



CHRISTIAN  
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**Anger, Intimacy,  
and the Crazy Cycle:  
Creating a Win-Win Marriage**

Paul Van Valin

**Beyond Forgiveness:  
Biblical and Psychological  
Dynamics of Reconciliation**

Jared Pingleton

**Life after Infidelity:  
Dealing with the Brokenness**

Sheri Keffer

**The Rationale and Effectiveness  
of Marriage Intensives**

Sharon May and Alan Hart

**Domestic Violence, Separation,  
Divorce, and the Bible**

Mark Gaither

**Children of Divorce:  
Minimizing the Divided Self**

Tammy and Jay Daughtry

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CONFLICT,  
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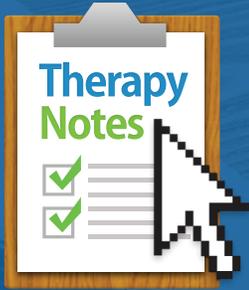
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## FEATURES

- 10 Anger, Intimacy, and the Crazy Cycle: Creating a Win-Win Marriage** *by Paul Van Valin.* Anger is a powerful human emotion that can be both sinful as well as a God-given, protective mechanism. As a clinical psychologist, Paul Van Valin believes that many times anger results from unmet needs and desires for intimacy, which produce confusion and conflict with our spouses as individual differences collide. He advocates that couples develop discipline, insight, and specific prayer to resolve arguments and create closeness.
- 16 Counseling High-conflict Couples** *by David Hawkins.* Most marriage therapists dread working with highly-conflictual couples. Trying to moderate chronic contentiousness is exhausting, stressful, and often ineffective. Author and clinical psychologist, David Hawkins, helps navigate therapists through the rough waves, swirling currents, and powerful tides of the stormy seas that fighting couples face with an insightful approach to understanding and helping these conflicted marriages.
- 20 Beyond Forgiveness: Biblical and Psychological Dynamics of Reconciliation** *by Jared Pingleton.* Conflicts exist in all marriages, which typically lead to forgiveness opportunities. However, for growth and intimacy to result from conflict, we must do more than forgive—we must reconcile. Although some people in the Church believe these two constructs are synonymous, Christian clinical psychologist, Jared Pingleton, outlines 10, key distinctions and offers a template for a healthy resolution to conflict resulting in true reconciliation.





**26 The Rationale and Effectiveness of Marriage Intensives**

*by Sharon May and Alan Hart.* Instead of traditional, 50-minute, weekly marital counseling, which can often be unfruitful, frustrating, and long-suffering, these authors propose a much more effective clinical model of intervention for hurting couples. Based on the theoretical paradigm of Emotionally Focused Therapy, Sharon May and Alan Hart discuss a comparatively advantageous and helpful framework of working with these couples on an intensive basis.

**35 Game Changers: Three, Transformative Truths Every Counselor Needs to Know to Encourage Healthy Marriages**

*by Shaunti Feldhahn.* What we do not know can hurt us... or at least not help us. Author and researcher, Shaunti Feldhahn, suggests clinicians need to know what she calls three “game changers” regarding the inflated divorce statistics our culture commonly accepts and how to build daily habits of intentional kindness toward one’s spouse—all of which she maintains will provide hope to hurting couples.

**38 Domestic Violence, Separation, Divorce, and the Bible** *by Mark Gaither.* The delicate, but brutal, topic of spousal abuse and domestic violence is a controversial subject in both the Church and clinics today. Mark Gaither offers a thoughtful discussion on many of the salient issues and dynamics that swirl around the unpleasant, but all too common, reality of domestic violence. He suggests we hold true to the biblical intentions of the design and purpose of the marital covenant but also accepts the uncomfortable fact that all humans need healing, redemption, and hopefully reconciliation. Rather than simplistic and reactionary “stay married or get divorced” thinking, Mark recommends the concept of healthy boundaries through therapeutic separation.

**42 Life after Infidelity: Dealing with the Brokenness**

*by Sheri Keffer.* Perhaps nothing hurts more than betrayal, rejection, and abandonment. Sheri Keffer shares from her own painful experience of marital infidelity and also compassionately provides results from her clinical research of people who have suffered the heartache of an unfaithful spouse. She then provides a seven-pronged, biblical and psychological framework within which to restore trust and safety for purposes of redemption and reconciliation.

**46 The Do's and Don'ts of Marital Separation**

*by Linda Mintle.* Our litigious culture often advocates divorce when marital distances, disappointments, and disputes become commonplace. Linda Mintle suggests a viable alternative to divorce using a biblically-based, therapeutic separation for many of these situations. Her insight offers helpful guidelines and procedures governing marital separations that can hopefully provide safe, effective, and growth-producing healing in fractured or conflictual marriages.

**50 Children of Divorce: Minimizing the Divided Self**

*by Tammy and Jay Daughtry.* Blended family experts, Tammy and Jay Daughtry, provide a beneficial, research-based discussion of the effects, alterations, and dynamics of divorce on children. Their wisdom is powerfully descriptive of the issues involved in understanding the impact on, and required adjustments for, children of divorce. Pastors, church leaders, parents, educators, and clinicians alike will be well-informed about the variety of challenges from this perceptive article.



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## Is Your Marriage Compatible or Combatale?

**Surely, no couple walks back down the aisle from their wedding ceremony believing their marriage will be the worst mistake of their lives. Presumably, most marrying couples are “in love” and feel happy, harmonious, and hopeful about their future lives together.**

**I**ronically reminiscent of the opening line from Charles Dickens’ classic book, *A Tale of Two Cities*, marriage can truly be the best of times and the worst of times. Perhaps nothing in the whole realm of creation can be more heavenly glorious, nor more horribly grotesque, than marriage. It is in a marriage that humans can experience some of God’s most exquisite ecstasies, as well as some of the adversary’s most awful agonies. Marriage can genuinely be either a marvelous blessing or a miserable curse.

In this issue of *CCT*, we want to explore what determines these differences, as well as offer some tools to help minister to many of the most significant challenges couples face. Surely, no couple walks back down the aisle from their wedding ceremony believing their marriage will be the worst mistake of their lives. Presumably, most marrying couples are “in love” and feel happy, harmonious, and hopeful about their future lives together. However, those who work with marriages know well that the idealistic bliss of the honeymoon seldom endures through the couple’s golden anniversary.

We know from clinical experience that many marriages lose that elusive, yet effervescent, “spark” early on in the relationship and those glowing feelings of love and desire are never rekindled. Work, children, financial stress, dysfunctional families of origin, and several other issues bring young, romantic couples’ heads out of the ethereal clouds causing them to experience the gravity of life rather abruptly—often crashing them back to earth with their heads spinning and hearts aching. However, even if there is no trauma

or drama... mediocre, monotonous, and mundane marriages are usually miserable. So what are we to do?

Let’s start at the beginning. In God’s grand and glorious love story to us, the Church—His bride, He begins and ends His intimate disclosure of Himself within the concept, and context, of marriage. From the first two chapters of Genesis (where God created the first couple and gave them blessing, provision, and dominion over the rest of His creation) to the last two chapters of Revelation (where the wondrous invitation of the wedding supper of the Lamb is described), God’s personhood and promises to His dearly beloved family are couched within human marital typology. And then near the middle of His book, we are given a vivid and visceral celebration of the intricate intimacies of marriage within the passionate prose of the Song of Songs.

Then what’s the problem? Why doesn’t this marital metaphor and message inspire us to live happily ever after, with God and our spouse? Well, the bad news is that Satan (and sin) makes his evil entrance into the world and the scriptural narrative in the third chapter of Genesis. The good news is, interestingly, he makes his eternal exit in chapter 20 of Revelation. The sobering reality is that we live suspended between the two sets of the story.

Consequently, we experience conflict. We have misunderstandings, hurts, confusion, betrayal, fear, abandonment, loneliness, shame, abuse, stress, alienation, and more. Whereas human marriage may be the highest prototype of God’s relational design, it is undoubtedly the most challenging relationship of all to do



well. In this issue of *CCT*, we want to provide tools to help marriages not just survive, but thrive.

We begin this edition with some insightful discussions about dealing with anger, conflict, and unresolved grievances which so frequently, and rapidly, degenerate into crazy cycles within most marriages. Paul Van Valin, David Hawkins, Jared Pingleton, Sharon May and Alan Hart draw from more than 175 combined years of professional and clinical experience to guide those who help couples learn how to facilitate potential win-win outcomes instead of suffering chronically hurtful or stalemated conflicts. Far from seeing conflict as intrinsically evil or dysfunctional, these authors believe productively managed conflict can be a powerful catalyst for growth and intimacy. Paul Van Valin helps us understand how to translate angry emotions into win-win scenarios; David Hawkins provides valuable insight into the dynamics of highly-conflicted couples and how to effectively minister to them; Jared Pingleton facilitates understanding

many of the complex challenges involved in moving beyond forgiveness to enable reconciliation of estranged couples; and Sharon May and Alan Hart describe the efficacy and effectiveness of utilizing an intensive, creative model of marital intervention to address serious spousal issues.

However, we know that many times there are not positive outcomes to marital hurts and difficulties. Sheri Keffer compassionately and courageously considers how to understand and address the heartache of betrayal involved in infidelity. Mark Gaither tackles the controversial issues involved in domestic violence and the painful implications of those difficulties for the future of marital relationships. Unfortunately, we have all had clients and parishioners who have not successfully handled the pain of broken hearts and vows; accordingly, Linda Mintle supplies readers with a strong understanding of the essential biblical and clinical factors and dynamics regarding marital separation and divorce. And addressing the impact of divorce on

children, Jay and Tammy Daughtry provide helpful principles for assisting the vulnerable who are involved in the devastation of divorce.

While these ugly and heart-breaking realities that surround marriage are painfully real, we nonetheless trust you will be blessed, strengthened, and encouraged by several inspiring articles that emphasize the redemptive, hopeful, biblical model and message of matrimony. Shaunti Feldhahn shares positive, helpful perspectives on marriage that will prove beneficial to those who minister to hurting and broken marriage relationships.

Developing and maintaining a healthy, mutually-beneficial marriage relationship requires commitment, dedication, prioritization, support, willingness, and ongoing hard work. This covenantal, “profound mystery” (Ephesians 5:32) is God’s ultimate design for relationships, families, and the Church. Let us renew our efforts—and indeed our vows—to make our marriages and those of the people with whom we work magnificent! ✨



# ***ANGER, INTIMACY, AND THE CRAZY CYCLE:***

CREATING A WIN-WIN MARRIAGE

All couples go a little crazy... at least once in a while.

Humans want to parent well, but we are all imperfect parents. Some lack empathy, nurture, and encouragement. Some are abusive. Whatever our backgrounds, we all want life-giving relationships, but we may be absent a role model or not even know what a healthy relationship looks like. We select mates while wearing the blinders of romance that hide the challenges to come. I am not sure what it means for my wife, Becky, but I am convinced that her inability to see all of my flaws is part of God's grace to me.

We seek that soulmate while selling an unsustainable better-than-normal version of self. As true intimacy develops, my needs come into conflict with my wife's needs. I am an introvert, while Becky is an extrovert. Early on, I would ask, "How long are we staying at this party?" She was dumbfounded that I would want to limit her capacity to socialize. It took several years for us to be able to understand each other. I needed to know how to parcel out my sociability, while she needed to recharge her social battery. Many of those conversations contained anger... sometimes expressed and received well, sometimes not.

The most significant conflicts come from spouses poking at open wounds or seeking exit strategies. From time to time, two people accidentally step on toes, but sometimes they stomp them on purpose. When conflicted communication becomes too frequent, intense or prolonged, we are killing our relationships. When one, or both, begins exit strategies, such as adultery, the significant anger needs to be expressed and received empathically. With tongue-in-cheek, I tell every adulterer, "You have earned a beating, and you're going to get it," meaning we cannot evade our spouses' feelings while we work on how to share anger constructively.

### **The Value of Anger**

Anger is a God-given emotion that helps preserve human life and relationships. Where it is not expressed, there exists a shallow, brittle relationship that will not manage normal stress. Anger communicates feeling, perspective, and desire. It protects, defends, and moves us to action. It expresses jealousy. There are many appropriate contexts to experience anger, and there is always a righteous expression. "Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. 'In your anger do not sin.' Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold" (Ephesians 4:25-27, NIV).

PAUL VAN VALIN

The marriage counselor teaches daily disciplines, such as taking “time outs,” to limit anger expression and encourages making daily, romance deposits in the “bank of love,” in addition to prayer, positive thinking, and expressing encouragement.



Anger often accompanies truth and is acknowledged by mature believers while not giving the devil a foothold. We read that Jesus Christ expressed a wide range of emotions in anger-inducing contexts, from being silent before His accusers to driving the moneychangers and merchants from the temple with violence. Also, God’s wrath was often very direct.

I use the biblical term, “sin,” throughout this article. In counseling and consulting sessions, I rarely utilize it as it evokes all manner of transference reactions and delays establishing the non-judgmental, safe relationship that facilitates growth. People have difficulty admitting sin or, often, even realizing that their expression of anger is sinful. We self-justify to defend and protect from shame. We hold others accountable and excuse ourselves to appear righteous. Helping couples gain motivation to change requires a very safe context in which their shame is skillfully managed so they can accept personal guilt and take responsibility.

My ideas and wishes are not all righteous, so I seek guidance from the Word of God, training, reflection on my past personal and professional mistakes, and the advice and stories of wise counselors. I take the “cord of three strands” mentioned in Ecclesiastes 4 literally and invite all clients to seek out three, wise advisors. Counseling often fails due to a lack of support that helps manage the stress of change. Counseling is unfinished until there is a “cord of three strands” and individuals can manage their emotional expression. Anger and conflict are not marital problems. Sinful expression is the problem.

### **Sinful Anger Gives the Devil a Foothold**

From murder to quiet contempt, there are many sinful expressions of anger. Any deviation from “love your neighbor as yourself” is a sin. The “deeds of the flesh” and “fruit of the Spirit” in Galatians 5 provide language for categorizing godly versus fleshly motives and outcomes and can measure the consequences of our choices. “Did this discussion yield more

deeds of the flesh or fruit of the Spirit?” Thus far, no one, either believer or non-believer, has objected or reacted defensively when I introduce these constructs compared to the unsophisticated use of “sin.” When introducing myself to new clients, both believers and non-believers, I ask for permission to “say stupid things sometimes” to obtain approval to use humor; then, I ask, “May I reference wisdom literature such as the Bible?” This short conversation is lighthearted and allows me to receive permission to be myself. Discretion is used with biblical references for non-believers, but overall I am relaxed and authentic in every session.

Violence is a common outcome of sinful anger. In their excellent book, *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking when Stakes are High*, Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler explain that most critical situations where feelings are strong and there is disagreement between two or more people are usually poorly done. They describe a continuum of “silence to violence.” Silence at one end involves the withdrawal of self and restricted communication (what John Gottman calls “stonewalling”) with both verbal and physical violence at the other. Most couples want to eliminate violence, except for truly abusive people who use it as a tool... but once a “silence to violence” response pattern is well ingrained in a marriage, a couple cannot end it alone.

### **Speaking the Truth in Love**

A fellow grad student was a self-professed follower of Jesus who behaved in ways that most evangelicals would label “un-Christian.” Another believer was complaining to me about this and stated she felt compelled to confront him. The tone she was using made it seem as though her goal was to “put him in his place” and lay on a load of shame.

I referenced Ephesians 4:15, “Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ,” and asked her to consider her motivation. “I can’t stand him, so love is probably not

my motivation,” she said. We have to help couples judge their motives and predict the consequences of speaking when angry.

Typically, the therapy that marriage counselors provide is more directive and active than that of individual counselors. We are coaches who set specific goals and plans with gracious flexibility and manage the direct expression of anger at all times. I allow clients a small amount of unfiltered anger to leave their systems, but always ask permission to use my judgment to interrupt, redirect or teach. I always get consent and am very active in crafting conversations that have value. Competence and confidence managing angry exchanges are paramount when dealing with adultery, physical violence, and people with severe character disorders, such as narcissism and obsessive/compulsive personalities. I say, “I want this to be a safe place, and if I let you go on for too long, you will find coming here discouraging.” We have to provide an experience different than what they can create on their own.

### **DIP into the Sea of Tranquility: Discipline, Insight, and Prayer**

Discipline is part of the believer’s life. The Apostle Paul metaphorically used boxing and racing many times. Athletes regularly discipline their diets and exercise regimes. The marriage counselor teaches daily disciplines, such as taking “time outs,” to limit anger expression and encourages making daily, romance deposits in the “bank of love,” in addition to prayer, positive thinking, and expressing encouragement. We help couples structure their time together to maximize positive interaction.

Insight may bring dramatic results. An entrepreneurial couple described a crazy cycle: The wife gets stumped on a problem and takes it to her husband. He provides an answer immediately, and she then yells and criticizes him. This was a six-year-old pattern they both thought was nuts. In 10 minutes, I referenced their PRO-D Comprehensive System scores and explained that while they were both very entrepreneurial, as in passionate, risk-taking, fast-paced and competitive, she was more administrative, while strategic thinking was his number one asset. She quickly asked, “So he can do something better than me, and I want to compete with him, so I tear him

down?” That brief conversation ended that crazy cycle. She concluded with, “Now I thank God for my strategic husband.”

Prayer can lead to miraculous breakthroughs. A pastor asked me to meet with one of his members, Jim, for breakfast. I listened to Jim’s tale that was loaded with frustrations spanning a decade. “I know pastor is hoping I will go to Virginia to spend a week with your team, but I am done. I will never divorce my wife, Adrienne, but I will just live my life the best I can. I can’t take any more hurt.” I knew a little of Jim’s history. He was very disciplined, devoted, and had a servant’s heart. It took a lot for him to put up these walls. I asked him if he would pray. “Of course,” he said. I described the “two-word” prayer, “Bless Adrienne,” and the “six-word” prayer, “Show me how to bless Adrienne.” This daily assignment is given to all of my couples. Jim promised he would pray these simple prayers daily, though he doubted it would do any good.

I saw him three months later. “How is it going, Jim?” I asked. “Terrible,” he said. “I have been praying that prayer and Adrienne is treating me better than she has in years.” “Keep praying,” I said. Three months later, I was back in Jim’s city and able to ask him, “How is it going?” “Worse than ever,” he said. “I am beginning to have positive feelings for her.” Jim and Adrienne eventually came to Virginia for a Leaders Marital Intensive Assessment and Consultation. God still answers prayers.

There are many tools, guides, classes, and trainers available to develop excellence in helping angry couples. A few resources are listed at the conclusion of this article. Assisting angry people to make peace is very, very satisfying. ✕



PAUL VAN VALIN, PH.D., *founded Eden Counseling and Consulting, and Eden Leaders Institute in Virginia Beach, Virginia in 1995. Paul and his wife, Becky, will celebrate 42 years of marriage this year. Author of Win Every Argument, Win Every Heart: A Leader’s Guide to Effective Communication, Paul has been helping leaders, teams, and couples improve communication for more than 40 years. Paul is a PRO-D Comprehensive Assessment Certified Coach and Distributor and loves to help people increase intimacy with God, self, and others.*

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:**

- *Win Every Argument, Win Every Heart: A Leader’s Guide to Effective Communication* by Paul Van Valin
- *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High (Second Edition)* by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler
- AACC Light University resources
- Books and Certification Training from John Gottman
- “Four Session Marriage Counseling and Essentials of Pre-marital Counseling” by Paul Van Valin on YouTube®



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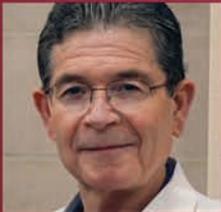
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- EBCC 105: Identifying Problems Treatable by Counseling
- EBCC 106: Christian Counseling for Depression/Anxiety – Part 1
- EBCC 107: Christian Counseling for Depression/Anxiety – Part 2
- EBCC 108: Moral Injury in the Setting of Life Trauma
- EBCC 109: Christian Counseling for Moral Injury – Part 1
- EBCC 110: Christian Counseling for Moral Injury – Part 2
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# COUNSELING HIGH-CONFLICT COUPLES



There is little more frustrating to a clinician than feeling inadequate in a counseling situation... when the challenge before us appears to exceed our capabilities. When our task involves helping a highly-conflicted couple, we often not only sense their tension but, at times, also feel overwhelmed by the pressure, which makes our assignment even more difficult.

I consider myself a seasoned marriage counselor; however, highly-conflicted couples sometimes strain my capabilities. Can you relate? I feel excited at the prospect of helping another couple, while simultaneously experiencing a degree of anxiousness about the challenge. High-conflict couples are often engaged in intense power struggles, each partner trying to get something from his or her mate, yet doing so in ways that exacerbate the problem. They demand, blame, punish and coerce, hardly noticing their actions are adding fuel to the fire... and then we step into the arena.

Fortunately, we have help in our endeavors. Author and psychologist, Marshall Rosenberg, wrote in his book, *Non-violent Communication: A Language of Life*, that highly-conflicted couples are trapped in power struggles with one another, using “life-alienating language” filled with judgments about rightness and wrongness, goodness and badness. He discovered that couples who try to control each other often end up in conflict, whereas couples who are accepting of one another are much more likely to connect.

Our mission is to help couples rid themselves of alienating, defensive, self-defeating actions and embrace life-giving, connecting behaviors. It is a fascinating area, and I invite you to learn more about how you can assist.

### Common Dynamics of High-conflict Couples

Whatever field of practice we enter, we must be trained and have a certain level of competence. First, a person must decide if he or she really wants to do this work. Not all do, or should. If this is a capacity where you want to specialize, begin by learning about high-conflict couples and the best practices for treatment.

Some common characteristics of high-conflict couples and areas of focus and intervention for our work include:

- **Couples locked into oppositional stances** – viewing a mate as “the enemy” and someone to fight rather than seek ways to foster trusting collaboration
- **Couples frequently angry with one another** – failure to manage emotions, causing them to become angry, passive-aggressive, and subsequently failing to “think straight” rather than using emotionally-balanced communication
- **Couples with poor conflict-resolution/communication skills** – inability to stay issue-focused, share feelings, and speak respectfully to communicate in healthy, uplifting, and solution-focused ways
- **Couples with poor impulse control** – inability to talk about one issue at a time, manage emotion, and stay solution-focused instead of managing emotion and maintaining a healthy outcome to the conversation
- **Couples using reprisal for talking openly about concerns** – exhibiting little ability to tolerate worries of a mate or consider legitimate concerns that need attention in order to embrace critical feedback and seek deeper, more meaningful conversations
- **Couples with a tendency to blame and find fault** – viewing the actions of a mate in critical, negative ways, assigning hurtful motives, and behaving in an unbelievable manner he or she will never acknowledge, as opposed to perceiving behavior as a legitimate expression of underlying, unmet needs
- **Couples who express rigidly held beliefs about the other** – little ability to view his or her mate positively, alter perspective or note any strengths or helpful movement rather than considering various, contrasting aspects that challenge narrow, unhealthy beliefs
- **Couples who offer little insight into their contribution to existing problems** – little ability to monitor actions or see his or her role in existing difficulties instead of owning his or her part in the current situation and being determined to work on a solution

DAVID HAWKINS



These issues, fully understood and incorporated into our practices, will guide our work with high-conflict couples. We can develop strategies for assisting couples in letting go of attitudes and behaviors that ultimately serve to create even more conflict and disconnection.

### Challenges to Diagnostic Considerations

As we work with high-conflict couples, it is natural and helpful to think about diagnoses. Addressing the problem is an integral aspect of our training and trade. Yet, while we are trained to render accurate diagnoses, challenges arise when counseling high-conflict couples.

We often focus on the couple, *not the individual*. Subsequently, we frequently focus on *interpersonal* dynamics, not *intrapersonal* ones. It is easy to lose perspective that the way an individual behaves during counseling may or may not be representative of how he or she functions in the world. If focused on “couple-functioning,” we may lose sight of individual functioning and “forget” there are individuals involved as we

note the exchange between the two. When we meet with couples, we subsequently have limited ability or time to spend with each partner to determine what is actually happening.

With these issues in mind, we have a responsibility to be mindful of the couples in our presence and how they relate to one another, but also how they function as individuals in the relationship. We must assess and ensure that each person is fully capable of being involved in active couples work. Additionally, we need to realize when to refer someone for individual counseling instead of, or before, joint therapy.

### Gender Differences in Conflict

Do men and women deal with conflict differently? Remember what John Gray taught us in his groundbreaking book, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, where he wrote: “Men mistakenly expect women to think and react the way men do; women mistakenly expect men to feel, communicate and respond the way women do. We have forgotten that men and women are supposed to be different. As a result, our relationships are filled with unnecessary friction and conflict.” Indeed, men and women are different.

Studies suggest women are more likely to assert themselves when attempting to resolve conflict, while men tend to avoid controversy. Men are inclined to be passive, passive-aggressive or outright aggressive. Women cope with conflict within the context of strong, negative effects much more competently than men. I agree with these findings and see this in my practice daily. As a result, I work diligently to help clients recognize and appreciate not only gender differences but also the distinctions residing within their particular and unique marriages.

### How Can Clinicians Effectively Intervene?

Taking all of these high-conflict issues into consideration, we have an exciting opportunity to intervene at a time and in a way that can have a profound influence on couples. Couples work is rarely easy, and moving into a high-

Successful intervention and treatment begin after assessing that both individuals are emotionally capable and willing to participate in the rigors of couples counseling.

conflict situation is not unlike entering a battle zone. We must determine if we are willing and prepared to enter this challenging arena.

We all know when a marriage is not going well, the individuals involved are typically not doing well either. When stressed out at home, we do not function optimally. However, working with high-conflict couples in our profession is a way to help individuals, couples, and even families facilitate peace.

Successful intervention and treatment begin after assessing that both individuals are emotionally capable and willing to participate in the rigors of couples counseling. By using essential insight, emotional balance, and strength, skilled marriage counselors can begin the process of helping high-conflict couples identify the issues fueling the fires of conflict, as well as assist them in connecting and gaining expertise in communicating effectively. Teaching

communication and conflict resolution skills will help couples manage their emotions and put issues in perspective to cultivate real intimacy.

Are you ready to enter this field of practice? As a teacher and friend, sitting with high-conflict couples during their journeys can be life-changing, both for the counselor and client. ✦



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# Beyond Forgiveness:

## BIBLICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DYNAMICS OF RECONCILIATION

Conflict is inevitable in close human relationships... and if you disagree with me, then that proves the point! Couples who maintain they do not experience conflict likely have such a superficial relationship that they rarely get close enough to experience friction. Or, perhaps worse, they are locked in abject, resolute denial.

Conflict exists in marriage because: 1) we are in proximity to another human and experience friction; 2) we are all different from one other, yet naively and arrogantly expect the other person to be like us (which, of course, is the “right” way); 3) we are all fallen, fleshly, flawed, selfish, shame-filled sinners; 4) we subconsciously expect the other person to be perfect—always meeting our needs and never letting us down; and 5) we all have spouses who suffer from an inherent mate selection deficiency. Whew! And perhaps the greatest irony of all is that nearly everyone coming to marital therapy does so with the implicit goal to change their spouse because, if they could, they could live happily ever after!

When conflict is not successfully resolved, it can create deterioration, destruction, and dysfunction within the relationship. Unhealed hurts lead to unintended divisions, which lead to unbridged distances that typically lead to unhealthy acting out or medicating the pain. Over time, unresolved conflict can create patterns of festering grudges and harbored resentments resulting in toxic bitterness and severe marital discord.



Of course, we all know as Christians that we are commanded to forgive—repeatedly and unconditionally. Unfortunately, in the Church, we are often implicitly, if not explicitly, taught that forgiveness and reconciliation are, in essence and function, synonymous. However, that simplistic notion is not only fundamentally and entirely incorrect; it is a misleading and potentially dangerous fallacy both theologically and psychologically. Often, people hesitate or even refuse to forgive someone who harmed them—wrongly believing that if they do so, they will have to make themselves vulnerable again prematurely or ill-advisedly.

While we all know we should not only forgive, but also reconcile the differences and disputes in our marriage, we are rarely taught what that looks like or how it works. Far from interchangeable, the concepts and processes of forgiveness and reconciliation, respectively, are in many dynamic ways opposites of one another and possess at least 10 crucial, practical, and functional distinctions:

**1.** To begin with, the definitions of these two concepts are very different when describing the role and function of each in a relationship. Forgiveness means “*to excuse, to pardon, to remit or cancel*” a debt, hurt or offense. Reconciliation addresses the interpersonal separation caused by the injury and describes efforts “*to bring estranged persons together again in love or friendship.*” Functionally, forgiveness is best understood as “giving up our right to hurt back.” Without the prerequisite of forgiveness absolving the offense, it is impossible to restore the breach in the relationship. Reconciliation is clearly not the same as forgiveness; rather, it is the desired outcome or result. Thus, it is impossible to reconcile without forgiveness—though it is possible (and, again, commanded) to forgive without reconciling.

JARED PINGLETON

From the outset, it is crucial to note that forgiveness is biblically mandated, whereas reconciliation is biblically preferred.

2. From the outset, it is crucial to note that *forgiveness is biblically mandated*, whereas *reconciliation is biblically preferred*. The Bible distinctly calls and commands us to forgive everyone and everything (Matthew 6:12-15; 18:21-35; Mark 11:25; Luke 6:37; Colossians 3:13; Ephesians 4:32). This is to not only emulate the forgiving love of the Father, but also to free us from the burden of holding grudges, resentments, and bitterness—which make us toxic and relationally unsafe. Furthermore, and very significantly, withholding forgiveness makes us unable to receive God’s forgiveness (it is reasonable to conclude from studying the previous passages that unforgiveness blocks our receptivity of God’s love, grace, and mercy—making unforgiveness functionally unforgivable).

3. Since the biblical onus to forgive is on the person who experienced the offense, *no apology is necessary* from the offender to achieve forgiveness. However, to potentially reconcile, *an apology is needed* from the person(s) who wronged or harmed the offended. An apology essentially acknowledges and accepts personal responsibility for one’s offense whether in attitude or action. As such, when reconciliation is desired, it is vital to help the person who was hurt feel an empathetic concern or godly sorrow (see 2 Corinthians 7:10) from his or her offender for the pain and express appropriate remorse and repentance. At times, an apology may not be enough; there are instances when restitution is biblically indicated (Exodus 22:3-14; Leviticus 5:16; Numbers 5:7). Conversely, no apology or action of any kind is necessary from an offender for an injured person to forgive.

4. Consequently, forgiveness is an exclusively *unconditional* phenomenon. No one can make another person forgive them, no one can earn or deserve to be forgiven, and no one can truly place limits or parameters on forgiveness. God simply gives and forgives out of His nature and character. Thus, we know we are never more like God when, like Him, we fully and freely forgive those who hurt us. On the other hand, never do we allow offenders to control us more than when we choose not to forgive them (interestingly, we can even permit an offender to control us from the grave). However, reconciling must always be fundamentally *conditional*. Theologically-speaking, for us to be restored into a healthy relationship with God, we must confess our transgressions and humbly repent from those sinful attitudes and actions. For interpersonal reconciliation, this same process must also take place between the offender and offended parties, which potentiates restoration of trust and the creation of psychological safety, potentially leading to relational reunification.

5. Consequently, forgiveness is inherently an *intrapersonal* matter, whereas reconciliation is decidedly and patently *interpersonal*. Forgiveness actually has nothing to do with the offender; it is an attitude and decision that takes place within the person offended. On the other hand, the purpose of reconciliation is a transactional process between the two people involved in whatever offense or injury necessitated the forgiveness of the offender (to compound things further in a relationship, frequently both individuals experience damage from the other spouse whether intended or not and, therefore, both must forgive before reconciliation can be accomplished).

6. Forgiveness, then, is a *unilateral* attitude and action, whereas reconciliation is a *mutually-oriented* and directed dynamic. In other words, forgiving takes only one person and has nothing to do with the other individual’s response(s), but reconciling takes (at least) two people to effect and requires active participation and agreement for both to align with one another. Much



like a marriage covenant, which is simultaneously activated by each spouse whether the mate reciprocates or not (i.e., a spouse is to love his/her mate and keep his/her vows regardless of whether the other person does or does not), reconciliation requires both parties to choose to make peace and reach out again.

**7.** Undoubtedly, forgiveness is inherently and functionally *idealistic* in both theory and practice. Attaining the ideal, but required, standard of godliness involved in the forgiveness process does not depend on anyone or anything and reflects and promotes the character of Christ within us as we exercise His command. However, we need to understand that to risk reconciling with a person we have forgiven for hurting us needs to be completely *realistic*. We must count the cost (see the building project metaphor in Luke 14:28-30) before we risk reaching out and potentiating reinjury or worse.

**8.** For forgiveness, it is altogether *unnecessary to establish trust*; but to reconcile, it is absolutely *necessary to re-establish trust*. Because of the previously mentioned characteristics and qualities of forgiveness, trust is an entirely irrelevant factor in the forgiveness process. However, we know that trust is the basic building block of all healthy relationships. Attachment theory teaches that nothing is more crucial to the formation of healthy relationships than the infant's pure sense of trust and dependency on the reliability and consistency of the caregiver(s). It is essential to rebuild and restore confidence within a broken or betrayed relationship to heal a relational breach, transgression, infidelity or violation.

**9.** *Forgiveness restores the individual* (and possibly others; see the fascinating principle of Matthew 18:18, which

is contextualized between two illustrations of forgiveness), whereas *reconciliation restores the relationship*. Forgiving can set us free from our literal or figurative imprisonments; reconciling can liberate relational bondages and constraints.

**10.** Finally, *forgiveness potentiates healing for both parties*; whereas, interestingly, *reconciliation potentiates healing and prevents further hurt for both parties*. Some may see the paramount goal as reconciliatory bliss resulting in living happily ever after, but we all know when we reconcile, we are bound to get hurt again. Intimacy does promise happiness but also increases the potential for hurt.

Conflict is definitely complex and complicated. Helping couples negotiate and navigate their differences successfully can be very challenging, but also tremendously rewarding. This ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-19) is indeed a high and holy calling, and it must begin with the most powerful principle of the Gospel... forgiveness. ✦

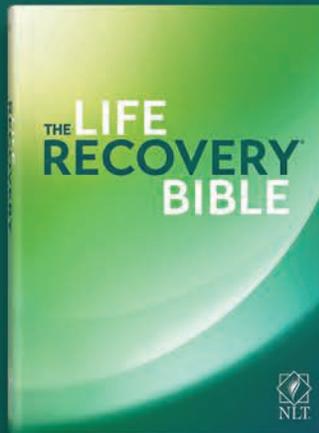


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A respected leader in the Christian mental health field, Jared has been in professional practice since 1977 offering help, hope, and healing to thousands of individuals, couples, families, and churches and has authored or co-authored eight books, as well as numerous journal articles.



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The Rationale and Effectiveness of

# Marriage Intensives

The marriage counseling field has gone through significant changes in the past 25 years. When I, Sharon, entered this line of work in the mid-90s, it was abuzz with change. Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) and other models were challenging the field to shift away from modifying behaviors and teaching communication skills to instead focus on the emotional bond that connects partners to one another. This philosophical shift trickled over into the counseling room where clearly outlined models, such as EFT, focused on helping couples foster a more secure and loving attachment bond.

The winds of change are blowing again in the marriage counseling field, bringing with them not a new therapeutic model, but a fresh way to structure couples therapy called the intensive model. The marriage intensive model is emerging as a highly-effective and impactful way of working with couples to bring about significant and lasting change. In the late 1990s, after training in EFT, I eagerly entered the marriage counseling field and quickly discovered my passion for the intensive model structure. After years of trial and error (I have conducted more than 700 intensives with individual couples, and many more in the group setting), I carved out the Safe Haven Marriage Intensive Model.

In my experience of conducting weekly counseling sessions, I experienced frustrations, for both myself and my clients, because I knew what I could do if couples were able to stay another two hours or two days. The nine steps of EFT clearly outlined the process for walking couples from distress and disconnection to healing and emotional connection. I was hopeful to walk couples through all the steps in one swoop over a few consecutive days. However, I discovered that sitting with couples for more extended periods allowed the conversations to unfold and emotions to be accessed and processed without the feared words, *“Well, that is all the time we have; we will have to pick this up next week.”* Greater therapeutic opportunities opened up when I knew I was not restricted by the clock.

This extended time enabled me to guide couples to get to the heart of their issues, make significant shifts, and find solutions. Then, weekly, follow-up sessions for about two months helped solidify changes and create a new way of interacting that led to solutions that fit into couples’ real-life circumstances.

### **What is the Marriage Intensive?**

In a marriage intensive, couples come for counseling over an extended period. The traditional, one-hour-per-week sessions are expanded to several days. The therapy can be with one or two counselors and one couple or conducted in a group of three to five couples. For this article, we will focus on the private marriage intensive with one counselor and one couple.

A marriage intensive is a way for couples to get to the heart of their distress and begin a journey of healing and connection, all in a few days. Whether it is healing from years of slow disconnection, accumulation of hurts or deep wounds as a result of betrayal, couples are guided as they dig deep to recover and love each other well.

SHARON MAY AND ALAN HART



One husband summarized it this way, “*The stereotype is that real men don’t usually sit on a couch this long talking about feelings, but I really do want to understand myself, heal my marriage, and know how to love my wife. And the intensive was the way to do it... the best way possible.*”

### Why Couples Choose an Intensive

At the Safe Haven Relationship Center, we have identified a few, significant reasons why couples seek a marriage intensive as opposed to weekly marriage counseling.

- **Couple “stuckness.”** There are times when both the counselor and the couple get stuck and cannot make the necessary breakthroughs. Couples are then left disappointed in the lack of progress after several months of counseling.
- **Revolving door of counselors.** Having gone through numerous marriage counselors with little success, the thought of starting over with yet another is disheartening.
- **Couples are highly motivated.** Couples want more from their marriages. They do not want to continue living hurt and disconnected and are motivated to make their unions work. Many couples come to our intensives as a last-ditch effort, often not sure if they should stay or leave their marriages. The intensive can be a powerful experience, as couples are able to either achieve healing in their relationships or make sense of why they are separating.



### Why is the Marriage Intensive Structure Effective for Counselors?

The intensive model sets a different framework for not only couples, but also counselors. The extended time allows counselors to follow their therapeutic structure, keep momentum, and not lose traction in the counseling process.

As any counselor knows, working through the healing steps to help couples emotionally connect is difficult. This is

especially true when couples begin each counseling session revisiting the argument of the week. I am sure other therapists have heard debates like: *“Please tell him how wrong he was for not calling to tell me he would be late; I thought you told him in our last session he needs to call me.”* As a result, counselors, often spend the first half of a session being an understanding witness to disagreements... and after calming tempers, containing hurts, and refocusing to get back to the marital model steps, half or more of the allotted time has been consumed.

At one time or another, counselors get stuck in their work with couples. However, referring couples to a marriage intensive provides them with a new marriage-shifting experience where they can then return to their therapists for meaningful follow-up sessions. This innovative concept creates a win-win for both couples and counselors.

Additionally, many couples live in areas where there are few marriage counselors and resources available. The intensive model offers a solution that allows couples to experience effective marriage counseling through the investment of a few days of concentrated, focused attention.

### **Keep in Mind**

There are times when an intensive may not be the best option for couples. Each spouse needs to be assessed for readiness, attend willingly, and not be involved in any current abuse, affairs or addictions. It is best if disclosures are made before the intensive; and if they arise during therapy, the goals will need to shift.

Know your therapeutic marital model well, as well as the model in the intensive format. Many counselors believe the intensive model is just extending the counseling session length. Although longer sittings are productive, counselors have to know what to do with the extended time to maximize its productiveness. As therapists, it is crucial to understand what you want to accomplish during the intensive, what experience you want couples to have, and what it will take to bring about change. It is essential that you are clear on what to do each hour of the intensive. By understanding the model you work from well and re-learning it with the intensive format in mind, you will be able to move through the therapeutic process over a few days. During treatment where therapists are required to work with couples hour after hour, it is not possible to go home, clear your mind, get supervision, and return with a new plan for the next session the following week. It is imperative to know where you are going and what interventions will get you there.

One critique of the marriage intensive is that profound change cannot happen over just a few days. In our clinical work and follow-up sessions with more than 700 couples, we have experienced that through the intensive format it is possible to make the same lasting transformation as seen in weekly therapy, and often more effectively. Follow-up sessions are always meaningful and solidify changes as couples work to make them real in their daily lives. Some couples need the space between weekly meetings to process, re-group, allow their hearts to shift or practice what they have learned.

**At one time or another, counselors get stuck in their work with couples. However, referring couples to a marriage intensive provides them with a new marriage-shifting experience where they can then return to their therapists for meaningful follow-up sessions.**

When couples venture to attend an intensive and spend an extended time on the counselor's couch, it is a courageous journey. They arrive with many anticipatory fears, just as they do with weekly counseling sessions: *What will we talk about for the next several days? Will we run out of things to say? Will they gang up on me? This is our last-ditch effort... what if it doesn't work?* Also, couples arrive with some unrealistic expectations: *I brought my husband, now change him* or *I came so you can tell my wife how wrong she is.* However, once in the intensive, couples are surprised at how quickly the days go by, the ease of the process, and how satisfying it is to "get to the heart of it all" and go through the deep work necessary to grow as a person and love well.

As a counselor, it is essential to be aware that you are part of what God is doing in the lives and marriages of the couples in your presence. You are on holy ground. It will, therefore, serve you well to obtain the best training possible and know your model and the progressive process of an intensive. It is also recommended that you and your spouse attend a marriage intensive as participants, as the best way to learn is to experience it firsthand. ✦



SHARON MAY, PH.D., is the originator of *Safe Haven Marriage Intensives*, and founder of the *Safe Haven Relationship Center* in Carlsbad, California. She is a certified *Emotionally Focused Therapy* supervisor and co-author of *Safe Haven Marriage: Building a Relationship You Want To Come Home To*. If you have questions or want further information about marriage intensives, or intensives for families and individuals, please contact Dr. May at [grow@havenofsafety.com](mailto:grow@havenofsafety.com).



ALAN HART, M.S., conducts *Safe Haven Marriage, Family, and Individual Intensives* and is part of fostering healthy communities where people can grow and live well.

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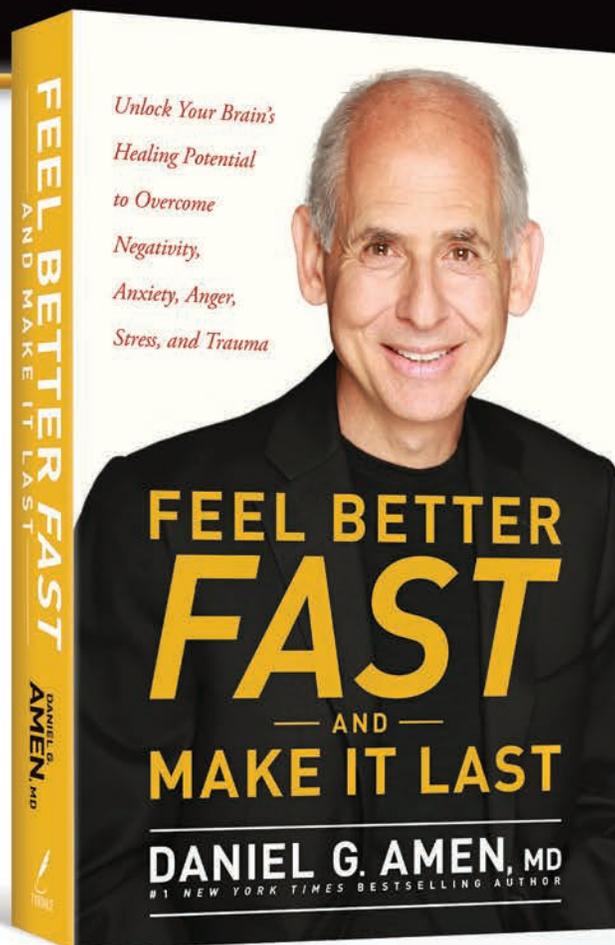
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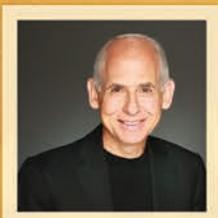
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\*Understanding Counselor Liability Risk, NSO and CNA, March 2014.

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# Game Changers:

## Three, Transformative Truths Every Counselor Needs to Know to Encourage Healthy Marriages

As Christian counselors, you witness firsthand the heartache of couples in struggling marriages. You hear their hard stories, but also get to encourage them toward healing and unity. You get to give them hope. And yet... you need hope, too! It can be difficult to hear these stories day after day. The enemy probably whispers in your ear the lie that there's very little hope to be had.

So based on 15 years of rigorous research, I want to share three, game-changing truths that will give both *your clients* and *you* hope. These “high-leverage” truths are surprising facts that are very simple and effective at heading off many of the problems facing couples today. You will see this knowledge soften hearts and truly transform relationships.

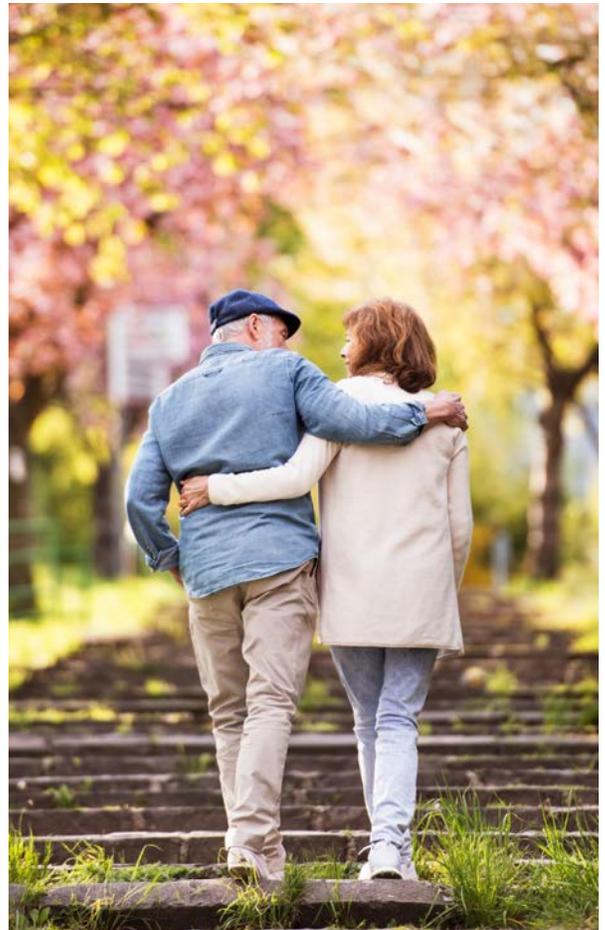
**Game-changing Truth #1: The 50% divorce rate is a myth, and the rate of divorce is much lower in the Church.** This truth was the most significant research shocker of my career. For years, I believed the divorce rate was 50% and the same in the Church. And I knew those “facts” made it far easier for struggling couples to lose hope and give up. Then I saw some very contradictory Census Bureau data. After investigating the complex statistics for eight years, I debunked this damaging urban legend in my 2014 book, *The Good News about Marriage*. The fact is: the vast majority of marriages last a lifetime, and those who stick with troubled marriages usually make it!

A bit of detail... the divorce rate for society as a whole is not, and has never been, close to 50%. Only very high-risk groups have gotten that high (like those who marry as teenagers). There is no way to measure the exact divorce rate, but for first-time marriages, it appears to fall somewhere around 25%. And if those in the “most troubled” marriages category stick with it, 80% are very happy five years later!

Even better, church attendance significantly reduces divorce. We have all misunderstood the Barna studies, which did not examine whether or not the survey-taker *went to church*. We partnered with Barna and re-ran the numbers with church attendance included. Bottom line? According to the Barna numbers and every other study done on this subject, regular attendance drops the divorce rate anywhere from 25-50%—or more! According to a Harvard study that came out since my book was published, once-weekly church attendance reduced divorce risk by 57% (*Religion and Health: A Synthesis*; VanderWeele, 2017).

Countless Christian leaders I have spoken with have been discouraged by the false belief otherwise. As one pastor put it, “If the rate of divorce is the same in the Church, despite all my hard work, then all my hard work doesn’t mean very much.” And as one churchgoer said, “If on something as crucial as marriage doing what the Bible says makes no difference... what does that mean about the Bible?”

SHAUNTI FELDHAHN



Hear me on this... you can boldly proclaim the truth *that church attendance does matter...* that doing what God asks *does* change everything! I have seen firsthand the all-important hope and motivation that returns to even the most difficult marriages when a couple hears the awesome truth that most such marriages make it and, that if they will plug into church community and not give up, they can make it too.

**Game-changer #2: Husbands and wives can speak life into their marriages by understanding the most important factor in their spouses' emotional security.** After surveying thousands of men and women, especially for my books, *For Women Only* and *For Men Only*, the most crucial game-changers for the emotional health of marriages are these: husbands need to reassure their wives of their love and wives need to appreciate and respect their husbands (which, of course, comes straight from Ephesians 5:33).

Wives need to know that at least 75-85%

of men look confident but have a great deal of self-doubt. It is so easy for a man to feel inadequate—which is his most painful feeling. He wonders, “Am I any good at what I do?” and looks to his wife for signals about the answer to that question. So, when she avoids the knee-jerk comments that he sees as criticism (e.g., “Why did you dress the kids like that in this weather?”) and looks for ways to show appreciation, the results are astonishing.

In particular, we discovered that “thank you” is the equivalent of “I love you” for a man. “Thank you for taking the trash out” and “Thank you for working so hard to provide for us” hits the priceless mark for men. A man who hears these compliments throughout the day will *feel* in his bones that his wife cares about him—which prevents many, many problems.

On her side, a husband usually does not realize that his wife will not feel permanently loved just because she’s married! At least 80-90% of women have an inner question that asks, “Am I loveable?” which in marriage translates to, “Does he really love me?” and “Is he glad he married me?” She is looking to her husband for signals about the answers to those questions. So, when he purposefully looks for little, daily ways to show his love to her, it sends a priceless message. When he reaches to take her hand when walking across a parking lot, it says, “I’m so glad I married you.” And when they are in an argument and he says, “Look, I need to get some space, but we’re okay,” it creates a powerful reassurance in her.

**Game-changer #3: Building the daily habits of showing intentional kindness transforms people.** Scripture commands us to be kind to one another (Ephesians 4:32), and most of us think we *are* kind. We do not realize we are a bit deluded! In our research for *The Kindness Challenge*, we discovered three, simple, daily actions that can transform people and repair any type of relationship!

We call it the “30-day Kindness Challenge.” You can see more at [www.jointhekindnesschallenge.com](http://www.jointhekindnesschallenge.com), but here’s how it works for marriage. For 30 days, the person doing the Challenge says nothing negative about his or her spouse (either to or about him or her to anyone else), finds one thing to praise or affirm each day, and performs one, small act of kindness or generosity for his or her husband or wife.

The results blew my mind! Fully 89% saw an improvement in their relationships—even though the effort was all one-sided. We also discovered that this exercise thoroughly retrained his or her mindset resulting in much less overall negativity. This improvement even happened in very troubled relationships. Talk about game-changing!

As you counsel those in hurting marriages, you have an incredible opportunity to share these simple relationship game-changers. For 15 years, my main priority has always been to support those of you who are on the front lines helping people in their relationships and faith. I am so grateful for what you do. As you continue to pour into marriages, I pray you will see hope restored—both for you and your clients. ✨

*NOTE: “Game Changers: Three Transformative Truths Every Counselor Needs to Know to Encourage Healthy Marriages” by Shaunti Feldhahn is an edited excerpt of “Game Changers: Five Transformative Truths Every Pastor Needs To Know” published in the March 2018 issue of Ministry International Journal for Pastors, [www.MinistryMagazine.org](http://www.MinistryMagazine.org). Used by permission.*



SHAUNTI FELDHAWN, MPP, is a social researcher, popular speaker, and best-selling author. Her books, including *For Women Only* and *The Kindness Challenge*, uncover the small truths that make significant differences in relationships. Shaunti earned her Master of Public Policy (MPP) degree from Harvard and resides in Atlanta, Georgia.

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# **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, SEPARATION, DIVORCE, AND THE BIBLE**

“These bruises and scars are from my spouse.” Those can be divisive words, not only for the abused person and his or her partner, but also for the church they attend. That’s because systematic theology and practical theology often exist in tension, and no one feels the strain more keenly than Christian counselors. Compassion and common sense say the couple must separate for her safety and, very often, the safety of their children. Church pastors and elders, however, may not agree.

A 2015 LifeWay Research survey of 1,000 Protestant pastors asked, “Do you consider divorce a sin when an individual is being abused by his/her spouse?” Twenty-eight percent answered, “Yes.”<sup>1</sup> This number represents only a slight change from a survey conducted by James and Phyllis Alsdurf, authors of *Battered into Submission: The Tragedy of Wife Abuse in the Christian Home*, in 1989. They asked pastors to determine when they would support a battered woman’s decision to separate from—not necessarily divorce—her abuser.

“One-third of the respondents felt the abuse would have to be life-threatening. Almost one-fifth believed that no amount of abuse would justify a woman leaving, while one in seven felt a moderate expression of violence would be justification enough. The remainder interpreted ‘occasional’ violence as grounds for leaving.... Only 2% of the pastors said they would support divorce in situations of violence.”<sup>2</sup>

To explain their rationale, many would likely cite Matthew 19:1-12. This passage describes the Lord’s encounter with a group of Pharisees, who asked the loaded question, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for

any cause?” (v. 3, ESV). Take note of the phrase, “for any cause.” They asked, in essence, “Is it permissible to divorce one’s wife for any reason a husband finds suitable?”<sup>3</sup>

Jesus offered three points to reframe their perspective on marriage. *First, rather than seeking morally permissible ways to end marriages, we should devote our creative energies to keeping them intact.* Jesus recalled the creation story and God’s original design for marriage to show that our Creator intended for one man and one woman to be joined for life in a divine union that no one should sever. Sadly, the religious leaders were seeking loopholes rather than honoring the blessing of marriage and the sanctity of the marriage covenant.

*Second, legal paperwork does not make a marriage, and a legal document cannot unmake a marriage.* Yes, marriage is a contract between people, but it is also much more. It is a union sealed and celebrated by God. A man and woman are joined by His sovereign decree, not by the authority of a clergyman, church or public official. These earthly authorities merely attest to what God has done. Jesus asserted that a certificate of divorce on earth does not change God’s view of a couple’s marriage.

MARK GAITHER



*Third, one must accept the lifelong implications of marriage before entering a covenant sealed by God.* To illustrate the gravity of marital commitment, Jesus drew upon a familiar figure in those days: the eunuch. The defining characteristic of a eunuch is castration, after which a man could neither marry nor procreate. Obviously, one does not experiment with this decision; it is permanent from the outset.

While all three synoptic Gospels recount the Lord's teaching on marriage and God's desire for both partners to remain committed until death, Matthew's account includes the phrase, "except on the ground of sexual immorality." He undoubtedly included this particular exception because Joseph, "... a just man... resolved to divorce her (Mary) quietly" (1:19) when he thought she had been unfaithful.

From this "exception clause," we learn that a marriage sealed by God can be broken by the sin of one or both partners. This, however, begs the question, "Is sexual immorality the only permissible grounds for divorce?" Did Jesus set out to articulate a comprehensive view of divorce and remarriage, or did He reestablish a lost theological principle to correct a distorted perspective, namely "divorce for any reason?"

Some Christian leaders would say yes, that the only moral justification for pursuing divorce is a sexual sin. They also recognize that someone who is abandoned or unjustly divorced cannot be held accountable for the sin of another (1 Corinthians 7:15). So, many feel bound by Scripture to reject any grounds for divorce other than sexual immorality or abandonment and do not support separation, even to protect an abused spouse from further harm. However, is this reasonable? This rationale appears to fall into the category of unwarranted biblicism, a simplistic proof-texting that limits application to only what

the Bible explicitly states and ignores any broader implications.

If the Lord's response in Matthew 19:1-12 (and 5:31-32) represents His comprehensive view of moral grounds for divorce, then a wide range of deviant or destructive behaviors does not qualify, including physical battery, spousal rape, ongoing felony crime or unchecked substance abuse. At the risk of sensationalizing the point, a married person could pursue a divorce in response to an adulterous affair, but not for serial murder. In fact, any deviant behavior that does not have a sexual component would not qualify as moral grounds for divorce. Surely, the Lord did not intend for the permanence of marriage to insulate an unrepentant sinner from the consequences of his or her sin, no matter how depraved.

At the same time, we cannot read too much into the Lord's silence on the matter. Although Jesus did not provide a list of moral grounds for divorce, He did not intend for us to repeat the theological error of His day and grant writs of divorce "for any cause."

So, how do we apply His teaching with integrity, especially concerning spousal abuse? We honor the sacredness and permanence of marriage by using every reasonable means to heal and restore failing marriages. This may include a *structured* therapeutic separation to provide immediate safety for the abused spouse or children and beginning individual treatment for each person in the household.

Many Christian leaders worry—and rightly so—that separation is merely a slippery slope to divorce. Therefore, a therapeutic separation must have a legal framework to set ground rules: living arrangements, co-parenting duties, financial management, behavioral or even geographic boundaries, etc. This legal framework also establishes binding consequences for violating the agreement. A ther-

apeutic separation must also seek the ultimate restoration of the marriage. Separation cannot continue indefinitely without becoming a de facto divorce.

However, when a marriage partner refuses to repent of deviant or violent behavior, he or she has effectively ended the marriage. For the good of all, divorce may be the only responsible and moral option. In fact, the real possibility of divorce may provide the incentive to repent and then commit to reconciliation.

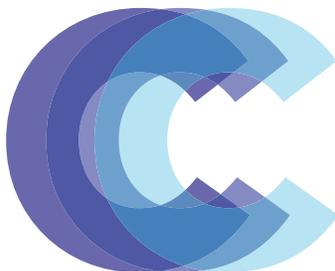
This position will not likely sit well with many systematic theologians, who seek clear lines and unambiguous definitions. For those in the trenches, however, where theology becomes painfully practical, pragmatic wisdom and insightful discernment are required. If we have exhausted every alternative to restore the marital union, and the abusing or wayward partner remains intractable, the upright partner must not be held hostage. He or she is “no longer enslaved.” ✦



MARK W. GAITHER, M.TH., is the author of *Redemptive Divorce: A Biblical Process that Offers Guidance for the Suffering Partner, Healing for the Offending Spouse, and the Best Catalyst for Restoration*. He earned his Master of Theology degree from Dallas Theological Seminary and, next year, expects to complete a Doctor of Ministry degree in parachurch organization management. Mark resides in Frisco, Texas with his wife, Charissa.

### Endnotes

- 1 “Views on Divorce Divide Americans,” *LifeWay Research* (blog), August 12, 2015, <https://lifewayresearch.com/2015/08/12/views-on-divorce-divide-americans/>.
- 2 Alsdurf, J., & Alsdurf, P. (1989). *Battered into Submission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity), 158.
- 3 See David Instone-Brewer. (2003). *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church: Biblical Solutions for Pastoral Realities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity), 55.



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# LIFE AFTER INFIDELITY: DEALING WITH THE BROKENNESS

As I pulled into the driveway of our home, I was speechless. It did not matter that our trumpet vines were in full bloom, or the kids next door were darting through the sprinklers, or even how our yellow lab, Baily, greeted me with his wet nose pressed against our windowpane.

I had absolutely no desire to go inside.

**W**hy? My heart still ached from the conversation Conner (not his real name) and I had on our front porch the day we decided not to have kids until we figured out what to do with his porn addiction. The desk in our office reminded me of times I found receipts from calls to sex lines or to hire prostitutes. My living room brought back memories of the night several deacons came to pray over Conner and fight for our marriage. And our bedroom took me back to the night Conner revealed he had been having affairs throughout our four years of therapy.

I was shattered. Shattered is what happens when someone is beyond broken; when the layers of pain turn a person's world into shards of glass. I did not know who I was anymore. At one time, Conner had a thriving ministry. It was not a surprise that sexual infidelity and the pulpit do not mix. He lost his job, and we lost our church community and friends—they scattered like crickets. We were too ashamed to tell people what actually happened. Hoping it would go away, we tried to make our way through the whole mess, but it only got worse.



### A New Pair of Glasses

Eventually, betrayed partners garner enough courage to reach out to leaders in their faith communities or counselors for support. Some partners report feeling understood by those who “get it,” while others describe being sorely misunderstood or deeply hurt. Just finding out their spouses have been sexting other people, looking at porn, sleeping with a co-worker or having same-sex encounters, they arrive at our offices hoping no one will recognize them or detect what they are hiding.

As well-meaning professionals, we begin to ask the betrayed partner questions like, “What was it like growing up in your family?” or “How busy were you with your children before all this happened?” With a raised eyebrow they might say, “Maybe having more sex or buying new lingerie might help.” The partner is bleeding out—and the subtle question behind the question is, “What’s your part—or fault—in this betrayal story?”

I get it. Many of us are simply looking through the lens by which we have been trained. As a former pastor’s

wife, betrayed spouse, and therapist, I have apologized to partners I have worked with for “pathologizing” them by using phrases like, “You were two, heat-seeking missiles who found each other” or “You’re addicted to your husband” or “Stop snooper-vising” to describe their behavior. Saying it even hurts today. How else can partners find truth in the midst of lying, gaslighting, and deception? I didn’t know what I didn’t know.

Thanks to research, there is more to this story. There’s a new way of seeing partners through the framework of a multidimensional trauma model.<sup>1</sup> I call these layers of impact the Dirty Dozen (discovery, disclosure, and deception traumas, along with the effects to one’s self-concept, spiritual well-being, personal health, sexuality, and relationship issues within their coupleship, families, community or treatment trauma among well-meaning institutions and professionals). The good news is this paradigm shows us how we can better support betrayed partners and their families.

SHERI KEFFER

## I See You

The pain is real. According to my research with 100 betrayed women, 76% showed clinical symptoms of post-traumatic stress. These are not soldiers returning from war or survivors after a devastating tornado or earthquake. These are our clients, friends, family members, bosses, and neighbors. It might even be your story.

Seeing the impact that infidelity has on partners is like getting a new pair of glasses, and suddenly everything comes into clearer focus. Today, when I meet betrayed partners, I listen to their immediate need for safety and imagine them on a gurney in an Intensive Care Unit (ICU). I take note as they describe symptoms of shock, confusion, ruminating thoughts, difficulty sleeping, panic, hypervigilance, and depression—signs often associated with post-traumatic stress. They desperately need our help. Their families need intervention, recovery, and support. First treating betrayed clients from the lens of crisis care (safety, validation, stabilization, and support) is much like being in an ICU ward and saying, “I see you.”

## There’s a Hole in the Fence

The word betrayal dates back to ancient Hebrew and conveys two ideas: to betray (reema), “what comes from a person of chaos;”<sup>2</sup> and to deceive (bagad), “to hide, cover, offend or deal unfaithfully.”<sup>3</sup> Betrayal is a deliberate act of disloyalty intended to dupe or cheat by lying and breaking someone’s trust. There must be limitations between the unfaithful spouse and the betrayed. Boundaries protect the fidelity of the relationship. Drs. John Townsend and Henry Cloud define boundaries as “personal property lines that promote love by protecting individuals.”<sup>4</sup>

Lying obliterates trust. Because betrayal creates a hole in the fence, all bets are off when it comes to keeping secrets. Firm boundaries often include sexual safety after discovery (many 12-step groups promote a 90-day period of sexual abstinence), virtual safety on all devices, and access to all bank accounts and e-mails, including passwords. Betrayed partners need two things to rebuild trust: safety and the truth. When I asked 100 women what was more damaging, the sexual behaviors (including pornography, massage parlors, prostitution, strip clubs, and affairs) or continued pattern of lies; surprisingly, 65% shared the lies were more damaging. The majority (88%) said they would be willing to stay if the betrayer’s lying stopped. Relationships depend on trust and trust depends on truth.

## Digging into Our Roots

Unhealed wounds steeped in shame can trigger behaviors that cause us to hurt ourselves and those we love. These beliefs (shame about ourselves in light of what happened to us) often come from childhood wounds of two kinds:

1) wounds of omission—the good things we needed but did not get, and 2) wounds of commission—the things that happened to us that should not happen to anyone.

Regardless of the marital struggles in the home, sexual betrayal is *never* the answer. Men in sex addiction recovery groups talk about what they are looking for in a sexual hit. They often say it is not the body parts that bring them back to a particular porn site; it is the facial expressions reflecting longing and desire: “I need you”... “I want you”... “You matter to me.” Research now points to neuroscience and inadequate attunement, attachment, and availability from primary caretakers as a reason why many sex addicts struggle with underlying emotions and intimacy.<sup>5</sup> It can set them up with unrequited needs to be wanted, appreciated, and admired—the very thing that pornography and affairs promise.

For betrayed partners, if recovering from sexual infidelity is not challenging enough, digging into prior wounds feels daunting. This work can be implemented later in treatment once the issues of safety, truth, and stabilization have been addressed. While using the Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) scale to sort out early childhood wounds from the current pain of sexual betrayal, an unexpected finding was discovered. The research revealed 79% of the women reported early childhood wounds, while 20% showed no early childhood trauma. For both parties, whether betrayed or betrayer, healing their past or present wounds, shame beliefs, trauma replications, and triggers are where the more in-depth psychotherapeutic work lies.

## Hope and Restoration

Change is possible. Working with counselors or clergy who have been trained and certified<sup>6</sup> is critically important to helping couples move from betrayal into reconciliation. A “cheap sorry” or “quick forgiveness” can leave unresolved pain buried for years. Restoring after betrayal takes time and happens through owning and atoning. A Jewish tradition reflecting these ideas is the Teshuva (repentance). This practice has several steps:

- Recognize – what you did was wrong
- Regret – what you did wholeheartedly
- Reveal – how you offended through confession
- Remorse – over your part by making amends
- Resolve – by making every effort to avoid doing it again
- Refrain – from doing that thing the next time you are faced with the same situation (accountability, recovery, sobriety)
- Repair – the relationship with truth, trust, and forgiveness

It is no surprise that action steps take time to be incorporated into a relationship so trust and safety can be restored.

Over the years, I have had to face the internal rumblings about my failed marriage to Conner as we did not end up in the “hall of fame.” I left defeated, weathered, and wounded. As much as I longed to get to the other side of this mess together, we did not. Yet, I know I battled well. The Hebrew word picture for lust (ava) is “the strong nail that hooks you to itself,”<sup>7</sup> in contrast to the ancient Hebrew inscription for hope (qave), which is “what comes after the nail.”<sup>8</sup> Betrayal does not have to become our destiny. While my marriage ended as a casualty, my life has been anything but a fatality. I now stand in HOPE. Each time I share my story, and another betrayed partner heals, it moves hope forward. Restoration is the sweat equity that richly grows from digging out—and doing it well. ✦



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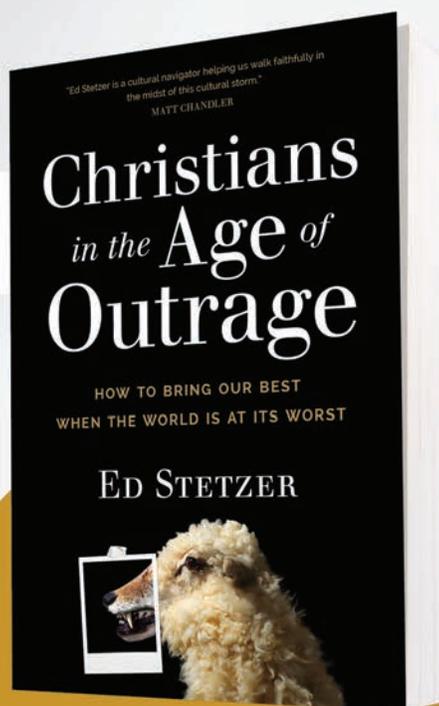
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# THE DO'S AND DON'TS OF MARITAL SEPARATION

Jan and Nathan, a Christian couple, were fighting again. For the first time, the word “divorce” was used. Jan wanted out, tired of Nathan’s lack of attention to the family, long work hours, and emotional distance. Talking with a friend, she decided she deserved better and was ready to divorce. The couple had no counseling or spiritual intervention. They were angry, disillusioned, and ready to call it quits. There was no abuse, betrayal or addictions in play... only growing unhappiness. They wanted to talk about possible separation.

During my 30 years of providing couples therapy, this scenario has become commonplace. Unhappy couples want their relationship pain to stop. Often, they believe divorce is the answer. Statistics on separation and divorce show that almost 87% of separated couples go on to divorce. Only 13% repair their marriages and stay together.<sup>1</sup> Yet, even with the most difficult couples, healing and hope are possible. Two important questions to consider are: 1) Does separation facilitate the healing process? and, 2) Is separation a helpful strategy?

When any couple goes through a difficult time in their marriage, I initially ask three questions. First, “Can they temporarily refocus their pain away from the other person to self-reflection?” Rather than blame, will they reflect on

the role they may play in their current unhappiness? What is their part in the dysfunctional patterns that have been established? Questions concerning wounds from the past, operating out of fear or other unhealthy emotions, falling away from truth and intimacy with God, and their stance on the possibility of change are explored.

Second, “Do they understand that while they do not have control over their spouses, they do have a great deal of influence?” For every action in marriage, there is a spousal reaction. They cannot control their spouses’ reactions but can control their own. Over time, couples are choreographed into a complex dance that requires altering steps to move forward. When a step in the dance is modified, so is the couple’s dance. The focus, then, is

on how to respond differently to change the interaction, not the other person. For example, if statements of blame are met with similar responses, the contemptuous cycle continues. However, if one partner chooses to respond differently, the interaction has to change. With that change comes tension to shift back to old, familiar ways. Change is sustained only when couples can reinforce and maintain new steps from their previously dysfunctional dance, which is the result of therapy.

Third, “Do they view marriage as a holy act?” Since marriage is sacred, it will be under spiritual attack. Problems may be traced to one or both spouses getting out of alignment with God’s way of thinking and doing things. A little disappointment, unhappiness or wounding can lead to negative feelings. Lies begin to grow in a person’s mind: “He doesn’t care about me,” “There is someone better for me,” “I don’t deserve this,” etc. If those thoughts and feelings are not addressed and better aligned with the truth of the Gospel, emotional distance can result, which is a predictor of divorce.

When a relationship is in crisis, therapists may offer what is called, “therapeutic separation.” If implemented, this strategy must be carefully navigated and time limited by a trained therapist; otherwise, it will provide a respite the couple may find desirable. Researcher, John Gottman, found that the effectiveness of marital counseling is directly related to motivation levels of both partners.<sup>2</sup> Reconciliation requires that two people commit to the process and agree on the outcome of preserving the marriage. Thus, honesty regarding reasons for wanting a separation is critical. However, if the goal is to end the marriage instead of helping the couple grow stronger, therapeutic separation is not recommended.

Other reasons not to use therapeutic separation include: one partner doubts his/her commitment to the marriage, infidelity is in play, codependency is a problem, trust issues are significant, one partner does not cope well with change, and depression or instability are significant factors. Separation does not work when a spouse has already disconnected emotionally; instead, it only reinforces the distance. Thus, it is essential to determine if marital counseling is merely a checklist for the couple to say they tried therapy or if there is a real willingness to do the difficult work required of reconciliation.

Safety is key. Marital separation is needed when a spouse or family member is not safe... and there is never a justification for abuse. The same is true for unrepentant serial behavior, like infidelity. The spouse should not have to expose herself/himself to the consequences of harmful, risky behavior (e.g., sexually transmitted infections, AIDS, etc.). This is also true in cases of untreated addiction where families are at risk for abuse, harm or neglect of children. Separation is used to provide protection while treatment is being administered. Therefore, if safety is an issue, it needs to be addressed before any attempt toward reconciliation can begin. Over time, if there has been a significant change, the abuse and potential harm is absent, and the partner is willing, therapists may consider trying a period of reconciliation to attempt moving forward.

Therapeutic separation for marriages without abuse, abandonment, and harm is viewed as a temporary timeout and cooling off period to do the individual and couples work necessary for reconciliation. When contact is minimized, spouses are less reactive. Separation offers a time to reflect on positive and negative aspects of the marriage. The time apart is used to speak honestly and revisit values and beliefs. Issues can be addressed once or twice a week in the controlled environment of a therapy office. The work is to build a more positive connection and make repairs. Support from a pastor and prayer intercessors is helpful during this time as well.

Ground rules for therapeutic separation, as well as consequences if those rules are violated, should be established with the therapist up front. The time apart should be brief, generally no longer than three to six months, and determined in advance. Expectations should be clear regarding communication, which spouse will leave the house temporarily, sex and intimacy, spending money and paying bills, and how children, family, and friends will be informed. Also important is the directive to not seek help or advice from a lawyer during this time. No dating is allowed, as the covenant of marriage is still intact. If needed, couples may be encouraged to work on individual issues contributing to their problems. Time committed to prayer is also essential, which provides a positive intimacy, moments of peace, and enlists the help of the Holy Spirit to transform hearts.

LINDA MINTLE

The downside of using this approach is that it creates more distance, less communication, and an avoidance of working together as problems erupt. It is sometimes difficult for couples to stay focused on the goal of separation toward reconciliation. In some cases, separation can support the idea that divorce is needed. However, the temporary relief that physical separation brings is reinforcing. For the first time in a long time, a spouse can experience peace and freedom from fighting, criticism, and tension. "This is what my life without the other person could be" is often the realization. Peace is attained without the other person being present, and a less active nervous system can signal the mind to think separation brings happiness. If there are children involved, separation affects them in terms of increased anxiety, feeling responsible, and may even force divided loyalties.

In summary, therapeutic separation is not the first-line approach to couples work, but it can be effective if used for reconciliation. Separation stops the disruption but does not fix the problem unless both the commitment to therapy and spiritual renewal are met. Then, evidenced-based treatments can help move couples toward reconciliation.<sup>3</sup>✦



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# Children of Divorce:

## MINIMIZING THE DIVIDED SELF

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We prefer marriages remain intact. And, that the God who breathes new life into dry bones and resurrects those who have been mourned and sealed away be given the opportunity to revive and restore as only He can. We also recognize that the toxic stress present in the daily lives of children of divorce will often lead to ongoing emotional and behavioral issues, as well as put them at risk for self-harm and addiction. As we consider the effects of divorce on children, we must acknowledge that we can minimize the predictable, harmful consequences it creates and facilitate a trajectory in these children's lives that will lead to positive outcomes. Maintaining a healthy, functional marriage is always our hope and first choice. However, when divorce occurs, the pain, chaos, and isolation are intense, and we must help those families with the same compassion and empathy we would bring to someone who tragically lost a parent to death. We can, with God's presence and input, "turn what the enemy meant for evil into good."

Researchers have identified six, predictable risk factors for children of divorce.<sup>1</sup> The adverse outcomes associated with the presence of these risk factors are familiar and well documented: poor academic performance, depression and anxiety, sexual promiscuity, aggressive behaviors, self-harm, unhealthy/dysfunctional interpersonal relationships, and substance abuse. No doubt divorce is quite the heinous specter. How shall we ward ourselves against such a pervasive evil spirit? The remedy is in the sickness. The number of these factors and their prominence will increase the likelihood of unfavorable outcomes. Conversely, mitigating and counteracting their presence and importance will redirect children of divorce toward positive results. Let's consider these six risk factors as a foundation as we explore the idea of creating a template for ministering to divided families.

**1. Parental Loss.** Losing contact with one parent or having it drastically minimized is especially difficult for children. This absence is the root of the divided self. The fact that the child loves the idea of his/her parents' marriage puts him/her in conflict with them—a factor that cannot be eliminated, but the effect can be mitigated with awareness and intentionality.

- At risk for the child: Losing an emotional connection with a parent
- Result: Deep attachment wounds
- Symptoms: Anger, depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem

To minimize this risk factor and facilitate connection, it is vital to increase time and access to both parents for children of divorce, as well as provide psycho-education for parents on attachment and the need for ongoing connection. If a parent is absent, consider an intentional mentoring program to match kids in single-parent families with a wise and caring mentor they can spend time with and serve alongside for necessary support. Research vets out the importance of having at least one, safe, loving, consistent adult in a child's life as it can drastically increase positive outcomes. When a parent is absent, this can be an essential solution to help minimize pain and improve stability in children.

**2. Economic Loss.** Divorce and separation produce two homes with half the income. Low cash flow means very little "fun" money. A change in socio-economic status often produces lifestyle modifications such as loss of housing, inconsistent meals, and even a shortage of clothing and school supplies.

- At risk for the child: Loss of identity and peer status, fear of not having enough at home or what they need to succeed at school
- Result: Perceived self-worth diminished and increased anxiety regarding parental tasks resulting in the child becoming a "mini parent" where he/she is asked to carry out adult tasks and burdens that are not appropriate
- Symptoms: Negative self-image, school tardiness or truancy, isolation, non-compliance, high-risk behaviors, and joining the wrong crowd

This risk factor can be mitigated by helping parents stabilize income and reduce "guilt" spending. Help them recognize the difference between what is needed versus what is wanted. Training parents to budget and use their money wisely can be transformative for the entire, single-parent family. Other possible ways to help include: providing free financial planning services, asking church members to create earning opportunities for children and parents, and, if needed, creating a financial "net" of support to help with the first two years of transition for anything from kids' camps/activities to rent.

**3. Lack of Parental Competence.** When parenting alone and no longer part of a team, there are times when a parent does not know what to do. As a result, familiar parenting expectations and strategies are unable to be upheld due to the overwhelming level of stress.

- At risk for the child: Loss of active and engaged parenting, potentially causing the child to become "parentified"
- Result: No boundaries for kids, inconsistent school attendance, passive parenting
- Symptoms: A negative attitude about school and homework, pushback with teachers, and leaning into the passive parent to gain selfish outcomes (often angry at the consistent parent at the other home)

To correct this risk factor, help parents recognize the need for appropriate boundaries, consistent discipline, engagement with school and extracurricular activities, and increased communication with the co-parent. If necessary, provide co-parent training and intentional parenting classes that are age specific. Church members could create a "parent mentor" opportunity for younger parents to gain friendship and guidance with more "seasoned" parents. Additionally, creating a library of accessible parenting books, videos, and resources by age/stage of development would be beneficial.

TAMMY AND JAY DAUGHTRY

**4. More Life Stress for Kids.** The transition from a one to two-home family, inconsistent patterns, a possible move away from friends and familiar faces, having to live and adapt to two, different parenting styles and schedules, losing items between homes, and not being allowed to take essential belongings back and forth eventually wears on children.

- At risk for the child: Loss of friends, extracurricular activities, teachers, school support, and predictability
- Result: Anxiety of the unknown, seeking to understand a new rhythm of life, isolation, and fear
- Symptoms: Poor grades, acting out at school and home, depending on peers or alcohol/drug use to help lower stress, avoiding church, embarrassment, and insecurity

Alleviating this risk factor requires assisting parents in recognizing the need for the familiar. Encourage parents to keep their kids in the same church, school, peer group, and extracurricular activities to help them maintain a sense of self during the expansive transitions. Help parents recognize the importance of limiting unnecessary changes and realize their urge to “move and start fresh” is often damaging to kids (especially if it also moves children away from their other parent). Enlist mentors who actively seek and support children in transition and are willing to maintain a consistent connection. This type of dedication will let kids know they matter even if they are unable to go to church every week due to a parent’s schedule. Encourage church members to create scholarship funds for camps and other activities for single-parent families. Offer single-parent education training opportunities and specific events for kids to relax and engage with peers their same age. Also, imperative for reducing kids’ stress is finding them a skilled child therapist as needed.

**5. Parental Adjustment to the Divorce.** The better a parent adjusts to divorce, the better a child will cope. If

the parent takes years to stabilize, it significantly increases the risk for kids emotionally, physically, and systematically.

- At risk for the child: Needing to emotionally take care of his/her parents, having to hide his/her personal pain, being emotionally “poisoned” regarding the other parent, and worrying about his/her parent’s absence when he/she is out attempting to numb the pain
- Result: Emotional and behavioral “parentification” and losing the sense of being a child
- Symptoms: Overseeing all meals, taking care of siblings, carrying financial concern and burden over what things cost, seeing parent drunk or high, meeting new dating partners in a revolving door pattern that interrupts childhood and demands an inappropriate level of response from children

To stop this risk factor, it is critical to help parents stabilize emotionally, relationally, and mentally. Provide parent education on the Divorce Adjustment Two-year Study and help them focus on getting stable and processing grief and anger in healthy ways. Encourage single parents to go to counseling for at least three to six months following the divide of the family and, if resources are available, recommend continuing for one, full year. Parents must be educated on the risk of numbing behaviors (e.g., alcohol, drugs, sexual rebound relationships, etc.) and be given specific help planning for the alone time when their children are with the other parent. How will they spend that time and how can they maximize it? The danger of isolation is real, so parents will need the support of community even though they may feel guilt and shame and want to pull back from the Church and important relationships out of embarrassment and sadness.

**6. Inter-parental Conflict.** The more toxic the relationship between biological parents, the harder it is on kids. When parents stay in unhealthy patterns and expose children to their verbal and emotional conflict, it is damaging to children, especially at school functions and weekly hand-offs between homes.

- At risk for the child: Extreme anxiety, loss of peace when both parents are present, lack of enjoyment at his/her extracurricular events, and stress during transitions between homes
- Result: Divided self is maximized, competing attachments, feeling guilty for loving each parent due to the hatred of one another, carrying internal pain and keeping secrets, and being made to be the messenger or spy
- Symptoms: Fear, depression, numbing out behaviors, “parentification,” and toxic stress that may carry far into his/her adult life

This risk factor can be alleviated by educating parents on the extreme concern children have regarding parental interaction. Additional avenues to minimize risks include: offering co-parent training classes and counseling; helping parents process the numerous, powerful emotions associated with relational distress and dissolution; facilitating the recognition of specific co-parent triggers to separate what is personal from parental by developing techniques for compartmentalizing hurt and anger; and creating a financial “net” of support, if needed, to help with first two years of transition.

When discussing the effects of divorce on children, the assumption is that it is the cause of the symptomatic expressions we fear for our children. The behavioral and emotional issues produce adverse outcomes that read like a

felon's rap sheet, prompting fear and loathing in the hearts of caring adults. Instead, what if we considered divorce as just a precipitating incident? The real damage is being done by a child's divided sense of self that is either exacerbated or mitigated by the way parents handle post-divorce challenges. As pastors, counselors, coaches, and therapists, God has uniquely positioned us to facilitate the healthy untangling of personal and parental responsibilities. Successfully guiding parents into independent, fully-functional roles, while helping them process and compartmentalize their hurt, anger, and pain, establishes a solid foundation on which to build a positive, cooperative co-parenting relationship. It is in the context of this kind of post-divorce association that we can minimize the divided self a child experiences following family dissolution. ✦



JAY DAUGHTRY, M.MFT., AND TAMMY DAUGHTRY, M.MFT., are authors, national trainers, and co-founders of *The Center for Modern Family Dynamics* in Nashville, Tennessee. Together, they oversee *Co-parenting International* and have been training therapists, pastors, military chaplains,

pregnancy center directors, and school leaders on the critical topics of co-parenting, stepparenting and understanding kids from complex families. Tammy's book, *Co-parenting Works! Helping Your Children Thrive after Divorce*, has been featured on *FamilyLife Radio*, *Focus on the Family*, *Moody Radio*, *Life, Love and Family* with Dr. Tim Clinton, as well as more than 50 other radio and TV outlets. In 2014, Jay and Tammy co-produced the digital curriculum, "*One Heart, Two Homes: Co-parenting Kids of Divorce to a Positive Future*," featuring 31 guest experts, as a high-definition tool to help organizations support single parents and stepparents who are "co-parenting" kids between two homes. For more information, visit their Web site at [www.CoParentingInternational.com](http://www.CoParentingInternational.com).

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## “I’m Not Happy in My Marriage”



When someone says, “I’m not happy in my marriage,” I usually hear, “We don’t have what we once did.”

I am not one to respond with, “Marriage isn’t about your happiness,” or “Marriage is hard... suck it up.” I would rather paint a beautiful picture of marriage, point the couple in the direction of marital satisfaction, and provide practical steps for enjoying life together.

Ecclesiastes 9:9 says, “Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun—all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun.” God did not give you a spouse to be a grind; He gave you a spouse to accompany you through the grind. When you turn your spouse into the grind, your marriage drifts.

Marital satisfaction is a choice, not an outcome. You cannot discover it online, and it will not find you after a series of serendipitous events as depicted in movies. It is based on decisions, factors, and skills couples can do something about in any season or stage of life. You decide your way into marital satisfaction by either choosing it or drifting away. Those are the only two options.

Dear friends of mine listened to me preach on marriage for six years before they had their first child. Several of my sermons included the challenge to eradicate the kid-centered home. My friends would say to each other, “That will never happen to us. We will never have a kid-centered home.” Guess what? After the birth of their first child, everything changed. That child became the center of their universe. As my friend so eloquently put it,

Every marriage needs voices that help keep it on key.  
Voices that rejoice about, delight in, and praise the love of the couple.

“We stopped being us.” As a result, their marriage drifted from what they once enjoyed. Children certainly bring couples into new seasons and stages of life and, for some, it leads to marital drift.

The following are three decisions I challenged my friend to make after he shared with me details of his marital drift:

**1. Prioritize your marriage.**

Genesis, 2:24 says, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.” According to this verse, the bond between a husband and wife is to be stronger than the one between a parent and child. Your children will not be with you forever, but you and your spouse are together until the Lord returns or calls one of you home. Remind your children often that they are a welcome and extraordinary addition to your home, but not necessarily the center of your household.

For years, I have taught my kids this lesson from Genesis 2:24, and often ask them to repeat it back to me: “I will not be with mom and dad forever, so plan accordingly.” Just for fun, I sometimes tell them, “Your mom and I have big plans after you leave home.” We enjoy our marriage while raising teenagers and plan on continuing that happiness long after they leave home.

**2. Prioritize quality couple time.** Almost 20 years ago, one of my mentors told me, “Ted, if you’re going to thrive in ministry and marriage, you and Amy need to prioritize a daily delay, weekly withdrawal, and annual abandon.” We heeded that advice and have followed that outline ever since.

A *daily delay* is 15-20 minutes a day of tech-free, kid-free, and distraction-free conversation. We talk about

the house, budget, schedules, church, parenting, and upcoming trips. Sometimes it is serious and heavy, and other times it is more laid back where we just laugh and dream together.

The *weekly withdrawal* is our date night. Every date communicates to our children, family, and friends that “our marriage is important.” The daily delay keeps short accounts on more substantial issues so we can protect our date night from escalated conflict. Nothing ruins a date night faster than turning it into a business meeting.

An *annual abandon* is time out of town. In Song of Solomon 7:11-12, the Shulamite bride invites her busy, shepherd king husband, Solomon, on an annual abandon: “Come, my beloved, let us go to the countryside, let us spend the night in the villages. Let us go early to the vineyards to see if the vines have budded, if their blossoms have opened, and if the pomegranates are in bloom—there I will give you my love.” She is inviting him away from the busyness of life in town to the countryside for some romance and intimacy. What a beautiful example for everyone.

Amy and I love to schedule our annual abandon four to six months in advance. That way, we have plenty of time to dream and talk about it leading up to the occasion. The months preceding the trip are almost as fun as the getaway itself.

**3. Surround your marriage with good backup singers.** Some marriages drift because of the voices speaking into the relationship. Our church in Branson, Missouri, has a saying that fits our country music town: “Every marriage is a duet in need of great backup singers.” We get this saying from Song of Solomon 1:4, where the Daughters of Jerusalem praise the love of Solomon and the Shulamite

woman: “... We rejoice and delight in you; we will praise your love more than wine....”

Every marriage needs voices that help keep it on key. Voices that rejoice about, delight in, and praise the love of the couple. Voices of support that encourage the couple to prioritize marriage. Voices that remind the couple to go on a date or plan time away.

Who are your backup singers? Who do you need to turn down or mute? Who do you know who needs the volume turned up? These questions are beneficial for couples to answer together. Maybe your next weekly withdrawal can be a double date where you invite another couple who needs the volume turned up a few levels? Amy and I are very intentional with whom we spend quality time with... and our marriage is better as a result.

**One Final Encouragement**

If your work and ministry involve helping couples, never forget that you are a backup singer. Whether couples are in drift or crisis, we get to help them decide their way to marital satisfaction. What a great calling! Help them prioritize marriage, not just at home, but also in their jobs and careers. Encourage them to make the most of the time they have together. Keep up the great work as you praise the love of the couples in your care. ✘



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## Breaking Faith or Bearing Fruit?

**D**ivorce. It is an ugly word... a sad word. It is about something breaking or fracturing and can involve neglect, bruising or a break in the wall of unity. It is a violation of someone or something that was once whole. We in the Christian world have primarily used the word for the end of a marriage in the courts of law and have taken the words of Malachi and said, "God hates divorce." Which, indeed, He does. However, I would suggest that we have not understood our God clearly in this area. We have severely limited His words to us and in doing so have limited our obedience to Him.

Most certainly, since the beginning, our God created man and woman in relationship. God said, "Let us make man in our image, *after our likeness*: and let *them* have dominion over... the earth" (Genesis 1:26). He created a "them"—single, yet plural—which means relationship. They were different and yet they were one. He told *them together* to bear fruit—which certainly means across all spectrums of human life, not just children. Multiply—make more of the beauty, the good that I have made... make more in My likeness. Fill the earth with My likeness. Take care of it and command it for good. They were blessed abundantly by God so they, in turn, might bless each other, the earth, and succeeding generations... multiplying the likeness of God everywhere they went.

God directed humans to rule the earth and the creatures on it but said nothing about ruling each other. Ruling was for things outside the relationship, done jointly, and the outcome was to be fruit and a subdued and nurtured world. Power was used to bless both each other and the



world... and it was good. In Genesis 2, we get some more information. Aloneness was declared bad, and a corresponding helper was needed. In essence, we have two servants joined together to produce and bear fruit, both living under the government of God. Instead, humans ignored the governance of God in their lives and put themselves in the place of power. They took it upon themselves to rule their choices, decisions, and each other. As a result, multiplying and bearing fruit of any kind became painful for all. By putting themselves in the place of God—seeking what they wanted rather than what He wanted—the joining of two as one is now marred. Divorce, wearing many different faces, entered the world.

Let's do a bit of a word study. The word divorce means disunion (the breaking of something) or a breach (a violation). It means to sever or separate something or to neglect or cause a gap in the wall. "Little" divorces happen all the time in many marriages—for years. How many times can skin be ruptured and still heal? How many

times can a wall of protection be destroyed before it cannot be built again? We have lost sight of the fact that our God hates divorces of all sizes and kinds.

Is it divorce to hide away every evening while looking at pornography behind a shut door and ignoring both wife and family? Is it divorce to batter a spouse with objects, fists or words? Is it divorce to bar your spouse from any access to money? Is it divorce to pour out rage and humiliation on your family and deceitfully present a different face at church? Have you not, in the words of Malachi, broken faith with your spouse and acted both treacherously and deceitfully?

God says, "For I hate sending away... and he who hath covered violence with his clothing..." (Malachi 2:16). Do not all of the previously mentioned involve a sending away? Where did we get the idea that the only thing we can call divorce is a piece of paper provided by a secular court?

Years ago, I had a phone conversation with a pastor about a woman

in his church who was being beaten and finally fled on foot in her robe at night to the police station. We found a safe house for her, and I advised her not to return home to her husband. She did not. The pastor who called me told me I was wrong not to urge her to return to her husband. I responded, "She has no husband." You see, to husband another is to preserve, save or safeguard. Jesus says His Father is the husbandman of the vineyard (John 15). He nurtures that vineyard so it is protected and bears abundant fruit. Any behavior in a relationship that does not look like Him is a rupture to that bond, whether it is words, fists, coercion or an abuse of power. Our God does, indeed, hate divorce, violations, deceit, rage or violations of any kind.

We have undoubtedly misled many suffering people with our rigid

interpretation of what God hates. In doing so, we have contributed to the damage of precious people created in the image of God and confused them about who He is and what He says. Also, we have failed those who abuse because we have minimized and glossed over matters that God hates, thereby not always preparing them a pathway for repentance, redemption, and reconciliation. We have not always protected the vulnerable, nor have we always confronted the abusive. Many times, we leave marriages saturated with sin and deceit without truth or care because we value the external appearance of marriage over the holiness of God lived out in hidden places.

In marriage, we are meant by God to oversee His world and multiply His likeness and beauty in all that we do—bearing fruit that carries the fragrance of Christ even behind closed

doors. The Bible commands us not to break faith with God (Numbers 5:6, Joshua 22:16), and He promises to never break faith with us (Psalm 89:33). As people helpers, let us courageously and compassionately live out the gracious and loving ministry of reconciliation He has given us (2 Corinthians 5:18) and encourage marriage partners not to break faith with their sacred covenant. ✝



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## It Happened at a Big, Fat, Jewish Wedding



I remember hearing a sermon about Jesus' first miracle when I was a child. I was not very impressed.

There were a couple of factors working against my appreciation of what happened at that wedding in Galilee. First, by that point in my life, I had developed quite a taste for Kool-Aid,\* and I had watched my mom perform a similar miracle—water to grape Kool-Aid\*—dozens of times. Second, as a third-generation teetotaler, raised in an extreme Holiness environment, I didn't really know what wine was, other than the fact that if you drank any, you would go straight to hell without passing glory, along with the smokers and Episcopalians. For a variety of reasons, my initial exposure to the telling of Jesus' first miracle had left me both overwhelmed and confused.

However, as time passed, I experienced a growing sense of interest in Jesus' first miracle. Let's face it; He had lots of time to think about that defining moment. He had waited through at least four millennia before so intimately stepping into human history through the incarnation, and then waited 30 more years before beginning His public ministry. Jesus had plenty of time to think about this moment. Plus, I had begun to see that the Trinity possessed some extraordinary speaking and writing skills. Our world was *spoken* into existence—idea turned into energy and matter—by this loving community of three, and stories were *written* by using the lives of individuals and nations as paper and ink. Surely it could not be an accident that Jesus' first miracle was at a wedding feast. All of the elements of this story must

have great significance.

Before getting to the main point, I should say a word or two about typology. Typology, of course, is seen in biblical interpretation as a method for trying to understand the remarkable ways that figures and events in the Jewish Scriptures seemed to point to Jesus. You could say that it was Jesus who introduced this idea. Working in reverse, He said, "... Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father..." (John 14:9). Paul was making a case for one thing pointing to another when he called Adam (in Romans 5:14) "a type [τύπος] of Him who was to come." Adam was a "type" of Christ. And Paul referred to Jesus as "the last Adam" (1 Corinthians 15:45).

Take a look for yourself. Begin in Genesis and start flipping pages... Adam and Eve were given both Paradise and Presence. After they rejected

both, we see that Paradise is reoffered as the Promised Land and then the Kingdom of God. After they rejected companionship with God, this gift of Divine Presence is reoffered in the form of Tabernacle, Temple, Incarnation, Pentecost, and, finally, “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” One thing, pointing to another.

Abraham offers his son, Issac. God offers His son, Jesus. A lamb, caught in a thicket of thorns is provided to Abraham as a substitute for Issac. God provides a Lamb crowned by thorns as a substitute for you and me.

Jacob sees a ladder leading to heaven. Jesus goes up that ladder at the ascension. Joseph is seen as a Christ type. Both are rejected by their own people, become servants, are betrayed with silver coins and falsely accused, sit at the right hand of the Ruler of the Land, suffer greatly, and provide a way for deliverance.

Moses goes to the top of a mountain, brings back covenant laws and returns aglow from being in the presence of God. Jesus delivers a new covenant in the form of the Sermon on the Mount and later glows on the Mount of Transfiguration, showing His Divine nature and true humanity. Jesus accomplishes, during 40 days in a desert, a victory over willfulness. Moses leads a march through a desert, but it takes the children of Israel 40 years to partially accomplish what Jesus did in 40 days.

Jesus talks about His own resurrection in terms of the “Sign of Jonah,” three days in the belly of a tomb. He is also careful to bookend His ministry on earth with Pass-over celebrations three years apart and points to the Shewbread of the Temple becoming the communion bread of the Church.

So, against that setting, let’s take a look at Jesus’ first miracle presented in John 2:1-11. It cannot be an accident that Jesus chose a wedding feast for the backdrop when the curtain was

finally pulled for the first miraculous demonstration of His true identity. After all, the Church would come to be referred to as His bride, and He the groom. However, there seems to be something else going on here, something equally symbolic. It is no surprise that John, the mystic-poet, is the only Gospel writer to cover this fast-breaking story. He tells us that Jesus asks for six earthen vessels. These jars—containing 20 to 30 gallons of water—were for purification. This meant they would be thoroughly clean, allowing no accusations of deception concerning this miracle. But there may be an even deeper meaning to John’s images. He reminds us in 2:1 that it has been three days since Jesus’ baptism. Three days since Jesus had given His personal endorsement to John the Baptist’s method of preparation; first empty and clean your own vessel if you are to be ready to be filled with God.

And then there are the six jars of clay. What might Jesus be using them to point toward? We know that a gallon of water weighs in at about eight pounds. So these earthen vessels contained mostly water and weighed somewhere between 160 and 240 pounds. Minus a few Big Macs,<sup>6</sup> in some instances, that describe most of the adults I know.

With wedding images in the background, Jesus takes center stage and kicks off His public ministry by radically changing the contents of earthen vessels. Spirit is added, and plain water becomes extraordinary wine. If you miss that it was wine, you may miss the point of the miracle. Spirit is added to the material. Radical transformation from the inside out! *Jesus’ first miracle foreshadows all that will follow.* It is about miraculous changes to the contents of earthen vessels.

Much later in John’s Gospel, three days after the crucifixion, Jesus’ time will have come in full. Then, against

the backdrop of another wedding—Jesus to His church—we will see how that first miracle pointed so beautifully toward His last. The contents of earthen vessels can be radically changed by the personal incarnation of the resurrected Christ—in us.

Weddings are a celebration of joy, intimacy, and union, and also where Jesus’ first miracle foreshadowed the sacrament of Holy Communion, which offers the real possibility of experiencing the mystery of “Christ in us” and changing the contents of our earthen vessel.

Paul had a number one teaching theme, “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27). It was the possibility of union with God and the way to fulfill Jesus’ number one teaching theme, the availability of life with God, here and now—the ability to intimately *know* the Trinity and begin living eternally, here and now, with God (John 17:3).

Wedding feast. Union with God. Earthen vessels. Water to wine. Saul to Paul. Me and you to Jesus. It wasn’t a bad setting for that first miracle.

And when early marriages end in conflict, separation, and divorce, it is a good time to remember that our friendship and union with God remain as a source of healing. ✠



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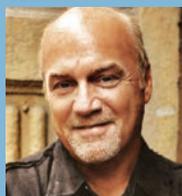


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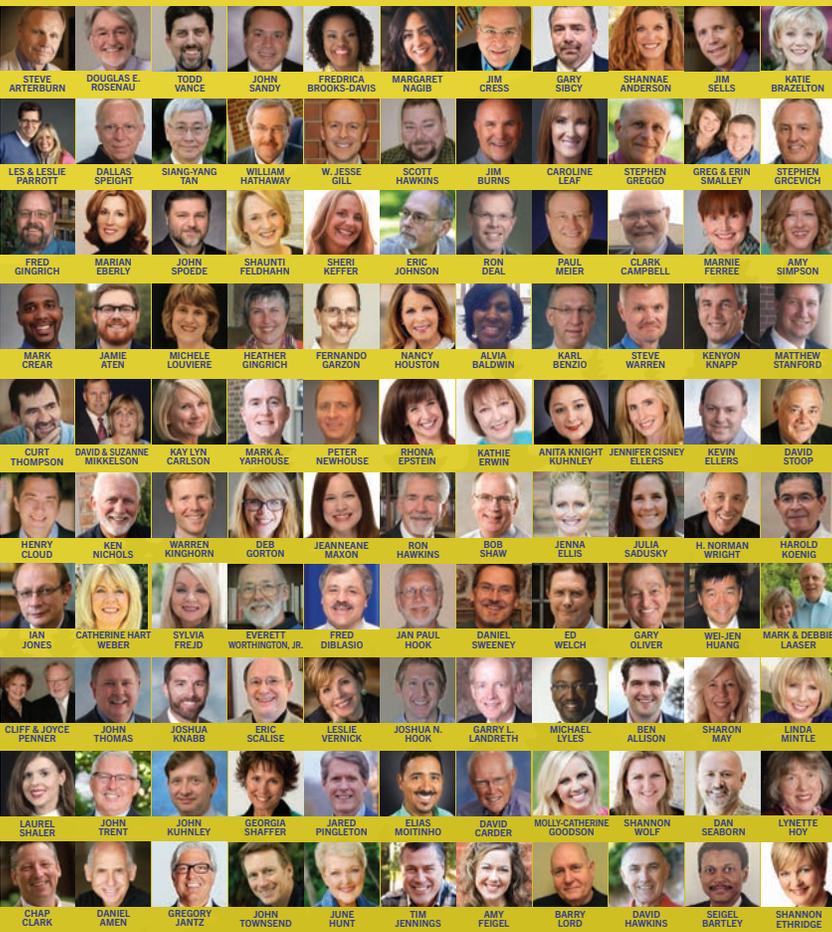
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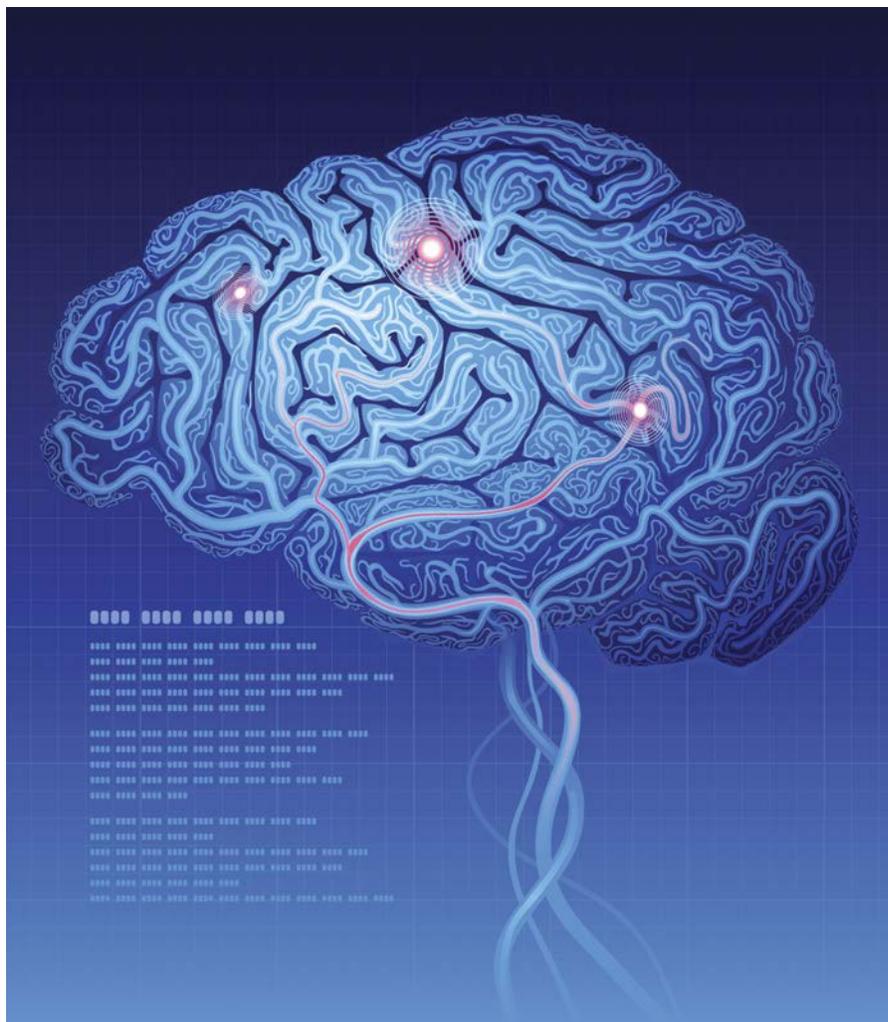


## The Anatomy and Physiology of Pain

Imagine that you are driving and hit a bump in the road. Your tires register the sensation and transmit it through your wheels and steering system. You have to make an executive decision as to whether the bump was a pothole, rock, animal or human being—because each option requires a different level of response. In other words, the “bump” has to be interpreted and a responsive action initiated.

Pain systems function similarly. Pain receptors in tissues (nociceptors) register changes in temperature, pressure, and inflammation like wheels reveal road bumps. This pain signal, however, is just the beginning of a complex process that involves multiple areas of the spinal cord, brainstem, and cerebral cortex to determine whether that signal (bump) should be responded to as a pothole or someone’s pet.

The nerve endings of the pain receptors transmit a signal to a nerve bundle outside of the spinal cord called the dorsal root ganglia and then to the spinal cord. This step in the process can be influenced by injections, external nerve stimulators, anticonvulsants, and anti-inflammatory agents. The spinal cord is circular with a background of white matter and a core of gray matter that looks like a pair of angel wings connected in the middle. The pain signal enters the top of the wing in an area called the “dorsal horn.” The dorsal horn area is called the “gatekeeper” of pain, as it has a series of nerve connections (interneurons) that modulate and filter whether the pain signal is transmitted any further by releasing a substance called Gamma-Aminobutyric Acid (GABA) that turns down the volume on the signals.



Thus, insignificant pain signals, like the ones triggered in my fingers by me typing this article, are inhibited and never make it past this “gate.” Drugs, such as gabapentin and pregabalin, increase this GABA activity in the dorsal horn area to enhance pain modulation. If the signal makes it past the security gate of the dorsal horn, it crosses over (decussates) to the lower segment of the opposite angel wing. Here it enters the ascending (anterolateral) pain pathway that transmits the signal from the spinal cord up to the brain. In our analogy, this is the bump getting sent through

the steering column to our hands.

The ascending system involves several different components (tracts) that interact together to present the brain with a clear set of data about the pain signal and its context. The spinothalamic tract involves the hypothalamus and gives data about the nature and location of the pain signal. The spino-reticular and spinomesencephalic tracts provide data about the emotional intensity and context of the signal. For example, does the character of the pain signal require that we become more alert, fearful or focused in our response? The amygdala is

engaged in giving context to the emotional history of these kinds of signals from the past. The spinohypothalamic tract involves the autonomic nervous system responsiveness to the indication delivered. The spinotectal tract includes the superior colliculus that directs our eyes to look for the origin of the signal. All of these ascending systems work together to deliver a comprehensive message to the cerebral cortex, where an executive decision has to be made about how to respond.

The clarity of this evaluation can be impacted by anxiety and depression, cultural and social variables about the meaning of pain, recreational drugs and alcohol, and other medical conditions or medications. If the signal is deemed minimal or temporary, the response should be negligible. However, if the signal is considered significant, the descending analgesic system can become activated. In our analogy, the descending analgesic system represents our reaction to the bump in the road by stopping the car and taking action.

The descending analgesic system involves the interaction of the brain with several areas of the brainstem and spinal cord. The cerebral cortex sends signals to the brainstem (locus coeruleus and raphe nucleus) to increase serotonin and norepinephrine activity. These two neurotransmitters act together to empower nerve tracts that begin in the brainstem (periaqueductal gray area) and project down into the spinal cord to the gatekeeper area for pain modulation—the dorsal horn region. These descending analgesic nerves release substances onto the pain-modulating nerves in the dorsal horn to decrease pain signal intensity. The elements that are released are natural, endogenous opiates—enkephalins, endorphins, and dynorphins. Synthetic pain pills (opioids) mimic the effect of these naturally-occurring

substances in the descending analgesic system of the spinal cord. Some antidepressants can enhance the activity of the descending analgesic system by increasing serotonin and norepinephrine levels. Duloxetine is FDA approved for three pain indications, in addition to depression and anxiety, because of this effect. Cannabidiol (CBD) oil may enhance descending analgesic system effects in the dorsal horn while having a direct anti-inflammatory effect.

This discussion has given a snapshot of the complexity of how multiple systems manage pain at different levels of the central nervous system. However, these pain-modulating systems are designed to address the management of discomfort on a short-term basis. Chronic pain lasting more than three to six months in duration can result in the system losing the calibration of its modulation abilities. In this scenario, fewer stimuli can result in pain signals that are more intense in perception and do not diminish as quickly. Here, pain becomes an experience instead of an event, with potential critical impacts from social, spiritual, cultural, and psychological variables on how it is perceived and managed by these complicated and interconnected modulating systems. ✘



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### Further Reading

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Chronic pain lasting more than three to six months in duration can result in the system losing the calibration of its modulation abilities.

## Divorce Law 101: Basic Questions Answered



**A**s reported by the American Psychological Association, 40-50% of American marriages end in divorce.<sup>1</sup> Of Christians who attend church regularly, the divorce rate is 38%.<sup>2</sup> Christian counselors will inevitably encounter clients experiencing the pains of divorce.

In light of the pain and emotion divorce brings, going through a legal process can be exceptionally stressful. Counselors should not offer legal advice to clients facing divorce, but understanding the legal process will better prepare them as they assist

clients in making important life decisions. Importantly, divorce laws vary dramatically from state to state; therefore, clients should not rely on the experiences and outcomes of others.

### Should the Client Hire an Attorney or Self-represent?

Clients may be inclined to opt for self-representation (*pro se*) to save money. However, the *pro se* option may not be the best for clients, especially if they are susceptible to manipulation or intimidation. Self-representation requires clients to

continue communicating with their spouses and understand a complex legal process. Self-representation takes considerable time and effort, adding to an already emotionally grueling situation. The court or a local bar association may provide resources for *pro se* divorce clients.

Securing a knowledgeable attorney can benefit clients undergoing divorce. Attorneys provide clients with a legal expert and may offer a buffer between having to communicate with spouses. If the spouse has also secured an attorney, the attorneys will speak among themselves on behalf of their respective clients and possibly negotiate without court intervention. While expensive, attorneys may be able to suggest ways for clients to save on costs or work out a payment plan. Also, local bar associations might provide *pro bono* (no-cost) assistance to clients whose income is below a certain level, especially in cases of domestic violence.

### Should the Client Choose Fault v. No-fault Divorce?

All states allow for “no-fault” divorce, where parties typically cite “irreconcilable differences” on the petition. Some states offer only a no-fault option.<sup>3</sup> In other states, citizens have a choice to file for “fault” divorce. No-fault divorce often requires a period of separation before filing, ranging from one month to two years, and may depend on whether the couple has minor children.<sup>4</sup> However, no-fault divorce is usually less expensive and contentious than a “fault” divorce. No-fault is usually the best option for clients who are not abused, can work amicably with their spouses, and endure any waiting periods.

Sometimes states allow divorcing couples to circumvent the waiting period if one or both spouses file for a “fault” divorce. A fault divorce is typically offered in cases of adultery, abandonment, prison or mental health confinement, or physical/emotional abuse. In addition to the possibility of avoiding the waiting period, a fault divorce may position the non-offending spouse to gain a larger distribution of marital property. However, “fault” must be proved, and both spouses are allowed to present evidence of fault. This often leads to a long, expensive, and highly-contentious divorce process with “dirty laundry” exposed on both sides. When possible, clients should carefully consider both options with the advice of a knowledgeable attorney, a caring counselor, and loving friends and family.

### How Will Property be Divided?

Where the parties cannot agree, courts may determine how property is to be divided. Some states follow the “Community Property” rule.<sup>5</sup> Under this rule, property acquired during the marriage (“marital property”) is presumed to be divided 50-50, including debts, bank accounts, investments, retirement funds, houses, cars, and other physical property. Property acquired before the marriage or during separation is presumed to belong to the spouse who bought the property. Sometimes gifts or inheritances given to one spouse will stay with that spouse even if acquired during the marriage. Of course, there are various exceptions to these general guidelines per state law.

Other states follow the “Equitable

Distribution” rule. Under this rule, courts will divide property *fairly*, but not necessarily *equally*, between the spouses. In these states, property may not always be physically divided. Instead, a court may award each spouse a percentage of property-assets and debts (e.g., 40/60), sometimes requiring property liquidation. This situation can get complicated, which is why many divorcing couples choose to negotiate property division without court intervention. Property division laws vary state by state.<sup>6</sup> Alimony laws also vary state-by-state.<sup>7</sup> As for another resource, Dave Ramsey offers advice on managing post-divorce finances.<sup>8</sup>

### What about the Kids?

Like property, courts typically allow spouses to agree on how to handle child custody. If courts are petitioned to intervene where there is no agreement, they will ask, “What is in the best interest of the child?”

Two types of “custody” must be determined. “Physical custody” refers to the residence of the child(ren) and the visitation rights of the non-custodial parent. “Legal custody” refers to the right to make decisions about the child(ren)’s health, education, and general welfare. Either can be “joint,” meaning parents share responsibility; or “sole,” meaning one parent has total authority. In sole physical custody situations, the non-custodial parent is typically entitled to visitation rights as determined by the court.

Usually, a non-custodial parent is required to pay child support, with state-dependent exceptions. Each state has its own laws, and many offer calculations to determine child

support.<sup>9</sup> Some states may allow spouses to agree on other child support amounts. Child support orders can be modified, usually when the custody arrangement changes or a spouse experiences a significant adjustment in income. A parent who fails to pay child support may be brought to court under state law or the federal Child Support Recovery Act of 1992.<sup>10</sup> Federal law requires each state to offer custodial parents the assistance of a Child Support Enforcement Agency.<sup>11</sup>

### After Divorce

Ultimately, Christian counselors should instill hope in clients who are undergoing a divorce and during recovery. Essential steps include ensuring clients have developed a self-care strategy and good co-parenting/communication plan with their ex-spouses. Focus on the Family offers additional resources.<sup>12</sup> Many churches provide divorce aftercare programs and spiritual care. Understanding these basic, legal principles will assist you in helping your clients during and after divorce. ✕

*The information contained in this column is provided for educational purposes only. Nothing in this column should be construed as legal advice, and readers should seek advice from a qualified attorney within their jurisdiction for concerns/questions on specific matters. Law varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction.*



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If courts are petitioned to intervene where there is no agreement, they will ask, “What is in the best interest of the child?”

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- 2 Wright, B.R.E. (2010). *Christians are hate-filled hypocrites... and other lies you've been told.* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House), p. 133.
- 3 Washington, D.C., Wisconsin, Washington, Oregon, Nevada, Nebraska, Montana, Missouri, Minnesota, Michigan, Kentucky, Kansas, Iowa, Indiana, Hawaii, Florida, Colorado, and California.
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- 9 A state-by-state child support calculator can be found here: <https://www.allaw.com/calculators/childsupport> (accessed 1 March 2019).
- 10 For more information, see U.S. Health and Human Resources, Office of Child Support Enforcement. Available at: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/css> (accessed 1 March 2019).
- 11 For a state-by-state reference, see "State Agencies" U.S. Health and Human Resources, Office of Child Support Enforcement. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/css/child-support-professionals/state-agencies> (accessed 1 March 2019).
- 12 "Healing the Wounds of Divorce." Focus on the Family. Available at: <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/marriage/divorce-and-infidelity/divorce-and-separation/healing-the-wounds-of-divorce> (accessed 1 March 2019).

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## For This Reason: Separation, Divorce, and Remarriage

*For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.... – Mark 10:7-8, NIV*

The King James Version of this verse uses the term “cleave” instead of “be united.” I think “cleave” is a better descriptor. In Scripture, the word “cleave” has different, but related, definitions used to describe two things being glued together (Psalm 137:6, KJV) and two things being forcefully split apart (Psalm 141:7, KJV). Once two things are glued together, they do not come apart easily.

Personal and painful, separation, divorce, and remarriage can be divisive issues. Over the years, I have seen how faith communities approach these issues from different perspectives. As a counselor, I do not feel my role is to pronounce spiritual judgment. Rather, I have always felt my purpose was to help navigate through the situation by trying to understand each person’s unique circumstances and conscience.

### Separation

Whenever individuals come to me expressing a desire for marital separation, I generally ask a series of questions.

- *For how long?* Some view separation as relief from pain. The length of the separation can provide insight into the depth of the pain.
- *How is the separation to be logistically handled (housing, parenting, financial and other responsibilities)?* In a



separation, the relationship continues, as do the relationship’s responsibilities. Thoughtful preparation can indicate more than a reactive desire to “run away.”

- *What is the purpose?* Personal motivations aside, I also listen for goals that reflect a continued commitment to the relationship, and to the other person.
- *How is the time to be used both personally and collectively?* In Scripture, for example, sexual separation is for a defined time frame and a specific purpose (1 Corinthians 7:5). Separation should be used to refocus effort toward the relationship, not abandon effort altogether.
- *Does the person envision eventual reconciliation?* I have found some consider separation a “trial run” at divorce.

They want to experience how being separated feels and determine whether the pain of separating is less than the pain of continuing.

- *Is there anything that could happen which would make the separation unnecessary?* I have been surprised by how asking this question may forestall a separation. The desire to separate can gather so much momentum that alternatives are left behind. Before taking the step of separation, I ask that those alternatives be, at least, revisited before rejected.

In the case of physical abuse within the marriage, however, I do counsel physical separation as a matter of safety for a spouse or children. Physical abuse within marriage is antithetical to how I read Scripture: “So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who

loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church....”<sup>1</sup> Physical abuse comes from a place of domination, oppression, and rage... none of which are part of God’s vision for marriage or the family.

## Divorce

Divorce is the forceful act of cleaving a marriage in two. As an ax splits wood, divorce takes effort, with the rending rarely done in a single stroke. Divorce, even “amicable,” in my experience results in pain. While people react to divorce in different ways and degrees, I have found three constants to help move toward healing.

**1. Comfort.** A hurting person needs comfort. Scripture abounds with promises of God’s comfort—from King David’s iconic 23rd Psalm to 2nd Corinthians 1, we are reminded that the comfort we receive from God is to be passed on to others. The healing process starts by giving time and space to grieve. And as the person grieves, there is an opportunity to come alongside and provide precious words of comfort.

**2. Hope.** The death of a relationship can leave devastation in its wake, including the capacity to experience hope. Hope is not some ethereal spiritual concept; hope is a practical, proven benefit in healing and recovery. Christian or not, a hurting person needs to be reminded that, while the marriage has died, hope survives. One of the most effective ways I have found to communicate the source of this hope comes from Jeremiah 29:11, which greets every person who walks in the front door of my practice.

**3. Assurance.** A person suffering from divorce can feel like a failure displayed to the world. The exposure of broken promises, shattered dreams, and unsuccessful efforts

is revealed in front of family, friends, and coworkers who become witnesses to this intimate disappointment. Christians may feel an additional burden of disappointing God. In such a case, I gently remind them that love is stronger than disappointment, and God’s love is stronger, still. The verse I share is, *“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.”*<sup>2</sup> In sending Jesus, God factored in human failure, with the motivation made plain through John 3:16.

## Remarriage

I have found marriage to be the most inspirational, challenging, and instructive of human relationships, with parenting a close second. Lessons learned *in* the marriage need not end *with* the marriage. Those lessons are still available to inspire, challenge, and instruct, especially when remarriage is contemplated. The wise take counsel from a variety of sources, including their own experiences; the foolish do not. You have probably heard the saying: “Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” Remarriage is an opportunity to learn from a past relationship to benefit a future one.

The human psyche needs time to process, integrate, and grow, especially from painful or traumatic events. Entering into remarriage, therefore, should be given careful thought and time, not something to be rushed into to alleviate pain. Solomon, in Ecclesiastes 3, says there is a distinct time and season for everything, for every activity under the heavens. For example, after a time of rending comes a time of mending.<sup>3</sup> Mending is when broken things are repaired so, when the time

comes, they emerge stronger and ready for use again.

People can look to leaders for simple answers to complex questions, like those that arise from separation, divorce, and remarriage. Yet, in the realm of such intimate relationships, leaders, I believe, must tread lightly. Leaders are not able to “fix” broken relationships or mandate an end to pain, but they can help people find a path to healing that is personal, appropriate, and meaningful.

Leaders who mirror the cross-section of those served have their own experiences along the spectrum of marriage, separation, divorce, and remarriage, with insights gained from each. These insights allow leaders to contribute to the recovery process through wisdom acquired, compassion extended, and counsel given. Though this good work can be hard, leaders are reminded not to become weary in doing good, “... for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.”<sup>4</sup> That harvest blesses you by blessing those you serve. ✕



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Washington, which emphasizes whole-person care, addressing the emotional, relational, physical, and spiritual aspects of recovery. He is the best-selling author of 37 books and a sought-after speaker in person, on television, and radio ([www.drgregoryjantz.com](http://www.drgregoryjantz.com)).

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Ephesians 5:28-29, NASB.
- <sup>2</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:18-19, NIV.
- <sup>3</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:7, NIV.
- <sup>4</sup> Galatians 6:9, NIV.

## Divorced Parent Relocation, Attachment, and Later-life Divorce



### Separated Parent's Relocation and its Impact on Child Maladjustment Over Time

Stevenson, M.M., Fabricius, W.V., Braver, S.L., & Cookston, J.T. (2018). Associations between parental relocation following separation in childhood and maladjustment in adolescence and young adulthood. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 24(3), 365-368.

Family courts are challenged when custodial parents petition to relocate their children away from noncustodial parents. Noncustodial parents may also move in many districts without court approval. Do such relocations by either parent predict psychologically harmful consequences for the child? Cross-sectional survey research has explored this important topic, but Stevenson and colleagues

applied a stronger, longitudinal design to investigate the outcomes for the child over time.

Research participants were derived from a subsample of the Parents and Youth Study, which was a longitudinal study of the role of stepfathers and fathers in teenagers and young adults in Phoenix, Arizona, and Riverside, California. In both areas, families were recruited from the children's schools. Children had to be 12-years-old at the start of the study, and their parents had to self-identify as either white or Mexican-American. The children had to live primarily with their mothers, and the mothers had to be remarried or have a male partner who acted in the father role for at least one year prior to beginning the study. Eighty-one families participated and were divided into two

comparison groups. One group had 38 families where the children had been separated by an hour or more traveling distance from the noncustodial father through either the father's move from the region or the mother's. In the other group, the mothers and biological fathers were not separated by such a distance.

Interviewers talked with the mothers and children separately over a 10-year period. Interviews occurred when the children were 12.5, 14, 15.5, 19.5, and 22-years-of-age. The interviewers adapted questions from several psychometrically-supported self-report and interview instruments to investigate mother/stepfather non-violent and violent conflict, mother/biological father relationship quality, the children's juvenile justice involvement, risky sexual behavior, drug use,

## Attachment styles may better predict relationship satisfaction than whether someone is in a first or second marriage, so care about making satisfaction assumptions without attachment evaluation should be taken.

involvement with delinquent peers, internalizing symptoms such as anxiety, externalizing symptoms such as aggression, and sense of mattering to parents. A series of multiple regression analyses were used to analyze the findings.

Results were informative. Separation from the biological father by distances of an hour or more was associated with significant behavior problems, anxiety/depression symptoms, and disrupted relationships with all parental figures (the biological mother, stepfather, and biological father). These findings remained after controlling for mother/stepfather conflict and domestic violence, mothers' family income, and mother/biological father relationship quality. The researchers mused that "the current findings raise to a new level of seriousness the risks to children posed by relocation" (p. 376) and encouraged the courts to factor these and other research findings into their decisions related to relocation requests. Though limitations to this study certainly exist, the results do highlight that Christian therapists should carefully assess and discuss relocation risks to child welfare when one separated/divorced parent is considering moving away from the child's area.

### Attachment and Relationship Satisfaction among First Married, Remarried, and Post-divorce Relationships

Diamond, R.M., Brimhall, A.S., & Elliott, M. (2018). Attachment and relationship satisfaction among first married, remarried, and post-divorce relationships. *Journal of Family Therapy, 40*, 111-127.

Attachment theory can aid us in understanding the impact of divorce

since attachments, loss, and separation are key issues in the experience. Diamond and colleagues chose to explore the association between relationship satisfaction and attachment style in people from a variety of marital statuses. The researchers utilized national and Midwest regional listservs and online message boards to survey 562 individuals who were in their first marriages, separated/divorced or remarried. Sixty percent were in their first marriages, 122 were separated or divorced, and 100 were in their second marriages. The researchers used the Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale, the Relationship Questionnaire, the Relationship Styles Questionnaire, and demographic items in the survey. A series of one-way analysis of variances (ANOVA) were used to analyze the data.

The survey revealed that attachment was associated with relationship satisfaction among the groups. Unmarried separated/divorced individuals were less secure than first-married individuals on every attachment index and less secure than second-married people on some indexes. A somewhat surprising finding was that first marriage and remarried groups did not differ on any attachment index. This finding may relate to the current debate in attachment literature about whether attachment style is an ongoing dispositional characteristic derived from early childhood or if adult attachment is more closely associated with the quality of specific current relationships. The authors believed their findings could be interpreted from both vantage points.

While limitations, such as having a non-representative highly white (91%), female (83%), and educated sample, exist, the study does have

value for Christian mental health professionals. Attachment styles may better predict relationship satisfaction than whether someone is in a first or second marriage, so care about making satisfaction assumptions without attachment evaluation should be taken. Consequently, therapists should consider incorporating attachment theory and principles into conceptualization, assessment, and treatment planning for couples when increasing relationship satisfaction is a goal.

### Marital Divorce and Cohabiting Breakup in Middle and Later Life

Wu, Z., & Penning, M. (2018). Marital and cohabiting union dissolution in middle and later life. *Research on Aging, 40*(4), 340-364.

Much is known about risk factors for union dissolution in marriages prior to mid-life; however, with the aging population, the need to examine middle to later life factors more carefully to determine whether they are consistent with earlier marriage and cohabiting findings is apparent. Wu and Penning utilized retrospective data from the 2007 Canadian General Social Survey (GSS-21, n = 17,194) to examine marital and cohabiting union histories to identify risk factors for separation/divorce and cohabiting breakup.

Participants in Wu and Penning's application of the Canadian survey had to be 45 or older. The study utilized a random phone number survey strategy and had 9,646 women (56% of the sample) and 7,548 men (44%) participate (15,846 in marriages and 1,348 cohabiting). The explored interview variables primarily focused

on union history and children in the relationship, along with demographic variables. Primary statistical analyses consisted of Cox proportional hazard models of duration dependence to estimate the correlation between independent variables and union disruption.

Among the main findings, those in cohabiting arrangements at age 45 and older showed an average relationship of 10 years, suggesting relational stability at this age range compared to younger individuals; however, they also were at significantly higher risk of breakup than those in marital relationships. Thus, cohabitation “does not yet appear to represent an equally stable alternative to marriage, at least for the cohorts included within the current study” (p. 357). Also, their findings offered “limited support for expectations based on prior theory

and research focused on younger populations” (p. 357). One similar finding was that the more children born inside the marriage, the lower the risk for marital dissolution. The same was not true of cohabitation. Several additional findings supported the need for further research on middle-aged and older couples. For example, for married men 45 and older (but not women), longer marriage length was positively (instead of negatively) associated with risk for marital breakups. The authors wondered, “... it may be that our findings reflect a pattern of gradually declining marital satisfaction among men that emerges in the middle years of life and threatens subsequent marital stability” (p. 357).

Limitations for the study exist, such as the cross-sectional design rather than longitudinal, but the findings alert Christian mental health

professionals to the fact that they cannot assume that risk and resiliency factors for young, married couples are the same for middle-aged and older couples. More research needs to be conducted. ✕



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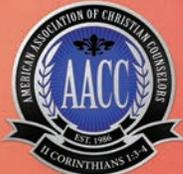
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**Anger, Intimacy, and the Crazy Cycle: Creating a Win-Win Marriage – Paul Van Valin**

1. Van Valin tells counselees he wants counseling to be a
- a. pleasant experience
  - b. safe place
  - c. place to express unfiltered anger
  - d. place to hold your spouse accountable

**Beyond Forgiveness: Biblical and Psychological Dynamics... – Jared Pingleton**

2. Pingleton points out that forgiveness is biblically mandated, whereas
- a. reconciliation is often impossible
  - b. reconciliation is also biblically required
  - c. reconciliation is biblically preferred
  - d. none of the above

**Children of Divorce: Minimizing the Divided Self – Tammy and Jay Daughtry**

3. When parents do not adjust well to divorce, children may
- a. hide their emotional and personal pain
  - b. worry about the absence of a parent
  - c. lose the sense of being a child
  - d. all of the above

**Counseling High-conflict Couples – David Hawkins**

4. Successful intervention and treatment begin with
- a. assessing if both individuals are willing and emotionally capable
  - b. teaching communication and relational skills
  - c. putting key issues in perspective to cultivate intimacy
  - d. assessing conflict resolution skills and motivation

**The Do's and Don'ts of Marital Separation – Linda Mintle**

5. Mintle says valid reasons for temporary separation are
- a. cases where a spouse or family member is not safe
  - b. unrepentant serial infidelity
  - c. untreated addiction
  - d. all of the above

**Game Changers: Three, Transformative Truths Every Counselor... – Shaunti Feldhahn**

6. Feldhahn discovered that “thank you” for a man
- a. is the same as saying, “I respect you”
  - b. helps his weak, fragile ego
  - c. is the equivalent of, “I love you”
  - d. shows him that he is needed

**Life after Infidelity: Dealing with the Brokenness – Sheri Keffer**

7. Keffer says the impact of infidelity on the betrayed partner
- a. is similar to PTSD
  - b. is much like being in a cancer ward
  - c. should result in separation in most cases
  - d. creates an unhealable hope and trust wound

**Breaking Faith or Bearing Fruit? – Diane Langberg**

8. Langberg believes that we have left marriages without truth or care
- a. because we do not think God hates divorce
  - b. because we encourage separation in abusive relationships
  - c. because we gloss over the abused spouse's part
  - d. because we value external appearance over the holiness of God

**The Rationale and Effectiveness of Marriage Intensives – Sharon May and Alan Hart**

9. Intensives may not be best for couples who
- a. both have full-time careers outside the home
  - b. are currently in affairs, abusive marriages or addictions
  - c. see the intensive as the last resort before separation
  - d. do not have the same belief and faith in Christ

**Divorced Parent Relocation, Attachment, and Later-life Divorce – Fernando Garzon**

10. Separation from the biological father by a distance of one hour or more
- a. was associated with significant behavior problems
  - b. was associated with anxiety/depression symptoms
  - c. disrupted relationships to all parental figures
  - d. all of the above

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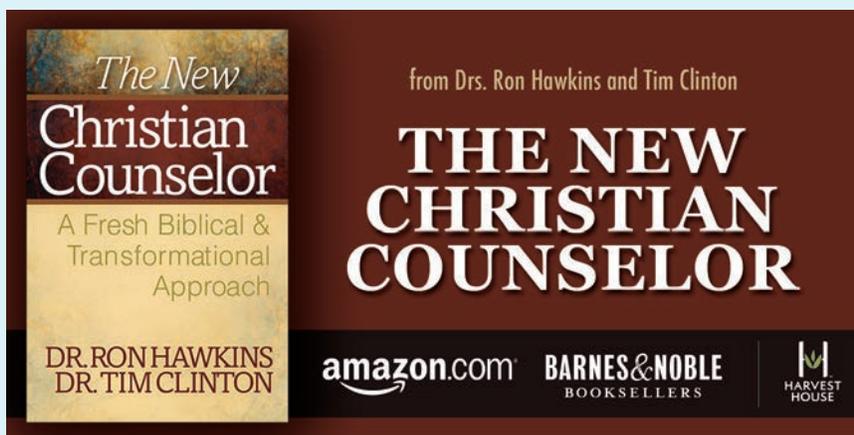
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## Hold Hands While You Sleep

When my dad died, it knocked the wind right out of me. His presence in my life was one of warmth, wisdom, comfort, and kindness. I hated to see him go and dreaded the void he would leave. I knew how I needed to grieve. It was time to enter a quiet place in the mountains and be alone with my memories, my sorrow, and my Savior—the One my dad had taught me of so well.

I arranged to get away to the Peaks of Otter Lodge in the Blue Ridge Mountains to say goodbye. It was not a final goodbye—as some of the last words my dad whispered to me were a reminder that because of Christ, he would see me again. Nevertheless, it was goodbye for now. In the lodge, I spent some time reading my Bible and reminiscing about my childhood days and adult life, including my final days with dad. Tears began to flow as I tried to find the words to thank God for the gift He had given me in the kindest man I have ever known. Somehow in the moment, I decided to write my thoughts in a letter to my dad. Much of what I wrote was simply a thank you for all the love he gave, especially toward my kids. He loved deeply and was the most genuine human being I have ever known. My father taught me life lessons that are forever etched in my heart and soul. The day he died, I remember going home to tell my daughter, Megan, and son, Zach, about their Papa C. We talked about heaven and how Papa C was now with Jesus and Nanny C. I told them if I could be half the dad to them that he was to me, that they would be blessed. I promised them I would do my very best.

Dad did not have much by way of material blessings, but he passed a generous and rich legacy down to



his kids. A few of our family's prized possessions include my dad's 410 lever-action shotgun that my brother gave to my son, Zach, and a couple of worn Bibles he used for studying and preaching. The shotgun has special meaning to me because every time I see it, I go back to one of my favorite memories of time spent together with my father and son. One time when Zach was young, he was with me hunting turkeys, but we had not heard or seen anything all day. After some quiet hours with no turkeys in sight, we connected with my dad who took us to his favorite spot—the backside of the Thurston farm. No sooner than we sat down, dad chirped a few times with his old box call, and suddenly a bird answered. We bagged it together and just laughed at what seemed like a total miracle. Zach was thrilled, and a tradition with my father was passed on to my son—one that was far more about family and time together than hunting.

One of my dad's Bibles given to me by my brother brought another surprise. As I looked through the pages, I saw notes, thoughts, coffee stains, and a picture of my mother. Written in ink

around the portrait were these words, "Mid... how I have missed you. It will be a grand reunion someday soon. Love, Jim." I cannot even bring myself to think about being without my wife, Julie. I remember once asking my dad, who lived without my mother for more than 10 years, how he did it day after day. After he thought for a moment, he told me what the hardest parts were for him. He said he would reach out to touch her in the middle of the night to hold her hand, but she wasn't there... and that is what left him broken and alone. He said very poignantly, "I really miss her." And I knew he did. Somehow, each day he was able to put a bridge over it all, focus on the calling God had on his life, and turn his love and heart toward his children and grandchildren who loved him dearly. His legacy of life and love live on to this day.

A persistent heart cry I hear from those in difficult or broken relationships is, "All I have ever wanted is for someone to love me." Why? Because God wired us that way. In the Garden, before the fall, God saw Adam alone and in need of companionship. So

He gave to Adam, Eve. One who was “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Genesis 2:23). One to come alongside and do life with him. Someone to hold, caress, cherish, serve, be tender toward, and prefer above all others. Someone who Solomon described as “a lover and friend” (Song of Solomon 5:16). That is why I have often said there is nothing more beautiful than to be in love with someone when they actually love you back. Few things in life cause more pain than to be in a relationship with someone who is supposed to love you but doesn’t... or even worse, someone who ignores and hurts you repeatedly.

### Throw-away Love

How do we leave a legacy like my dad’s in today’s fast-paced, “throw-away love” society? Running too fast in this hurried world, we lose sight of one another. We forget that without compassionate love for each other and connection with those in our lives, the rest does not matter. God wired us for relationships and called us as Christians to behave in those connections in a way that represents His love. Many struggles can occur when two, imperfect humans get together in a world broken by sin. Sometimes the issue is simply that we have forgotten how to be people who stay—people who consistently, faithfully, day after day work toward building lasting relationships characterized by forgiveness, faithfulness, and love.

### Finding a Love that Lasts

If you feel like you have failed... so have we all. It is not what you have done before, but rather the commitment you make and how you handle struggles going forward. All relationships are going to go through times of disaffection, disagreement, and occasions when you do not feel close. Problems are ubiquitous in relationships. *However, it is what you do or don’t do during times of trouble that will*

*determine the future of your relationships.* As I have reflected on this topic recently, here are some of the actions I have found to make a profound impact.

- Become an emotionally safe couple who fights fair. Do not dig up the past, throw insults or try to manipulate when a disagreement arises. Commit to truly listening to one another and developing an atmosphere of safety. This will allow you to accept influence from each other and become your partner’s support system and truth teller in life.
- Connect through simple, shared pleasures. Find a restaurant, walking trail, hobby or television show that you both enjoy and make it a habit to enjoy these small things together. Do not take life so seriously that you forget to laugh and have fun.
- Prefer one another and help each other.
- Be kind to each other and focus on your friendship.
- Say you are sorry.
- Learn how to participate in non-sexual touch—physical affection says a great deal about your bond and love.
- Embrace mutually enjoyable intimacy.
- Find ways to worship, pray, and express gratitude to God together.
- Envision your marriage going the distance and do not ignore or fear the future—dream together about special times you will have growing older together.

If you are struggling in your relationship, you do not have to try to do everything all at once. Start with prayer and kindness... find a pastor or Christian counselor if you need a third party for guidance... and think about

your legacy.

After my dad told me that he would reach for my mom’s hand in the night and she was not there, I realized something profound. Through their years of marriage, my parents had learned to hold hands while they slept. This small act embodies so many of the encouragements I previously mentioned: kindness, non-sexual touch, intimacy, and safety.

As I was finishing this article, I came across a beautiful story of life-long commitment. Tom and Delma Ledbetter, a couple married for 62 years with two children, seven grandchildren, and seven great-grandchildren, were enjoying retirement together. Friends and family saw the couple as extremely content and genuinely appreciative of their relationship to the very end. When Tom and Delma became sick and required hospice within days of one another, their nurses decided to set up their hospital beds side by side. Eventually, the two passed peacefully within an hour of each other... while holding hands.<sup>1</sup>

In this “throw-away love” culture, learn to hold hands while you sleep. ✕



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### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Layne, M. (2019). God TV. Unending love: Elderly couple die on same day while holding hands. <https://godtv.com/unending-love-couple-die-on-same-day-while-holding-hands/>.



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