

# Pre-Marriage Counseling: Why, How, and for How Long?

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In the beginning there didn't seem to be a need for pre-marriage counseling.

The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep and while he was sleeping he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man and he brought her to the man. The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman' for she was taken out of man. (Gen 3:18, 21-23)

In his statement, Adam demonstrates that he understands the relationship for which God created Eve. "For this reason a man will leave his father and his mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." (Gen 2:24) However, it wasn't long after their creation that their sin destroyed that perfect relationship thereby establishing the basis for barriers which continue in marriage today.

To the woman he said, "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you."

To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you. and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground. since from it you were taken: for dust you are and to dust you will return." (Gen 3:16-19)

From that point forward sin has created an inherent need for godly advice on that important topic of marriage—before, during, and after. Unfortunately, most of that advice has been anecdotal, passed down in the cultural history of each civilization. "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree" (Teutonic). and "Never marry a woman who drinks" (Otto VV. Adomeit, Sr.). "A man should not marry a woman with the mental reservations that after all he may divorce her" (Talmud). These bits of wisdom are a part of this heritage. But on the whole, this is all that has been preserved. Thus far, no records have been found of any kind of formal pre or post marriage advice or systems.

There is only one source within which lies scattered marriage and pre-marriage counsel, and that is the Bible. Generally, this advice takes the form of Scriptural principles that are applicable to both pre and post marriage counseling. The first specific example that we have of pre-marriage 'counseling' is Abraham's demand:

He said to the chief servant in his household, the one in charge of all that he had, "Put your hand under my thigh. I want you to swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I am living, but will go to my own relatives and get a wife for my son Isaac... [God] will send his angel before you so that you can get a wife for my son from there." (Gen 24:2-4, 7)

Much of the pre-marriage advice from the Lord in the Scriptures is based on Old Testament regulations concerning who the Israelites could or couldn't marry. Many of them are similar to the quotation above, such as Gen 28:1 and Jdg 14:3. Many principles reflect different commands from him. God commanded that the High Priest was required to marry a virgin from the people of Israel (Lev 21:10,13,14b) but Hosea was commanded to marry an adulteress (Hos 1:2). God provided for the taking of captive wives (Dt 21:11-13), and showed how that principle was put into practice in the captives taken for the men of Benjamin from the virgins of Shiloh (Jdg 21:20-23). He gave instructions concerning premarital chastity and race (Dt 22), and provided for a year's exemption from military service for newlyweds (Dt 24:5).

There are other passages, which provide general advice, which is useful for establishing pre-marriage counseling system, such as, "He who finds a wife finds what is good and receives favor from the Lord." He gives us the ultimate ideal wife to look for (Prov 31:10ff) and reminds us of the responsibilities of those 'betrothed' (1 Cor 7). But the passage that comes closest to our concept of pre-marriage counseling, comes in Titus, where Paul encourages him:

Teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live... to teach what, is good. Then they can train the younger women to have their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to the husbands, so that, no one will malign the word of God. (2:3-5)

From this last section, we have a glimpse into God's system whereby Christians take care of and teach one another. Here, the more experienced women teach the younger ones how to be good wives and mothers. There is also the expectation that part of this teaching process was done by example, as in Titus 2 and as God reminds us, "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds, and praise your Father in heaven" (Mt 5:16). But the final responsibility of the training of young people in all aspects of life rested on the family, and more specifically the father. "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it" (Pr 22:16) and, "Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:4). The father was [is], the head of the family responsible to God for the instruction of his family (Eph 5).

Perhaps this is why for so many hundreds of years within the Christian Church, there doesn't seem to be a concerted effort by the Church to be involved in Pre-marriage counseling. But times have changed. In this century, especially the last 50 years, the emphasis on premarital counseling has increased dramatically. And I believe the reason for that shift is linked to the changes that have occurred in these last 50 years. Primarily, that the family itself plays a decreasing role and influence in establishing and supporting marriages today than they did in years past. Consider these points:

1. *Decline of the Family Choice.* In previous generations, marriages were commonly arranged by the family for economic, political, or survival purposes. Choices for spouses were often made by parents or guardians, sometimes with no respect to the wishes of the wedding couple. "Being in love" as the sole motivating force for choosing a spouse is a phenomenon almost exclusively of this century. Today, parents or other family members may not even be consulted about such important life choices until after all plans have been decided. It is interesting to note that there is a statistical correlation between the increased ability to choose one's mate and the astronomical rise in the divorce and marital dissatisfaction rate.

2. *Decline of Family Role Models.* Because of the astronomical divorce and marital dissatisfaction rates among the parents and grandparents of each current generation, good role models for marriages within families are more difficult to find and relied upon less for healthy support and advice. The result is that very few people today know how a "good" marriage should function.

3. *Decline of the Family Influence.* In centuries past, when societal and cultural norms re-enforced family standards and values, the responsibility of the family to prepare couples for marriage was considered sacred. Today, the philosophies of "values clarification" and "secular humanism" promoted by our society, have supplanted the family as teachers of ethics and morals. Therefore, many couples enter marriage today with

beliefs, expectations, and standards for marriage that are culled from many different sources, other than family. The ideas that develop from this eclectic approach are at times in conflict with one another, often have not proven the test of time, and sometimes are simply destructive.

To fill the void of family influence on marital issues, our society and culture is ready to substitute two institutions: Psychology and/or Religion. Psychology (Psychiatry & Psychology) and the helping sciences (Social work and Marriage & family development) are poised to become the leading influence in pre-marriage counseling. Thus far, they have been principally used in a reactive role; that is, for rebuilding and restoring. They have yet to be used proactively, to influence and prepare couples for marriage. Sexual sensitivity sessions required of many incoming freshman classes on college campuses is a first step toward gaining that influence. The time may come when to be able to apply for a marriage license, one must have gone through a pre-marriage course with a certified family counselor. This is where the role of the church and clergy have become more important in this century. As much as the roles of the church and the clergy, have declined in this century, our society still acknowledges the church's importance in promoting family values, and as a protector of spiritual values for the time being. The clergy, as representatives of the church, fill the role of teachers in the realm of pre and post marriage counseling for the Church and for society. And they are expected, with their training and experience, to provide help for couples before, during, and after their marriages. This expectation comes from both the church and unchurched, Again, for the time being. Unfortunately, the time for the Church's influence may be running out. In spite of high divorce rates, there is a resurgence in the expectations for marriage. Many couples are willing to endure hours of pre-marriage counseling to give their marriages a head start. But they demand appropriate and workable principles upon which to build their marriages. All too often, pre and post marriage counseling in the Christian Church has failed to meet these expectations, And I think there are some common reasons why this has happened.

First: Many Christian Churches have forgotten the efficacy of the Word and Sacraments for pre and post marriage counseling. They have relied too heavily "Pop" psychology, which has had disastrous effects for three reasons.

A. Psychology is a "science" based on almost purely subjective opinions and observations. There is sometimes little scientific evidence to substantiate its theories. Even corroborated data is often interpreted differently depending on the training & perspective of the researcher. Therefore theories, applications and conclusions change from one near to the next, from counselor to counselor. Any Pastoral counselor basing his pre-marriage program on primarily on psychology has built his program on 'shifting sands' (Mt 7:26)

B. For many years it's been popular to use questionnaires and compatibility tests as part of pastoral premarital counseling. Often these tests are inadequately adapted from valid psychological tests. The results were less than desirable: some couples were evaluated as totally incompatible, and others lulled into complacency by believing they were "made for one another"—the tests proved it. The tests became the center of attention instead of good advice on how to live together as husband and wife.

C. Psychology often does not recognize the existence of God, let alone the power of God, working through the means of grace to transform people's lives. By substituting Psychology for Spiritual training, the role of the pastor changes from shepherd of the means of Grace to diagnostician of the psychological well-being of the engaged couple. He goes from instructor in the mysteries of God, to fudge and fury over their marriage. Pastors not called to that position, and they are not adequately trained for it. Additionally, many couples resent Pastors taking on that role.

Second: Because of the lack of systematic Scriptural materials, pastors rely on a combination of their seminary training, personal experience, and gimmicks introduced by well meaning clergy magazines and newsletters to make their programs look professional. The results are a lack of consistency, a system based on

personal experiences that aren't always applicable to each situation (and highly dependent on the individual gifts of the pastor), and a frustration for both clergy and couples that they are really accomplishing much.

(Note: One of the gimmicks utilized is an endless presentation of statistical information and percentages whose main emphasis is to "scare" the couple into making good choices. Where this fails is that statistics can be manipulated and are limited in valid application. Also, the study or the statistic often becomes the point of discussion rather than the idea you're trying to get across. Finally, it's motivation by fear, and fear only motivates if the couple buy into it. More often than not, fear alienates and destroys the relationship that you're hoping to build.)

Third: Finally, because it is another responsibility piled upon a whole list of tasks that never seem to get done, not enough time or effort has been directed toward developing a consistent and practical program. All too often, the focus is on immediate needs rather than long-term goals; eg. a few hours of counseling before the wedding instead of an on-going system of helps for positive Christian choices and joyful Christian living.

Fourth: The integrity of the pastoral office has suffered tremendously in our modern age. With lawsuits littering the courts and media, sexual harassment and molestation cases, stories of open adultery and unscriptural divorces, clergy no longer hold the elevated role model position that they did in times past. Because of that, members are less likely to believe something just because the Pastor says it's so. Without the consistency and authority of the Scriptures, pastoral counseling becomes just one more opinion to add to the couple's repertoire of marriage advice.

Conclusion: Over and over again, the failure of many Pastoral counseling systems, is that they ignore the only source of hope and life for marriages. The Word and the Sacraments are that system upon which all our instruction and counseling must be based. And the necessity that drives this insistence on Scriptural counseling is evident in every aspect of family life today, unbelievable divorce and marital dissatisfaction rates, rampant family violence and abuse, and a whole new generation of children being raised without a clue to what marriage was intended to be. However, the most important reason of all to do pre-marriage counseling is that God instituted marriage as the most intimate relationship possible between a man and a woman. It was created to be a blessing for mankind through which God grants husbands and wives fulfillment and joy, makes families, and blesses societies and civilizations with peace, stability and purpose. Through marriage, he also demonstrates in human terms the intimate relationship between Christ and the Church.

All of the children of God deserve to see what marriage is like in perfection (before the fall) and what potential exists for marriage even in a sinful world. To do that, they need to be taught. And what they need to be taught is how to put marriage's designer and creator's principles into practice. To teach them that, "With God, nothing is impossible." (Lk 1:37) and through faith in Christ, that power has now become ours (Eph 1:19). Even if they choose not to work toward that potential, we still ought to teach them what God has to offer them. "I have come that they might have life and have it to the full." (Jn 10:10)

The life that Christ has come to bring us is the fullness of eternal life with God in heaven. Until we reach that goal, the Good Shepherd also has come to bring us full life here on earth, as much as is possible with the stain of sin still infecting us. In order to bring the fullness of God to our pre-marriage counseling, we need only do what we have been called to do, "Preach the word of God, Be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction." (2 Tim 4:2) That sounds really simplistic, but at the base of all our failures in pre and post marriage counseling is not doing the preparation necessary to preach the wonderful works of God.

The majority of Christian counseling has forgotten that principle; and has forgotten that the only power for positive change and full life is the means of Grace. Basically their pre-marriage counseling has failed because they assumed that their couples knew all that, and they could move on from there. But in reality, their reliance on gimmicks, studies and statistics is nothing more than a dog and pony show, with approximately the same results. Many people are very impressed, but what has been accomplished?

On the other side of the coin, our pre-marriage counseling lacks substance, when we follow those same mistakes of relying on human devices. But perhaps more often, our counseling lacks substance when we throw a bunch of passages together, and assume that because it's the Word of God, we've done our job. An important

part of our preparation for pre and post marriage counseling is to recognize what St. Paul writes to Timothy that:

There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of Godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them. They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over weak-willed women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires, always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth. (2 Tim 3:1-7)

Some of our members will be marrying people like that, and unfortunately some of our members' fiancées will be marrying people like that. So whether it's for our member, the other partner, or the non-member couple that we're marrying as an evangelism prospect, Preach the word.

We should preach that Word, remembering that one of the great opportunities that we have in pre-marriage counseling is to “prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Eph 4:11-14). What better act of service could there be than treating our spouses as God intended them to be treated? By doing so, not only would the body of that family be built up, grow together, and mature; but in seeing that kind of act of service, the family of believers would grow together. And those outside of the family of believers would take quick notice of how we love one another. “Not with words or tongue but with actions and in truth” (1 Jn 3:18).

To better meet the needs of our families, in teaching them how to love one another within marriage, I would propose these principles:

#### *Principle 1: Know the Word*

It seems obvious, but so often overlooked. As you read and study the Word, think about where this passage or that Bible history lesson would fit into your pre-marriage outline. Keep an open file to stuff those ideas into. For example, by using Bible stories as object lessons or illustrations for the points in your outline, you do double duty: You make your point live in a real life situation and you teach them even more of the Word. Type the passages and sections out for them, so you can refer to them quickly; and so that they have something to read at home. (You never know, they may just put some effort into it). Never be “ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Rm 1:16). Look for places where a specific word of God fits appropriately.

#### *Principle 2: Know Your People*

In pre-marriage counseling as it is generally poorly practiced, 1-3 months before the wedding, the secondary goal (below teaching them the Word of God) is to build a closer relationship with them as Christians. So after they're married, in good times and bad they will perceive you as a resource person, pastor, and friend (God-willing). Get out of your head that you're going to affect any change in their direction at this point. Most of the time, by the time they call you: A) everything is already decided, B) their patterns and personalities are well-established, and C) before the wedding all they want to think about is the wedding. and afterwards they're too busy adjusting to married life. So bring them the Word of God, let the Holy Spirit do his work, and you get to know them better. (It'll help you personalize the wedding sermon.) Even more important than that, it will help you correctly apply the Word for them.

#### *Principle 3: Be Open, Up-front, and Consistent*

With all the stresses that they're going through, the last thing they need is to feel that they're getting jerked around by an uncooperative pastor. Have your congregation develop policy statements on things like

weddings. Cover topics like: living together, weddings for non-members, church use and expectations for clean-uu etc., costs. music and soloists and as much as possible be positive and preach the Gospel wherever possible. Have copies handy so that when any one asks you about getting married, the sheet will be handy.

*Principle 4: Bring the Couple into the Process of Preaching the Gospel*

If our opportunity is to make disciples, and then train and equip those disciples, here is an excellent opportunity. Teach them that their wedding service is also a worship service, and as such may be the only time that some of their guests will hear the Gospel. Let them know that in their readings, sermon texts, hymns and songs they will have the opportunity to build a beautiful and meaningful theme. In that Gospel based theme, they will have something to support themselves throughout their lives (Video taping is one such blessing), and the Holy Spirit will work in the lives of their friends and relatives—someone might be called to faith, some marriage might be healed or strengthened. And then give them some leeway to make that service their own, (With the gospel message of course).

*Principle 5: Know Your Limitations*

Although I agree with most of what *Shepherd Under Christ* (Schuetze and Habeck, 1974) says about pre-marriage counseling, I disagree with the part about pastors being diagnosticians concerning potential problems in later married life. Pastors are not trained Psychologists or Psychiatrists. There's too much temptation to get in over our heads. We don't have the diagnostic training and we don't have the time (especially before a wedding) to do justice to a long term counseling situation. To Shuetze and Habeck's defense, their book was written before we had the benefit of Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Services (WLCFS) and other good Christian counselors. There's an idiom which states, "A wise preacher is one who sticks to his business and lets others do theirs." Our call is to preach and teach; and most of the time, we do well, if we stick to that. But in the course of your preaching, teaching, and counseling, you may become concerned about things that may be beyond your expertise. When that happens, please find the appropriate resource person to diagnose that area, and work with them.

## **Systems**

Schuetze and Habeck's (1974) advice that three, one and a half hour sessions are a basic minimum is a pretty sound point. 3 to 4 sessions would be optimal for the hectic schedules of a soon to be married couple. Organize your outlines of those sessions around the Word of God that you want to present to them. In your planning, and later in your discussions, many secular topics will be covered. Although we don't want to avoid any topic in these open discussions, remember that your primary purpose is to teach them the Word of God and how that Word applies to the topic at hand. All too often. Pastors have tried to do too much in their counseling and have gotten into topics that beyond their expertise. The area of finances becomes one of these areas. You will certainly want to talk about Christian stewardship, and financial stewardship is part of that: but going off on an extended discourse about the dangers of credit cards, can be dangerous. Your couple may think, "What does he know about life outside of the parsonage? He has no house payment, the church picks up his mileage, insurance, etc." If you feel that certain secular areas are important to talk about in specifics, call in one of your "trained" laypeople ("member minister") who has expertise in this area. The layperson will feel as if they're more apart of the team by being asked, your couples will probably enjoy the "professional" help, and you won't be wading barefoot through a pond that may be unfamiliar to you.

My outline, for a basic pre-marriage counseling program, looks most of the time like this:

<i>Session I</i>	<i>Session II</i>	<i>Session III</i>
<b>What is love?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Man's definition</li> <li>• God's definition</li> <li>• Commitment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Man's idea</li> <li>❖ God's idea</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<b>How do we put Love into Practice?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Subjecting self</li> <li>• Building Spouse</li> <li>• Disc. on self-esteem</li> <li>• Prioritizing and Problem solving</li> </ul>	<b>How do we keep love alive?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Import. of Means of Grace</li> <li>• Sexuality and Intimacy</li> <li>• Keeping Joy and Peace</li> <li>• Reminder of Support Systems (eg, you)</li> </ul>

I believe it's a good idea to combine within these sessions, the actual development of the wedding services. I've found that if you set up the service right away, much of the opportunity to teach and build within that wedding service is lost. Also, as you work through the various passages within the sessions, the couples seem to get more out of picking their own passages.

Any system, which reflects your personality and the situation you are pastor in, filled with the Word of God—matched to the needs of your wedding couple will be effective. God promises that. Just remember that being in such a close and personal time with that couple, bringing them the Word of God doesn't mean that they're going to come back from their honeymoon with the desire to become missionaries. You just sow the seed of the Word of God, water and fertilize it whenever you can with the means of Grace, and the Holy Spirit will make it bud, flower, and flourish. For better or worse, people always remember the pastor that married them. Let their memories of you on their wedding day center on the Word of God that you brought to them.

The size of a congregation, or the size of the WELS population in a congregation's area will play a role in how extensive pre-marriage counseling can become. The advantage of a small congregation is that with fewer weddings, there is opportunity for more personal contact between the couples and the pastor. The advantage of a larger congregation or area with a WELS population, is that more joint activities can be introduced. More member ministry involvement, including different kinds seminars, joint newly married clubs, and yearly newlywed dinners, can all add to the outreach and education of the Church. You may also be able to tap into positive peer pressure with these joint activities.

Follow up is an important part of continuing the work begun in pre-marriage counseling. The time interval between the wedding and the follow up can be set, as for a large congregation, in yearly Newlywed dinners; or set, around the sixth month or first year anniversary. The structure of the visit could include devotion, personal visit, feedback on the pre-marriage sessions and how you could make them better for the couples to come. You will want to encourage them to continue in God's love for one another by remaining in his love (Word and Sacraments again), and leave them with the reminder that you will be available for their support in the future.

Don't wait until the set time, if you notice a newlywed couple who have dropped out of church participation. Sure, they're busy, but it's easy to slip into bad habits as a new couple with a new joint schedule. Move your schedule up for their post wedding visit, just in case there's something that might need to be discussed.

At the beginning of this paper, we spent some time reviewing some of God's directives toward the choosing of a spouse. There was a reason for that. If we continue to do pre-marriage counseling as we do, there's little chance that we will effect much change in Christian's life choices. And many Christians will suffer needlessly. Love is blind, and yet that is the common reason for choosing a spouse. Once people are in love, it's difficult to get them look at their partner objectively, based on scriptural principles. So what we need to do, ultimately, is extend our pre-marriage counseling downward, so that we are reaching Christian young people before they choose their life partners.

Alcohol and drug counselors, and educators have learned through scientific study, that many of the attitudes toward important life issues show up in children at an early age. Sometimes as early as first and second grade. So they target their 'positive life choice' education programs starting at these tender ages. I think that we need to take this approach to heart, and begin to teach our children about choosing life partners (i.e., in legal marriages) at earlier ages. Ultimately, I'd like to see a Family life curriculum developed whereby over the entire

course of our Christian educational system we would address in an organized fashion, the gift of God in families:

1. How those families should function, according to God's plans
2. How they do function, in, sinful society
3. What Help God provides in times of trouble for families
4. Why we should respect ourselves and make good life choices  
(Based on Law-Gospel principles)

There are many other similar topics, that we could cover in this. I believe there are many misconceptions about families that develop among our members, that are not necessarily based on reality or biblical principles. And with the numbers of divorced families, single parent families, blended families, and intergenerational families, increasing in our congregations; it would be nice to have a system developed where we would be able to discuss the issues that come into these different types of families.

### **Recommendations**

I recommend that the Synod develop a department of family studies at Martin Luther College, that will be responsible for evaluating secular studies on family issues; developing research on Christian family concerns; and creating a comprehensive system of family life courses, from preschool through Seminary training. I would hope that they share their research with WELS congregations, schools, high schools and training schools.

I recommend that the Seminary, through its Pastoral Theology professors, access qualified WELS psychiatrists, psychologists, and counselors, then join with the family study department at MLC, and develop a system of pre-marriage and marriage counseling aids for Pastors and staff ministers.

And finally, I recommend that all of us within the representative ministry of the WELS, always keep in mind that the effective tool for pre-marriage counseling is the Means of Grace. This is the gift that God has preserved within our fellowship, it is our great heritage; and it is what our members need to learn to give them access to the best possible marriages on this earth.