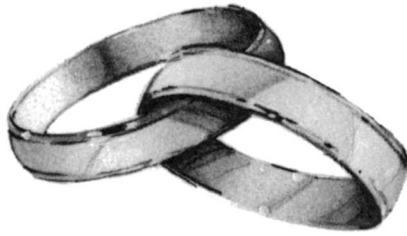

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CHAPTER 1

Marriage Today



The wedding service is about to begin. Three hundred people are crowded into the sanctuary with an air of expectancy. A popular couple from the church is about to commit themselves to one another for the rest of their lives. They have gone together for the past three years and seem so ideally suited for each other. Ever since they were in their early teens many people have said this couple seem destined to be together. They are intelligent, expressive, capable, involved in the activities of the church, and each has a stable family background.

Who would think that just four years later this couple would meet in a courtroom to finalize the details of the dissolution of their marriage?

Divorce happens. It has happened to a couple you know. Perhaps you even officiated at their wedding ceremony. It's painful for everyone involved. The loss of dreams, hopes, and expectations has a lasting effect not only upon the couple, but on their families and everyone involved in their initial coming together.

Marriage is the closest bond that can occur between two people. That was God's original intent. But who is really prepared for the demands of living together in such a way that needs are met, dreams are fulfilled, harmony is attained, and God is glorified through their relationship? Very few. Someone needs to help couples of all ages enter marriage with a greater opportunity for it to last and for each partner to be fulfilled. It is safe to say that the church and its pastoral staff is the last agency to make an impact upon marriage and divorce today.

Marital breakup is so frequent, even among Christian couples, that it appears to be an accepted part of our society. Even cartoons reflect this attitude.

The attitude toward marriage today was revealed in the office of a marriage counselor when a young woman said, "When I got married I was looking for an ideal, but I married an ordeal, and now I want a new deal!" A recent cartoon in the *Los Angeles Times* pictured a pastor performing a wedding. Instead of the usual "till death do you part," he said, "till divorce do you part." This is not entirely unreal.

Another cartoon shows a minister performing the wedding ceremony for a couple and he is saying, "And do you, Mary, take Jim to be your husband, to have and hold, love and cherish, until things get a little tough, you get burned out, and split?" Still another recent cartoon shows a couple in a pastor's office working out the wedding vows and the woman is saying, "And finally, we'd like to change the 'until death do you part' section of our vows to 'substantial penalty for early withdrawal.'"

This past year a Los Angeles paper ran an advertisement for a wedding chapel in Reno, Nevada. The ad read, "Marriage Discount \$22.00, includes wedding service, music, witness, cassette recording of ceremony, marriage scroll, parking." Unfortunately this reflects how little thought and preparation are given to one of the most important events in a person's life.

What is happening today with marriage and divorce? Family life is changing. Only 25 percent of the households are "traditional" anymore—two parents with children. There are as many single-person households as there are traditional. The age for first marriages is significantly higher than it once was—26 for men, 24 for women. This last fact is healthy for marriages since marrying too young contributes to divorce. The divorce rate for our country has leveled off and, because of the delay of age of marriage, the rate may actually drop during the nineties.

Within California, the divorce rate varies radically from county to county. In Los Angeles County there were 41,326 licensed marriages and

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32,011 confidential marriages in 1989 for a total of 73,392 marriages. There were 42,088 divorces that year. But in Orange County 3,888 licensed marriages and 6,079 confidential marriages took place, totaling 9,967. There were 16,123 divorces for the same year.¹

Confidential marriages may take place when a man and woman have been living together and marry without first procuring a marriage license or obtaining and filing health certificates. This means they do not have to take a blood test and AIDS test, and the woman does not undergo the test for rubella. To be married, they are required to go through a ceremony of solemnization by a person authorized to solemnize marriages and to complete a special marriage certificate. The certificate is mailed to the county clerk and kept there as a permanent confidential record.

The original purpose of this law was to encourage persons living together, perhaps having had children, to legalize their relationship by allowing them to do so with a minimum of publicity and embarrassment. But it appears that many see it as a short cut to having a public ceremony. And it runs counter to the purpose of the physical exam and blood testing, which were originally instituted for the protection of the couple.

The concern over the status of marriage and the family has been with us for many years. A pioneer in the field of counseling, Carl Rogers made the statement:

To me it seems that we are living in an important and uncertain age, and the institution of marriage is most assuredly in an uncertain state. If 50-75 percent of Ford or General Motors cars completely fell apart within the early part of their lifetimes as automobiles, drastic steps would be taken. We have no such well organized way of dealing with our social institutions, so people are groping, more or less blindly, to find alternatives to marriage (which is certainly less than 50 percent successful). Living together without marriage, living in communes, extensive child care centers, serial monogamy (with one divorce after another), the women's liberation movement to establish the woman as a person in her own right, new divorce laws which do away with the concept of guilt—these are all groping toward some new form of man-woman relationship for the future. It would take a bolder man than I to predict what will emerge.²

MARRIAGE AS SCHOOL, AS SPACE VOYAGE

Marriage is one of God's greatest schools of learning—it can be a place where a husband and wife are refined. The rough edges are gradu-

ally filed away until there is a deeper, smoother, and more fulfilling working and blending together that is satisfying to both individuals. But this takes an incredible amount of time, energy, and effort.

In his book *The Mystery of Marriage*, Mike Mason describes the marital journey in a unique way:

Marriage partners may be thought of as the astronauts of society—the daring explorers who do all the test flying in a sort of ongoing experiment in the most radical fringes of human relations. Naturally there are many crashes, many casualties in this stratosphere of intimacy. It is a most dangerous profession, and one with a high rate of burnout. It is demanding, draining, and often dreary work, and unlike space exploration the rewards it offers do not seem very glamorous. There will be no ticker tape parades for the good wife or husband, and most couples actually have a tendency to avoid the very aspects of their work which do offer the greatest rewards. Particularly are they prone to resent all the time that they must “waste” with one another, and after the first year or so of marriage they begin to have great difficulty believing that the lavish interpersonal extravagance which characterized their courtship might actually still be allowed, let alone be a necessary or glorious thing. Accordingly, great amounts of energy are channeled into other concerns, into friendships and social life, into careers, into the raising of offspring (godly or otherwise), into every conceivable cause except the cause of marriage itself. For what possible practical use could there be in continuing that systematic and unrelenting invasion of privacy which is the heart and soul, the rocket fuel, of a loving relationship? Everywhere else, throughout society, there are fences, walls, burglar alarms, unlisted numbers, the most elaborate precautions for keeping people at a safe distance. But in marriage all of that is reversed. In marriage the walls are down, and not only do the man and woman live under the same roof, but they sleep under the same covers. Their lives are wide open, and as each studies the life of the other and attempts to make some response to it, there are no set procedures to follow, no formalities to stand on. A man and a woman face each other across the breakfast table, and somehow through a haze of crumbs and curlers and mortgage payments they must encounter one another. That is the whole purpose and mandate of marriage. All sorts of other purposes have been dreamed up and millions of excuses invented for avoiding this central and indispensable task. But the fact is that marriage is grounded in nothing else but the pure wild grappling of soul with soul, no holds barred. There is no rulebook for this, no law to invoke except the law of love.

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So while marriage may present the appearance of being a highly structured, formalized, and tradition-bound institution, in fact it is the most free and raw and unpredictable of all human associations. It is the outer space of society, the wild frontier.³

DREAMS VERSUS REALITY

As most couples move toward marriage, their sense of reality is distorted by wishfulness and fantasy. Once they are husband and wife, this intense romantic illusion can neutralize positive developments in their marriage. Unrealistic expectations and fantasies create a gulf between the partners and cause disappointments. Each person in the relationship can create such detailed fantasies that neither the other partner nor the relationship has any chance for survival.

Many marriages today are like the house built upon sand—they have been built upon a weak foundation of dreams. When we dream our minds do not have to distinguish between reality or fantasy, so we are able to create without restraint. Often, therefore, our dreams are starting points for successful endeavor. However, dreams that are not followed by adequate planning usually do not come true.

Marriages built on dreams are risky because dreams do not consider the disappointments and changes that are inevitable in every marriage. When the season changes and the rains of reality and the winds of stress blow upon such marriages, the relationship that should hold them together crumbles. Much more is involved in fulfilling dreams than merely expecting them to come true. Mason describes marriage's blunt reality in this manner:

To be married is not to be taken off the front lines of love, but rather to be plunged into the thick of things. It is to be faced, day in and day out, with the necessity of making over and over again, and at deeper and deeper levels, that same terrifying momentous and impossible decision which one could only have made when one was head-over heels in love and out of one's mind with trust and faith. This is not resignation to a fate, but the free and spontaneous embracing of a gift, of a challenge and a destiny.

Is it any wonder if people cannot take the pressure? It is a pressure that can only be handled by love, and in ever-increasing doses. Marriage involves a continuous daily renewal of a decision which, since it is of such a staggering order as to be humanly impossible to make, can only be made through the grace of God.⁴

Building a good marriage means a person must take time to redefine roles, beliefs, and behaviors and negotiate the differences with his/her partner. Money, time, power, family traditions, friends, vocations, and use of space in the home are just a few of the issues that need to be negotiated.

A newly married couple needs a spirit of adventure, because getting married to a “stranger” means that there are going to be a lot of discoveries. What if one is a night person and the other is a morning person? One is talkative in the morning and one at night? Perhaps one likes to be babied when he or she is sick while the other hides illness and wants to be left alone. Or one likes the room at 78 degrees and the other at 68 degrees. Maybe one wears a set of underwear for three days; the other changes it twice a day. One uses a towel once and discards it; the other uses it for a week. These are just a few of the practical day-to-day items that can drive a couple crazy. The spirit of adventure will help the couple realize, “We’re different and that’s OK.”

Perhaps this dilemma is best expressed this way: “A marriage is not a joining of two worlds, but an abandoning of two worlds in order that a new one might be formed.”⁵

WHY MARRIAGES FAIL

Here are four usually unidentified reasons that marriages dissolve. First, one or both persons fail to understand the stages and changes of individual development—the seasons of their lives—and how these affect their marriage. Many women experience an identity transition around thirty and experience a mid-life transition in their late thirties or early forties, as do men.

Second, people have an inadequate basis upon which they build their personal identity and security. Too many build their identity on performance, perfectionism, or appearance, and these eventually fade. The best basis for marriage comes from the one who instituted marriage in the first place; but for too many, the teachings of God’s Word have not been incorporated in depth into their lives, transforming both their identity and their security.

Third, people come to marriage with either unresolved issues between them and their parents, or they come from dysfunctional families, and this intrudes upon their marriage.

Fourth, some marriages dissolve because the partners were never prepared for marriage and because their expectations about marriage were totally unrealistic. David Mace, a pioneer in the field of marriage enrichment, describes this lack of preparation:

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When I try to reconstruct, in counseling with couples, their concepts of the making of a marriage, I find that it adds up to a most confused hodgepodge of starry-eyed romanticism, superstition, superficial concepts, and laissez-faire. Seldom do I find any real understanding of the complexity of the task of bringing two separate individuals into a delicately balanced coordination of each other's thoughts, feelings, wishes, beliefs, and habit patterns.⁶

What happens if a couple marries at the start of their transition from adolescence to adult? They find themselves learning to separate from their parents, trying out the new adult world, and adapting to a spouse all at the same time. Sometimes early marriage (ages seventeen to twenty-two) contributes to difficulties with parents, and the partners end up retaining some of their childish qualities. The new husband and wife may both feel extra strain at this time because they are both emerging. This is why early marriages have such a high risk.

These young adults may have had little experience in forming peer relationships with members of the opposite sex. One mate may become a tool to help the other relinquish the relationship with his/her parents and become an adult.

GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

No matter at what stage a couple enters marriage, they will have issues and conflicts to resolve. Both the man and woman must continue to develop personally as well as together. They can no longer rely upon their society, culture, family, or even their commitment to their faith to keep their marriage together. Marriages receive less outside support today than they used to because of the change in values, culture, divorce laws, and an emphasis upon selfishness and individualism. Greater effort and commitment on the part of each are needed. Couples also must develop a strong commitment to two primary marriage concepts in Scripture: fidelity and permanency.

A lasting relationship is more possible if both partners continue to grow and develop. If the husband uses his wife to further the attainment of his dream and in the process she loses her own dream, her growth will be stifled and eventually both will be disappointed. For example, a medical student marries and his wife supports him for years in the pursuit of his dream. She forgoes her own advancement, education, and intellectual development. Soon children arrive. He is into his eighty-hour-a-week practice and becomes acquainted with a woman who is freer,

less restricted, and more intellectually stimulating than his wife. He decides to change partners.

Or a man may choose to marry only because in his profession a family man is more acceptable. In this case he may see wife and children as necessary accessories.

Sometimes a marriage relationship hinders the pursuit of a man's dream. His wife may have no interest in his dream and may even prevent him from attaining it. Her own dream may be complementary, different, or antagonistic. Any of these conditions can affect the success of the marriage.

If a woman sees herself exclusively in the traditional roles of wife and mother, she may derive her identity from her husband and what he does. She sees her husband as her protector and turns her whole being over to him. She continues to support his dream as long as he gives sufficient attention to her and their family, and as long as she feels needed by him and their children. She probably believes that men are attracted primarily to physical beauty and helplessness. But as she ages, her physical attractiveness may fade and her husband may grow weary of her "helplessness." By her thirties and forties she may be needed less and less by her husband and family, and she may be forced to seek out her own identity.

If a woman has been overly dependent on her husband and decides to change, her husband may feel threatened, especially if the change costs him something. He accepts it better if it benefits him. She could begin to believe that her husband is the obstacle to her growth. Actually, it may just be that he is not giving her the encouragement she desires from him.

It is not uncommon for a woman in her late thirties or early forties to experience an identity crisis. She may become disillusioned with her traditional role; she may resent her caretaker husband. If she decides to develop some independence and pursue a career, she may face a number of obstacles. Job availability may be limited. Or if she finds a job, she may find the role of both career woman and homemaker a strain. Some women are fearful of the feelings of competition and power within them that have lain dormant for so many years. Accepting these and using them in creative ways, both within the home and in a career, can be a freeing experience.⁷

But no matter what age a person marries, he or she will find certain difficulties—as well as a great many advantages—in adjusting to married life. It is our task in premarital counseling to help people in advance.

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In the midst of developing their own personal lives, a man and a woman marry. The romantic idealism eventually turns to the question, "Will we make it together?" Great expectations and hopes are mixed with fears, anxieties, and surprises. A host of new and unexpected events come into their lives. Those that are expected or anticipated will be handled fairly smoothly, but the surprises can be disruptive. This is why extensive and thorough premarital preparation with a minister or counselor is a necessity. As there are stages and phases to work through in one's own life, there are also important stages and phases to work through in the first few years of marriage. Too many couples are unaware of these, and such premarital counseling can help them anticipate these adjustments.

TWO TASKS IN MARRIAGE

The first task is to define what a *wife* is and what a *husband* is. In marriage, each must retain his/her individual identity while drawing close together as a couple. A marriage relationship is meant to be a freeing-up relationship, never a confinement. Each person is freed to develop uniqueness and spiritual giftedness in his or her own way, and join these to give the marital relationship strength and greater potential.

This may mean breaking loose from preconceived images each one has of what a spouse should be. If couples cannot allow each other to develop, grow, and be creative in defining new roles, the conflict will be intense. As one person vividly put it, "Both of you will wind up drilling holes in your own marriage before it has left the shore."

A second task is to develop the romantic love of courtship into a love based upon steady commitment. Before people marry, they may be drawn to their friend because of a specific character trait that they see as a strength. But when they marry they may find that this "strength" begins to bother them. They begin to view it as a weakness rather than a strength and soon want the person to change. This character trait, however, is an expression of their mate's personality. If it bothers a person it needs to be discussed but not attacked as a weakness. Labeling a behavior as a weakness does little to bring about change.

The love that is needed to stabilize a marriage is the type of love God displays to each of us—an unconditional commitment to an imperfect person. This takes energy and effort. It means caring about the other as much as you care about yourself. Krantzler describes what marital love actually means:

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Marital love requires the ability to put yourself in your partner's place, to understand that the differences that divide you are the differences of two unique personalities, rather than betrayals of your hopes and dreams. The unconditional willingness of each of you to understand and resolve these differences through the sharing of your deepest feelings, concerns, attitudes and ideas is a fundamental component of marital love. Postponement of your need for instant gratification when your partner feels no such need; sharing the struggle to triumph over adversities as well as sharing the joys and delights of being together; nurturing each other in defeat caused by forces beyond our control and renewing each other's courage to prevail in the face of despair; carrying necessary obligations and responsibilities as a flower rather than as a hundred-pound knapsack; acknowledging the everyday value of your partner in a look, a smile, a touch of the hand, a voiced appreciation of a meal or a new hair style, a spontaneous trip to a movie or a restaurant; trusting your partner always to be there when needed; knowing that he or she always has your best interests at heart even when criticism is given; loyalty and dedication to each other in the face of sacrifices that may have to be made—all of these are additional components of marital love that courtship knows little about.⁸

WHAT KEEPS A MARRIAGE?

One way in which the premarital counselor can assist couples is by telling them the facts of other successful marriages. One survey studied couples with enduring marriages to discover how marriages both survive and satisfy those involved. In a survey of 351 couples, 300 said they were happily married; nineteen were unhappily married but were staying together for various reasons. The remaining thirty-two couples contained one person in the marriage who was unhappy. Each husband and wife responded individually to a questionnaire that included thirty-nine statements and questions about marriage.

The couples were asked to select from the list those statements that best reflected their own marriage. The results are shown below.⁹ Interestingly, the top seven reasons for what makes a good marriage were the same for men as for the women.

Here are the top reasons respondents gave, listed in the order of frequency:

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Men

My spouse is my best friend.
I like my spouse as a person.
Marriage is a long-term commitment.
Marriage is sacred.
We agree on aims and goals.
My spouse has grown more interesting.
I want the relationship to succeed.
An enduring marriage is important to social stability.
We laugh together.
I am proud of my spouse's achievements.
We agree on a philosophy of life.
We agree about our sex life.
We agree on how and how often to show affection.
I confide in my spouse.
We share outside hobbies and interests.

Women

My spouse is my best friend.
I like my spouse as a person.
Marriage is a long-term commitment.
Marriage is sacred.
We agree on aims and goals.
My spouse has grown more interesting.
I want the relationship to succeed.
We laugh together.
We agree on the philosophy of life.
We agree on how and how often to show affection.
An enduring marriage is important to social stability.
We have a stimulating exchange of ideas.
We discuss things calmly.
We agree about our sex life.
I am proud of my spouse's achievements.

The emphasis that partners place on friendship can lead to a helpful discussion with your couples. I encourage you to share this chart with them. List the characteristics in any order on a piece of paper and have them select what they think would be the most important. Then present the results.

The First Year of Marriage, by Miriam Arond and Samuel Parker, is a significant resource for both counseling and teaching. One author is a psychiatrist and the other is a former editor of a bridal magazine. The authors write:

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In researching this book, we contacted hundreds of men and women who shared with us their experiences of adjusting to marriage. We spoke with newlyweds in their teens, newlyweds who are almost senior citizens, newlyweds who married interracially and interreligiously, newlyweds who married people much younger and older than themselves, newlyweds who have children from a previous marriage and newlyweds gaining stepchildren.

We found that regardless of age, reason for marrying, cultural and family background, or previous marital history, there are issues that newlyweds universally face. Inherent in the intimacy of marriage are practical, everyday questions of handling money and dividing household chores, as well as such complex emotional matters as trying to balance the need for closeness with the desire to maintain one's individuality. It is, in fact, in addressing and resolving these and other issues that you establish and solidify your identity as a married couple.¹⁰

The authors discovered that people who enter marriage unprepared for any problems, adjustments, or disappointments often panic when their marriage is not as it should be and end up feeling they made a big mistake. The basic difference between couples who split up early in marriage and those who stay together is often their attitudes toward their problems. A realistic, prepared, firm biblical attitude toward life and difficulties is a foundation.

Is there a future for family life and marriage as we know it today? Definitely. The vast majority of people in our society want a stable marriage and family life. But we are competing with non-Christian values that are reflected in every phase of our society. Thus, encouraging fidelity and commitment must be our continual message. What people desire and what they end up with are not always the same. In any endeavor, having dreams and goals without concrete plans and preparation will bring failure.

That is where counselors in the church have an opportunity. Imagine what would happen if each couple who married in the next ten years experienced six to eight hours of premarital counseling in their local church, as well as spending sixty to seventy hours on outside preparation through books and tapes. This is the concept of this book. And it is already happening in many churches today.

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NOTES

1. Telephone conversation, Bureau of County Records, 227 N. Broadway, Los Angeles, CA 90012; and Bureau of County Records, 630 N. Broadway, Santa Ana, CA 92701.
2. Carl Rogers, *Becoming Partners: Marriage and Its Alternatives* (New York: Delacorte, 1972), p. 11.
3. Mike Mason, *The Mystery of Marriage* (Portland, Ore.: Multnomah, 1985), pp. 73-74.
4. Ibid., pp. 55-56.
5. Ibid., p. 91.
6. David Mace and Mera Mace. *We Can Have Better Marriages If We Really Want Them* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), p. 98.
7. Material in this section was adapted from Maggie Scarf, *Unfinished Business* (N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980) and Daniel Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man's Life* (N.Y.: Ballantine, 1979).
8. Mel Krantzler. *Creative Marriages*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1988), p. 50.
9. Jeanette Lauer and Robert Lauer, "Marriages Are Made to Last," *Psychology Today*, June 1985, pp. 22-27.
10. Miriam Arond and Samuel L. Pauker, *The First Year of Marriage* (New York: Warner, 1987), pp. 3-4.