

With Couples in the Pastor's Study

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“With couples in the pastor’s study” embraces a large swath of the pastoral concerns for those who are under-shepherds of God’s flock, whether or not those concerns are addressed through counseling sessions within the confines of the four walls of a pastor’s study or office. Couples in marital—and extra-marital—relationships have been in need of godly counsel throughout the history of our fallen race. Pastors today stand in a line of hopeful counselors of couples that stretches back far past the time of the Savoy Declaration back to Eden itself.

Biblical historical background

There in Eden, the sin of Adam that plunges the human race into misery is committed in the context of a marital relationship gone awry, so we might say that the first sin of human beings gave rise to the need for pastoral counsel even before there was a pastor in existence, much less one with a study into which Adam and Eve could be invited. The crisis in the first marriage has been in many ways a paradigm for those faced by the under-shepherds of God’s people down to the present age. What pastoral counselor has not seen the husband who is silent and submissive when he ought to speak and assume responsibility with love—the same husband quick to speak words of blame when things go wrong? As was the case for that couple driven eastward from Eden, that passive husband is often coupled with a woman who is by nature prone to take emotional control of the relationship and shape its destiny.

The challenges for pastoral counseling of couples remain as redemptive history progresses to the time when God cuts covenant with a one whom he justifies by faith. One wonders whether the priest named King of Righteousness might have done well to ask a particular worshipper at the City of Peace to stay awhile after the communal meal and collection to discuss the ramifications of his tendency to pretend that he is not married when far away from home. Certainly there is a need for marital counseling when the same aged saint submits to his wife’s directive that he have sex with her maid as a means to obtain a longed-for child. At the point, couples counseling becomes a complicated sorting out of sexual and emotional issues among a threesome—a counseling challenge no pastor welcomes! Homosexual practices extending to the threat of rape are seen in the Canaanite cultural context of the patriarchs, and even more grievously, sexual abuse involving incest involves one who appears to be a believer. In the next generation, marital conflicts over parenting enter the mix, with husband and wife at odds with one another through their children. Lack of communication, manipulation, and deceit damage the marital relationship to an extent that would defy the expertise of the wisest under-shepherd. In the next

generation of God's elect, couples' therapy would have to become group therapy, with a third, and then fourth, and even a fifth person involved. The pastoral counselor would have been hard pressed just to get everyone satisfied with the seating arrangement! Not surprisingly, this dysfunction results in a family that is conflicted to the point of physical violence.

Overworked and beleaguered Moses receives no respite from marital and extramarital crisis in the next era of redemptive history. Religious ceremonies that turn into orgies and intentional sexual seduction of the men of the congregation by pagan outsiders are added to the full range of challenges that couples present in the counseling tent. These are tough times for couples counseling, and they see the development of the tough love practices of the tribe of Levi and Phineas the priest: intervention by sword and spear. The technique is not without its positive aspects, but it must be confessed that there seems a lack of evidence of long term benefits for pastoral counseling by execution.

Sexual ethics and marital norms appear to decline even further during the period of the judges, with women especially bearing the resulting shame and suffering. Polygamy continues to be practiced, even among those who seem to be devout believers, and it continues to bring marital and familial strife. Samson is undoubtedly not alone in embracing intermarriage with the Canaanites who were to be supplanted. While a story like that of Ruth brings a happy ending to such intermarriage, it can be surmised that is the exception to the rule. The sordid episode of the Levite and his concubine in Gibeah shows that Israelite sexual ethics had sunk every bit as low as those of the cities of the plain destroyed by God in patriarchal times. The Levite's host offers his daughter for sexual abuse and the Levite goes even further in forcing his concubine outside into the hands of men who rape her with such violence that she dies. Rather than condemn such behavior, the tribe of Benjamin take the side of the rapists. When Benjamin's ultimate defeat threatens the survival of the tribe because of a lack of wives for the survivors, the "solution" is the virtual kidnapping of women to that purpose. As is always the case when the institution of marriage is in decline, it is the female sex who are most victimized. What a daunting task would have faced anyone who sought to be a pastoral influence for good in such a time!

The coming of the theocracy does not appear to bring significant change, for the loyal under-shepherd of God's wayward flock continues to confront thorny problems in marital relationships among both the people and their leaders. Imagine bringing biblical counsel to the national leader who has funded the building of an extravagant new sanctuary and composed wonderful worship music and prayers, yet is of the opinion that anything goes so far as sexual liaisons and marital relationships are

concerned! Needless to say, his son and heir goes even further in public displays of multiple marriages and sexual promiscuity. How do those who are pastoring the common folk disciple and discipline couples when the upper class is in such rebellion against biblical marital norms? Divinely inspired prophets of the theocratic era bring sinful marital relations to the forefront again and again in their preaching. Promiscuity, adultery, lewdness, and prostitution—these prophetic images of marital infidelity are undoubtedly used to portray spiritual truths precisely because the reality of marital breakdown is familiar to those to whom the prophets speak.

Though not much is recorded in the exilic books in regard to the state of marriage, it can be assumed that those offering pastoral care to the exiles faced the same kinds of circumstances as did their forefathers, with the addition of new pagan influences. Ezekiel provides a positive example of marital love and faithfulness, but on the other hand the beautiful Jewess Hadassah is pictured as keeping secret her religious identity as she wins bedroom approval and a crown from a pagan emperor who divorced his former queen in a manner that seems a patent violation of Scriptural standards.

Circumstances have clearly not improved for pastoral counselors in the time of the Restoration. Malachi confronts priestly disregard for basic biblical doctrine concerning the nature of marriage, with those who are charged with leading the people in worship practicing a sinful divorcing of their wives that the Lord equates with bloody violence. The Jews who have returned to the promised land are castigated for adultery, and intermarriage with unbelievers after the return from exile reaches the point of a public crisis that is a major concern to Ezra. Exile may have driven polytheism from the nation Israel, but clearly many marriages continue to be in crisis.

By the time of Christ, the Jewish community gives little appearance of being much different from the surrounding pagan cultures. Even the religious leaders of Israel are divided over the issue of divorce, with some taking the position that men can divorce their wives virtually on a whim. The sexual standards by which men are judged are far more lax than those imposed upon women. Women are second class citizens, and their prostitution is common. Biblical doctrines related to sexuality and marriage are virtually ignored. When Jesus affirms the biblical viewpoint concerning marriage as set forth in Genesis, even his own disciples seem aghast at such a strict standard and rhetorically ask if it is not better to avoid marriage under such conditions. Clearly marital standards in Jewish culture are woefully short of God's intentions.

In the early Church, there ample references to indicate that the newly formed congregations include a significant number of converts out of lives characterized by sexual sins. Church pastors undoubtedly would have had frequent need to minister to men and women who were dealing with the aftermath of their own and others' sexual wrongdoing while developing a biblical understanding and practice. The presence of clear teaching on marriage and family relationships in the pastoral epistles provides an indirect proof that there was a need for cultivating biblically based marriages and families among the believers. Even with sound teaching, those who had professed Christ were not now exempt from sexual sin and living in wedded bliss. Pastoral intervention is needed in the form of rebukes against extra-marital sexual intercourse, intermarriage with unbelievers, refusing sexual relations within a valid marriage, and even incest.

This cursory review of biblical history relative to the sexual and martial problems dealt with by under-shepherds of God's people through the ages has two purposes in this paper. The more negative intent is to remind pastoral counselors of the 21st century that there is nothing new under the sun. The good old days when God's flock enjoyed sexual purity and marital harmony without interruption have never existed in reality. Though cultures and times may differ in the specifics of their manifestation, the temptations and challenges facing believers in these last days are the same as those that have been faced by the elect in ages past. But God's sovereignty over the affairs of human beings has not been eclipsed in our day. Now is not the time for either nostalgia or despair on the part of pastors who would seek to be used by God with the couples who enter their studies. The more positive statement to be made upon reflection on biblical history is that pastoral counselors of couples today stand in a long line of godly men who have sought to respond to the needs of their generations by upholding the standards that God has given in his Word. Undoubtedly they were not perfect in that calling, and neither can we expect to be infallible. But God has always been faithful to guide and sustain his servants who seek to be faithful to him and his Word in shepherding his people, whether by means of encouragement or exhortation, comfort or confrontation. As we approach pastoral counseling of couples in our day, it is well for us to remember that God has not given us "a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control."¹

Current cultural context

Although there are no new sins in our cultural setting that make it unique in the annals of human history, different cultures manifest the same old sinful human nature in different ways, and it is helpful

¹ 2 Timothy 1:7

for the under-shepherds of God's flock to know the times in which they live so that they can better minister to his people who live in those times. This does not mean that pastoral counselors are to immerse themselves in popular culture so that they can be "relevant," or that they need to develop "seeker sensitive" interpretations of Scripture to make it more palatable to the modern/postmodern mind. In fact, to properly understand culture requires a viewpoint with reference points outside and beyond that culture, so that the viewer can avoid the blind spots of one who is so immersed in the culture as to be oblivious to its nature and influence. For the pastor who brings a couple into his study for counseling, it is the unchanging truth of God Word that provides those reference points beyond their culture—and his—so that he can see their circumstances and challenges more clearly. A few signs of the times in particular may be helpful to the pastor in understanding and responding to the cultural influences upon the couples to whom he seeks to minister.

Couples today live amidst the ruins of the traditional views of sexuality and marriage their forbears knew, and there is little indication of any new traditions appearing to take their place. It is true that some of the traditions that prevailed in the American culture of earlier modernity were contrary to God's truth, so we need not mourn their passing, but postmodernism is long past even a discerning between good and bad traditions. The concept of tradition itself has been rejected as intrinsically flawed. This means that for the typical couple who walk into the pastor's study today, there are in reality no solid cultural traditions upon which they rely. As a couple in relationship, they're making life up as they go along, with no authority outside of themselves for guidance. Past generations are seen as having nothing to offer, and indeed are seen as under the condemnation of the present, which is assumed to have progressed in every way beyond what is past. The couple will have habits and life patterns, and they will be aware of "the way our parents did it," but there are for them no authoritative traditions, no cultural norms that have some weight in themselves.

Neither does the couple the pastor brings into his study consider that their relationship is subject to any contemporary outside authorities. Religious, social, or legal entities are viewed as having no power to govern the couple's personal relationship. Indeed, the reverse is the case, as there is an assumption that institutions like churches and states should simply rubber stamp and support whatever kind of relationship the couple desires to have. One important ramification of this reality is that this leaves their relationship entirely dependent upon their own individual resources. This creates a constant drain upon them as individuals and leaves the relationship in a perpetually weakened state. They are

never able to say “we have to do it this way, because that’s the way it is done,” so every decision is made starting from scratch. A young couple with whom I am acquainted took this approach in discussing which of them should take the last name of the other after marriage. Simply following the tradition that the wife takes the husband’s name was not an option, but neither did either partner want to take the other’s name. There was no outside authority to make the decision, so the only solution seemed to be to leave it to chance. They flipped a coin, and chance decreed that the husband take the wife’s name. As it happened, however, on the drive to the town office to effect the change, the young husband confessed that he could not bring himself to follow through with the deed. The wife acquiesced to his decision, but the husband was left with the sense that he is now under obligation to her, since he failed to follow through with his commitment to abide by the coin toss. Every time now that they are not in agreement, he—and she—are reminded of his failure. Now he would like to have a child, but she would not, and he cannot even propose a coin toss, since he has already violated the terms of their arrangement. Without tradition or an external authority to which to appeal, a couple must struggle as best they can to make a life together with their own limited personal resources, and it is no wonder that many find the task difficult, if not impossible.

The loss of tradition and external authority structures has further led to an elevation of individual autonomy that further and often fatally undercuts the stability of the couple’s relationship. Any relational issue can become the point at which the very existence of the relationship is challenged. The extent of this radical autonomy of the individual is seen in the contemporary redefinition of the most basic aspects of sexuality and sexual relations. Each individual is left to determine his/her own sexual identity, and that identity is fluid, not fixed. A couple may begin their relationship as a man and a woman, but one or both of the partners may decide to change his or her gender identification. In addition, even if the individuals’ genders remain the same, their preferences for sexual relations may shift. Without any expectation of continuity even at the most basic level of sexual identity and orientation, the couples’ most intimate experience together becomes a stress, rather than a source of strength for their relationship. The same fluidity and self centeredness extends to career choices, decisions regarding parenting, or virtually any other aspect of life together.

The couples whom the pastor invites into his study, then, usually come with few resources to call upon for decision making or crisis management. The couple coming to ask the pastor to officiate at their wedding will have little, if any, idea of marriage traditions that support their decision to marry and

inform their understanding of what marriage will mean for them. They will usually have rejected their perceived notions of their parents' marital models. One or both of the individuals will often have been sexually active, but have no sense of how that affects their relationship. Both persons will have preconceived ideas and expectations based on highly individualized thoughts and feelings, and much of that content will be unknown to his or her companion. In the case of a couple coming in search of pastoral help with relational problems, it can be assumed that they come with individualistic viewpoints that have led them into conflict. They will lack the support of traditions that have in other time periods strengthened a marriage, and their understanding of sexual relations in marriage will often be as confused as they are highly charged by the influences of the larger culture in which they live. In many cases, they will come with individual viewpoints and agendas that rank above their concerns as a couple.

A thoughtful consideration of these and other important elements of the current cultural context of the couples who walk into his study will be of value to the pastor in seeking to effectively counsel them in accordance with biblical truth. That is not, of course, to say that the pastor will accommodate his thinking to the culture. But an awareness of the sinful tendencies and temptations that are common to couples today will help the pastor identify the particular needs and struggles of the couple to whom he is seeking to minister.

Wrong orientations in counseling

Pastoral counselors, like those whom they counsel, are sinners influenced by their own wrong attitudes and harmful cultural elements, so it is important for the pastor to guard against wrong thinking as he sits down with couples for counseling. It will be helpful to reflect on the manner in which he approaches the counseling experience and evaluate that approach by biblical standards. Other pastors may share this writer's sense of not being particularly gifted in the ministry of counseling, and therefore it may be of value to identify and be on guard against the tendencies that are addressed in the following paragraphs.

Counseling that is truly biblical is not the mere application of a set of rules to the lives of the couple who has come into the pastor's study. It is particularly tempting to think in these terms in the case of a couple who have obviously deviated from God's law in their choices and behavior. It is clear that when sins have been committed, there is a need to acknowledge and repent of those sins, but a legalistic approach to counseling runs the danger of focusing on external behaviors rather than dealing with the deeper issues of mind and heart that give rise to wrong actions. This will be especially important in cases

where one partner's sins are more evident than the other's, which may encourage in the pastor a natural tendency to take the side of the party who seems to be "in the right." Rather than thinking in terms of rules, the wise under-shepherd will seek to discern in the couple inclinations of the heart and will. Our Lord Jesus is the perfect example of one who listens and speaks in a manner that reveals the deeper attitudes and issues that need to be addressed. This does not mean, of course, that sin is not confronted; in fact, a focus on the heart is what will enable the counselor to confront sin on a deep and significant level. What is to be avoided is a focus upon law or rules as if they are an end in themselves that causes the pastor to view the couple in his study in mechanistic terms as rule keepers/breakers who by their own efforts gain or lose God's (and the pastor's) approval and blessing. Notice that such a viewpoint also tempts the pastor to view his own role as counselor in mechanistic terms: success or failure as a counselor will be determined by the extent to which the pastor can get the couple to keep the rules that the pastor is advocating.

Another example of the temptation to mechanistic thinking that arises out of modernity is the appeal of seeing the counseling of couples as a matter of the right technique. Often this comes into pastoral counseling as a popular methodology—say, for instance, the behaviorism that was endorsed in the group home setting where this writer worked as a young adult—is given expression with the use of Christian terminology. With a behaviorist approach, the pastor's goal with a couple would be to engage them in behaviors that will generate more positive relational outcomes, thereby bringing about change in the couple's thinking. The focus is on external behavior, and such an approach reduces the couple and the counselor to the levels of material and manipulator. Any fixed technique or method that a counselor adopts as standard operating procedure will have the effect of depersonalizing himself and the couple, and this is certainly not what Scripture envisions as loving pastoral care.

Part of the appeal of viewing the counseling of couples as the application of law or as the practice of an effective technique is that the pastor gains thereby an organizing paradigm that makes his counseling more than aimless conversation, giving him an idea of where his counseling of a couple is headed and a means to evaluate its effectiveness. The pastor develops a picture of a good marriage relationship and gauges the success of his counseling by how much progress the couple makes toward that ideal. This could be called an outcome based way of thinking. Its inherent limits are obvious: any outcome so envisioned is limited by its external focus, and may have nothing to do with a proper understanding of God's will and his means of effecting his will in the lives of the couple sitting in the

pastor's study. What the pastor needs is a paradigm and viewpoint that transcend mere human understanding of what it means to be in human relationship as husband and wife.

A biblical theology for counseling couples

The perspective and paradigm for which the pastor seeks as an under-shepherd of Jesus Christ to couples is found, of course, in God's Word. A sound theology will prove to be the most important element for a pastor to have as he sits down with a couple in his study. As is the case with so many foundational doctrines, the book of Genesis is the best place to begin, although relevant passages will be found throughout the Bible, all the way to the book of Revelation.

It is interesting to note that the climax of God's creative work is a couple—the first man and the first woman are given to one another in the first marriage. This is presented first in Genesis 1:26–31:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Several elements of the text emphasize the theme of marriage here, though as yet it is only implied. The singular term *man* is used in God's declaration of purpose, and serves as the antecedent for the plural pronoun *them* attached to the verb *have dominion*. So, too, in the description of God's creative act in fulfillment of his declared purpose, we read in the first two poetic lines *man* and *him*, set in chiasm, and in the third line the plural indicators *male and female* and *them* set in parallel with the singular terms of the first two lines. There is the clear implication here that it is not the male by himself nor the female by herself that individually possess the image of God, but rather it is in relationship together that the male and female are in God's image. Once created as male and female, it is as a couple that God blesses them. In his first words to the man and woman, God speaks to them as a couple, and indeed, it is only as a couple that man/mankind can imitate his/their Creator by fulfilling his mandate for his image-bearers:

“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” It is only then, having placed the couple at the place of dominion over the rest of creation, God pronounces all that he has created *very good*.

In the recapitulation and expansion of God’s creation of the first couple in chapter two of Genesis, this emphasis on marriage is made more explicit. After creating the human male and charging him with the responsibility to guard and keep the Edenic holy place, God unexpectedly pronounces something *not good* in this paradise. The male is lacking *a helper fit for him*, and his resulting aloneness is a state that is wrong, that is, contrary to what is good. In discharging the task of naming various creatures, this wrongness is made apparent to the man. Having made him aware of this fact, God now subjects the male to a death-like sleep in order to take from his side a part of his body that is made into the body of the female who is then presented to him. That the man understands the implied meaning of God’s action is shown in the man’s declaration in response to what God has done. The new husband declares that he and the woman are one and he names her, and at the same time names himself, with a shared name.

Moses’ inspired commentary on the event makes it clear that this is not a one time happening, but is rather a template for all subsequent human marital relationships. The male and female couple created by God’s special act of creation are to be a paradigm for all their offspring. No human relationship, not even the intimate bond between a child and his parents, is to be considered more binding than that of a husband and wife. Moses maintains nothing less than that there is a recapitulation of the first human coupling in every subsequent coupling, so that it can be said *they are one flesh*. As in the first creation account all is pronounced *very good*, so also at the close of the recapitulation of human creation in chapter two, the idea of goodness is communicated through the statement that the man and his wife were both naked without shame. Once again, the climax of God’s creative work is the establishment of marriage. With the institution of marriage, God has reached the completion of his earthly creation. Having received God’s blessing and mandate, the couple can now enjoy the rest in God’s presence that expresses itself in glorifying and enjoying him. Truly the biblical view of marriage immeasurably surpasses that of any merely human thought!

The centrality of human marriage continues in the biblical account of the Fall, for the first effect of sin is that the couple are estranged from one another. Whereas before, they were naked and

unashamed, as sinners they know shame and hide their bodies from one another—the same bodies they had previously seen and enjoyed as *one flesh*. Those bodies will now experience death, the ultimate earthly severing of the marital relationship, and even in life, the couple will now be separated by desires that put them at odds with one another. Yet this does not result in God’s throwing over his design for marriage after the Fall. Moses’ law of Genesis 2:28 was, after all, communicated to sinful human beings, and God’s creation mandate for the first couple remains in force for all those couples that follow, regardless of how far they fall short of that mandate. Marriage, then, remains at the center of God’s intention for those creatures he made in his image even in their fallen state.

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Apostle Paul provides us with an infallible hermeneutic of the Genesis account of the establishment of human marriage when he says that “This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.”² We can assume that the term *mystery* carries the same meaning as in other passages: a truth that has been heretofore unknown but is now revealed by divine revelation.³ We have it on apostolic authority, then, that a proper reading of the Genesis account of marriage sees it as prophetic of the union that is effected between Christ and his Church. This means, then, that earthly marriages are not ends in themselves, but signposts of the gospel of God—the good news that is “the power of salvation to everyone who believes.”⁴ An earthly marriage that makes a man and a woman one flesh is a reflection—made very dim at times by human sin—of the union of Christ Jesus with his chosen bride that is effected by the Holy Spirit’s regenerating power. The love of Christ for his Church and his nurturing of the Church as his own body, and the submission of the Church to her Lord and Savior are shadowed—again, poorly because of sin—by marriage on earth. This is the basis for a biblical understanding of marriage that forms the necessary context for Paul’s commands to husbands to love their wives and to wives to respect their husbands.⁵

The book of Revelation carries forward this metaphor of marriage as the final end of human history. Ultimately, every human being is a member either of the bride of the Lamb, the new Jerusalem, or a part of the false bride, the harlot who is condemned.⁶ As the institution of human marriage served as

² Ephesians 5:32

³ Other uses of the term are in Romans 11:26; 16:25; 1 Corinthians 2:1, 7; 4:1; 15:51; and Ephesians 1:8; 3:3, 9.

⁴ Romans 1:16

⁵ Ephesians 1:33

⁶ The imagery of the harlot and the bride is developed in Revelation 17-21.

the climax of the six days of God's work of creation, so the marriage of Christ and his Church is the climax of his work of redemption that is completed at the end of time. It is no wonder, as Jesus teaches, that earthly marriages do not continue into the age to come.⁷ Why should earthly marriages, which are but the shadow of the heavenly reality, continue once the reality of the union between God and his people has come? This writer's wife will certainly feel it no loss to exchange the dim foreshadowing of her husband for the radiant brightness of the Lamb!

A well developed theology of marriage as reflective of the relationship between God and his people would require a more thorough treatment of the texts mentioned above, as well as the addition of many more. Even this brief introduction, however, may provide sufficient material for thinking about an approach to counseling couples that gives theology a central role in the process. Marriage as a type of the union God sovereignly wills between himself and creatures in his image is the only meaning that lifts the institution of marriage above the level of a merely human means to some humanly determined goal. If human marriage is not viewed as the reflection, however marred, of eternal truth, then it will be forever subject to the vagaries of definition and practice of whatever human philosophy holds sway at the moment.

A gospel oriented counseling of couples

As the pastor welcomes a couple into his study for counseling, it is therefore advantageous to make a sound theology of marriage his starting point. One advantage is that this gives him a beginning point that is outside the immediate context of the couple's relationship. Starting with the biblical theology of marriage establishes the truth of Scripture at the center of the counseling agenda. This can be especially helpful to the pastor in cases where the couple—or one of them—comes with a definite agenda that they wish the pastor to accept as his own. A second advantage of beginning with the presenting of a theology of marriage from the Bible is that it puts the Scripture in the place of authority. The pastor is not making his own (or another's) list of rules or technique of interaction the standard to be applied to the couple's relationship. Rather, the pastor is standing alongside the couple, so to speak, in discovering the authoritative voice of God's Word. A third advantage to commencing counseling with a presentation of a biblical theology of marriage is that this will naturally put the pastor in the role of teacher with the couple he is counseling. Hopefully, this will make the most of the gift of teaching that is central to his pastoral calling. Finally, it is probable that most couples do not have an adequate

⁷ Matthew 22:30

understanding of the Bible's theology of marriage, so teaching that focuses on a biblical theology of marriage will address that need and provide the couple with a basis for beginning to properly examine their own relationship before God.

When one or both of the couple with whom the pastor is meeting are unconverted, making a biblical theology of marriage the focus will be wonderfully advantageous to a presentation of the gospel. Basic teachings regarding the creation of human beings in the image of God, original and ongoing sin, the wrath of God, redemption, and other key doctrines will inevitably come to the fore as the theology of marriage is unfolded. It will be natural for the pastor to lead the couple to the point of personally responding to the gospel's command to repent and exercise faith in Christ. What may have begun with the couple's query "Will you perform our wedding?" may lead to the life-changing question "Will you submit to Jesus Christ as your head and savior?"

For the couple who already profess and give evidence of genuine faith in Christ, a focus on the Scripture's theology of marriage will be a wonderful reminder of the sovereign grace of God in Christ in choosing and redeeming his bride. This will logically lead into a consideration of the sanctifying work of Christ through the Spirit in the Church "so 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."⁸ The couple can be reminded that, given the nature of marital relations, most of God's sanctifying work in them will take place in the context of their marriage. This will then put the focus of pastoral counseling on their mutual growth in holiness. It will be as the couple comes into right relationship with God that they are able to come into right relationship with one another. Rather than the typical problem solving focus of secular counseling, the pastor's ministry to the couple will be focused on growth in godliness.

The foregoing is not meant to imply that the pastor's time with a couple becomes a theology class, but it does assume that the decisions and behaviors of people arise out of a their personal theologies—that is, how they think about God and his relationship with them. Human choices are never truly random or meaningless, but are expressions of a particular set of beliefs rooted ultimately either in self-will or a will submitted to God. Pastoral counseling of couples should have as its aim the addressing of the couple's wills, not the mere changing of external patterns of behavior. The process of pastoral counseling is similar to that hoped for in preaching: the Holy Spirit empowering the Word of God so that

⁸ Ephesians 5:27

it speaks to the understanding in such a way as to engage the heart, thereby bringing about a change in the will through the gift of faith.

Although the truth of God's Word does not waver, the specific course of pastoral counseling will vary widely in keeping with the differences among couples and their personal circumstances, and in accordance with the particular spiritual gifts of pastors. There will be room for confrontation as well as comfort, and for patience as well as pressing for a response. At times, learning may seem excruciatingly slow, and on other occasions, there will seem to be remarkable gaining of insights. It will be wise to aim for orthodoxy and consistency in theology and flexibility in terms of technique. The incredible variations we see in Scripture in God's dealings with human beings encourages pastors to an openness to the Spirit's varied work in the couples they counsel. Biblically based counseling is not a mechanical application of the same routine, but a sometimes exhausting and sometimes exciting following of Christ in loving, feeding, and protecting his flock.

A caution

Even as pastors seek to work hard as under-shepherds of the Church of Christ in the counseling of couples, for most of them there will be one couple that is to be of primary concern. For a married pastor, his own marriage is to be his priority in ministry. A biblical theology of marriage demands that a husband love his wife as Christ loved the Church, and that command is not set aside when a man becomes a pastor. For a pastor to neglect his wife in a supposed dedication to his pastorate is not merely foolish—it is wicked. Long before a pastor tries to help couples apply to their relationships a biblical theology of marriage, he should be applying it to his own relationship with his wife. This is not to say that the pastor's own marriage must be perfect, nor that he himself has to be a perfect husband. This side of glory, no saved sinners are perfect in holiness. It is to say, however, that "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness."⁹ If pastors would be teachers and counselors of couples—which they should be—then they should humbly examine themselves so that their faith is shown in their living.

Conclusion

Ultimately, when the pastor invites a couple into his study for counseling, he is simply seeking an opportunity to be used by God in the work that the Spirit himself is doing in their lives. The under-shepherd is not the Savior nor the Master of the flock of God. It is hoped that he will have a love and

⁹ James 3:1

concern for those whom the Lord sends his way, and that he will do his best to provide for them pastoral care, but he can not of himself determine the outcome of his counseling nor shape the eternal destinies of those couples with whom he meets. The under-shepherd can, however, have full faith and confidence in the sovereign will of God to bring glory to himself in every circumstance.