

The following notes are from Rob Ruhnke, the author of *For Better & For Ever*. Sponsor Couples are encouraged to study these notes as part of their training process. Then, when they are preparing for an evening session with an engaged couple, they may find it helpful to review the notes on the specific topics they plan to deal with.

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### **OVERVIEW OF CONTENTS:**

I am often asked: *Is there a reason why chapters are placed in the order they appear in the Table of Contents?* My answer is: *Yes, however that does not mean couples must study the chapters in this order. Here are my thoughts about the ordering of the chapters.*

- I put the **Checklist Of Things To Do** up front because it deals with questions that may be on a person's mind when thinking about marriage preparation, such as, *What documents do I need? What about decorating the church?* But I also included important information about options for mixed religion couples (Catholics may *not* know they can plan a wedding in the church of the non-Catholic party) and the critical importance of establishing their freedom/readiness for marriage in the church (any previous marriage may present an obstacle that will need to be dealt with). *This is especially important for couples planning to marry in the Catholic Church who may be unaware of the requirements of Catholic Canon Law.*

- The 4 chapters: **The Families From Which We Came, The Person I Have Come To Be, Christian Marriage Involves Constant Change, and Family Traditions** form a block of material which could be the most important information in *For Better and For Ever*. These chapters provide the insight for establishing a solid foundation for a healthy and lasting marital relationship. To put it another way, when marriages are in trouble it is usually because the couple is struggling with issues of their families of origin which they have never learned to deal with in healthy/effective ways. All the prayer and good intentions that a couple might rely on to make their marriage work will likely prove futile if they never learn to deal with the family issues they each carried into the marriage. I strongly encourage every sponsor couple and every engaged couple to purchase Harville Hendrix's "*Keeping The Love You Find, a Personal Guide*" and study it along with these chapters of my book. Hendrix's book is a much fuller explanation of what needs to be understood and acted on.
- **Couples Who Are Living Together / Sexually Active.** I assumed that many people would be curious to see what I had to say in this chapter, so I put it in the middle of the book with the hope that they might take a look at other chapters as well.
- **Sexuality & Intimacy & Parenthood...** is the beginning of another block of material which includes Christian Marriage: Essential Elements, Marital Spirituality, and Prayer. These 4 chapters present a description of *Christian Marriage* and how it is distinct from *civil marriage*. These chapter are intentionally spread out so that ~ if the suggested schema is followed ~ this content is talked about each evening after the issues of the Family of Origin have been dealt with.
- **Money Matters & Career Planning.** The importance of this content should be obvious. I did not want to put it in any earlier, but I did want to put it before the chapters on Communication because I thought it might raise some questions about which the couple had some difficulty communicating.
- **Marital Communication & Problem Solving.** This content is placed *after* the investigation about issues of the Family Of Origin and Money Matters with the hope that by this point the engaged couple & their sponsors have established enough trust that the engaged may be open to learning about the reality of disillusionment and the importance of learning communication skills *even if they are not convinced they will ever need them!* It is like the wisdom of learning to swim even if it is not something you plan to do much of.
- **Mixed Religion Marriage.** This chapter is primarily for couples who do not share the same faith traditions, however, it may be just as important for couples who share the same faith tradition but may have radically different ideas about the practice of their faith. In addition

to the material in *For Better and For Ever*, the web site at [www.marriagepreparation.com](http://www.marriagepreparation.com) offers a wealth of information and links to support groups for couples who are establishing *interchurch* and *interfaith* marriages.

- **Family Planning.** For many couples this is a too little talked about topic. I hope the questions will provide an opportunity for more open discussion about this topic.
- **Decisions of Conscience** follows the discussion of family planning because it is just one of a number of topics about which couples may have very different ideas. This chapter offers well established principles and methods for couples to use in making decisions that honor the conscience of both persons.
- **Marrying Again & Stepfamilies.** This chapter offers some important considerations to follow. The key word is lots of *dialogue*...about the past and with children and in-laws.
- **Parenting.** This chapter seeks to help couples to get on the "same page" before they take on the challenge/responsibility of being parents.
- **Belonging to a church & Planning the wedding ceremony.** These chapters are recommended as material for sessions with the pastor. However, it is good for sponsor couples to be ready to assist those preparing for marriage with this content also.

## **1 - FAMILY OF ORIGIN.** [Back to top](#)

An orientation to these 4 chapters - ***The Families From Which We Came, The Person I Have Come To Be, Christian Marriage Involves Constant Change, and Family Traditions.***

When I direct a training session for prospective sponsor couples, I spend a significant amount of time (sometimes an hour or more) engaging them in a conversation about the critical importance of understanding the role that each person's Family of Origin plays in marriage. A mere intellectual understanding of this dynamic is not sufficient, both persons will also need to develop the skills for dealing with the issues of their different families. Too many couples tend to avoid sharing about and dealing with the issues of the family of origin.

Why?

First, there is a strong tendency for couples to believe that their love for one another is the answer to their needs. Their love for one another satisfies the unmet needs they have been carrying around. Listen to couples in love talk about one another and their relationship: *He/she is the perfect person! It is like we have always known one another! I feel completely safe with him/her!* When these kinds of feelings are going on, there is no motivation to want to do anything that might "rock the boat." Couples in love are not likely to think it is a good idea to

spend time together investigating the bad things that took place in their family of origin, except to share that they are so *glad they will never have to deal with that stuff anymore*.

Secondly, no matter what anybody tries to say about the importance of learning to deal with issues, rather than avoid them, couples in love have a marvelous ability to believe that *their strong love for each other will enable them to work out any problems which might arise*.

Sponsor couples can remember living through this phase of life. If they have been married for a number of years, they know from experience that: 1 - What they thought they could leave in the past and never have to deal with *does not stay that way*. 2 - No matter how much they love one another, *love does not teach them how to deal effectively with the "wounds" of the family of origin*.

For example. Joe grew up in a family in which his father was a "strong & silent" kind of person who served on active duty in the military during most of Joe's early years. In many ways, Joe was much like his father in that he tended to be a quiet person who did well in his studies but never got much involved in the social activities of high school or college. When Joe and Lisa started dating they were inseparable. Lisa had grown up in a family in which her father was much like Joe's father. Since Lisa never felt very close to her own father, she was so happy to have found the "perfect" man in Joe who was obviously pleased to spend endless hours with Lisa. They seemed to be the perfect couple even to their parents. Lisa never tired of talking with Joe, and Joe was content to listen to whatever Lisa had to say about anything. He especially liked her words of affirmation, and though he did not say a lot, he knew that Lisa understood how much he loved her.

Joe and Lisa married. And you can probably guess what happened to this "perfect" match. After they married, Joe got busy with the project of being a husband and father and breadwinner. He had less and less time just for Lisa. Lisa began to notice that Joe rarely had anything to share with her about himself, and she began to notice that he rarely talked unless she asked him a direct question (which felt to her more and more like a chore). Five years into the marriage, Lisa had an affair with a co-worker that had started out as just "someone I could talk with." They went to a marriage counselor, but it did not change anything. Joe did not think there was anything wrong with their marriage and could not understand what he needed to change. Lisa felt that she could no longer live with a person who "never talks with me." Lisa filed for divorce.

All of us probably know a number of "Joes and Lisas". Their marriage failed not because they were bad people, and not because either of them wanted their marriage to fail. The main problem is that they never learned how to investigate the dynamics of their families of origin and assess how those dynamics were likely to play out in their own marriage. If they had done this kind of work when they were "in love," they might have had the motivation and courage to

risk learning the skills of dialogue, namely, "sharing" and "listening" and "acceptance." If they had done this, they might have been able to continue the process of dialogue when they married. Even if they had struggled, they might have understood the value of seeking professional help before their relationship deteriorated to the point that it could never be put back together.

Though it may sound very strange, it is worth listening to this statement: *"Each of us is likely to be attracted to a person who has the worst qualities of our family of origin."* This is a critical insight that can be fully investigated by a study of Harville Hendrix's "Keeping the Love You Find: A Personal Guide." While none of us would consciously make such a choice, this book offers insight into why each of us ~ at an unconscious level ~ is predisposed to make this kind of choice. While Lisa thought she was marrying a man who was not like her own father, she actually selected a man who was very much like her father. In the phase of romance, Lisa experienced herself and Joe as equally open to one another. She felt so good about all the time she spent being physically close to Joe and assumed he was a man who would always be eager to spend time with her. It never occurred to her that Joe actually rarely talked to her, and that he never shared much about himself with her. Lisa "saw" only the "Joe" she wanted to see. Lisa discovered the real Joe only after they married. *And the real Joe was very much like her own father, with whom she never felt close.*

The story of Joe and Lisa is the reason for helping couples in love to carefully study their individual family of origin and share all of this information in dialogue. The goal is to learn especially about the weaknesses and flaws of each family, and try to discover how those weaknesses and flaws have been passed on to the next generation...that is, the individuals who are in love with one another. If they can learn how to do this on their own, great! If they need more help, that is why they are meeting with a sponsor couple.

Sponsor couples will be wonderful companions on the journey into marriage because they will be able to share their own struggle to learn the same lessons that the engaged couple needs to learn. It is usually easier to learn to dialogue from those who have had to learn it the hard way. It can actually be confidence-building for the engaged couple to learn that their sponsors had to learn how to deal with the fact that they were so different from one another, and had to learn skills that were not a part of their experience while growing up. Learning how to "share," learning *not* to "mind read," learning to talk about issues (rather than try to ignore them or wait for them to "go away"), learning to "understand" (rather than debate). These are critical skills that need to be learned if they were not part of a person's family of origin. There is no better time to learn these lessons than the time of marriage preparation.

By the way, these skills will be specifically addressed in the chapters on **Marital Communication & Problem Solving.**

## 2 - COUPLES WHO ARE LIVING TOGETHER / SEXUALLY ACTIVE. [Back to Top](#)

Note: This Chapter of *For Better and For Ever* was written before I read "Let's Make Love, the meaning of sexual intercourse" by Jack Dominian [ISBN 0-232-52338-X]. Much of what follows was copied from his book (which is now out of print).

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The phenomena of sexual intercourse before marriage and couples "living together" prior to marriage have become so common in 1<sup>st</sup> world countries that most couples who are preparing for marriage think of this as "normal" (socially acceptable) behavior. Even though they are aware that this behavior is "forbidden" by Christian churches, they usually think that their own sexual actions are "justified" because of their love for one another and, perhaps, their plan to marry. Today the shrinking minority of abstaining engaged couples are often hesitant to let their peers know they are *not* sexually active!

*Why have the traditional norms of abstaining from sexual intercourse prior to marriage and avoiding any possible suggestion that the couple is "living together" prior to marriage almost completely disappeared?* To answer this question it may be important to recall that the past social/religious norms not only taught sexual abstinence prior to marriage, but also taught that sexual intercourse was primarily for procreation and that is why it was appropriate only for married couples who would/could provide the appropriate setting in which to produce and care for children. While many/most adults have learned from personal experience that human beings rarely engaged in sexual intercourse "primarily for the purpose of procreating children," this continued to be the standard teaching of Christian churches well into the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even though more and more people were no longer "buying" the teaching of the churches, until 1960 the fear of an unplanned pregnancy at least indirectly backed up the teaching of the churches. In 1960, the introduction of "the Pill," made it possible to think that "making love" need not result in pregnancy, and there was no reason why "making love" needed to be reserved for marriage. The message of the churches seemed irrelevant.

In dealing with the issues of sex outside of marriage, churches must learn how to restate the appropriate norms of the past in the light of a deeper/fuller understanding of the meaning of sexual intercourse.

Informed Christians (and churches) today know and teach that "Sex is not just for procreation anymore!" Since 1959, Christian Churches have been speaking of sexual intercourse as *uniquely expressive of the meaning of Christian marriage*:

"Husband and wife become two in one flesh in a reaffirmed lifelong union of indissolubility." (The Family in Contemporary Society, Lambreth Conference 1958)

"This [marital] love is uniquely expressed and perfected through the marital act . . . these actions signify and promote the mutual self-giving by which spouses enrich each other . . . ." (Roman Catholic, Vatican Council II 1963)

"Above all, it [sexual intercourse] communicates the affirmation of mutual belonging . . ."  
" (Marriage & The Church, Anglican 1978)

"Sexual love, including genital acts when they express that love, shares in the divine act of loving with every human activity which is creative, dedicated and generous . . ."  
(Methodist Report 1980)

The Churches are moving to a view that human sexuality is primarily to be seen in its *relational significance*. This relational significance is not necessarily, nor essentially, bound up with the procreative function of sexual intercourse. The *quality of the relationship is the prime criterion of sexual ethics*. This thinking has radical consequences for our understanding of the meaning of sexual intercourse. If procreation is no longer the primary purpose of sexual intercourse (and most human beings would agree that it is not!), then there is no logical reason for arguing that it must be limited to marriage (as long as pregnancy can be avoided). However, Christian Churches now say that a fuller understanding of sexual intercourse, which 20<sup>th</sup> century psychology has made possible, reveals that the integrity of the act (of "love making") requires a *relationship of continuity, commitment, exclusiveness and faithfulness in order to do justice to its personal and interpersonal meaning*.

This understanding shifts the moral/ethical criteria from biology (emphasis on the *integrity of the act*) to the *quality of the relationship*, and the ethics of sexual intercourse is measured by the criteria of:

- Commitment - the first criterion of successful sexual intercourse is the committed love of two persons.
- True love - the morality of sexual intercourse will include how well each person is focused on tending to the needs of the other person.
- Exclusiveness - so that each feels *safe* in order to choose to be *vulnerable*.
- Faithful - now and into the future, so that all can be shared in common and parenting is made possible.
- Integrity - the physical act is important, but even more important are the relational criteria by which the two persons join not merely their bodies, but also their hearts and minds and spirits.

The responsibility of Christian teachers is to present this information in a way that motivates those preparing for marriage to conclude that the commitment of married love is the logical and spiritual foundation for sexual intercourse that is truly love making. There may be some room for debate about whether this kind of commitment is possible for those who are not married. There will be couples who will insist that they are "totally committed" and thus it is appropriate to express their love by sexual intercourse even though they are not (yet) married. But married people are more likely to understand that "total commitment" is exceedingly rare unless and until one is willing to make a public and permanent commitment to the other person, i.e., marry the other person. And it does not end there. The integrity of the relationship will require that both persons invest in the kind of relationship building that will sustain their marriage as a "communion of life and love" all the days of their life.

As with all teaching, the best teachers will begin by being witnesses to this kind of love. The value of this kind of witness cannot be overestimated, because the most common accusation of *couples who are not married* about *those who are married* is that "they no longer love each other." While this accusation may not be 100% true, it may be closer to the truth than many married couples would like to admit.

The challenge therefore is one that can engage all of us . . . couples preparing for marriage, sponsor couples, and clergy (celibate or married). If we want singles and couples preparing for marriage to abstain in order to appropriately express their love in the commitment of Christian marriage, those who are married (or living the public commitment of celibacy) must be committed to being committed lovers in ways that are transparent enough to convince those who are preparing for marriage that sexual intercourse really is best when it is celebrated in marriage.

### [3 - SEXUALITY/INTIMACY/PARENTHOOD.](#) [Back to top](#)

Note. In the directions for the use of *For Better and For Ever*, the previous chapter (***Couples who are Living Together***) is listed as one of the chapters that the couple preparing for marriage will deal with in their meetings with the "pastor." If that happens, there may be no reason to deal with it (again) in the sessions with the sponsor couple. However, the sponsor couple and/or the engaged couple may choose to go over some or all of that material in that chapter.

The current chapter, ***Sexuality & Intimacy & Parenthood***, builds on the previous chapter by stressing the key ideas a second time (but in different ways so it need not be boring or repetitive). This way, if the chapter on *Couples who are Living Together* is not directly covered in the session with the sponsor couple, the ideas will be dealt with.

My reason for this design is that I would prefer that this information about sex and commitment be discussed BOTH with the pastor (who may be a celibate) and also with a

sponsor couple (who are, hopefully, married lovers). If ~ for whatever reason ~ the pastor does not cover this material, the sponsor couple ought to cover both chapters.

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1) The first part of this chapter is a highly condensed bit of history that culminates in the statement in the 3rd paragraph: *"The Church (or Christian tradition) teaches husbands and wives to give equal importance to the continuing development and deepening of their love for each other, and to their role as parents. Teaching about the meaning of sexual intercourse links together these two elements of Christian marriage, i.e., the commitment to be ever faithful and intimate lovers, and the commitment to establish a lasting relationship to provide an adequate "home" for the generation, education and formation of children."*

The above statement is in accord with contemporary Christian tradition and official Roman Catholic teaching and Canon Law. It is important to remind those preparing for marriage that for many centuries Christian tradition stated that marriage was primarily for producing offspring and that it was considered inappropriate or even sinful for a married couple to engage in sexual intercourse unless their conscious intent was to try to conceive a child. Any form of birth control was considered exceedingly evil. Contemporary Christian teaching that the love of one's spouse is at least as important as being open to being parents is a huge change in the teaching.

It is worth spending time on this point because even though many/most of the couples who are preparing for marriage might be intellectually committed to this new teaching (and the fact that they may be sexually active may seem to "prove" they buy this new teaching), there is another reality to consider. Engaging in sexual intercourse does not prove that one actually believes it is a "good and holy" experience (as is now taught by Christian churches). It is not uncommon for married couples to struggle with this teaching. For example:

It is not uncommon for a woman (or man) who seemed to be very open to sexual intercourse prior to marriage, to be less and less interested in sex in marriage. This may be because the husband (or wife) has never learned how to be a good lover (sexually), but it may also be because she/he was willing to override negative concepts about sex prior to marriage so that she/he could achieve marriage (now there is no need to pretend to enjoy sex).

Negative ideas about sex may be conscious (and easy to identify) or they may be buried in the subconscious (and much harder to identify). Ideas about what is appropriate (or not appropriate) in making love are likely to be strongly influenced by one's family of origin rather than by one's independent and mature adult thinking. Even those who believe they have really positive ideas and attitudes about sexual love making are rarely able to act as though they really believe that married sexual love is HOLY. Ask any church congregation if it is "more holy"

to: a) pray in church with your family on Sunday, b) collect clothes and food for flood victims, or c) spend an hour making love with your spouse. How many will stand up in public and say they think "c" is just as valid an answer as "a" or "b"?

The bottom line is that it is very important for the sponsor couple to rise to the challenge of this "teachable moment." If you can admit that it was not easy for the two of you to overcome some of your own negative attitudes about sex and sexuality, and that it may have taken months and years into your marriage to talk honestly about this with your spouse ~ and this communication led to healthy growth in your marriage ~ this may be a great gift to the couple you are sponsoring. They may not be able to articulate their gratitude to you, but your words may be a source of hope for them as they work through similar challenges in their marriage.

2) The concept of "intimacy" is another point to spend some time on. The problem with the word "intimacy" is that it too often is associated with sexual/genital behavior. While sexual behavior can be included in the concept of "intimacy," the word is used in this chapter to speak of much more than sexual behavior. As the text says: *A helpful way to think about intimacy is to note that it sounds like "into - me - see" . . . it is about both persons choosing to reveal and share all of the self with the other person.*

This understanding of intimacy is radically different from what most people actually experience. Though most people think they are being "intimate" when they are sexually active, the truth is that most of the sexual activity that one sees portrayed in modern media and music is exactly the opposite of true intimacy.

The common stereotype is that men are clueless about intimacy and are quite content to "do sex" and are not much interested in intimacy. But many women are equally afraid of the vulnerability of intimacy. So the challenge of learning how to be intimate with a person of the opposite sex is a major task for most women and most men. Most couples are amazed to learn that learning to be intimate with one's spouse is a major responsibility for a Christian. It might be rightly called the 11<sup>th</sup> Commandment: *Thou shalt learn to be intimate with your spouse.* Failure to take this commandment seriously may be the primary sin of many "good" Christians because it may be the beginning of the deterioration of their marriage which may end in separation and even divorce.

3) The final point of this chapter is to mention that Christian marriage is also about parenthood. While this chapter paid special attention to the value of loving one's spouse, it is also important to remind those preparing for marriage that Christian marriage is also about being open to children. Fully loving your spouse means that you are also open to sharing your love with new children of God who are the "fruit" of your love for one another.

#### 4 – MONEY MATTERS & CAREER PLANNING.

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This chapter focuses on 3 points:

1 - Financial Planning prior to marriage. Most couples do this poorly, and *not because they have too little money*. Rather, the problem is that most couples are not comfortable dealing with the deeper issues that are connected to money, such as, "power" and "control" and "freedom" and "responsibility." Even couples who are relatively well off financially easily get into serious problems because one or both of them have a need to "be in control of the finances" or "have the freedom to do what I want with my money" in a way that leaves the other person out of the process. If one or both of them have never learned to take appropriate responsibility for financial matters, he and/or she is likely to be continually doing things that add to the burden of the other spouse and the children.

It is helpful to think of money as POWER. In a marriage, if this power is not managed well, the result is that one (and sometimes both) of the spouses feels "abused" by the way the other person deals with the financial resources of the marriage. A common stereotype is that if one person manages the financial matters and does not know how to include the other person in the process, the other person will feel abused. As the marriage progresses, this problem only gets worse, with the one taking care of the finances feeling more burdened by the way the other person seems to not appreciate the hard work of managing the finances, while the other person feels more and more left out and resentful that he/she is "treated like a child." ("given an allowance").

While there is no plan that fits the needs of every couple (one check book or two?, separate accounts or joint accounts?, etc.). Every couple needs to design a plan that addresses the issue of sharing power and responsibility for the financial resources of the marriage. Even if they both are completely comfortable with one person doing all the work, they need to face and deal with what happens if that person is "run over by a truck this afternoon." Failure to deal with this possibility is not merely foolish, it may be a signal that there are deeper issues about power and responsibility that they are denying even to themselves. That is why the sponsor couple needs to appropriately challenge them on this matter.

The sponsor couples should note whether or not they have done serious work on the homework of this chapter. If they have not, that might be a clue that they are having trouble with some of the deeper issues.

2 - Career Planning is a more and more important matter to deal with as a couple. It was once common for couples to assume that once they married, it was HIS career that would be the priority factor around which they would make decisions about where they would live, who would be the primary parent to deal with the children, who would be responsible for meals,

etc., etc. Today, many/most couples are entering marriage with the idea that both of them may have to work to provide for the family. They can no longer merely assume that his (or her) career will be the primary factor in making decisions about jobs, location of the family, etc.

There are no simple answers when husband and wife both work. The heart of the matter is learning to dialogue and share responsibility and decision making. And learning how to get help early if the two people cannot find a way to arrive at a plan they can both support.

3 - Planning for Children. This is added to this chapter to raise the issue that wise couples give appropriate attention to the costs of raising children. Most couples tend to underestimate the expenses of children, and the sponsor couple may be able to help them plan more realistically.

In addition, the sponsor couple may be in a good position to affirm that the expenses of raising children are worth making sacrifices for. It may not always be a question of providing more financial security; it may also be an opportunity to talk about making choices in the direction of moving away from the excessive materialism that is so common in 1<sup>st</sup> world countries.

## 5 – MARITAL COMMUNICATION.    [Back to top](#)

Things to know about this chapter on **Communication**:

1) The reason that it is placed here (rather than in the beginning of the book) is that most engaged couple think they do not need to learn anything about communication.

- If they are "in love" they think they are communicating very well (and they may be right) and assume that if they ever have any communication problems they will just "work them out." (Of course, that is easy to say, but not so easy to do!)
- If they have moved beyond romance and are beginning to need better communication skills, there is a tendency to assume that getting married will "solve" some of their issues/problems. It is easy to assume that once they marry, then things will "settle down" and they will have time to deal with things better. (Of course it does not work that way, because once they marry they will more likely develop even more defenses and communication will become even more difficult.)

So the design of *For Better and For Ever* places Communication after the chapters dealing with the Family of Origin and Finances. The hope is that by this point the engaged couple has begun to trust the sponsor couple and is more open to their suggestions. If the sponsor couple can share their own history of having to learn the skills of marital communication the hard way, that

may be helpful in "selling" the engaged couple on the value of learning and practicing these skills.

2) There are so many books and theories on communication that the main challenge of writing this chapter was to keep it as simple and practical as possible. I also wanted to write the Chapter in a way that would build on concepts that might be already familiar to sponsor couples. For this reason, the content is drawn from these sources:

1 - Harville Hendrix's Imago theory which is to be found in *Keeping the Love You Find, a Personal Guide*. This book was recommended as a source for better understanding the issues of one's Family of Origin earlier in *For Better and For Ever*.

2 – Dr. Sue Johnson. Her book, *Hold Me Tight*, is designed for couples. Each chapter is followed by exercises for the couple to learn and practice. Dr. Johnson says that *"If you can work your way through my book together, you likely do not need to see a therapist!"*

3 - Marriage Encounter. Sponsor couples who have taken part in a Marriage Encounter will hopefully remember the teaching about Romance & Disillusionment & Love is a Decision.

In my opinion, these sources fit together quite well and are resources that I hope engaged couples will find helpful into the future (when they are married).

3) Key concepts to stress in talking about communications skills.

Romance - Actually is a time of *illusion* when each person is viewing the other with "rose-colored glasses" and choosing NOT to see things that might be considered negative. It is "wonderful" because during this time the couple can't get enough of each other and "talk about everything." They do this, however, because they are not actually dealing with the other person, but only the illusion (or what Hendrix calls the "Imago"). Communication seems easy at this point because couples in love let down all their defenses and they have no fear of one another. They trust each other completely. While this is good, it only lasts while they are "in love."

Disillusionment - Is the next phase, when Romance comes to an end. While most people think of this as something "bad" (and it surely can feel bad!), what is actually happening is that the "illusion" of Romance is falling away and we are able to see more clearly the reality of the other person. The odd thing is that we tend to think that the other person "changed," but actually we have been refusing to see what has always been there. For example, she says "you are always coming home late, you don't love me anymore!" She has forgotten that when they were in love he also kept her waiting, but she was so in love that she was willing to overlook his picking her

up late and she was always willing to buy his excuses. At this point, she is interpreting the same behavior in a more negative sense. He has not changed; it is her view of him that *she has changed*. This is a classic example of disillusionment.

Decision Time. The experience of disillusionment is likely to feel bad. But it is also a time of opportunity. Each person has a chance to decide what to do in this relationship that now feels so different from when the couple was "in love." There are three basic choices:

**1 - One choice is to leave the marriage.** They can separate and even get a divorce. It is a choice that many make (about 50% of first marriages end in divorce).

**2 - The second choice is to stay in the marriage, but give up on the idea of an intimate marriage** that the couple had during the time of romance. This "giving up" can take a number of forms. They can "stay together" for the sake of the children or the money or just to look good to relatives and friends, but they give up the concept of an intimate marriage. They learn to put up with one another, and may even look like a loving couple to their neighbors and friends. But they don't really love one another. They choose to put the energy (that could have been put into building an intimate marriage) into work, hobbies, addictions, other friends, etc.

**3 - The third choice is to choose a path of building a new kind of relationship.** Marriage Encounter calls it "Love is a Decision" ...it means to learn how to build an **intimate relationship** with the reality of each person (in other words, without the illusion of Romance). What is the difference? Fear. During the time of Romance, there was no fear (or at least neither person would admit it). Now, each person is honest enough to admit he/she has significant fears. The fears usually come down to either "the fear of being rejected or deserted" or "the fear of being destroyed/dominated by the other." Very often these two basic fears will be married to each other, the one who fears rejection will reach out to the other for support, the one who fears being hurt/destroyed will pull back and away. The more the one reaches out, the more the other pulls away. The result is a vicious cycle and the fear/distrust increases.

But what if each of these two people could STOP and think? What if they could develop some skills that could break the cycle of fear of rejection and fear of being hurt? What if they could stop chasing after and running from one another? What if they could stand face to face and communicate THROUGH THEIR FEARS?

This is the purpose of communication skills (which the couple thought they did not need to learn earlier in their relationship). Effective communication skills enable human beings (and married couples!) to deal with one another *in spite of their fears of one another*. And if they learn to do this, they will discover that they can indeed learn how to build an intimate marriage even though they also have some fears. In fact, it is very normal to have fears. People who have no fears are not the normal ones! *Those who learn how to build an intimate marriage are the*

*ones who have learned how to deal with their fears in positive ways that result in an intimate relationship.*

The four basic skills are SHARING, LISTENING, ACCEPTANCE, and RISKING FURTHER GROWTH. They are described in the text of *For Better and For Ever*. Sponsor couples will remember more of this if they participated in a Marriage Encounter weekend. The skills are not difficult to understand, but they are a challenge to put into practice. It is much like learning to play golf. The basic concepts are very simple (hit the ball into the hole), the hard part is doing this with consistency on a golf course.

Each of the skills is a challenge, but I think that "acceptance" may be the hardest to learn how to use in an intimate relationship. The "trick" is for both persons to agree that "accepting a person does not mean approval of the person's behavior."

For example. If you are telling me about the terrible mess of driving up to the mail box at the Post Office where it is very hard to get into the right position (and I say: "OK"...meaning, I get the picture!) then you continue to tell me that you got out of the car to put a letter in the mailbox at the Post Office because you were not close enough to reach it (and I say: "OK"...meaning: I see what you are saying....but part of me is wanting to say "Why did you not take the time to get closer to the mailbox?) then you go on to say that while you were standing outside the car a gust of wind slams the door shut...and now you are terrified that you may be locked out of your car...with 5 other cars waiting in line to drive up to the same mail box (and I say to myself, if I say "OK" will she think that am thinking that what she did is acceptable/understandable?????)

The point here is to affirm the fact that it is not easy to learn how to communicate "acceptance" of the person when it is impossible to be in agreement with the behavior. This will take lots of work....and it is never done once and for all time. Communicating "acceptance" will often require much more than "OK". It may require something like, "Honey, that is a terrible story. It is really hard for me to listen to your experience and avoid getting distracted by my own stressful feelings when I think of you getting out of the car to mail that letter. But I also understand that you are upset and you are telling me all of this because you would appreciate my support of you because it was scary and embarrassing and frustrating for you to go through all of that. Do you want to tell me more about it?".....

## **6 – PROBLEM SOLVING.**    [Back to top](#)

Things to know about this chapter on **Problem Solving**:

1) The most important idea is to help the engaged couple to learn that there is no such thing as a marriage that does not have "problems to solve." Many/most engaged couples have grown up on the myth that if they "really love one another" they will always be able to "work things out." The trouble is, of course, that when couples grow beyond romance they may lack the "loving motivation" to work things out.

2) What is needed is a plan and a set of skills for dealing with issues. That is the purpose of this chapter, namely, to suggest that wise couples will develop a plan of action and learn the skills that they will need for dealing with issues (another name for "solving problems").

3) The sponsor couple can help by sharing their own experience to learning (perhaps the hard way) that they do better when they have a plan for dealing with things. They can also share the particular skills that they have developed that work for them. Because people are different, it is possible that different couples will use different skills.

Some examples:

Some couples develop a set way to carve out "couple time" (apart from their children) so they have time every day or month (or whatever) to pay attention to one another. This time can also be used to deal with issues (solve problems).

Other couples do not have a set time to do this kind of thing, but prefer to set up this kind of time whenever they need private time together.

Other couples do a combination of these. They may set aside some special time once or twice or three times each year. Then from day to day they deal with things as they need to (but there is no set time or schedule for doing this).

The bottom line is finding something that "works" for you.

4) Notice the reference to Rituals for Resolving Problems and Healing Hurts at the end of the chapter. These are put in an appendix because they will probably only "make sense" if they are understood as things that "real people really do." Things like writing a "love letter" may seem odd if you have never done that before, but if you have participated in a Marriage Encounter weekend you know from your personal experience how helpful that can be. You may be able to share this experience with an engaged couple. I highly recommend that sponsor couples make use of these rituals in your own marriage, and then ~ if you find them helpful ~ pass on your experience to the engaged couples you sponsor.

## **7 – CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE: ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS.**    [Back to top](#)

Things to know about this chapter:

Remember this is one of the chapters that answer the question: *What is Christian Marriage?* This chapter focuses on 4 specific elements. Some of this material is mentioned in other chapters, but this chapter is trying to be very clear about criteria that must be present if the marriage is going to qualify as a "sacramental marriage" by the standards of Catholic Canon Law (if the couple is being married in the Catholic Church), or "Christian marriage" (if the couple is Protestant and being married in a Protestant Church).

These four elements can be thought of as four building blocks that add up to Christian marriage (or "sacramental marriage" in the Catholic Church). Or to put it another way, if any one of these four elements is missing there is something radically wrong with the resulting marriage. It may be a perfectly legal civil marriage, but it may not achieve the status of "Christian marriage."

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The four elements:

1 - A permanent and unconditional commitment. While this might seem obvious, we live in a society in which divorce is so common that people often give little thought to the seriousness of this element. Each person needs to be clear in his/her thinking, and very honest with him/her self and his/her fiancé. It must be absolutely clear that entering Christian marriage is just as serious as making a personal commitment to Jesus Christ as one's Lord. Most people can understand that a commitment to be a disciple of Jesus is never something casual, or something to "try out" for a while. And having made such a commitment, there is no question about just walking away from it. This is the kind of thinking that needs to be in the mind of both persons as they choose one another for life, with God as their witness.

2 - Open to the Gift of Children. Notice that this is not a promise to have children because no one can be sure that God will bless their love making with a pregnancy. But it is an important element of Christian marriage that each person is open to the possibility that God will give them the gift of a child. Another way to say this is that each spouse must be open to the reasonable request of his/her spouse to the kind of lovemaking which could result in the conception of a child.

3 - With God as a Partner to the Relationship. There is nothing wrong with two people who have little or no understanding of Christian tradition thinking of marriage as something that involves "just the two of us." But there is something radically missing if two people who claim to be Christians think that marriage is "just the two of us." From the very beginning of Christian

tradition there has been a strong and consistent tradition of married Christians thinking of God (or Jesus) as a "third party" to their marriage. So, for example, in times when husband and wife are having trouble with one another they can turn to God with the understanding that God has a vested interest in assisting them. This "relationship of three" is a stronger relationship in the same way that a three-ply cord is stronger than a two-ply cord.

4 - An Intimate Relationship with one's Spouse and with God. Prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the development of the field of psychology, the concept of intimacy (this was addressed in the chapter *Sexuality & Intimacy & Parenthood*) was not necessarily a part of Christian marriage (or any other kind of marriage). This does not mean that married couples were not intimate or had no understanding of or desire for intimacy, but it does mean that one of the benefits of modern psychology has been to help Christian teachers deepen their understanding of Christian marriage.

The Apostle Paul taught that the relationship of husband and wife is to be just like the relationship of Christ and the Church. [Note. It is NOT appropriate to read Paul's teaching as an affirmation of the subjugation of women to men. It is critically important to note the first sentence, *Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ*. Paul was writing long before the concept of equal rights and dignity for women was ever considered and there was no "language" for such concepts. Thus, Paul says the husband is just as responsible for serving his wife as the wife is for serving her husband. It is a way to speak of equal dignity of men and women even before the advent of political rights for women.]: *"Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church; however, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. "* [Eph 5:21-33]

It was only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, that Christian teachers began to understand and apply the lessons of modern psychology to the concept of Christian marriage. In the past, marriage was primarily about the business of ensuring the future of the family/tribe. It was about

producing and caring for children who would carry on the family name. Love was not necessarily essential for accomplishing these goals. But by the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was clear that marriage had evolved into something new. While marriage continues to be about ensuring the future, that is not why most couples marry. Most couples in modern countries marry because they "love" one another, and ~ if they are Christians ~ they come to understand the Christian tradition about marriage in a new and fuller way. Now it is possible for husbands to understand that to love your wife "*...as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her...*" (Eph 5:25-26) affirms the 20<sup>th</sup> century psychological concept of intimacy. And to put it even more strongly, anyone who claims to be a Christian has a personal responsibility to be as intimate with his/her spouse as he/she is with Jesus, because ~ as Paul says ~ "*Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body.*" (Eph. 5:28-30)

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PS: All of the above is consistent with the teaching of Christian Churches. For Roman Catholics this information can also be helpful in understanding the issue of the Church's annulment process. When a Catholic marries (even if he/she marries someone who is not Catholic) it is the responsibility of the Catholic to establish a marital relationship that includes all four of these essential elements. The purpose of the meetings with the pastor and the marriage preparation programs which are required of Catholics is to make sure that they understand what Christian marriage is and they must state that they are prepared to establish and sustain such a marital relationship. Thus, all marriages which are celebrated with the formal approval of the Roman Catholic Church are presumed to have all four of the essential elements named in this chapter. Such a marriage is called a "sacramental marriage" to distinguish it from a marriage that may be legal in civil law, but does not necessarily have the four essential elements of Christian marriage.

It is this presumption ~ *based on the sworn testimony of the couple* ~ that the marriage is a sacramental marriage, which makes it possible to understand the Catholic annulment process. If a marriage that is presumed to be a sacramental marriage (in Catholic canon law such as marriage is called a "valid" marriage) disintegrates and ends in divorce after the couple has made every possible effort to make the marriage work, one (or both) of the spouses may approach the pastor and seek assistance for how to live into the future. In many cases the person is already thinking about the possibility of another marriage. The first responsibility of the pastor to make sure that the person (and the ex-spouse) has made every possible/appropriate effort to reestablish the marriage, and if this is not possible to make sure that the failed marriage has been appropriately ended in civil law (the civil divorce must be

completed). Then the pastor can assist the person to reflect upon the "failed" marriage and perhaps determine that one or more of the essential elements of Christian marriage were never actually achieved. The point of this investigation is not to decide whom to blame, but rather to simply assess (which is much easier in hindsight) the sad reality that one or both of the spouses were unable to do the "job" of Christian marriage.

*How could this be?* After all the work of marriage preparation, how could either of them say they did not know how to do the job of Christian marriage? The answer is actually quite simple. When most couples marry, they tend to believe that their love for one another is the "stuff" of marital love and commitment. They are not completely wrong, but they are wrong in thinking that just because they "really love" one another when they are planning the wedding that they know, and know how to use, the skills of sustaining their love and commitment through the "good times and bad time" that every marriage will need to deal with.

What most couples fail to do, before they marry, is to adequately identify all the issues of their individual family of origin and learn the skills for the lifelong project of establishing and sustaining an intimate relationship. Marriage preparation programs try to help them do this, but couples who are "in love" easily convince themselves that they really don't need to learn anything. They are naive and mistaken, but the problem is that they don't know it! They are much like folks who want to be professional athletes and actually think they can accomplish their goal because they are "so determined" and "so committed," but few of them actually succeed because they really don't understand the kind of skills and hard work that are required. Just like most folks who want to be pro athletes, couples who fail at Christian marriage are not usually "bad" folks, usually they are good folks who never understood what such a commitment would require.

Are Christian marriages then so rare that most folks never achieve that goal? It is not easy to answer that question. It is very much like asking the question: How many folks who believe they are "Christians" are actually authentic disciples of Jesus?

## **8 – MARITAL SPIRITUALITY** [Back to top](#)

Things to know about this chapter:

The task of the sponsor couple is to help the engaged couple understand the "practicalness" of this chapter. I say that because many/most people tend to think that "spirituality" is the business of only very few and very special people (such as clergy or people who live in monasteries). Most couples who are preparing for marriage are not likely to think of their lives as shaped by their "spirituality." Especially in our society today, when it is rather common for

engaged couples to be "distant" from their church and uncomfortable with questions about "their spirituality."

The issue of "spirituality" is important because, as the text of *For Better and For Ever* says, it is a way of addressing a person's *core values*. One way to assist the engaged couple may be to explain to them that if the word "spirituality" feel alien to either of them, it may be helpful to substitute the phrase "core values" or "deepest values."

While there is no law that would prevent people from being married to a person who has radically different core values, spouses who share radically different and even contradictory core values are going to have lots of trouble trying to sustain an intimate marriage.

Rather than trying to debate about what values a person *ought* to have, this chapter attempts to encourage/challenge couples to reflect upon the most fundamental questions, namely: *Who is my Lord?, and what are the consequences of discipleship?* [Note. These questions assume, of course, that both of them are Christians even if they are not of the same Christian denomination. If one of them is not Christian, then the couple will need to determine what questions will be appropriate for them...they might look to the sponsor couple for assistance in this task.] That is the purpose of the using the Scripture quotes of the teachings of Jesus. My point is that a person is free to disagree with what Jesus has to say, but to reject the teaching of Jesus is also a rejection of Christian discipleship. One cannot claim to be a Christian and live a life that contradicts what Jesus teaches.

If the two people preparing for marriage can agree that each of them claims Jesus as Lord, then it should be obvious that ~ as disciples of Jesus ~ they will love one another as intimate friends/lovers (they will be as intimate with one another as they are with Jesus), and they will extend this kind of love to their children, extended family, their neighborhood and ultimately the whole world. Christian discipleship eventually touches every other decision...one's profession, politics, choice of friends, recreation, even the kind of house and neighborhood one chooses to live in.

## **9 – MIXED RELIGION MARRIAGE.**     [Back to top](#)

Things to know about this chapter:

Much of what sponsor couples need to know about this chapter is right in the text of *For Better and For Ever*, but it is also important to know that the web site at [www.marriagepreparation.com](http://www.marriagepreparation.com) has a great deal of additional information for interchurch and interfaith couples. There is so much good information and links to additional resources that it

was much more practical to put it on the web site than try to put it all in the book. Sponsor couples should look at some of this material on the World Wide Web so that they can tell the engaged couple more about what is available.

Most folks (sponsor couples and engaged couples) are not aware of how much Christian churches are trying to become more helpful to interchurch and interfaith couples. If a particular local church is not being as helpful as it might be, make sure that the engaged couples know about these resources which they can assess for themselves.

## **10 – PRAYER.**    [Back to top](#)

Things to know about this chapter.

1) One of the most important skills for maintaining a healthy/intimate marriage is the ability of the couple to pray . . . as individuals and as a couple. I put a lot of information into this chapter because I know from experience that most adults are very uncomfortable admitting that they do not know much about prayer or how to pray. I tried to answer questions that people might be hesitant to ask: "what" prayer is, and "how" to do it, and "why" it is such an important element of Christian marriage.

2) The importance of prayer in family life can very easily be underestimated. Real/healthy prayer is a mature and adult reality. It might be compared to healthy living and eating. In the same way that unhealthy families fail to teach children healthy habits of living and eating, unhealthy families usually fail to teach children healthy habits of spirituality and how to relate to God. That is why so many of those who are preparing for marriage have no practice of prayer, and are not aware they are missing something important!

More than a few times, I have gotten into a conversation with a person who has little use for God or religion (and, of course, does not go to church or engage in regular habits of prayer). Sometimes I have managed to establish enough trust that I was able to ask the person: "Tell me about the God you don't believe in." or "Tell me more about why you don't go to Church." And then I listen very carefully . . . and encourage the person to tell me more and more. [I use all the right "rules" for listening....."tell me more about...", "so you are saying....", etc.]

When I have thoroughly listened, and the other person is asking for my response. He/she is likely to assume that I will try to argue against what was said, or try to prove him/her wrong. But I am more likely to say: "If that was my experience of God (or Church) I would not believe in that God either (and would not go to Church)."

It is interesting where the conversation goes from that point. But I often sense that I may have made a very useful point, namely, that I strongly believe that our practices of Faith and Prayer are very much influenced by our life experience and especially by our experience of growing up in our Family of Origin. For those who grow up in healthy and faith filled families, having a healthy relationship with God and healthy practices of prayer is likely to come naturally. For those who grew up in unhealthy families, it will be a major challenge to develop a healthy relationship with God and healthy habits of prayer. There will be exceptions of course, children will eventually make their own choices no matter how well they were brought up or how poorly they were raised.

3) The time of marriage preparation can be a rare and valuable teachable moment, not just about dealing with one's spouse-to-be, but also about dealing with God. The more a person comes to understand the concept of Christian marriage, the more it becomes obvious that having a healthy relationship with God & one's Church is "part of the package."

While Churches and clergy have tried to teach about the importance/value of Prayer, it is entirely possible that couples preparing for marriage will finally "get it" during their sessions with their sponsor couple. It might be the first time that one or both of them have met a normal/healthy couple and discovered that "ordinary people" actually pray! The witness value of the sponsor couple is not that they come across as "super churchy," rather it is more often the fact that they are "normal" (i.e., they enjoy many of the same kinds of activities that the engaged couple does). In other words, the engaged couple can see that they too could incorporate prayer and church going into their own lives without becoming "odd" or "alien."

The bottom line: If the engaged couple "graduates" from your sessions with a commitment to praying together, you have accomplished something wonderful. If they learn how to pray, and keep it up, they will have developed perhaps the most important insurance policy for their marriage. Make sure to talk about the box at the end of the questions:

- *The current divorce rate in the U.S. is about 50% of all marriages, or one divorce out of every two marriages. However, notice the difference in the following statistics.*
- *Of those couples who worship together each Sunday, the divorce rate is 3.3%, or one divorce out of every 30 couples who worship together each Sunday.*
- *Of those couples who pray together in their home on a regular basis, the divorce rate is .3%, or one divorce out of every 300 couples who pray together in their homes.*
- Does prayer make a difference? You decide.

*[NOTE: These statistics are not the result of scientific method. These statistics are my*

*effort to “quantify” the consensus of a number of surveys (which were not accomplished by scientific method) and many conversations with pastors and married couples over the past 40 years. The numbers are my attempt to get people thinking about prayer as a positive element in their plan for establishing and sustaining an intimate and life-giving marriage. For more information, go to the website [www.marriagepreparation.com](http://www.marriagepreparation.com) – in the search box type “prayer”.]*

## **11 – FAMILY PLANNING.** [Back to top](#)

Things to know about this chapter:

1) The first goal of this chapter is to help the engaged couple address the topic of family planning as a couple. Most couples have been sexually active prior to their marriage, so most of them have already had to deal with the issue of family planning. Unfortunately, most of them have dealt with the issue of their fertility by talking about it as little as possible except to make sure that "she takes care of things." The responsibility for not becoming pregnant is too often left to her, while the man takes little or no responsibility for insuring that she does not become pregnant before they marry. This is one of the reasons this is such a difficult topic, i.e., *they have not been dealing with their fertility in a way that assumes and presumes that they are equally responsible for family planning and the method(s) they might choose to use for this planning.*

2) The second goal of this chapter is to put the issue of family planning into a larger context. Family planning is best viewed as ONE of a number of important values, and couples need to consider these other values when they dialogue about the topic of family planning.

The text of *For Better and For Ever* names these values:

### **1 - Love is a fundamental element of Christian marriage.**

"Making love" (sexual intercourse) is a very important part of Christian marriage, not because marriage is only for producing children but because married couples have a right and responsibility to be good to one another and for one another.

### **2 - Love making, in Christian marriage, is not merely a good idea, it is a "sacred reality."**

While almost every engaged couple is very much in favor of sex, only a small minority of these couples could write an essay on *"How sexual intercourse brings married couples closer to God."* The experience of being sexually active, does not necessarily result in couples understanding/experiencing the full/positive meaning of marital sex. The powerful combination of Family of Origin, the messages of modern society and media, and early life experiences of sexual intercourse may well have taught and verified more negative ideas about sexual

intercourse than positive ones. Just because couples are sexually active, it does not automatically follow that they have healthy ideas about sex. If they did, there would be fewer married couples having problems with their marriage.

### **3 - Openness to new life and Responsible Parenthood.**

While most couples do not marry solely to become parents, being open to parenthood is an essential element of Christian marriage. In addition, the concept of "responsible parenthood" is an essential element of Christian marriage. Any couple that would conceive children without planning for how these children will be appropriately cared for and educated (all the way to adulthood) would be failing as Christians. They would be sinning against their children and against the community that would be burdened by the consequences of their failure to be responsible parents. While Christianity surely affirms the right of married couples to try to be parents, it equally affirms that they have a very serious responsibility to appropriately care for their children.

### **4 - Appropriate family planning.**

Christian Churches affirm the concept of family planning. This means that married couples have the right/responsibility to use appropriate means of postponing the possibility of conceiving a child when the couple determines that the resources (financial, spiritual, psychological, physical) of the family are not able to tend to another child at the present time.

There are many "methods" of family planning. They can be put into 3 categories:

Total abstinence. The only method that is 100% effective and 100% safe (no negative side effects) is abstinence from sexual intercourse. Other methods have lesser degrees of effectiveness and safety. These methods can be divided into two basic categories: Natural and Artificial.

Natural methods which rely upon some days of abstinence. There is more than one natural method and all of them have the advantage of having no unhealthy side effects. Natural methods rely upon identifying the exact days when the woman is able to conceive and allow the couple to choose to abstain from sexual intercourse during those days. Natural methods of family planning have become more reliable/effective during the past 50 years because of advances in biology (better understanding of signs of fertility in the female cycle of fertility) and science (better instruments for observing and tracking these symptoms of fertility). However, these modern natural methods are not as well-known as artificial methods because the effectiveness of the method depends upon the couple understanding how to use these methods and having the maturity and commitment to use these methods. Since it is hard to "make a buck" on these natural methods, the pharmaceutical companies and the medical

profession have given little attention/publicity to these natural methods. Most young people have never seen a T-V ad promoting the benefits of natural methods of family planning. [For the sake on being inclusive, "withdrawal" of the penis at the moment of male orgasm is a very ancient method of trying to avoid pregnancy, and might be called a "natural" method of family planning. However, modern science has established that semen is already present in the pre-ejaculate (lubricating) fluid of the male and this pre-ejaculate semen can fertilize the ovum. Withdrawal is no longer considered a method of family planning.]

Artificial methods do not rely upon any abstinence. They are subdivided into: a - barrier methods (which use some mechanism for try to keep sperm from coming in contact with an ovum), b - chemical methods, which change the normal biological processes (usually in the woman) so that the couple is made unable to conceive (or if conception takes place the fertilized egg is not able to implant and develop to full term), c - surgical methods which (usually permanently) sterilize either the husband or the wife, d - abortion of a fertilized ovum or a baby at any time during pregnancy.

All of these artificial methods have varying degrees of effectiveness. Even surgical methods which would seem to be 100% have been known to fail! While all of these methods offer the advantage of not requiring any period of abstinence from sexual intercourse, all of them have some negative side effects and some of the possible side effects are exceedingly dangerous. Christians consider abortion the killing of an unborn child.

The popularity of artificial methods is probably due not to their safety and reliability, but to the fact that they are marketed so effectively. Artificial contraceptives (of all kinds) are a significant money making opportunity for pharmaceutical companies and medical professionals. The medical profession, by and large, opts for recommending these methods because they are a more efficient use of their time (which assures more profit to medical personnel). Most couples know so little about modern methods of family planning that they rarely have even the curiosity to learn these methods, so they are willing to risk the side effects of artificial methods mostly because they are not aware that they might achieve their family planning objectives just as well or even better by natural methods.

5 - Making decisions as a couple. The ethical arguments ~ pro and con ~ of various methods of family planning are another element which couples need to consider in making decisions about family planning. Christian Churches all have teachings about responsible parenting and family planning. Every couple ought to be encouraged to thoroughly and prayerfully study the teaching of their particular faith tradition as they dialogue with one another about how best to do their own family planning. If they are an interfaith or interchurch couple, they will want to incorporate the teachings of both traditions into their own decisions as a married couple.

## **12 – DECISIONS OF CONSCIENCE.** [Back to top](#)

This chapter should speak for itself. The critical point is that engaged (and married) couples are likely to discover that they have significantly different ideas on a number of important topics. Since they are committed to establishing a Christian marriage, that means that they are also committed to give each other's ideas and values equal importance and dignity. This, of course, is much easier said than done.

This chapter offers couples:

1 - A process of formulating decisions when they discover that they have radically different (and perhaps contradictory) ideas about some important topic or issue.

2 - A process for formulating a decision that they can "live with," when they cannot arrive at a decision to which they can both give 100% agreement.

## **13 – MARRYING AGAIN & STEPFAMILIES** [Back to top](#)

Things to know about this chapter:

1) The first goal of this chapter is to help couples who have been married before (at least one of them) to realize that they need to address some topics and issues that people who are entering marriage for the first time may not need to think about. The primary mistake that couples make is to assume that a previous marriage or significant relationship is merely "past history" that will have little or no effect upon the marriage they are preparing to enter. Statistics can show that when one or both persons have been married before, their marriage is more likely to end in divorce than couples who have no previous marriage.

2) The second goal of this chapter is to alert these couples to the issues and topics that they need to deal with during their process of preparing for marriage. If the first goal is to warn them about the significant challenges of marrying again and ~ if there are children to deal with ~ establishing a stepfamily, the second goal is to assure them that their desire to marry (and set up a step family) may be accomplished quite well if they are willing to learn what needs to be done, develop the skills they will need, and set up the appropriate spiritual and psychological support systems they will surely need.

3) The third goal is to try to coach/motivate these couples to the awareness that they will need to be "above average" if they hope to be successful. Every "2<sup>nd</sup> marriage" and every stepfamily will have to deal with more factors (which will add stress) than "first time" marriages. To offer a simple comparison, a "first time" marriage might be compared to learning to swim in a swimming pool. There are challenges, of course, but most of them can be managed most of the time. A "2<sup>nd</sup> marriage" and "stepfamily" might be compared to learning how to swim long

distances in the ocean. The challenges are significantly greater and some are impossible to control.

This is not meant to discourage those who believe that entering a new marriage or setting up a stepfamily is the right thing to do and is in accord with God's will for them. It is however meant to help these couple realize that such a project will require a level of maturity and spiritual development and sense of humor that is "above average." While, with the grace of God, "everything is possible," successful 2<sup>nd</sup> marriages and stepfamilies will be the first to say that their success has been the result of more work and prayer and humor than they ever dreamed it would take.

#### **14 – PARENTING: FORMING A NEW GENERATION.** [Back to top](#)

Things to know about this chapter:

This chapter is NOT designed to be a comprehensive treatment of the topic of "parenting." The small goal of this chapter is to touch on two issues, with the hope that the sponsor couple may help the engaged couple to go a little more deeply into these topics.

1) The first point is to try to help the couple to think about their fundamental attitude about "parenting." The child should NOT be thought of as the possession of the couple which the couple has a "right" to parent in any way they choose. If the parents are Christians (and I would hope that other faith traditions would agree with this), it is important for the parents to understand and act out of an awareness that any child they are blessed to "parent" is a child of God. Thus Christian parents have the responsibility to raise their children in a manner that they will grow up to understand and experience God as their ultimate Parent.

It is common for human beings to speak of "my child," but it is very important to understand that it is much more accurate to understand that every child is "God's child."

2) The exercise at the end of the chapter should be written as a response to the question: "*How are we going to combine our efforts to raise our children to appreciate and live their ultimate dignity as children of God?*"

#### **15 – BELONGING TO A CHURCH.** [Back to top](#)

Many couples who are preparing for marriage have little or no real connection to a local church community. In addition, they are very likely to move to a new city when they marry (or within the first years of their marriage), and they are likely to not take the initiative to "connect" with a local church community for regular family worship.

The purpose of this chapter is to try to help them think of "belonging to a church" as one of the standard responsibilities of marriage, just like, arranging for housing and paying taxes. The sponsor couple may be able to "sell" this idea more effectively than the pastor. A married man may be a powerful witness to the engaged man in this matter. The married man may be able to suggest that in the same way that many things will change when they marry (the guy will no longer spend weekends partying with his single friends!), one of the changes will be to take the initiative and lead to "join a local church and take your wife to Sunday worship" because *that is what responsible married guys do*.

[16 – OUR SUPPORT PLAN \(p. 209 English edition\)](#) [Back to top](#)

Use your personal copies of *For Better & For Ever* to create the ***“Road Map” – the Support Plan for the first six months of marriage***. Then, the two of you decide when it is time to update your SUPPORT PLAN and how you are going to do that. You may decide to work separately in writing down ideas you want to include in your Updated Road Map that were not included in the one you wrote before you were married, and then dialogue together to combine your separate ideas into a single updated SUPPORT PLAN that you both agree will be your guide for the months ahead. It is a good idea to include a **date** at the end of your Updated Support Plan to talk about **how this updated SUPPORT PLAN is working** and **whether want to make any Updates**.

It will be especially valuable to talk about ~ “Who do we plan to ‘check in’ with?” ~ if there is a need to re-think who these people are.

So, your SUPPORT PLAN is always a work-in-process that you change to meet the current needs and challenges of your marriage and family. If you make it a digital document that can easily be edited (always keeping copies of the previous Support Plan), you might be amazed at how it changes through the years. It could be a treasure to reflect on when you celebrate wedding anniversaries and might even be passed on to your children when they are old enough to appreciate the family history that began with just the two of you.

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