying time. 1 Thess 5:17-18⁸⁵

Many who have experienced one or more of these nonphysical abuses have also experienced physical abuse. June Hunt defines physical abuse as follows: “Physical abuse involves any use of size, strength, or presence to control or hurt someone.”⁸⁶ Physical abuse is often preceded by verbal threats of physical harm. Such was the case of one young couple who had just gotten married and moved back to his home state of Arkansas. The couple had not been married long when the emotional and verbal abuse began. The first occasion of him threatening her verbally with physical harm occurred when they were driving from his folk’s home in one town to their home several hours away in another town. The conversation between them got tense and escalated with him finally crying out, “I am going to kill both of us!” As they were traveling on the interstate he began driving at a high rate of speed and recklessly. Then suddenly, and without any warning, he slammed on the brakes while they were traveling approximately ninety miles per hour. All of this was done in an attempt to dominate and control her by fear. To make matters even worse, his young wife was pregnant and due to deliver their first child within three months. This was her first introduction to his abusive ways. As the days and weeks passed the emotional and verbal abuse continued. He socially abused

⁸⁵ June Hunt, “Verbal & Emotional Abuse,” *Hope for the Heart Biblical Counseling Library*, Vol. IV (Dallas: Hope for the Heart, 2006), 1.

⁸⁶ Hunt, *Wife Abuse*, 3.

her by taking her keys and wallet so she couldn't go any where. Her life was a textbook example of how abuse starts, escalates, and finally explodes into physical abuse. The young man finally got so angry one day that he shook and screamed in the face of their infant child and punched her in the face with his fist. With the help of her parents, this young woman and her baby were able to get away from that dangerously abusive situation, but many women are not as fortunate.

Like this woman, thousands of women go through these various stages of abuse. June Hunt answers the question, "What is the cycle of abuse?" She explains, "Like a volcano, abuse doesn't start with a sudden outburst of physical force, but rather with intense internal pressure in need of an outlet. Abusive patterns develop in three stages that are cyclical, becoming increasingly violent. Family members who fall victim to these patterns feel traumatized by the mere anticipation of a violent eruption.

Unfortunately, the escalating nature of abuse is rarely curbed without intervention and adequate accountability."⁸⁷

1. Agitated Stage – An environment of tension and anxiety marks the beginning phase of abuse. The husband communicates his dissatisfaction over something small and blames his wife. Through verbal and emotional abuse, a husband maintains passive psychological control over his wife and creates fear of impending disaster. During this stage many women buy into the lies spoken to them and accept responsibility for their husbands' unhappiness. Then they try to adjust their own behavior in an effort to please their husbands and relieve the tension in their homes. Prov. 13:2
2. Acute Stage – In this phase, the pressure becomes so intense that the abuser erupts and gives full vent to his rage. When violent behavior is unleashed, family members, outsiders, or police are often called upon to diffuse the rage. This acute stage of aggressive behavior doesn't last long, but over time these overpowering outbursts tend to become more frequent and more dangerous. Prov. 29:22
3. Apologetic Stage – During this "honeymoon phase," the abuser becomes contrite, and the wife feels soothed by her husband's loving actions. With renewed

⁸⁷ Ibid.

hope for change and her deep desire to have a successful marriage, she views his overtures as apologies and extends forgiveness. But, as with all honeymoons, they don't last, and the cycle of anger occurs again . . . and again. Prov. 27:12. This temporary honeymoon phase is characterized by dramatic transformation from being villainous to virtuous. This transformation is demonstrated by a number of the following: Apologetics, bargaining, remorse, crying penitence, romance, gifts, peacemaking, promises, helpfulness, accepting responsibility, and pleading.⁸⁸

The Baggage of Sexual Issues

Romance and sex the second time around is not always easier than the sexual intimacy experienced in a first marriage. If one of the partners had sexual trauma or abuse in a previous relationship it could negatively affect her ability to be sexually intimate with their new spouse. For most men, there is nothing that is more frustrating in marriage than sexual issues. In their book, *When Victims Marry*, Don and Jan Frank say, "When someone has been a victim of sexual abuse, it is often difficult to separate the past from the present. The victim of sexual abuse begins to believe many lies about herself as a result of the abuse. Some of these lies are centered around her value as a person. The victim often feels her only value is determined by her sexuality."⁸⁹ If there are sexual issues in a second marriage, they must be resolved, but how does one adequately address these issues? First, the couple needs to start with a clear understanding that men and women are wired differently by God. God did this so that we would complement each other in the marriage relationship. Women respond better sexually when an emotional connection has been made first. Men, on the other hand, tend to make an emotional connection during sexual intimacy. That's how affairs take place. The woman makes an

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Don and Jan Frank, *When Victims Marry* (Grand Rapids: Dickinson Press, 1990), 90.

emotional connection with a co-worker that she has been longing for with her spouse, but for whatever reason, he has shut down emotionally. Don and Jan have some timely advice for couples who are struggling with sexual intimacy as a result of past sexual issues.

“To the men . . . learn to develop intimacy outside the bedroom. How is that done? By being willing to share your feelings with your wife. Sit down at the kitchen table and talk to her about things like where you want to be in your career in five years. Tell her about your childhood; hug her when she’s cooking dinner—no strings attached—and pray with her, sharing your innermost desires; ask her what she cares about most deeply; be willing to spend an evening caressing and kissing—agree in advance that that’s as far as it goes. As you invest in your relationship by sharing yourself, you will begin to see a response. A woman who has been sexually abused needs first of all to feel safe. She needs to know that she can trust you, that you love her for who she is, and that she has a choice with regard to sexual intimacy. If she feels she has no choice, watch out! Be careful about making demands in the name of “submission.”⁹⁰

A key verse here for the men to remember is, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her.”⁹¹ The Franks continue in their book to suggest ten steps to recovery in this area of sexual issues in marriage.

Step 1: Face the Problem: This is the discovery step. It is looking at ourselves truthfully. It is self-examination with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Ask yourself the list of questions listed on page 108.

Step 2: Recount the Incident: If a childhood memory came to your mind as you examined yourself, you may need to relate it. Retelling hurtful incidents does not change what has occurred, but does provide for an emotional release. This step is similar to a grief process. See Nehemiah 2. When you recount the incidents the Holy Spirit brings to your mind, try to detail them as much as you can. It is important that this is done only with a person who will offer support and understanding. I usually recommend the detailed recounting be done with persons of the same sex. Recounting is the initial step of “removing the debris.” For total removal to be completed there must be a connection of the emotions.

Step 3: Experience the Feelings: This is the second step in removing the debris. It

⁹⁰ Ibid., 97-98.

⁹¹ Eph. 5:25 NASU (New American Standard Updated Version).

is important that you realize God made you an emotional being. He does not want our emotions to totally rule our lives, but He does want us to express them appropriately. When we continue to suppress intense feelings and hold them in, they often work their way out into our behavior or into our body. The most common example is an ulcer. This step is also part of the grieving process. Through the grieving process, we release emotions that have occupied valuable space in our hearts.

Step 4: Establish Responsibility: If God has brought to your heart a specific incident, you need to look at that event objectively in order to establish proper accountability. If you have a history of abuse, you are prone to react in one of two different ways: (1) You assume false responsibility and take on all the guilt for what has occurred; or (2) you push out all responsibility and project all blame onto others. Most victims of abuse have carried their offenders' guilt for so long that it is difficult for them to assume proper responsibility in their everyday adult life. If you were abused as a child, you need to place the responsibility on the offender. Establishing responsibility does not mean we are justified in taking vengeance. It does mean we sort out where the accountability lies.

Step 5: Trace Behavioral Difficulties/Symptoms: What does it mean to trace problem areas in our lives? It means we begin to look at (*face*) our current patterns, particularly those that involve our interpersonal relationships, and *identify* the undesirable characteristics that predominate. After we identify those behavioral patterns we wish to change, we *trace* them back to when and where they originated in our lives. Next, we set about by a disciplined approach to *erase* those unhealthy and damaging patterns. Finally, we seek God's wisdom and empowering to *replace* those destructive patterns by implementing more healthy ones.

Step 6: Observe Others/Educate Yourself: It is through this step we attempt to involve others in the process of our healing. It may be necessary for you to seek help as you and your spouse examine patterns from your background. The objectivity of a specialized counselor or support group can speed the recovery process.

Step 7: Confront the Aggressor: Confrontation is not always appropriate. If it is to occur, it should be surrounded by a great deal of prayer and seeking God's timing. Bringing these issues into the light should be done with the motive of reconciliation. Confrontation is a way to put responsibility in the hands of the rightful owners. When confrontation is indicated, it is helpful to consult an objective third party and to practice the confrontation prior to a face-to-face meeting with the offender. This often provides important feedback that can prevent a premature confrontation, or it can help you prepare for possible responses from the offender. Note 1 John 1:7.

Step 8: Acknowledge Forgiveness: Forgiveness is a vital part of the healing process, but it is not the only part. Before we can truly extend forgiveness to another person, we must first acknowledge that an injury has occurred and that we have experienced pain from that injury. It is in recognizing that pain and working through it that forgiveness becomes a priceless gift offered to the one who has hurt us. By acknowledging forgiveness we are not condoning the actions of the offender. We are, however, acknowledging the complete work of Christ's blood on

the cross to forgive anyone and everyone.

Step 9: Rebuild Self-Image and Relationships: In Romans 8:29 we are told we are “being conformed to the image of His Son.” When we have grown up with a faulty foundation or have experienced painful events that have scarred us emotionally, we need to be rebuilt. This rebuilding is best accomplished by internalizing the Word of God. Learning to integrate the Word of God and allow the Holy Spirit to touch and heal the broken places in one’s life cannot be minimized. God’s Word is the “re-bar” that makes the foundation firm.

Step 10: Express Concern/Empathize with Others: This step provides hope. God allows us to comfort others with the comfort we have received from Him. Note 2 Corinthians 1:4. God is able to redeem any situation in our lives if we are willing to place it all in His hands.⁹²

The Baggage of Conflict Resolution

A final piece of baggage that deserves “checking in” to would be that of conflict resolution styles. The couple should reveal and discuss how each has handled conflict in their personal life and previous relationships. Did either have a tendency to numb their emotions with food, drugs, or alcohol? These issues are critical to the health of the couple relationship. Remember, if the couple relationship is not strong, the blending process will be hampered, and could very easily fail. How an individual resolves conflict is important; but how a couple resolves conflict is doubly important. The survival of the new step family depends on resolving conflicts efficiently and in way that promotes a healthy couple relationship. The question is not, “If conflicts arise?” rather, the question is “**When** conflicts arise, how will we address them?” Although it is not the purpose of this thesis to cover all the conflicts couples have in marriage, (neither time nor space would allow that), according to John Gottman, author of *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, the two “marital hotspots are two conflicts that occur so frequently they merit special

⁹² Frank, 108-116.

mention: how frequently the couple has sex and who does more housework.”⁹³ Whether one is talking about a first marriage or a subsequent marriage, these two conflicts seem to top the list. So, principles, techniques, and strategies for addressing these two conflicts can most certainly be applied to the other conflicts couple’s experience. The Apostle Paul told the church at Rome, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.”⁹⁴ When there is conflict in a marriage the peace is gone. Resolving conflicts is a two-way street and takes both individuals to participate in the resolving process. June Hunt has some insight into conflict resolution and says, “Each one of us begins to develop a style of handling conflict at an early age. Your personal way of fighting evolves out of your natural instincts, your personality and your early family dynamics. Many of us are unable to defuse conflict because we are repeating the extreme patterns of childhood . . . attacking and confrontational or evasive and avoiding. Either strategy fails to appropriate the grace that is available to a child of God.”⁹⁵ The writer of Hebrews says, “See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled.”⁹⁶ When conflicts are not resolved properly, bitterness can grow and can destroy a couple’s relationship. Hunt continues, “We are all created to be different! God has uniquely designed each one of us with a different set of personality traits, preferences, motivations, skills, desires and ways of responding. For example, how would you describe a glass that is filled halfway with

⁹³ Gottman, 154.

⁹⁴ Rom. 12:18 NASU (New American Standard Updated Version).

⁹⁵ Hunt, Conflict Resolution.

⁹⁶ Heb. 12:15 NASU (New American Standard Updated Version).

water? Is the glass half empty, or do you see a glass that is half full? Both responses are correct, yet conflicts develop when your natural way of seeing things differs with that of another.”⁹⁷ Hunt continues by suggesting seven principles to apply when resolving conflicts:

- #1 – **Humility**—Don’t take advantage of a higher position. Philemon 8-9
- #2 – **Integrity** —Be absolutely honest about the problems.—Philemon 10-11
- #3 – **Vulnerability** — Share your heart feelings.—Philemon 12-13
- #4 – **Submission** —Don't force an action not under your control.—Philemon 14
- #5 – **Optimism** —Expect the best of another.—Philemon 14
- #6 – **Faith** —Remember the sovereign hand of God.—Philemon 15-16
- #7 – **Exhortation** —Choose your words carefully.—Philemon 21⁹⁸

Dr. David Olson, President of Life Innovations, Inc. and developer of “Ten Steps for Resolving Couple Conflict” says, “Every couple has differences and disagreements. But healthy couples find ways to resolve marital disputes without turning them into marital wars. Couples who accept and appreciate the fact that their partner has independent opinions tend to reach successful and satisfying resolutions.”⁹⁹ Olson suggests the following ten steps in helping couples resolve conflicts within their marriage:

1. Set a time and place for discussion.
2. Define the problem or issue or disagreement.
3. How do you each contribute to the problem?
4. List past attempts to resolve the issue that was not successful.
5. Brainstorm. List all possible solutions.
6. Discuss and evaluate these possible solutions.
7. Agree on one solution to try.
8. Agree on how each individual will work toward this solution.

⁹⁷ Hunt, Conflict Resolution.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ David H. Olson, Ph.D. *Prepare/Enrich*, (Minneapolis: Life Innovations, Inc., 2002), 12.

9. Set up another meeting. Discuss your progress.
10. Reward each other as you each contribute toward the solution.¹⁰⁰

Olson concludes, “When you have issues that are ongoing, use this Ten Step approach to deal with them. The exercise may boost your success in ending issues that resist resolution.”¹⁰¹

The couple who is serious about their new relationship surviving will be willing to help each other with these different pieces of “baggage”. Even though the honeymoon in a second or subsequent marriage may be over, a couple can still bind together to build a strong, growing, and lasting marriage with each other. The couple relationship is the first and most important element to blend properly in the step family. The strength of the blended family will be determined by the strength of the couple relationship.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

CHAPTER III -- "RIDING THE ROLLERCOASTER"

STEP PARENTING

The increase to over sixty percent of second and subsequent marriages ending in divorce can be partially attributed to the “step parenting rollercoaster” individuals find themselves on after the wedding bells have become silent and day to day living ensues. The analogy of a rollercoaster is very accurate as there are many ups and downs in the relationship between step parents and their new step children. What kind of relationship should a step parent attempt to develop with his/her step children? Should one try to replace the biological parent, or just cultivate a friendship with the stepchildren? Sad to say, many step parents do not attempt any kind of relationship with their step children. As was stated earlier in this thesis, leading authority on stepfamily issues, Ron Deal says, “Parenting in stepfamilies is a two, three, or four-person (sometimes more!) dance. Parent-stepparent harmony is the crux of successful parenting within your home. The two most critical relationships in any stepfamily home are the marriage (couple relationship) and the stepparent-stepchildren relationships.”¹⁰² If you find yourself in the new found position as stepparent, maybe you are asking questions like, “Where do I start?” or “How can I build a healthy relationship with my step children?” and “Who disciplines who?”

¹⁰² Ron Deal, “Smart Stepparenting,” *n.d.*, <http://www.focusonyourchild.com/relation/art1/A0000342.html>.

The first important step for the stepparent is to get the lay of the land regarding his/her step children. Access the situation. Getting to know each step child and his/her history is imperative. Knowing their past, what they have been through including losses, hurts, disappointments, possible abuse, emotional scars and relationship with the biological parent they no longer are living with is critical for the step parent's understanding of the child's attitude, actions, and reactions. Step two is to formulate realistic expectations. One cannot expect acceptance and change overnight as the blending process is just that, "a process." The stepparent must give the step children time to adjust and accept the changes of their new surroundings. In his article, *How to Build Healthy Relationships With Your Stepchild*, Ron Deal makes the following suggestions to help accomplish these first two steps:

- 1. Give yourself time to develop a workable relationship.** Realize that love and caring takes time to develop, especially with pre-adolescent and adolescent children. Some research suggests that children under the age of five will bond with a stepparent within one to two years. However, older children-teenagers in particular-may take as many years as they are old when the remarriage takes place.
- 2. Children's loyalty to their biological parents may interfere with their acceptance of you.** Children are often emotionally torn when they enjoy a stepparent. The fear that liking you somehow hurts their non-custodial, biological, parent is common. The ensuing guilt they experience may lead to disobedient behavior and a closed heart. In order to help stepchildren deal with this struggle: Allow children to keep their loyalties and encourage contact with biological parents. Never criticize their biological parent, as it will sabotage the children's opinion of you. Don't try to replace an uninvolved or deceased biological parent. Consider yourself an added parent figure in the child's life—be yourself.
- 3. The cardinal rule for stepparent-stepchild relationships is this: Let the children set their pace for their relationship with you.** If your stepchildren are open to you and seem to want physical affection from you, don't leave them disappointed. If, however, they remain aloof and cautious, don't force yourself on them. Respect their boundaries, for it often represents their confusion over the new relationship and their loss from the past.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Ron Deal, "How to Build a Healthy Relationship With Your Stepchild," *n.d.*, <http://successfulstepfamilies.com/view/5>.

Deal continues by giving three suggestions for helping build relationships with one's stepchildren.

“Early on, monitor your stepchildren’s activities. Know what they are doing at school, church, and in extracurricular activities, and make it your aim to be a part. Second, throughout the first year of remarriage, stepparents should be involved with stepchildren when another family member can be present. This ‘group’ family activity reduces the anxiety children feel with one-on-one time with a stepparent. Third, share your talents, skills, and interest with the child and become curious about theirs. These shared interests become points of connection that strengthen trust between stepparent and stepchild. Sharing the Lord through dialogue, music, or church activity is another tremendous source of connection.”¹⁰⁴

It is interesting to note that when the God of the universe decided to send His only begotten Son into this world, He decided to have Him raised by a stepfather. We often forget that Joseph was Jesus’ step dad. One does not often remember that Jesus, as a stepchild was raised in a blended family. All that to say this, God loves stepparents and the step family. According to the gospel writer Luke, it appears that Jesus’ step family was pretty healthy as he says, “The Child (*Jesus*) continued to grow and become strong, increasing in wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him.”¹⁰⁵ He concludes in verse 52 of the same chapter, “And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.”¹⁰⁶ As these verses clearly indicate, the blended family and step parenting can be abundantly blessed by God.

Ron Deal, in his article “The Effective Stepfather: A Check-List to Live By,” gives eight tools that should be in every stepfather’s tool box.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Luke 2:40 NASU (New American Standard Updated Version).

¹⁰⁶ Luke 2:52 NASU (New American Standard Updated Version).

1. Initially Provide In-direct Leadership. There are two kinds of influence (or power) in relationships: 1) positional power and 2) relational power. Initially as a stepfather you have positional power because you are an adult in the house who is married to the children's mother. As your relationship with the children grows, often over a period of years, you gain relational power because they now care about you personally. In the beginning, when limited to positional power, effective stepfathers provide in-direct leadership in their home by leading through their wife who holds a great deal of relational power with their children.

2. Express Your Commitment. Articulate your commitment to your stepchildren's mother. Keep in mind, however, that early on this won't necessarily be considered a positive by your stepchildren. In fact, they may be threatened by it. Children who hold a strong fantasy that their parents will reconcile can find your commitment a barrier to life as they would have it. Additionally, mom's remarriage (whether following a death or divorce) is often perceived as another loss to children, not a gain (as you see it).

3. Communicate Your Role. Children need to hear that you know that you're not their dad and won't try to take his place. Communicating that same understanding to their father is also very helpful to him; hopefully this will help him to not fear our involvement with his kids. Finally, tell your step kids that you are looking forward to your growing relationship and that you know how awkward that can be for the child. Let them know that if they feel stuck between you and their dad, they can make you aware of it and it won't hurt your feelings.

4. Be a Spiritual Leader. Many stepfathers discover that sharing faith matters is, in addition to spiritual training for the child, a good way to connect emotionally. Processing the moral content of a TV program or 'thinking out loud' about your decision not to spend money on a bigger fishing boat helps children see your character and learn important spiritual values at the same time.

5. Be Approachable. Part of being approachable and accessible to stepchildren is knowing that not everything is about you. In fact, most of a kid's negative reactions to stepparents are really about the child's losses (stepparents just happen to be the easy target for a child's heartache). Show yourself not easily offended and able to deal with their emotional ups and downs. This will make it more likely that they see you as someone they can trust.

6. Show Appreciation. If you want to win someone's heart, give them a thousand compliments (even when they aren't asking for it). Showing appreciation is the quickest way to build someone up and help them to feel comfortable in your presence. Words of affirmation go along way to engendering safety and closeness.

7. Spend Time Together. Find time to be with your stepchildren, but do so with wisdom. If a child is not welcoming of your presence, join their life at a distance. This means taking them to their soccer game and cheering from the sidelines, but not being too much of a coach. It also means knowing what's important to them and gently inquiring with interest: "You studied for three hours last night for that science exam. How did it go?" Also, if you say you are going to be somewhere, be there. Don't disappoint a child who is deciding whether to let you in their heart or not. Focused time will deepen the trust and emotional bond in your relationship.

8. Manage Stress and Your Anger. Children are quick to forgive biological

parents when they make mistakes (and we all do). But they aren't as forgiving of stepparents. When stress and conflict arise (and they will!) make sure you manage yourself well. The child's assessment of your character will not include how they contributed to the conflict, even if they intentionally "pushed you." All they will see is an angry person. Keep in mind that one task for children are to determine whether loving their stepfather is worth the risk. Give them every reason to believe it is. This, of course, does not mean that you can't ever get angry or stressed. But it does mean that you manage your emotions and not overreact toward the child or their mother. Communicate through your actions that it is safe for the child to be vulnerable around you and you'll notice them softening with time.¹⁰⁷

The first two steps mentioned up to this point have to do with the stepparent and what he/she needs to do to aid the blending process in their new family. The third step that must be accomplished if the blending process is to be successful is for the biological parent to accept his/her new spouse as the parent to his/her children. This important step is sometimes harder to take than one might think. When an individual remarries they often do so with someone who is quite different than their previous partner. It is common for one to marry someone who is the polar opposite to their previous spouse in areas like appearance, personality, vocation, and even likes and dislikes. The pain of the previous relationship drives them to seek someone that in no way reminds them of their former spouse. Such was the case with Margaret Broersma, author of the article *Accepting My New Spouse as a Parent to My Children*. Broersma said this about her second husband, "Rog is quite different from their birthfather. During the first year of our blended family, before Rog and I had time to work out the differences between us, he would sometimes reprimand my sons for something that had not been wrong before. Or perhaps he would

¹⁰⁷ Ron Deal, "The Effective Stepfather: A Check-List to Live By," *n.d.*, <http://www.successfulstepfamilies.com/view/321>.

allow something that had previously been discouraged.”¹⁰⁸ To illustrate the damage that can be caused when the biological parent does not accept his/her spouse as the parent of his/her children Broersma continues,

“When these situations occurred, my children and I would give each other a ‘look,’ conspirators against his ‘not understanding us.’ As long as I continued to do this, the boys continued to resent and disrespect their stepfather and his authority in our home. But when I began to trust God and acknowledge to myself that this new man was just as much a part of God’s plan for the character development of my children as I was, then I could encourage them to respect his wishes and obey him. When I trusted my children to God and also trusted them to their stepfather, harmony in our home increased one hundred percent. At the same time my husband was learning to trust me to be the mother of his daughters.”¹⁰⁹

The initial response of children toward their stepparent is to hate them because they are not like their birthparent. If the biological parent, however, accepts and supports the new stepparent as the parent of his/her children, then hatred most often transitions to respect, and finally evolves into love.

Step parenting and Discipline

One of the crucial issues that perplex many blended couples is this, “who disciplines who in our new family?” David’s son, Solomon said, “A wise son accepts his father’s discipline, but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke.”¹¹⁰ The key mentioned here to accepting discipline is wisdom, and that particular quality is often missing in the heart of a child. Solomon confirmed this when he said, “Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a

¹⁰⁸ Margaret Broersma, “Accepting My New Spouse as a Parent to My Children,” *n.d.*, <http://www.successfulstepfamilies.com/view/86>.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Prov. 13:1 NASB (New American Standard Bible).

child”¹¹¹ Since most children have foolishness rather than wisdom in their hearts, how can a stepparent effectively participate in the vital matter of discipline in the blended family? First, a definition of the term “discipline” is in order. What is discipline? Jeannette Lofas says, “Discipline means guidance. It comes from the term *disciple*. Discipline says, ‘I Love You.’ The children who don’t get guidance, teaching, and discipline are the children who aren’t loved.”¹¹² Since discipline involves correction, one could define it as “corrective guidance.” With that in mind, how can a stepparent do their part to correctively guide his/her new step children? Author Ron Deal, in his chapter, *Smart Step Four: STEP in Line* tells us that unwise stepparents rush into authoritative parenting, while wise stepparents grow into their role. To aid stepparents in transitioning into a disciplinary role Deal suggests three positive relationship styles.

1. The “baby-sitter” role: Baby sitters have power to manage children only if parents give them power. Biological parents who have passed power to the stepparent and back it up with action will generally find their children to be cooperative with the stepparent. Parents and stepparents negotiate rules together behind closed doors and must seek unity in their decisions. The biological parent then communicates the rules to the children with the stepparent standing in support. If a rule is broken, as far as the children are concerned it is the parent’s rule, not the stepparent’s. If a consequence is to be enforced by the stepparent, to the children it is the parent’s consequence. Baby-sitting stepparents, then, are extensions of biological parents. The stepparent/baby-sitter system maintains the pre-stepfamily parenting arrangement with the biological parent acting as the primary nurturer and disciplinarian. Most critically, it allows the stepparent time and emotional space to focus on relationship development with the stepchildren.
2. The “uncle-aunt” role. After a moderate relationship has developed, stepparents can move into the “uncle or aunt” step parenting role. If a sister to one of the parents comes to visit she carries some authority with the children simply because she is their aunt. She is not a full-fledged parent, but carries power through her extended family kinship. Stepparents can gradually gain a basic level of respect

¹¹¹ Prov. 22:15a NASB (New American Standard Bible).

¹¹² Jeannette Lofas, *Family Rules: Helping Stepfamilies And Single Parents Build Happy Homes*, (New York, New York: Kensington Publishing Corp. 1998), pg. 9.

that allows children to accept them as extended family members by marriage. Furthermore, as personal bonds deepen, shows of affection and appreciation can become more common.

3. The “parent” or stepparent role. Eventually, *some* stepparents will gain “parental” status with *some* stepchildren. Younger children tend to grant parental status to stepparents more quickly than adolescents. It is quite common to be considered a baby-sitter by an older child, an aunt by a middle child, and a parent by the youngest child. It is important that stepparents not consider themselves failures if they do not achieve parental status with every child.¹¹³

Maxine Marsolini, author of *Blended Families* suggests that the most common household for a blended family consists of a birthmother and a stepfather. Since most blended families have this setup she purposes that there are two basic parenting styles adhered to by the stepfathers.

There is the “Captain” father. He wants to groom a shipshape family. So from day one he corrects every behavior he is not pleased with in the children, from how they chew their food to whether they put on a belt with their jeans. If he can just fix the kids, his house will be happy. This doesn’t work—probably because he wants respect for rules, not relationships. A family with a Captain father will be frustrated. Family members will begin choosing sides. Captain husbands interpret a wife’s concern as a lack of respect for their authority in the home. So the couple is now at odds. The second parenting style adhered to by some stepfathers is called the “Mr. Rogers” father. His goal is not to fix the children, but to develop relationships with them. They will draw near to him because he puts relationships ahead of rules. He is supportive of the personhood of his children. In this home, respect for the stepfather begins to grow soon after the marriage. His goal is not to replace the children’s father. He takes time to talk to the mother about parenting and discipline issues. He realizes that change will be difficult for the children. So he moves slowly into their world. The family is not divided and the parents are not divided as they raise their children.¹¹⁴

The answer to the disciplining dilemma is learning “Loving Discipline.” But what is loving discipline? Author Kevin Leman sheds some light on the subject by saying, “Parents need a system of discipline that achieves a happy medium, where the

¹¹³ Ron Deal, *The Smart Step-Family* (Grand Rapids: Bethany House Publishers, 2002), 150-153.

¹¹⁴ Maxine Marsolini, *Blended Family* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2000), 108-110.

children get plenty of love but also some reasonable limits that teach them how to be accountable and responsible.”¹¹⁵ This “Loving Discipline” starts out with each parent disciplining their own biological children at the beginning of the marriage. Leman goes on to unveil what he calls the seven secrets of Loving Discipline as follows:

Secret #1 - Relationships come before rules. If parents in a stepfamily try to use Loving Discipline without extra sensitivity to the anger their children feel (usually because of the divorce that made their blended family possible), its effectiveness will be greatly reduced.

Secret #2 - The whole is more important than the parts. When Loving Discipline is practiced consistently, all family members are treated fairly; all get equal time and equal opportunity to participate and contribute.

Secret #3 - You are in healthy authority over your kids. You are not too permissive or too authoritarian. You strike a middle ground that some parenting specialists call authoritative.

Secret #4 - Hold children accountable for their actions. Loving Discipline does not punish but lets the child pay a reasonable consequence for misbehavior or a poor attitude.

Secret #5 - Let reality be the teacher. Using reasonable consequences as a tool and not a weapon in the blended family is an art.

Secret #6 - Use action, not words. A key to Loving Discipline is to give children responsibilities, but always reserve the right to “pull the rug out.” Make clear the kind of behavior you expect from your children, but keep the consequences varied, depending on the kind of training you believe they need at the moment.

Secret #7, - Stick to your guns. In a blended family, sticking to one’s guns does not mean mowing everyone down. It means being firm in enforcing whatever rules you all have agreed upon, even when your heart is breaking for the child who has just chosen to lose an entire weekend of wonderful activities by not being responsible.¹¹⁶

Since most would consider discipline as a major issue in nuclear families, one would probably multiply that a hundred times to approach the delicate ramifications discipline initiates within the blended family. The number of children involved, their personalities, and ages all contribute to the blending process when it comes to discipline.

¹¹⁵ Leman, 208.

¹¹⁶ Leman, 210-211.

As in the nuclear family, however, it all comes down to unity, consistency, and fairness between the couple. Without these critical ingredients, no approach or parenting style will work and successful blending will not come to pass.

Step parenting and Favoritism

Nobody likes the teacher's pet. There's something about the kid in class who always seems to get to be the monitor during bathroom break, gets out of class to clean the erasers, or gets to be first in line to go to lunch that just reminds one of the sound made by a set of fingernails screeching along a chalkboard. In like fashion, no child likes living in a home where the biological children are obviously the birthparent's pet. A lot of damage is done by stepparents who demonstrate favoritism towards his/her own children. The Bible character Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel had a blended family in that although he had two wives, he also had children through two handmaids making his family a complex blended family to say the least. Having children from several partners certainly invites one to show a bit of favoritism. Israel struggled with favoritism as mentioned in Genesis 37:3 which reads, "Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a varicolored tunic," (NASU). The story continues that Joseph had a couple of dreams and when he told his family the dreams we read the follow reaction of his brother, "His brothers were jealous of him" ¹¹⁷ Joseph's brothers became so jealous, in fact, that they entertained the possibility of killing their brother Joseph. Verse twenty of the same chapter reads,

¹¹⁷ Gen. 37:11 NASU (New American Standard Updated Version).

“Now then, come let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits”¹¹⁸ What follows is that Joseph is taken, his varicolored coat is ripped off, he is thrown into a pit, and finally sold into a life of slavery to passing gypsies. Although the typical blended family does not experience a response to favoritism to that extreme, one should not underestimate the destruction favoritism can cause within the blended family. It is imperative that stepparents decide from the start of their new blended family that they are going to be fair to all the children treating each one of them exactly the same. Since blood is thicker than water, this is easier said than done. James Dobson, founder of *Focus on the Family* was asked the following question; “What’s the biggest hurdle blended families face?” Dobson responded,

Blended families can face special challenges. But there is a more serious problem that can develop. It concerns the way the new husband and wife feel about their kids. Each is irrationally committed to his or her own flesh and blood, while they’re merely acquainted with the others. When fights and insults occur between the two sets of children, they are almost always partial to those they brought into the world. The natural tendency is to let the blended family dissolve into armed camps, us against them. If the kids sense this tension between the parents, they will exploit it to gain power over their siblings.¹¹⁹

Sometimes stepparents struggle with trying to “fit in” with their new stepchildren. A stepparent may even have the tendency to feel guilt that they don’t love their stepchildren like they do their own children. In her book, *The Stepfamily Survival Guide* Natalie Gillespie has a suggestion for helping stepparents overcome favoritism. “Establish traditions between you and your stepchildren only. If you like to sew, consider designing costumes together each year or making a quilt. Have stepparent-

¹¹⁸ Gen. 37:20a NASU (New American Standard Updated Version).

¹¹⁹ James Dobson, “What’s the biggest hurdle blended families face?,” *Focus on the Family*, 2000, <http://troubledwith.com>.

stepchild nights on the town as well as parent-child date nights.”¹²⁰ The most important thing you can do is to pray daily for your stepchildren by name. Ask God to give you His agape love for these children He has allowed into your life. God is sovereign and He placed you as the stepparent to these children so He desires to use your talents, giftedness, and personality to lead them and be the example of what a godly parent can be. We tend to favor one person over another because we have a relationship with them and know them better. In an effort to overcome favoritism, Gillespie continues by suggesting twenty ideas for stepparent-stepchild fun time:

1. Assemble a kite or model rocket together and fly it at a local park or beach.
2. Read a book aloud together.
3. (Girls) Get makeovers together and take “glamour” photos of each other.
4. Go fishing.
5. (Girls) Talk about boys. Casually impart healthy guidelines while giggling over infatuations and relationships.
6. (Guys) Talk about girls. Impart healthy guidelines while opening up about past infatuations and relationships.
7. Show your stepchildren your childhood home.
8. Drive your stepchildren by their former house—but only if this will instill a sense of nostalgia, not reopen old wounds.
9. Get a kitten or puppy to take care of together.
10. Bake something sweet together, and enjoy it with a favorite movie.
11. Go to the gym together.
12. Exchange stories of when you were little. They weren’t there for your childhood, and you were not there for some of theirs.
13. Find a Barnes & Noble, Borders, Starbucks, or other coffee shop and share conversation over a smoothies or cappuccino. For younger children, an ice cream shop will do instead.
14. Play “I Spy,” “Twenty Questions,” and sing favorite songs in the car.
15. Look through photo albums together of when your stepchildren were little. Allow them to share memories of their former family.
16. Look through photo albums of when you and your spouse were little.
17. Play a favorite board game, or put together a puzzle.
18. If your stepchild’s grades are good, it is your visitation time, and the school gives permission, surprise your stepchild with a “skip day” and go to the mall, the game room, or the movies.

¹²⁰ Gillespie, *The Stepfamily Survival Guide*, 92.

19. Take your stepchild to work and then out for a “power lunch.”
20. Build a scrapbook together of new memories.¹²¹

Blended couples need to understand that favoritism may be natural, but it is still a choice that is made by them. Before the wedding vows are made the couple should pray together daily and discuss thoroughly the topic and agree together that they will not display favoritism toward their biological children in their new stepfamily.

¹²¹ Ibid., 96-97.

CHAPTER IV – “SURVIVING THE BLENDER”

STEPFAMILY BIRTH ORDER

“What baby wants, baby gets!” How many couples of nuclear families have said something similar about their last born child? While being cognizant of the birth order of the children in one’s nuclear family certainly helps in understanding their personalities and behavior, understanding the effects of birth order within the blended family dynamic is critical if one desires for the blending process to be successful. When a couple marries and brings to the mix a couple of firstborns, middle born children, or last born children, they have the makings of “family fireworks” that can either be beautiful to watch or explosively destructive. There are typically two pictures that come to mind of step-sibling relationships. The first picture is that of the fairy tale, Cinderella with her “wicked step-sisters.” The wicked stepmother and her two daughters treated Cinderella like dirt. They cut her down constantly with their words, and made her work like a live-in slave. Sad to say, when two families come together forming a new blended one, the stepsiblings often tend to model their behavior after the stepfamily Cinderella lived in rather than a second picture, The Brady Bunch. Some remember this TV sitcom that was famous during the 70’s of a man and woman who married, each bringing three children into their new blended family. Most of the time, the Brady Bunch siblings got along, respected each other, and were kind with their words toward one another. Which of these two stepfamilies is your family most like?

When a couple is preparing to marry for a second time they are excited about the new family they are about to form. However, most children about to enter a new family don't normally hold the same heart-felt excitement as their parents. It is a myth to believe that kids are resilient and can easily adjust to the surroundings of a new blended family. In most cases the children are disillusioned, hurting, and longing for their biological parents to get back together again. Lisa Cohn, contributor to *The Christian Science Monitor* says, "Children in a new stepfamily don't spend most of their days happily joking with their new stepbrothers and stepsisters. In fact, they often resist closer relationships with their stepparents and stepsiblings. They long for their biological parents to remarry."¹²² Rivalries between siblings are normal within nuclear families. Biological brothers and sisters, fuss, fight, argue, tease, and pull pranks on each other on a regular basis. When one steps into the blended family arena, however, these rivalries occur more often and typically can be much more volatile than in the nuclear counterpart. Natalie Gillespie, author of *Stepfamily Success* suggests, "Natural sibling rivalry multiplies in stepfamilies, where parents are prizes to be fought over and personal possessions must be protected from the 'outsiders.'"¹²³ Before plunging into the birth order issues that need to be addressed in every blended family, one should consider several common hurdles all stepsiblings must get over.

¹²² Lisa, Cohn, "The Good News about stepfamilies: Children can find nurturing homes in blended families," *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 3, 2002, <http://www.highbeam.com>.

¹²³ Natalie Gillespie, *Stepfamily Success: Practical Solutions for Common Challenges*, 123.

Birth Order Hurdles

First, there is the hurdle of sharing. Although the attribute of sharing among natural siblings is a common issue, one can be assured that the challenge to share in the stepfamily among stepsiblings is a more emphatic issue. Stepsiblings are often upset when there are new kids with whom they have to share their parent. Sharing a room with a new stepsibling is a major adjustment and cause for resentment. Sharing the family money can become an issue as well. If the family has jumped from two children to four or six, the child may worry if there will be enough money to buy his clothes, or get birthday or Christmas presents. It is the parent's responsibility to reassure children they won't have to miss a meal, or a birthday present because there are more people in the family now. The God who provided for their first family will provide for this new family as well. The parent can pray with the child and share the following verse with them, "And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus."¹²⁴ To help the children get over the sharing hurdle the parent needs to make sure he/she constantly affirms his/her love for them. Just because a new family has been formed, nothing has changed in the "love department." Telling children they are loved on a regular basis is very important in the blending process.

The second hurdle is jealousy. Probably the greatest cause for jealousy within the stepfamily is favoritism shown to the biological children. When a parent favors his child over his stepchildren he can expect trouble with the blending process. Favoritism drives a wedge between his kids and the step kids. The greatest way to get over this hurdle, or better yet, keep it from developing, is to be very careful to treat all the children with

¹²⁴ Phil. 4:19 NASU (New American Standard Updated Version).

fairness. When it comes to household chores, treat all the children the same. Teaching all the children to clean up after themselves and dividing the household chores equally is important. A parent can make a chart with the chores listed and a rotating schedule so that each of the children has a turn doing the different jobs in the home. The fairy tale scenario of Cinderella is an extreme example of unfair treatment of the children. When it comes to birthdays and Christmas, treat all the children the same by giving the same amount and the same kind of gifts. Kids are smart and can easily find out what things cost through the internet. When it comes to allowance, treat them all the same.

A third hurdle experienced by stepsiblings is that of stress. The stress created by having to deal with stepparents, stepsiblings, step-grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins should not be underestimated. The stress of shuffling from one parent's house to another, living out of suitcases, having two sets of school books, two sets of clothes, two different bedrooms, and two sets of rules from one house to another, should never be underestimated. The stress caused by the holidays should never be underestimated. To help stepsiblings get over the hurdle of stress be careful not to expect too much from them at the beginning of the blending process. Since children in a blended family do travel back and forth from one parent's home to another, make sure they have what they need at both places. One must be careful here, however, not to overcompensate by giving a child too many material things, as many parents do sometimes out of a sense of guilt. Life in general comes with stress as does the blended family, so one can never eradicate all stress, but alleviating rather than adding to stress is the goal here. Alleviating stress in

the blending process is a choice that every person can make. A verse that is applicable is, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.”¹²⁵

Birth Order Characteristics

Although several have researched and written on the subject, most people quote one person when they delve into the topic of birth order—Dr. Kevin Leman. Dr. Leman has poured his life into studying and understanding what he calls, “the birth-order blender.” In his book, *Living in a Step Family without Getting Stepped On* he sheds some much needed light on this weighty subject. Leman begins by laying the following foundation: “Starting a blended family involves a lot more than having Mom and Dad and all the kids move in together. You’re bringing together two sets of birth orders, and birth order has a lot to do with why family members look at things so differently from one another. Call it *different personalities*, if you please, but if there is anything a blended family needs to understand, it’s *who is who and why each person is the way he or she is*. This issue could be one of the most important issues of all: When children from two different families are brought together by the marriage of their parents, all of them are plunged into the birth order blender.”¹²⁶ What are the traits, both positive and negative of the typical first born, middle born, and last born child? Leman provides the following charts listing the traits of each birth order:

¹²⁵ Rom. 12:18 NASU (New American Standard Updated Version).

¹²⁶ Leman, 17-18.

Table 1: Positive and Negative Aspects of Being a **Firstborn or Only Child**¹²⁷

Firstborn Trait	Positive Aspect	Negative Aspect
Perfectionistic	Does everything well	Overly critical and dissatisfied with his own performance
Driven	Ambitious, headed for success	Always under great pressure
Organized	Able to stay on top of everything	No room in his life for flexibility
Scholarly	Able to think problems through and solve them	Sometimes thinks too much, is overly serious
List-Driven	Gets things done; knows where he's going	Boxes himself in; becomes a slave to his "to-do" list
Logical	Avoids pitfalls of compulsive behavior	Knows he's right even when he isn't
Leader	Plays an important part in his family, community, etc.	Expected to do too much; always leaned on by others
Compliant	Known as a "good guy"	Known as an "easy mark"
Aggressive	Gets ahead in life; others look up to him	Tends to be selfish and to disregard the feelings of others

¹²⁷ Ibid., 42.

Table 2 : Positive and Negative Aspects of Being a **Middle Born**¹²⁸

Middle Born Traits	Positive Aspect	Negative Aspect
Feels squeezed and rootless	Learns not to be spoiled	May be rebellious because he feels he doesn't fit
Sociable	Makes friends easily	May make the wrong kind of friends or place too much importance on sociable activity
Compromising	Easy to get along with	Can be taken advantage of
Compatible	Willing to work things out	May not share real feelings
Mediator	Good negotiator and peace maker	May be willing to have peace at any price
Independent	Entrepreneurial, willing to take risks	Uncooperative, bullheaded or stubborn

Table 3 : Positive and Negative Aspects of Being a **Last Born**¹²⁹

Last Born Traits	Positive Aspect	Negative Aspect
Charming	Likeable, fun to be around	Manipulative, maybe a little flaky
People Oriented	Relates well to others	Lacking in discipline, would rather talk than work
Affectionate	Caring and lovable, wants to help	Can be gullible, easily taken advantage of
Uncomplicated	What you see is what you get, seldom uptight	Can be absentminded or seem like an airhead
Seeks Attention	Entertaining and funny	Can be temperamental, spoiled, or impatient
Tenacious, persistent	Won't take no for an answer	Can paint himself into a corner, see things only "my way"

¹²⁸ Ibid., 95.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 79.

When a couple is trying to blend two sets of children, many questions surface. One common question is, “Will the birth order positions of my children change during the blending process?” In other words, if my first born is younger than her first born, will my first born become a middle born? Although, by age, a child may become a different birth order in his new family, personality and behavior is another question. Just because in age a child is now younger or older than his/her stepsibling doesn’t necessarily mean their behavior and personality traits will change. Leman explains, “The answer is . . . probably no. It depends on the *timing*. By the time a child is five or six years old, the grain of the wood is set. A firstborn is always a firstborn. Just because he suddenly has a stepbrother who is older, he doesn’t stop being conscientious, goal oriented, or perfectionistic.”¹³⁰ The exception to this birth order change seems to be if the children involved are under five or six years of age. Leman offers this example, “For example, suppose little Rufus was born first in his original family but when he was two, his parents divorced and his mother quickly remarried a man with two other children, one of whom was three and a half and the other was just ten months. In this case, little Rufus is almost certain to grow up with the characteristics of a middle child.”¹³¹ Being cognizant of the birth order traits of one’s children, then, is critical to understanding why they may behave in a certain way during the blending process. Since knowledge is power, it will better equip the parent in dealing with his/her children. Leman concludes, “The point to remember is this: When a child who is born into one birth order lands in another position in his blended family, do not treat the child as something he is not. He may have to take

¹³⁰ Ibid., 22.

¹³¹ Ibid.

on different responsibilities or play different roles at times, but never forget who he really is.”¹³² Remember that the traits listed previously of firstborn, middle born, and last born children are typical, but there are what Leman calls “variables” which sometimes come into play. Sometimes a first born may have some of the traits of middle or a last born child and there are reasons for this. Leman suggests several birth order variables which may cause this mixing of the traits.

1. The sex of the child (the order in which boys and girls arrive in the family).
2. Spacing – (the number of years between children).
3. Physical differences – (height, weight, illness, disability).
4. The birth order of the parents – (Birth order affects adults’ style of parenting and also causes parents to identify with certain of their children better than others).
5. The blending of two or more families because of death or divorce – (Blending, of course, is the biggest variable of all for any stepfamily, but other variables usually play an important part).¹³³

One of the main traits that will come to the surface and affect the blending process in a negative way is perfectionism. It is listed on Table 1 first because it needs to be addressed especially if the blending process is to be successful. Although all three birth orders can have this trait, the first born child almost always has it, and sometimes to a fault. Leman refers to this trait as the “deadly enemy of the stepfamily.” He describes perfectionism this way, “I often tell my clients that perfectionism is slow suicide. If you are a perfectionist, remember your disease can kill any marriage. Above all, it can kill you.”¹³⁴ Stepparents who are perfectionists will always experience friction with their

¹³² Ibid., 23.

¹³³ Ibid., 29.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 47.

stepchildren. If you find yourself in that boat, Leman has some timely advice he calls “don’ts and some do’s for perfectionist step moms or step dads:”

1. Don’t be so picky with your spouse, your step kids, your own kids, and yourself. Good advice for any perfectionist is this: If you must make a constructive criticism, do it only after giving two or three compliments.
2. Don’t ask so many questions, especially questions beginning with the word *why*. Wanting all the facts, details, and reasons is a telltale firstborn, only child trait.
3. Don’t try to “do it all.”
4. Do be willing to laugh at your mistakes. Always try to find the humor in the situation.
5. Do lighten up and lower your expectations.
6. Do try to be more positive. Perfectionists are notorious pessimists.¹³⁵

Another trait that affects successful blending of the birth orders is one found in the last born. It is second to last on Table #3—seeking attention. Sometimes the need for attention is so strong it can drive the child to do something wrong or even dangerous to gain attention. When two last born children find themselves suddenly in a new family, both of whom are used to getting attention, it can be “double trouble” as their two personalities collide. Neither one had to share this prized position of “baby of the family” up to this point, so the parents must realize how this may affect both children’s behavior. Jealousy issues can arise very quickly between the two last born children so parents need to be ready to proactively deal with it. Why do last born children starve for attention and do sometimes whatever it takes to get? There may be a number of reasons, but the one big obvious reason points back to the first born. By the time the last born comes along the parents have given out thousands of accolades to the first born for things like the first step he took, when he said his first word, when he could ride a bike without training wheels, etc. When a last born comes along, all of those monumental

¹³⁵ Ibid., 61-62.

achievements are “old hat” so-to-speak. Big brother has already done these things. Instead of breaking out the camera or giving a standing ovation, the parents may just yawn and say something like, “Hey Susie, look, little Johnny is walking, do you remember when his big brother took his first step?” Time has passed, the parents are all “pictured out” and tired and so the excitement they had when their firstborn accomplished these things typically is not there any more. Maybe that’s why last born children tend to be more competitive and starved for lime light. When this last born predisposition is translated to adulthood and a last born finds himself/herself in the role of a parent it does beg certain questions:

1. Are you a good role model? Before demanding that our spouse and stepchildren act more responsibly, check how well you are doing as a responsible adult. Babies of the family are notorious for their irresponsibility.
2. Are you messy or are you a neat freak? Many last born children are messy. If you fall anywhere in that category, be slow to demand neatness from your step kids when you won’t be neat yourself.
3. Are you self-centered or others-centered? Because they’re often spoiled, last born children are typically self-centered. As an adult, you have probably learned to cove up your self-centeredness quite well, but the pressures of being a stepparent may bring it to the surface. No one person is more important than the entire group.
4. How likely are you to blame others for your mistakes? Refusing to accept blame is another classic last born trait, and if you’re doing this in a stepfamily, you can get stepped on—and fast!
5. Are you used to the limelight? If the rest of the family could be honest, what would they say about your interest in them? Do you ask them about their ideas, their schedules, and what they think, or are you usually talking more about yourself and your plans?
6. Do you use your gifts and skills positively? You may be gifted in sizing up relationships and lightening up tense situations with a little laid-back humor. You probably feel comfortable in social situations, and you like to solve problems with the aid of others. And you’re also good at getting others to do things you’d like to have accomplished. Last born children are skilled at management from the bottom, meaning that you are able to persuade (and even manipulate a little bit) your way through situations that might stop others in their tracks.¹³⁶

¹³⁶ Ibid., 79-81.

One key trait that plagues middle born children is the first one mentioned on Table #2—they feel squeezed and rootless. What this means in laymen’s terms is that they do not feel like they ever get any respect. A child who does not feel like he gets respect will often do things in an attempt to gain respect. Leman says, “The key reason that they feel so disrespected is that they feel squeezed between the older and younger siblings.”¹³⁷ Because of this need for respect, middle born children will likely, of all the children, be the rebellious one in the family. Not only that, but according to Leman, “middle children have a propensity to leave home first and live farther from the family than anyone else. Middle children are the ones who will most often physically distance themselves from the rest of the family. It’s not necessarily because they are on the outs with everyone else. They simply like to do their own thing, make their own friends, and live their own lives.”¹³⁸

Birth Order Collisions

According to Leman the major cause for birth order collisions in the blended family is what he calls “life-styles.” “A Life-style,” Leman continues, “is a unique way of living and interacting with others. Everyone’s life theme begins with the words, ‘I only count when . . . How you finish that sentence determines your individual personality and how you will interact with others. In an original nuclear family, it is difficult enough to deal with all the birth orders, life-styles, and life themes. But when families blend and

¹³⁷ Ibid., 90.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 91-92.

become binuclear, the lifestyle/birth order demolition derby begins in earnest.”¹³⁹

Although every person is different and no two are exactly alike, Leman suggests that most people fit into one of several categories of life-styles.

First, some people are what he calls “*controllers*.” He explains, “Controllers are powerful people who operate from one of two motivations. Either they strong need for power motivates them to want to control everything and everyone, or they operate out of fear. This controller is on the defensive and is basically out to be sure no one takes control of him! One hundred and eighty degrees from the controller is the *pleaser*. A driving force behind a pleaser is the need to be liked by everyone. Pleasers try to keep the oceans of life smooth so that they can gain everyone’s approval—particularly in their families. Pleasers typically have a poor self-image. Beyond the pleasers, you will find *martyrs*. These people almost always have a poor self-image. Martyrs have an uncanny ability to find losers who will walk on them, use them, or abuse them in some way. Martyrs learn to be doormats while growing up, usually from fathers who were very strict, possessive, and controlling. Close cousin to the martyr is the *victim*. Victims, martyrs, and pleasers all have the same problem—low self-esteem. They often feel taken advantage of, but through all their complaining, they get what they really want—to be the center of attention. The other broad life-style category is *attention-getter*, which has some similarities to the controller. Last born children often have this life-style because they are the powerful little buzzards of the family who are desperately seeking lots of attention, mainly because they see all those bigger buzzards (their siblings) circling above them in a rather intimidating way. There are may other life-styles. A few of the more basic ones include *driver*, the goal oriented person who must reach objective at any cost. Another life-style is the *rationalizer*, an intellectual type who tries to avoid or deny his emotions by throwing up a smoke screen of theory, facts, and opinions and refuses to expose his real feelings. One other life-style that pops up often is the *goody-goody*, first cousin to the pleaser. The goody-goody’s life theme might be “I only count when I follow the rules.”¹⁴⁰

So, as one can easily see, birth order and the blended families are like oil and water in that they naturally repel and separate rather than mixing well together. God loves the blended family, however, so with His help, knowledge of the children’s traits, and life-styles, a couple can pull together to make the blending process a success. The most

¹³⁹ Ibid., 106-107.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 113-118.

important things the couple can do is to be united, love each other, love each child, pray together. God will help with the birth order blender so that the results will be as smooth as possible under the circumstances.

CHAPTER V -- "MINE, YOURS, & OURS"

STEPFAMILY FINANCES

“*Money*—the very word wells up emotion in us. I marvel at how easy it is to become defensive over money issues. There is nothing we possess (outside of love) that is not impacted by money. Next to health, most of us recognize the almighty dollar as life’s biggest necessity.”¹⁴¹ Rhythm & Blues legends, *Boyz II Men*, sing a song entitled *Money: That’s What I Want*, and the first verse says, “The best things in life are free, but you can give ‘em to the birds and bees. . . I need money, that’s what I want . . . give me money, that’s what I want.” The second verse is even more emphatic in making the point, “Your love gives me such a thrill, but your love don’t pay my bills. . . I need money, that’s what I want . . . give me money, that’s what I want.” Most would agree that this song places a little too much emphasis on the “green stuff” but it is a point well taken. It seems that many step couples have embraced this song’s philosophy concerning money thereby adding to the marital stress already present in step families. Approaching money from a Christian perspective, Maxine Marsolini, in her book, *Blended Families*, says, “It’s time to mentally redefine money. By defining money in its truer sense, as a tangible resource and practical tool given by God to be used as a medium of exchange through which our family’s daily needs and even occasional desires are met, we give our currency a non-emotional identity. By removing our emotional attachment to money we

¹⁴¹ Marsolini, *Blended Families*, 157.

can scrutinize our actions, set goals, and see where we lack sound structure with personal finances.”¹⁴² Couples in both nuclear and stepfamilies have to address financial issues. In their article, “Stepfamily Finance\$: Money & Stuff – Part 1,” authors Carri and Gordon Taylor said, “The number one cited issue that breaks up first marriages is money. With the step couple, money is the second leading cause that will lead to divorce. It is second only to children because of the complexity of the preexisting relationships the new couple brings.”¹⁴³ Since money matters play such an important part within blended families, it demands the attention of every couple who is considering remarriage. Stepfamily finances are typically very complicated as they often include additional elements like alimony and child support. Marjorie Engel explains stepfamily financial issues this way: “Remarried couples bring an assortment of financial assets and liabilities to the new union. Typical categories include income and taxes; debts and credit; investments and business assets; retirement plans and pension benefits; and future prospects that include earning ability and inheritances. Family responsibilities also impact family finances. These services include homemaking and child rearing; care of extended family members; and, of course, financial responsibility for children of a previous relationship.”¹⁴⁴ Financial solutions can be found for any blended family if the couple will commit to self-examination, full disclosure, and the overall good of the family unit they are about to form. To enter into a second marriage without discussing,

¹⁴² Ibid., 158.

¹⁴³ Carri & Gordon Taylor, “Stepfamily Finance\$: Money & Stuff—Part 1,” 2005, <http://www.successfulstepfamilies.com>.

¹⁴⁴ Marjorie Engel, “Wedding Bells and Dollar Bills,” 1999, <http://www.stepfamilies.info/education>.

planning, and making certain financial decisions together is asking for relational trouble from the start. To keep financial struggles to a minimum, couples must build a workable plan by answering several important questions about their stepfamily finances. Questions like, “Should we pool our money or keep it separate?” “Who will be the financial director of the family?” “Do I have an obligation to support my stepchildren?” “What about inheritance issues?” “Will both spouses work?” “How will we reduce debt?” “Do we have a plan for savings?” “What about allowance for the children?” These are just a few of the myriad of questions that need to be addressed in the blended family. Marsolini concludes, “These questions are probably only the tip of the financial iceberg facing many remarrieds. Yet if we do not resolve these identifiable money issues, frustration, bitterness, and competition will set in. Unfortunately, most financial questions are often difficult to resolve in the blended family.”¹⁴⁵

Issue #1 -- Combined or Separate Monies

Should we pool our money or keep it separate after marriage? This is a question that demands serious discussion before a couple comes together. The important point here is that the couple comes to an agreement as to where money will be put after they marry. Since everyone is different, some couples cannot imagine keeping their money separate after marriage while others can't imagine putting it all together. Marjorie Engel says, “Informal studies show that couples who favor pooling their money into an ‘ours pot’ are no more or less satisfied with their money management than those who keep money separate. In either case, the legal realities of marriage are binding enough that

¹⁴⁵ Marsolini, *Blended Families*, 160.

pooling is not necessary to make the couple financially linked and interdependent.”¹⁴⁶

Whether a couple decides to pool all of their funds, maintain separate accounts, or create three accounts, (mine, yours, and ours), they need to realize that there are both positive and negative ramifications with each decision made. For example, concerning separate accounts, Engel says,

“Husbands and wives may be embarrassed to initiate a discussion about ways to keep stepfamily finances separate. Feeling the need for separate money seems to evolve from circumstance as much as temperament. When couples desire separate finances, they are acknowledging that they have separate or different interests and that they want to make certain financial choices as an adult without needing to ask ‘permission.’ Even though they love each other deeply, the effort to ‘avoid potential hassles’ prompts many remarried couples to keep their money as separate as possible. ‘Avoiding dependency’ is another reason for choosing to keep separate stepfamily money.”¹⁴⁷

Engel suggests several negative ramifications which usually are the results of keeping monies separate. “We tend to create two separate families living under the same roof when each remarried parent pays for herself or himself and her/his children’s expenses. These ‘separate pot’ couples strongly believe that each partner must contribute an equal share toward stepfamily household expenses, which is seldom fair. The old model of men providing all financial support for the family doesn’t fit for stepfamilies; neither does the newer idea of a 50/50 split. A completely separate system also tends to fall apart in a stepfamily financial crisis.”¹⁴⁸ Although every family, nuclear or step, has financial crisis from time to time, the stepfamily experiences crisis foreign to their

¹⁴⁶ Magorie Engel, “Handling Stepfamily Money,” 1999, <http://www.stepfamilies.info/education>.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

nuclear counterpart. For example, the sudden increase of expenses as the result of a child who was previously living with their other parent comes to live with the couple, or an ex-spouse takes the other one to court for more child support and is granted it by the judge. Then, on the other end of the spectrum, you have the traditional model of putting all the income into an “ours” pot. Proponent of this method, Maxine Marsolini suggests, “A house divided cannot stand. A house united is a fortress of strength. Privatizing money—viewing the dollars we earn as *his* or *hers* and not *ours*—poses a threat to the marriage. The best scenario for money and marriage is to look at money as community property. Holding on too tightly to personal earnings gives negative feedback to a spouse.”¹⁴⁹ Although a combined pot has positive ramifications, Carri and Gordon Taylor suggest a negative ramification as well. “One problem that can arise is when the new wife is writing alimony or child support checks to the ex-wife. Even though she signed on to all these pre-existing relationships and legal agreements, resentment can surface.”¹⁵⁰ The Taylors go on to suggest three models, which, in their estimation work better than a straight “ours” approach.

- 1) Everything stays separate.
- 2) Three pots – his, hers and ours. A joint account is established where they each deposit money to cover the ‘ours’ expenses. Everything else continues to stay separate. How much each contributes to this pot can be handled several ways.
 - a) They each contribute equally.
 - b) They each contribute proportionally depending on their income.
 - c) They determine another way which will be equitable.
- 3) A merging plan. They use the elements of #2 and determine what time-frame

¹⁴⁹ Marsolini, *Blended Families*, 168.

¹⁵⁰ Taylor, “\$tepfamily Finance\$: Money and Stuff – Part 2.”

will be reasonable, considering their assets and debts, to merge the ‘yours’ and ‘mine’ into an ‘ours.’¹⁵¹

None of these approaches are easy, but with much communication, prayer, and unity, a couple can find the approach that is best for their particular blended family. Margorie Engel concludes, “Stepfamily money—separate accounts, pooled accounts, or a ‘his’/‘hers’/‘ours’ accounts system. There’s no right or wrong way to handle the finances in a remarriage. The comfortable balance will change with the amount of money available, the length of the marriage, and evolving needs. The initial stepfamily money management system needs to be flexible, not carved in stone.”¹⁵²

A side bar to deciding where to put the money in a newly formed stepfamily is answering this question: “Who will be the one to direct the family finances and be responsible for paying the bills?” Sometimes the wife does this, but more often it’s the husband. Why? Directing the finances is often viewed as a leader/provider type role; hence the husband is naturally expected to do it. Paul told the church at Ephesus, “For the husband is the head of the wife”¹⁵³ This contributes to the idea that leading the finances in the home is the man’s responsibility. Can a husband lead the wife with her paying the bills? The short answer is “Absolutely.” The key to deciding who will take on this challenging responsibility of directing the finances is to discern which one is better acclimated for it. Which of the two is better with the details of money matters? Therefore, it is not unbiblical, and may be advisable for the wife to keep the checkbook

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Engel, “Handling Stepfamily Money.”

¹⁵³ Eph. 5:23 NASU (New American Standard Updated Version).

and pay the bills. During the blending process, handling the task jointly for a period of time may be the most logical solution. This provides the opportunity for both partners to get comfortable with the task.

Issue #2 – Stepchild Support

Do I have the obligation to support my stepchildren? What about inheritance issues? What about allowance? These are just a few of the questions making “stepfamily waters” a little cloudy at times. These are also questions that should be decided fully before a couple remarries. How far should the obligation to support stepchildren go? Most would agree that a man and woman who are coming together to form a new marriage relationship are becoming “one flesh” as the Bible tells us in Genesis 2:24, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.” Whether it is a first or second marriage, this “one flesh” aspect should exist. This “one flesh” union speaks to physical consummation but does not end there. There is also the idea of the initiation of a new family, related but separate from his/her previous family. It is not unreasonable, then, to assume that since the couple is becoming unified as one flesh that the children should become unified as well. Maxine Marsolini puts it this way, “As a mother and a stepmother, my heart is to see all of *our* children sense inclusion, not exclusion, when it comes to family matters.”¹⁵⁴ So, the short answer is “yes;” the stepparent should support his/her stepchildren and include them in the family inheritance. Variables like the children’s ages at the time the blended family is formed certainly matter. For example, the

¹⁵⁴ Marsolini, *Blended Families*, 155.

inheritance would typically be more for minor children than adult children as adult children have fewer needs than minor children do. Marsolini takes the inheritance issue further by saying, “I think it is also important to consider our stepchildren in estate planning. Are we willing to prepare for a secure future for that child also?”¹⁵⁵ One is reminded what God says about those who have come to a relationship with Him when it comes to inheritance; “The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.”¹⁵⁶ If God is willing to cross over the bloodlines to include His adopted children in His inheritance, we should follow His example and include our stepchildren. What is included as inheritance is certainly different from family to family. One issue of inheritance that can be a real source of bitterness is that of what the children receive from their natural family. If a child is promised something from their biological parents, but then that is taken away at the formation of a blended family, the result can become very volatile. Such was the case of a young lady named Julia. Marsolini explains her story,

“I was nearly twenty and already in college,” says Julia. “My mom and dad had been married over twenty years.” “You told me that a particular set of china dishes has caused a lot of family bitterness. Why is this such an issue?” “These were special dishes passed down from my great-grandmother to my grandmother and then to our family,” Julia explained with obvious annoyance over the subject. “Grandma wanted us to have them—my sisters and I—when we were grown. But my dad has remarried and taken the china to his home with his new wife and her girls.” “How do you feel when you think about these heirloom dishes being at his house?” “I feel like we could be cheated out of what belongs to us,” Julia admitted. “We are the natural grandchildren. His wife and girls aren’t even related to us.” “Does your dad understand your feelings?” I asked. “Oh, he says we’ll get them

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 156.

¹⁵⁶ Rom. 8:16-17 NASU (New American Standard Updated Version).

someday. But we have no guarantee that that will happen if he dies before his wife dies. Or his wife may decide to dispose of them at any time. They just aren't special to her like they are to us."¹⁵⁷

One can easily see how a story like this can be multiplied thousands of times around our country. When a nuclear family comes to an end and a blended family is formed, life is totally disrupted for the children involved. This disruption spills over into inheritance issues more times than we would like to think.

A final area to consider within the issue of stepchild support is a family allowance. The keys to remember for giving an allowance to the children are consistency and fairness. The parent who supports his/her birth children with financial and material support above the support rendered to the stepchildren is asking for jealousy, bitterness, resentment, and the ultimate failure of the blending process. Not only will it damage the relationship between the stepparent and stepchild, but it will also affect the relationships between the stepsiblings. Marsolini gives some valuable insight in establishing an allowance for the children.

The first step in teaching financial faithfulness to our children is getting money into their hands. An allowance is the easiest way to accomplish this step. With parental guidance this *allowed* money creates numerous ways for parents to teach sharing, impart trust, and develop marketing skills in our children. Through these lessons their self-esteem is elevated. Being trusted with money gives children feelings of accomplishing big-people stuff, just like Mom and Dad. A great way to start teaching money lessons to a young child is with three jars or three boxes. Label one for *Giving*, one for *Saving*, and one for *Spending*. With these three jars we can teach a child three money concepts:

1. How to share with God and others.
2. Delayed gratification by saving for more expensive items.
3. Seeing immediate desires come to pass from the spending jar.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ Marsolini, *Blended Families*, 155.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 166-167.

Issue #3 – Debt Retirement

How will we reduce debt in our blended family? There is no question but that most Americans suffer with some level of financial debt. Many families have no savings to speak of and are living from paycheck to paycheck. So, if debt is an issue in the average nuclear family, the issue is exacerbated within the typical stepfamily. Couples often bring to the marriage the burden of two individual's indebtedness. A discussion before the wedding on a plan for debt reduction is imperative. From a Biblical perspective debt is not the will of God for His children. "Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law."¹⁵⁹ According to Paul here, the only debt we are to keep is our debt to love other people. When it comes to money, indebtedness equals slavery. We become a slave to the person or financial institute we are indebted to. When it comes to the blended family, indebtedness can cause a level of stress God never intended for this newly formed family. Hollywood and the media have convinced us that we deserve to enjoy life at the fullest and need not withhold anything from ourselves. Maxine Marsolini shares the following consideration on debt; "The best way to avoid debt is to embrace God's Word as truth on the subject. Heed His wisdom. Next, create a simplified lifestyle so that it is possible to live on less money than you make."¹⁶⁰ A simple debt reduction plan to develop is the "70/30 Snowball Plan." First, the couple creates a lifestyle so that they can live on seventy percent of their income each month. Second, they give God ten percent, and thirdly, put ten percent in savings. Fourth, with the final ten percent, they pay the minimum on their

¹⁵⁹ Rom. 13:8 NASU (New American Standard Updated Version).

¹⁶⁰ Marsolini, *Blended Families*, 173.

debts paying extra on either the debt with the highest interest rate or the debt with the lowest balance. Once that debt is paid off, they add what they were paying on the paid off debt to the next highest interest or lowest balance debt. This snowballing effect will accelerate the payoff of debt and save the couple hundreds if not thousands of dollars in interest. It is simple, but it works, and thousands of couples, both nuclear and step have obtained financial freedom from this plan. The key is discipline and consistency in running the plan.

God never meant for money to become such a divisive issue. The problem begins when we transfer our trust from God to money. Paul, in writing to Timothy gives the following critical analysis about loving money by saying, “For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.”¹⁶¹ The Rich Young Ruler stands out as a stark example of one who loved and trusted money more than God. When he asked Jesus what it took to inherit eternal life, Jesus, knowing his heart, responded, “Go, sell all that you have and give the proceeds to the poor, and then you will have riches in heaven.” Jesus was not saying that performing a good work gets you to heaven; rather, He was touching upon where this man had his trust. The young man’s response is sobering. He hung his head and walked away from Christ because his trust was in his money and possessions. The writer of Hebrews adds the following thoughts about loving money; “Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, “I WILL NEVER DESERT YOU, NOR WILL I EVER FORSAKE

¹⁶¹ 1 Tim 6:10 NASU (New American Standard Updated Version).

YOU."¹⁶² What we love we trust and what we trust—we love. The enemy continues to use this neutral item we call money to steal, kill, and destroy. Every couple who fails to plan in this area in fact plans to fail.

¹⁶² Heb. 13:5 NASU (New American Standard Updated Version).

CHAPTER VI – “JOINT CUSTODY WITH A GEM OR A JERK”
EX-SPOUSE CO-PARENTING

Can you successfully co-parent your child or children even though you are no longer married to your ex? Is it possible or impossible? Experts (those who have been through it themselves) seem to think that it can be done, and done effectively. The initial scripture that comes to mind shedding light on the subject says, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.”¹⁶³ Notice, first of all that emphasis of this verse is on “you.” You cannot control how your ex-spouse behaves. You can only control how you act and what you say. You can determine whether there is peace between you and another person but not the other way around. When there are two ex-spouses who control how they act and what they say, then you have the formula for successful co-parenting. What co-parents need is what Jann Blackstone-Ford and Sharyl Jupe call “Ex-Etiquette.” They explain, “. . . proper etiquette is ‘a code of behavior based on consideration, kindness, and unselfishness.’”¹⁶⁴ The three qualities of consideration, kindness, and unselfishness are the ones typically missing within the co-parenting relationship. It seems to be the norm for the ex to speak and behave badly in front of the children. The key to successful co-parenting is for both parents to focus on the children.

¹⁶³ Rom. 12:18 NASU (New American Standard Updated Version).

¹⁶⁴ Jann Blackstone-Ford, & Sharyl Jupe, *Ex-Etiquette for Parents* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, Inc., 2004), 4.

When we get our eyes off of what is truly important and on ourselves, our rights, and our wants, the most important thing, (the children) suffer. In their book, *The Co-Parenting Survival Guide* Elizabeth Thayer and Jeffrey Zimmerman say, “Successful co-parenting requires flexibility and a sincere recognition that parental conflict is destructive to your children’s future. Determination and perseverance are two important basic traits that foster success.”¹⁶⁵ According to Thayer and Zimmerman successful co-parenting can be assessed by the following:

1. Less litigation and attorney involvement.
2. Cordiality and civility in parent interactions.
3. Regular nonconflictual communications.
4. An ability to attend children’s events and activities together without overt hostility.
5. Cooperative decision making on essential issues.
6. Cooperative decision making on most routine issues.
7. Flexibility in changing plans.
8. Support and help for the other parent when needed.¹⁶⁶

Obviously the above list is much easier said than done. Successful co-parenting takes a team approach to say the least. In order to accomplish the purpose of this thesis, the main areas of consideration will be the spiritual approach to co-parenting and co-parenting with an ex-spouse who is uncooperative.

A Spiritual Approach to Co-Parenting

One must realize that, as was stated at the beginning of this thesis, the family was God’s idea. There is a spiritual element to the family, a vacuum so-to-speak that only

¹⁶⁵ Elizabeth S. Thayer, and Jeffrey Zimmerman, *The Co-Parenting Survival Guide* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc., 2001), 64.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

God can fill. Some co-parents are Christ-followers, others are not, and in some cases, one is and the other isn't. That still does not erase the spiritual element involved in the family unit and more specifically, co-parenting. Since the purpose of this thesis is to help provide effective blended family ministry within the twenty-first century church it is important to approach co-parenting, first and foremost from a spiritual angle. In her book, *I'm Not Your Kid: A Christian's Guide to a Healthy Stepfamily* Kay Adkins suggests what she calls the "Seven Beatitudes for Successful Co-Parenting." Jesus preached His Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 and in chapter five He shared nine different beatitudes for blessed living. From this list, Adkins suggests seven different "Be" attitudes Christian co-parents should have to help produce healthier kids:

1. Be Healed -- Jer. 17:14; James 5:16. According to researchers, divorce recovery can take between two and five years, but might never take place if the person does not exert effort to recover. If you will be healed, consider taking some of the following steps: First, Read, read, read. Learn about the effects of divorce on adults and children and how to overcome the hurts of the past. Second, Write. Journal your own ups and downs. Third, Don't dwell on the past; plan for the future. Fourth, When in the dumps over your own unmet emotional needs, meet someone else's emotional need. Fifth, Learn to forgive. Seek support through counseling or a group such as *Divorce Recovery*. Sixth, Pray. Honestly confess your ugliest feelings to God (He can handle it!). Seek His comfort, and His perspective.

2. Be the Adult -- 1 Cor. 13:10-11. In other words, "when I grew up, I began to speak as an adult, think as an adult, and reason as an adult." Divorcees frequently resort to childish ways of dealing with each other. So the first tip for being the adult is to learn to communicate with the other parent in an adult manner. Do *Away With Childish Speaking*. Healthy communication takes time and practice to achieve. A good book on healthy communication is a must! But here are some tips: First, Begin conversations by affirming "We're here for the sake of the kids." Second, Make your goal to understand, rather than to persuade. Third, Choose your issues carefully. Is it really about the child, or about your need for vengeance? Fourth, Ask sincere questions: "What do you think we should do?" "How do you feel about this?" Fifth, Give your full attention to the other person. Don't plan your response, interrupt, blame or accuse the other person. Sixth, Communicate like an adult both verbally and nonverbally, even if the other person doesn't. (80% of communication takes place non-verbally!) Seventh, If communicating with the former spouse is particularly difficult, consider mediation.

Eighth, Pray before the meeting, and pray afterward. Next, Do away with childish thinking and reasoning. First, Take every thought captive (2 Cor. 10:5). Feelings of stress or anxiety might indicate some runaway-thoughts that need to be reined in. Second, Express emotional thoughts to God before expressing them to someone else. Third, Confess your thoughts to a trusted and objective friend. Fourth, When negative thoughts consume you, redirect. Choose to think on things that are pure, true, beautiful, and righteous (Philippians 4:8). Children need equal effort from both parents in providing authoritative, mature guidance for their lives. Support each other in speaking, thinking, and co-parenting like adults.

3. Be Dependable -- 1 Cor. 4:2. Parents are stewards of the children God has given them, and God holds each steward accountable for their care. To be a dependable parent: First, Fulfill obligations—legal and otherwise—in a timely way, without hassle, and without using them to manipulate the other parent. Second, Respect the court ordered purpose of the support. Offer to give a periodic account to the other parent of how the funds are used to care for the children. Third, Plan regular meetings by phone or in person, so that both parents stay informed of issues concerning the child.

4. Be Respectful -- Phil. 2:4. Walk into most any public school classroom, and one of the rules posted for the class and the teachers to follow will be “Respect each other, and respect yourself.” In other words, value others and value yourself. After a divorce, valuing the former spouse is often the farthest thought from our minds. But it is something we need to do, because we value our children, because of the long-term relationship we still will have with their other parent, and because every person has value and worth in God’s eyes. First, Respect the need of the children to have the other parent in their lives. Second, Respect the other parent’s right to be involved in decisions and events concerning the children. Third, Respect the fact that parenting is a difficult job no matter the circumstances. All parents make mistakes.

5. Be Perceptive -- Exod. 2:4-8. Isn’t it ironic that God allowed Moses to be entrusted to the custody of his enemy? Moses’ family had the presence of mind not only to remove their baby from imminent danger, but to watch and wait and take further action for his welfare. Then they trusted God for the rest. How difficult it is during a personal crisis to think calmly, clearly, and to place focus on those who are most at risk. Our children of divorce are at risk. Parents can come to the rescue simply by being perceptive. First, Stop. During the aftermath of divorce, it takes a very deliberate effort to stop focusing on self and start focusing on the children. Second, Look. Children (including teenagers) do not possess adult skills to understand their emotions, much less to find the words to express them. Parents must learn to pay close attention to behavior. Third, Listen. Then listen to the response, uncritically, unemotionally, and courageously. Children, like all of us, cannot help the feelings they have. Knowing what goes on in a child’s mind is over half the battle.

6. Be Near -- Ruth 1:16-18. Ruth had the right idea when it came to family commitment and loyalty. She considered her mother-in-law to be her only family, and promised to always be near her, physically, spiritually and emotionally.

7. Be a Team -- Eccles. 4:9-12. Team: two or more draft animals harnessed to the

same vehicle or implement. What an image for co-parenting! Yet what it takes for divorced couples to see themselves as a team for the purpose of parenting can only be described as a miracle. And, as any coach will avow, “Attitude is everything!” First, Have an agreed upon goal. The goal might be very broad, like “we will raise our children to know that they are loved by two parents.” A team without a common goal cannot begin to play the game. Second, Make a game plan. What roles will each parent play? What roles do they want the stepparents to play? How can they help each other? How will they ensure that children do not play them against each other? What strategies can be negotiated to facilitate the most desires of each parent for the kids? Third, Communicate. A football team planning to run a two-point conversion play needs to tell the field goal kicker. A parent who wants to break a child of the new habit of lying will communicate the problem and the strategy to the other parent. Fourth, Pull your weight. The more both parents take part in parenting tasks, the more the child will feel connected to each as a parent. It would take a real miracle to accomplish all of these things in your co-parenting. They are not one-time changes, but day-to-day, incremental decisions. Be encouraged that every effort made will improve the family life of your child.¹⁶⁷

Christian co-parenting becomes very challenging when one of the parents is not a believer. When there is no desire to hold to and teach Christian values a Christian parent has his/her work cut out for them. Maybe that is one reason why Paul told the Christians at the church in Corinth, “Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness?”¹⁶⁸ The point is that a Christ-following parent and unbelieving parent will not be on the same page when it comes to spiritual things, values, discipline, etc. The two just don’t have the same goals and desires, so like oil and water, they just don’t mix well. The picture Paul paints here is that of polar opposites. One is in the light, the other in the darkness, one is righteous, and the other is unrighteous. Bringing that kind of opposition into the parenting arena is like stepping up to the plate with two strikes against

¹⁶⁷ Kay Adkins, “Seven Beatitudes for Successful Co-Parenting,” 2004, <http://www.successfulstepfamilies.com/view/207>.

¹⁶⁸ 2 Cor. 6:14 KJV (King James Version).

you and the best pitcher in the league getting ready to deliver his best pitch. For the parent who finds himself/herself in this position the founder of

Successfulstepfamilies.com, Ron Deal gives the following four suggestions.

1. First and foremost, admit that you cannot control what is taught or demonstrated in the other home. Too many people are still trying to change their ex-spouse, even after they've been divorced for years. (If you couldn't change them in your marriage, what makes you think you can change them in your divorce?) Letting go of control forces you to 1) let God be in control of what you can't change; and 2) make the most of your time with your children.

2. Influence your children toward the Lord, while in your home. All parents need to model the Christian walk and impress on their children the decrees of God (Deut. 6:4-9). But you will also have to inoculate them. Medical inoculations are controlled injections of a virus; this allows the body to develop anti-bodies that can combat a live virus, if ever encountered. Spiritual inoculations present viewpoints that oppose the word of God and then teach Biblical concepts that help children combat them. For example, discussing a TV program that glorifies greed and then showing children a spiritual view of money and stewardship. Children who have one parent not living a Christian life will need inoculations to help them deal with an environment that is hostile to their growing faith. It is critical, however, that you remain neutral about the other parent; the inoculation cannot be a personal attack. A comment like, "Your father shouldn't be lying to his boss-he's so self-centered," pulls on children's loyalties and burden's them with your hostility. Ironically, it also diminishes your influence as they react defensively against your negativity. A more appropriate response is, "Some people believe lying is fine when it serves a purpose. But God is truth and wants us to be honest, as well. Let's talk about that"

3. You may have to endure years of prodigal living as your children try out the values of the other home. This is a truth that many parents fear. Children may experiment with the "easier, less demanding" lifestyle of the other home, especially during the teen years when they are deciding whether the faith they've been handed ("inherited faith") will become their own ("owned faith"). Lovingly admonish them toward the Lord (not "away" from the other parent), and be close enough to reach when they repent.

4. Pray daily for the strength to walk in the light and introduce your children to Jesus at each and every opportunity. Your model is a powerful bridge to their personal commitment to Christ. Do all that you can to take your kids by the hand and lead them in a way of the Master (Eph. 6:4).¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁹ Ron L. Deal, "When Your Child's Other Home is Leading Them Away From Christ," *n.d.*, <http://www.successfulstepfamilies.com/view/6>.

A spiritual approach to co-parenting takes a lot of prayer and wisdom to make the right decisions. The author James gives a promise God makes to us concerning wisdom when he says, “But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him, (James 1:5 NASU). We all lack the wisdom to make right choices and decisions when it comes to parenting our children. It is wonderful to know that God desires to grant the wisdom we need if we just ask. God is not stingy with His wisdom either as James points out that He will give it “generously” to those who ask. The word here for “generously” is the Greek word “*Haplos* (hap-loce’); meaning bountifully, or liberally.”¹⁷⁰ This is a verse that every co-parent should claim daily because co-parenting is hard work.

Co-Parenting with an Uncooperative Ex-Spouse

Sometimes, whether a parent is a Christ-follower or not, they can be very uncooperative in their duty of co-parenting. Get this picture: First, a person’s marriage begins to falter. Next, there’s the divorce and maybe it was an ugly one. After that, there are feelings of resentment because of what the ex-spouse was responsible for in the relationship. Maybe it was taking out the garbage, or making sure the kids had clothes for school, but now you are forced into having to perform these functions. Your thoughts toward your ex get more and more negative, but you still have to interact with him/her. As resentment builds after the divorce, an ex-spouse can easily become more and more uncooperative when it comes to co-parenting issues. Elizabeth Thayer and Jeffery

¹⁷⁰ *Biblesoft's New Exhaustive Strong's Numbers and Concordance with Expanded Greek-Hebrew Dictionary*, 2003 Biblesoft, Inc. and International Bible Translators, Inc., 1994.

Zimmerman speak to what they call “conflict addiction” that can become a malady in one or both of the parents who find themselves in the role of co-parent. Thayer and

Zimmerman explain the results of continuing negative interactions between ex-spouses:

If these interactions continue and escalate, as they often do, one or both ex’s find themselves thinking and saying things like, “I’m not going to bend anymore,” “I’ve been hurt enough.” “Every time I say ‘yes,’ he/she takes advantage.” “No more Mr/s Nice Guy/Gal.” Unfortunately, it’s quite likely that once again your ex feels the same way. In fact your interactions become contests. Who will win? Or, at least, who will not lose? “There’s no way I’m going to be made a fool of this time,” you think. You get used to this feeling, expect retaliation, get energized by the prospect of ‘winning,’ and get support from family, friends, and your attorney. This establishes the dynamic of *conflict addiction*. Conflict addiction occurs when the battle becomes so important that it is almost impossible for one or both parents to behave in a manner that is best for the children (or at times even for themselves). In essence, the conflict takes over. It becomes more powerful than the love of the children. It clouds thinking and impinges on the ability to make rational choices. On February 12, 2000, the *New York Times* reported a tragic incident when after what seemed like a high-conflict divorce, one parent reportedly called the other to inform him of the death of their son. The second parent hung up before the information could be conveyed!¹⁷¹

Like marriage, co-parenting will not work successfully when there is just a one-sided effort. Sad to say, many parents find themselves in the position where they are willing to work at this co-parenting thing, but their ex-spouse shows no desire whatsoever. The worst thing about that situation is that it is the children who suffer most. Julie Ross and Judy Corcoran call this situation “Joint Custody with a Jerk” which is the title of their book on the same subject. Their approach, however, is a secular non-biblical approach which has its merit, but still fails to fill that spiritual void. They define co-parenting cooperation as, “working together toward a common goal. Fostering a spirit of cooperation with your ex means laying down your weapons in the war of divorce in order to protect your children. It means that when your ex begins to argue with you, you don’t

¹⁷¹ Thayer and Zimmerman, 20-21.

argue back. It means you stop being reactive and start being proactive. Your kids should be your priority, and although it may kill you to share them with a jerk, it will hurt them irreparably if you continue to do battle.”¹⁷² What the authors have to say is good, but incomplete. One needs the spiritual void addressed. When a spouse is trying to co-parent with an uncooperative ex, he/she needs the kind of help that only God can give. Author of *The Smart Stepfamily*, Ron Deal offers the following ten tips to help parents cope with a difficult ex-spouse:

Dealing with a difficult ex-spouse can be very discouraging and defeating. Yet, we are called to continue trying to pursue good, to “turn the other cheek”, and “walk the extra mile.” Hopefully the following tips can aid you in your efforts to cope—*because it’s all about the children.*

1. **Be sure to notice your own part of the ongoing conflict.** Christian ex-spouses, for example, often feel justified in their anger toward their irresponsible ex-spouse. It’s easy, then, to also feel justified in your efforts to change them in whatever ways you feel are morally or practically necessary. Unfortunately, this sense of “rightness” often blinds good-hearted Christians from seeing just how their own behavior contributes to the ongoing cycle of conflict. Any time you try to change a difficult ex-spouse—even if for understandable moral reasons—you inadvertently invite hostility or a lack of cooperation in return. Learn to let go of what you can’t change so you don’t unknowingly keep the between home power struggles alive.
2. **Stepparents should communicate a “non-threatening posture to the same-gender ex-spouse.** An ex-wife, for example, may continue negativity because she is threatened by the presence of the new stepmother. It is helpful if the stepmother will communicate the following either by phone or email: “I just want you to know that I value your role with your children and I will never try to replace you. You are their mother and I’m not. I will support your decisions with the children, have them to your house on time, and never talk badly about you to the children. You have my word on that.” This helps to alleviate the need of the biological mother to bad-mouth the stepparent or the new marriage in order to keep her children’s loyalties.

¹⁷² Julie A. Ross and Judy Corcoran, *Joint Custody with a Jerk* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 113-114.

3. Keep your “business meetings” impersonal to avoid excessive conflict. Face-to-face interaction has the most potential for conflict. Use the phone when possible or even talk to their answering machine if personal communication erupts into arguments. Use email or faxes when possible. Keep children from being exposed to negative interaction when it’s within your power.

4. Use a script to help you through negotiations. This strategy has helped thousands of parents. Before making a phone call, take the time to write out your thoughts including what you’ll say and not say. Also, anticipate what the other might say that will hurt or anger you. Stick to the business at hand and don’t get hooked into old arguments that won’t be solved with another fight.

5. Whenever possible, agree with some aspect of what you ex-spouse is suggesting. This good business principle applies in parenting as well. Even if you disagree with the main point, find some common ground.

6. Manage conversations by staying on matters of parenting. It is common for the conversations of “angry associate” co-parents to gravitate back toward negative personal matters of the past. Actively work to keep conversations focused on the children. If the conversation digresses to “old marital junk,” say something like, “I’d rather we discuss the schedule for this weekend. Where would you like to meet?” If the other continues to shift the conversation back to hurtful matters assertively say, “I’m sorry. I’m not interested in discussing us again. Let’s try this again later when we can focus on the weekend schedule.” Then, politely hang up the phone or walk away. Come back later and try again to stay on the parenting subject at hand.

7. When children have confusing or angry feelings toward your ex, don’t capitalize on their hurt and berate the other parent. Listen and help them explore their hurt feelings. If you can’t make positive statements about the other parent, strive for neutral ones. Let God’s statutes offer any necessary indictments on a parent’s behavior.

8. Remember that for children, choosing sides stinks! Children don’t want to compare their parents or choose one over the other. They simply want your permission to love each of you. This is especially important when the two of you can’t get along.

9. Wrestle with forgiveness. Hurt feelings from the past are the number one reason your ex—*and you*—overreact with one another. Do your part by striving to forgive them for the offenses of the past (and present). This will help you manage your emotions when dealing with them in the present.

10. Work hard to respect the other parent and his or her household. For your kids sake, find ways of being respectable even if you honestly can’t respect your

ex-spouses lifestyle or choices. Do not personally criticize them, but don't make excuses for their behavior either.¹⁷³

This chapter on co-parenting began with Paul's admonition to the church in Rome with these words, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men."¹⁷⁴ The thrust of this chapter has been aimed at the prospect of there being peace between two ex-spouses who are co-parenting their children from different places or homes. Paul does infer in this verse, however, that sometimes there will be no peace between two people. Sometimes it doesn't matter how much one person tries, the other ex is just bent on getting revenge and being hateful and disagreeable no matter what. In cases such as this the children are the ones who suffer the most. It doesn't matter how bad a mom or dad has been, kids still retain this affinity towards their biological parent. When a parent finds himself/herself in this situation where he/she has tried all the steps, tips, suggestions, counsel, strategies, etc. and none have worked, all that is left to do is to give it to God and be what he/she needs to be whenever with his/her children. Kelly Shafer shares ten strategies one can use when at the end of this rope we call co-parenting.

- 1. Accept that you have not control over your former spouse's choices.**
- 2. Set a good example when the children are with you by focusing on your own behavior.** With your children having one unhealthy parent, it's even more important that you are a good role model for your children.
- 3. Educate your family and get help from professionals.** When my children's father promises to come to his daughter's dance recital or son's baseball game and doesn't, I hurt for my children. Soon after, my feelings turn to anger and resentment. Educating myself . . . helps me let go of the resentment. Only then can I function well.
- 4. Take a moment to vent. (But do it away from the children!).** Venting (or talking with a good friend or counselor) is not only a good tool, it's necessary.

¹⁷³ Deal, "Dealing with a Difficult Ex-Spouse: 10 Tips to Help You Cope," *n.d.*, <http://www.successfulstepfamilies.com/view/117>.

¹⁷⁴ Rom. 12:18 NASU (New American Standard Updated Version).

Consider healthy and neutral forms of venting like journaling.

5. Treat the other co-parent with respect. You do not have to pretend to like your ex-spouse's behavior, but you do need to treat him/her with respect.

6. Don't turn a blind eye; take action when necessary. Oftentimes, you may want to bury your head in the sand and pretend like you co-parent with a healthy person. But there are times when your co-parent's behavior is so unhealthy or potentially damaging that you can't afford this luxury, and you must take action.

7. Choose Your battles carefully. When divorced parents are not healthy, they often tell their children to keep secrets from the other biological parent ("Don't tell your mom you saw me drinking. Don't tell your dad my new boyfriend is living with us"). But we hear things. We see things. We pick up on body language and one sibling shushing the other when they start to talk about a forbidden topic. It's tricky to approach your ex regarding his/her behavior, especially when you've learned about it from the children. It may have more negative than positive consequences, so you must pick and choose your battles carefully.

8. Tell the truth, but don't badmouth the other parent. It's important that our children get the truth from us, especially in unhealthy family situations already wrought with lies, secrets and broken promises. Of course, this can be abused too. We aren't on a truth-telling mission. We simply must tell our children the ugly truth sometimes, but always at an age-appropriate level and only when necessary.

9. Celebrate your stepfamily, regardless of the difficulties you face. An equally important part of this strategy is to celebrate the time you have together as a couple and as a stepfamily instead of dwelling on whatever difficulties you may be facing.

10. Tap into a spiritual source. Without tapping into a spiritual source, you may find it difficult to sincerely embrace the other nine strategies shared here. For us, connecting with our spiritual source takes the form of prayer, community worship and spiritually-based support groups. We pray for happiness and good health—for our children, ourselves, and even our ex-spouses.¹⁷⁵

The best spiritual advice one could give when it comes to the difficult task of co-parenting is the same advice Paul gave the church at Thessalonica when he said, "Pray without ceasing."¹⁷⁶ Daily prayer should be offered for the children, yourself, and the ex-spouse. Prayer with the added "mustard seed" of faith can move "co-parenting mountains." So, when all else fails, pray trusting your Heavenly Father to be at work in

¹⁷⁵ Kelly Shafer, "10 Respectful Strategies to Use with an Unhealthy Co-Parent," *n.d.*, <http://www.successfulstepfamilies.com>.

¹⁷⁶ 1 Thess. 5:17 NASU (New American Standard Updated Version).

your blended family. Note what Paul told the church at Philippi in Philippians 1:6 and 2:13, “For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”

CHAPTER VII -- "EX-ETIQUETTE FOR HOLIDAYS AND TRADITIONS
STEPFAMILY CELEBRATIONS

Landon was born four years ago, but shortly after he was a year old his parents divorced. Even though he was still an infant, Landon immediately entered the “holiday see-saw” spending his first Christmas with dad in Arkansas, his second with mom in Florida, his third with dad, and back and forth it goes. But that’s not all; the same thing happened with his birthday as well. You see, each year thousands of children experience this back and forth “holiday see-saw” during Christmas, birthdays, Easter, and Thanksgiving, just to name a few holidays. Landon is still young enough not to really understand what is going on when it comes to holidays and traditions. One day, however, he will know and understand. Right now it is fun to have two Christmas trees, two present opening sessions, and two birthday cakes and parties, but one day he is going to ask, “Opa, Why don’t my mommy and daddy live together?” “Why don’t my mommy and daddy spend Christmas together like you and Oma do?” “Why don’t they both give me a birthday party—**together**?” “Why don’t we share Thanksgiving turkey together?” These kinds of questions are surely coming, and can quickly bring tears to one’s eyes. You see, as adults we don’t always consider the impact the holidays may be having on our children. As the New Testament church attempts to reach out to her community, she needs to be able to encourage, help, and teach blended couples how they can make the best of holidays and family traditions within their stepfamily. Although many churches schedule couples retreats to help strengthen the families of their congregations, not many

offer help to the step couple who are struggling with what to do for the holidays. What kind of ex-etiquette should couples display for the holidays and other family celebrations? Considering both holidays and family traditions are a must for success in the blending process.

Ex-Etiquette for Holidays

Etiquette was defined earlier in this thesis as “a code of behavior based on consideration, kindness, and unselfishness.” Ex-etiquette, then, would simply be applying consideration, kindness and unselfishness to the interaction one has with his/her ex-spouse. When it comes to holidays, co-parents need an extra dose of this ex-etiquette. Jann Blackstone-Ford and Sharyl Jupe are co-parents of four children as Jann is married to Sharyl’s former husband. They co-author the book, *ExEtiquette for Holidays* and have appeared on noted shows like *Good Morning America*, *The Today Show*, and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. During their years of personal experience, Jann and Sharyl have come up with what they call *Ten Rules of Good Ex-Etiquette for Holidays Other Family Celebrations*.

1. Put the children first.
2. Remember the spirit of the special occasion or holiday.
3. Never badmouth your ex, extended-family members, the host, or others.
4. Get organized well in advance.
5. Don’t be spiteful.
6. Don’t hold grudges.
7. Use empathy when problem solving.
8. Be honest and straightforward.
9. Respect each other’s turf, holiday rituals, and family traditions.
10. Compromise whenever possible.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁷ Jann Blackstone-Ford, and Sharyl Jupe, *Ex-Etiquette for Holidays* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, Inc., 2008), 3.

Many couples who have gone through a divorce don't even feel like celebrating when the holidays come around. The past memories of holidays spent with their ex-spouse only bring pain and misery. So what can a parent do about the holidays? Forget them all together? Move into a cave thereby isolating you until the holiday is over? One reality that every individual must come to grips with after a divorce is that holidays will never be like they used to be. With that in mind, the first step to enjoy the holidays again after the divorce is to make sure you cultivate the right expectations concerning holidays. Blackstone-Ford and Jupe explain it this way, "Having reasonable expectations for the holidays is the first step toward bringing the holiday spirit back after your divorce and making them run more smoothly. This means, look at your life as it is right now; don't try to recreate the way things use to be before the divorce, because they simply won't be the same."¹⁷⁸

Although time does help, there is usually a lot of stress surrounding a stepfamily during the holidays. The stress is unusually strong right after a divorce. What can a parent do to handle this stress? Jean McBride, in her article, *Soothing Holiday Stress* provides some much needed advice to help minimize the stress a parent may be feeling during the blending process.

For Your Children

1. Put the kids first. Think about what they need for this holiday to be a good one for them. I'm not talking about things but rather the quality of the time you are with them. For example, children do best with consistency. Try to keep parenting schedules the same. When that isn't possible, prepare your children ahead of time. Help them know what to expect.
2. Don't make rules about where gifts must be kept or played with. Put yourself in your children's shoes. Would you like it if you received a gift that you loved, only to be told you must leave it behind when you move from one house to another?

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 22.

Give your gifts with no strings attached.

3. Keep your children out of the middle. No matter what!
4. Stay out of the "competition game" with the other parent.
5. Help your children make or select gifts for their other parent. By doing this you model thoughtful, generous behavior. If you cannot participate in this experience, find another adult who is in a more neutral position, to help.
6. Allow children to discuss past holidays if the subject arises. Children's memories are not subject to divorce.
7. When grandparents and other extended family have been part of your children's world, keep them involved during the holidays.
8. Reassure your children through your words and actions that everything is going to be OK. No guilt trips when they are scheduled to spend time with the other parent.
9. The two best gifts you can give your children are your loving attention and the opportunity and freedom to love their other parent.

For Adults

1. Take good care of yourself. This is said so often it is almost worn out. The fact is, it is still important. Keep the old standbys in mind: eat right, get enough sleep, exercise, limit caffeine and alcohol, and remember to laugh.
2. Get extra support. Enlist the help of friends and family. Join a support group or schedule a meeting or two with a therapist if you're having a hard time.
3. Allow yourself to feel your feelings. Holidays can be tough when you are newly separated or divorced. Stuffing feelings doesn't make them go away. Learn to identify your feelings and then deal with them. The only stuffing we want this holiday season is in the turkey!
4. Make plans for yourself if you are going to be without your children for the holidays. For most people it helps to be with other people. Think about what you need and then make it happen. Don't be a victim.
5. Blend the old ways with new traditions. This may be the year to take a holiday ski trip or go to the beach.
6. Avoid the trap of spending money on your children as a way to buy their love. Set a budget for gifts and stick to it.
7. Focus on your children and what they need to have a meaningful holiday.¹⁷⁹

The stress of an upcoming holiday can hinder a parent from thinking clearly when it comes to dealing with the issues surrounding it. Rehearsing the above mentioned steps for both the children and the adult can help relieve part of that stress.

¹⁷⁹ Jean McBride, "Soothing Holiday Stress," *n.d.*, <http://www.successfulstepfamilies.com/view/84>.

Another issue to consider when addressing ex-etiquette for the holidays centers around gift giving to the ex-spouse and his/her new partner. When there are no children involved the matter becomes quite simple. Whether you give a gift or not to your ex in that case usually makes no difference. The picture changes drastically, however, when there are children involved. The child should be encouraged to remember and celebrate both of his/her parents' birthdays and Christmas with gifts. Gift giving on birthdays and Christmas can be very awkward for a parent after a divorce, especially if it was a volatile one. This is where the parent needs to pull up their boot straps and do the right thing. Although it may be hard to help choose a gift for one's ex-spouse, the success of the blending process may depend on it. This gift giving procedure can even get more difficult when applied to the ex-spouse's new partner. Should I help choose and even purchase a gift for my child's new stepparent, or my new step child's parent? The short answer is yes you should. Doing so demonstrates God's love, acceptance, and forgiveness, all of which there's too little in this world. In the Bible Jesus said on one occasion, "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."¹⁸⁰ In most cases one would not say that their child's new step parent is their enemy nor has persecuted them, so how much more should he/she demonstrate godliness by helping his/her child purchase a present for them. The best way to change the way you feel about your ex-spouse or his/her new partner is to begin praying for them. Prayer can change the way you feel about a person over time. When a child sees that you have an amiable relationship with both your ex and his/her partner that goes along way toward the blending process.

¹⁸⁰ Matt. 5:44 NASU (New American Standard Updated Version).

Ex-Etiquette for Family Traditions

A popular musical one can still see on Broadway is *Fiddler on the Roof*. The musical is permeated with Jewish tradition, especially the one concerning choosing a life's mate. In the storyline, the younger generation attempts to change the old tradition of a matchmaker choosing a mate for someone to the individuals being able to choose for themselves. As a result of this "rebellion" of the younger generation, the father, Tevya sings a song entitled *Tradition*. The song and the musical are a stark reminder of just how powerful traditions are in society and family units. The word "tradition" is defined as "The passing down of elements of culture from generation to generation, especially by oral communication."¹⁸¹ This definition applies well to races and nationalities, but for the purposes of forming stepfamily traditions, a better definition is offered by Suzen J. Ziegahn, author of *The Stepparent's Survival Guide*. She defines traditions as, "a family event marked by the family doing it together and believing in the continuity of the event."¹⁸² Ziegahn continues, "Traditions derive from past experience and help shape the present. The philosophy behind traditions comes from families building their histories together. It's these same traditions that are often so difficult to leave behind in a divorce or other type of family separation."¹⁸³ Whether we realize it or not we all have traditions surrounding annual events like Christmas, Easter, or Thanksgiving. For example, growing up, my family never stuffed stockings with gifts at Christmas time. Oh, we had

¹⁸¹ Online dictionary, *n.d.*, <http://www.dictionary.com>.

¹⁸² Suzen J. Ziegahn, Ph.D. *The Stepparent's Survival Guide* (Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, Inc., 2002), 192.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

stockings, and even “hung them with care in hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there;” but we never put anything in them. My most embarrassing “holiday tradition moment” took place on my very first Christmas after being married. My sweet little wife surprised me with a stocking stuffed with all kinds of little goodies first thing Christmas morning. I was shocked, embarrassed, and didn’t know what to say. I had not even thought about stuffing her stocking with little gifts like she had done for me. You see, in her family growing up, they had developed this tradition of stuffing the stockings and sharing them first thing Christmas morning. Needless to say, that became a family tradition in our new family from that Christmas until now. If there can be little surprises like that for nuclear couples, what about blended couples? They both come into a second or subsequent marriage with previous family traditions they enjoyed together. Traditions one looked forward to and enjoyed in previous family relationships may be awkward and even painful in a new stepfamily. Blackstone-Ford and Jupe offer this piece of advice;

“If there has been a breakup, the key is to try to modify the past tradition, not abandon it. You save the traditions you love, and you alter the ones that no longer work. Look for ways to keep parts of the family tradition but add new aspects that will raise everyone’s spirits and get their mind off ‘the way it used to be’ or ‘the way it *should* be. Little things help. Buy a new CD instead of the one you always used to play. Add a few new decorations around the house. Invite friends over instead of just being alone. Cook a new meal, or buy takeout! Do something just a little bit different that acknowledges both the past and the present—and then put one foot in front of the other.”¹⁸⁴

Combining holidays and family traditions can be very challenging, but it can be done. The keys to doing it properly are humility, sensitivity, and flexibility. It is so easy to be proud of something we always did in our previous family for Christmas, birthdays, or Thanksgiving, but as the Bible reminds us, “Pride goes before destruction, and a

¹⁸⁴ Blackstone-Ford and Jupe, 25.

haughty spirit before stumbling.”¹⁸⁵ Having a sensitive spirit toward your new spouse and traditions that are important to him/her is important as well. Stocking stuffing was important to my new bride, so whether I had done it before or not was not important. What was important was that she really enjoyed doing it and it helped make her first Christmas away from her birth family feel more like home. Flexibility, when it comes to traditions, is necessary for being successful in the blending process. Ron Deal gives the following additional practical strategies for combining holiday and family traditions:

- 1. Be flexible and make sacrifices.** You cannot make everyone happy all the time. Accepting this truth immediately takes away the pressure to give everyone what they want. Being flexible means realizing you can combine, modify, or sacrifice old traditions during a given year in order to give your stepfamily opportunity to develop new ones. Set the tone for negotiation by showing a willingness to sacrifice. If you won't, why should your children or stepchildren?
- 2. Plan, plan, plan.** As a couple, be proactive in discussing upcoming holiday plans. Determine your preferences and wishes and what sacrifices you will make on behalf of the other home. Then, contact the adults in the other home and start negotiating. If you have three or four homes involved in the equation, start planning very early.
- 3. Complex stepfamilies may have to be really creative.** Stepfamilies that have children from both adults (complex stepfamilies) often find themselves pulled in multiple directions during the holidays. One creative approach is to let each parent and children spend the holidays with the extended family members of their choosing. This may lead them to be in different homes for Easter dinner, yet acknowledges their differing family connections and honors family traditions. This may be particularly useful to new stepfamilies. As the stepfamily integrates over time, the decision to combine holiday activities may be met with less resistance.
- 4. Do what you can do and accept what you cannot change.** Work on your co-parental relationship throughout the year so as to improve your chances of respectful negotiation during the holidays. But realize that ultimately you cannot control the other household and you may have to grin and bear it. When stuck in awkward or tough situations, appeal to difficult family members with "for your dad's sake, let try to put our differences aside." Hopefully this will be motivation enough. In the end, lay what you cannot change at God's feet and go on.
- 5. Maintain the stepping stone of patience as individual family members grow to accept new traditions.** Patience sounds easy on paper, but in real life it's a tremendous challenge. Ask God to help you live out this fruit of the Spirit

¹⁸⁵ Prov. 16:18 NASU (New American Standard Updated Version).

(Galatians 5:22).

6. Live and learn. One stepfather found himself disappointed year after year because his stepson had to be rushed off to his father's house in the middle of Christmas day. He was never able to fully enjoy the day with his wife and stepson because everyone was watching the clock. Eventually he and his wife proposed a change to her ex. As it turned out, her ex-husband was also discouraged each Christmas and was open to changing the visitation agreement. They settled on an alternating arrangement that gave each home an undisturbed Christmas holiday while the other home had an undisturbed Thanksgiving holiday. The loss of togetherness experienced during a given holiday was moderated by the joy they received during the other.

7. Be compassionate regarding your child's preferences during the holidays. At the same time, teach children that sacrifices sometimes have to be made to make the new stepfamily a priority.

8. Daily rituals of connection are important to the integration process. The small, simple behaviors that families repeat on a regular basis communicate care and commitment. Hugs before leaving for school, a special note in a lunch box, Friday night pizza and a family video, and Sunday dinners with Grandma are rituals that keep people connected. Biological parents should strive to keep alive pre-stepfamily rituals of connection while stepparents work to create new comfortable ones. For example, a parent will hug children before leaving for work, and the stepparent may touch them briefly on the arm. A parent may write an "I love you" note and hide it in a backpack while the stepparent's note notifies the child of a raise in allowance. Take advantage of repeated behaviors to communicate care and develop trust in steprelationships.¹⁸⁶

Additional ideas for starting new traditions can be found at www.familylife.com.

On this website are resources such as Barbara Rainey's *Thanksgiving: A Time to Remember*, and the interactive advent nativity, *What God Wants for Christmas*.

Holidays and traditions are here to stay and their importance should not be minimized. The smart parent will realize this and do all he/she can to make them both meaningful and memorable. The successful blending process depends on it.

¹⁸⁶ Ron Deal, "Combining Holiday and Family Traditions," *n.d.*, <http://www.successfulstepfamilies.com/view/92>.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has proposed answers to two important questions faced by the New Testament Church as we attempt to minister to families in this twenty-first century. The first question was, “*Does a blended family problem really exist?*” As was discovered in the research, not only does the problem exist, but it has grown to the point that the number one family unit in the United States is, in fact, the blended family. Since the blended family has become the most prominent family unity in our nation, it is urgent that the twenty-first New Testament Church provide curriculum, programs, events, and ministries that address the issues, and minister more effectively to blended families. This led us to the second question addressed in this thesis, “*What are the issues faced by blended families today?*” Although neither time nor space would allow this thesis to address all issues faced by blended families, six critical issues were addressed and solutions were proposed as follows:

The Couple Relationship

The first and most important fact we discovered was that the most critical element in the process of blending a family is the proper blending of the couple’s relationship. Our research found that when one leaves one relationship, one takes baggage into subsequent relationships. This thesis proposed that every couple attempting to blend a new family “check-in,” (fully discuss) several issues which were pictured as baggage. The first piece of baggage one carries into a new relationship is spiritual issues. Church denomination, doctrine, baptism, etc. all need to be thoroughly discussed so that the

couple is in agreement when it comes to religious issues. The second piece of baggage one carries into a new relationship is that of emotional traumas. When issues are not properly identified and dealt with in one relationship, they will resurface in a new relationship. The reappearance of old issues in a new relationship will hinder the blending process. This thesis proposed steps one could take to address unresolved anger taken from June Hunt's *Hope for the Heart Biblical Counseling Library* on the subject of anger. These steps to resolving anger can be found on page 53. Another emotional trauma often experienced surrounding a divorce is that of depression. This thesis proposed three steps for releasing this baggage of depression taken from June Hunt's *Hope for the Heart Biblical Counseling Library* on the subject of depression. These steps to releasing depression can be found on pages 54-55. A third emotional trauma this thesis addressed was that of abuse. Several non-physical types of abuse were considered. The thesis addressed emotional, psychological, social, and economic abuse. The non-physical abuse that overshadows each of these types is verbal abuse. Once again, in her library of counseling materials, June Hunt offers some tremendous advice for those suffering verbal abuse from a partner. This thesis highly recommends the use of her *Seven Steps Essential to Victory* over verbal abuse which can be found on pages 58-60. The final emotional trauma this thesis addressed was that of physical abuse. Statistics reveal that a person who has physically abused his partner rarely quits his abusive ways without outside intervention; the solution proposed by this thesis is for the domestic violence victim to physically remove herself from the presence of the abuser. The first most important thing is the physical safety of the abused and her children. The third piece of baggage one carries into a new relationship is that of sexual issues. Contrary to

popular belief, romance and sex the second time around is not always easier than the sexual intimacy experienced in a first marriage. If there are sexual issues in the marriage this thesis proposed that first the couple need to start with a clear understanding that men and women are wired differently by God. God did this so that men and women would compliment each other in a marriage relationship. This thesis recommends the application of Ephesians 5 for both the husband and wife. If a couple comes into their marriage with sexual issues, this thesis offers the solution proposed by Don and Jan Frank, in their book, *When Victims Marry*, suggesting ten steps to recovery in this area of sexual issues. These ten steps can be found on pages 63-65. The final piece of baggage one carries into a subsequent marriage is that of conflict resolution. Each person uses certain methods to resolve conflicts and brings these methods into the new relationship. This thesis proposes the use of June Hunt's seven principles to apply when resolving conflicts. These seven principles can be found on page 67. This thesis also proposes the use of the ten steps in helping couples resolve conflicts by Dr. David Olson, President of Life Innovations also found on page 67 of this thesis.

Step Parenting

The second important issue for blended families that this thesis addressed was that of step parenting. Somewhere between 60-70% of second and subsequent marriages end in divorce, and that, for the most part, can be attributed to the "step parenting rollercoaster." If the couple relationship is the most critical relationship in the blended family, the second must be that of the stepparent-stepchildren relationships. This thesis proposed three steps every step parent needs to take to ensure proper blending of the new family. First, get the lay of the land, so-to-speak. One cannot overemphasize the

importance of getting to know each step child's history and developing a relationship with each one of them. Second, formulate realistic expectations. Blending a family is a process and takes time. The smart step parent will give the step children the time and space to facilitate the blending process. Ron Deal has several good articles dealing with step parent relationship and this thesis highly recommends reading and applying his principles to the blending process. Two of Deal's articles explored were, *How to Build Healthy Relationships With Your Stepchild*, and *The Effective Stepfather: A Check-List to Live By*. The third step this thesis proposes to assist in the blending process is for the biological parent to accept his/her spouse as the parent to his/her children. That acceptance must be visible and verbal to facilitate the blending process. This thesis addressed two particular areas that seem to hinder the blending process most when it comes to step parenting. The first area was that of step parenting and discipline. To aid step parents in a disciplinary role this thesis proposed three positive relationship styles as given by Ron Deal which can be found on pages 75-76. The answer to the disciplining dilemma is learning loving discipline. This thesis proposed learning and applying the seven secrets of loving discipline as given by Kevin Leman as found on page 77. The second area of consideration to being a successful step parent was favoritism. Dr. James Dobson purports that favoritism is the biggest hurdle that step parents have to get over if the blending process is to be successful. To guard against showing favoritism this thesis suggested twenty ideas for step parent-stepchild fun times as given by Natalie Nicole Gillespie and found on pages 80-81.

Stepfamily Birth Order

The third important issue for blended families that this thesis addressed was stepfamily birth order. When a couple is preparing to marry for a second time they are excited about the new family they are about to form. However, most children about to enter a new family don't normally hold the same heart-felt excitement as their parents. It is a myth to believe that kids are resilient and can easily adjust to the surroundings of a new blended family. The reality is that in most cases, children are disillusioned, hurting, and longing for their biological parents to get back together again. Every child has his/her own personality. The orders in which children are born into a family most often bring certain birth order traits. This thesis proposed that every parent become familiar with the birth order traits exhibited by their children so they can better understand and know how to deal with each child. When two first born, middle born, and last born children come into a new family, most often their birth order traits collide rather than blend. As a result of this collision, there are several hurdles parents must help them get over. This thesis addressed three of the most prominent hurdles stepchildren must get over. First, there is the hurdle of sharing. This thesis proposed that to help children get over this hurdle of sharing the parent needs to make sure he/she constantly affirms his/her love for them. Second, there is the hurdle of jealousy. This thesis proposed that the greatest way to get over this hurdle is to be very careful to treat all the children with fairness. The third hurdle experienced by stepchildren is that of stress. This thesis proposed that to help stepsiblings get over the hurdle of stress step parents should be careful not to expect too much from them at the beginning of the blending process. Also, since children in a blended family do travel back and forth from one parent's home to

another parent's and step parents need to make sure children have what they need at both places.

Stepfamily Finances

The fourth important issue for blended families that this thesis addressed was that of stepfamily finances. This thesis has already revealed that the second leading cause for divorce for second or subsequent marriages is the issue of money. Stepfamily finances are typically very complicated as they often include additional elements like alimony and child support. Although there are a number of financial issues which blended families face, this thesis addressed three of the most prominent ones. First, the issue of whether the blended couple should have combined or separate monies was explored. The important point here is that the couple comes to an agreement as to where the money will be put after they marry. This thesis proposes the use the model provided by Gordon and Carri Taylor. They proposed three models but this thesis suggests using their third model as a workable solution. The Taylors call this third model, "a merging plan." This involves starting with three accounts, (his, hers, and ours) and then merging them all into one over an agreed time-frame. These models can be found on pages 100-101. Second, the issue of stepchild support was addressed. Does an adult have the responsibility of supporting his/her stepchildren? This thesis proposed that a parent should support his/her stepchildren. Whether it involves something as simple as allowance or more complex like inheritance it is the position of this thesis that a parent should support his/her stepchildren. When it comes to providing an allowance for children still living at home, this thesis proposes the use of Maxine Marsolini's insight in establishing an allowance for the children which can be found on page 104. Third, the issue of debt retirement was

addressed. This thesis proposes the use of the 70/30 Snowball Plan for use with debt retirement. This plan involves creating a lifestyle in which you can live on 70% of your present total income. Next, give 10% to God as a tithe. Then, put 10% in a savings account not to be used for normal living expenses. The final 10% use to pay debt paying extra on either the debt with the highest interest rate or the debt with the lowest balance. Once that debt is paid off, add what was being paid to the paid off debt to the next highest interest or lowest balance debt. This snowballing effect will accelerate the payoff of debt and save the couple hundreds if not thousands of dollars in interest.

Ex-Spouse Co-Parenting

The fifth important issue for blended families that this thesis addressed was that of ex-spouse co-parenting. Can you successfully co-parent your child or children even though you are no longer married to your ex? Experts (those who have been through it themselves) seem to think that it can be done, and done effectively. This thesis proposed that a good start towards successful co-parenting can be achieved by applying Elizabeth Thayer and Jeffrey Zimmerman's eight solutions as found on page 109. The two main areas of co-parenting which were covered in this thesis were a spiritual approach to co-parenting, and co-parenting with an ex-spouse who is uncooperative. This thesis proposes the use of the 7 "Be" attitudes Christian co-parents should have to help produce healthier kids as given by Kay Adkins on pages 110-111. Christian co-parenting becomes very challenging when one of the parents is not a believer. This thesis proposes four suggestions as given by Ron Deal for every parent who finds him/herself in this position as given on page 113. A second area that many parents find themselves in is having to co-parent with an uncooperative ex-spouse whether they claim to be a believer

or not. This thesis proposes applying the ten tips to help parents cope as given by Ron Deal in his book, *The Smart Stepfamily*. These ten tips can be found back on pages 116-118.

Stepfamily Celebrations

The sixth and final important issue for blended families that this thesis addressed was that of stepfamily celebrations. The two specific areas addressed were ex-etiquette for holidays and family traditions. This thesis proposes the use of Jann Blackstone-Ford and Sharyl Jupe's *10 Rules of Good Ex-Etiquette for Holidays and Other Family Celebrations* as a solution for the added stress the holidays bring the blended family. These rules can be found on page 122. Jean McBride, in her article, *Soothing Holiday Stress* adds to what Ford and Jupe suggest and this thesis highly recommends the use of their suggestions for minimizing the stress found around the holidays. They have suggestions for both the children and adults involved and these suggestions can be found on pages 123-124. Another issue surrounding the holidays which this thesis addressed was gift giving. The position this thesis takes is that one should participate in giving gifts to the ex-spouse for the sake of the children involved. God is a giver and we should follow His example by being a giver as well. The final area of discussion was ex-etiquette for family traditions. This thesis proposes that a good solution for the issue of combining holiday and family traditions is to apply the strategies suggested by Ron Deal in his article, *Combining Holiday and Family Traditions*. Deal lists eight suggestions that, if taken, could help a couple combine family traditions more smoothly. These suggestions can be found on pages 128-129.

The following story, although fictional, is being relived by blended families everywhere in our nation.

Jim and Patricia are in the blending process. Jim is a widower whose wife passed away three years ago. Jim has four boys, three of which are in their twenties with the youngest just entering his teen years. Patricia, on the other hand, is ten years younger than Jim. She had an ugly divorce that started with infidelity on her ex-husband's part. She comes to the new marriage with a couple of kids, one in high school and the other a year younger than Jim's youngest son. Jim and Patricia went through some pre-marital counseling, but sad-to-say, it was the typical material designed for first marriages. Nothing was said about the baggage of spiritual, emotional, sexual, and conflict resolution issues that this couple is bringing to the new relationship. This is the reason why over sixty percent of second marriages end in divorce. It is the desire of the author of this thesis to use these materials to create pre-marital material specialized for couples just like Jim and Patricia. Helping a couple like Jim and Patricia with their couple relationship first is critical to the success of the blending process they are entering.

Since three of Jim's sons are in their twenties, the focus on step-parenting will be on Jim's youngest teenage son for Patricia. Her oldest is in high school and youngest is entering the sixth grade, and both are girls. Jim hasn't had any experience parenting girls, but now he finds himself as their stepparent. It will be the intention of this thesis to provide these resource materials so that stepparents like Jim and Patricia can use them to navigate the "step-parenting waters" especially in the sensitive area of discipline.

Jim's youngest son, who's entering seventh grade and Patricia's youngest daughter whose entering sixth grade have already had some "fireworks" between them as

they both are used to the “last born” position in the family. This thesis gives the tools and steps to help couples like Jim and Patricia understand the “birth order hurdles and collisions” their children are having and how to deal with them effectively.

Jim comes to the new marriage with a house that is paid for, but Patricia comes with a home and a mortgage. A couple of Jim’s sons are in college and Patricia’s oldest will be going soon. Although there is some very good finance curriculum available, much of it doesn’t address the unique financial situations blended couples like Jim and Patricia face. Material in this thesis can be used to help Jim and Patricia make right financial decisions, get out of debt, and plan for the future of their blended family.

Jim’s previous wife passed away, but Patricia’s ex-husband lives in another state. Patricia was granted primary custody of her two daughters with her ex having visitation rights during the summers and holidays. The previous husband doesn’t get along with Jim, and has been difficult to deal with when it comes to picking dates for flying his daughters to see him. The help Patricia needs to co-parent effectively with her ex spouse cannot be found within the pages of the typical parenting book. It is the desire of the author of this thesis that Patricia and parents just like her can use the material found in this paper to effectively co-parent with her ex whether he is a “gem or a jerk.”

Jim and Patricia have five children between them. Even though Jim’s previous wife passed away, he still has his parents, her parents, brothers, sisters, brothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, aunts, and uncles who would like to see the kids over the holidays. Patricia has her ex husband, his parents, her parents, brothers, sisters, brothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, aunts, and uncles who all want to see her two daughters over the holidays as well. Typical books on celebrating the holidays and family traditions are worthless to

families like Jim and Patricia's. Both Jim and Patricia need to learn and model "ex-etiquette" when it comes to celebrating the holidays and family traditions. The resources found in this thesis will assist blended couples like Jim and Patricia experience the holidays with less stress and possibly enjoyment.

It is the desire of the author of this thesis to make these materials and resources available to the community and churches for events like couples retreats, seminars, conferences, financial seminars, Bible studies and small group gatherings in an effort to help the twenty-first century church become more effective in ministering to the increased numbers of blended families in this country.

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