

*Divine
Portrait*

FRAMING THE
ART OF MARRIAGE



The BiLD (Biblical Institute of Leadership Development) Training Center is a ministry of Fellowship Bible Church of Northwest Arkansas. The Training Center is the tangible expression of one of the three guiding metaphors that best describes the mission and vision of Fellowship; namely, that Fellowship is a "greenhouse," a "training center," and a "launching pad." The necessary link between the greenhouse and launching pad is the BiLD Training Center where people are prepared and equipped for leadership in life and ministry.

Baseline is one of five areas of focus for BiLD.

baseline*

FIVE KEY EXPERIENCES



small group



classroom



cross
cultural



life on life



leadership

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BiLD Training Center

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Preface

Welcome to *Divine Portrait: framing the art of marriage*. We're glad you chose this study, and we sincerely count it an honor to serve as guides through the material. We'll be the first to tell you that we are not marriage experts. Our friends, children, and grandchildren will second that!

But we do have a passion for this material and we're on the journey toward its truth. This study won't answer every marriage question you face. It won't promise to fix your marriage in eight easy sessions. But it will give a set of lenses in which to view men, women, and marriage more clearly. And that's important. Because vision is critical for the success and enjoyment of marriage, at every stage and age.

We chose to use the metaphor *Divine Portrait* to describe marriage, because that's the picture that God offers us. However, the Bible doesn't prescribe exactly how every couple is to paint that portrait. As we'll see together, biblical marriage is not a paint-by-numbers project for Christian husbands and wives. Instead, the Bible frames the divine portrait of marriage, and then invites each couple to bring their unique lives to the canvas of marriage.

If you use this workbook as a Small Group study, your group will consist of diverse couples—different backgrounds, temperaments, callings, and seasons. You will cover the landscape of marriage: newlywed and veteran, first-time married and remarried, children and no children, struggling and thriving, fresh and stagnant. So how will we speak to such a variety of couples? We'll do our best to stick to the Bible and let it speak with both purpose and practicality. And that should give us all renewed vision. And renewed vision gives renewed passion.

It has been said, "The teacher learns twice." We have learned and grown much from putting these sessions together. Our prayer is that you will too.

Mark and Lisa Schatzman
Fellowship Mosaic Congregational Leader

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FOR THE SMALL GROUP LEADER

THANKS FOR LEADING your small group through the *Divine Portrait* study on marriage. I hope you find the Chinese proverb to be true—"the teacher learns twice." Here are some tips to help you become acquainted with the content and the format.

CONTENT: This series is more of a "how-come," than a "how-to." Our desire is to give a big, healthy vision for how to think, feel and do marriage biblically. The first four sessions frame God's picture for men, women, and marriage in broad strokes...almost as one larger message. Then we add the practicalities of teamwork, resolving conflict, sexual intimacy, etc. The material will touch the real-world issues of marriage that you would expect, but we'll do it in a way that keeps God's big picture of marriage in view.

FORMAT: This is a video curriculum. The sessions were recorded at a live conference in February, 2017.

SMALL GROUP MEETINGS:

- Discuss the small group questions. (30+ min)
- Remind each couple to talk through the "Take it Home" questions with their spouse.
- Note: For the Sexual Intimacy session, instead of a large group discussion, couples will split into two groups, male and female, and discuss the small group questions written for the appropriate gender.

HOMEWORK:

There is VERY little, but what is there is ESSENTIAL! We ask each person to:

- **Read** the short, introductory article at the beginning of each chapter. It takes about three minutes. One spouse can even read it aloud while the other is driving to group!

- **Watch** the video or listen to the podcast for that weeks session.
- **Discuss** the “Take it Home” questions as a couple after each small group meeting! Watching the videos and discussing the material as a group is only part of the growth process. Talking it through and applying it to each marriage is where the real growth takes place. Emphasize this!

GROUND RULES:

- Transparency keeps it real. Share your stories—your good and bad, your funny and painful. This will create authenticity and intimacy in the group, as well as encourage each other by seeing how others have similar victories and struggles.
- Say nothing that will embarrass or disrespect your spouse. Marriage small groups have earned the bad rap of being a place where people bash their spouse. The rule is “Thou shalt not confess someone else’s sins.”
- Remind the couples of our goal—growth. You may have couples who struggle with unrealistic expectations of how the study will “fix” their marriage or have unhealthy comparisons to other couples.
- Remind them that our goal is healthy growth, not perfection.
- Remind the couples of the most important thing to bring each week—themselves. The tendency in marriage groups is to focus on our spouse’s shortcomings. This will kill growth. Continue to encourage personal growth by helping folks focus on their own growth or struggle.

Session One

Introduction

FRAMING MARRIAGE

SO YOU'RE STARTING A SMALL GROUP focusing on marriage? Congratulations! (You think.) Exciting! (You hope.) The truth is, you may not know what to expect. Let's face it; there are a lot of marriage studies and books available. Why would Fellowship decide to write another one? For that matter, why include marriage as part of our Baseline Leadership Development in the first place?

We want to see men, women, and marriage from God's perspective. In fact, we *need* to see them from God's perspective. Without a clear vision of manhood and womanhood, it's tough to see the marriage relationship that brings us together clearly. And without a clear vision of marriage, it's even tougher to see your spouse clearly, much less love and respect them. The goal of this material and small group experience is to give and refresh our vision so that we can think, feel, and do marriage in a healthy, God-glorifying way.

As you'll see in the coming weeks, vision is everything. Without it, we merely ride the highs and lows of marriage. Or worse, we grope our way dimly through the monotony of daily life wondering if there is supposed to be more to this relationship. **Regaining vision is the fuel of a healthy and growing marriage.**

So what can you expect from this small group experience?

First, this study will focus more on the how-comes, than the how-tos. Yes, it will be practical. But the most practical thing we can do is start with a biblical frame that allows you to paint the picture of your marriage. And this isn't a paint-by-number exercise. Every couple is unique, living in a different season of life with different circumstances. So in the sessions, video teachings will frame each topic biblically. Topics will include things like why God made marriage, what makes men and women tick (and what makes us ticked off!), and how to build, maintain, and celebrate teamwork in marriage.

Second, the most important part of this experience is what you bring to it... individually and as a couple! Make a commitment to focus on your own growth. Yes, that means looking at how the sessions apply more to you than to your spouse! In between the sessions you will need to watch the video, read the short introductory article and take time to talk as a couple. *Take it Home* questions are included at the end of each session. They give you an opportunity to paint the picture of your marriage within the biblical frame. These conversations with your spouse may be the most important part of your experience. Skipping these talks will stunt the process of growth in your marriage.

Third, remember that growth is a process. Fixing, healing, or solving all your marriage problems in eight sessions is not realistic or healthy. Growing more into the man, woman, and marriage God has for you is healthy. Stay open to how God wants to use this experience in your life and marriage. And enjoy the process!



Video Teaching

Session One

Introduction

Watch the video segment for Session One and take notes on anything that stands out to you.

Expectations for this series:

1. More “how come” than “how to.”
2. The most important part of this series...***you!***
3. Use your group.
4. Your goal—growth.
5. An overview of the material.



Take it Home

Ask each other these questions before the next session. The goal is not just to get through them, but to take time to talk...and to listen...as a couple.

- What are you hoping to gain from this marriage small group experience? Be more specific with each other.

- What will be some of your personal challenges during this study? What will be some of your challenges as a couple?

- How can you work together to overcome these challenges and take steps toward growth?

- Pray aloud together. Ask God to simply open your eyes toward His best for your marriage during the coming months.

Session Two

The Image Created

AIM HIGHER

I HAD THE PRIVILEGE of being the driver's ed. instructor for four of our children. I use *privilege* loosely. There were times in the process where the ride wasn't fun for either of us and it strained our relationship. One thing I noticed; each child struggled with keeping the car in the middle of their lane. Each would drift to the right and almost run off the road, then over-correct to the left and almost cross the center-line, only to over-correct again. It was like riding shotgun with someone who is DUI. And it wasn't because of a lack of effort or not paying attention. The teenager had white-knuckles and a furrowed brow!

I said the same thing to each driver: "Try lifting your vision from right in front of the car and focus further down the road. Set your sights on where you are going, rather than where you are." As each learned to do that, the car magically seemed to straighten out more. In driver's ed, it's called "high-aim driving." In life, it's called "high-aim living." And it keeps us from over-correcting with white-knuckles and a furrowed brow. We need to focus more on where we're going, than where we are.

Perhaps no relationship is more difficult to practice than in marriage. It's so daily, so immediate. We're prone to drift and then over-correct. And it doesn't take

Session Two

The Image Created

long to relate to each other with white-knuckles and a furrowed brow. Soon the ride gets tense, the relationship grows sour, and passion dries up.

This is where most couples get stuck “in the ditch.” And their natural response is, “How do we get the enjoyable ride back? How do we fix our marriage?” That’s a good question, but it’s not the best question. And it isn’t the right first question.

I have a deep conviction in life: **passion follows purpose.** In every area, our passion *in* life will grow if we aim at higher purposes *for* life. Again, nowhere is that more true than in marriage. Couples who lose passion in their marriage are those who have lost sight of the highest purposes for their marriage. They no longer pursue high-aim living, and life is an exhausting series of over-corrections that drain the relationship over time. The temptation is to think of ways to refuel the relationship. But dry passion is just a symptom. The problem is low purpose.

So how do we set our sights on higher purposes? To gain this vision, we have to ask a better question “Why marriage?” Not “How marriage,” but “Why marriage?”

This raises our sights and gives us a better vision. And to answer this why question we must go back to the picture of marriage that God gives us. To aim higher, we don’t create a vision for our marriage, we receive the vision that God has given us already.



Video Teaching

A Vision For Men, Women and Marriage

Session Two
The Image Created

Watch the video segment for Session Two. As you watch, use the outline on this page to follow along or to take notes on anything that stands out to you.

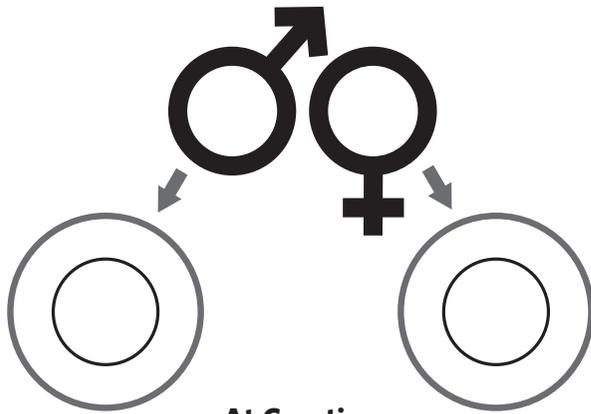
I. Why marriage?

“Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’ So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” Genesis 1:26-27

- *“Marriage is living with glory.”*
Mike Mason, *The Mystery of Marriage*

II. Why Men and Women? Genesis 2:15-25

The Image Created



At Creation

Genesis 1-2

Image reflected equally,
but also distinctively.

Session Three

The Image Fallen in Men

PARADISE LOST

IT WAS A CRISP, CLEAR DAY when our men's discipleship group gathered around a pond on beautiful farm land. The coffee was hot and the conversation was warm. One of the men suddenly snapped a picture of the pond with his phone. "Hey guys, look at this!" Because the pond was so still, it reflected the clouds and trees above it almost perfectly.

What was more amazing was that the pond actually magnified some things above it on the landscape. A windmill in the distance that was difficult to see by just looking at the landscape was actually clear in the pond's reflection. The perfectly still pond was a small, visible reflection of a greater, invisible reality.

I wish marriage was like that. But the pond is "still" no longer. Soon after Adam and Eve's honeymoon (or during it perhaps!), Genesis 1 and 2 turned a dangerous page. Genesis 3 opens with a spiritual attack on the first couple. And disastrously, Adam and Eve listened to the voice of Satan and rebelled from their Creator. The result—they chose to paint a self-portrait with their lives and marriage, instead of a Divine Portrait.

We can not over-exaggerate the effects of sin in all of our relationships, especially marriage. Sin is the rock

Session Three

The Image
Fallen in Men

that hit the pond. Its ripple effects are tsunami-like. The image of God in man and woman is still present in us, but it's distorted forever. The canvas of marriage can still paint a Divine Portrait, but it's marred and scarred forever.

The first thing our first couple did, after eating the forbidden fruit, is hide from each other. Then they hid from God. Guilt. Shame. Fear. Both horizontal and vertical relationships were broken. And we've been hiding ever since. Genesis 3 tells us why intimacy in relationships is so difficult. Relationships expose our own sin and nakedness, no matter how creative the fig leaf we design to cover ourselves.

Marriage, the closest of relationships, exposes us the most. So our fig leaves get more creative. In fear and shame, perhaps he covers his insecurity with a fig leaf called drivenness or always being right. Likewise, she may cover hers with a fig leaf called busyness or perfection. Either way, they're both hiding. And when you can hide no longer, you blame.

"Adam, where are you hiding, son? Eve, what have you done," God said. Adam's response, "The woman that You gave me offered me the fruit..." Eve's response, "The serpent deceived me..." Both blamed. It would be comical if it didn't hit so close to home. "No, honey, I only said that because you..." "Wait a minute; I only did that after you..." Guilt, shame, fear, blame. These are the effects of the Fall on all relationships...in all marriages.

And God judges man and woman for their sin. God uniquely cursed man and woman, just as He uniquely created them. Something happens uniquely in the soul of a man and woman. And it is this "something" that makes marriage so uniquely difficult.



Video Teaching

Session Three

The Image
Fallen in Men

Watch the video segment for Session Three. As you watch, use the outline on this page to follow along or to take notes on anything that stands out to you.

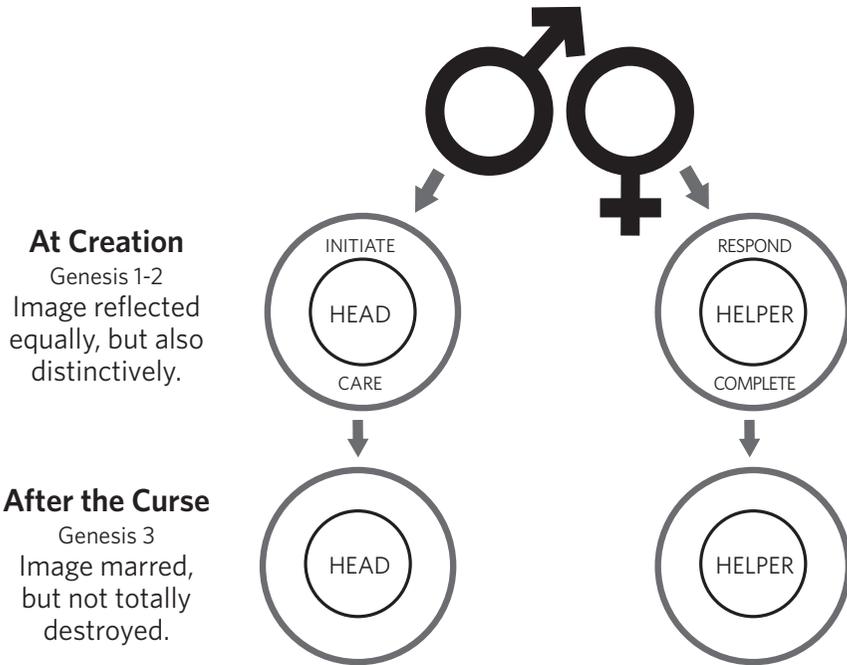
I. Marriage made on a spiritual battlefield.

II. The effects of sin on all relationships...all marriages.

Session Three

The Image
Fallen in Men

III. The Fall of Man...passive and dominant.



Session Four

The Image Fallen in Women

GAMES WE PLAY

THE BLAME-GAME. There's not a couple who doesn't play it in their marriage. Some of us are amateurs; some of us have achieved professional status. The kicker is that the better we get at it, the more damage it does... in us and to our marriage. The goal of the blame-game is to find out who is at fault for this mess.

In my marriage, I've found myself self-righteously thinking, "God, I know I'm not perfect here, but she's at least 81.5% at fault in this situation." Only to find that my wife is thinking the same thing about me! We came by the blame-game honestly. We inherited it from our first parents; then we owned it for ourselves and perfected it in our marriages.

Even much of what we read and hear about marriage in Christian circles can perpetuate the blame-game. Think about most sermons and books on marriage that you've come across; think about most Mother's Day and Father's Day sermons. The message is often, "Women, you are wonderful. You are our better-half. Thank you for putting up with us as men. Men, you are the problem. If

Session Four

The Image
Fallen in Women

you would be better, lead better, then your marriage and family would be different.”

Let’s face it, when it comes to most Christian marriage teaching, the focus is “what’s wrong with the man and how can we fix him?”

As we’ve seen, there is an abundance of truth here. Men have fallen tragically into passivity and dominance. But while this is true, it’s not the whole truth. And not telling the whole truth is damaging to men, women, and marriage. To focus only on the fall of the man is not only unfair to men, it’s dishonoring to women.

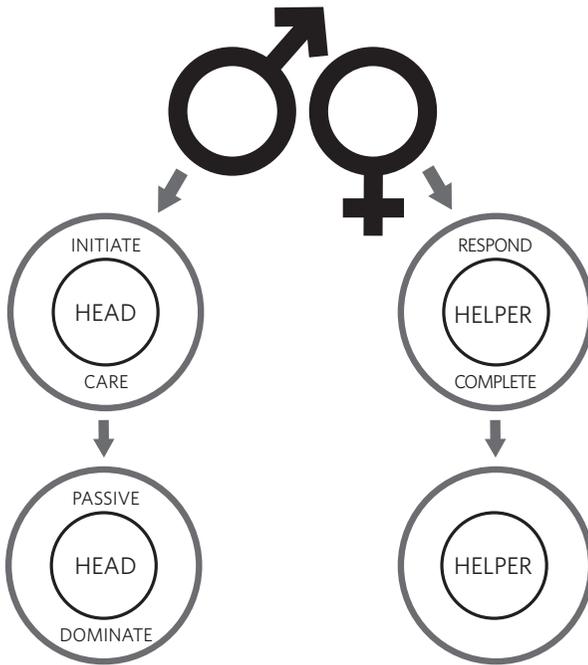
Not speaking biblically and honestly about the fall of the woman has resulted in women not being empowered with wisdom, grace and strength. And it’s been patronizing. It fails to give women the dignity of dealing with the effects of their own depravity. Honest and courageous women know that, yes, their husband can be a real “Son of Adam,” but they are a “Daughter of Eve” as well.

As we read God’s curse upon man and woman in Genesis 3, we find that God gives a unique curse to a man and a unique curse to a woman. That curse upon a woman has had dramatic effects upon her soul and her marriage. Understanding this curse gives insight. And insight can empower a woman to live wisely and grow more into the feminine image of God that He created in her.

So let’s quit the blame-game and look at where each of us has fallen from the image of God created in us. The journey of personal growth and marriage oneness starts there for every man... and woman.

Watch the video segment for Session Four. As you watch, use the outline on this page to follow along or to take notes on anything that stands out to you.

I. The Fall of Woman.



At Creation
Genesis 1-2
Image reflected
equally, but also
distinctively.

After the Curse
Genesis 3
Image marred,
but not totally
destroyed.

Session Five

The Image Redeemed in Teamwork

FROM A VICIOUS-CYCLE TO A LIFE-CYCLE

TURN ON A FAMILY SITCOM and you'll see it. *Everybody Loves Raymond, The King of Queens, According to Jim...* a passive man who bumbles through life is married to a controlling woman who comes behind him to clean up the mess. It's so common; it's comedic cliché. But when the script is our life instead of a sitcom, it's not comedy. It becomes a vicious cycle that makes us crazy. We feel stuck and hopeless. And we turn to the blame-game to argue our way out of the cycle.

I met Andy and Tammy at a conference where I taught on marriage. Like all of us, they struggled to communicate well with each other. Three weeks later, I was on the phone with Andy. The dialogue went something like this: "Andy, how are things going with Tammy?" "Fine." "Really?" "Yep." (Awkward pause.) "That's great..." Then I heard Tammy's voice break into the background; "Who's on the phone, honey?" Andy answered her.

What I heard next was loud, very loud. And her voice wasn't on the other phone extension either. "Tell him! Tell him right now or I'll get on the phone and I'll tell

Session Five
The Image Redeemed
in Teamwork

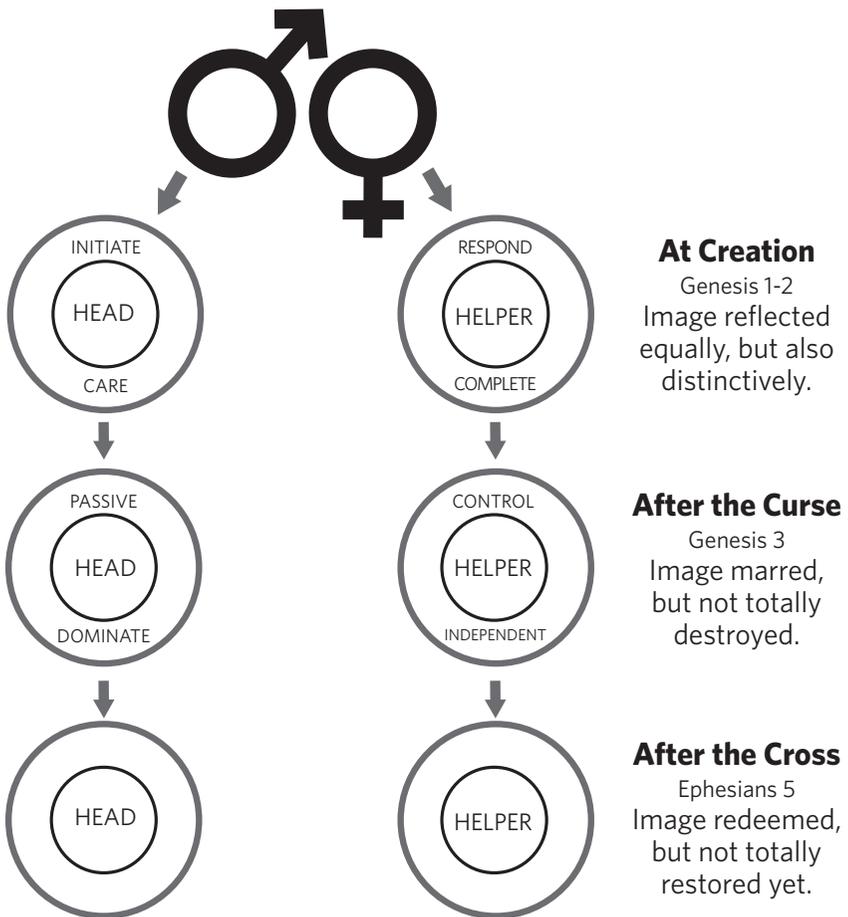
him!" (Another awkward pause.) I wanted to pretend I didn't hear it, but there was no use. My neighbor probably heard it. "Andy, you know I heard that. What's really going on?" "I don't know." "Well, what would Tammy say is going on?" "I don't know." I believed Andy. He really didn't know what was happening in his marriage. He just knew it was painful, and he was stuck and hopeless.

I had Andy ask Tammy what she needed most from him at this point in their marriage. He put down the phone for a minute to ask. Then he came back on the line with this answer: "She says she just needs me to talk to her. She's tired of living so lonely." The effects of the Fall were evident in their marriage, just as they are in our marriages. He moved passively around her; she responded with an angry control. He responded with more passivity; she responded with more angry control. And the vicious-cycle continued.

How does a couple break out of this? Enter grace; enter hope. Enter the New Testament commands on marriage. Just as the Garden story told us that men and women were uniquely created and then uniquely fell, the New Testament gives husbands and wives a unique calling in marriage. When we embrace and pursue this calling, we reclaim our God-given identity as men and women, and we empower our spouse to live out theirs. And the life cycle begins...

Watch the video segment for Session Five. As you watch, use the outline on this page to follow along or to take notes on anything that stands out to you.

I. The Image Redeemed. Ephesians 5:22-33



Session Five
The Image Redeemed
in Teamwork

II. What does all this really mean to us?

A.

B.

C.

Session Five

The Image Redeemed
in Teamwork

- Reflect on the New Testament commands for a man to love and lead his wife, and the woman to follow and respect her husband. Why has God given a man and a woman unique assignments in marriage? What makes these assignments so difficult?

- Think of a couple you know who seems to be living (for the most part) this New Testament model. How would you describe them? What do they do that models these New Testament commands?

- Ephesians 5:33 gives a one-word summary assignment to husbands and wives—love and respect. Both men and women need both love and respect. Why do you think God calls a man to love and a woman to respect?

- Men, when you love your wife as Christ loved the Church, what does that tend to produce in her? Women, when you respect your husband as the leader of your relationship, what does that tend to produce in him? Be specific.

- Brainstorm as couples together: Women, what communicates love to you? Men, what communicates respect to you?

- Describe the Holy Spirit's role in an Ephesians 5 kind of marriage. Share where you need the Holy Spirit's power so you can live out your unique calling as a husband/wife.

- How can this group pray for you as you pursue this calling?



Take it Home

Ask each other these questions before the next session. The goal is not just to get through them, but to take time to talk...and to listen...as a couple.

- Evaluate your progress in either loving/leading or following/respecting your spouse. Be specific. It's okay to brag on yourself. It's okay to admit where you've fallen short.

- List the positive or negative effects that your actions have had on your spouse. How have these helped or hindered his/her ability to live out God's calling for them?

- Describe how your spouse can encourage you to be the man/woman God has called you to be. What do you "need" from your spouse? Use this time to move forward in the growth of your marriage relationship, not focusing of past hurts and hangups. Tell your spouse how they can help you grow to be God's man/woman.

Session Six

Resolving Conflict: Maintaining Oneness in Marriage

A GAME WITHOUT RULES

IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL SUNDAY AFTERNOON, yet he came back into the house and went straight to his room. Just an hour earlier, my youngest son was playing football with the neighborhood boys. Now I found him angry and sulking as he played on his tablet.

“What’s up, bud? Why aren’t you and the guys playing?”
“I quit,” he replied. “Why’d you quit?” Angrily he answered, “Because (name withheld to protect the guilty) keeps changing the rules! It’s not fair and it’s not fun!”

Don’t you hate playing a game with someone who keeps changing the rules? It’s confusing. It’s frustrating. It’s maddening! Even worse, none of the players can ever win and no one knows when or how the game is supposed to end.

Sometimes, conflict feels like a game where the rules keep changing. Too many times, conflict in marriage definitely feels like that. In their book, *Fight Fair!*, my friends, Tim and Joy Downs say,

Session Six

Resolving Conflict:
Maintaining Oneness
in Marriage

“Conflict, the art of disagreeing while still holding hands, is a game without rules. It may sound strange to speak of conflict as a ‘game,’ but in a sense it is. Every marital disagreement has two players, a starting point, and a finish line. There is a playing field and a time limit, and there are penalties, fouls, and grounds for disqualification along the way. There are winners and losers too—though in this game, unlike most, both players can win or both can lose.”

Every married couple experiences conflict. Yes, every! It’s just that every couple doesn’t play the game in a way that causes each spouse and the marriage to win. When an argument arises, some think, “I’d rather not play this game.” They have lots of creative ways of quitting when they feel like the game is getting tense. For others, when conflict starts to heat up, they think, “I only play to win!” For them, conflict is a competition with clear winners and losers.

But if we are going to win at oneness in marriage, there has to be a better way than these two losing approaches. Whether they’ve written down the rules or not, every couple who handles conflict in a healthy way follows a similar approach. We’ll look at this approach, this healthy path, in this session.

Here’s the good news for all of us. **The end game for conflict is the same as it is for every aspect of marriage—oneness.** Yes, conflict can be a tool that God uses to build oneness in your marriage! I know we see it as a threat that divides us, but it doesn’t have to be this way. That’s why we need God’s vision to reframe conflict, just as much as we need His vision in other areas of marriage (perhaps more).

The healthiest, richest, deepest, strongest, and happiest married couples are the ones who have learned to *re-solve* conflict regularly when it occurs. That’s the end-game that God has for us. To grow into this kind of oneness, we have to play by a similar set of conflict rules.

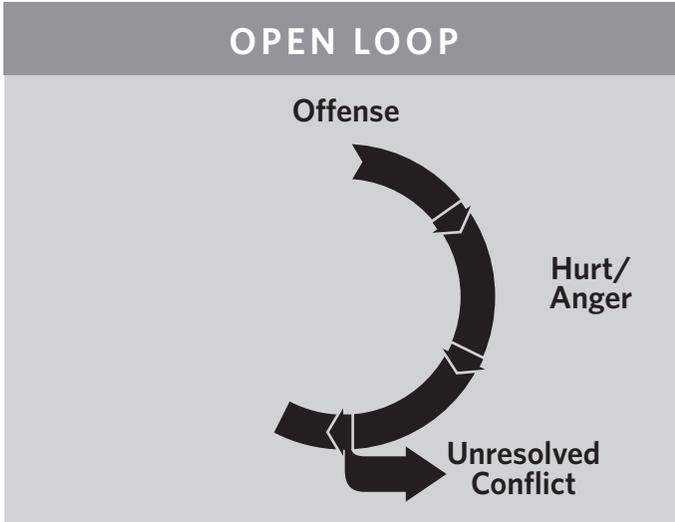


Video Teaching

Session Six Resolving Conflict: Maintaining Oneness in Marriage

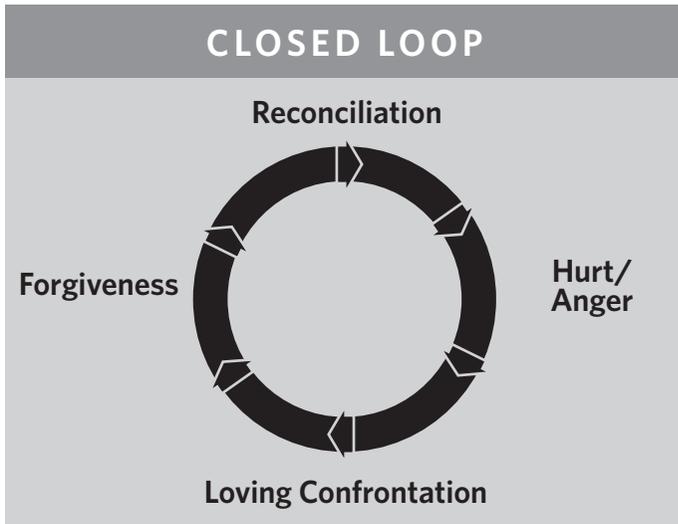
Watch the video segment for Session Six. As you watch, use the outline on this page to follow along or to take notes on anything that stands out to you.

Closing the Loop on Conflict¹



Session Six

Resolving Conflict:
Maintaining Oneness
in Marriage



¹“Closing the conflict loop” has been largely adapted from Gary Rosberg’s, *Choosing to Love Again* (Colorado Springs: Focus on the Family Publishing, 1992.) These same principles are found in the “We Fight Too” session of FamilyLife’s® *Weekend to Remember*® marriage conference.

Session Six

Resolving Conflict:
Maintaining Oneness
in Marriage

- How does understanding that anger is a “secondary emotion” help you in handling conflict?

- Read Ephesians 4:1-6 out loud.

- What does the beginning of chapter 4 tell us about God’s goal for our relationships/marriage?

- Are there any areas of your relationship that you have declared off-limits or try to avoid because they might bring up conflict? What has been the result of that tendency in your marriage?

Session Six
Resolving Conflict:
Maintaining Oneness
in Marriage

- Can you pick an unresolved conflict and work through the conflict loop? Take time to listen and seek to understand your spouse. Seek or grant forgiveness for any offense needing it. Close by praying together.

Session Seven

Sexual Intimacy: Celebrating Oneness in Marriage

"There are three things that are too amazing for me, four that I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a snake on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a young woman."

Proverbs 30:18-19 NIV

"The most crucial theological truth about sexuality is that God loves sex and evil hates it."

Dan Allender & Tremper Longman, *The Intimate Mystery*

Sex—beautiful, mysterious, pleasurable, powerful, playful, passionate... True, but that's not the whole truth. Sex is not just something that married couples do. It's also something we talk about, think about, dream about, and fight about.

How can something that brings so much pleasure in marriage, also bring so much pain? When it comes to romance and intimacy in marriage, how is it that sex can hit the target so perfectly, and yet create so many misses—miscommunication, misunderstanding, missed expectations...?

Session Seven
Sexual Intimacy:
Celebrating Oneness
in Marriage

I was talking with Dr. Gary Oliver, noted author and counselor on marriage, about how to approach a chapter on sex in a small group curriculum. In one of his emails, this is what he said:

“Sex is a challenging topic to discuss in mixed company. Actually it’s difficult for some folks to discuss in same-sex company. Funny thing is that it’s primarily healthy or biblically-based teaching on sex that’s hard for some to talk about. Guys can tell jokes and not feel weird at all, and some women can discuss the soft-porn romance novels with no discomfort. But somehow Satan makes sure that when it comes to talking about sex in the context in which love was designed to exist and to thrive, healthy sex in the context of marriage, folks can get very uncomfortable. Almost as uncomfortable as talking about finances or prayer.”

But this is a marriage curriculum. You can’t not talk about sex. And yet, that’s just it. How does a small group of couples talk about sex in a way that is honest and vulnerable, yet encouraging and edifying?

We’ll do it by staying true to our format. The video teaching will talk about how the Bible frames sex, and the discussion questions will let each couple paint the picture for their marriage.

Helpful resources for further insight will be given at the end of the discussion section. The hope is that you will explore the resources that meet your marriage needs. We tried to select resources that paint an accurate picture of the privilege, joy, gift, creativity, and responsibility of sex in marriage.

Our goal for the sexual area of our relationship is the same as it is for all areas of marriage—oneness.



“How I Found God in Bed”

by Dave Meurer (2011 © Christianity Today, kyria.com)

(Note: Article reprinted with permission)

A lot of people say that they find God in the beauty and wonder of nature, and while I am very happy for them, I find it much more exhilarating to find God in the warm afterglow of a truly stupendous orgasm.

Before all you nature lovers fire off incensed emails about the breathtaking exquisiteness of nature, bear in mind that the breathtaking exquisiteness of nature also contains malevolent grizzly bears, blood sucking mosquitoes, and shockingly frigid water in which to drown. If you spend enough time in the beauty and wonder of nature, you will find that the beauty and wonder of nature basically wants to kill you. This is, after all, a fallen world. The lion and the lamb will one day lie down together, but until Jesus actually ushers in the Kingdom, the lamb would be prudent to keep a bit of distance from Simba.

Nature certainly reveals the power and creativity of God, but I don't think it directly teaches us about the love of God. The Swiss Alps are spectacular and a raging ocean inspires awe, but neither land nor sea is relational. And as noted earlier, the natural world is often deadly. Think blizzards, or Haiti.

But while nature is fraught with peril, I have never come remotely near death while in bed with my lovely bride. On the contrary, in bed I feel warmth and love and passion and loyalty and joy. So which is most reflective of the heart of God, the Grand Canyon or sex?

I find it significant that when God sought to give us a powerful analogy of his relationship to us, he chose to say the church is the “Bride of Christ.” That's a staggering thought, but we're often not very staggered by it because we haven't taken the time to really let it sink in.

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So think about a truly wonderful time you've had in bed with your spouse—the hunger you felt for each other, the vulnerability of nakedness and passion, the desire to please each other, the sense of contentment as you drifted off to sleep after making love. Think back to when you were dating, and how you longed to be with each other and loved to spend hours with each other. Recall how it made you feel when this amazing person whispered words of love.

God deliberately taps into that experience as he tries to convey the passion, the commitment, the deep longing, and unshakable love he has for us.

A Taste of Heaven

I believe that God wants us to enjoy the very best that earthly love has to offer. He wants us to have a rich, deep, incredibly real relationship with our spouse. And he wants it to dawn on us that his own love for us is far richer, deeper, and more honest than the very best we've ever experienced with our mate. Had he not been the one to invoke the image of marriage when talking about our relationship to Christ, I would have thought it far too intimate to dare to draw that comparison. I mean, it's one thing to talk about a kindly king adopting wretched orphans. It's a much deeper metaphor to talk about a marriage with God.

All analogies break down, and so does the analogy of a marriage with the God of the Universe. I mean, God is not having sex with us. But we can certainly get the drift of his point. He loves to love us. And if we take the time to let it sink in all over again, we will find ourselves loving to love him back. It really is a lot like marriage.

When I say that I found God in bed, what I really mean is that the more I have come to know, trust, and love my wife, the more I have come to know, trust, and love God. Learning about human love, especially in the closest of all possible human relationships, helps me better grasp divine love.

If you have a relatively happy and healthy marriage, and if you find sex a rich and fulfilling experience, then multiply the good

stuff by a factor of a billion and you'll probably get a sense of the bliss of heaven. Although the Bible teaches that we won't "marry or be given in marriage" in heaven, there is no way that life above is going to be a step down from life on earth. The entire package of heaven—the joy of being with God, and the ecstasy of the heavenly experience—will far exceed the best we've enjoyed on this fallen ball of sod.

When You're Wounded

But now a word to those who can't relate to the concept of finding God in bed, because the bedroom is a place of frustration or heartache. For varied reasons, some people find sex a source of sorrow or tension. Intimacy can be colored by dark secrets of a painful past, by a medical issue, or a complexity only God understands. The ideal expression and enjoyment of sex, as originally envisioned by God, is often marred by the bad stuff of life. Can sexually wounded people still find God in bed?

As one of those wounded people, I say "yes." I affirm from my own experience that God is able and willing to reveal Himself to you—and even bring a great deal of emotional healing—through the healthy experience of physical connection with your mate. It may take a lot of work to get there. It can be a long journey. But if you're willing to walk it, God will travel the path with you.

My woundedness happened early. I was molested as a child. It wasn't a one time thing. It was a ruinous, soul-damaging series of violations that began when I was just five years old and lasted for years.

Without going into all the awful details, let me simply say that my ability to trust someone else was deeply and severely damaged. My experience was so terrible and bewildering that, to preserve my sanity, my mind just blocked it out, and on some level I simply went numb—for years. Sexual feelings, when I felt them, were mixed with self-loathing and emotional paralysis. I was a mess, and I wasn't quite sure why. But I hid it pretty well.

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I met and married the woman of my dreams, but the ghosts of my childhood trauma haunted our new life. Sometimes physical touch, especially if it was unexpected, plunged me into a lonely and desolate place. I both craved and rejected intimacy. I was a mystery to my wife.

When I finally opened up to her, and allowed all the pain and fear to tumble out, it marked the beginning of my pilgrimage to emotional and sexual wholeness.

If you've been sexually wounded, your default setting might be "remain emotionally distant in an attempt to feel safe." View that as a temptation, not an option. Emotional distance and sexual barriers are a weak substitute for the life and marriage God intends for you.

It takes courage and determination to leave that deceptively "safe" but destructive place. I highly recommend professional counseling for any man or woman who has suffered sexual abuse. (I needed it.) You're worth it, your spouse is worth it, and your marriage is worth it.

I've suffered things that no one should suffer. I've endured things that often drive people to press the self-destruct button on their lives and marriages. But I made a decision to turn to God, my wife, and a small circle of close friends. I gritted my teeth and fought through my fears and weirdness for the normal and healthy life I knew God wanted for me. My life is so much richer and happier, but it took work to get here. It will likely take work for you, too.

But if you have a choice in the matter, don't settle for anything less than finding God in bed.

—DAVE MEURER



Video Teaching

Session Seven
Sexual Intimacy:
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Watch the video segment for Session Seven. As you watch, use the outline on this page to follow along or to take notes on anything that stands out to you.

- I. Purpose of Sex: it's God's idea.
 - A. Visible picture of an invisible reality.

"Every time a couple makes love, they are renewing their wedding vows." —Jerry Kirk
 - B. Mutual pleasure.

- II. Reasons why something so pleasurable can be so frustrating or painful.
 - A. Bought into lies and myths.
 - B. Differences between men and women.
 - C. Unmet expectations and miscommunication.
 - D. Difficult seasons.
 - E. Sex and shame in a broken world.

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III. Ways to build oneness.

A. Seek to serve, honor, and bless each other.

B. Learn to communicate desire and needs.

C. Grow over time (patience and grace).

IV. Celebrating oneness...what's allowed in marriage?

A. Follow the same pattern for holiness as in other areas of our lives:

All things are lawful for me,' but not all things are helpful. 'All things are lawful for me,' but I will not be dominated by anything.

1 Corinthians 6:12 (ESV)

i. Is it prohibited?

ii. Is it helpful?

iii. Is it enslaving (trap)?

V. The Goal of Sex in Marriage. Genesis 2:24

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- Of the five barriers identified in the video that couples experience, which ones do you struggle with as a couple? What are some ways to move beyond those barriers?
 - Lies/myths
 - Differences between men & women (needs, desires, responses)
 - Unmet expectations & miscommunication
 - Different seasons of married life
 - Shame from sex in a broken world
- One author observes that *"80% of couples face a serious sexual challenge at some point in their marriage."* Does this surprise you? Why or why not?



“Our Best Sex Advice”

by Marriage Partnership writers (2011 © Christianity Today, kyria.com)

(Note: Article reprinted with permission)

Planning

It’s funny—a wife will put great effort and planning into meal preparation, but we think sex should be spontaneous. It’s as if you were to go into the kitchen blindfolded and start taking things off the shelf and say, “Okay, we’re going to have a spontaneous meal.” It doesn’t work that way. You have to plan for it, set an attitude for it.

The same is true of sex, but we don’t do it. We think that, without energy or planning, we can get into bed when we’re the most tired and have wonderfully fulfilled sex. If we want wonderful sex, we have to plan for it—and then communicate to our spouse what we think is wonderful.

—Mary Ann Mayo, Fall 1990

Evaluate Priorities

We need to be careful we aren’t always putting something else ahead of sex: *Nightline*, paying the bills, getting our child her third drink of water. It’s too easy to think, Oh, well, there’s always tomorrow. Sometimes we need to heed the feelings-follow-actions dictum and decide to have sex.

—Elizabeth Cody Newenhuyse, Summer 1991

Men and Aging

As a man ages he will require direct penile stimulation to get an erection, rather than responding to visual stimuli or thought stimulus. This may actually enhance lovemaking for the couple, because the man and the woman will become more similar in their arousal responses.

—Cliff and Joyce Penner, Fall 1992

Giving Pointers

Expressing positive messages during sex enhances the experience for both spouses. In contrast, criticism and sexual arousal just don't mix. When we're aroused, we are open and vulnerable. So avoid making negative comment about your husband's approach while the two of you are making love.

If there are times when you feel you must take "corrective action" during sex, state your desires positively. For example, instead of saying, "You're pressing too hard," try saying, "A lighter, whispery touch would feel wonderful."

—Cliff and Joyce Penner, Spring 1993

Nonverbal Cues

Consider the importance of nonverbal communication during your sexual times together. Once you've taught each other what is most effective and enjoyable for each of you, then you can incorporate that knowledge into your lovemaking by using nonverbal signals. You can lovingly move each other's hands to the place where your body hungers touch. You can move your own body to get the stimulation you desire. You can also decide to use prearranged signals to let each other know when some activity has become negative, or when some other touching would be more positive.

—Cliff and Joyce Penner, Spring 1993

Simultaneous Orgasm

The myth that simultaneous orgasm is the epitome of sexual fulfillment is based on a number of false assumptions. First, it assumes that two people get aroused and then respond at the same pace. That is highly unlikely. Second, it assumes that goal-oriented sex is more fulfilling than pleasure-oriented sex. On the contrary, goal-oriented sex can interfere with fulfillment by introducing demand, anxiety, and often a feeling of failure, all of which hinder the body's natural response mechanism.

—Cliff and Joyce Penner, Winter 1994

Don't Underestimate Kissing!

Keep kissing, passionately, every day. Kissing is the barometer of the state of your sexual relationship.

—Cliff and Joyce Penner, Summer 1997

Not Interested?

Sometimes I wonder if women really understand how intense the male sex drive is or how intrinsic a man's sexual fulfillment is to his self-acceptance. Remember men and women are different. If our wives had our testosterone levels, they'd be a lot more interested in sex. Of course they'd also have beards and hair on their chests. It could also cause liver damage—so don't slip testosterone into your wife's coffee.

—Louis McBurney, Spring 1998

Get Some Rest

Sleep-deprived spouses are not sexy, so before you can revitalize your love life you'll need to get some rest. Take a nap. Go to bed tonight when you get the kids to sleep. We actually have advised parents to have a sleep date. Get away for 24 hours, but spend the first part of it sleeping. Until you overcome some of your sleep deprivation, you won't be alert enough to concentrate on loving each other.

—David and Claudia Arp, Spring 2000

What's Okay?

In marriage a couple may do anything in their sexual play that meets five specific criteria: (1) It's just the two of you. (2) You allow mutual respect and agreement to guide your choices of sexual play. (3) It causes no pain physically, emotionally, or spiritually. (4) You keep the focus on your relationship. When having sexual release becomes an addiction driven to levels of compulsive behavior, replacing the connection to your spouse with various stimuli that are essentially fantasy based, you rob your marriage of the most crucial part of intimacy—the blend of relational and sexual connectedness. (5) It doesn't always take the place of genital union.

—Louis and Melissa McBurney, Spring 2001

How Often is Normal?

It's as if there's some grand scale of "normalcy" that everyone wants to fit in. Just because you don't have the same libido as your wife's friends' husbands doesn't indicate an "abnormality." This isn't a competition. There's no normal frequency of intercourse. It's whatever is right for you as a couple.

—Louis and Melissa McBurney, Spring 2004

Crock Pots vs. Microwaves

Men can become aroused in 2 to 3 minutes (and sometimes 30 seconds!)—but women take 10 times as long. That's 20 to 30 minutes to become as aroused as her man. Marriage won't turn a Crock-Pot into a microwave! Remember, the first description of love in 1 Corinthians 13 is, "Love is patient."

—Shay and Robert Roop, Spring 2005

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Not Now

A woman may say, "I don't want to have sex," but her husband hears, "I don't want to have sex with you." Saying, "Not now" instead of, "No" lets a husband grasp it will happen, just not at that moment. But be sure to make time for intimacy within the next 24-48 hours or hubby will start to believe that "not now" is the same as "no."

—Shay and Robert Roop, Spring 2005

Sexual Zones

Become a student of your spouse's sexual zones. A woman has more erogenous zones than just her breasts and vagina. Explore with her, and discover where she's most responsive. Kiss, stroke, or caress each body part. Ask, "How does this feel? Does it make you tingle? What would make you feel even more tingly—if I caressed less or more?" Remember that although it's good to work toward climax, the journey is pretty unbelievable too.

—Gary and Barbara Rosberg, Winter 2006

Different Kinds of Sex

So often couples feel the pressure to have "perfect" sex—complete with earthquake, fireworks, and multiple orgasms. Not every time you have sex will be a "bell ringer." And that's okay, because you're both connecting. Sometimes sex will be a quickie to meet the need of the moment. Sometimes it will be functional sex, or just because sex, when you think, I'm not in the mood, but my spouse needs me right now. Sometimes it may be comfort sex, when life has brought devastation and the only comfort and security is to be found in the arms of your spouse as a lover. You'll be ahead when you understand that the different kinds of sex point to the ultimate reason for sex: the relationship. The goal is not whether you end with a climax. The goal is that you're connecting as a couple.

—Gary and Barbara Rosberg, Winter 2006

Say “Why not?”

What if you started to say, “Why not” to your spouse? Let’s say your husband calls you and announces, “I’ll meet you at home; we’ll enjoy some lunch—and each other.” Instead of lamenting the lost opportunity to run an errand, respond, “Why not?” Or when your wife e-mails you and announces, “The kids are going to be at sports practice for two hours. If you come home early, I’ll make it worth your while,” don’t think of that backlog of paperwork on your desk. Respond, “Why not?”

—Gary and Barbara Rosberg, Winter 2006

Sexual Problems

Every couple except maybe one or two in the entire universe will have sexual problems at some point in their marriage. Anyone who tells you otherwise is misleading you. Every man is going to suffer from three major issues at some point: impotence, premature ejaculation, and delayed ejaculation. The good news is there are ways to work through those, so don’t spend so much time fretting over them.

—Debra Taylor and Doug Rosenau, Spring 2007

The Big O

The big O is not orgasm. The big O is oneness. It’s not how great the bodies or how great the orgasm. It’s “Was that a loving experience where we shared with each other? Was it contributing to our oneness?”

—Christopher McCluskey, Spring 2007

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Initiating Sex isn't the Only Way to Express Sexual Desire

Most of us typically think of sexual desire as a hunger for sex—often with sexual thoughts or fantasies—that prompts us to initiate sex.

It turns out, however, that most women experience a receptive type of sexual desire. For many women desire is “triggered” by thoughts and emotions arising during sexual excitement, not before. So when a husband becomes frustrated because he wants his wife to pursue him sexually and he believes that she has no interest in sex because she doesn’t do that, he’s actually not giving her enough credit! Most women will respond positively to sexual advances—they just don’t initiate them because that’s not the way they were designed.

By recognizing that most men are proactive with sex and most women are reactive, and then by accepting and respecting those differences, we can allow a woman’s type of sexual desire to “count.”

—Debra Taylor and Michael Sytsma, Summer 2007

Good in Bed?

We have to fight against taking our sexual responsibilities for granted. On the day we marry, we gain a monopoly. Our spouse commits to have sexual relations with no one else. Regardless of whether we act thoughtfully, creatively, or selfishly in bed, they receive only what we provide. Without any competitions, some of us, quite frankly, simply stop making an effort. Do I want to reward my wife’s commitment to me, or do I want to make her regret it? Do I want to bless her, or take her for granted? Do I want to be a generous, enthusiastic lover, or a miser reluctantly doling out occasional “favors”? When the Bible tells us in Hebrews 13:4 to keep the marriage bed “pure,” the application goes far beyond avoiding physical acts of immorality to include inner virtue.

—Gary Thomas, Winter 2007



Resources for Further Growth

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- ***Improve Your Sex Life: expert advice for married women***, Kyria.com. A series of brief articles and discussion questions that is highly practical and biblical (for women and men!).
- ***Intimacy Ignited: conversations couple to couple***, Dillow and Pintus. (Navpress, 2004) A walk through the Song of Solomon that is biblically solid, relationally practical, and refreshingly candid.
- ***Real Questions, Real Answers about Sex***, Louis and Melissa McBurney (Zondervan, 2004). Offers frank, humorous, sensitive, and biblically-grounded answers for Christians looking for more than mere technical advice. Based upon readers' questions to *Marriage Partnership* magazine.
- ***Celebration of Sex: a guide to God's gift of sexual intimacy***, Douglas E. Rosenau (Nelson, 2002). Some have dubbed this practical and biblical book as one of the definitive resources for sexual intimacy.

Session Eight

The Meaning of Marriage

THE STORY OF US

EVERY WEDDING DAY, something is born. Hopefully, not a baby. In a wedding, the *he* and the *she* exchange vows, and a *we* is born—a relationship; an *us* is created. Now, if the *he* and the *she* will nurture the *we*, the *we* will grow stronger in depth and unity. Then that *we* will turn around and grow the *he* and the *she*. I know, this sounds like a tongue-twister. But it's a central truth. It's how God uses marriage to grow us up.

God's ultimate goal in all of our lives is to change us into His image. To "conform us into the likeness of His Son" has been His goal since before there was time (Romans 8:29). God uses everything to accomplish this beautiful objective—our health, our job, our children, our sufferings, our successes. Why should it surprise us that God uses our marriage to accomplish this too? To quote the subtitle of *Sacred Marriage*, Gary Thomas' excellent book, "What if God designed marriage to make us holy, more than to make us happy?"

Some would say, "That doesn't sound very romantic or fun." But we wouldn't say that. By now, we know that passion follows purpose.

Session Eight

The Meaning
of Marriage

If we pursue the highest purposes for our marriage, we will experience higher passion in our marriage. And can you get any higher a purpose than Christ-likeness? Think of some of the attributes of God: complete joy, beautiful holiness, unconditional love, fierce strength, tender mercy, patient faithfulness, kind grace... If our marriages were described like this, people would say it was a fairytale.

But it's not. It's a Divine Portrait—a relationship that experiences a little bit of God's glories painted on the canvas of our marriage.

On this side of eternity, a Divine Portrait is a process, more than it is a product. And the process that God uses to reveal Himself in our lives is called oneness.

This makes sense. God Himself is the tri-une oneness of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And He made mankind in His image. Is it any wonder then that marriage is to be the unified picture of a man and a woman?

Our oneness paints a picture of the living God. Think about the institution of the Church. Jesus as the Head and the Holy Spirit as the Helper, live, love and work in God-glorifying oneness. The institution of marriage is to be the living, loving, and working unity of a head and a helper as well.

When we reject a self-portrait and pursue a Divine Portrait, the blessings are huge. God gets glory; we experience joy; our marriages grow in intimacy; our children grow in security; our homes have purpose; our testimony has credibility; and our world sees Jesus. All this because of the picture of our marriage!

Yes, there's more at stake with our marriages than meets the eye. Seeing that vision gives marriage its meaning.



Video Teaching

Session Eight

The Meaning
of Marriage

Watch the video segment for Session Eight. As you watch, use the outline on this page to follow along or to take notes on anything that stands out to you.

I. The blessing of living to paint a Divine Portrait:

A. God is glorified.

B. We experience joy and intimacy.

C. Children get vision and security.

D. The world gets a glimpse of Jesus-His power,
redemption, love, joy...

- Ask that Valentine's Banquet question: "Describe a couple you know, married longer than 20 years, who seem to be growing more in love with each other." What role does Jesus play in their marriage?

- Think of a season in your marriage that was particularly flat or painful. How would you describe your own attitudes and actions during that season?

- Counselor James H. Olthuis has written, "*Every Christian marriage has a mission to make Jesus present in the world.*" Why isn't this talked about more among married Christians?

- In what ways does seeing marriage as "painting a Divine Portrait" change your approach to your relationship? How does it change your attitudes? Your actions?

Session Eight
The Meaning
of Marriage

- Describe the fruit of pursuing marriage as a Divine Portrait. What are some of the effects on your spouse? Your children? Your church community? Your community around you?

- As you choose to pursue your marriage as a Divine Portrait rather than a self-portrait, what needs to change in you? What are the specific areas that God must work within you to see His character displayed more?

- Share an area of personal growth that you would like the group to pray for.

WRAP UP

“Where Do We Go From Here?”

KEEP GROWING. God calls us to continual growth in Christ, in all areas of our lives. We’re wired for growth. Without it, we don’t just plateau; we slowly die. Keep growing as a man or woman and as a married couple.

- **Bonus Sessions**—I asked Sue Addington to write some additional sessions that cover hot topics she has dealt with through years of leading women’s groups. Her sessions on Servanthood and Expectations are fantastic! If you can work through these as a small group, that would be best. If your group can’t, then do them on your own and as a couple. They will be well worth your time.
- **Other Resources**—There is so much good material available on Christian marriage and family. Books, podcasts, videos, conferences, seminars. The list is so large, it’s impossible to list them all. But Lisa and I have tried to practice the habit of being life-long learners in our marriage. We don’t try to read everything out there. But we periodically and regularly read one book, or attend one seminar, or listen to one message about how to grow in our marriage. This practice helps renew and refresh our focus on what’s most important.

Wrap Up
Where Do We
Go From Here?

For articles, web links, books, and messages on Christ-centered marriage and parenting, check out these websites:

nwaHealthyMarriages.com

and

FamilyLife.com

PASS IT ON. By now you know that passion follows purpose. There's nothing like the shared joy of seeing God use you as a couple. If God has used this material in your life, why not gather some couples around you and lead them through it. You don't have to be a marriage expert. You just have to be on the journey toward a Divine Portrait, and invite others to join with you. (Your Community Pastor would be happy to help you get started.)

Thank you for joining us in our journey toward a Divine Portrait. For His glory and our joy, may our marriages be a good picture of Jesus!

Mark Schatzman

BONUS SESSION ONE

Servanthood In Marriage

By Sue Addington

OUR LIVING ROOM was packed with young women who were gathered to discuss a chapter on submission from our stimulating semester-long study on Christ-centered homemaking. For many in attendance this Scriptural mandate was new and a bit puzzling.

“So what do you think about the topic this week?” was my opening question. I must admit I was expecting groans, eye-rolling, and maybe some initial complaints from this “green” gang.

I’ll never forget the first wife who opened the sharing. She was new to the area and to our group, and a mother to a baby less than one year old. What she said not only got everyone’s attention, but also positively directed the rest of our time of talking together.

“This week, after going through our lesson on submission, I felt that it was important to tell my husband about how I had chosen to follow him to this new place with our baby, to follow his dreams even though it was a challenge. I wanted him to know that I had made an effort to serve him.”

Bonus Session One

Servanthood
In Marriage

She paused, “But after I finished explaining about my submissive serving efforts, he completely took me off guard by his response. He asked, ‘Did you think I came here to this new job FOR ME? I came here specifically for you and the baby! I came here mainly because I knew this would make life better FOR YOU. That was my main goal.’ Servanthood!”

Today, even as I type, I personally know two dear couples who are living out selfless, tireless serving of the other. The first, a wife in her 80s patiently, minute by minute cares for a soon-to-die husband, one who does not recognize the faces around him any longer. The other is a young man in his 30s passionately battling to preserve his wife’s eye-sight affected by some mysterious, complex symptoms. Servanthood!

Today a young husband will crash exhausted into bed as night falls after chasing around his two energetic toddlers all alone for a full weekend so his wife has time away with college friends. Servanthood!

Today a busy wife will pick up yet another of the “infamous socks on the floor” to put in the basket for washing, hopefully with a smile. Servanthood!

Ah, this serving one another—Jesus’ clear prescription for greatness—isn’t it mind-boggling at times? Whether in a leading role as husband or in the wife’s helping role, servanthood is constantly happening in so many ways. Neither role from the Divine Portrait has the corner on serving, does it?

Is serving always easy? No. Is serving always hard? No. But serving begs a daily choice in marriage—sometimes obvious, sometimes not, sometimes appreciated, sometimes missed, sometimes demonstrated in large ways, but most often in the small.

Rick Warren points out the commonly experienced rub of servanthood, “Marriage is a life-long process designed to teach you to see the needs of another

person as more important than your own. It's a difficult transition because it's not natural. To think this way requires an intentional shift that can be made only through the power of God in your life."

What about Jesus, the One from whom the power to serve comes? It appears that a primary theme, repeated often, in his comments, conversations, and commands happens to be not about the merits of leading, but more about the absolute greatness of servanthood.

Most definitely His word choice holds no glamour for the human ear—selflessness, sacrifice, dying to self, being last rather than first, giving up our rights for the sake of others and considering others as more important than ourselves.

Jesus not only talked about this serving, he modeled it in the dailies of real life—stopping, touching, helping, giving, attending, caring, loving, being interrupted, and being inconvenienced.

And greatest of all demonstrations, in the end, His death on the cross showed us the most extreme example of serving of all time—laying down His life for mankind.

So, husbands and wives, do you want to be great in God's mind? In marriage? In all of life, really? Daily go to Jesus' simple prescription—choose servanthood!



Take it Home

Bonus Session One

Servanthood
In Marriage

Ask each other these questions. The goal is not just to get through them, but to take time to talk...and to listen...as a couple.

- Read Ephesians 5:21-28 and then the following example of one couple's response.

"Out of respect for Christ, be courteously reverent to one another. Wives, understand and support your husbands in ways that show your support for Christ. The husband provides leadership to his wife the way Christ does to his church, not by domineering but by cherishing. So just as the church submits to Christ as he exercises such leadership, wives should likewise submit to their husbands. Husbands, go all out in your love for your wives, exactly as Christ did for the church - a love marked by giving, not getting. Christ's love makes the church whole. His words evoke her beauty. Everything he does and says is designed to bring the best out of her, dressing her in dazzling white silk, radiant with holiness. And that is how husbands ought to love their wives. They're really doing themselves a favor—since they're already 'one' in marriage."

Ephesians 5:21-28 (MSG)

Bonus Session One

Servanthood
In Marriage

Wayne Grudem is a well-respected theologian/pastor who has written numerous books and teaches around the world. He has also co-authored books and/or articles with both Dennis Rainey and John Piper. Here is his personal experience with servanthood described in a recent interview.

“We moved to Phoenix Seminary in Arizona in 2001, primarily because of Margaret’s health. She had been experiencing chronic pain after an auto accident a number of years earlier, and we found that the pain was aggravated by cold and humidity. Well, the Chicago area is cold in the winter and humid in the summer! After a couple of trips to Arizona, which is hot and dry, we realized that Margaret felt much better there. So I phoned the academic dean at Phoenix Seminary and asked if there might possibly be a job opportunity there for me. It is a long and wonderful story of the Lord’s guidance and provision, but the result is that we have been here since June 2001, Margaret has felt much better, and I also love the seminary where I am now teaching. So we are thankful for God’s blessings in many ways. I am thankful to the Lord that when we were making a decision about whether to move to Phoenix, on the very day we were talking and praying about it, I came to Ephesians 5:28 in my regular schedule of daily Bible reading, and the Lord used this verse strongly in my own decision process: ‘In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.’ After reading that, I thought it was important for me to move for the sake of Margaret’s physical body, her physical health.”

- Explain to each other what surprises you in the story.
- Explain what inspires you.
- Tell each other about ways that you have seen your spouse serve you so unselfishly.

FYI Quote Information

Bonus Session One

Servanthood
In Marriage

Rick Warren, article in *Crosswalk*, *Five Biblical Purposes for your Marriage*, Baptist Press, Wednesday, January 19, 2005

Interview—Dr. Wayne Grudem—*Highlights and Reflections*, December 18, 2006 By Adrian Warnock

Jeremy Kingsley, *Be Last: Descending Into Greatness*

Full quote:

“Our culture presumes that being first, richest, hippest, happiest, and most liked is the key to finding joy and contentment, the key to being great. The good life is marked by convenience and freebies. Even the church, in some instances, mistakes a blessed life with an easy and unchallenged life. But Jesus calls us to give up our pretensions of greatness defined by fame, carefree living and accomplishment. Contrary to popular opinion, greatness is defined by the humble and often hidden actions of a person who has given up on coming out on top. It’s consistently putting Jesus and others first. Living a life of greatness is actually walking a difficult path of self-sacrifice and inconvenience, driven by a greater concern for others. A truly great person does not need to be served but is bent on serving others. Jesus said it Himself: ‘The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve (Matthew 20:28).’”

BONUS SESSION TWO

Expectations: Teamwork Challenged

By Sue Addington

EXPECTATIONS—REAL AND UNREAL

IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL SUMMER AFTERNOON and the backyard beckoned. Our three young children were quietly napping, but we were soon “snapping” at each other.

I started, “You are gone all week with this job, and when you come home I need a break! I am exhausted. Why are you not rescuing me?”

He responded, “But my hours away are completely packed with meetings and business events—from early morning through late each night. I am tired too. Can’t I just chill when I get home?”

What followed was a conversation so long that we both ended up with painful sunburns. Thanks to the sleeping children and attentive listening to each other’s thoughts that day, the friction we’d both been feeling was eased a bit. We ended that never-forgotten conversation with fresh perspective each of us had not stopped to consider before. We realized we both had expected the other to know what we needed, know what we wanted, and just do it.

Bonus Session Two

Expectations:
Teamwork
Challenged

Change took time, but expectations were adjusted beginning that day. Thirty-five years later we are still adjusting.

According to Dennis Rainey, there are at least 25 areas in which couples will be challenged regarding their expectations. Which ones ring some bells in your own marriage:

- Finances
- Relating to the opposite sex
- Loneliness
- In-laws
- Romance and affection
- Spiritual growth together
- Roles of husband and wife
- Communication
- Values and lifestyle choices
- Trials and suffering
- Where to attend church
- Differences
(male/female, backgrounds, religious training, cultural)
- Travel
- Debt
- Children
- Entertainment
- Weekends
- Traditions
(holidays, birthdays, and other celebrations)
- Resolving conflict
- Work and Career
- Vacations
- Priorities (schedule)
- Sexual intimacy
- Roles of mother and father
- Selfishness

Doctors Sarì Harrar and Rita DeMaria have concluded together,

Bonus Session Two

Expectations:
Teamwork
Challenged

“Unspoken, half-hidden expectations about married life put wives and husbands to the test... These ‘rules’ form in childhood and our teen years as we watch our parents’ marriages and absorb silent imperatives about the roles of husbands and wives from society; from our cultural and religious affiliations; and from TV shows, movies, and books. Previous romances and even friendships further shape our expectations. And at a deeper level, we often believe our spouses will somehow intuit and heal our wounds.”

How about you and your spouse? Are there unrealistic expectations lurking below the surface? Are those expectations and disappointments rooted in your past?

Could your expectations be tangled in “romantic” ideas of what marriage should be? Concerning a young bride’s wedding night, another woman wisely advised, “Just remember. It’s not like in the movies!”

Are your unreal expectations there because you find yourself comparing your spouse or your marriage to others with whom you rub shoulders? Do you catch yourself thinking “the grass looks greener on the other side”? IF ONLY our marriage was AS happy...exciting...fun...godly...financially secure as the Jones’ marriage!

Unreal expectations in marriage do not surprise God. One of the primary stories He’s chosen to write for our benefit, warning, and example brings human nature clearly to the forefront.

Didn’t Abraham and Sarah both deal with unreal expectations? He expected his wife to play along with a self-serving lie, not once but twice; she expected her husband to give her a child with a servant girl, clearly outside God’s promised plan. It’s good that they chose to make their adjustments to realistic and godly expectations, isn’t it? In the end, both are praised by name in the Hebrews 11 list of God’s faithful.

Bonus Session Two

Expectations:
Teamwork
Challenged

So what can be done in the here and now when our own unreal, unmet expectations trip us up?

Certainly we can BEGIN with these three basic steps:

1. Communicate expectations first to the Creator alone and/or together. Ask Him about what is realistic and what is not. Ask for His patience and wisdom as you address these expectations with His Word as your guide.
2. Communicate to one another as He leads, being patient and humble as you grow together and adjust to one another's unique gifting and roles.
3. Expect God's GREAT things in your marriage. After all, your union is patterned after the glorious Godhead. Confidently, excitedly, expect God to work.

Husbands and wives, have hope. Don't let disappointments and unmet expectations get you down. The Divine Artist Himself has promised that He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it. And thankfully that includes your spouse.



Small Group Discussion

Bonus Session Two

Expectations:
Teamwork
Challenged

Which TV, movie, or media-famous couple live out a life that you envy?

- The peaceful Ingalls in *Little House on the Prairie*?
 - The exciting spy couple of Mr. and Mrs. Smith?
 - The funny and friendly Huxtables?
 - The glamorous Prince William and new bride, Kate, of London fame?
 - Athletic, beautiful, and rich David and Victoria Beckham?
 - The godly Billy and Ruth Graham?
 - Do any others come to mind?
-
- Do you wish your marriage was more like your parents' marriage? Has that required an adjustment in your own marriage as you compare yours to theirs?
-
- Which of you tends to be the more "romantic" in terms of what you expected early on in your marriage?

Bonus Session Two

Expectations:
Teamwork
Challenged

- Have you deliberately patterned your marriage after another healthy marriage that you watch regularly? Who are they? What might be a challenge in trying to be like another couple who happen to be two different people from you and your spouse?

- How does Philippians 2:1-9 speak to husbands and wives about dealing with the challenge of disappointments and unmet expectations?

- Does thinking about Abraham and Sarah and their relationship challenges encourage you regarding expectations? How?

- In what ways does the early material in this study on God's Divine Portrait for marriage, regarding His carefully crafted roles, help in assessing unreal expectations as they arise in your marriage?



Take it Home

Bonus Session Two

Expectations:
Teamwork
Challenged

Ask each other these questions. The goal is not just to get through them, but to take time to talk...and to listen...as a couple.

- From the article, read through the list of 25 challenges on page 102 out loud together. Separately choose the two top challenges you each feel your marriage faces. Share your two with each other and spend some time talking about ways to address those challenges.
 - On a scale of one to ten, together grade yourselves as a couple in:
 - Communicating with God about your marriage expectations.
 - Communicating with each other about your expectations.
 - Expecting great things from God and His works in your unique marriage.

Notes:

- Family Life Today®—*Twenty-Five Great Expectations for Your Marriage*, Wednesday, September 25, 2002
- Reader's Digest (RD.com) *Fight Unrealistic Expectations—Learn to love your imperfect marriage*, Sari Harrar and Rita DeMaria

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