

Marriage as a Spiritual Discipline

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Introduction

Christians should view marriage as a spiritual discipline. While pervasive narcissism has eroded marriage as an institution in contemporary culture, marriage provides believers with the opportunity to prepare daily and discipline their hearts and minds towards sacrificial love and towards triumph over the potentially destructive effects of narcissism. By the design of the Creator, in marriage believers come to know each other intimately and provide each other with the benefit of daily opportunities to discern their individual growth towards the ideal of Christ's self-emptying love.¹

The Contemporary Challenges to the Institution of Christian Marriage

Recent research by a reputable Christian research foundation has echoed the commonly held belief that the institution of marriage is in serious danger. Furthermore, this most recent report has shaken evangelicals by asserting that the divorce rate in America for born-again Christians has now actually passed the divorce rate for non-believers by as much as 3%.² Though this research sample does not closely delimit the percentage of couples who are living together outside of marriage,³ the results of this research project should awaken the church to the seriousness of the crisis within its own walls. Furthermore, the research provided another surprising outcome. By chronological age, the greatest percentage of divorced Christians is in the "Builder" generation (37% divorce rate) and the "Boomer" genera-

tion (34%), with the "Buster" generation reporting only a 7% divorce rate.⁴

Other sociological research confirms that as an institution, marriage is a popular, but unstable entity with 50% of contemporary marriages ending in divorce. The divorce rate in America climbed during the 1960s and 1970s, but has stabilized at about 50% in the 1990s. About 75% of those couples who divorce will later remarry, but at least 50% of these remarried couples will be divorced again.⁵ The median length of a marital union is seven years.⁶

Even in the face of these alarming statistics about marital failure, there continues to be a strong motivation among adult couples to form durable committed relationships. The majority of couples seek to live together in harmonious, mutually satisfying relationships, continuing to hope that they might find happiness together, rather than pursue the hollow and potentially life threatening experiences of promiscuous sexual liaisons.⁷ Within the church, marriage continues to be the sanctioned form of union for those individuals seeking a committed life-long relationship.⁸

Biblical Theological Foundations for Christian Marriage

The literature that lays a foundation for Christian marriage in Scripture is too extensive to review comprehensively in this article. Nevertheless, this author would like to emphasize those biblical and theological themes that encourage Christian couples to reflect upon their marriages as an opportunity for spiritual

growth and discipline.

Marriage should be viewed as divinely ordained in creation to fulfill the created nature of humanity in the desire for intimacy, companionship, and community.⁹ The Genesis account of creation indicates that God designed mankind to have a special relationship with him, including the priority for the male and female to live in intimate harmony and companionship (“it is not good for man to be alone”; Gen 2:18). The man and woman were commanded to procreate (“be fruitful and multiply”; Gen 1:28), to share in a mutual life calling (of “maintaining dominion over all of creation”; Gen 1:28), and to live interdependently with each other and in ultimate dependence upon God. However, the entrance of sin into the world corrupted God’s original design for the man and woman, and ever since, we humans have lived in constant awareness of our common “naked vulnerability” and loss of innocence (cf. Gen 3:16-19). The constant and foreboding challenges of survival, the pain of childbirth, and the existential awareness of death and finitude have contaminated the original design and intent for men and women.

Since the Edenic Fall, the stain of sin continues to cover all of human experience, including this originally purely conceived covenantal relationship of marriage.¹⁰ However, even after the Fall, marriage continues to provide adults with a uniquely vulnerable relationship in which the Creator’s image is mirrored in a creaturely vessel on a continual basis. For in holy matrimony, the individuals surrender their psychological defenses, which serve to keep them safely protected in all other relationships. Most marriages become the premier experience of human vulnerability in which each individual

places his personal fragile soul into the care of his beloved marital partner. However, because of sin, most of the time, even in marriage, this unique state of emotional and spiritual vulnerability is subliminal. Even so, in times of conflict and relational dissonance, this vulnerability to one’s life partner is evident as even the most innocent slights and misunderstandings can lead to deep pain and disappointment. Beyond our conscious control, such moments of relational, emotional, and spiritual vulnerability return us to our most unexpected and unwanted memories of past pain and the deeper core aspects of our personalities. In these moments of intense and unexpected vulnerability, it is tempting to view our marital partners as our mortal enemies!

Nevertheless, Holy Scripture describes a dramatically different model of marriage. The Old Testament gives us a penetrating view of God’s intent for marriage, as the children of Israel were challenged to transcend the patriarchal customs of their neighbors. Under divine guidance, the Hebrew society evolved in a patricentric manner, which in its ideal form was to transcend the cultural paradigm of patriarchy of the ancient Near East in which women were viewed as inferior to their husbands, fathers, and sons. The concept of the covenant transformed this devaluing of mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters and placed the ultimate burden of responsibility for the care and nurture of the family upon the males.¹¹

The New Testament ideal for the marital union is demonstrated most clearly in Ephesians 5:18-33: it is a covenantal relationship in which husband and wife voluntarily commit to love each other after the model of Christ’s relationship to the Church. Contrary to popular misconcep-

tions, this covenant relationship demonstrates a quality of voluntary loving sacrifice and submission that is unparalleled in our culture.¹²

Reflections upon Marriage from Contemporary Therapeutic Theories

Some contemporary research about marriage may echo the spiritual truths of the Christian faith. For instance, some research suggests that the experience of seeing our marriage partner as our mortal enemy is an instinctive reaction to the anxiety evoked by marital relational dynamics.¹³ Through studies of thousands of marriages, Dr. John Gottman and his colleagues at the marital research laboratory at the University of Washington in Seattle have demonstrated the inevitable toxic influence that anxiety has upon relational dynamics.¹⁴ Now we see more clearly how our God-given natural reactive responses for self protection are stimulated by the presence of intense anxiety: it mobilizes the autonomic nervous system's stress response and sets an automatic neurological and physiological process in motion.

Gottman has demonstrated the toxic effects of what he calls the Five Horsemen: the interpersonal responses of contempt, criticism, stonewalling, defensiveness, and belligerence.¹⁵ The manifestation of these toxic interpersonal responses mirrors what the Christian church has understood as sinful behaviors, counterproductive to the goal of developing a righteous and godly marriage relationship. Spurred on by Gottman's findings, evangelical marriage counselors are teaching couples how to short circuit these nervous system reactions and to respond with Holy Spirit inspired love. By

responding to anxiety with love, couples escape victimization from bodily responses that function outside conscious control.¹⁶

These new techniques effectively help couples deal with the inevitable threats and anxieties facing contemporary marriages. In the western world couples marry because of a romantic attraction to one another, but they do not realize that marital relationship dynamics are at work when they begin courting one another.¹⁷ Issues related to gender differences, personality temperament, and family of origin projections, are destructively reinforced by the unique stresses of life in the contemporary post-modern, post-industrial, technological world. Our culture encourages marriages of romance, convenience, and happiness that are inevitably vulnerable to the Five Horsemen.

Despite the politically correct perspective that men and women are basically alike but have been culturally influenced to believe in gender differences, the reality of these differences has persisted over time, and continues to be one source of overwhelming anxiety within contemporary marriages. Brain research has shed light on the different ways that men and women process and react to life issues, which lead most couples down the slippery slopes of communication problems, role expectations, and the unhappiness of unfulfilled marital expectations.¹⁸ When one feels misunderstood and disappointed, and the emotional threats of anger, shame, and guilt, one is led to the all too familiar anxiety driven reactions in which one's spouse is seen as withholding, or worse yet, betraying the assumed marital contract. Falling out of love, or the mutual suppression of the marital romantic attraction, leads these couples to

believe that they are hopelessly incompatible and incapable of finding marital happiness.¹⁹

At the turn of the twentieth century, Analytic Psychologist Carl Jung first identified the attraction of opposites in personality temperament as another dynamic in romantic attraction.²⁰ Describing this phenomenon of the attraction of opposites, Jungian-oriented marital counselors have come to recognize that as many as 75% of couples who marry in response to romantic attraction have unconsciously been drawn to someone who is fundamentally different and opposite in their psychological orientation to life. While this attraction of opposites through romantic love is culturally encouraged as the most intense form of interpersonal attraction, their fundamental differences inevitably spawn conflict. This conflict leads to intense pain and disillusionment when the spell of romantic attraction is overcome by the anxiety continually evoked. Overwhelmed by their interpersonal conflicts, these couples look longingly at the 25% of those couples who have married a peer with similar personality temperaments and have considerably less interpersonal conflict as a result. Comparing their marriages with these more user-friendly marriages, the couples who are married to their opposite personality types, feel betrayed and discouraged. I suspect that most of the marriages surveyed by the Barna Associates and other sociological studies (indicating 50% divorce rates) are marriages of personality opposites. The result is that the couples could not endure the chronic presence of anxiety and its dysfunctional children, the Five Horsemen.

Finally, many contemporary family systems theorists have stressed the role

that family of origin dynamics have upon mate selection and the attraction of romantic love. These theorists suggest that individuals are attracted to potential marital partners who have grown up in families that have the same level of emotional development, but which represent complementary systemic dynamics.²¹ Issues related to self-differentiation motivate these complementary dynamics. For instance, as two potential marital partners are unconsciously attracted to their future spouse's family relationship patterns, they believe that these relationship patterns mirror the relational dynamics of their birth families. Later as the truth begins to become clear, they discover that these dynamics appear to be complementary on the surface, such as in patterns of relational closeness. The one partner comes from a family that is emotionally fused interpersonally with very poor interpersonal boundaries, and the other partner comes from a family that is more emotionally detached with very rigid interpersonal boundaries. At the same time, they have not been attracted to a potential marital partner whose birth family's interaction is more sophisticated and/or demands a higher level of individual self-differentiation. Because their level of self-differentiation is compatible, they experience an unconscious safety and comfort. But because their interpersonal relational styles are opposites (fusion versus detached), they are unconsciously emotionally attracted to each other as potential balances to their individual birth family dynamics.

The Spiritual Disciplines

Progressive sanctification is the theological understanding of how redeemed Christians continue to grow in grace as

they pursue their spiritual journey of life in Christ. The New Testament tells us that the pursuit of the mind of Christ is the daily expression of this progressive sanctification for the Christian (1 Thess 5:23). The dimension of this progressive sanctification that continues to challenge each Christian believer is daily confronting the sinful habit patterns of the old Adam and growing in grace into the new Adam. (Col 3:1-17).

Historically, the Christian church has practiced spiritual disciplines such as prayer, meditation, study, worship, stewardship, fasting, solitude, submission, service, simplicity, confession, and celebration.²² Counseling has not been considered a spiritual discipline, though spiritual direction has been a common practice of soul care throughout church history.²³ With the rise of psychology and psychotherapy, many ministers abandoned the practice of spiritual direction and the nurturing of the spiritual disciplines in favor of the powerful change interventions of psychotherapy. Psychological problems required psychological diagnoses and a field of specialists emerged and gradually stole the “birth-right of soul care” from the church.²⁴

Christian counselors focus on exploring the sinful habit patterns of the old Adam because these patterns undermine the promised righteous life style characterized by the fruit of the Spirit. Clinically trained Christian counselors have developed the skills needed to discern the ways in which these sinful habit patterns, dysfunctional interpersonal relationships, and pathological lifestyles continue to contaminate the believer’s longing to know and to live the mind of Christ. Through a combination of skills developed in academic study as well as in the

clinical supervision of actual counseling, clinically trained Christian counselors learn how to identify, interpret, and interrupt the unconscious and conscious manifestations of these sinful habit patterns and unhealthy, ungodly lifestyle issues, in order for the believer to practice new habit patterns of personal righteousness and relational health.²⁵ This process of identification, interpretation, and interruption of these personal and interpersonal dimensions of the continuing influence of the sinful old Adam, utilizes skills and interventions that take seriously the human ego’s resistance to change, the continuing destructive influence of painful life experiences, and the presence and power of temptation and of the ongoing systemic influences that serve to sabotage the expression of the mind of Christ. “Identification” involves the naming and illustrating of how these personal, systemic, and spiritual dynamics are at work in the life of the believer. “Interpretation” seeks to connect these manifestations of sin and dysfunction to their historical, narrative, systemic, interpersonal, cultural, and spiritual origins. “Interruption” involves the various combination of psychological, scriptural, marital, systemic, medical, and spiritual interventions that lead to a “working through” of the continuing presence of old Adam dynamics and change and transformation towards the possibilities of the new Adam (Rom 12:2).

Richard Foster describes the role of the spiritual disciplines as helping the believer replace the automatic sin-oriented habit patterns of the old Adam with new habit patterns of righteousness characteristic of the new Adam.²⁶ Spiritual disciplines do not cause the believer to experience righteousness. Spiritual disciplines prepare the believer to receive the

gifts of God's grace by reducing the influence of the old automatic sin-oriented habit patterns and replacing them with habit patterns oriented to God and his righteousness.²⁷

Spiritual Narcissism

Contemporary critics of American culture describe our culture as a culture of narcissism.²⁸ By this analysis, they are pointing to the prevalent attitude of self-orientation that is dominant in every aspect of our lifestyles. The "me generation" reflected in the attitudes and values of the "boomers, busters, and gen-Xers" is so naturally and completely oriented to their own personal agendas, interests, needs, and desires that not to be "self-oriented" is considered to be controversial and anomalous at the least and pathological at the worst. Called by other names like "postmodern," this idolatry of the "Self" places truth, morality, personal boundaries, political correctness, and spiritual experience at the individual discretion of each person.

Within the therapeutic sciences, concepts like "self actualization," "self-differentiation," and "individuation of one's self" have become the standards by which individual psychological health are measured.²⁹ This self-orientation leads potential counselees into a preoccupation with issues that prevent a full understanding of their personal pain. People come to therapists with a limited conception of their problems, but armed with the popularized theoretical understanding of how to heal their personally defined frustrated and diminished "selves".

Narcissism is the clinical label used to define the personality that is completely self-absorbed. The narcissistic personality has dominated the psychodynamic theo-

ries and therapies of the twentieth century. Requiring long-term psychodynamic psychotherapy with a very high recidivism, the souls of these narcissistic personalities are chronically depressed, empty, and vulnerable to a host of addictions and dysfunctional lifestyles.³⁰

This prevailing dominance of narcissistic preoccupations has infected the world of the spiritual as well.³¹ Congregations are filled with narcissistically vulnerable parishioners who are rewarded with a theology of materialism, success, and excess rather than a theology of simplicity, sobriety, and surrender. The world of narcissistic excess and personal self-absorption is subtly reinforced in congregations that have misidentified the needs of the ego/self with the yearnings of the soul.³² As a Christian pastoral counselor, I have come to discover how frequently we need to beware of what our ego/self defines as "desire," for what the ego wants, is rarely what the soul needs.

It has been this author's experience that the healing of the narcissistic personalities of our generation is not complete unless there has been a significant spiritual transformation in the process. Since most contemporary psychotherapy is a process designed to address the assumptions, attitudes, and adaptation of the ego/self, it leads to therapeutic outcomes that are ultimately reflected in a better narcissistic adjustment to a narcissistic world. However, when the underlying issues of narcissism and spiritual narcissism are recognized and addressed in the therapy as well, long-term healing can occur.³³

Finally, the common tendency towards narcissistic responses is not only characteristic of counselees. It is also the natural response of most counselors as well. Unless the counselor has experienced a

spiritual transformation, which corrects the narcissistic outlook, he or she will inadvertently perpetuate this narcissistic worldview in the course of treating the counselee. The counseling process becomes a collusion between two individuals who prescribe the same narcissistic solutions to life's problems. This phenomenon is described as a "shared paradigm." Since it is the nature of paradigms to filter data that is consistent with the paradigm, alternative solutions to life's problems, or confrontation with the counselee's attitudes that are narcissistically impaired and limited, does not happen since the counselor falls victim to the same paradigmatic filters.³⁴

The problem of narcissistic collusion between counselor and counselee is very dangerous in situations involving the counselee's marriage. Marriage is vulnerable to the temptations and limitations of narcissism. Romantic love tends to provide endless narcissistic mirroring to both partners. While "falling in love," the couple spend hours enveloped in mirroring each other's narcissism. Yet when the "honeymoon is over" and the couple returns to normal reality and can no longer maintain this shared narcissistic illusion with each other, intense conflict and feelings of betrayal replaces the narcissistic illusion. When the contents of this narcissistic betrayal are shared in therapy with a counselor who is also forming a therapeutic alliance around shared narcissistic assumptions, it is inevitable that the counselor will be seduced into affirming the narcissistic perspective of the counselee.

Collusion around narcissistic issues can be prevented by intentionally gearing the counseling process towards producing marital growth and transformation. If the best prospect for individual growth and

adjustment and soulful attention to issues of connection and intimacy arises from transforming narcissism, then marital counseling provides the best context in which such growth and transformation can occur. Formed in a shared narcissistic illusion called "romantic love," and thrust into an inevitable narcissistic crisis when "the honeymoon is over," the ups and downs of the marital connection are the best window into the individual narcissistic needs of both marital partners. But most importantly, the covenant of the marriage has been divinely ordained as the primary context in which personal growth towards self-sacrifice is to occur (Ephesians 5). Consequently, focusing upon the marriage is the primary way of affirming the healing potential that the marriage provides for both partners.

The Healing Potential in Marriage

Marriage and family therapists have demonstrated effectively that marriage is a potential crucible for the change and transformation of the individual partners.³⁵ Applying a variety of theoretical orientations, these marital therapists are demonstrating the opportunities for personal change when couples are encouraged to transcend the anxiety, anger, and bitterness of their relationship. As previously stated, the key to seeing the change potential within the marital relationship is to shift the focus from the partner to one's self and one's own feelings of anger, anxiety, and bitterness.

As the couple understands the manner in which the romantic attraction prevented their ability to understand who they really were, and as they appreciate that they brought their individual narcissism and brokenness into the relationship for healing, they are able to learn how to

work through their marital issues more effectively. They are now able to appreciate how they were attracted to each other through the process of projection: They had unconsciously given each other qualities of their own personalities that seemed “to fit” their partner; but when these projected qualities later resulted in conflict, both partners reacted defensively.³⁶ Armed with this appreciation, they come to accept these projected qualities as aspects of their own denied personality and are ready to be challenged therapeutically with the potential for change.³⁷ Forgiveness occurs as both partners become more conscious and remorseful of how they have been using each other as a way of avoiding the pain of their own narcissism and brokenness.

The Role of Forgiveness in Marital Healing³⁸

The role of forgiveness in marital healing has received considerable attention in the last decade, especially among Christian counselors. Forgiveness has been seen historically as an “event” that occurs spontaneously as the reality of the relational pain is acknowledged. However, forgiveness is actually a “process” that begins with the “event” of the moment of mutual conscious awareness of the relational pain. Forgiveness is not an easy process to activate. For true forgiveness to occur, the couple must be able to face and acknowledge with genuine remorse that they have hurt each other.³⁹

From the perspectives of Scripture and common sense, the process of forgiveness usually begins with a confession of remorse by the party who has caused the pain. The acknowledgement of culpability is essential. The ability to describe how the painful action evolved enriches the

potential for the process of forgiveness to lead to constructive change in the relational dynamics. The perpetrator of the pain then begins the forgiveness process by saying something like, “I am sorry for . . .”

As the confession is acknowledged, the wounded party must embrace and affirm the truthfulness of the pain that is being confessed. An unwillingness to face the pain by either party can prematurely abort the process of forgiveness. If the perpetrator of the offense cannot acknowledge the pain that has been inflicted upon the marital partner, the process of forgiveness is one-sided and left totally in the hands of the wounded partner.⁴⁰

Forgiveness can be painful as the parties uncover old unhealed memories and re-encounter the grief and sadness in these memories. It is this author’s conviction that grief is an essential but frequently overlooked aspect of the process of forgiveness.⁴¹ Because grief is also a “process” rather than an “event,” the recovery of forgiveness can be long and painful as the wounded party must grieve thoroughly the losses that the relationship has incurred.⁴²

As the wounded party continues in the process of forgiveness, various beliefs, assumptions, and expectations are encountered within the heart and mind of the person. As these assumptions, expectations, and beliefs are uncovered, the wounded party now finds himself/herself on an inward journey that is arduous and intense, and beyond the expectations of relational justice that seem fair for anyone who has already been emotionally wounded. It soon becomes evident that because of the depth of personal vulnerability that forgiveness requires, that this process of forgiveness requires us to explore aspects of our personality, per-

sonal life story and unconscious memories that would not have been encountered, if the pain in the relationship had not evoked the necessity of forgiveness. Counselors have frequently remarked how the work of offering forgiveness to someone who has perpetrated a sinful act towards them seems so unjust in light of the fact that they feel like innocent victims.⁴³

The outcome of the process of forgiveness is inevitably a more thorough understanding and appreciation of the brokenness that both parties brought into their marriage. The process of forgiveness provides the couple with an intimate journey together, which if completed successfully, yields a level of healing and growth that benefits both participants as well as their marriage.⁴⁴

Marriage as a Spiritual Discipline

The effects of forgiveness upon both the marriage and the individual partners tends to move the healing to a deeper level involving spiritual dynamics and leading to less recidivism. After years of invoking spiritual wisdom during hundreds of counseling sessions with believing Christians, the author has come to realize that marriage offers believers in Jesus Christ a rare and unmatched opportunity to practice the principles of the Christian faith, including forgiveness, on a daily basis. The nature and level of personal vulnerability to the marital partner is unparalleled, providing a frequency of conflict and dissonance that requires the power of forgiveness to transcend.

Nevertheless, most couples, including Christians, tend to develop automatic habit patterns of sin that exacerbates the pain and conflict in their marriage. The Barna research quoted at the beginning of this article demonstrates that these auto-

matic habit patterns of sin are inevitably strong enough to drive the couple to court instead of the confessional. When we add the research of Gottman and others that demonstrate the role of anxiety and the human body's innate physiological responses to anxiety, the power of anxiety to activate these automatic habit patterns of sin that exacerbate the marital relationship is more thoroughly understood today than at any other time.

As the habit patterns of sin unfold in each relationship, the importance of developing new habit patterns of healing is needed. Even in marriages that are not in serious crisis, these dual habit patterns of sin and healing are evident.

For believers the ultimate goal of the journey of life is the pursuit of the mind of Christ. Spiritual disciplines like prayer, meditation, Bible study, worship, stewardship, fasting, acts of mercy and kindness, and solitude serve to help the believer focus his/her mind on the righteous things of God in Christ. These spiritual disciplines prepare the mind and heart through new habit patterns dedicated to Christian righteousness and maturity, and find their fulfillment in the moments of grace as the Holy Spirit is acknowledged and celebrated in our lives.

Spiritual disciplines are "disciplines" in the sense that they are activities devoted to righteousness that require a disciplined commitment and activity to achieve. Living the daily challenges of marriage with a "disciplined" heart, mind, and will is required for marriage to mirror the standards of Ephesians 5, in which the husband is enjoined to love his wife self-sacrificially like Christ loved the Church and the wife is enjoined to love her husband submissively as unto the Lord. The kind of self-sacrifice and submission

spoken of in Ephesians 5 cannot be the actions of a “command performance,” nor will they arise spontaneously in the presence of narcissistic wounds in the marriage. What is required to reach the righteous attitudes of Christ towards the Church is the daily disciplined response of love and forgiveness in the midst of narcissistic injury and anger. To achieve the loving and forgiving response that is needed to provide the spiritual healing that is latent in marriage, the believer must engage the *challenges of transcending the pain on a daily basis*. As we have suggested, forgiveness doesn’t come easily or without work. To commit oneself to the response of forgiveness on a daily basis is to commit oneself to being open and transparent at our depths with the one person who has the potential power to really hurt us in that vulnerability.

The tempter seeks to undermine our spiritual disciplines. Our success in striving after holiness is a strike at the constant agenda of the tempter to keep our automatic sinful habit patterns in place, blocking our efforts to transcend the hurts and disappointments of life through Christ’s love. The tempter seeks to undermine our marriages, to keep us defensively misaligned in this primary relationship, and to hurt our witness to a lost world. In contrast to this picture of hopelessness, however, the attitude of seeking to find in marriage the spiritual habit patterns of love and forgiveness, will strengthen our marriages, keeping us intimately connected in love, and demonstrating the truth to the sinful world around us.

If marriage can be seen as a spiritual discipline, then our marital partners can be seen as our personal spiritual friends/directors. A spiritual director, or spiritual friend as some people prefer, is someone

who serves as a companion on the spiritual journey. A spiritual friend/director gives consultation to our process of moving towards Christ and away from temptation. A spiritual friend seeks to lift us up in love and communion with Christ as the goal of the spiritual relationship.

As daily companions who see both the best and the worst of our efforts to grow in Christ, our marital partners have a unique perspective to offer us from their experiences with us. If they choose to speak the truth in love, their counsel can gently remind us of the truth, and support us as we return to the right path. Of course, if they choose to speak the truth in a high anxiety confrontational manner, they can activate our defenses and with the autonomic nervous system in full operational mode, can keep us distracted from things of the Spirit! For believers in Jesus Christ, the challenge is transforming our marriages from the chaotically explosive potential of the old Adam to the honest, while loving and supportive, possibilities of the new Adam.

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ENDNOTES

¹Many biblical texts could point to this life journey goal of self-emptying love, but this author has selected Philippians 2:1-11 as his favorite text.

²The Barna Research Group in Ventura, California reported in its December 21, 1999 press release that in a survey of nearly 4000 adults, 27% of the sample defining themselves as "born-again Christians" had experienced divorce at least once. The same research sample indicated that 24% of "non-believers" had experienced divorce at least once. Furthermore, the denominational population groups studied ranked the frequency of divorce as 34% for non-denominational Protestants, 30% Jewish, 29% Baptist, 25% mainline Protestants, 24% Mormons, 21% Roman Catholic, 21% Lutheran and 21% atheist and agnostic.

³The press release that announced these startling results did not indicate what percentage of the research sample lived together unmarried or how this contemporary secular marriage model might have affected the research conclusions. Sociological studies suggest that 50% of cohabiting adults have never been married, with a rise in over a million additional cohabiting couples in the five-year period from 1988 to 1993 (rising from 2.5 million to 3.5 million). See David Olson and John DeFrain, *Marriage and the Family: Diversity and Strengths*, 2nd ed. (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1997) 14.

⁴Again, the frequency of non-marital households is not reported in the press release.

⁵Olson and DeFrain, *Marriage and the Family*, 14.

⁶*Ibid.*, 15.

⁷The threat of sexually transmitted dis-

eases has led many to adopt “serial monogamy,” if not marriage.

⁸Scripturally, a life of chaste celibacy is encouraged as the alternative to marriage for those who have been given the spiritual strength to live as single adults (1 Cor 7:7).

⁹Gen 1:26-27 affirms the image of God in mankind. Christian counseling specialists like Wayne E. Oates and Larry Crabb have demonstrated the Triune relationality of God and its implications for a Christian anthropology of persons in intimate community, mirroring the Triune community.

¹⁰The concept of marriage as a covenantal relationship that mirrors God’s covenant with His people, stands in sharp theological contrast to the contractual models of marriage that dominate our contemporary culture.

¹¹The author is indebted to Dr. Daniel Block’s manuscript, “Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel: A Survey of Laws and Customs,” which will be published in an edited text on the ancient family, for a helpful exegesis of the Old Testament narratives describing the Hebrew family’s covenantal structure. Dr. Block’s analysis demonstrates the implications of the patricentric view of the family in contrast to the patriarchal view of the prevailing culture, and cogently corrects the popular misconceptions that the Old Testament gives license to the neglect and mistreatment of women by men.

¹²Ephesians 5 sets a covenantal standard that is a model of marital intimacy characterized by self-sacrificial love by the husband for his wife,

and inspires a voluntary self-submission in response from the wife towards her husband. Again, there have been misinterpretations of this passage, leading to an inaccurate understanding of the self-sacrificial covenantal qualities of a biblically inspired marriage.

¹³Many marital and family therapy theorists argue that primal fears and anxieties underlie marital dynamics, especially in the midst of conflict. See the Imago Theory described by Dr. Harville Hendrix in *Getting the Love You Want: A Guide for Couples* (New York: Henry Holt, 1988) as a classic example of this thesis.

¹⁴Dr. John Gottman has written often on this topic. Cf. his best seller co-authored with Nan Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (New York: Crown, 1999).

¹⁵In *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, Gottman describes the Four Horsemen of criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. He has since added “belligerence” to his list of horsemen, bringing the total to five destructive horsemen.

¹⁶The Christian Counseling and Family Studies Department at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary has been encouraging Christian counselors to make these applications in marital counseling. The department is also exploring empirical research into the relationship (if any) between Gottman’s Five Horsemen and sinful attitudes and behaviors.

¹⁷The author recognizes that the cultural fascination with romance is very influential in American society

and has replaced the family contract form of marital union still characteristic in third world countries. Anthropologist Helen E. Fisher has written an excellent analysis of the marital attraction process in *Anatomy of Love: The Natural History of Monogamy, Adultery, and Divorce* (New York: Norton, 1992).

¹⁸Deborah Tannen has written a popular discussion of these gender differences in *You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1990). Christian psychologist Larry Crabb has proposed an integrated theological and psychological interpretation of gender differences in his book, *Men and Women: Enjoying the Difference* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991). The tomography brain research of the last decade has demonstrated that men and women have some differences in brain functioning as well. See Daniel G. Amen, *Change Your Brain, Change Your Life* (New York: Three Rivers, 1998) for a popular resource on tomography studies of the human brain.

¹⁹This concept of the mutual suppression of feelings of attraction, is a theoretical description of the eventual dominance of rejection in a relationship previously dominated by attraction, as explicated by British Object Relations Theorists, a popular school of marital and family therapy, illustrated by Drs. David and Jill Scharff, *Object Relations Couple Therapy* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1991).

²⁰Carl Gustav Jung was a disciple of Sigmund Freud who eventually split from the psychoanalytic move-

ment founded by Freud and developed his own school of Analytic Psychology in response. Jung postulated a theory of "the mysterious conjunction," in which the attraction of personality opposites was part of the genesis of romantic love. See C. G. Jung, *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, Volume 14 "Mysterium Coniunctionis", New York, New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1963 for a full discussion of this mysterious conjunction of opposites in marriage.

²¹The family systems theories of Murray Bowen are foundational in this understanding of couple dynamics as derivative of the mixing and merging of their individual family of origin dynamics through what is called a multigenerational projection process. See C. Margaret Hall, *The Bowen Family Theory and Its Uses* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1981) as one excellent illustration of Bowen's theories about intergenerational influences upon the marital couple dynamics.

²²The author has chosen to follow the approach of Richard Foster in defining the classical spiritual disciplines.

²³The classical process known as spiritual direction is primarily a disciplined mentoring by a spiritual director of a directee in the spiritual disciplines of prayer and meditation. The field of Christian counseling has been in the process of reclaiming the role of spiritual direction, but sees it as distinctly different from other forms of counseling, because of its exclusive focus upon the spiritual life of the directee.

²⁴See Leigh E. Conver, "Soul Care: The Repurchase of a Stolen Birthright," *Review and Expositor*, 94 (Winter 1997) 107-130 for the author's analysis of this stolen birthright and its return to the ministry of the local church.

²⁵The author acknowledges that Christian counseling is a loosely defined counseling discipline that covers the spectrum of commitment to the integration of biblical, spiritual, psychological, family systems, and psychiatric perspectives. On the far right of the spectrum, Christian counseling is understood to be exclusively biblical in content and competence. On the far left of the spectrum, Christian counseling is almost exclusively the application of human sciences competency with a very limited application of Christian theology to the process. Martin and Deidre Bobgan, *Against Biblical Counseling, For the Bible* (Santa Barbara, CA: EastGate, 1994) represent the extreme right position. Carroll A. Wise, *Pastoral Psychotherapy: Theory and Practice* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1980) demonstrates the far left position. As chairman of the Department of Christian Counseling and Family Studies at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, this author is defining Christian counseling as it is taught at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary as the balanced integration of clinically acquired counseling skills within a biblical worldview and theological orientation that is Scripturally consistent. Within this integrative orientation, it is appropriate to see how sin manifests itself in the

lives of believers in a variety of habit patterns, dysfunctional relationships, and personal psychopathology. The thesis of this article that "for believers, marriage is a spiritual discipline" is consistent with this orientation to Christian counseling.

²⁶Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (Worcester, PA: Victory Films, 1984), videocassette.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸See Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1979).

²⁹"Self-actualization" is a product of Humanistic Psychology with its belief in the positive nature of human potential that is realized through a process of growth. "Self-differentiation" is a concept from Family Systems Theory that describes the process of "holding onto your own sense of self, while interacting in intimate relationships." Persons with low self-differentiation have poor personal boundaries and can quickly lose their sense of personal self in relationships. Persons with high self-differentiation are capable of maintaining very intense interpersonal relationships while holding on to their own identity. "Individuation of self" is a concept from Jungian Analytic Psychology that describes the life long natural process towards wholeness and balance. Individuation is that process of growth and development towards maturity in which the person becomes more internally

balanced and more in touch with conscious and unconscious aspects of his/her personality.

³⁰The most famous proponent of the treatment of narcissistic personalities is Heinz Kohut. See Heinz Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self: A Systemic Approach to the Psychoanalytic Treatment of Narcissistic Personality Disorders* (New York: The International Universities Press, 1977) for a thorough explication of Kohut's theory of treatment of narcissism.

³¹See David F. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) for an analysis of the church's seduction by the narcissistic and postmodern dimensions of our culture.

³²Because so much of our lives is governed by the ego/self striving for mastery and control in the external world, it is easy to lose touch with the deeper and more subtle yearnings of the soul. If "more is better" and "bigger is best," which are the assumptions of the reality of the ego/self seeking mastery and dominance and control, the yearnings of the soul for connection and relationship, surrender and self-denial, and union with the Almighty become lost in the process. St. Augustine's confession that our "souls are restless until they find their rest in God" is outside of the awareness of the ego/self's preoccupations with mastery and control.

³³One of the classical aspects of this difference in ego and soul and long term healing can be viewed in the importance of deep relational connection, which is crucial to the soul's

survival and growth. As a reflection of the Imago Dei, the soul needs to experience intimacy with others and with God in order to be whole. However, the ego/self is so preoccupied with mastery and control, that the ego rarely recognizes the futility of pursuing mastery and control as a solution to the problem of connection and intimacy. The successful therapeutic outcome of most individual psychotherapies does not necessarily integrate the soul's needs for connection and intimacy.

³⁴The problem of unconscious collusion between counselor and counselee is one of the strongest arguments for Christian counseling. The Christian counselor, having experienced the process of spiritual transformation (the renewing of the mind), has an essential resource to offer to the counselee who is undergoing the same process.

³⁵One of the distinctions of the field of marriage and family therapy within the counseling professions is that marriage and family therapists believe that the interpersonal world of the family is the most productive forum for engaging in change. Identities are forged in the interpersonal crucible of the family; problems develop and are reinforced in the same interpersonal space of the family; and the solutions that are most commonly shared with other family members are found in the systemic exchange of marriage and family therapists. Some marriage and family therapists, like the author, believe that long term change is best achieved in the unique crucible of the marriage.

³⁶The concepts of projection and projective identification are commonly understood within psychodynamic theories to be the interactive consequences of mutual attraction and mutual repulsion around similarities in the individual personalities that are denied consciously, and must be displaced through projection into the other person in order to be managed. Typically there is enough compatibility in this process of projection that the receiver of the projections has some identification with the contents of the projection and reacts as if they were truly part of his or her personality. See Scharff and Scharff, *Object Relations Couple Therapy* for a thorough analysis of how projection and projective identification occur.

³⁷The healing suggested in the ownership of previously denied and projected parts of one's self, involves conscious acceptance of the truth of this denial and projection; acceptance of the destruction to the relationship that has occurred through the denial and projection process and the injustice that has occurred as the partner has lived with these projections; acceptance of the historical origin of these qualities in the counselee's past; and the changing of these qualities through cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and relational changes. In the last five years, many secular therapists have also added spiritual techniques to their therapeutic armament to help counselees experience their abilities to change these previously denied and projected qualities of their own personalities.

³⁸The author wants to acknowledge his indebtedness to his friend and colleague, Bobby Cunningham, for the original insights into the dynamics of forgiveness, which the author has confirmed repeatedly through the years. These insights are found in Dr. Cunningham's article, "The Will to Forgive: A Pastoral Theological View of Forgiving," in the *Journal of Pastoral Care*, 39 (June 1985) 141-149. Another respected scholar within the Christian counseling field who has written prolifically and helpfully is Dr. Everett Worthington. See the references in the bibliography for further details about Dr. Worthington's contributions to our contemporary understanding of forgiveness as a process. Finally, Terry D. Hargrave's work, *Families and Forgiveness: Healing Wounds in the Intergenerational Family* (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1994) has been a valuable resource to this author.

³⁹The process of facing and acknowledging the mutual pain and hurt that has transpired in the relationship appears to be very difficult and so much so that many couples prefer the downhill slide into divorce, rather than face with genuine remorse the painful reality of how much they have hurt each other. It has been this author's experience that the depth of narcissistic defenses that are utilized by either party in the relationship, determines the ability to engage in a genuine process of mutual forgiveness. Without the presence of genuine remorse, forgiveness cannot occur. Genuine remorse appears to

be impossible for many narcissistic personalities who cannot acknowledge that they are sorry for their actions.

⁴⁰As stated previously, seriously narcissistically impaired individuals cannot acknowledge their culpability and continue to project the responsibility for the relational breakdown upon their partners. However, there are also many instances in which the wounded party must move towards forgiveness, even in the absence of confession by their perpetrating partners, as an attempt to give up the bitterness and hurt that they have experienced as a result of the marital conflict. Finally, there are instances in which this "one-sided" attempt at forgiveness is appropriate when the perpetrator is no longer available to heal the relationship, as in death.

⁴¹The author is thankful to his former graduate student, Charlie Gass for pointing out the presence of grief in the process of forgiveness and demonstrating this dynamic in his doctoral thesis, "Implementing a Pastoral Psychoeducational Program on Human Forgiveness in North Central Florida," an unpublished Doctor of Ministry thesis at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, December 1966.

⁴²The process understanding of grief has been affirmed universally, but the reader is invited to consult David K. Switzer's work, *The Dynamics of Grief* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970) for one analysis of grief as a process.

⁴³Whenever this author ventures into

the process of forgiveness with someone who has been wounded by another, he feels that it is appropriate to acknowledge at the front end that the process of forgiveness will likely be a lengthy and painful journey. As one counselee observed years ago: "Forgiveness is harder work for the victim than for the perpetrator, for the perpetrator only needs to face their sin, but the victim ends up taking an odyssey into their life history that they did not choose."

⁴⁴The process of forgiveness, though painful and emotionally challenging, is also very redemptive. The author finds working towards forgiveness with couples to be the single most satisfying experience of his professional ministry. Forgiveness is contagious in that being present to the process of forgiveness transforms all of the participants in the process, including the therapist/facilitator.