

Marriage & the Counsel of God

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by

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1. Introduction

There are as many reasons to pursue marriage counseling as there are people to seek it. But there are four directions from which forces compel us to counsel before pursuing a marriage or before seeking to terminate one: forces from above, beside, below, and within. First, the force from above is God. God created us to live in communion with Himself and each other. He defined that communion even more specifically by creating new life through the union of husband and wife. The wisdom of our creator is the first and most compelling force to seek the fulfillment that comes within a relationship that is lived according to His design.

Second, a good marriage is important to the community of people around us, near and far. The world itself, whole nations and small communities, is only able to recognize and devote significant effort toward noble causes when marriages and families are sound and vibrant. Christian congregations provide an environment of mutual support when marriages within it are healthy and encouraging. Extended families also benefit from the common effort to know the blessings of relationships according to God's design.

Third, a good marriage is essential to those below--the children. Children learn about their relationship to God by observing their fathers and mothers. The fallen human nature of children needs a united perspective and response from parents. The souls of children need the united yet multifaceted witness of parents.

Finally, each person involved in a relationship has a soul that yearns to know the union that God intended. The distorted thinking of human nature and the aggressive nature of perversion (especially through the media) make a life within God's Word and grace essential if goodness is to be discovered and protected. Our souls need truth to know what makes life and grace to inspire us to that life. Such absolute truth and grace can only be found in the Word of God.

God's Word as the only reliable response to human need in relationships is the origin of this book and the reason for its title, "Marriage and the Counsel of God." What follows is the product of more than twenty-five years of study coupled with more than twenty years of marriage counseling (pre and post). The clarity of God's design for relationships as communicated in the Bible and fidelity to that provide the most reliable means of developing, sustaining, and restoring good marriages. The text generally follows Martin Luther's chief parts of the Christian faith from his Small Catechism: The Ten Commandments, The Creed, The Lord's Prayer, Baptism, Lord's Supper, and the Office of the Keys. However, longer sections of scripture are considered where appropriate and other matters of counseling are treated in supplementary sections. For example, the counseling proper begins with a careful treatment of Genesis 1-3 since that is the foundation and source of everything else the Bible has to say about marriage and relationships. Ephesians 5 is treated in greater detail under the 2nd article of the Apostles Creed because Christ provides the other great witness to God's intent for relationships.

The companion workbook should be given to each of the individuals seeking counseling. They are to complete the battery of questions (2.b.) before counseling begins and then continue to read ahead make notes on the subsequent materials. As the counselor leads the individual or couple through these materials the counselee(s) can refer to their notes for questions, disagreements, or interest in further discussion. These materials are printed on one side only to allow ample space for notes.

2.a.i. Preliminary Concerns – Outline

I. Preliminaries

- A. Consent of those responsible to God for your well-being
 - 1. Parents of the woman
 - 2. Parents of the man
 - 3. Pastor
 - a. Eligibility in regard to the state
 - i.) Marriage license
 - ii.) STD counseling
 - b. Eligibility in regard to family
 - c. Eligibility in regard to the Church
 - i.) Of one faith
 - ii.) In the image of Christ and His Church
 - iii.) With obvious and consistent morality/virtue
- B. Proposal and acceptance
 - 1. With full capability to fulfill what is required
 - 2. With a full understanding of what is being proposed
 - 3. Freely and without deceit or duress

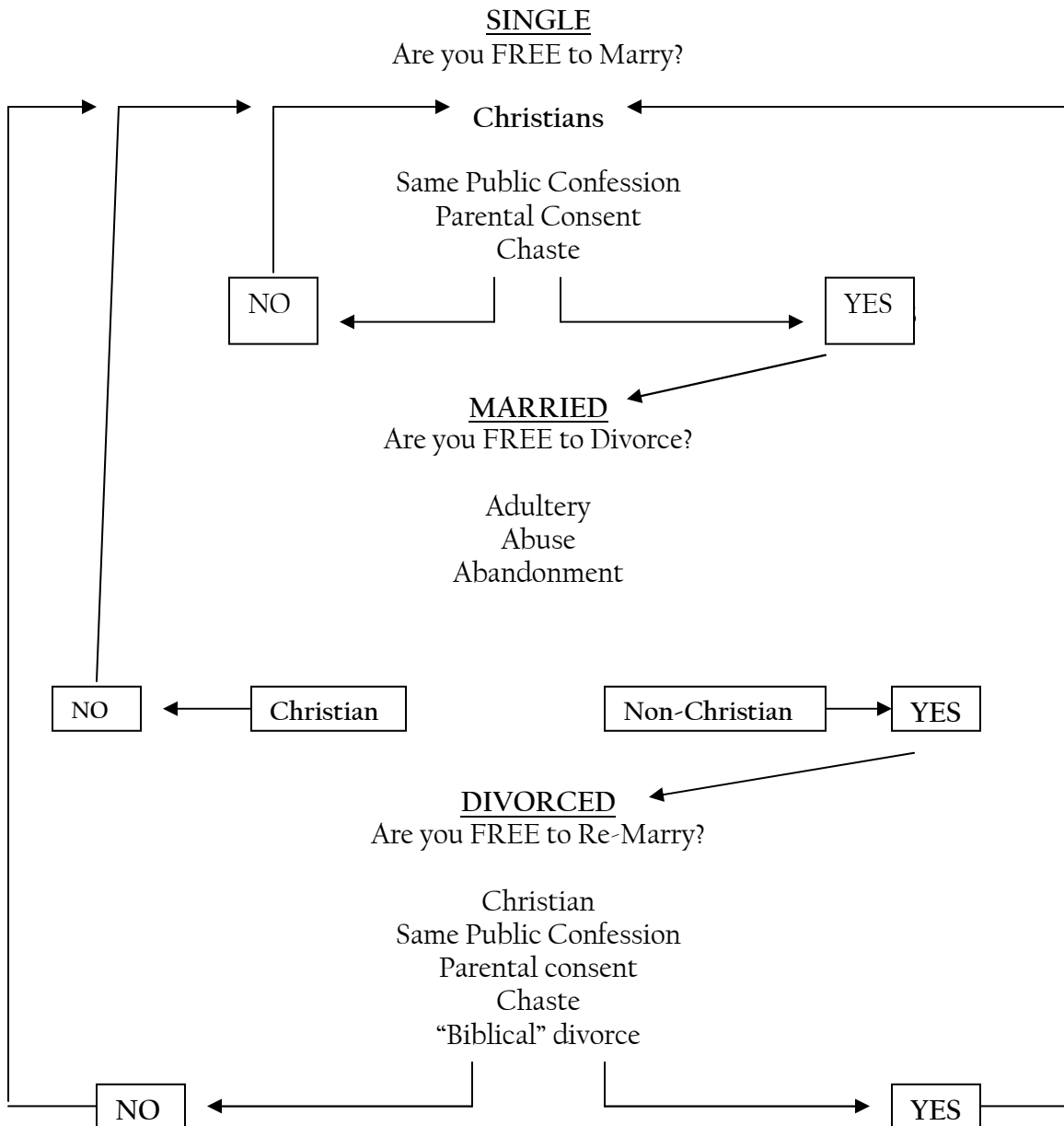
II. Preparations

- A. Counseling to insure all of the above
- B. Final consent of pastor
- C. Rehearsal . . . date/time _____
- D. Wedding arrangements in human modesty to the glory of God
 - Date/time _____
 - 1. Texts
 - 2. Music
 - 3. Apparel, marriage party (people), conduct before, during, and after
 - 4. Photography: before, during, after
 - 5. Reception
- E. Use of the church
 - 1. Pastor
 - 2. Organist
 - 3. Musicians
 - 4. Cleaning

III Post wedding pattern of living

- A. Faithful involvement in the life of God's Church
- B. Personal devotions (pulse)
- C. Private confession and absolution (blood pressure)
- D. Faithfulness to vows - in every respect

2.c.i. Flowchart of Preliminary Marriage Matters – Outline



2.c.ii. Flowchart of Preliminary Marriage Matters – with explanation

SINGLE

Are you FREE to marry?

This question was considered above under preliminary concerns. The question has three areas of interest:

1. Regarding civil law – Are either of the individuals already married? Is there any kind of legal encumbrance or litigation against either person that we should all know about? Are they of legal age?
2. Regarding physical circumstances – Marriage is not necessarily the best solution to a pregnancy or to economic expediency. (“It’s cheaper to live together,” or “This way I can be on his or her insurance.”)
3. Regarding emotional and other circumstances – Is someone fleeing a bad situation at home? Is one or both of the individuals trying to get something they lack? Is one or the other creating a burden of commitment, even though the other has fears or serious reservations?

Christians

You may not be able to know the answer to this question until the end of all the counseling. However, it is helpful to know how each person assesses their own relationship to Christianity and to God. Note that this question is entirely before and separate from the question of public confession/membership.

Same Public Confession

Once the individual’s own faith has been identified and articulated, we can consider what that means in comparison to any church body they hold membership in or identify with. This is a good time to talk about integrity; that is, consistency between one’s inner beliefs and one’s outward confession and conduct. The marriage union (as well as all other relationships) depends on honesty (not trust) between the individuals. If words and conduct are not consistent with inner convictions, then we really never know the person we are trying to bond with. Discrepancies between the private and public person are like dirt on a surface meant to be bonded to another. No glue can hold.

Once we have determined the convictions of each individual, we can consider how they compare to each other, to the Word of God/orthodox Christianity, and to the options available in which they might confess that publicly and in communion with others.

Parental Consent

This was also included above in preliminary concerns. Here we simply need to know whether both sets of parents have given their consent. If they have not, we need to pursue the cause. If their cause has merit, we need to work that out with the couple. If their cause does not have merit, they must either recognize that and give consent, or realize that their refusal cannot be accepted as an obstacle to the marriage.

EXAMPLE: I have had both cases. In one case, a mother refused consent. Upon investigation her objections were absolutely legitimate. The couple refused to honor

her concerns and flew to Vegas for a quick wedding. They are still legally married, but that marriage has never been good or joyful for either of them. In another case, I had parents raise objections that a long conversation was able to relieve. This system of counseling offers great relief to most parents, as they see the depth, comprehensiveness, and biblical character of the material.

Chaste

The individuals must be chaste. If they have not been, the situation needs to be resolved and confession and absolution provided. They may choose to resolve this by marrying immediately, in which case this becomes “post” marriage counseling. If they separate they need to make arrangements to insure that they can remain chaste.

NO

YES

MARRIED

Are you FREE to divorce?

Marriage is an extension of and witness to God’s relationship with His people. Consequently, Christian marriage is dependant on the individual’s relationship with God. A person’s relationship with God has eternal consequences; a marriage to another person does not. For these reasons, Paul makes clear in 1 Corinthians 7 that a believer’s union with God always takes priority over their relationship to another person. Yet union with God includes love, which motivates love and reconciliation between people, if possible. Therefore,

1. A Christian is free to divorce if their spouse puts their relationship with God in peril.
2. A Christian is also free to divorce if their spouse terminates the marriage in fact by:
 - a. Committing adultery (this includes not only the physical act of intercourse with another, but conduct which demonstrates that a spouse is devoted to another person).
 - b. Abuse of any kind that puts a spouse’s health in jeopardy.
 - c. Abandonment, which is really a combination of adultery and abuse as defined above.
3. Nevertheless, a marriage need not necessarily be terminated for any of these reasons, if the offending spouse is penitent and willing to amend and if the offended spouse is capable of seeking reconciliation.
4. If the offending spouse is claiming a Christian faith, then we have cause to investigate:
 - a. Is this confession of the offending spouse of a character that would urge reconciliation?
 - b. Is this confession just a sham, in which case the offending spouse is no Christian at all, and the offended spouse is free to divorce anyway?

(This explains why the flow chart appears as it does. According to 1 Corinthians 7:10-12, if both parties claim a Christian faith, then we have every reason to believe that reconciliation may be achieved.

Adultery
Abuse
Abandonment

NO Christian

Non-Christian YES

DIVORCED

Are you FREE to re-marry?

If individuals who come for marriage counseling have been married already, we must know the circumstances of the termination of their first marriages. Here, some special care is appropriate:

1. That we not impose any kind of physical or spiritual penalties that the Bible does not impose.
2. That we not disturb or disrupt absolution and healing that has already been established.
3. That we also not gloss carelessly over situations where, from God's perspective, a previous marriage is still in place. Doing so would make us a party to adultery and of encouraging the very destruction of marriages we are trying to prevent. Thus, only in cases where none of the biblical causes for divorce exist, would we pursue this issue. Even so, if the former spouse(s) have already remarried or if they are unwilling, we cannot force reconciliation.

The rest of the categories below have been addressed above.

Christian
Same Public Confession
Parental consent
Chaste
"Biblical" divorce

NO

YES

At any point along this process, if we find a "no" answer, then we return to previous, more fundamental questions. If we are not dealing with two Christians, we need to go back and resolve that, for we have no reason to be a part of uniting believers to unbelievers (2 Corinthians 6:14). If there is resistance to chaste conduct, the question of Christian faith is raised again. If there is a divorce, at many points we may again be forced to consider the question of an individual's Christian faith. When seeking re-marriage, we may need to go back and evaluate reasons for a previous divorce, or the individual's disposition may again put their religious convictions in question.

When all aspects of concern are resolved, then the "yes" answer is appropriate and the couple or individual may pursue their course.