

Couples in Conflict: a Biblically-Based Approach to Problem Resolution

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INTRODUCTION:

- This workshop presents a Biblically-based counseling approach with couples who are in conflict.
- These conflicts are problems (as identified by the couple) that have, thus far, resisted resolution.
- The purpose of traditional couples counseling with those who are in conflict is to facilitate resolutions in which both partners have been satisfied and have a feeling of closure with reference to the identified problem(s).

Introduction

- As the couple attempt to resolve their differences they may find themselves drawing away from the “will of God” and placing more credence in their own (often conflictual) perspectives rather than in God’s commands and promises
- The objective of this counseling approach is to assist the counselor in integrating Christ into a therapeutic (healing) process, so that the counseling is not done independently from Him
- This workshop is meant to empower the counselor and the couple to develop a relationship with God, which will help the couple resist the temptation to act independently of God’s support, guidance and wisdom in their attempt towards problem resolution.

Introduction

- The goal of this workshop is to provide counselors a biblically-based approach to problem resolution that draws upon secular couples counseling methods
- This approach which uses both **Christian faith principles** and secular couples’ counseling methods—for insight and direction in helping couples resolve problems.
- There are 8 stages to this couples counseling approach

The Biblical Covenant as the Basis for Couple Relationships

A Covenant is:

1. An agreement enacted between two parties in which one or both make promises under oath to perform or refrain from certain actions stipulated in advance.
2. A major metaphor to describe the relationship between God and the people of God (OT as the old covenant; NT as the new covenant).
3. The covenant is the instrument constituting the rule of the kingdom of God and the term "covenant" is a significant lens by which and through which we can understand, appreciate, and recognized the biblical ideal of religious community and most importantly the family.

George Mendenall & Gary Herion, "Covenant", *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 1:1179

Covenant as the Basis for Couple Relationships

- Humans are in a covenant relationship with God.
- Concept of covenant applies to all human relationships.
- Covenant love provides the basis for marital relationships.
- The marriage relationship is where you are loved unconditionally and where you can count on that love even when you least deserve it.

Covenant Obligations Within Marriages

- Couples living in a covenant relationship must be willing to forgive and be forgiven by one another.
- Couples living in a covenant relationship must accept their bondedness to one another.
- Couples living in a covenant relationship accept law in the form of relationship patterns, rules and order that provides structure to their relationships.
- Couples living in a covenant relationship have a temporal awareness as they carry memories of their past together, as they live in the present and as they anticipate the future.

Four Essential Concepts in a Covenantal Theology of Marital Relationships

1. Initial Covenant
2. Grace
3. Empowering
4. Intimacy

Balswick & Balswick, (2007): *The Family: A Christian Perspective on the Contemporary Home*, 3rd ed.
Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

Initial Covenant: To love and Be loved

- Central point of covenant is the unconditional commitment demonstrated by God to His creation.

"As for me I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you..." (Gen 9:9-10)

- The example of the prodigal son:
Just as the father welcomed home his wayward son, Jesus demonstrated unconditional love to a people who have rejected the Father but now seek to return home.

1 John 4:19, "We love him because he first loved us"

The Initial Covenant and Commitment

- When a child is born parents make an unconditional commitment to love that child. The infant or young child is unable to make such a commitment in return but as the child matures the initial covenant can develop a more mature bilateral covenant.
- The ideal for the marital and mature parent child relationships is the unconditional bilateral and reciprocal relationship based on intra-familial commitments.
- This demonstrates the willingness to be unselfish rather than thinking only of the self (*selfish*) or only of others (*selfless*)

Grace: To Forgive and Be Forgiven

- By its very nature, a covenant is grace-from a human perspective the unconditional love of God makes no sense except it is offered in grace .
- We are called to share in a gracious relationship with God.
- Grace means unmerited favor.
- Couple relationships are meant to be lived out in an atmosphere of grace not law- living out of grace and forgiveness which is necessary to maintain committed marital relationships

To Forgive and Be Forgiven

- Couples cannot lived only under law and not grace.
- We can forgive others as we have been forgiven and the love of God as experienced within makes it possible for us to love others in an unconditional way
- A marital relationship based on law in which each demand perfection of each other is problematic as "we all have fallen short of the glory of God"
- A covenant of grace rules out judgmental unloving law as a basis for couple relationships. Such an atmosphere leads to a sense of perfectionism in which one can only earn love by doing everything the right way.

Empowerment: To Serve and be Served

- The process of helping each other is based on the ability for one to recognize his or her potential and to reach the potential through one's encouragement and guidance.
- The one who empowers must learn to step back, recognized the uniqueness of each person and never use control, coercion, or force.

To Serve and be Served

- Covenant is the love commitment; grace is the underlying atmosphere of acceptance and; empowerment is the action of God in people's lives
- Empowerment is love in action

2 Cor 12: 19c *"Everything we do is for the sake of building you up"*

1 Cor 8:1 *"Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up:"*

Empowering supports the couple to become interdependent and prevents one from having "inappropriate" power over the other- power that stifles the growth of the other.

Intimacy: To Know and Be Known

- Commitment should be based on mature (unconditional and bilateral) covenant love.
- Couple relationships should be established and maintained within an atmosphere of grace which embraces acceptance and forgiveness.
- The resources of the relationship should be used to empower rather than to control one another.

What is the meaning of intimacy?

To Know and Be Known

- Intimacy is based on a knowing that leads to caring, understanding, communication and communion with other
- Intimacy can lead to:
 1. Deeper covenant love within the marital relationship
 2. A commitment that fortifies an atmosphere of freely offered grace.
 3. The climate of acceptance and forgiveness within the relationship that encourages serving and empowering others.
 4. A resultant sense of self-esteem leading to the ability of each to be intimate without fear.

Hurting Behaviors in Couple Relationships

- Among hurting behaviors in couple relationship are conditional love, self-centeredness, perfectionism, faultfinding, efforts to control others, unreliability, denial of feelings, and lack of communication.
- With such behaviors the focus is on the self rather than on the best interest of other marital partner.
- In hurting families, each individual is affected on a personal level

Hurting Couples

- For example, one may not feel loved or worthy of being loved by the marital partner.
- Such individuals are limited in their ability to love unconditionally and a vicious circular pattern results which may perpetuate the real problems
- Hurting marital partners tend to withhold grace often demanding unreasonable perfection and blaming the other partner who does not measure up and they feel rejected and try harder to be perfect.

Hurting Couples

- Hurting partners in a marital relationship control rather than empower their partner and the partner may lack confidence that they can influence others in an affirming and validating manner.
- Hurting couples are those in which are not in touch with feelings-need a safe atmosphere in which they can express their feelings- need for open communication

Christian-Based Family Therapy and Mainstream (secular) Approaches

- The need to humble ourselves and accept that **we are imperfect as counselors**
- Unfortunately many counseling professionals today tend to think a dichotomy exists between the two. Some may fear that a synthesis between psychology and theology would result in soft scholarship and/or "Bible thumping."
- We use both psychology and religion for insight and direction, not for proselytizing. Some may be concerned that including religious perspectives would undercut the depth of analysis of family process and interaction. Rather, theology is the part of religion which requires critical thinking and problem solving.

Christian-Based Couples Therapy

- The Christian-based marital therapist empowers the the family to develop a relationship with God, which will help the couple to resist the temptation to act independently of God's support, guidance and wisdom—in their attempt to repair relationships
- Problem areas begin to be identified and the couple may end up on opposite sides of the fence.
- The couple may find themselves lost in a sea of indifference wrought with strife and conflict.
- As the family attempt to resolve their differences they may find themselves drawing away from the “will of God” (covenant) and placing more credence in their own (often conflictual) perspectives rather than in God's commands and promises

Christian-Based Couples Therapy

- Couples may create 'do-it-yourself-relationships' that separates them, and their relationships from God's wisdom.
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- The message in this workshop is that the counselor must also integrate Christ into the therapeutic (healing) process.
- Counseling needs to be 'biblically-informed' and that the counselor knows that they are not the authority in this 'healing' process. (John 1: 48.)
- It is imperative that the counselor accept that that they (alone) cannot guide relationships back to health; and that the knowledge that they have (from secular psychology) is not perfect....That only God's knowledge is perfect (John 8: 31-32.)

Characteristics of "Happy" Couples

Tolstoy's adage:

"All happy families are alike, but unhappy marriages are unhappy in their own way."

- Characteristics (John Gottman)

- foundation of affection and friendship
 - "validation sequences"
 - ability to resolve disagreements
 - "positive sentiment override"
- a 5 to 1 (or better) compliment-criticism ratio is optimal
 - as the ratio decreases, marriage satisfaction decreases
- Amount of conflict relatively unimportant (all relationships have conflict)

Distressed couples (Gottman cont.)

- Engage in a wide range of destructive fighting techniques
 - Personal attacks (name calling)
 - Dredging up the past
 - Losing focus (...and the "kitchen sink")
- Tend to resort to the "four horsemen of the apocalypse"
 - Criticism
 - Contempt
 - Defensiveness
 - Stonewalling



Gottman: The Four Horsemen – Expressions of Specific Negative Behaviors.

◦ **Criticism** – more damaging than complaints. Includes character attacks, i.e., “you never pick up after yourself,” “You are really boring.” Also includes global complaints, i.e., “You never.....” or “You always.....”

Contempt – is most corrosive and more destructive than criticism. It conveys disgust and disrespect. It can include sarcasm, mockery, insults, eye rolls, scowls, and hostile humor to belittle the intended partner. Hinders any attempts at reconciliation, and usually includes an attitude of superiority.

Gottman: The Four Horsemen – Expressions of Specific Negative Behaviors.

◦ **Defensiveness** – Attempts to blame the partner for the aggressor's behavior. It usually becomes a counterattack. That escalates negativity.

Stonewalling – an overwhelmed partner uses this to convey that (he) does not want to continue the interaction. It is usually a man, and the pattern is his withdrawal in the face of active pursuit and demands. Although the stonewaller appears hostile, his actual feelings are “when she going to stop.”

Physical sense of *emotional flooding*, and the person is so overwhelmed that they cannot even listen. This, of course, only serves to infuriate the partner more, and provoke their mate to “engage, discuss, and be accountable.”



Gottman: The Four Horsemen – Expressions of Specific Negative Behaviors.

When all four horsemen are present, Gottman can predict with 94% accuracy a divorce or separation will occur, usually within the early part of the relationship.

Emotionally disengaged couples do not display the Four Horsemen, as they do not even care to get into these highly charged and emotionally embroiled battles. These couples live in quiet desperation but end up divorces usually within 7 to 14 years. The relationship just slowly withers and dies.



THE EIGHT STAGES OF COUPLES COUNSELING

Stage One: Defining the Conflict and (proposed) Resolutions

- Determining the 'nature' of the conflict (i.e., values, desires, needs, fears, preferences, obligations, etc.)
- ❑ ***Biblically-based principles***
 - ❖ Asking for spiritual help
 - ❖ Helping each other on their spiritual journey
 - ❖ Learning from your growth in your relationship with Christ and applying it to your relationship (Jeremiah 29:11-13)

Stage Two: Identifying Responses to Conflict

- Ways couple response to conflict (fighting—arguments/blaming/criticizing; physical and/or verbal abuse; fleeing—avoidance/'workaholism'/drug and alcohol abuse; and freezing—indecision/procrastination/panic attacks)
- Can result in individual low self-esteem/guilt/depression/negativity
- ❑ ***Biblically-based principles***
 - ❖ Getting past the hurt (with God's help)
 - ❖ Receiving grace from God for forgiving each other
 - ❖ Recognizing the impact of perpetuating conflict (Proverbs 12:18, Proverbs 14: 29; James 1:19, Ephesians 4:26)

Stage Three: Examining Reciprocal Interactional Patterns of Conflict

- Learning a habitual response to conflict from families of origin
 - Triggering of individual internal turmoil
 - Cyclical responses by one partner's belief of how the other is about to behave (i.e., cognitive distortions)
- ❑ ***Biblically-based principles***
- ❖ The spirit with which we approach conflict makes all the difference in the world [Christians are to approach conflict with a spirit of humility, gentleness and patience (Ephesians 4: 1-3)]
 - ❖ Neither "fight or flight or aggression or avoidance" provides a solution to conflict. There is always a third way which calls for love and self-control (1 Corinthians 13: 4-7; 2 Peter 1: 5-6)

Stage Four: Assessing the Content of Conflicts

- Identifying two levels of content in any conflict:
 - (1) Manifest content, i.e., specific topics or problems
 - (2) Latent content, i.e., the underlying concerns—desires, fears, values, and practical family issues
- ❑ **Biblically-based principles**
- ❖ Praying to God for wisdom and relying on His perfect understanding and knowledge
 - ❖ Using this knowledge to communicate with each other [Jesus spoke directly to people who were caught in the grip of fear...or stuck in hatred of the other (Proverbs 10:12)]

Stage Five: Assessing the Process of Handling Conflicts

- How do couples go about dealing with conflict?
 - Observing constructive vs. destructive communication habits
 - Noting poor communication habits (i.e., dishonest communication, incomplete communication, unclear/vague communication, and other poor communication *habits-double bind, incongruent communication*)
 - Observing the negotiation patterns of each partner-as individuals
 - Then assessing how the individual patterns of each partner combine into reciprocal interaction patterns
- **Biblically-based principles**
 - ❖ Encouraging the couple to learn from Christ-as a model communicator and problem solver (WWJD) [Often Jesus taught followers not to be judgmental (Matthew 7: 1-5, Luke 6:37)]
 - ❖ Helping couples to communicate their feelings in a way that it does not criticize or cause alienation from one another [‘Consider others as better than ourselves’ (Philippians 2:3-7)]

Stage Six: Designing Solutions

- Teaching the couple—step by step—through the three steps of collaborative problem-solving:
 - 1) Expression of initial positions
 - 2) Exploration of concerns
 - 3) Solution-building and selection
- **Biblically-based principles**
 - ❖ Compromise as a sign of love and humbleness
 - ❖ Giving away power is not a sign of weakness, but an act of love
 - ❖ When we care about someone, we will care enough to move beyond attitudes and behaviors which enable relational “unhealthiness” (Ecclesiastes 4: 9-11; 1 Peter 4:8)

Stage Seven: Implementation of Problem Resolution

- Using “coaching techniques”:
 - Positive reinforcement
 - ‘Shaping and modeling’
- Immediate feedback as the couple practices new behaviors
- ‘Visualization’
- Homework assignments—giving the couple tasks that help them toward independence of the counselor

- ❑ **Biblically-based principles**
 - ❖ Diffuse escalating violence
 - ❖ Forgive those who do not understand or make mistakes
 - ❖ Embracing that patience is a virtue, etc.)

Stage Eight: Closure, Termination and Handling Future Conflicts

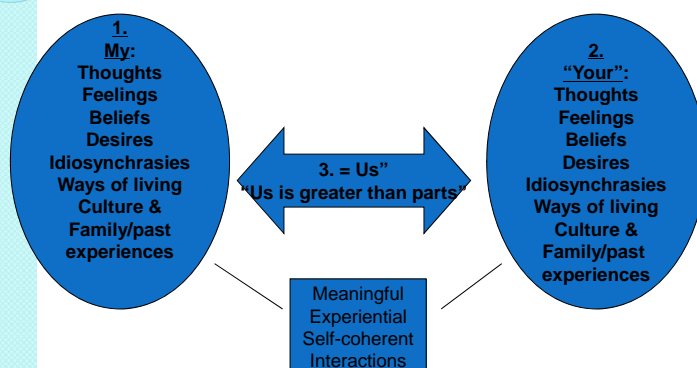
- Reviewing the progress that the couple has made throughout the counseling process
- Spreading out the last few sessions (in order to build the couples’ confidence in their being able to get along **without** the assistance of a counselor)
- Helping the couple anticipate their ‘Achilles heels’ and/or their relational vulnerabilities
- Providing self-help and resource information that the couple can use to revive their relationship—especially for couples who have been engaged in long term conflict and may have forgotten how to have fun and enjoy the relationship (e.g., couples retreats, self-help books on relationship enhancement, etc.)

Stage Eight: Closure, Termination and Handling Future Conflicts (continued)

□ **Biblically-based principles**

- ❖ Encouraging the couple to take individual responsibility for any discontent that they may develop in the future—avoiding blaming each other for unhappiness in the marriage [It is easy to blame. “Joshua blamed God, his wife, and other people when ill fortune arrived” [Joshua 7]]
- ❖ Encouraging the couple to pray together and to engage in activities that facilitate their spiritual growth—individually and as a couple
- ❖ Helping the couple to locate faith-based couples’ retreats
- ❖ Providing self-help books that help the couple to grow in their faith and in their relationship

Establishing “The Power of Three”



Catalina Woldarsky

Ten Biblical Rules for a Happy Marriage

- **Never bring up mistakes of the past.**
- *Stop criticizing others or it will come back on you. If you forgive others you will be forgiven (Luke 6:37)*
- **Neglect the whole world rather than each other.**
- *And how do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul in the process (Mark 8:36)*
- **Never go to sleep with an argument unsettled.**
- *And don't sin by letting anger gain control over you. Don't let the sun go down while you are still angry (Ephesians 4:26)*
- **At least once a day, try to say something complimentary to your spouse.**
- *Gentle words bring life and health; a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit (Proverbs 15:4)*
- Steve Arterburn: *New Life Ministries*

Ten Biblical Rules for a Happy Marriage

- **Never meet without an affectionate welcome.**
- *Kiss me again and again, your love is sweeter than wine (Song of Solomon 1:2)*
- **"For richer or poorer"-rejoice in every moment that God has given you together.**
- *A bowl of soup with someone you love is better than steak with someone you hate (Proverbs 15:17)*
- **If you have a choice between making yourself or your mate look good, choose your mate.**
- *Do not withhold good from those who deserve it when it is in your power to help them (Proverbs 3:27)*
- **Don't use faith, the Bible, or God as a hammer.**
- *God did not send His Son into the world to condemn it, but to save it (John 3:17)*
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