

A CASE FOR FOCUSED MARRIAGE PREPERATION FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE
WISCONSIN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SYNOD

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Abstract

The world is not hospitable to lifelong marriage. With a national divorce rate over 50%, divorce ends more marriages than death. Christian churches in America have recognized the fact and is trying to address it. Couples sign up for counseling, seminars, and retreats. And despite all the money spent to fix marriages, the divorce rate has remained level after decades of steady increase.

Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) pastors recognize the same challenges. One avenue that has been underutilized is a preemptive approach. At the same time that young people are intensely preparing for college and for careers, the church can be intensely preparing them for marriage. Real preparation is more than simply giving young people the latest communication techniques or stress relieving habits, but it is developing and maturing their faith through Word and sacrament.

Word and sacrament build up a faith confident of its status before God. A confident faith looks ahead to marriage as a way to live out its status. This project will do two things: 1) identify and refute the most malicious lies directed at single people and 2) suggest a few methods by which churches and ministers can intentionally combat those messages and supplant them with the messages of Scripture.

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Introduction

It's easy to cast stones at others: to look out from behind our comfortable walls at the world and watch their view of the family crumble. The family "out there" now includes the divorced, the cohabitating, and the homosexual union. The world has shifted "marriage" far from the relationship that God set up in Genesis 2. Good thing the church is safe from such erosion.¹ Well, not really. The statistics don't lie. Christian marriages fall apart at the same rate as non-Christian marriages. Much of Christendom has recognized the fact. So we have reacted. We have unleashed waves of seminars, marriage mentoring, marriage building exercises, and marriage retreats. They fill the minister's calendar, populate the announcement section of the bulletin, and demand the church's time and resources. Even as we mobilize, pastors lament about broken and breaking marriages, "By the time I hear about problems in a marriage, it's already too late. They don't want any help; they just want validation."

We should not become disheartened. These efforts are not in vain. They have saved countless marriages. Our efforts, by God's grace, fix marriages. They save failing marriages, often reacting to marriages that are already in downward spirals.² We spend time and energy reacting to bad situations. While we are busy saving marriages, future marriages cry out for the same kind of help and attention. They call for us to become proactive. We need to get ahead of the curve, to hold up Christ and his cross before the eyes of those looking ahead toward marriage. We need to open the pages of Scripture so that God can etch onto the hearts of young people his definition of marriage.

Creation was not complete until God created the first marriage. We witness tension in Scripture when Adam has no companion. God himself instituted marriage. He blessed the union and used it as a blessing. Throughout history God has used countless aspects of marriage and family life to illustrate his own relationship with people. In John 2, Jesus chose a wedding feast as the context for his first miracle. He uses the picture of a wedding feast as a backdrop for

¹ Most religious demographics divorce at very similar rates. Whether Christian, non-Christian, or atheist, the numbers don't fluctuate that much. Barna Studies found, "Born again Christians who are not evangelicals were indistinguishable from the national average on the matter of divorce: 33% have been married and divorced."

² Some of those involved in marriage counseling share this sentiment. Those same pastors admit that many of those who come to marriage enrichment seminars and classes are on the opposite end of the spectrum. They care deeply for their marriage and seek to improve it.

several of his parables.³ And then God sets his glorious imagery of Revelation 19 as a wedding feast.

God also uses the marriage bond itself as an illustration of his relationship with his people. The prophets key in on this idea, as does Jesus when he depicts himself as the bridegroom in the Gospel accounts and then again in Revelation 21. God uses the prophet Hosea and his wife Gomer as a negative example. Her unfaithfulness to Hosea was an illustration of how Israel had treated the husband of her youth.

Countless times God uses the picture of a Father guiding and teaching his children, of a mother protecting and guarding her children. God even reveals himself as our Father. He calls us to pray like children addressing their dear father.

Yes, God wants healthy families. He wants healthy marriages. He uses them to teach us. He uses them to bless us. God designed this world with marriage at its heart. Can a broken family still see the light of God's grace? Of course it can. A broken home is no more a sin - it no more obscures the relationship between Jesus and a believer - than any other thing a person can do to walk away from God.

Unfortunately, divorce is an all too common occurrence in our American culture. A third of all married people will divorce.⁴ Pastors, counselors and the sociologists agree that the more our children see divorce, the more likely they are to seek divorce. Our youth are growing up in broken homes that are likely to beget broken homes.⁵ They grow up with a warped sense of marriage. They have a mental definition of marriage that dictates how they view and participate in dating, friendships, and other inter-gender relationships. How they define marriage and family impacts where they look for spouses and when they begin looking for spouses.⁶

³ Matthew 22 and 25 and Luke 12 and 14.

⁴ ("New Marriage and Divorce Statistics Released" 2009). This statistic is a different measurement the commonly held statistic that about 50% of marriages end in divorce. This statistic comes from the State marriage reports. Most states report a marriage rate roughly twice that of its divorce rate. The state statistics analyze marriages. They take into account the number of marriage - which could be second, third or subsequent marriages - while the Barna study looks at individuals. Roughly one-third of all married people get divorced.

⁵ Alan J. Hawkins, Tamara A. Fackrell, and Utah Commission on Marriage, *Should I Keep Trying to Work It Out?: A Guidebook for Individuals and Couples at the Crossroads of Divorce (and Before)* (Produced, 2009). p 43. The likelihood of children who watch their parent's divorce are twice as likely to get their own divorce.

⁶ Barna and others show that the average age of marriage has risen over the last half century or so. However, in "A Case for Later Marriage" Ehrhard contends that up until the 1930s the average marrying age was closer to that of today. She applauds a later marriage as a potentially positive movement.

Pastors in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) recognize the problem. When asked, “What is the strongest force that shapes the attitude and mindset of youth toward marriage,” a little more than two-thirds of respondents indicated that the young people are influenced by what they see at home. In so many of the homes our youth are growing up watching dysfunction and brokenness. Compound that by the fact that some pastors struggle to reach teens and young adults with directed and biblical messages regarding marriage. Working in our favor is the fact that WELS pastors have established a strong voice through catechism classes. In those classes, we teach and explain God’s design for marriage to students.

But, we face a gap. Many of our young people learn God’s plan for marriage in seventh or eighth grade and then again when they seek pre-marriage counseling, if they seek it at all. In the intervening years they are influenced by a culture that is increasingly skeptical of marriage. Modern culture is increasingly comfortable with cohabitation and divorce. American culture increasingly turns people inward and promotes self-gratification. Culture defines love far differently than the way our children learned from their Savior in Sunday school, catechism and church. The idiom applies: “If you aren’t teaching them, someone else is.” As pastors and as a church, we look into the faces of young people for whom we must do more. We must continue to let the voice of our Savior be heard in their lives. We must let them hear the voice of the one who designed marriage and his design for their life. We must make his voice heard when our young people are in their teens and twenties. All other voices are poisonous and leech-like. Those other voices seek to sabotage their marriages before they even begin. It is no wonder that we face a divorce rate within the church that mirrors the rate of those outside the church. In effect, we have asked young people to recall and practice the principles of marriage we taught them when they were thirteen and fourteen years old.

I will contend that we have allowed an imbalance in the growth and development of young people. We have pushed our children to prioritize and focus on school and career - things that probably will change - all the while ignoring what we hope will be life-long, their marriage. Human nature obsesses over being better tomorrow than we were today. In that pursuit we have begun to ask middle-schoolers to think about college and their future career. We spend hours and hours preparing high-schoolers for college. We give them aptitude tests, college prep courses, and take them on campus tours. College students attend job fairs, look for career advice and training. We do all this knowing that students may change schools, they probably will

change majors and they almost certainly will change careers at least once in their lives. And yet, what do we do to prepare the faith and minds of those same people for a marriage that will - God willing - last a lifetime?

Let us together, as the spiritual leaders of these young people, take up this challenge. Let us struggle. May we see the desperate need of our single young people. And then may we go out armed with recognition of the need. Let us employ methodology unique to the context of our audiences and circumstances. Whatever methodology each of us utilizes, let us press towards this destination: a young person mature enough in their faith that they are eager and better prepared to begin a godly marriage, should the LORD bless them with one.

Literature Review

The body of material written about marriage is incredibly vast. Narrowing the field of literature to “Christian marriage” or “saving marriage” doesn’t actually narrow the field. Books and book tapes are only a portion of a whole industry attempting to save, fix and even recover marriage. The industry includes seminars, motivational speakers, literature and Bible studies all targeted at improving the marriages of American Christians.

Timothy Keller’s, *The Meaning of Marriage*, is among the most popular marriage books. Keller helps readers define marriage the way God defines it. He helps Christians achieve a godly perspective on marriage. In this work, Keller defines marriage in a way that is approachable, meaningful and relevant. Keller lays out the obstacles our culture throws up against God-pleasing marriages. He lays out how God views marriage and so how marriage ought to be viewed by Christian men and women, single and married. Keller echoes many of the ideas of Emerson Eggerichs when it comes to the role of love and respect in a marriage. He also echoes the ideas of Greg Chapman in how to express appreciation and value to spouses. He fleshes some of their ideas out more completely.

A book in the top ten on Amazon.com is Greg Chapman’s *The 5 Love Languages*. Chapman identifies what he considers the primary methods by which people show and receive love. He breaks down the five languages into easily identifiable and accessible categories.⁷ His

⁷ His categories are: Words of Affirmation, Quality Time, Gifts, Acts of Service and Physical Touch. He provides a short and helpful quiz within his book to help his reader identify their primary and secondary love languages. He contends that every human being has a primary love language which is not always the same primary

original book is designed for the intimate relationship between a man and a woman. The popularity of his first book has inspired him to write other versions with the same five languages for children, teens and single people. He explains how to communicate through those love languages contextually in different relationships. With little difficulty, principles can be applied to a wide variety of relationships.

Chapman has teamed up with another popular series. *A Student's Guide to the 5 Love Languages: True Love Waits* is part of an extensive series of books published by LifeWay Press. Their *True Love Waits* series focuses on educating and motivating teens towards a life of chastity. Their name brand is built on novels (*The Love Killer*), parenting guides (*Why True Love Waits* and *Pure Parenting: Teaching your Teen Why True Love Waits*), Bibles (*True Love Waits Bible*), teen non-fiction (*Revolutionary Purity*), and teen Bible Study (*Pure Joy*). The strength of these materials is the ability to open a dialogue between teens and parents, pastors, and youth leaders about the difficult subject of sex. Unfortunately, the materials focus almost exclusively on teen's sexuality. According to their own numbers,⁸ they have been very successful in motivating young people to commit to sexual purity. But, sexual purity is only one component of a healthy marriage. They seem to make sexual purity itself the ultimate goal and not the relationship with God and with teens' future spouses. Certainly, the Christian is well served when reminded about the role chastity plays in God's plan for marriage. But ultimately, chastity serves the same purpose that children and marital companionship serve: to keep the Christian on his walk of faith. *True Love Waits* focuses on the chastity almost to the exclusion of the broader picture - the entire walk of faith.

Dr. Emerson Eggerichs wrote *Love & Respect*, a book that has gained popularity in Christian marriage counseling since its publishing in 2004. Eggerichs' book is one of the more biblically based marriage books available.⁹ His premise is drawn from Ephesians 5:22-33 and can be easily applied in any mixed gender relationship whether romantic or platonic. This book

love language of the person's spouse or children. In order to communicate love most effectively with their spouse, a person must learn to speak their spouse's primary love language.

⁸ British Broadcasting Corporation. "How Effective Are Abstinence Pledges?," *BBC*, June 29, 2004, sec. Magazine, accessed February 11, 2014, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/3846687.stm. Between 1994 and 2004, 2.5 million young people made an abstinence pledge by filling out an abstinence card.

⁹ Many Christian marriage books are loosely called "Bible-based." They make use of Scripture here and there and they try to extract principles of marriage and relationships from Scriptural accounts.

brings to the fore a unique dynamic that is merely touched on in most other relationship books. Based on Ephesians 5:33, Eggerichs develops two premises. The first is that women primarily communicate through expressions of love. That's how they communicate value, it's also the avenue through which they feel valued. This first premise is not unique to Eggerichs. His second premise is that men communicate value primarily through respect. They communicate value and how they understand being valued. The second premise is rarely explained as thoroughly as Eggerichs does in his book. His conclusion to these two premises is that as much as women need unconditional love from their husband to feel secure and valued, men need to feel unconditional respect to feel secure and valued.

From within the WELS circle, *Growing Together in Christ* is an approachable resource to get a grasp on the biblical fundamentals of marriage. Gene Gronholz and Mark Zarling define marriage with a solid biblical hermeneutic. They help couples and counselors to look at marriage the way God looks at it. This book is a great starting place. In simple and succinct terms it explains God's design for marriage.

One other resource that is valuable and can be useful for ministry is *His Needs, Her Needs: Building an Affair-Proof Marriage*. This book lays out the top needs of both men and women in marriage. The author's purpose in meeting those needs is to prevent an affair. He sees the potential of an affair in every marriage. His reader would not be remiss to think him an alarmist given to overstating his case. That being said, his advice about the needs of both sexes are well taken. His premise that each spouse has specific needs offer a useful insight. He says that wives have needs for affection and intimate conversation, among other things. Husbands have need for sexual fulfillment and a recreational companion, among other things.

While relationship books are invaluable when considering how to teach young people about marriage, literature designed to give insight into the mind and heart of young people is also valuable. In addition to Greg Chapman's book on *The 5 Love Languages for Teens*, another useful resource in this regard is Annie Drake's *Help Me... I Have a Teenager*. The book discusses sex, relationship and dating but also a wider array of topics. *Help Me* talks extensively about a variety of issues that parents of teenagers face. At one time or another, most adults are stymied by the thought process of teens. Drake helps adults understand what is going through the minds of teenagers.

The idea of purposeful and intentional development of young people for marriage appears to be a relatively new concept. One article stands alone as having addressed the issue. “Building a Healthy Marriage through Early and Extended Outreach” from *The Journal of Psychology and Theology* lays out a plan for how to be proactive in preparing young people for marriage. Benjamin Silliman makes a strong case that communities which actively reach out to young people with messages about marriage actually improve the married lives of those individuals. His focus is on the community and not specifically on the church. However, much of what he says is good food for thought for the church community.

“Barriers to Providing Marriage Preparation” by Elise Ehrhard from *Family and Community Ministries* is an insightful and penetrating reflection on why churches may not provide the kind of pre-marriage preparation that couple desperately need. The largest reason is because of “lack”: lack of funds, time and support. Pastors are unable, unwilling or unsupported to offer their counsel to young couples. Even as individuals wait longer than they have in recent history to get married, they do not seek out the counseling they need to begin marriage on a sure footing.

Ehrhard forces her readers to revisit the concern that young people are waiting too long before they get married. She claims that when young men and women wait until their late twenties to get married, they differ from their mid-20th century parents but not from their pre-1930s grandparents. She combats the argument that age is to blame for many of the relationship woes of our day. In fact, the longer young people wait before they get married, the statistically less likely they are to get divorced.

Divorce itself is another topic. But two good works to be familiar with are the study from the Institute for American Values, “Does Divorce Make People Happy,” and “Should I Keep Trying to Work it Out?” from the Utah Commission on Marriage. These two works dispel some of the myths about divorce. Myths that contribute to an attitude of acceptance and normalcy of divorce.

Divorce apologetics and rationalization are often sensed in culture and popular media. But it is also academically studied and documented. Stephanie Coontz’ “Mating Games: Changing the Rules For Sex and Marriage” from *Christian Century* is a succinct summary of the school of thought that assails young people who hold the biblical view of sex and marriage. She is a strong proponent of the “hook-up” culture which separates sex from marriage. She

encourages young people to have sex while single so that intimacy is not a driving force for getting married. Without the pressure of wanting sex, young people can make better decisions about whom to marry, according to Ms. Coontz.

Much has been written to address the question of marriage, of how to fix marriages, of how marriages should be viewed. In *Brethren Life and Thought*, Eric Brubaker writes, “A Christian View of Marriage” to help crystalize the Christian’s worldview on marriage. Against a world that seeks to redefine marriage, Brubaker writes a brief and succinct defense of marriage.

Predictably, non-Christian authors lack a Christian perspective on so many aspects of marriage. In fact, many of the marriage articles being published today focus on defining marriage in light of the same-sex marriage movement. Many of these publications emphasize the role of interpersonal skills in a committed relationship. But they leave the reader with a sense that they miss something. “Commitment” and “communication,” along with all those other psychological and anthropological watchwords for a healthy relationship, are powerful concepts for a healthy marriage. However, they are made all the more powerful and effective when they are applied to the power of the gospel. God’s law and gospel, his Word and sacraments give truly lasting power to all the other key concepts you find in any relationship manual.

Methodology

What makes a successful marriage? This question is the foundational question for family therapists, sociologists and pastors. It was a question I also arrived at through the experience of my own dating life. I’ve noticed the question has been integral to the spiritual life of congregations I have been a part of. More pressing to my un-married mind was the question, “How can a single person give themselves the best chance at a successful marriage?” And so I began with the broadest possible question, “How can a single person prevent ever having a failed marriage?” With that idea in mind, I began the search for literature. As I looked for devotionals, how-to guides, research and any other written material I could think to look in, I began to see a gap. The Christian bookstore doesn’t have a section on “devotionals for the dating couple.” Amazon.com has plenty of material on how to date, how to get along with another human being and the differences between the genders. But I could not find ready-made answers on how to

prepare for marriage. I especially could not find anything that offered an answer to the critical spiritual component. How can I prepare myself to represent Christ to the woman that I marry?

Finding no literature, I turned to asking shepherds in the WELS. I randomly selected 200 WELS pastors for a short survey. I chose them by going through the WELS directory and choosing one or two active pastors per page. I then sent them an e-mail containing a link to a surveymonkey.com survey of six questions. I wanted to know if they had observed what I had observed or if they saw trends and materials that I had not seen. So, I asked questions like, “Describe the role you have played to prepare youth for marriage.” I asked them, “What resources do you find helpful in preparing the unmarried for marriage?” I wanted to know if they saw the gap that I saw, “What would you like to see change in your church culture about how youth are prepared for marriage?” The questions were as follows:

1. Describe the role you have played to prepare youth (grade school age through college age) for marriage?
2. What would you say are the top three attributes (character, inter-personal, spiritual, etc.) that contribute to a successful marriage?
3. What is (are) the strongest factor(s) that shape the attitude and mindset of youth toward marriage?
4. How do culture, church and peer group inform youths’ pre-marriage development?
5. What resources do you find helpful in preparing the unmarried for marriage?
6. What would you like to see change in your church culture about how youth are prepared for marriage?

Of the two hundred that received surveys, sixty-four responded.

A survey was not enough. I wanted to ask the same and similar questions to uniquely qualified individuals. I wanted to ask people who spent their working life asking many of the same questions I was asking. And so I conducted phone interviews with a family therapist, men in the WELS education system and with other ministers who are known for their marriage initiatives. I hoped they would have insights into what young people need to be ready to take on the privilege, blessings and responsibilities of marriages. I reached out to seven people and was able to conduct phone interviews with five people. These are the base line questions I asked:

1. What role do you play in preparing youth for marriage?

2. What have you noticed as common traits or skills in successful marriages?
3. What have you noticed as common traits or skills that lead to the demise of a marriage?
4. What do you think are the best tools in a WELS' pastors' arsenal for preparing youth for marriage?
5. What would you change about how the WELS pastors' you know educate and prepare young people for lifelong, healthy relationships?
6. What material and resources would you recommend for me to read?
7. What materials and resources would you recommend for use in a congregation?
8. What question would you be asking if you were me?

The survey was flowed naturally with questions arising based on previous answers.

In both the surveys and the interviews, I stressed the anonymity of the interaction. There is no way for me to know who of the two hundred pastors polled actually took the time to fill out the survey. I also can't know what answer each respondent gave. The interviews were conducted with the understanding that specific answers and sentiments would remain anonymous.

I began my research with the question, "How can a single person prevent ever having a failed marriage?" Through my research, my initial question evolved into, "What does a single person need to know, do, or believe to have the best chance at a successful marriage?" "Who is best positioned to nurture those things in a young person?" And, "What is the best approach and timing for that development?"

Results

"Single people today need a brutally realistic yet glorious vision of what marriage can be."¹⁰ So where should single people look for such a vision? Examples are out there. Many parents and pastors live a real but glorious marriage. Many pastors preach and teach God's view of marriage.¹¹ A few men are making use of youth groups and campus ministries to talk about

¹⁰ Timothy J Keller and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God* (New York: Dutton, 2011). 12

¹¹ When asked, "What do you do to prepare young people for marriage" many pastors pointed to their sermons on marriage. Some even specifically mentioned sermons targeting the unmarried.

marriage. However, 68% of surveyed WELS pastors admit to having no intentional nurture of young single people.

How are young people defining marriage, then? If not from literature and not usually from their pastors, where? “Parents are children’s most powerful teachers, role models, sources of information and support.”¹² Whether by their model, by their words or both, so many young people realize their view of marriage through what they see in the home. Ought this to concern us as we live in a world where 52% of marriages end in divorce?¹³ Not even Christian marriages are immune to the effects of that divorce rate.¹⁴ Again and again, the research points out the importance of parents. One minister said, “Parents are huge” when it comes to preparing their children for marriage. The same minister stated, “The best thing you can do to prepare young people for marriage is to have a good marriage yourself.” And for those parents who feel hypocritical talking about marriage he said, “It is doubly important for divorced parents to talk about their own failures and successes with their teen and young adult children.”

Beyond the numbers, the interviews portrayed an emotional distress for WELS pastors. They know that the church is fighting tooth and nail for the integrity of marriage. They sense that more can be done, but they feel outgunned. In many cases they feel like Sisyphus rolling his gargantuan stone. As soon as they make headway with a young person the forces of culture, peer groups and a generally sin-filled world roll the stone right back down the mountain. Too many pastors feel defeated already.

They correctly sense that more can be done. But that is true of any corner of ministry. What the survey and interviews did show is that pastors are doing more than they give themselves credit for. WELS pastors preach law and gospel. They preach and teach about marriage. They talk about marriage with the people they meet. They maintain regular and interested contact with young people in their congregation. For all the work that WELS pastors *do* do, they still feel frustrated. At times, they even feel defeated.

¹² Benjamin Silliman, “Building Healthy Marriages through Early and Extended Outreach with Youth,” *Journal of Psychology & Theology* 31, no. 3 (September 1, 2003): 270–282. p 273.

¹³ “Marriage and Divorce,” *Http://www.apa.org*, accessed January 31, 2014, <http://www.apa.org/topics/divorce/index.aspx>.

¹⁴ Barna Group. “New Marriage and Divorce Statistics Released,” last modified 2009, accessed December 2, 2013, <https://www.barna.org/family-kids-articles/42-new-marriage-and-divorce-statistics-released>.

Survey Highlights

WELS pastors face the challenges of broken marriages every day. They know that some of the best tools are in their hands and yet already during high school and college, young people are disconnecting from that which will best prepare their hearts for marriage. Listen to those pastors speak in their own words in this section that highlights a few of the responses garnered through the survey. The highlights below represent voices with an especially insightful, poignant or contrary view. These highlights have been chosen in order to give a sense of what kind of data came from the survey without necessarily representing every opinion. The highlights were not chosen in order to allow themes to come through. Instead, they were chosen to represent the breadth of insight and schools of thought that exist in the WELS parish today.

- **Describe the role you have played to prepare youth (grade school age through college age) for marriage?**
 - “Basically discussing and applying the sixth commandment and God’s gift of marriage in confirmation class and having occasional Bible studies for college age kids.”
 - “With grade school age youth, my role is primarily teach of God’s truths about marriage in connection with the sixth commandment in catechism. In the teen years the role is probably teacher in connection with topical studies with youth group. And college age ... only if a college age couple is anticipating marriage and I work with them in preparation for it.”
 - “Talking openly about God’s plan for marriage and blessings in marriage (whether that’s in a sermon, confirmation class, Bible study, etc.). I think modeling a Christian marriage is important too. Our youth are inundated with bad marriage stories and they often have false ideas of what marriage is like... Our youth need to hear the good marriage stories seen in our churches and among God’s people. The last thing and probably most important is to get the youth in the Word. A person rooted in the Word will draw strength from him for all circumstances in life whether marriage

or otherwise.”

- “Made Scriptural applications for marriage in Catechism class when in parish and now in religion classes at ALHS [Area Lutheran High School]. Also share common sense advice in high school religion classes. Bring in husband and wife team to talk about God’s roles.”
 - “Obviously we cover the sixth commandment in catechism class. But, we don’t have much time to spend on it. We do a four week class called the truth about sex every four years in the teen group. I try and address young people as well in any marriage related sermon.”
 - “I have taught confirmation classes, have taught youth classes and campus classes in studies specifically about God’s gift of marriage and sexual relations.”
 - “Confirmation class; teen class; mention regarding marriage in sermons. Very little to truly ‘prepare’ anyone for marriage except to recognize it is ordained by God and to last a lifetime.”
 - “Father of four girls, Sunday school teacher, devotion leader at Lutheran Elementary School, catechism teacher, youth group teacher, pre-marriage counselor, pastor.”
 - “Not that much other than teaching them from the Small Catechism during confirmation and through sermons that I preached at weddings where young people were in attendance.”
- **“What would you say are the top three attributes (character, inter-personal, spiritual, etc.) that contribute to a successful marriage?”**

- “1. Forgiveness 2. Humility 3. Faithfulness”

- “1. Spiritual maturity through insightful and regular application of God’s Word throughout their personal lives, including all their relationships. 2. Spiritual maturity through regular confession of sins during worship and hearing repeatedly just how forgiven they are for Jesus’ sake. In so doing, they are practicing to repent to their spouse someday. 3. Spiritual maturity in which they develop their spiritual character to include honesty, integrity, self-control, the other fruit of the spirit, and especially love, the kind of love that is quick to announce forgiveness when their spouse is trying to settle a dispute. 4. Spiritual maturity that recognizes the best any of us can do is to marry a sinner. It might as well be a sinner who knows the Lord, that is, a sinner who loves the Lord more than he or she loves the spouse. 5. Spiritual maturity which hates arguing, hates winning at the expense of others, hates vying for power, loves to communicate, loves to see their spouse grow to full potential, loves to serve, loves the God-given roles assigned to husband and wife, loves to fix the problem rather than the spouse. 6. Spiritual maturity which understands the limits of ‘what I can change’ (only myself, my attitudes, plans, reaction – not you). 7. Spiritual maturity which understands the power of words in communication and understands the audience to which one is speaking. It really helps to know how to process one’s feelings (such as resentment) in a way which benefits one’s spouse. 8. Spiritual maturity which recognizes the lies of Satan in pornography and any other shortcut (alcohol, shopping, work, hunting, gossip) that tries to achieve a goal apart from the ways God promises to bless us.”

- “Focusing on the other [person] is primary. Looking at what you get out of marriage sets yourself up for disappointment. Determination is key so

you don't quit. Forgiveness is important so resentment does not continue to build up."

- "1. Spiritual – Having a spouse who shares your doctrinal fellowship and theological convictions. 2. Personal character – I would expect that it would be better to marry and honest, hard-working, understanding unbeliever than a dishonest, lazy and selfish believer (though we might argue whether someone who claims to be a believer and is content to be these things is really a believer). 3. Inter-personal – Probably the most important of which is openness to grow in this area. Of all the important skills for building a successful marriage, these are the easiest to learn."
- "1) Active in their relationship with Jesus (e.g. worship, Bible study, participate in programs). 2) Willing to talk about their faith and understanding of Bible teachings. 3) Respected by other people."
- "Open lines of communication between husband and wife. Sex is not used as a bargaining chip by either spouse in the marriage relationship. Good money management principles. Above all these, but including them the fact that both partners want Christ to be at the center of their marriage and their lives."
- "Living with the truth about marriage and not living with marriage myths... therefore knowing your partner's love language, knowing how to fight a good fight, and realizing that men and women think differently."
- **"What is (are) the strongest force(s) that shape the attitude and mindset of youth toward marriage?"**
 - "Pop culture – music, videos, movies."

- “In my experiences, the picture of marriage that people have most clearly is their parents’ marriage. This is the one they see in action every day (or in cases of divorce, rarely). This is what they think that marriage is ‘supposed to be.’ Culture plays a role, but I personally don’t think it’s as strong as the marriage they see on display in the home. Certainly we also trust in the living, active Word of God and the power it has to shape a youth’s attitude of marriage.”
- “Friends, media, most importantly a parent who is a good role model and willing to be open and talk to their kids about marriage and sex.”
- “Their own sinful flesh. Their parents’ marriage. Society/mass media.”
- “1. TV and movies – especially the society’s definition of ‘love’ as a fleeting emotion. 2. Their parents – A child whose parents are committed in marriage are more likely to have a high view of marriage. 3. Their friends/peers – the attitude of the ‘crowd’ the youth spends significant time with will have a strong impact.”
- **“How do culture, church and peer group inform youths’ pre-marriage development.”**
 - “Our youths are horribly confused. They have little grasp of the true nature of love nor of the true role of sexuality in the marriage. Many of our youth, even in rural America, come from broken homes and have no example of what a committed relationship means. The church simply needs to continue to clearly teach the Lord’s will and purpose for marriage.”
 - “Our American culture is horrible. It’s amazing any marriages work out with the trash on TV, movies, etc. But I’m sure Corinth was no better, nor

Rome. Peer groups are powerful, but no more powerful than the Christian home. Find a God-pleasing place to raise and educate your child. Our Lutheran High schools are worth their weight in gold. Surround your children with a God-pleasing peer group. There are always Christians in every place, but you may have to look for them.”

- “Unfortunately, I think culture is more active and the church/family more passive in talking to their kids and shaping opinions.”

- “1. The idea of ‘love’ as an emotional high – when that emotional high goes away, then love goes away. This is certainly not the biblical definition of love (‘doing in the best interest of the one loved regardless of the cost to the one loving’). 2. The culture’s attitude toward sex – Sex is a much more casual topic in our society and many youths have a much more casual attitude toward it. 3. The rejection of authority (including the church’s) – A big problem I have seen in pastoral ministry is otherwise ‘good, faithful’ Christian parents accepting their children’s ungodly actions surrounding the sixth commandment (having sex before marriage, living together before marriage). When the parents reject the Scripture (and therefore, the church’s) teaching on marriage, it is inevitable their children will do the same.”

- “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right...’ I don’t think the biggest blessings come simply from teaching about marriage, or even giving communication skills. Fostering the New Man as a child grows up learning to love what God loves, having a Spirit-given distaste from the evils that threaten a marriage, and a heart of submission to God’s Word – even when it’s difficult – are general Christian attributes for the church to foster that can protect and rescue marriages from many evils. Outside of worship and Bible study, there’s great benefit in opportunities to model and discuss this. Youth groups and

service opportunities that help model healthy marriage in congregational volunteers and set early patterns of Christian service and attitudes are a blessing.”

- “The influence of the world in general is hard to overcome. Many church going WELS people opt to live together before marriage.”
- “The Disney culture exaggerates romance as the only happiness, peer groups socially reward and punish according to conformity with the cultural standards for male-female relationships, and an hour or two in church setting are hardly enough to promote lasting, godly formation in this area.”
- **“What resources do you find helpful in preparing the unmarried for marriage?”**
 - “Review the Bible passages on marriage. Other resources may be good and helpful. But the best resource is what God says in his Holy Word. His Word covers sex, finances, children, birth control, church and the role of husband and wife as man and woman.”
 - “Mostly a four part Bible study intended for this purpose. It usually is broken into two two-hour sessions, though it can be broken into four sessions or one mammoth session of four hours. Increasingly, it is becoming very difficult to accomplish even this much.”
 - “We use the Catechism and the Bible. If the pastor can’t teach accurately and precisely using these, then maybe he’s not trained well enough to be a pastor. I believe the worst thing a pastor could do is use and reference anything psychological as if that has and contains the answers instead of

God's Word.”

- “Personally, I think the most important this is having a personal ongoing relationship with the youth. I don't think there is a formula for marriage preparation.”
- “I use bluefish TV's The Truth About Sex study. Otherwise, I do my best to be open and speak positively about the blessings of marriage.”
- “The Bible. I am not being trite. I have never found any other resource to be of great value. Of course, works that correctly expound what Scripture teaches – e.g. the Catechism, our synod's statement on Man & Woman in God's World – can be useful. Nothing can ever substitute for Scripture, however.”
- “Experience – I like to tell stories (both good and bad) about the impact the person you choose for your spouse has (arguably the most important earthly decision an individual makes). Drilling the pertinent Bible passages into their heads – No Catechism student leaves my class without memorizing (and being able to explain the meaning of) Genesis 2:24 and Hebrews 13:4 for pre-marriage counseling, I have used Professor Schuetze's book, ‘Building a Christian Home.’”
- **“What would you like to see change in your church culture about how youth are prepared for marriage?”**
 - “I would like to have more Bible study on dating and what marriage is for the teenage crowd so they are not already living together or sexually active when they finally decided to come to the minster and ask me to perform their wedding.”

- “We need to create a culture in our church that includes the expectation all families will be having family devotions in their homes and that all parents will be growing in grace and knowledge so they can speak confidently and openly in their homes as per Deuteronomy 6:6-9.”
- “Oh boy! That’s a fine kettle of fish! There is a part of me that says firm discipline on the 35-40ish year old parents of our current teenagers who are ‘trashing’ their marriages might help. Yet some of those ‘trashers’ just end up trashing the Scriptural truths in conversations with their kids. Maybe we need to “use” some “solid” married couples in their late 30s and early 40s in our studies with teens and college aged youth to talk about the challenges and the solutions in Christ. In our church, it’s probably a matter of some Bible studies geared towards our young unmarried about marriage.”
- “I’m not sure that there needs to be a change, more than there needs to be a determined focus to share what God says in connection to marriage. I’ve noticed that my confirmation students tend to pay close attention when we go through the sixth commandment. Martin Luther once said, ‘If you don’t teach your children, the devil will.’ The devil’s got some great ideas about their marriage. Let’s wield the Spirit’s sword and share God’s plans and intentions for marriage.”
- “I would like the church to help parents have a stronger home and family life. That is by far the best preparation for the youth who will establish their own family one day.”
- “I would like for the staff minister or an elder to teach the Sunday morning Bible class so that I might have the high schoolers for some study/discussion. For all married couples to attend a marriage retreat weekend, preferably all at once, but more likely over a five year period. If

the young people see the married couples working on marriage, it will help instill a greater appreciation and healthy anticipation for marriage. For couples to establish a baby-sitting cooperative so their children see their parents dating regularly. For men to grow in their ability to lead by example and through inclusive negotiation rather than by declaration and/or by raised voice, or by not leading at all. For women to grow in their ability to positively reinforce all godly male behavior rather than trying to change men's behavior through unhelpful criticism. For men to grow in their understanding of women's need for security. For women to grow in their understanding of men's need to be needed/useful."

- "I would like to see Christians behave like God's children in marriage. But then we live in a sinful world. Preach Law and Gospel and don't stop. Quit looking for a better fix than God's Word. Encourage, admonish, teach, proclaim and never ever cease the clear and precise wonder of God's Word."
- "More open and frank talk about the sexual/physical intimacy side of marriage (blessings and potential pitfalls both). A greater appreciation and joy for God's gift of children modeled, not just given lip service. More direct teaching on birth control. More parents who stay married (to each other), love each other, and model a godly married life together."
- "It would be great if we could get experienced, godly couples matched up with unmarried ones to serve as mentors. Starting before the wedding to establish a comfortable relationship. People need a better place to go than the internet, since many won't ask parents or pastors for advice until a problem becomes critical."
- "Maybe more deliberate approach to topics in teen Bible class. Greater appreciation for those who have stayed married. A desire for continued

growth/Bible study after marriage (marriage seminars have been poorly attended) which doesn't breed that respect for marriage in the youth."

Discussion

The sad fact is that a majority marriages are falling apart. The divorce rate has plateaued over the last two decades. But the rate is still formidably high. Every year in the United States there are two marriages for every divorce. Another way to look at the divorce problem is that a quarter of all Americans eighteen years and older have divorced.¹⁵ The counseling pastor can shake a stick at a dozen different factors that contribute to the high numbers of divorce that even plagues church-going Christians. A higher percentage of people cohabit before getting married, more and more children watch their parents divorce, pre-marriage promiscuity, the worship of self, the secularization of society and the infiltration of that secular world into our churches are just a few of the woes that contribute to failed marriages.¹⁶

Some of the factors that eventually sabotage marriage can be addressed with our young people. We can "head them off at the pass" so to speak. Our young single people do have high hopes for the success of marriage.¹⁷ They want marriage and the happiness that God brings through the marriage bond.¹⁸ One youth minister said his teens and young adults crave guidance for their relationships. They desire the relationships with parents and other adults that can help them prepare for that marriage.¹⁹ We owe it to them and to our God to do all that we can to nurture the faith of young people so that they are ready for the challenges of marriage.

¹⁵ Hawkins, Fackrell, and Marriage, *Should I Keep Trying to Work It Out?*. P 42

¹⁶ Ibid. p 42-44

¹⁷ Clark University. Clark University, "New Clark Poll: 18- to 29-Year-Olds Are Traditional about Roles in Sex, Marriage and Raising Children | Clark News Hub", n.d., accessed January 31, 2014, <http://news.clarku.edu/news/2012/08/07/new-clark-poll-18-to-29-year-olds-are-traditional-about-roles-in-sex-marriage-and-raising-children/>.

¹⁸ Paul Taylor, "For Millennials, Parenthood Trumps Marriage," *Pew Social & Demographic Trends*, March 9, 2011, accessed January 21, 2014, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/03/09/for-millennials-parenthood-trumps-marriage/>. Marriage is an important life event for Millennials even if parenthood has become more important.

¹⁹ Silliman, "Building Healthy Marriages through Early and Extended Outreach with Youth." 274

The survey makes it clear that pastors are talking about marriage with their congregation. Young people listening to sermons and Bible studies hear God's designs about love, sex and marriage. The topic is in the air. Pastors have opened it up and young people know that it's on the table. Unfortunately, many who took the survey hope that young people will also learn by osmosis. Many of those who responded hoped that young people would learn from the good examples in their lives, and that the majority of growth would happen in an organic, unplanned, and unintentional way. Are good marriage practices more "taught or caught?" Young people learn most from watching their own parents. Ideally, young people would learn good marriage practices from observing their own parents. However, the sad fact is that more of our youth have negative influences in their homes. More young people pick up destructive habits where they should be learning constructive habits. They learn through observation just as many traits and skills that may later submarine their marriage. I sense that our young people need direct and intentional conversations about all that God has done for them. In a perfect world, pastors can be content to allow their young people to catch how to have a good marriage. But in the world we live in with broken homes, a sexually steeped culture, and mass media that actively attempts to reshape the definition of marriage we cannot leave our young people's future marriages up to a hope that they have enough good influences in their lives. The territory of marriage is a bitter battlefield. Satan attacks on multiple fronts with great speed, efficiency and with a tremendous amount of appeal to the minds and imaginations of young people. We, too, must be ready and willing to fight bitterly for the territory. Unspecific and general attacks with the weapons of Word and Sacrament are deadly to Satan's strongholds. The efficacy of God's Word is not in question here. But we can do a better job of delivering the weapons God has placed into our hands. We can be more strategic, more specific, more daring and more straightforward.

Young people need more than the general messages from the pulpit or in Bible study. Pastors want, and young people need, focused conversations that are directly relevant to teens' lives. They enjoy when their pastor sits down and talks with them, face-to-face, about God's grace. And then the Pastor challenges them to live in the light of that grace. They appreciate when he challenges them to live out their faith by dating and seeking a spouse in a way that lives up to the lavish love their Father has showered on them. They, like any other Christian, like to be challenged to live their faith. Anytime they are crushed by the law and built up by the gospel,

they ask, “What now?” They like to be shown concrete ways in which they live differently when they live in accord with God’s commands.

They want us to arm them with the armor of God. We can go to war against the false ideas and the misconceptions that young single people have about marriage. At worst, many young people go through their teens and early twenties without any spiritual guidance on the matter from those who love and care for them. At best, many of them have general instruction and admonition from pastors and parents. I propose that we continue to take the fight to the enemy. Instead of playing defense with marriage “fixer-upper” efforts, let’s go on the offensive. We need to meet the enemy head on where he thinks he is strongest. I propose that we sit down with teens and listen. We hear their struggles, their fears, their excitement and their passions. Not only do their pastors and youth ministers need to listen, but also their parents. We listen to them. We act as a sounding board. We can give them gentle guidance and steering. In all this we continue to give them the guidance God has for them so that they themselves are armed and ready to defend against the arrows of the evil one. Nurturing teens and young adults means a shift in from reactive tactics to offense. More than an offense, it is a preemptive strike. The amount of time and dedication needed to “be there” might seem overwhelming. It means the dedication of pastors’ most valuable resource – his time. In an interview, a pastor who now is in the worker training program said, “If I had to do it all again, I would spend more time with young people in one-on-one conversation.” This ministry is about dislodging the lies of Satan and our culture before they have a chance to take root and instilling ever deeper the truths of Scripture. This is a prime opportunity to do just that. It is an opportunity to replace lies with the truth and to watch as God blesses the marriages for which he has prepared young people. In the next few pages let’s target a few specific lies and begin a conversation about how to attack them. I have purposefully ignored marriage topics about which young people generally are simply naïve.²⁰ Instead, I have focused on key areas where I have observed that young people are not only naïve they are maliciously misled. The following five topics are areas in which secular American society has most hijacked God’s plan for marriage.

²⁰ Several interviews exposed the idea that engaged couples often have very little sense of how finances within a marriage work

The Illusion of Sex

The lie easiest to identify is the lie of sex. Many pastors lament about how rampant sexuality is in our culture. Premarital sex is the presupposition from every popular show, every billboard, even from the pages of our public school curriculum.²¹ But the lie goes deeper than, “Sex is fun. Everyone is doing it. You are an outsider if you don’t join in.” Sex has moved beyond the dangerous forbidden fruit to a normal part of everyday life. Popular television depicts sex as part of the vetting process. It asks our young people, “Are you sure you want to be with that man or woman? Sleep with them and let their performance be your guide.” Movies like “This Means War” make the “sex test” an integral part of the plot. Popular music and TV have lead the charge and corners of psychology and academics have followed up. Speaking about casual sex and hookups one family specialist says, “It is also more important than it used to be for couples to have enough experience to distinguish lust or infatuation from love. Like it or not, this probably means that hookups will persist as a phase of the life course for people who delay marriage until they are at a place where they are willing and able to invest some serious time in developing a relationship.”²² So many have the wrong attitude of, “Of course casual, unhindered sex is normal! You owe it to yourself to allow yourself sexual outlets, stopgaps, so that you can put off the serious search for a spouse.” The enemy is deeply entrenched.

Fortunately, the Conqueror has armed us with numerous weapons to dislodge this part of the enemy’s army. Evangelicals have written a plethora of materials that encourage and empower teens to commit to chastity before marriage. LifeWay Press produces useful material. Their material strongly focuses on the temporal benefits of remaining chaste – no pregnancy, no STDs and no mental or emotional trauma. Unfortunately, they motivate largely by law. What if you paired their methodology with God’s sacraments? What if we use forgiveness, life and salvation as motivating forces instead of relying on law motivation and logical arguments? LifeWay Press is strong in their ability to use Scripture and logic to persuade a young person to a life of purity. Let’s take some of that logic and couple it with the power of the sacraments.

²¹ Amanda Peterson Beadle, “Teen Pregnancies Highest In States With Abstinence-Only Policies,” accessed January 31, 2014, <http://thinkprogress.org/health/2012/04/10/461402/teen-pregnancy-sex-education/>. “In the US, 37 states require sex education that includes abstinence, 26 of which require that abstinence be stressed as the best method.”

²² Stephanie Coontz, “Mating Games: Changing Rules for Sex and Marriage,” *Christian Century* 129, no. 2 (January 25, 2012): 22–24. 24

Where LifeWay press attempts to empower young people with facts and the example of others, let's empower young people with the power of the gospel. Let's show them the beautiful relationship that Christ has with his bride. God fights every day for the purity of his beloved and how he longs for her like the husband in Song of Songs. Instead of trying to change the outpouring of hearts through the statistics of teen pregnancy, let's be the messengers of a message that changes hearts from cold and dead to beating and alive. Let's use the tool that God has given us to do that: the life and death of his one and only Son. Instead of driving young people to their own prayers as if that was their source of power, we can drive young people to their baptism and to the Lord's Supper and show them the power that resides in Christ's sacrifice and promise. Where LifeWay Press tells youth to be pure for the sake of their future spouse, we can encourage youth to be pure because God has made them pure through the washing of rebirth and renewal. What a powerful God we have that he has already washed all of our robes in the blood of the Lamb and made them whiter than snow. Let's not ignore the facts and figures the chastity pledge movement has cultivated. But we can build on the foundation of an all-loving God who sent his Son not for the world's condemnation but for its salvation. Indeed a pastor has a powerful weapon in his arsenal.

The majority of people – especially young people – need to be recalibrated on the matter of sex. Too often, sex is seen as a performance. Sex is about taking pleasure from the partner.²³ Sex is the cheese that lures the mouse into the trap. Sex is the road to control the opposite sex. Young people often see sexual performance as a way to gain popularity among peers. But faith sees sex as an expression. It is not primarily the expression of erotic love, an idea that swirls around our teens like fog in the early morning. Sex is an expression of unity found only within the marriage vows: a physical expression of the unity each spouse promises before God at the altar.²⁴ Our culture would have us believe that sex dwindles and suffers after the marriage vows. That it is really exciting and fulfilling outside of marriage but boring inside. But that's not the way our God designed it. He designed it to be deeply satisfying, deeply moving, deeply fulfilling, and deeply spiritual when expressed with a committed spouse.

²³ The world often casts this as the purpose of sex. Gronholz and Zarling identify the fallacy and combat it in their book. Gene Gronholz and Mark Zarling, *Growing Together in Christ* (Northwestern Publishing House (Milwaukee, WI), 1996). 21

²⁴ Keller and Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*. 80

The Worship of Self

While sex is the easiest lie to detect, it is not the only lie. It may not even be the most insidious. The sinful nature continues to corrupt God's creation. It continues to soil humanity and especially the marriage relationship. American culture has fed a "me-first" mentality. Human selfishness is nothing new. Satan fostered and exploited selfishness in our first parents. And just like our first parents, that selfishness corrupts humanity's view of marriage. Today, that selfishness takes on the form of "accept me for me."²⁵ That goes not only in the realm of politics and culture, but also in the marriage. Young people look for dates and partners who will never try to change them. The message of society is that young people are perfect just the way they are. As our culture teaches our young people that they are perfect the way they are, young people are set up for failure in every relationship, especially marriage.

The flip side of the "accept me for me" mentality is the search for perfection. Young people have become obsessed with continuously seeking a partner without flaws.²⁶ They seek Mr. and Mrs. Perfectly Right. Mr. or Mrs. Right does not exist.²⁷ One dark side of entitlement is that single people sometimes feel that they have to hold out for the perfect person. The perfect man who is always an open communicator, sensitive, always wants to talk, is expressively loving, and puts his wife first; the perfect woman who is always supportive, respectful, beautiful, and willing to go along with whatever her husband says. Single people are looking for someone who has arrived; who has put away his or her past, is mature for his or her age, has a career and is already self-supporting. In part, this is why we see the average age of first marriages on the rise.²⁸ Young people are content to wait until their potential spouse has a career, has no debt,

²⁵The popular comedy, *New Girl*, features two of the main characters Nick and Jess. Nick does not have his life together. In an episode where Jess tries to help Nick pay years of overdue fines, fees and bills, Nick gets extremely upset. "Stop trying to change me! Just accept me for me." He is exasperated by her even though he is a barely functioning adult – a recurring theme in many episodes of the show.

²⁶ Keller and Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*. 33

²⁷ Ibid. 37

²⁸ The debate wages over the pros and cons of a higher marriage age. In her article, *A Case for Later Marriage*, Elise Ehrhard points out some of the pros of a higher marriage age. She states that the marriage age dipped drastically during the middle part of the 20th century. Even in the 19th century, the average age of marriage was closer to the average age today than to the age of the 1940s. She points to neuroscience that supports the fact that the prefrontal cortex – the part of the brain associated with the "orchestration of thoughts and actions in accordance with internal goals" – doesn't fully develop until age 25. She also points to the statistic that people who marry after age 25 have a lower divorce rate than those who marry before. Argumentatively, she postulates that

and has lived on their own. In other words, young people look for a roommate. Someone who exists in the same space at the same time, but someone on whom the young person is not dependent. They don't want somebody they need. If the potential spouse still has issues to work out or if the potential spouse hasn't got their personal life under control, young people are encouraged to flee. They are encouraged to let him or her work on those issues by themselves instead of staying in the relationship and being an agent of change.

The ideas of "accept me" and "be perfect" require no faith on the part of the individual. While the mindset appears to hold out the promise of happiness, they are actually subversive to the purpose and happiness in marriage. Young people think they are seeking a marriage of live-and-let-live, where the two partners simply occupy the same space. But an "accept me" attitude holds a married couple at arm's length. They eliminate the possibility that the two people will have any real or lasting impact on each other.

A thoughtful Christian easily sees the flaw in this way of thinking. None of us are ever "done." God continuously shapes and molds us on our path to haven. Parents and spiritual leaders can and even must step into a single person's life and nurture them see things the way they actually are. Instead of looking for someone who has everything together – and the equally dangerous quest for someone to fix – we can get young people excited for the adventure. Through the eyes of faith, they can say, "I see the potential in you. I'm excited to see what God does with you over our lifetime. I want to go along for the ride!"²⁹

The young single person is not only excited to embark on that journey with their spouse, they are also excited to have someone who can keep them on the road that God has set before their feet. As one pastor put it, "There is no other more sanctifying person in my life than my wife." We see a negative example of the power a spouse has to help their partner in their walk of faith in the Garden of Eden. Eve needed only a word from Adam to help her see the sinfulness that Satan held out to her. The bubble of his deceitful promise would have been popped if Adam had fulfilled his role as God's sanctifying agent in her life. But he himself was taken in by the deception. He was unable to point his wife to the promises of God because Satan had blinded

marriage does not solve the problems of wandering eyes or heart. If a single young man or woman cannot control their lusts on their own in the mid and late 20's, they will be unable to do it with a spouse. Her opposition would saw that marriage and the sexual expression of a married couple are specifically designed to fulfill sexual and emotional needs. Many see the control of roving hearts and minds as one of the main reasons God started marriage.

²⁹ Keller and Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*. 121

him to the truth. No one knows a husband as well as his wife, or knows a wife as well as her husband. No other Christian on the planet knows so well where their spouse is in their walk with God. No other person is able to more accurately and helpfully guide an erring spouse back onto the path of God. When done with love, tact and concern a Christian can relish the correction of his or her spouse, even seek it out and come to cherish and love their gentle and firm rebuke. More importantly, no other Christian is able to apply specific gospel so well as a spouse. God knows each of our sins completely. His full forgiveness is all the sweeter because he knows everything and yet still chooses to forgive. The forgiveness of a spouse who knows our faults better than anyone else is all the sweeter because they know just how deeply the sin had taken root.

A Christian couple sees that their spouse has a role in his or her eternity. A Christian sees his or her spouse as one of God's messengers. A messenger who brings God's Word into the home. How different the attitude compared to someone without a Christ centered marriage! Instead of seeking to restore the image of God in each other a spouse in that marriage seeks to remain unchanged and to cling to their sense of independence and identity. How much work parents and other spiritual leaders have to bring about the godly view of the matter!

The Lie of Love

You've heard it before, the answer to the questions, "Why do you want to get married? How are you going to make it last?" The answer comes, "We love each other." Young people still believe the lie, "All you need is love!" All too often, a couple who is ready to call it quits on their marriage gives "we don't love each other anymore" as the reason. What kind of love wanes and ebbs? Can a couple be madly in love one day and falling out of love the next?

Centuries ago marriage was once about fulfilling a role in society.³⁰ Young people got married primarily because of social obligation. In order for young men to be respected and reliable, they needed a family. In order for young women to be taken care they needed to marry. During the course of the 20th century, the reason for a couple to get married has shifted from social obligation to fulfilling emotional love. Unfortunately, the definition of "love" has also shifted. What is meant by love is really an infatuation that can fluctuate based on numerous

³⁰ Ibid. 32

factors. “Love” grows and shrinks based on how partners treat each other, the individual’s circle of friends, and available relationship alternatives.

Too many individuals have the same definition of “love” that they had when they were young. When young people begin dating, they have an immature idea of love. According to one pastor a majority of couples in pre-marital counseling still have that immature definition. Immature love is based more on hormones than on mature emotional and logical decisions. We might even encourage teens to have a fluid definition of love as they attempt to find for whom and what they are looking. But as they grow older and have more mature relationships, they need to develop a more sustainable, permanent, and dependable understanding of love. The kind of love with which God loves. Parents and spiritual leaders wish that development would happen on its own. The sad fact is that too often it doesn’t. So leaders need to be ready to step in and help young people define and seek godly love.

As far as reasons to get married go, “love” is a viable and laudable reason. In fact, it can be a very good reason. But the love must be a choice as well as an emotion. Emotional love lasts only for a short while before it begins to be effected by changed emotions, changed expectations, and changed familial reactions to the relationship, even a change in the attractiveness of another person. But an intentional love that is renewed each and every day lasts a lifetime. It is the kind of love that God has for his children. God does not love his children based on some whimsical emotion, but rather based on his decision to love. He loves us completely, desperately, and eternally because he chooses to. He loves each human being not because we are good looking, serve him, respect him, or even love him the way he deserves. He loves despite our shortcomings. His love is defined by his choice and by his sacrifice.

“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”³¹ The love that God designed for marriages is not a self-serving love. The Apostle Paul describes love as God designed it when he wrote that love is patient, it is kind and it keeps no record of wrongs.³² It does not seek primarily to fulfill itself, but rather seeks to fulfill the needs of the other. When the faith of a single person grows to understand and lives this kind of

³¹ Romans 5:8

³² I Corinthians 13

love, they don't need to be skilled negotiators.³³ They don't need to negotiate to get what the self wants because the spouse isn't interested in what they can get for themselves. They don't need skill to persuade, cajole, or threaten their partner into serving themselves. God's kind of love sees self-centeredness as the problem.³⁴ This kind of love fights every day to put itself second. This kind of love is counter-intuitive and counter-cultural. We can, we must, work to reinforce Christ-like love for spouses in our single people. We show young people what Christ's love looks like and then challenge them to reflect that same love in their romantic relationships.

As spiritual leaders, we strive to nurture people and their faith so that it can love like Jesus. "We love because he first loved us."³⁵ That kind of love is present in at least the background of all of our Bible studies and sermons. When they say, "I love him" ask them, "Why do you love him?" "What about them makes you want to put them ahead of yourself?" Or, "What do you mean by 'love?'"³⁶ Maybe instead of asking the question, "How do they make you better?" We ought to ask the question, "How do you make them better?" Let's equip parents – especially parents who have broken their own marriage³⁷ – to study Ephesians 5 together with their teens and young adults and to share together God's truths about marriage.³⁸ Let's empower parents to be able to say, "God describes how it is supposed to look. Is that what your relationship looks like?" Let's continue to go to Scripture with young people and point out the ways God has loved us and then let's encourage them to live that kind of love in their relationships. That kind of love is sustainable, renewable, well founded and lifelong.

³³ Coontz, "Mating Games." 24. She says that negotiation is one of the most important skills to a successful relationship.

³⁴ Keller and Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*. 65

³⁵ 1 John 4:19

³⁶ We encourage young people toward godly love. We must be careful to teach and impress a love for God above all. Too many young women have stayed in dangerous relationships, have caved to improper sexual demands, and have abandoned friends and family on the pretext of selfless love. Love that puts the partner in the place of God is as dangerous as a me-first attitude.

³⁷ Hawkins, Fackrell, and Marriage, *Should I Keep Trying to Work It Out?*. 43. They trace divorced parents as a factor that almost doubles the chances that children will get divorced. Without purposeful talk in a broken home, each generation's marriages will be twice as likely to break apart if the one set of parents got a divorce. That trend is unsustainable. It is especially important for divorced parents to talk with their children if parents hope to prevent their children from having to go through the same process. And the same work found that a significant number of divorced individuals wish they had done more to save the marriage.

³⁸ I understand the challenge this presents. Getting a divorced parent to honestly and maturely talk to their children about marriage? Yikes! But the simple fact of the matter is that someone has to. Someone has to heal the soul of those children. With God's healing, those young people can avoid becoming another statistic.

The Reversal of Roles

Think back to the last sitcom you watched. Was there a couple in it? What was the relationship between the two? Was the man a bumbling buffoon or a chauvinistic pig? Was the woman an assertive know-it-all or a romantic sap? In the most recent movies you have watched have you seen strong-willed women and ignorant, macho men? Or are they weak and unwilling to take on responsibility? American culture has gone through radical changes in the last fifty years on what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman. It is no wonder that young people are in crisis and at a total loss when it comes to fulfilling their God-given gender roles.

Countless books have been written about the roles of men and women within the home. It is not within the scope of this thesis to review even the best of these books. Doubtless, many from Northwestern Publishing House and other publishers can serve as excellent resources. Let us be content here to say that those resources exist and would be helpful to both pastors and parents.

Many of those who stand outside the church and critique her have strong opinions about how the church teaches and instills the roles of men and women. Too many times, our young people hear the caricatures of godly roles as a pregnant, uneducated woman and a working, detached husband. While that kind of couple may reflect God's designed roles for the sexes, it is not the definition of his roles, but merely an enactment of the definition. When interviewed, one minister said that roles are one of the most misunderstood aspects of marriage.

Young people do crave good role models for roles within a marriage. God has provided the perfect model for the roles of marriage. In Ephesians 5, Paul explains that the role of the husband to his wife is the same as that of Christ to the church. His role is to love her, to sacrifice for her, and to offer his life for her. The role of the wife to her husband is the same as that of the church to Christ. She is to respect him and submit to him the same way that the Church respects and submits to Christ.

In the same vein, Paul talks in 1 Corinthians about how the head of every man is Christ and the head of woman is man. Each must answer to its head, doing what pleases the head. Men express their role in the same way that Christ expressed his role given to him by his Father.³⁹

³⁹ Especially strong, independent young women may be comforted that Paul describes men's headship of women to be the same as the Father's headship of Christ.

Can a husband fulfill his role of headship as a stay-at-home dad? Can a woman express submission and respect by although she is better educated than her husband? The simple answer is “Yes!” The principles remain the same: headship and helper.⁴⁰ Each seeking to fulfill their own role completely independent from the spouse’s fulfillment of their role. Each spouse seeking to serve without demanding the service of the other. The application is unique to couples and circumstances. It is also a message far different from what our young people hear elsewhere. God’s message is at odds with the message they hear from their peer group, pop culture and sometimes even their own parents! Our young people need to be reminded about the principles God has laid out for the roles of a husband and wife. They also need to be given the freedom to apply those principles in their own situations. We can provide that for them. We can also continue to be a resource as they continue to navigate those roles and how to live them out day after day.

The Broken Promises of Divorce

So much of American economy seems to be based on planned obsolescence. Consumers have suspected for years that manufacturers in all sectors design their product to fail after a certain amount of time. From the printer that has a predetermined number of pages it will print before it needs to be replaced to the vehicles that seem to fall apart as soon as the warranty has expired. Things don’t last. We have come to accept that fact. We buy water contained in a one-time-use plastic bottles, we move into a “starter” home, and we buy technology that is already outdated. We consume one thing expecting the next thing to be better. We expect that when we move on to the next iteration of whatever it is, the product will be better and we’ll be happier.

Divorce has offered the same “upgradeability” to marriage. Politicians, actors, even our children’s own parents set an example that when one marriage fails expectations, a person has the right to ditch that marriage like last year’s cell phone and find a new one. I understand that there are countless reasons people get divorced and someone who has gone through that process may argue that their reasons were justified. That judgment is between them and God. However,

⁴⁰ Keller and Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*. 187

the majority of divorces in America end because one or both of the partners assume that they will be happier out of the marriage than staying in it.⁴¹

That is part of the lie too many have bought into. Statistically, those who are unhappy in their marriage are no more likely to be happy after a divorce than those who remain in their unhappy marriage. Said another way, two-thirds of the people who remain in an unhappy marriage label themselves “very happy” in that same marriage if they stick with it for two years.⁴² What can the pastor and the parent do with these numbers? The goal of this paper is not to shame those who have already gone through divorce. But these statistics are powerful. For the young single person who enters marriage with the attitude “if it doesn’t work out, divorce will solve the issues” parents and mentors can use the statistics to disillusion young people about divorce. In a throw-away society, throwing away even an unhappy marriage is no guarantee for happiness.⁴³

While the statistics are compelling, they have no power to change the hearts of our young people. Ultimately, young people need to look ahead towards their marriage with the eyes of faith. God designed marriage to be a life-long relationship. He designed it to anchor society even as it becomes counter-cultural.⁴⁴ Just as the state of being single can be a statement of

⁴¹ According to *Should I Keep Trying to Work it Out*, the top seven reasons people divorce are: lack of commitment, too much arguing, infidelity, marrying too young, unrealistic expectations, lack of preparations for marriage, and abuse.

⁴² Institute for American Values, *Does Divorce Make People Happy?: Findings from a Study of Unhappy Marriages* (New York: Institute for American Values, 2002).

⁴³ Of course, the pastoral heart will always use statistics like these with discretion. Never ever should they be used to cajole a victim into staying in an abusive relationship.

⁴⁴ In the 2014 Grammy Award Ceremony Queen Latifah performed a ceremony to marry thirty-four heterosexual and homosexual couples. The audacity of the act was appalling. A text-book example right on national television of how far marriage has been degraded. Thirty-four couples were married as a stunt for the entertainment of the masses. The “ceremony” meant nothing more than the other musical performances to those who acted out the service. Compare that farce to the weight of a wedding ceremony where the Word of God is present and the couple, with all gravitas and sincerity, make vows to remain faithful to each other for the rest of their earthly life. One is laughable and the other beautiful. One gives to marriage the importance and beauty God designed for it, the other makes it side show for prime time entertainment. A Christian marriage has always been and will increasingly go against the grain of our culture.

faith,⁴⁵ so also can remaining in an “unhappy” marriage.⁴⁶ God has called us to live our vocation no matter what it may be or how pleasant or unpleasant it may seem. He has called us to that vocation and has promised to sustain us and supply all our needs even in wretched circumstances. It takes faith and trust for a young person (or any Christian) to commit to keeping their eyes on God and finding in him their help under all circumstances.

Conclusion

I have attempted to demonstrate the great need for our parents and spiritual leaders to nurture young people in specific and intentional ways for future marriages. The need has arisen because Satan never rests in his pursuit of bringing down God’s gift of marriage. Because of his continuous scheming and plotting, a vacuum has arisen for some young people. The usual tools for faith-based marriage development – literature, counseling, teaching material – do not exist for young single people. Many pastors sense that gap. They sense that generally we do a very good job of talking about sixth commandment issues in catechism and that we provide sound biblical pre-marital counseling. They also know that the world is constantly waging war against wholesome, godly families. The enemy is constantly busy and does not wait until its victims reach a certain age. The enemy assaults Christians of every age, even young people, with lies about love, sex and relationships.

The enemies’ messages have actively re-educated and warped the minds of young single people when it comes to the illusion of sex, the worship of self, the lie of love, the reversal of roles, and the broken promises of divorce. Many have heard these messages both subliminally and openly from home, school and peers. The attitudes and information young people hear from culture is designed to sabotage God’s gift of marriage. We can step in. We can teach. We can communicate just how highly God values marriage. Perhaps we can even become proactive in fighting the numbers of broken marriages in the next generation.

⁴⁵ In *Meaning of Marriage*, Keller makes the case that remaining single is a statement of trust in God. The single person trusts that God would bless the individual through their singleness, without the support and nurture of spouse and children. “God will bless me through this vocation he has called me to.” 195

⁴⁶ This paper recognizes that the continuum between a “happy” marriage and an “abusive” marriage is full of a lot of grey. It is also important for us to help young people understand that “unhappy” does not always mean that God grants the right of divorce.

So what can the pastor do? Armed with awareness, what can church leadership do to fight back against the devils attacks? How can we be the foot soldiers as our God reclaims the relationships of our young people? God has placed in our hands weapons. His weapons come with a promise that they will be effective in stopping the enemy in his tracks. Our job is to seek ways to employ those weapons with the greatest skill and the best timing we can muster. With God's weapons in our hand we seek every opportunity to directly attack the enemy.

Let's preach to young people on the topics listed above – love, sex, divorce, roles and selfishness – when it comes to their future marriage. From the pulpit address young people directly, “Teens, what would the world have you believe about dating? What makes a great boyfriend or girlfriend?” Or perhaps, “If you are twenty something and single, the world wants you to make certain priorities. Let's recognize what those are and be ready with our own priorities laid out by God for our health, our wellness, for our walk with him.” If it doesn't already happen, take a few minutes in sermons about marriage to talk specifically and directly to young single people. If this message is important enough to mention specifically in a sermon, is it important enough to preach a whole sermon on? Some churches might consider a “Singles Sunday” in which Ephesians 5 or 1 Corinthians 13 is specifically applied to those who do not have a spouse but want to be godly people. What about an entire sermon series based on the “Great Romances of the Bible”? The preacher could take time in each of his sermons to address young single people.

The sermon need not be the only place in the worship service where marriage receives emphasis. The prayer of the church can be another great spot for that. In addition to thanking God specifically for blessing couples that have been together twenty-five, forty, fifty, sixty years, pray for the strengthening of young couples. Pray for the openness, honesty and love that a successful marriage requires for all married couples. Repent as a church for the times that the body of Christ has not supported young singles the way that it ought. Plead that God fortify young people to make wise choices and to trust God enough to follow his plan for marriage.

Bible study is another great place to talk about the issues facing young people. An intergenerational Bible study where young and old, single and married talk openly about marriage. Have young people ask questions about what it's like to be married? What are some of the surprises? What have been some of the greatest changes in culture when it comes to the perception of relationships? The older generation can ask questions about the biggest challenges

young people face when single? What are some of the pressures their peer group applies to them in the area of relationships? What role they see that God plays as they date, seek contentment in their single-ness and as they seek a spouse? Perhaps a Bible study can show clips from TV or movies and talk about the attitude the clip reflects about marriage.

For the church that has an existing youth group, the opportunities abound. What if we brought in a spiritually mature divorcee to talk about the challenges that divorce brought into their life and how it affected all those around them? What if we brought in a young couple to talk about the challenges and surprises of being married? A great opportunity to get parents and young people to talk together would be an afternoon seminar. Bring parents and young people together to ask each other questions. Break the study into groups, parents and young people, young people with parents not their own, young people with their own parents. Guide their discussion. Guide their study. Bring them back to the Scriptures and seed their minds with the thoughts that God would have them thinking about marriage.

Young people enjoy talking about relationships. They sense that there is more to learn, that they can do a better job and that it's an important topic. In one youth Bible study, talk to them about the importance of dating with purpose. Encourage them to write down a list of "must-have's" and "can't-have's" in a spouse. Guide the conversation to base those list of requirements on grace, forgiveness and God's love. What about a weekend camping trip where the young people are encouraged to bring their significant other? A weekend trip could be a great chance to discuss the world's expectations as opposed to God's.

One week, the youth leader could give some homework to the whole family (watch your young people groan at the thought of homework!). For one week, have the family document every reference to marriage, love, sex or relationships. They can write in a notebook every TV, movie, or music reference, everything they might read online, every post on Facebook or Twitter. Have them write down everything they might hear in school or in the locker room. Have the family discuss whether God would see each of those references as a good thing or a bad thing. It might spark some interesting conversation!

A real question is where to go next? What can a ministry do? What needs to be done to advance this thesis? The next step for the thesis might be to go back to the survey participants with follow up questions. They would provide interesting insight into a litany of follow up

questions. Two of the most important questions might be, “What do young people sense they need?” And, “How can parents partner with church leaders in the nurturing of young people?”

The parental aspect of this whole question would be fascinating to dive into further. How do parents talk to teenagers who show open hostility toward their parents? How can parents talk about sensitive subjects like dating, sex and marriage with argumentative teens? I would like to interview divorced parents who have struggled to discuss marriage with their children. Certainly the church needs to partner with divorced parents in order to break the cycle of broken homes before it repeats itself. Does the partnership between divorcee and church look different? What is unique about the role a divorced parent plays? Is it different than the role a married parent plays?

A whole different angle to the issue of nurturing the faith of young people in preparation for marriage is those who have been recently married. When they have a strong, healthy marriage, they become models for their children from the very beginning. How does a church get to those young couples? How do leaders engage families before children enter the picture? Are Bible studies the answer? Peer coaching? Mentoring? This could be a complex and interesting avenue of study.

No matter what deception of popular culture, what fallacy of the sinful nature, whatever lie of Satan the Church seeks to disprove and overturn when it comes to preparing young people for marriage, we must do it by nurturing faith. We can take on the problem of divorce in the church years before it is even a thought in the minds of young people by intentionally focusing on growing their faith in the areas that deeply impact marriage. The deeply abiding love of Christ, who forgave the sins of each spouse, empowers a solid and life-long marriage. When trust in that love is lived out in the fruits of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control⁴⁷ by both partners, a marriage built on Christ and expressed in ways he would express it cannot help but succeed.⁴⁸ Can we help our young single members prepare for marriage by having them read *5 Love Languages* or attend a communications seminar? Of course! The skills learned there can help prepare young people.

⁴⁷ Galatians 5:22-23

⁴⁸ God defines “a successful marriage” differently than our culture does. We define a successful marriage as one that is mutually fulfilling. God defines a marriage as one that gives him glory and brings his children closer to him. Can an unhappy marriage be “successful?” Not by the worlds standards but it can be by God’s.

But the skills of financial discipline, good communication, and allocation of responsibilities only go so far in a marriage. God grows the faith of young people and we purposefully drive them to ask, “How will I live out this faith in my future marriage?” All other skills for marriage must build on the bedrock of faith. Even a house built with strong materials cannot stand without a good foundation. So also, a marriage, no matter how well constructed with the best sociological, interpersonal and psychological materials will crumble unless built on a good foundation. As spiritual leaders we must take on the challenge to help our young people lay that foundation specifically and intentionally for the purpose that they be able to build on it a house that will last their lifetime.

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