



# **Electronic Thesis & Dissertation Collection**

J. Oliver Buswell Jr. Library  
12330 Conway Road  
Saint Louis, MO 63141

[library.covenantseminary.edu](http://library.covenantseminary.edu)

This document is distributed by Covenant Seminary under agreement with the author, who retains the copyright. Permission to further reproduce or distribute this document is not provided, except as permitted under fair use or other statutory exception.

The views presented in this document are solely the author's.

LD  
1401  
.262  
S-27  
1011

SUCCESSFULLY WORKING THROUGH CONFLICT IN  
MARRIAGE

By

SANTO GAROFALO

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE  
FACULTY OF COVENANT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

2011



SUCCESSFULLY WORKING THROUGH CONFLICT IN  
MARRIAGE

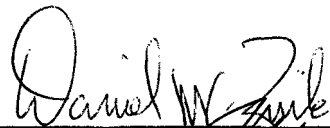
By

SANTO GAROFALO

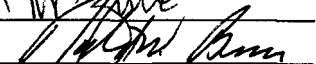
A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED  
TO THE FACULTY OF  
COVENANT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

Graduation Date MAY 20, 2011

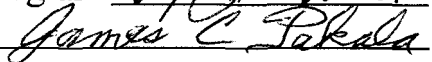
Dr. Daniel W. Zink, Faculty Advisor



Dr. Robert W. Burns, Director of DMin Program



Rev. James C. Pakala, Library Director



## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to understand how couples in healthy, lasting marriages worked through conflict in such a way that it strengthened rather than damaged the marital relationship. The study was comprised of interviews of couples who have been married for twenty-five years or longer.

This study utilized a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews with seven Christian couples that have been married for over twenty five years. The semi-structured interview questions were designed not only to get the couples to open up about how they de-escalate negative affect and cultivate positive affect in the midst of conflict but also to get them to dialogue about the ways they interact during times of non-conflict.

In the area of de-escalating negative affect and cultivating positive affect in the midst of conflict, the findings of this study revealed that healthy, long lasting couples learned to accept what most likely won't be changed about their partners. They also found ways to discuss their differences and in some cases resolve some of the issues that can be resolved. They demonstrate an increasing ability and willingness to work through conflict respectfully and gently. They have learned to accept each other for who they are but also to convey that acceptance and respect even in the midst of working through disagreements. In addition to this, they also affirmed the importance of forgiving each other.

In the area of how couples interact during times of non-conflict the findings of this study revealed that healthy, long-lasting couples strive to find ways to be more proactive in cultivating fun, humor, sacrifice, forgiveness, respect, fondness, commitment, and the like in their relationships.

The couples interviewed recognized the need to show love and respect to one another on an emotional level. They expressed the need to feel understood, heard, supported, valued and, in a word, loved. Thus, while counselors can certainly help couples work on spiritual intimacy, tongue control, and the like, one of the most vital things that a counselor can help couples do is to cultivate, strengthen, and pay some focused attention to connecting emotionally with one another.

This study concluded that healthy, lasting couples learned to accept what most likely won't be changed about their partners. They also found ways to discuss their differences and in some cases resolve the issues that can be resolved. They cultivate their friendship and express much respect, appreciation, and humor in their marriage. To some extent, they do so even in the midst of conflict. In addition to this, they strive to forgive when they don't do so consistently. Husbands are characterized by a willingness to sacrifice and a willingness to accept their wives' influence. Wives allow their husbands time to cool down and come back to the issue later. And although the couples interviewed may not have always spoken in terms of emotional attachment or bonding, most spoke of needing to listen empathetically to one another and to express emotions openly without doing so in a way that disrespects their partner. They also accept outside help from time to time, whether it be counseling, marriage enrichment seminars, books, men's groups, or even just going out with other couples.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</b>	viii
<b>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION</b>	
Introduction to the Study	1
Statement of Problem and Purpose	5
Primary Research Questions	6
Significance of the Study	6
Definition of Terms	9
<b>CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW</b>	
Marriage Preparation and Enrichment	10
Scriptural Principles	23
<b>CHAPTER THREE: PROJECT METHODOLOGY</b>	
Design of the Study	37
Sampling Criteria	39
Introductions to Couples Interviewed During this Study	40
Data Collection Methods	42
Researcher Stance	43
Limitations of the Study	44
Summary of the Project Methodology	44
<b>CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS</b>	
Positive Affect in Their Relationship	46

De-escalating Negative Affect	66
Accepting What Can't Be Changed, Changing What Can	70
How the Marital Relationship Was Strengthened	72

## **CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION & RECOMMENDATIONS**

Summary of the Study	75
Usefulness and Limitations of This Study	76
Conclusions Relating to Times of Non-Conflict	80
Conclusions Relating to Times of Conflict	92
Concluding Remarks	101

<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	106
---------------------	-----



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my wife, Mary Ellen, for encouraging me to enter the doctor of ministry program, supporting me through the entire process and especially for transcribing all of the interviews. I would also like to thank the saints at the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Duaneburg, NY and New City Fellowship of Atlantic City for all of their sacrificial support, prayer and patience as their pastor devoted lots of time to honing his pastoral and counseling skills. I literally couldn't have done it without them.

I would be remiss if I did not express my heart-felt gratitude to my professors, editors and friends at Covenant Theological Seminary. It may sound like a cliché, but I truly couldn't have done it without them. A special thank you goes out to Aaron Henning for picking me up at the airport, housing me and allowing me to inconvenience him more times than I'd like to admit.

I would also like to thank the seven couples who graciously agreed to let me interview them. I hope readers of this study learn as much from them as I have. Most of all, I thank my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for granting me the privilege of doing my little part in helping engaged and married couples strengthen their marriages with God's gracious help. Sola Dei Gloria!

Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION.

Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of  
Zondervan.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Pastors and other professional counselors who are charged with preparing couples for marriage and helping married couples stay married, face many difficult challenges in the new millennium. According to George Barna, founder of the Barna Research Group which, since 1984, has conducted research into cultural trends related to values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors:

There no longer seems to be much of a stigma attached to divorce; it is now seen as an unavoidable rite of passage. Interviews with young adults suggest that they want their initial marriage to last, but are not particularly optimistic about that possibility. There is also evidence that many young people are moving toward embracing the idea of serial marriage, in which a person gets married two or three times, seeking a different partner for each phase of their adult life.<sup>1</sup>

Dr. William J. Doherty, professor and director of the Marriage and Family Therapy Program at the University of Minnesota has noted this in his own practice. He attributes this shift in how people think about marital commitment to what he calls a “consumer marriage” mentality. In his book *Take Back Your Marriage: Sticking Together in a World That Pulls Us Apart*, he writes:

Reasons people give for getting a divorce reveal how they think about marital commitment. I have seen a shift over nearly 25 years of practice as a marriage and family therapist. I don't mean that most people are not experiencing real emotional pain at the time they decide to end their marriages. It's just that the reasons they give are far from the hard, nasty, problems that propelled spouses in previous generations to divorce: abuse, abandonment, chronic alcoholism, infidelity ... Nowadays many people

---

<sup>1</sup><http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/15-familykids/42-new-marriage-and-divorce-statistics-released>

explain their reasons for divorce in the form of disappointment in what they are not getting from their marriage, rather than in the form of an unconscionable breakdown of marital responsibilities.<sup>2</sup>

This researcher has observed this himself over the fifteen years of his own pastoral ministry. It is especially evident in the way many couples negotiate interests, arguing in a manner that causes harm to the relationship.

Psychologists Howard Markman and Scott Stanley, co-directors of the Center for Marital and Family Studies at the University of Denver, have conducted extensive research into factors that contribute to marital breakdown. According to them, “The inability to solve problems and handle differences constructively are among the major causes of relationship difficulties.”<sup>3</sup> They claim to be able to predict with an eighty percent accuracy the couples who will divorce within six or seven years of marriage based on how they interact. Dr. John Gottman has achieved similar results through his own research and claims an even higher percentage of accuracy.<sup>4</sup> Both have spent years developing therapeutic models for helping couples handle conflict in a constructive rather than destructive manner.

The current study investigates how couples in healthy, lasting marriages work through conflict and differences in a way that strengthens rather than damages their relationship. Using qualitative research methods, this study intends to interact not only with the scriptural and clinical data on marriage in general, but specifically with resources concerning how couples work through differences and problems in particular.

---

<sup>2</sup> William J. Doherty, *Take Back Your Marriage : Sticking Together in a World That Pulls Us Apart*(New York: Guilford Press, 2001). 35

<sup>3</sup> Clifford Notarius and Howard Markman, *We Can Work It Out : Making Sense of Marital Conflict*(New York: Putnam, 1993). 303

<sup>4</sup> John Mordechai Gottman and Nan Silver, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail : What You Can Learn from the Breakthrough Research to Make Your Marriage Last*(New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994). 20-21

What can be done to help couples work through their problems in a way that leads to deeper intimacy, trust and oneness? There is a large body of literature dealing with premarital and marital counseling as it relates to promoting both health and longevity in the marital relationship. Within this larger body of literature, there is much material dealing with conflict-resolution in particular. Finally, the Old and New Testaments speak to all of the above. These sources will provide for the material for the current qualitative study.

### **Psychology/Marriage Counseling**

In the last three decades, psychologists have conducted extensive research into the factors of marital breakdown. Gottman's research has led him to develop seven principles which, he contends, if practiced, will not only help married couples avoid divorce but will also significantly enhance marital satisfaction. By examining partners' heart rates, facial expressions, and how they talk about their relationships to each other and to other people, Dr. Gottman is able to predict with more than ninety percent accuracy which couples' relationships will endure and which will not.<sup>5</sup> Over the years, Gottman's former student Markman and his colleagues have conducted their own studies and have made similar findings. Both agree that in many cases, the breakdown of marriage is not due to conflict itself, but rather how conflict is handled.

At the very heart of the issues raised by the authors mentioned above, is the idea of dealing with the emotions that are often stirred when married partners argue. It's on this point that discussions and research on "emotional intelligence" will be consulted in this study. In his groundbreaking best-seller *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman

---

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.gottman.com/marriage/self\\_help/](http://www.gottman.com/marriage/self_help/)

describes emotional intelligence as “abilities such as being able to motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustrations; to control impulse and delay gratification; to regulate one’s moods and keep distress from swamping the ability to think; to empathize and to hope.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, the opinions and insights of various authors, psychologists and marriage counselors about emotions and their impact on relationships will be discussed in this study. In particular, Sue Johnson’s work on Emotion Focused Therapy for couples is expected to offer fertile background for this study.

### **Handling Conflict in Particular**

In particular, much research has been done on how effective various interventions are in helping couples work through problems and differences. Historically, much emphasis was placed on effective communication skills. For instance, according to Stanley, “One way to make it safer to draw together and deal with issues well is to use agreed-upon rules to help you in important conversations. We call this adding structure to your interaction.” However, the effectiveness of this approach has recently been questioned by Gottman, Johnson and others. Even Stanley and his colleagues have come to acknowledge the limitations of learning speaking/listening techniques. Thus, the new findings in marriage intervention studies will especially be examined.

### **Biblical Data**

The Bible speaks at length about the principles discussed by the authors above. It contains data on the differences between men and women and on the power struggle between husband and wife. It also gives insight into communication and healthy

---

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*(New York: Bantam Books, 1995).

conflict/resolution practices. Thus, a survey of the biblical data on the subject will also be considered.

In particular, the Bible seems to confirm the findings of many studies conducted in recent years regarding the positive benefits on marital relationships of being committed to: forever (till death do you part), forgiveness and fighting fairly. The Old and New Testaments not only prescribe each of these commitments for married couples but also direct couples to seek from God the ability to carry them out.

The Apostle Paul puts it this way in Ephesians, “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Statement of Problem and Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to explore how couples in healthy, lasting marriages can resolve conflict in such a way that the marriage is ultimately strengthened. It is the assumption of this study that although married couples often develop their own methods of working out differences, the methods used by many couples are often destructive to the marital relationship. This assumption is supported by the Barna research cited above. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to discover how couples in healthy marriages that

---

<sup>7</sup> Eph 4:29-32

have stood the test of time have learned to work through differences and disagreements in gentle and kind ways that strengthen their relational bond rather than weaken it.

### **Primary Research Questions**

In order to discover these positive ways of relating to one another, the research questions used to frame this study will be:

1. What positive practices do couples engage in when working through conflict that strengthen rather than hurt the marital relationship?
2. What things do they do to deescalate damaging behaviors when dealing with problems and differences?
3. In what ways was the conflict-resolution process constructive towards furthering the health of the marriage?

### **Significance of the Study**

The implications of this study are wide spread. The findings can serve to help couples in premarital counseling as well as couples receiving marital counseling and their families. The implications also are significant for the church and for the larger society.

### **Couples in Premarital Counseling**

The earlier a couple learns to communicate and deal with differences and disagreements, the better. According to Les and Leslie Parrott, “Research measuring how well engaged couples communicate compared to how well they communicate six years into their marriage shows that by learning effective skills early on they greatly increase their chances for success in marriage. A few simple principles, thoroughly understood and regularly practiced, will make the difference between whether you sink or swim as a



couple.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore, this research will provide some practical insight into the communication patterns of couples with healthy marriages.

### **Couples Receiving Marital Counseling**

According to a recent Barna study, “Among adults who have been married, the study discovered that one-third (33%) have experienced at least one divorce.”<sup>9</sup> American society does more to pull married couples apart than it does to keep them together, according to William J. Doherty’s book, *Take Back Your Marriage: Sticking Together In a World That Pulls Us Apart*. Between no-fault divorce laws, Hollywood’s glamorization of infidelity and the plethora of advisors who view marriage as an outdated, unnecessary institution, the odds are stacked against modern American married couples, Doherty contends. The findings of this study can be used to help reverse the trend of divorce.

### **Families of Couples Receiving Counseling**

In his book, *Marriage Savers*, Michael J. McManus documents the many negative effects of divorce on children, and notes that divorce and unhealthy ways of dealing with differences and disagreements don’t just affect the couple. He observes, “No one suffers more from the parental selfishness than children do.”<sup>10</sup> Other studies in the last two decades corroborate McManus’ claims.<sup>11</sup> Thus, discovering healthy ways for couples to deal with conflict and negotiate interests in marriage will prove valuable for the children and extended families of those couples.

---

<sup>8</sup> Les Parrott and Leslie L. Parrott, *Saving Your Marriage before It Starts : Seven Questions to Ask before (and after) You Marry*(Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1995). 72

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/15-familykids/42-new-marriage-and-divorce-statistics-released>

<sup>10</sup> Michael J. McManus, *Marriage Savers : Helping Your Friends and Family Avoid Divorce*, Rev. ed.(Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1995). 21

<sup>11</sup> Paul R. Amato and Alan Booth, *A Generation at Risk : Growing up in an Era of Family Upheaval*(Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

## **The Church**

According to Les and Leslie Parrott, “the Church will sink or swim based on how healthy its marriages are. Marriage is crucial to a church’s growth and outreach programming.” Local congregations are made up of individuals and families. If marriages in the church are not healthy, then not only will the church fail to be a guide to those outside the community of faith but it will fail to provide positive role models for youth and young couples in the church, they contend. Discovering how couples in healthy, long-lasting marriages negotiate interests constructively can only help strengthen the marriages of Christians who are open to the advice of older, wiser couples.

## **Society as a Whole**

Studies have indicated the negative impact the breakdown of marriage and family has had on society. Just as the implications of this study will have significance for engaged couples and married couples in general and couples in the church in particular, it will also have significance for the communities in which married couples live.

## **Definition of Terms**

*CBT*: Cognitive Behavior Therapy

*EFT*: Emotionally Focused Therapy.

*Healthy Marriages*: Marriages of couples in which both parties have made a habit of communicating clearly, compassionately and kindly and who have learned to work through differences in a way that has strengthened their relationship.

*HFT*: Hope Focused Therapy

*ICT*: Integrated Couples Therapy

*Lasting Marriages*: Marriages of Couples married twenty-five years or longer.

*Positive Affect:* Positive feelings, emotions or activities that strengthen the friendship in a marital relationship.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The purpose of this study was to explore how couples in healthy, lasting marriages negotiate interests toward resolving conflict in such a way that the marriage is ultimately strengthened. The goal of studying these couples' experience was to learn how to facilitate successful communication and conflict-resolution practices with engaged and married couples desiring to strengthen their relationships.

There is a large body of literature dealing with premarital and marital education and counseling as these relate to promoting health and longevity in the marital relationship. Much of this literature deals with conflict-resolution in particular. The scriptures of the Old and New Testaments speak to these issues as well. These sources provide a rich backdrop for the current qualitative study.

#### **Literature Related to Premarital Preparation and Marriage Enrichment**

##### *Communication Skills*

Over the last thirty to forty years Gottman, Markman, Stanley and many others have done extensive research on which interactions between couples contribute to marital breakdown and which interactions seem to contribute to marital health and longevity. Gottman summarizes his findings this way: "My research shows that, much more important than having compatible views, is how couples work out their differences...If there is one lesson I have learned from my years of research, it is that a lasting marriage

results from a couple's ability to resolve the conflicts that are inevitable in any relationship."<sup>12</sup> In *Fighting For Your Marriage*, Markman and Notarius describe their conclusions as such: "We have learned that relationship success depends on the ability of two people to manage the conflicts that inevitably occur in relationships."<sup>13</sup> Stanley and his colleagues in their book *A Lasting Promise* put it this way:

According to research conducted by our team at the University of Denver, as well as by other researchers around the country, it's the presence of certain negative patterns that can destroy a relationship... The key factors that put marriages at risk have to do with how couples think and interact, and especially how they handle conflicts in marriage.<sup>14</sup>

This research, in part, explains why so many have included, if not focused on, helping couples deal with conflict resolution in their writings, marriage preparation and enrichment material. It also explains why many researchers and practitioners have spent years discovering how to help couples replace negative interactions with more positive, healthy ways of relating to one another when the inevitable conflicts in marriage occur. Thus, marriage education and counseling material in the past have focused on teaching couples how to fight fairly. Gottman, Markman, Stanley, Worthington, Chapman and their many colleagues included a significant amount of material on how to argue in a respectful and non-damaging way in their marriage therapy and education materials. According to Gottman:

We have found that it all comes down to a simple mathematical formula: no matter what style your marriage follows, you must have at least five times as many positive as negative moments together if your marriage is to be stable.

---

<sup>12</sup> Gottman and Silver. 23, 28

<sup>13</sup> Howard Markman, Scott Stanley, and Susan L. Blumberg, *Fighting for Your Marriage : Positive Steps for Preventing Divorce and Preserving a Lasting Love*, 1st ed.(San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994). 17

<sup>14</sup> Scott Stanley, *A Lasting Promise : A Christian Guide to Fighting for Your Marriage*, 1st ed.(San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998). 26-27

If you and your spouse do not arrive at a stable equilibrium, when this balance, or “marriage ecology” becomes upset, you and your mate will find yourselves frustrated, sniping or lost in a dead end, quarrelling more and more. These are the signs of the failure to find a stable marital style you both find comfortable.<sup>15</sup>

In stark contrast with those whom he calls the “disasters” in relationships, he describes the “masters” in relationships this way:

When they brought up disagreements, they were less extreme in expressing feelings like anger and frustration. They complained and got angry, to be sure, but they were less critical of their spouse, less defensive, less contemptuous, and they were engaged, not disapproving, listeners...what was striking was the many ways, large and small, that stable couples showed their positivity. It translates into a useful list of ways to put more weight on the positive side of your marriage.<sup>16</sup>

Markman, Stanley and their colleagues recommend what they refer to as the “Speaker-Listener” technique. This technique basically includes the following rules: the speaker has the floor; you must share the floor; do not problem solve; speak for yourself; talk in small amounts; stop and let the listener paraphrase; the listener must paraphrase back to the speaker and refrain from rebutting; instead of rebutting, they must focus on the speaker’s message.<sup>17</sup>

However, it is commonly acknowledged that it is precisely when things heat up in a marital discussion that it becomes difficult to practice the new ways of relating that marriage counselors suggest. Thus, Gottman, Markman, Stanley and their many colleagues address this issue directly in their perspective writings.

---

<sup>15</sup> Gottman and Silver. 29

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 59

<sup>17</sup> Stanley. 60

In *A Lasting Promise*, Stanley and his co-authors give some ground rules on how to break the cycle of negative interactions and replace them with positive interactions.

According to them, the following ground rule is the most critical:

When conflict begins to escalate, we will call a Time-Out and either try talking again, using Speaker-Listener technique, or agree to talk later at a specified time about the issue, using the Speaker-Listener technique...If we could get the attention of every Christian couple and have them all agree to only one key change in behavior, this ground rule would be it. It's that important! This one simple rule can protect and enhance relationships.<sup>18</sup>

Gottman and Silver in *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail* write:

The major goal is to break the cycle of negativity and give whatever natural repair mechanisms you already have in your repertoire a chance to work. There are four key strategies for accomplishing this goal...(1) *calm yourself* so that flooding doesn't block your communication...; (2) *speak and listen non-defensively* so that your discussions or disagreements will be more productive; (3)...*validate each other* well as your relationship even (or especially) when the going gets tough; (4) ...*overlearn these principles* so that your new skills become second nature.<sup>19</sup>

Pertaining to the strategy "calm yourself," Gottman and his colleagues have given many helpful suggestions in their writings over the years. Everett Worthington

acknowledges this concept and adds these insightful comments:

People need ways to calm themselves if they are to employ good communication skills. Gottman (1999) teaches couples self-soothing strategies such as deep breathing. Of course, to benefit, people must recognize that they are losing control of their thinking and then respond by employing self-soothing strategies. Making that recognition-response link is one key to helping couples deal with hurts.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 96

<sup>19</sup> Gottman and Silver. 175

<sup>20</sup> Everett L. Worthington, "Hope-Focused Marriage: Recommendations for Researchers, Clinicians, and Church Workers," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 31, no. 3 (2003). 236

Recently, Gottman and Johnson have challenged the efficacy of communication skill training. In an interview with Les and Leslie Parrott conducted by the *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, the interviewer writes:

John Gottman has proposed that training couples in communication skills is not as effective as marriage interventionists have believed. For example, he found that “master” couples who have demonstrated the ability to create strong marriages only use the skill 4 percent of the time. Consequently, there is a debate among marriage interventionists about the utility and efficacy of communication skills training.<sup>21</sup>

The Parrotts respond by acknowledging their debt to and respect for Gottman’s research and writings over the years. However, they also explain why they respectfully disagree. They mention three reasons why they believe communication skill training is still helpful in marriage preparation and education. According to them,

First...when a couple is stuck dealing with an issue, it is often the clarification of the topic and the reflection of each other’s feelings that will create positive movement and reconciliation. Second,...there is a sense of self-efficacy that is generalized into other areas when skill improves-even momentarily-a couple’s condition. Seeing a difference buoys optimism and hope and these qualities go a long way even if the communication skills were to be only temporary. Third, even if learning communication skills is not as effective as it may seem to be, it often hooks a couple who is seeking counseling. That is, it is almost always a strongly felt need and a few simple and expedient skills provide immediate positivity for a couple seeking help. This can provide momentum for a counselor needing time to delve into deeper issues.<sup>22</sup>

When Scott Stanley was confronted by the same question asked to the Parrotts, he also gave a very respectful and yet passionate defense of skill training. Stanley makes these comments in defense of the Speaker-Listener technique:

---

<sup>21</sup> Les Parrott and Leslie L. Parrott, "The Symbis Approach to Marriage Education Other Titles: Saving Your Marriage before It Starts Approach to Marriage Education," *Journal of Psychology & Theology* 31 no 3 Fall 2003 (2003). 210

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 211



When couples practice it, they are practicing behaviors that have much larger meanings: turn-taking, going slowly and more carefully when talking about something difficult, learning to listen to the other instead of preparing a rebuttal when the other has the floor, and so forth. When couples practice such things, they are not just learning skills. They are also learning that each partner is someone with a different and valid viewpoint that is worthy of respect. I think a fairly strong argument can be made for the beneficial aspects of helping couples learn such important messages about the nature of communication with loved-ones (Lyster 1998) and having them learn such things behaviorally.<sup>23</sup>

One thing that proponents of communication skills are acknowledging more recently is the temporary effects that such skills have in managing negative interaction between couples. Stanley himself writes:

Nevertheless, it remains true that the single clearest finding from many outcome studies is that we can teach couples how to interact less negatively-and this is a very important outcome. But even it may contain some complexities we need to resolve over time. There are some puzzling findings in a few studies suggesting that, for some women, being less negative is only better for marriage in the short run, and not in the long run. It will likely take a decade for researchers to understand this finding better. In the meantime, it makes a great example of how interventions can be informed by ongoing research. If you do skills training with couples designed to interrupt and reduce negative patterns of interaction associated with increased risks of divorce, you want to make sure that women are understanding that the advice is to learn to raise issues constructively, not to simply be "nice." Sometimes, just being nice doesn't cut it (see Exodus 4:24-26 for a potent story about a bold female saving her husband's life in a pretty confrontive manner). Male or female, people need to bring up important concerns with their mates, and we can all help more couples do this in ways that strengthen rather than tear down the relationship.<sup>24</sup>

Whereas Gottman has become more critical of communication skill learning, Sue Johnson, who is best known for her groundbreaking development of what has been called Emotionally Focused Therapy, believes it may actually get in the way of a couple's need to bond emotionally and grow in intimacy. According to her,

---

<sup>23</sup> Scott M. Stanley, "Strengthening Marriages in a Skeptical Culture: Issues and Opportunities," *Journal of Psychology & Theology* 31, no. 3 (2003). 228

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 229

the message of EFT is simple: forget about learning how to argue better, analyzing your early childhood, making grand romantic gestures, or experimenting with new sexual positions. Instead, recognize and admit that you are emotionally attached to and dependent on your partner in much the same way that a child is on a parent for nurturing, soothing and protection...EFT focuses on creating and strengthening this emotional bond between partners by identifying and transforming the key moments that foster an adult, loving relationship: being open, attuned, and responsive to each other.<sup>25</sup>

Her research and conclusions regarding attachment theory have been so promising in helping couples in marital distress that virtually all schools of marital intervention methods have adjusted their interventions to at least include elements of EFT.

Worthington, for instance, has included a new preface to his updated edition of *Hope-Focused Marriage Counseling* which demonstrates the heavy influence EFT has had on his thinking. According to Worthington, "All of the empirically-supported treatments for couples' problems have veered away from skills training. The same lesson applies that was found in marriage research: It is most important to change the emotional bond between couples and heal damage to it."<sup>26</sup>

Markman, Stanley and associates also acknowledge EFT's impact on their approach. According to them, "Changes in the focus of marriage education curricula are paralleled by advances in empirically-based marital therapy in the direction of themes of deeper connection such as acceptance (e.g., Christensen, Jacobson & Babcock, 1995) and attachment (Johnson, 1996)."<sup>27</sup> Even Gary Smalley has been incorporating the insights of EFT into his marriage enrichment materials. In his book *The DNA of Relationships* he

---

<sup>25</sup> Sue Johnson, *Hold Me Tight : Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love*, 1st ed.(New York: Little, 2008). 7

<sup>26</sup> Everett L. Worthington, *Hope-Focused Marriage Counseling : A Guide to Brief Therapy*, Expanded pbk. ed.(Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2005). Xxviii

<sup>27</sup> Scott M. Stanley Howard J. Markman, Natalie H. Jenkins, Jocelyn N. Petrella, Martha E. Wadsworth, "Preventive Education: Distinctives and Directions," *Journal of Cognitive Psychotherapy: An International Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (2006). 418-419

writes: “People generally feel more understood, cared for, and connected when the communication focuses on their emotions and feelings rather than merely on their words or thoughts.”<sup>28</sup>

For each of these schools of marriage intervention, the insights of EFT have been incorporated into their more recent training materials. The Parrotts, Worthington, Markman, Stanley, Smalley and even Gottman to some degree suggest beginning with some communication skills to at least “stop the bleeding” for the time being in order to buy some time to do the deeper, more substantial work of helping couples repair hurts and establish a deeper emotional bond or connection. Johnson, however, sees that approach as an attempt to change the steps of a dance when it’s actually the music that needs to be changed.

In her book *Hold Me Tight*, Johnson gives the following critique of the communication techniques recommended by many Cognitive Behavioral Theory proponents:

Most of the colleagues who come to me for training have been taught to see conflict itself and couples’ power struggles as the main problem in relationships. As a result, they have focused on teaching couples negotiation and communication skills to contain the conflict. But this addresses the symptoms, not the disease. It’s telling people caught in a never-ending dance of frustration and distance to change the steps when what they have to do is change the music... Until we address the fundamental need for connection and the fear of losing it, the standard techniques, such as learning problem solving or communication skills, examining childhood hurts, or taking time-outs, are misguided and ineffectual.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, it seems that Johnson’s contention is not only that communication skills are ineffectual or unnecessary, but that moving couples in that direction is actually

---

<sup>28</sup> Gary Smalley, *The DNA of Relationships* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004). 133

<sup>29</sup> Johnson. 34-35

counterproductive. It moves the couple away from dealing with the underlying issues of disconnection that need to be addressed and explored.

Gottman in his more recent writings acknowledges this. Gottman explains: “I may surprise you by claiming that you ought not to worry so much about solving your marital problems as in dealing with the emotions they stir...the major goal is to break the cycle of negativity and use whatever natural repair mechanisms you already have in your repertoire to work.”<sup>30</sup> This is important to note since the actual cause of negative affect or arousal may not be the “issue” that initially seems to be the problem. Johnson explains it this way:

Most fights are really protests over emotional disconnection. Underneath all the distress, partners are asking each other: Can I count on you, depend on you? Are you there for me? Will you respond to me when I need, when I call? Do I matter to you? Am I valued and accepted by you? Do you need me, rely on me? The anger, the criticism, the demands, are really cries to their lovers, calls to stir their hearts, to draw their mates back in emotionally and reestablish a sense of safe connection.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to managing conflict in a constructive way and deepening connection and attachment, recent studies have been done on a variety of other factors, including such positive elements as sacrifice, commitment, forgiveness, friendship, fun and how they relate to healthy communication in the midst of conflict. According to Markman et al.:

...changes in the nature of the content of various educational programs for couples parallel the emerging shift in the field of marital research from a dominant focus on marital conflict to dimensions such as support, commitment, sacrifice, forgiveness, and spiritual connection. Such themes represent a shift to

---

<sup>30</sup> John Mordechai Gottman, Julie Schwartz Gottman, and Joan DeClaire, *Ten Lessons to Transform Your Marriage : America's Love Lab Experts Share Their Strategies for Strengthening Your Relationship*, 1st ed.(New York: Crown Publishers, 2006). 175

<sup>31</sup> Johnson. 30

constructs that are more positive, reflective of deeper motivations, and potentially transformative in the nature of relationship dynamics (see Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, in press; Stanley, 2007; Stanley and Markman, 1998).<sup>32</sup>

Such conclusions are important to this current study, specifically regarding the interviews with couples in healthy marriages. In their interviews they reveal principles and ways of interrelating during times of disagreement and conflict, and it is interesting to note their attitudes toward the positive elements mentioned above and how they come into play during disagreements.

### *Commitment and Sacrifice*

For instance, a couple's commitment to put their marital relationship above their personal agendas will certainly affect the way in which they handle differences and disagreements. Stanley and his co-authors put it this way:

Part of being team-centered is being sensitive to your partner, trying to hear your partner's perspective, seeking to build up and protect that person in loving ways because you are a team. It means making your partner's happiness, rather than your own, a priority. It means doing what you know is good for your relationship, like listening to your partner, even when you don't particularly want to. It means protecting your commitment from alternative attractions. These are the kinds of things that research shows dedicated people do in their marriages. These are the actions of pure love.<sup>33</sup>

In his book *Take Back Your Marriage*, Doherty also notes the importance of commitment to the health and longevity of marital relationships. According to him, "Without the glue of commitment, nothing else binds us together for the long and

---

<sup>32</sup> Howard J. Markman. 419

<sup>33</sup> Stanley, *A Lasting Promise : A Christian Guide to Fighting for Your Marriage*. 187

winding road of marriage. This glue is mostly a decision, a choice to be together and stay together through better and worse.”<sup>34</sup>

Research on sacrifice, more specifically, seems to suggest a strong correlation between un-coerced sacrifice and healthy, lasting marital relationships. In their article “Sacrifice as a Predictor of Marital Outcomes,” Stanley, Whitton, et al., write:

The current findings add to a growing body of evidence suggesting that positive attitudes about sacrifice may be an important dimension through which partners communicate about the relationship and the degree to which one can trust the other to “be there” for them. In other words, these findings suggest that individuals’ willingness to sacrifice may be important in the growth of relationships and may reinforce an overall sense of safety and security that is hypothesized to be fundamental to marital success (Stanley, Markman, and Whitton 2002).<sup>35</sup>

### *Forgiveness*

Another issue that modern research has shown to have an impact on is how couples handle the issue of forgiveness. Worthington and others have done extensive research on this over the past decade or so. According to him, “A ... more proactive key is to forgive hurts (Worthington 2001, 2003) and reconcile with the partner and with others besides the partner (Worthington and Drinkard 2000). Relational repair can reduce woundedness and therefore vulnerability. Forgiveness can sometimes prevent a person from moving to limbic system activity and conflict.”<sup>36</sup>

Worthington points out that this idea is not simply a theoretical or philosophical postulation but does indeed have some empirical research findings to back it up. For

---

<sup>34</sup> Doherty. 24

<sup>35</sup> Scott M. Stanley, Sarah W. Whitton, Sabina Low SadBerry, Mari L. Clements, Howard J. Markman, "Sacrifice as a Predictor of Marital Outcomes," *Family Process* 45 (2006). 289

<sup>36</sup> Worthington, "Hope-Focused Marriage: Recommendations for Researchers, Clinicians, and Church Workers." 236

instance, in the preface to his updated book *Hope-Focused Marriage Counseling* he writes: “Couples with long-term successful marriages have identified forgiveness as one of the top three qualities responsible for their marital success (Fennell, 1993). Why? More than twenty studies (see Fincham, Hall and Beach 2005) show that forgiveness is important to marriage...”<sup>37</sup>

In Johnson’s EFT approach, the injured party relives the traumatic injury and expresses the emotions experienced during the time of injury. The injuring party acknowledges the feelings of abandonment, feels them, and expresses empathy and regret. Then,

...the injured party is supported to face his or her fears of becoming vulnerable again and is able to ask that the attachment needs aroused by the incident be addressed. The other partner can now respond empathetically, creating a positive reenactment of the original injuring event. This process is then integrated into the couple’s story of the injury and their new ability to repair it.<sup>38</sup>

### *Friendship*

Gottman’s shift in thought and practice over the years has led him to focus more on what goes right in happy marriages rather than what goes wrong in distressed marriages. For instance, in *The Seven Principles For Making Marriage Work*, which he co-authored with Nan Silver, he writes:

Well-meaning therapists will deluge the couple with advice about negotiating their differences and improving their communication. At one time I would have done the same. At first, when I figured out how to predict divorce, I thought I had found the key to saving marriages. All that was necessary, I presumed, was to teach people how to argue without being overridden by the four horsemen and without getting flooded. Then their repair attempts would succeed, and they could

---

<sup>37</sup> Worthington, *Hope-Focused Marriage Counseling : A Guide to Brief Therapy*. Xxiv

<sup>38</sup> Jude Cassidy and Phillip R. Shaver, *Handbook of Attachment : Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications*, 2nd ed.(New York: Guilford Press, 2008). 824

work out their differences...But like so many experts before me, I was wrong. I was not able to crack the code to saving marriages until I started to analyze what went right in happy marriages. After intensely studying happily married couples for as long as sixteen years, I now know that the key to reviving or divorce-proofing a relationship is not how you handle disagreements but in how you are with each other when you're not fighting. So, although my Seven Principles will also guide you in coping with conflict, the foundation of my approach is to strengthen the friendship that is at the heart of any marriage.<sup>39</sup>

Gottman and his colleagues are not the only ones who have recognized that cultivating the friendship in marriage is important to a healthy, happy marriage.

Markman, Stanley and Blumberg also dedicate lots of space in the newest edition of their book *Fighting For Your Marriage* to cultivating friendship. They even have an entire chapter on "Playing Together."<sup>40</sup>

Perhaps these words from one of Gottman's most recent contributions puts it most succinctly:

The final part of building friendship and intimacy is to build positive affect. We maintain that each positive affect system requires effort and prioritization of time. This involves the therapist helping the couple to increase the Panksepp positive affect systems, such as play, comfort, humor, laughter, interest, amusement, curiosity, learning, fun, exploration, and adventure. Dealing effectively with conflict or adding insight into negative patterns, or creating bonding by healing attachment injuries, will not enhance these positive affect systems. They are separate emotional command systems that will not flourish by themselves, unless the therapist prioritizes them.<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> John Mordechai Gottman and Nan Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, 1st ed.(New York: Crown Publishers, 1999). 46

<sup>40</sup> Howard Markman, Scott Stanley, and Susan L. Blumberg, *Fighting for Your Marriage : A Deluxe Revised Edition of the Classic Best Seller for Enhancing Marriage and Preventing Divorce*, 3rd ed.(San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010). 255

<sup>41</sup> Alan S. Gurman, *Clinical Handbook of Couple Therapy*, 4th ed.(New York: Guilford Press, 2008). 153



### Relationship Principles From the Holy Scriptures

The Bible clearly teaches that the two greatest commandments of all are to love God and love others.<sup>42</sup> So, in a very general and yet concrete way, couples certainly can show their love to one another in the following ways: by truly listening before speaking;<sup>43</sup> choosing one's words carefully;<sup>44</sup> controlling anger in a godly, productive way;<sup>45</sup> being kind, compassionate and tenderhearted toward others;<sup>46</sup> putting the other person and even the marriage relationship before one's own personal wants;<sup>47</sup> forgiving hurts;<sup>48</sup> and telling the truth in love.<sup>49</sup>

This is all to say that particular scripture passages can be found to support virtually all of the methods mentioned above. Whether it's learning how to communicate in a gentle, empathetic way that avoids using destructive speech or digging deeper to address the real heart issues and emotions, the Bible provides only positive reinforcement. How can this be when some of these interventions seem to contradict or oppose one another? The answer can be found in the fact that the Bible affirms that thoughts, words, feelings and actions all have an impact on human relationships. Thus, according to the Bible, each intervention (whether learning to listen and speak more respectfully or listening for the real heart-cry of your spouse) has its proper place in marriage enrichment.

---

<sup>42</sup> Mark 12:29-31

<sup>43</sup> James 1:9

<sup>44</sup> Ephesians 4:29

<sup>45</sup> Ephesians 4:26-27

<sup>46</sup> Colossians 3:12

<sup>47</sup> Ephesians 5:21ff

<sup>48</sup> Colossians 3:13

<sup>49</sup> Ephesians 4:25

This explains why Stanley can appeal to the Bible when recommending the Speaker-Listener technique. According to Proverbs 12:18, “Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”<sup>50</sup> After he quotes this verse, Stanley makes this observation: “These reckless words do a ton of damage to oneness and intimacy and a sense of safety in the relationship.”<sup>51</sup> Or take the EFT method of caring enough to slow down and acknowledge and pay attention to genuine emotions rather than ignoring or suppressing them. Smalley refers to Proverbs 20:5 and makes the following comments: “It helps to remember what the Bible says: ‘The purposes of a man’s heart are deep waters, but a man of understanding draws them out.’ What lies within often lies deep within, requiring careful and sustained effort to draw it out.”<sup>52</sup>

According to all of the literature surveyed above, the goal is to strengthen marital relationships. The Scriptures display the same goal. Thus, whichever area, or areas, in a couple’s relationship needs strengthening should be the focus of the intervention. Gurman’s explanation of Integrative Couples Therapy expresses this idea well: “In ICT, the therapist selects particular interventions, not because of what they look like, but because of what they may accomplish. As in architecture, form follows function. Like architecture, couple therapy is a blending of art and science.”<sup>53</sup> In light of this, ICT

regularly incorporates many of the central therapeutic interventions that research on cognitive-behavior marital therapy and IBCT has shown to make a difference clinically, such as communication and problem solving coaching, behavioral exchange, and acceptance training. But whereas behavioral methods emphasize acceptance of the partner, ICT places an equal emphasis on the acceptance of self

---

<sup>50</sup> Proverbs 12:18

<sup>51</sup> Stanley, *A Lasting Promise : A Christian Guide to Fighting for Your Marriage*. 30

<sup>52</sup> Smalley. 144

<sup>53</sup> Gurman. 408-9

...ICT also regularly includes a number of the core interventions of empirically supported EFCT.<sup>54</sup>

That is simply to say, from a biblical perspective, as long as a particular intervention is helpful, true and holy, it is fair game to use in the strengthening and nurturing of strong marital relationships. This is extremely freeing for Christian couples desiring help in their marriage, as well as Christian counselors and pastors who desire to give such help. Not only do they have all of the rich, scriptural data on how to deepen and strengthen relationships, but they can also avail themselves to all of the modern studies which empirically verify scriptural principles and demonstrate ways of practically fleshing them out. For Christians, the Bible will be the ultimate measuring stick for all other writings. Stanley puts it this way:

Finding something that seems to be true based on research, then going back to see how it squares with Scripture, is a sound strategy of integration. Such a process tests the validity of the newer ideas by holding them up to the light of Scripture ...when and if research ever reveals findings that are inconsistent with revealed truth, we choose to follow Scripture. But one of the great blessings to us has been how wonderfully Scripture and sound marital research point in the same direction.<sup>55</sup>

Sometimes, marital research can also deepen our insight into scripture passages that speak to relationships. Take, for example, the often quoted verse in Ephesians 4:26 where Paul says, "In your anger do not sin; do not let the sun go down while you are still angry."<sup>56</sup> Some have interpreted this to mean that heated conflicts or disagreements have to be resolved before you go to bed for the night. This idea can actually be oppressive if a

---

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 415

<sup>55</sup> Stanley, *A Lasting Promise : A Christian Guide to Fighting for Your Marriage*. 7, 8

<sup>56</sup> Ephesians 4:26

couple is exhausted and the issue is too complex to be resolved before bed. Stanley makes these insightful comments concerning this verse of scripture:

Note that it says to not let the sun go down on your anger, not that you have to resolve the issue before you sleep. Some issues just are not going to be resolved late at night. When you are working so well together that you can agree to put off an issue until tomorrow and have confidence that it will be dealt with, that goes a long way toward reducing anger and frustration-and you can go to sleep.<sup>57</sup>

For the purpose of the current study, it will be helpful to conduct a succinct survey of the pertinent biblical principles that apply to marital relationships.

### *Sacrificial Love*

In Philippians 2 Paul sets forth one of the most powerful expositions of Christ's sacrificial love for His people found anywhere in scripture. He reminds the Philippian Christians of the attitude of Christ and how, although He was God, He didn't insist on the rights His position deserved, but rather humbled Himself, took on the form of a humble servant and became obedient to His Father, even to the point of death on a cross. On the basis of Jesus' example, Paul goes on to say that if they have the encouragement of being united with this Christ, if they truly have the fellowship with the Holy Spirit that they claim to have, then they should have the same attitude of their Lord and Savior. They should not only look to their own interests, but the interests of others. They should even consider others to be better than themselves. In other words, the only way the church can walk together in unity, peace and oneness is if each of her members thinks, feels and acts

---

<sup>57</sup> Stanley, *A Lasting Promise : A Christian Guide to Fighting for Your Marriage*. 106

sacrificially. They must have the same mind as Christ Jesus, the same heart as Christ Jesus and the same concrete expression of what is in their hearts and minds.<sup>58</sup>

In Ephesians 5:21ff, Paul applies this principle more specifically to husbands and wives. Husbands are called to love their wives as Christ loved His church. Wives are called to submit to their husbands (and respect them) as the Church submits to Christ.<sup>59</sup> Both of the responses called for by the Apostle Paul require altruistic sacrifice, commitment, servanthood, humility and forgiveness. It is interesting to note that modern research, done by both Christian and non-Christian researchers, has found that these very qualities are what make for a happy, lasting marriage. For instance, the following observation by Gottman could be found in a commentary on Ephesians 5:21ff. Regarding the masters of marital relationships, he explains:

Despite the wide differences in occupations, lifestyles and details of their day to day lives, I sense a remarkable similarity in the tone of their conversations. No matter what style of marriage they have adopted, their discussions, for the most part, are carried along by a strong undercurrent of two basic ingredients: love and respect...these are the direct opposite of-and antidote for-contempt, perhaps the most corrosive force in marriage. But all the ways partners show each other love and respect also ensure that the positive-to-negative ratio of a marriage will be heavily tilted to the positive side.<sup>60</sup>

He also notes how important it is for husbands to accept influence from their wives. This certainly resonates with both Philippians 2 and Ephesians 5. Even though the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church,<sup>61</sup> he puts her

---

<sup>58</sup> Phil. 2:1-11

<sup>59</sup> Ephesians 5:21ff

<sup>60</sup> Gottman and Silver, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail : What You Can Learn from the Breakthrough Research to Make Your Marriage Last.* 61

<sup>61</sup> Eph. 5:23

needs before his own. This attitude would certainly include taking her feelings, thoughts, concerns and ideas into consideration. Gary Chapman puts it this way:

What are these emotional needs that seem to be so vital in producing a successful marriage? Perhaps the three most basic are the need to feel loved, to feel respected, and to feel appreciated. To feel loved is to have the sense that my spouse genuinely cares about my well-being. Respect has to do with feeling that my spouse has positive regard for my personhood, intellect, abilities, and personality. Appreciation is that inner sense that my spouse values my contribution to our relationship. When a husband and wife feel loved, respected, and appreciated by each other, they are experiencing emotional intimacy.<sup>62</sup>

### *Compromise*

Closely related to the principle of sacrificial love and respect is the notion of compromise. That is to say, if each partner is seeking not merely to please themselves but the other, then the marriage relationship will not be one sided but rather will demonstrate a give-and-take pattern over the years. As Stanley puts it, “compromise is sometimes necessary. Paul tells us to “look not only to our own interests...” (Phil. 2:4). Good compromise can allow you each to do this for the other... You are not going to have a good marriage if either of you gets his or her way all the time. You can count on that.<sup>63</sup> Gottman and Silver make these insightful comments: “Like it or not, the only solution to marital problems is to find a compromise. In an intimate, loving relationship it just doesn’t work for either of you to get things all your way, even if you’re convinced that you’re right. This approach would create such inequity and unfairness that the marriage would suffer.”<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> Gary D. Chapman, *Covenant Marriage : Building Communication & Intimacy*(Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2003). 162

<sup>63</sup> Stanley, *A Lasting Promise : A Christian Guide to Fighting for Your Marriage*. 81

<sup>64</sup> Gottman and Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. 181

### *Commitment*

In addition to sacrificial love, the Bible also puts a premium on being committed “til death do us part.” In his book *Covenant Marriage* Chapman contrasts the modern view of contract marriage and the Bible’s teaching on covenant marriage. According to him, contract marriages are characterized by the following five characteristics: (1) contracts are most often made for a limited period of time; (2) contracts most often deal with specific actions; (3) contracts are based on an “if..., then...” mentality; (4) contracts are motivated by the desire to get something we want; and (5) contracts are sometimes unspoken and implicit. In contrast with a contract marriage, according to Chapman, (1) covenant marriages are initiated for the benefit of one’s spouse; (2) covenant marriages require unconditional promises; (3) covenant marriages are based on steadfast love; (4) covenant marriages view commitment as permanent; and (5) covenant marriages require confronting and forgiving.<sup>65</sup>

In chapter two of his book, Chapman supports his findings with scripture passages that deal with the covenant God makes with His people throughout the Old and New Testaments (Gen. 17:3-8, Exodus 19:3-6, 2 Sam. 7:12-29, Jer. 31, Matt. 26:28) as well as covenants made between two people (1 Sam. 18:2-4, Mal. 2:14, 16, Matt. 19:4-9). One of the examples that he mentions, concerning Jonathan and David, will suffice for the purpose of this literature review:

Read the covenant Jonathan made with David: “From that day Saul kept David with him and did not let him return to his father’s house. And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David along with his tunic, and even his sword, his

---

<sup>65</sup> Chapman. 25

bow and belt” (1 Sam. 18:2-4). Notice that Jonathan took the initiative in this covenant. His first act was an act of giving: his robe, tunic, sword, bow and belt. Jonathan’s motivation for making a covenant with David grew from his love for David and not from a selfish desire to manipulate David to do something for him. ...Covenants are born from a desire to minister to the other person, not to manipulate a person or to get something.<sup>66</sup>

Although there is some debate on what circumstances make it permissible for a spouse to get a divorce, most scholars will agree to at least two. The first is in the case of adultery (see Matt. 19:9) and the second is if an unbelieving spouse physically abandons a believing spouse (1 Cor. 7:15). These are the sad exceptions to the rule. Otherwise, according to Jesus, “what God has joined together, let man not separate.”<sup>67</sup>

Practically speaking, this long-term view of marriage can sometimes be the only thing that helps couples hang in there when they want to throw in the towel. But even beyond that obvious fact, a commitment of “till death do us part” has additional positive effects. According to Stanley, “The long-term perspective is crucial for a marriage to thrive over time. It frees you to grow closer because you feel secure enough to take the risks of disclosing more about yourself. Great security comes from knowing your mate will be there when it really counts.”<sup>68</sup> Doherty points out these additional benefits of being committed for the long haul:

The best way to keep the consumer culture from dominating your marriage is to see yourself as a citizen of your marriage, which is another way to say to be intentional, committed, and part of a community. Being a citizen of a marriage means taking responsibility to make things better and not just be passive, to value the marriage itself and not just your own interest in it, to struggle to make it better by naming problems and changing yourself first to take the long view that values

---

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. 13

<sup>67</sup> Matthew 19:6

<sup>68</sup> Stanley, *A Lasting Promise : A Christian Guide to Fighting for Your Marriage*. 180



your history together as a couple over short-term pain and struggle, to accept the inevitable limitations and problems, to see how your marriage affects many other people in your world, and to hold onto the dream, never completely fulfilled, of a more perfect union.<sup>69</sup>

### *Forgiveness*

Scripture clearly teaches that we are to forgive one another, which we see in

Colossians 3:12-14:

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.<sup>70</sup>

This call to exercise the grace of forgiveness is especially important to heed in the marriage relationship. Once again, we find the Apostle Paul applying this general exhortation to all Christians and to married couples specifically. In Ephesians 5:25-27, he speaks to husbands directly: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless."<sup>71</sup> Bryan Chapell explains the implications of this text this way in his book *Each For the Other*:

Paul says Jesus cleansed his bride, the church, "by the washing with water through the word." This reference to the baptism that Christ provided the church to signify the core truth of Scripture that His blood cleanses us from our sin holds important implications for husbands. The gospel of Christ's forgiveness should be a dominant voice in our homes...Of course, verbal commitment to the truths of God's forgiveness is a cruel sham if those principles are not lived out. A husband reassures loved ones of God's goodness and of each individual's significance in

---

<sup>69</sup> Doherty. 47

<sup>70</sup> Colossians 3:12-14

<sup>71</sup> Ephesians 5:25-27

His sight when, as the head of the home, he consistently reflects the reality of forgiving grace...A husband who grants forgiveness because he knows he also needs forgiveness shows his wife she is valued despite her faults and is not less deserving of mercy than he. As a result, forgiveness communicates the preciousness of a spouse, confirms that the spiritual need of one is no greater than that of the other, and powerfully unites a couple in the knowledge that their weaknesses do not invalidate their love, or God's.<sup>72</sup>

Gottman, Markman, Stanley, Worthington and Johnson all acknowledge the vital role that forgiveness plays in maintaining a healthy and lasting marital relationship.

Stanley, for example, emphasizes it's importance thus: "Forgiveness is a vital ingredient for maintaining oneness in marriage."<sup>73</sup> Worthington puts it this way,

People fuss. Sometimes they have to. But, if they do so productively without toxic communication and (especially important) not too often, the fuss can be beneficial. More important, the couple needs to reconcile and forgive each other afterward, soon afterward. If they repair the damage, the marriage can be stronger, not weaker, as a result of the conflict.<sup>74</sup>

In Johnson's EFT method, forgiving injuries is the fifth of seven conversations for a lifetime of love. Johnson explains it this way:

The first goal for partners is forgiveness. Just as with love, forgiveness has only recently become a topic of study by social scientists. Most scholars speak of forgiveness as a moral decision. Letting go of resentment and absolving a person's bad conduct is the right and good thing to do. But this decision alone will not restore faith in the injuring person and the relationship. What partners need is a special type of healing conversation that fosters not just forgiveness but the willingness to trust again. Renewed trust is the ultimate goal.<sup>75</sup>

Although the Bible does teach that forgiveness is certainly a moral decision, and thus the right and good thing to do, the Bible agrees with Johnson that it is certainly more

---

<sup>72</sup> Bryan Chapell and Kathy Chapell, *Each for the Other : Marriage as It's Meant to Be*, Rev. ed.(Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006). 44, 45

<sup>73</sup> Stanley, *A Lasting Promise : A Christian Guide to Fighting for Your Marriage*. 203

<sup>74</sup> Worthington, *Hope-Focused Marriage Counseling : A Guide to Brief Therapy*. Xxii

<sup>75</sup> Johnson. 171

than that. According to the Bible, the ultimate goal of forgiveness is true, substantial reconciliation and the reestablishment of intimacy, safety, and trust in the relationship. This is implicit in the call for believers to forgive as the Lord forgave them. How did the Lord forgive them? He remitted their offenses in such a way that trust and fellowship was completely restored, which is precisely what they are to do for each other. Johnson certainly offers some valid suggestions as to how this can be practically carried out with married couples in the “Forgiving Injuries” section of her book *Hold Me Tight*. John Gottman and his colleagues also deal a lot with the need for couples to forgive one another in their writings and interventions. They often refer to this as “repair” mechanisms. According to Gottman:

Even when we consider the predictors of divorce, we do not find that these never occur in marriages that are stable and happy, they just occur less often. That is why we focus so heavily on repair mechanisms. Every couple in their daily life together messes up communication, and every marriage has a “dark side.” It seems that what may matter most is *the ability to repair things when they go wrong*...Enabling couples to repair their own interaction is the central goal of marital therapy, and that we should terminate the therapy not when the marriage is a great marriage, but when the couple is capable of repair without us. Because of this objective, understanding what predicts effective repair becomes crucially important.<sup>76</sup>

Gottman and Silver put it even more poignantly and succinctly when they write:

“When you forgive your spouse, you both benefit. Bitterness is a heavy burden. As Shakespeare wrote in the Merchant of Venice, mercy is ‘twice blessed. It blesses him that gives and him that takes.’”<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>76</sup> John Mordechai Gottman, *The Marriage Clinic : A Scientifically-Based Marital Therapy*(New York: W. W. Norton, 1999). 7, 51

<sup>77</sup> Gottman and Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. 155

### *The Power of One*

The Bible also places great emphasis on each individual working on their own shortcomings and taking responsibility for their own part of the equation in the marital relationship whether or not the other partner is fulfilling their responsibilities or not. For instance, in his first epistle, Peter gives this command to wives: “Be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives.”<sup>78</sup> Implicit in Paul’s command for husbands to love their wives as Christ loves the church in Ephesians 5 is the idea of nurturing, caring, sacrificing and loving her despite her sins and faults. That is to say, he is not to do so only if she fulfills her role of submitting to him and respecting him. The Bible does teach that marital relationships are the most ideal and fulfilling when both partners fulfill their roles and put God and the other person first (i.e., Eph. 5:21ff, Phil. 2:1ff), however, each partner is responsible to fulfill their role whether or not the other person is fulfilling theirs. Smalley says that following these principles have made a difference in his own life. According to him,

If you want to control your reactions, you need to control your thoughts. You can take personal responsibility for all of your thoughts and actions and take your eyes off of blaming others for how you feel. This amazing truth has changed my life over the past two years more than anything else:...you must take your focus off the other person and look at yourself. Before you can control your reactions, you must control your thoughts. And when you do you will find amazing freedom ...It’s absolutely crucial to remember that when you choose to tap into the power of one, you empower yourself. You begin to control what you can control rather than trying to manipulate what will always lie outside of your power.<sup>79</sup>

---

<sup>78</sup> 1 Peter 3:1-2

<sup>79</sup> Smalley. 68, 70, 71

Stanley and his associates couldn't agree more. According to him, "You can only control your side of the equation, but that's quite a bit. We believe your partner is more likely to change in response to the healthy changes in you than to any direct or manipulative efforts you might make to change him or her."<sup>80</sup> In the 2001 revision of *Fighting For Your Marriage*, they put it this way: "A great marriage is predicted not so much by your finding the right partner as by your being the right partner."<sup>81</sup>

According to the scriptures, the advantage that the follower of Jesus has is that he has had his mind, heart and life transformed by the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection on his behalf.<sup>82</sup> God's unmerited favor shown to us in Christ motivates, empowers and teaches us to die to self and live for God and others.<sup>83</sup> In addition to this, the Bible teaches that God sends His Holy Spirit to live in the hearts of those who are united with Christ by faith to help them live a life of sacrificial love and service.<sup>84</sup> Thus, as Christian couples avail themselves to the various marriage interventions which are designed to help them bond emotionally, air out their differences gently and constructively, or repair hurts, they have inside help. Philippians 2:12-13 sums it up well: "Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose."<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>80</sup> Stanley, *A Lasting Promise : A Christian Guide to Fighting for Your Marriage*. 274

<sup>81</sup> Howard Markman, Scott Stanley, and Susan L. Blumberg, *Fighting for Your Marriage : Positive Steps for Preventing Divorce and Preserving a Lasting Love*, 1st ed.(San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001). 33

<sup>82</sup> Cf. 2 Cor. 5:14-21

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Titus 2:11-14 and Romans 6

<sup>84</sup> Cf. Ezek. 36:27 and Rom. 8:9-17

<sup>85</sup> Philippians 2:12-13

To sum up the literature review, we have given a brief survey of the literature dealing with premarital and marital education and counseling as it relates to promoting both health and longevity in the marital relationship. Within this larger body of literature we have focused on material dealing with conflict-resolution in particular. We have noted that modern research has gotten away from simple conflict-resolution skills to deeper issues of emotional bonding as well as cultivating positive affect. The scriptures of the Old and New Testaments were consulted where they speak to all of the above. We've also seen that both EFT and the revised Gottman Theory have shown tremendous promise according to the most recent studies and research.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this study was to explore how couples in healthy, lasting marriages negotiate interests toward resolving conflict such that the marriage is ultimately strengthened. It was the assumption of this study that although married couples develop their own way of negotiating interests when they come to an impasse in their relationship, their style of relating is often more destructive to the marital relationship than constructive. Therefore, a qualitative study was proposed in order to explore the positive ways that healthy marriages negotiate interests so that the process ultimately strengthens rather than damages the marital relationship. In this chapter the author describes the qualitative methodology used in this study.

#### **DESIGN OF THE STUDY**

The method that was used for this research is the general qualitative study. In *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education*, Sharan B. Merriam defines a qualitative case study as an “intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit.” She defines the five characteristics of qualitative research as follows: (1) qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people construct of experiences they have in the world; (2) the qualitative researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis; (3) qualitative research usually involves fieldwork; (4) qualitative research primarily employs an

inductive research strategy; and (5) the product of a qualitative study is richly descriptive through words and pictures.<sup>86</sup>

A primary objective of this study is to gather rich, descriptive data on how the couples interviewed constructively work through conflict in order to add to the material available helping younger couples learn healthy ways of interacting, especially when working through their own conflict. This qualitative study serves to supplement and complement, recent quantitative studies by Gottman, Johnson and others.<sup>87</sup> The advantage of a qualitative study is that it focuses more on “how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences.”<sup>88</sup> Merriam goes so far as to say that “research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making a difference in people’s lives.”<sup>89</sup>

According to Doherty, “A...problem with solitary marriage is that people don’t have access to the wisdom of other couples who have faced obstacles and either overcome them or learned to live with them gracefully. It’s one thing to read books by experts about marriage, and it’s another thing to hear it from a peer or elder who has walked in your shoes.”<sup>90</sup> This is where interviewing seven couples who fit the criteria

---

<sup>86</sup> Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research : A Guide to Design and Implementation*, The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series(San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009). 13-19

<sup>87</sup> Gurman. Gottman, *The Marriage Clinic : A Scientifically-Based Marital Therapy*. Johnson. Markman, Stanley, and Blumberg, *Fighting for Your Marriage : A Deluxe Revised Edition of the Classic Best Seller for Enhancing Marriage and Preventing Divorce*. Everett L. Worthington, *Hope-Focused Marriage Counseling : A Guide to Brief Therapy*(Downers Grove, Ill.: InteVarsity Press, 1999).

<sup>88</sup> Merriam. 5

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. 1

<sup>90</sup> Doherty. 163



above provided rich, descriptive data which proved useful, and may help other couples develop positive, productive ways of working out differences.

### SAMPLING CRITERIA

Because the purpose of this study is to glean data from couples who have a consistent history of working effectively through conflict, it was necessary to select a sample from couples whose marriages have lasted a reasonable length (25 years) and have also demonstrated healthy interpersonal interactions.

Thus, participants had to meet the criteria of longevity and health. As far as length is concerned, since we are interested in gathering data from couples who have demonstrated the ability to both survive and thrive “til death do us part,” it is necessary to sample from married couples who have demonstrated healthy negotiation practices on a consistent basis. On the other hand, we are not merely concerned with the number of years a couple has technically been married but also with the health of their relationship. They were not to consistently engage in the blaming, placating, computing or distracting methods of relating that Virginia Satir outlines in her book *The New Peoplemaking*.<sup>91</sup> A healthy marriage can be defined as a marriage in which both parties have made a habit of communicating clearly, compassionately, and kindly and who have learned to handle differences, especially negotiating interests, in a way that has strengthened their relationship. Markman, Stanley, et al. put it this way:

We and our colleagues have contributed at high levels to national discussions about how to define and measure “healthy marriage,” focusing on what we call safety theory, with healthy marriages having three essential types of safety: (1) emotional safety as reflected in day-to-day communication patterns, support, and

---

<sup>91</sup> Virginia Satir, *The New Peoplemaking*(Mountain View, Calif.: Science and Behavior Books, 1988).

closeness; (2) safety in terms of a secure commitment; and (3) safety in terms of freedom from fear, intimidation, or aggression (Stanley 2007; Stanley, Markman, and Whitton 2002).<sup>92</sup>

### **INTRODUCTIONS TO THE COUPLES INTERVIEWED DURING THIS STUDY**

The couples selected for the study have been observed by the researcher for many years (or recommended by a trusted colleague), have been married at least twenty-five years, and appear to have stable, and even flourishing, marriages. If it had become apparent during an interview that a couple failed to fit all the criteria, another couple would have been chosen. For example, if one party admitted to consistently letting the other “win” in order to “keep the peace,” that would have indicated the couple lacked the positive relational qualities needed for a healthy marriage relationship. As Gary Chapman puts it in *Covenant Marriage*, “Good communication requires that we identify and eliminate the unhealthy and then find new ways of communicating that foster understanding and intimacy.”<sup>93</sup>

Seven couples were selected to participate in this study. In the following section each participating couple will briefly be introduced. Their names and identifying information have been changed in order to protect their identities.

Six of the seven couples interviewed come from a reformed, evangelical religious background. Clark and Cassandra come from a more broadly evangelical background. The seven couples interviewed include:

---

<sup>92</sup> Howard J. Markman. 412

<sup>93</sup> Chapman. 42

1. Couple A: Bob and Barbara are a Caucasian couple who have been married for twenty-nine years and have lived in the northeast region of the United States their entire lives.

2. Couple B: Clark and Cassandra are an African-American couple who have been married for forty years and reside in the mid-Atlantic region of the country.

3. Couple C: Darius and Denise are an African-American couple who have been married over forty-one years and currently reside in the southeast region of the United States They were divorced from one another for a very brief period and remarried months later.

4. Couple D: Andre and Anita are a Caucasian couple living in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States who have been married over thirty-eight years. It is Andre's second marriage and Anita's first.

5. Couple E: Earl and Elizabeth are a Caucasian couple who have been married for over thirty-nine years and also live in the mid-Atlantic region.

6. Couple F: John and Jenna are a Caucasian couple who have been married for twenty-eight years and have lived in three different states in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States

7. Couple G: Greg and Gail are an interracial couple who have been married for thirty years. They have lived in the Southeast all of their married lives.

Two of these couples are from upper-middle class backgrounds, four are from middle class backgrounds, and one is from a lower-income community.

## DATA COLLECTION METHODS

With the exception of one interview which was held via live video over the internet, the semi-structured interviews were conducted face to face and lasted between thirty and fifty minutes. Interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed. The transcribed data was analyzed with a constant comparative method for rich descriptions, common themes, contrasts, and patterns noting similarities between couples' ways of dealing with conflict as well as significant differences. In particular, the researcher used a color-coding method of analyzing the data. Different colored highlighters were utilized to clearly mark which answers addressed the various research questions. Questions were not given ahead of time in order to prevent scripted, overly thought-out answers.

Because the study is semi-structured, a sampling of the questions that were used when interviewing married couples who fit the above criteria are listed here:

1. Tell me the story of a time when you communicated clearly and respectfully and yet still disagreed strongly. How did you work through it? I'm interested in hearing the story of how you worked through that situation together.
2. What do you think your pattern has been throughout the years?
3. If a young couple seeking advice on how to constructively manage disagreement were to ask you how to manage differences in a healthy and constructive way, what advice from your own marriage would you give?
4. Talk to me about the issue of compromise. Where has compromise come into play? Who initiates it? Would you say one partner does most of the compromising? How has this fostered more growth and health in your marriage?

5. How have you handled a conflict situation when one or both of you have hurt the other? How was it resolved? Where did forgiveness fit in? How did the conflict and restoration process foster growth and health in your marriage?

6. What role would you say cultivating friendship, fun, and intimacy plays in the health of your marriage?

### **RESEARCHER STANCE**

According to Merriam, “In qualitative study the researcher serves as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis.”<sup>94</sup> This means all observations and analyses in the study are filtered through the researchers’ perspectives and values. Merriam explains that researchers must be sensitive to how biases or subjectivity shape the investigation and its findings. Therefore, it is important for the researcher to employ critical self-reflection to identify and disclose potential sources of biases, assumptions, worldview, theoretical orientation and other connections to the study that may impact the investigation.<sup>95</sup>

I am a reformed, evangelical Christian who has served as an associate pastor, solo pastor and a church planter in the Presbyterian Church in America. My worldview can best be described as theistic and reformed. It is theistic in that I believe in a holy, loving, personal God Who has revealed Himself in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and supremely through His Son, Jesus Christ. My worldview can be described as reformed in that I hold to the confessions that have emerged historically out of the Presbyterian and reformed tradition. The former puts me in the camp of those who

---

<sup>94</sup> Merriam. 15

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. 229

view things through the lens of the Holy Scripture. That is to say, I seek to understand scripture in its context and apply it to every area of life. The latter explains why I value empirical research. Reformed Christians emphasize that all truth is God's truth. Thus, when we gather research data from the created order, it is of some real value.

While my professional status and worldview certainly affect the way I do research, the method of doing research and collecting data along with the strenuous requirements of the academic institution which will be reviewing my work at every stage help keep my research as objective as possible. In addition, my worldview leads me to deal with the subjects of my research as well as the data collected in a fair and honest way.

### **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

As stated in the previous section, couples interviewed for this study were limited to those living in the southeast, mid-Atlantic and northeast regions of North America. Therefore, while some of the study's findings may include universal principles that can be applied to a very broad section of the populace, as with all qualitative studies, the readers bear the responsibility of determining what can be appropriately applied to their own context. The results of this study may also have implications for broader issues connected to marital interventions.

### **SUMMARY OF THE PROJECT METHODOLOGY**

This chapter describes the qualitative research approach used to study the way couples in healthy, long-lasting marriages work through conflict so that it strengthens rather than damages the marital relationship. This qualitative design allowed for a deeper,

emic analysis of the meaning that married couples have constructed from their own experience of working through conflicts and disagreement in their marriages. The constant comparative method was presented as the means of data analysis. And finally, issues of internal and external validity, reliability, researcher stance, and study limitations were presented as they related to the research project. The next chapter presents the profiles and responses of the study participants.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS

This study utilized interviews with six married couples in healthy marriages who have been married for at least twenty-five years. The couples reflected on how they worked through conflict in such a way that it enhanced rather than detracted from their marital relationship. The interviews pursued answers to this study's specific research questions listed below:

1. What positive practices do couples engage in when working through conflict that strengthen rather than hurt the marital relationship?
2. What things do they do to de-escalate damaging behaviors when dealing with problems and differences?
3. In what ways was the conflict-resolution process constructive towards furthering the health of the marriage?

The findings will be reported according to the following structure: First, principles which couples feel contribute to the health and longevity of the marital relationship; second, actual practices used to work through differences or problems; and last, their own view on how the conflict-resolution process strengthened their marriage.

#### **Positive Affect in General**

In the following section, I will be reporting on general principles for relating in marriage that the couples interviewed identified as important elements in keeping the



friendship aspect of their marriages strong. In particular, I will be reporting on the positive qualities they cultivate in times of non-conflict that provide a source of strength and stability.

***Faith:***

Although none of the questions specifically addressed the role of faith in Christ in the quality or length of their marriage, every couple interviewed mentioned the role that faith plays in their marital relationship. I note this not because it is surprising considering all of the participants are professing Christians. Rather it is noted here simply to clarify that no questions concerning faith were asked.

When they mentioned their faith in God, it was connected with commitment to the marriage for the long-haul, forgiveness, sacrifice, wisdom, strength in hard times, and power to change. For instance, when Barbara's husband was unfaithful to her, she gives her relationship with God the credit for helping her hang in there. According to her, "Our relationship with God is the number one thing. For me, if I didn't have God, what would I have had?" Her husband Bob, who didn't believe in Christ until they were married over twenty years agreed with her perspective. According to him, "That is huge because when tough times come up, and they will, like Barbara said, if it wasn't for the Lord and her faith with some of the things that we have been through, we wouldn't have made it through."

Furthering this point, Darius said he doesn't understand how couples work through conflict in a healthy, constructive way without faith in Christ. He put it this way: "I don't know how married couples make it, quite frankly, without Christ. Christ is the

hope. You have two sinners who are incredibly self-absorbed. That is the problem with sin. It turns us in on ourselves. Without Christ I don't know how you make a marriage work.”

Some of the couples also mentioned the connection between their faith in Christ and their commitment to have a lasting marriage. Bob explained it this way:

For me though, it was becoming a Christian. No question though that the faith that Barbara has is what kept the marriage together. No doubt in my mind that that is what kept the marriage together. It wasn't because of anything I did. It wasn't because of money, fame, or the fact that we have kids. It wasn't any of that. It had nothing to do with it. It was because of faith that kept things together.

Darius expressed this idea even more succinctly: “I think we know we are Christians and we can't get a divorce. We've got to work it out. God will work it out.”

Greg and Gail consistently referred to the Lord throughout their interview. They both put a huge premium on prayer and leaning on Jesus for strength and help. When I asked them what the three most important things that helped them in their marriage were, Greg answered, “The common mantra in our marriage is ‘a three-fold cord is not easily broken.’ Jesus has to be the main person...the main strength or source of strength.” Gail agreed, “Yeah, He's the faithful marriage partner here.” When Gail was asked if she felt that Greg supports her emotionally, she made these telling remarks: “I do, at this point in my life I do. There's been times when it's been just me and Jesus and I love this man and I'm in it for the long haul, but basically Jesus is going to meet those needs for me.”

This exchange between Earl and the researcher reveals the role commitment to marriage for life plays in his own marriage:

Earl: The Lord has always been at the center of the relationship. We truly believe in the marriage as a sacrament and that sacrament marriage is a divine thing by

God and if we honor that, He would honor us. It's brought us a long way. There were a lot of struggles there...

Researcher: So you're talking about commitment for life, that covenant commitment, that perspective that marriage is for life, you're talking about the long view of marriage.

Earl: Right. It would have been easy at times to back out and people might have said it was a good thing to back out. Maybe Elizabeth would have been told: 'You married a real loser, he doesn't have a job, he can't even provide for his family; you can easily find somebody that can provide for you and all that.' You just commit to the sacrament of marriage and you want that and at times you don't even know what you are doing at the time because God is there at the center of it; He leads.

As Darius expressed earlier, couples also mentioned how their faith in Christ actually gave them the ability to work on their marriage relationship as individuals and as a couple. He went on to say:

One of the things I'm talking about more and more lately is never say: "That is the way they are." Never say: "That is the way I am," because people change and they grow. It's slow. Sanctification takes so long. Never say: "That is just the way he is" or "That's just the way she is." There is constant growth. Denise is opening up more now than she ever has and that is because I'm quieting down. I'm calming down and being less stubborn. As I calm down, she increases and I decrease. It is cool. It is working out.

Most couples mentioned their faith as it relates to the ability to repair hurts and forgive one another. Here's how Barbara put it in her own words:

"For something like that, it is a long process. You just can't say I forgive you. You have to work through so many things. At that point he wasn't a Christian and for me I was like, what is my faith if I can't work through forgiveness? If Christ forgave me then I have to work through this. Otherwise, what does my faith mean? It's not anything."

Cassandra also expressed this thought when she said, "Forgiveness has played a very important role in our life as far as him and I being together. We've had some very real incidents in our lives that have taken forgiveness; God forgiving me, God forgiving

us, me forgiving us.” Her husband Clark put it this way: “The decisions between two [people], especially two that profess salvation, one should be able to humble themselves. Whether it was right or wrong, one should be able to humble themselves and I thought the one had to be me.” Clark and Darius both mentioned the importance of forgiveness in their interviews. Clark even intimated that without it, his marriage wouldn’t have made it.

He put it this way:

In some relationships it may not have to be used as frequent, but that tool (forgiveness) we should be able to grab with a blindfold because she has forgiven me and I have forgiven her and if we didn’t use that tool, or if it wasn’t part of our toolbox we wouldn’t be together today. Very important tool. It should be part of everyone’s life because what can happen will happen.

Darius expressed it like this:

Well, forgiveness is important. We have to forgive moment by moment. We have to be willing to not hold onto stuff. We work stuff out. We’ve got to work it out. I haven’t sinned against her in a long while so I haven’t had to beg for forgiveness in a while. If I sinned against her I say, “I’m sorry” and she forgives pretty quick. She forgives quicker than I do because I hold onto stuff, years for a long time. I remind her of stuff but once we talk about it, I’m willing to drop it. Of course forgiveness is important otherwise you won’t resolve issues.

Andre and Anita, once again, were the exception to the rule. Andre spoke for both of them when he said, “We have a pretty uneventful marriage. I can’t think of anything. The thing with us is we laugh a lot together. We just don’t offend each other much. I know that in marriage there is constant hurt feelings and they have to forgive but we just don’t have that.” Greg also mentioned that forgiveness played a bigger role earlier in their marriage but that they don’t typically have major conflict now.

According to both Earl and Elizabeth, forgiveness plays a “huge” role in making their marital relationship work. In order to get the full impact of their responses, I am including our exchange in full here:

Elizabeth: I know now as I begin to recognize issues with my own behavior how much Earl has forgiven me. I really do. I can be so bad. I have to be right. Not so much anymore. I think God has been changing me.

Earl: She does things similar though. She will say, “Have you seen my keys?” or “What have you done with my keys?” I feel right away that she looks everywhere but right here. She directs it toward me like, “What did *you* do with my keys?” We are still working on it.

Elizabeth: He does give me a lot of forgiveness, but I do it a lot as well.

Earl: It is huge. If you didn’t have it you might get to first base but you won’t get to second base. You will never hit a homerun.

Elizabeth: We didn’t have it early in our marriage. We could easily go three days and not talk. It got so bad we were either going to get together or go our separate ways.

Earl: The thing that healed it was time. What we realized is that forgiveness healed it right away.

Couples, especially husbands, also noted how their relationship with Christ is intimately connected with their willingness and ability to sacrifice and put the other person first. This will be noted under the heading “Sacrifice” below.

***Sacrifice:***

Sacrifice includes putting the other person’s concerns and needs above one’s own and being willing to compromise. Darius expressed it well when he said:

I think that what happens is that you grow up and you learn not to get your way. And you learn to say, “This is not it.” I’m willing to back off on my vision, my dreams. Hey, we are sold on the American dream. The American dream is not biblical. The biblical dream is that Christ died so that we would no longer live for ourselves but for Him who died. So we live for other people; so we have to grow up. Maturing in the Lord you learn to live with tension because you are maturing.

Less mine, I have to get my way. It happens on both parts. I used to have to get my way.

Barbara defined sacrifice this way: “It is putting the other person first and not trying to get your way.” Bob went in to much greater detail:

The bottom line in all this stuff is you really have to look at how selfish you are, we all are, and the problems that are there exist because we are selfish. We’re selfish people. If you are going to have a successful marriage, you have to identify the depravity and how selfish we are and begin to work on it. It is a process now until we meet Him in glory. We are never going to perfect this thing. It is never going to happen. There is no perfect marriage. There is no perfect person. It’s tough when you have years of selfishness. The world teaches you to be selfish and put yourself first in every aspect. You learn that growing up but then you realize that that is not what it is all about. It is a tough transition but a necessary transition, especially in marriage. If you can’t put your spouse before yourself it is going to be tough. That was how it was before for years and it was rough.

John also felt very strongly about this. Without prompting, he expressed it this way:

Another important principle, and I’ve been thinking about it a lot because we have had some transitions when we came here, I was relying on Jenna for my spiritual sense than on God and I really had to recapture the fact that Christ died for me. The fact that He was willing to sacrifice all that for me and I can’t put up with, fill in the blank, for Jenna. That is absurd. I really have to say to myself, “If this is an issue, deal with it,” but it can’t be worse than what Christ did for me so at that point it all pales and I put things into a new light and regroup with her.

Earl also noted the important role that Christ’s sacrificial, unconditional love plays in his marital relationship. According to him, “Knowing that somehow I could muster inside me unconditional love for someone I love the way that Jesus did is an encouragement to me. I talked earlier about having pillars of support in your relationship; that is the pillar if not the main pillar.”

Gail brought up Gary Chapman’s concept of love languages and affirmed that while Greg’s love language is doing tasks like cleaning, she’s not very good at that. Thus, she views his doing the laundry and cleaning without complaining or being angry about it

as an expression of sacrifice. She adds, "...[H]e is so sacrificial in doing the tasks and being just so loving about it and still affirming me for doing things that I don't even recognize as important."

Cassandra explained the mutual sacrifice expressed in their marriage this way: "We have different activities that we call fun. Dancing is his. Going to the movies is mine. There is this trade off. I may not love dancing but I will go and vice versa. He'll say, "You want to go to the movies?" although it may not be his type of picture, he will go because he knows that is what I like."

This idea of compromise led to some very detailed and descriptive commentary from the couples. Thus, it warrants its own category.

***Compromise:***

According to Bob, compromise isn't something that couples do every now and then, rather it is an ongoing, regular practice in healthy marital relationships. He put it this way:

I think in a healthy marriage, compromise has to be a daily thing if not an hourly thing. I mean it doesn't matter what it is, how big it is or how small it is. In the past we just didn't have compromise. Now it doesn't matter what it is. If Barb says, "Could you get that for me?" or "Could you do this for me?", in the past I would always come up with an excuse. Now I just do it. It makes you stop and think. It is important. If your spouse is asking you to do something, you just do it. It is just respect for the other person. Marriage isn't something that happens on its own. You have to work at it everyday. That is just one example of compromise. And then there are different things that Barb has compromised. If she really didn't want to do a specific thing, she does it anyway or vice versa... We both have compromised on things. It makes a huge difference.

Denise and Darius engaged in the following dialogue over the question I asked about whether or not one person did most of the compromising in the relationship:

Denise: From my perspective, I tend to do more of the compromising. I tend to do whatever he wants. I may not like it but when we do it, because of my personality I have a different perspective on it so we argue because of my perspective not based on where we've gone. But once we're there, how I view looking at the situation...how I see it? It usually is just the opposite of his.

Researcher: Do you see it that way, that she does most of the compromising?

Darius: Yes. Denise has followed me more than I have followed her. We've moved two or three times because of me, otherwise we would still be in (names the state). We moved to the South because of my vision. We moved to the current city we're living in because we both agreed and we will probably move again because of me. I'm even saying now that once my boss retires I think I'm going to leave and Denise is not agreeing.

In Clark and Cassandra's relationship, it was more of a give and take pattern

throughout the years. Cassandra answered the question regarding compromise this way:

One of us has to humble ourselves. It doesn't matter whoever, we can kind of take turns but now we try not to let things come up that can't be squashed. There's nothing that serious than the first situation that we talked about so when these things come up and we don't always agree, to me I just say it is not that serious. Let it go.

In John and Jenna's marriage, both agreed that he often does most of the compromising. Jenna explained:

He tends to stay back. He is very secure and he is ok with me having my way so to speak unless he feels different. He came from a very easygoing family and I don't say that in a demeaning way at all. They were just very easygoing and had none of this high-tempered cultural background that I came from. Believe it or not, I'm kind of the moderate one in my family.

Andre and Anita were the most difficult couple to get pertinent data out of for this particular study since they both admitted to being very easygoing and rarely experience much conflict. Yet, even they acknowledged the value and importance of compromise.

According to Andre: "We sit down and we make that time to talk and it is a matter of really listening to each other and being willing to compromise. To hear the other person



and to give. Sometimes a little, sometimes a lot.” When they were asked if one partner usually does more of the compromising, they both agreed that Anita does. Here’s how our exchange continued:

Andre: Anita compromises more. She is more easygoing.

Anita: I’ll compromise on food, where we are going, what movie we watch.

Andre: Like the day I’m sitting on the couch reading a book on how our food is made and she comes walking in from the food store and I said I’m a vegetarian and she said ok. That was it. We gave all our meat away. That was it. She just said ok.

Researcher: How would you say compromise fosters health and longevity in your marriage?

Andre: Prevents arguments.

Anita: We still get along after thirty-eight years.

Andre: I would say it just makes the marriage run more smoothly because you are not digging in your heels and getting entrenched with knocking heads with each other. You make progress. You move forward because you are willing to compromise.

Earl and Elizabeth viewed compromise a little differently. When discussing how they worked through an issue where they saw things differently Earl said, “I must have just given up on it. Like I said, we realize that some of those things aren’t that important.” Elizabeth saw it a little differently and replied, “Or we said, ‘We don’t want conflict so that’s not going to be important’.” While Earl sees compromise as a partnership of give and take, Elizabeth views it as not being honest with oneself and each other. She put it this way: “I think most of our married lives we were so intent on pleasing each other that we did well together. Because we were both that way, I’m not so sure that we developed techniques to work things out; I think we gave in to each other.” She also acknowledged

that she is currently in counseling and her counselor has been working with her on expressing her true feelings. This, in part, may explain why she views some compromises as simply keeping the peace and avoiding conflict.

***Respect:***

Four of the couples interviewed shared that respect was a vital ingredient to a happy and lasting marriage. Bob mentioned the importance of respecting each another. When John and Jenna were asked to give the three most important ingredients to a healthy, lasting marriage Jenna answered, "Respect." John added, "Respect for each other." Elizabeth acknowledged how important respecting her husband is but felt that she has been weak in expressing it. Yet, when I asked Earl if he felt that she respected him, he quickly said, "I do."

Greg actually mentioned respecting one's wife as one of the three most important elements in a healthy, lasting marriage. According to him: "Just listening to each another, just respecting your wife and her opinion. At least what I've found, I can't speak for other women, but the Lord has given Rachel incredible wisdom and I'd tell young husbands to listen to their wives." Two of the things tied closely to respect are appreciation and fondness. Gail gave this example: "Greg recognizes my contributions that I don't even recognize....I don't even think, 'Well that's nothing, I wish I could do what you do.' It's like we just really appreciate each other."

***Personal responsibility:***

Another recurring theme from the interviews is the couples' recognition of the need for personal responsibility for their part of marital harmony and growth. According

to Bob: “A lot of the time when I look at it myself I find that her heart doesn’t need to change but mine does.” Similarly, as we saw earlier, Clark understood that someone had to humble himself or herself if the relationship was going to be restored and he realized it had to be him. John explained it this way: “You have to be patient with one another. You have to be tolerant. Even though you think they are this way you might be just as bad.”

He went into much greater detail below:

I fall back on biblical stuff. You are in charge and everything is your responsibility, so if the relationship is not working, you are not working hard enough as the man to make it happen. She may not be respecting him and those issues too, but I would focus more on the guy. Like you said to Caleb: “Before you get married I’m your guy, but after you get married I’m on her side. It is now your responsibility to make it work.” That was an important principal. Elizabeth expressed how she has been coming to terms with her need to take

responsibility for her part of the equation in marriage this way: “I know now as I begin to recognize issues with my own behavior how much Earl has forgiven me. I really do. I can be so bad. I have to be right. Not so much anymore. I think God has been changing me.”

Gail gave very detailed explanations of how God brought her to the point of brokenness over her own issues and how she learned to leave her husband’s issues to God. Here’s how she explained it:

I was trying to micro-manage the way that he dealt with people because I didn’t think he was warm enough, or this way enough, or that way enough. He would get off the phone and I would critique the way that he talked to somebody, I mean it was stupid. Like I said, when I was dealing with grief and depression and the Lord knocked me on my butt with that, I realized that I had no energy for anybody else but me and that I was enough to deal with, that my own failings and brokenness was enough for me to deal with before the Lord and that I had to trust God for Greg and just leave it alone and I really did. That was a turning point in our marriage.

***Emotional Connection:***

In Darius' following response, he expresses both his personal responsibility to change with God's help, as well as the renewed emotional expression that it opens up in his wife:

One of the things I'm talking about more and more lately is never say: "That is the way they are." Never say: "That is the way I am" because people change and they grow. It's slow. Sanctification takes so long. Never say: "That is just the way he is or that's just the way she is." There is constant growth. Denise is opening up more now than she ever has and that is because I'm quieting down. I'm calming down and being less stubborn. As I calm down she increases and I decrease. It is cool. It is working out.

In the context of working through the emotionally charged work of uncovering a hurt and forgiving, Barbara was asked the following question: "Have you found times when you worked through that rough process that that brings you closer?" She responded this way: "Yes, because when you are really opening up and sharing your feelings with the other person, it definitely brings you closer." The dialogue between Barbara and the researcher that follows is also insightful:

Researcher: Talk to me about trust. How does that affect ...

Barbara: For me trust is huge. If you can't trust the other person with your feelings, your emotions, what is there? Our relationship with God is the number one thing. For me if I didn't have God what would I have had? I don't know. I had to know from you (Bob), do you want to be married to me? 'Cause at that point, if he didn't want to be married to me then what could I do? You can't make someone love you. Constantly relying on God.

Cassandra conveyed how it took a while for her to feel comfortable enough to express her emotions to anyone and how now it helps to bounce it off of someone else to see if it's even worth expressing to Clark. According to her:

For the most part, I think I have gotten better over the years. I'm an introvert so a lot of my feelings can be kept in or I may share with somebody else just to bounce it off of them and then let it go because it isn't that serious. Now if I feel like it is serious then yes, I say I can't let this go and then I need to say something. Again that has come over time. There was a time that I wouldn't have expressed how I felt.

When I asked Earl and Elizabeth what advice they would give a young, struggling married couple who came to them for counsel, Elizabeth replied, "Take risks. Learn to feel each other's feelings with their hearts. They need to get out of their own feelings enough that they can feel the other person's feelings. Assuming that they're Christian or not Christian, that they need to trust in the Lord." She went on to explain in more detail: "Feelings just are. They are not anything to condemn someone for. If I can feel his feeling, it's not a judgment. It's just a feeling. If I can feel his feeling and get out of my own feelings then we will be brought together. It's a technique for bringing each other together."

For Greg and Gail, it seems that as they grew in their marriage over the years, they learned to interact on a deeper emotional level. They both mentioned a perpetual problem that they had over the years concerning whether she was going to go back to work after their child was born. She thought he had agreed that she would stay home but he merely assented to it. She said it took years to work through it emotionally. According to her: "Greg understood. It was like he finally understood what that had done to me. It was hard for us financially but he understood that it was like questioning everything that I had poured my life into. And it was like, he got that." When I asked them how they work through issues now when they come up she replied, "I think we've just learned to kind of

just say what we're feeling without accusing the other person of doing something. I think we've finally learned how to do that."

***Fun:***

After conducting six interviews, it seemed to me that asking the couples about what they do to cultivate fun in their marriage may reveal quite a bit about the current health of their marital relationship. In other words, it may uncover a need for the couple to rebuild their friendship and positive affect. The following is a fairly lengthy portion of the end of the interview with Darius and Denise to demonstrate this idea. They are responding to the researcher's question: "What role would you say cultivating fun, friendship, and intimacy plays in your marriage?"

Darius: Fun? (giggle)

Denise: We even see fun differently. From my perspective, his fun is to sit down and have an intellectual conversation and pontificate about whatever. That would be work for me. Fun for me is being mindless. He used to ask what am I thinking. Most of the time I'm not thinking. I'm just existing. I'm enjoying the moment. Not thinking about anything. Just enjoying what is.

Darius: We define fun different. We live in two worlds that come together. I live in my world. She lives in her world. Sometimes they come together. Sometimes they don't. That's the tension. That's the frustration. We are just really different in how we view reality. I don't like mindless. I like thinking. I'm very serious about life, purpose, direction and I want to talk about those things so I find someone to talk to them about.

Denise: Or you talk to me to a point. I ask immediate questions. I don't ask long-range questions which frustrates him.

Darius: We're coming together.

Researcher: So what do you do to cultivate the friendship aspect, the fun, the intimacy? What do you do to nurture that?

Denise: We probably have more fun with another person. We are more relaxed because we can have input bounce off from another person.

Darius: That is true.

Denise: We are both our own people but we are also appreciating the other person too, a couple.

Darius: We have to go out with people. That helps dissolve the tension. A third person acts as a diffuser so it is not as tense. We have found over the years we need other people because just the two of us, we don't have fun together.

Denise: To a point.

Darius: I mean we are ok.

John and Jenna are getting ready to be empty nesters soon. They conveyed their minor struggle to pay more attention to fun and recreation in their relationship. John put it this way: "I've actually been trying to cultivate that friendship between us by being more spontaneous." Jenna added, "When we first got married, it was the more dominate, interactive style friendship. When we had children, that drastically changed. Now we are getting back to what that was like again, to just kid around."

Cassandra was very passionate about being intentional about doing fun things together as a couple. She answered this way:

We have different activities that we call fun. Dancing is his. Going to the movies is mine. There is this trade off. I may not love dancing but I will go and vice versa. He'll say, "You want to go to the movies?" although it may not be his type of picture, he will go because he knows that is what I like. One of the things is we have a couple in our church who had date night. That is something we didn't do. There was no specific night or day where we said, "No interruptions." Nobody could say, "Come out dancing with me." This was an older couple and it really opened our eyes to say you know it really helps to keep the marriage fresh because it helps in the relationship building because you can have those same type of feelings when you first met even after twenty, thirty, forty years just by keeping that fire, that flame burning because you can get so caught up in ministry or anything that you forget. There are times that he is ministering and I'm

ministering and by the time you get home all you want to do is go to bed. For me I think about that. We need to do something tonight. I know it is important.

Andre and Anita have a lot in common and do a lot of things together. They explained how they try things that the other person likes even if they don't particularly like them and more importantly, they cultivate their friendship and enjoy many of the same recreational activities. According to Andre, "We are good friends. We do things for each other. We talk. She listens when I rant and rave about what is going on in the news or the church. I have felt a lot of support from her." Anita also expressed that she feels very supported and loved by him as well.

Elizabeth answered about what they do to cultivate fun, friendship, and intimacy very candidly. According to her:

I think that is a weakness in our marriage. We are high achievers. I'm a perfectionist. I want the kitchen cleaned before I leave it. He will say come watch this show with me. I really want to but I want to finish the kitchen first. We are a little weak on cultivating intimacy through friendship. I wish he would play games with me more and watch less TV. I wish we would go more each other's way once in a while. I do think they bring you to a higher level of intimacy and I don't think we do that much anymore.

At that point in the interview, they began to go back and forth a little bit. Earl became a little defensive and explained how he plays cards with her whenever they're on an airplane or ferry. He also mentioned how they had found a good program on the BBC network that they both enjoy watching and discussing together. Then he added, "Is it important and enhances? Yes. But after so many years she knows that the whole relationship doesn't depend on that because if it did it might collapse. But if we had the time we would like to do more. Where do you fit it in sometimes?" Elizabeth didn't agree that time was the issue and they continued to discuss it some more. Later on in the



interview Elizabeth said the following: “I would encourage couples to date each other, to take time and date each other, to play with each other, to regain your intimacy, focus on each other.”

One very interesting thing that jumped out at me in their interview is how highly they regard one another and even in the midst of expressing their different ways of viewing things, they expressed fondness, respect, and genuine admiration for one another. Here’s how they expressed it in their interview:

Elizabeth: I think I am a little weak on respect as well and I know how important it is for you as a man. I slip on that a lot. Do you feel like I respect you?

Earl: I do.

Elizabeth: As you reflect back to me, I’m always interested in your input on decisions from what I wear to job decisions. I think I do have a lot of respect but I do think I can be hard on you.

Earl: How important is it in our relationship?

Elizabeth: Important. Everything you ask us is important. Everything comes under unconditional love, sacrifice, etc. Even when we sacrifice for each other, it is not like Jesus sacrificing for us. It doesn’t even come close.

Researcher: Throughout the years do you feel valued by your mate?

Elizabeth: I feel I am held too high in regard. Sometimes too high. I want to say “If you don’t like something I do, tell me.”

Earl and Elizabeth, Andre and Anita, and Greg and Gail all considered their partners to be their best friend. Friendship was huge for Greg and Gail. When asked what role cultivating fun, friendship, and intimacy played in their marriage, the following discourse ensued:

Gail: Big.

Greg: You have to be a friend first.

Gail: We were. We started out as friends first, and grew into a romantic love relationship after friendship.

Greg: I mean, fun, you know we have fun and we laugh...

Gail: Yeah, laughter plays a big part. We laugh together every day. We joke around and we're silly. That helps so much.

***Humor:***

The first two couples interviewed were not asked what role, if any, humor played in their marriage. However, both Bob and Barbara and Darius and Denise both expressed much humor in the interview. For instance, observe the banter they engaged in upon answering the following questions: "Tell me the story when you guys had a situation where you communicated clearly and respectfully and you still disagreed strongly. How did you work through it?"

Barb: What if that has never happened? (laughing)

Bob: This isn't going to be good.

Barb: Sub-committee of the GOBC thing. I really thought you should go but you didn't want to.

Bob: How did we work through it?

Barb: (Jokingly) I just kept nagging you.

Researcher: Tell me about a time when you had a fight or strong disagreement, maybe a pivotal time, where you were having a hard time coming to a resolution. How did you go about resolving it?

Darius: We have a lot of those.

Denise: Just think of one.

Researcher: How did you get over that? How did you work through it?

Darius: Who said we worked through it?

Denise: We're still here.

Jenna simply said, "I think that humor is really important. You have to be able to laugh at yourself, the situation. You can't take it too seriously because it gets out of proportion." Andre and Anita also mentioned the importance of laughing at things together. Andre mentioned appreciating how Anita helps him laugh at himself and his situation. According to him, "I would come home depressed and lie in bed and she would have me laughing about it. She would see it from a funny point of view... You have to know how to laugh at yourself and your situation."

***Understanding/Empathy:***

A few of the couples mentioned the helpfulness of Gary Chapman's book *The Five Love Languages*. For instance, Barbara made these comments concerning the need to understand your mate:

Yes. I think that it's good to read different books like *The [Five] Love Languages*. You understand how the other person understands things and other books about men understanding women and women understanding men. Marriage is work. You have to study and learn about the other person.

John explained it in much greater detail. When answering my question concerning the three most important ingredients in marriage, he mentioned service and went on to say the following:

We have this concept of love language. Some people want gifts. Some people want praise. She wants service. When I'm loving her the most is when I'm able to

get the things done that are driving her crazy or ruining her day. If I get them done, she is feeling like she is supported and loved. I am a praise person. She throws them my way. The service concept may be just a way of understanding how the other one needs to be stroked or this love language. I think that is a really good concept because if you think your wife wants gifts and what she wants is you around the house, you can give her as many jewels as you want but it is not going to work. If you are around the house, changing diapers, vacuuming and you are letting her take a hot bath once a week with a little wine, that may be what she needs to get herself recharged and she is off and running again. If you are missing that love language, you are missing a really important piece. Women get into a rut with family responsibilities, house demands. It's entropy in motion. The kids constantly tear down what you've got and you are constantly trying to rebuild it.

### **De-escalating Negative Affect**

The section above reported on the general principles for relating in marriage which the couples identified as important in the interviews. In this next section, their ways of working through differences and conflict will be reported as well as the various ways they attempt to de-escalate negative affect.

#### ***Communication:***

Every couple mentioned that they have learned over the years how important communication is to a healthy relationship. Two of the six couples interviewed mentioned the helpfulness of setting aside time to talk. Three of the couples referred to the helpfulness of rules for fighting fairly. Three of the couples mentioned communicating in a gentle, kind manner. All of the couples mentioned the importance of keeping the lines of communication open.

Andre and Anita reported that they have times where they make a pot of coffee and sit down to talk without any interruptions. Andre states, "We say we have to carve out some time to talk about this so we don't have to try and talk while we are passing

each other or are distracted and doing other things. So we sit down and we make that time to talk and it is a matter of really listening to each other...”

Greg listed communication as the first of the three most important qualities in a healthy, lasting marriage. He described communication as “listening to each other, respecting your wife and her opinion.” Gottman would call this “accepting influence” from your mate.<sup>96</sup> Gail mentioned the importance of using words carefully and gently. According to her, “I think we’re both aware of the power of our words and really try to be careful of what we say and for me that sometimes is an expression of unconditional love because I’m choosing to be gentle or I’m choosing to be encouraging.”

Two of the couples had attended a marriage encounter weekend in the past. They both spoke of speaking and listening techniques, such as using “I” statements, communicating one’s feelings, and accepting those feelings. Earl recalled some of the things they learned at the marriage encounter this way:

We went to a marriage encounter and that was really good with the feelings part of “How did that make you feel?”, learning not to garbage-dump, what all the problems were, why it had more to do with “This is how it made me feel when you said that.” So we were able to kind of build upon that and get a little better at working things out when we didn’t see eye to eye.

Elizabeth, however, quickly pointed out: “Maybe those first two years we used those communication techniques, and then I think we kind of stopped using them and stepped backwards in our ability to work things out. That’s what I would say. Not that we had a lot of conflict that I can remember.” From Earl’s perspective, understanding each other’s feelings is something that has stuck with him ever since that marriage encounter

---

<sup>96</sup> Gottman, *The Marriage Clinic : A Scientifically-Based Marital Therapy*. 85

some thirty-seven years ago. In response to what advice he would give young couples that are struggling with how to handle conflict, he said:

Share some of those feelings and realize that for some people all they know how to do is garbage-dump. They don't realize that it's garbage-dump, they think it's sharing. "Well he never does this or never does that." It's not really getting to "When you do this it makes me feel this" or "When you say this it makes me feel like this." And that's what's most important because I'm made to feel this big. I'm made to feel like that ant that you step on the sidewalk. So then you realize that there's feelings here and how it's affecting her and I just blow it off and think that it's not that big of a deal, but it is a big deal to her. I think those techniques... we left that marriage encounter years ago but it carried through some of those things where we're more likely to be thinking about "You know what, she's right. I can understand, you dummy. It hurts her feelings." And you have to be more careful about it.

Five out of the seven couples mentioned the importance of taking a break when things get heated and agreeing to come back to it when things cool down and the issues can be discussed calmly. Bob explains how taking a time-out and coming back to it later has been helpful in their marriage:

One of the things we agreed now that if something comes up where we get so frustrated that we can't talk about it, we've come to an agreement where we say. "We just can't talk about it right now." I've done that a couple times. In the past we didn't have that agreement. In the past if I would have said that Barb would have just got upset like I was blowing her off. But once we got to the point where we said we are both allowed to do that it makes a big difference.

The conversation that followed gave good insight into their interactions in this area:

Researcher: Do you eventually get back to it?

Bob: Yes.

Researcher: Prior to that Bob would say that and never get back to it.

Barb: We never agreed to go back to it later. The argument would just keep going until one or the other would walk out or shut down.

Bob: In the spur of the moment when you get upset, especially myself, I know if it is something I'm passionate about or it is hurtful, I need to stop because I will say something that I shouldn't say. Postpone that and give myself time to think and work through it myself.

Researcher: You do get back to it?

Bob: Yes, I get back to it and my head is clear. Plus, when you wait it gives you the opportunity to think. A lot of the time when I look at it myself I find that her heart doesn't need to change but mine does.

Denise also mentioned that she often will take a break and wait until a more opportune time to get back to it. In the interview, her husband said that he doesn't like it when people say, "That's just the way he is." In response to that she replied:

I do say, "That's who he is" but by the same token when there is an opportunity that is not intense I can talk about "You are this." I can't talk about it in the midst of him being this. I have to step away. Let it go. When there is an open attitude and the conversation will go back and forth and there will be listening, then say something. I stopped arguing in the moment if I know it is not going to go anywhere.

When Clark was asked what advice he would give to a young couple who were constantly arguing and couldn't make any headway he said, "If it is a subject that you have to come back to, put it on hold and come back to it in degrees."

Interestingly enough, Greg expressed that sometimes he needs to wait and calm down. Gail acknowledged that she has to give Greg some time to process things instead of continuing to push the issue. Their dialogue on this is worth quoting in full:

Gail: One thing that we did learn is that I'm more verbal and quick to put things together and process things and Greg needs time. So I've learned to not push the issue, though sometimes that can mean that we don't end up talking about it but usually we can say, "Ok, lets talk about this tomorrow." We don't go to bed angry though, that we don't do but if it comes to a lot of processing and he needs the time, I just give him the time. I don't try to push him until he's angry and frustrated.

Researcher: Would you say, Greg, that most of the time you do get back to it?

Greg: If I can't avoid it, yeah (Gail and I laugh). Gail is really good at initiating reconciliation and dealing with the problem. I guess you really can't go to bed with that anger, because she's really good at dealing with it at times.

Gail: Usually, I have to invite him to come back to it. We've been able to have some really hard and tender talks about things that hit close to home and listen to one another and still acknowledge that it hurts.

Researcher: Would you both say you feel safe expressing your feelings with one another?

Both: Yeah, oh yeah.

### ***Accepting What Can't Be Changed, Changing What Can:***

Five of the couples mentioned accepting what most likely won't change and working through the things that may. What is interesting about this particular finding is that only one of the couples, Greg and Gail, were asked directly about accepting what can't be changed and working on the things that can be worked through. Denise put it this way:

For me, realizing that things happen that I can't change and not fighting to change them. Accepting them the way they are. Thinking about things that are positive. Not focusing on the negative things. Letting them go. Think on positive things. The negative things are there but they are not in the forefront. They are there to be worked on. They come and they go but it is not my main focus. Something I can't change I don't worry. Not worrying I take to heart.

Cassandra also felt strongly about this. Here's how she expressed it in the interview:

I think that now that we are older and I believe that God has given us a little wisdom that whatever comes up cannot be that great that we can't resolve it. And if it can't be resolved, let it go. So a lot of times, as he said earlier, one of us has to humble ourselves. It doesn't matter whoever, we can kind of take turns but now we try not to let things come up that can't be squashed. There's nothing that



serious than the first situation that we talked about so when these things come up and we don't always agree, to me I just say it is not that serious; let it go.

John made this candid comment: "You get to a point where you know it is not going to change, so you have to change. That is where prayer and asking God for your needs in a different way." The following exchange between provides a good example of how knowing each other well can make a difference in the way couples work through differences or difficulties:

Clark: Forty years we have know one another, what ticks each other off and you try and stay away from it so it keeps the disagreements, those things at bay. It doesn't stop friction from happening and we may discuss our disagreements, why we feel the way we feel and what we feel should happen the next time so it doesn't happen again.

Researcher: So you do talk about it.

Clark: We talk.

Researcher: And you share your feelings as well?

Cassandra: For the most part. I think I have gotten better over the years.

In response to the question: "What would you say the three most important ingredients in marriage are?" Andre responded this way:

Humor, compromise, accepting the other the way they are. Don't try and change them. That is a big thing. Don't try and change the other person. I know that is a problem in a lot of marriages. We don't try and change each other. She has always supported me in things I wanted to do, encouraged me. She has not tried to make me into somebody else. I don't try to make her into somebody I want her to be.

Greg felt very strongly about the issue of accepting each other for who they are and not trying to change them into something they're not. He explained it this way:

Nobody's perfect, so if there are things, maybe little quirks that you may see that you may have problems with, but if you spent your marriage trying to change the

other person you'd be miserable. You can't do that. You didn't marry your ideal, the ideal that you have that you want to make your wife like that. The Lord knew exactly who you needed and that is who He gave you. To try to change your wife, to me, would just make your life miserable and you would not be able to appreciate your wife for who she is, this gift that He has given you.

Gail expressed total agreement when she said, "I've had to come to that again and say, 'Ok, this is what God is calling him to' and I have to support him in that and not this when I think it should be this. It doesn't matter. I think just the discipline of mind to not focus like Greg said on those things but to affirm the person in front of you."

### **How the Marital Relationship Was Strengthened**

Throughout this chapter there are glimpses of how the couples' interactions have strengthened their marital relationship. In the following section, it will be more explicit.

When Jenna was asked how compromise has fostered growth in her marriage she gave this reply:

God has created John to be so giving and it has given me a sense to want to grow that way. His compromise, sacrificing whether it is keeping his mouth shut about something or physically giving up something, materially giving up something, has made me see that he has been a role model of Christ for me, that compromise for me has meant...there is nobody else in the world that would put up with me that way. He does it everyday. I see that and it softens me. In my heart that is what I'm thinking.

She also said that she has faith that God put her and John together for a purpose and that He is going to keep them together and make them both better because of each other.

As was noted earlier in the conversation between Bob and Barbara, they both agreed that working through it when they've hurt each by admitting the wrong and granting forgiveness has actually brought them closer. They noted that this was in stark contrast with the way they used to interact which consisted of an attack and withdraw pattern that left them both in isolation. Barbara noted that trust was also rebuilt. As Bob

later explained, “Especially from the pattern of our past, it would do the opposite before because you wouldn’t very rarely admit or say you were sorry. It would chip away at the trust. It kind of flip-flops when you are doing things right.”

Bob and Barbara also noted how being willing to compromise and put the other person first has made a drastic difference for the better in their marriage. Bob put it this way: “It is a tough transition, but a necessary transition especially in marriage. If you can’t put your spouse before yourself it is going to be tough. That was how it was before for years and it was rough.”

Darius commented how knowing that Christ died for Him so that he would live for Christ made an impact on him in his marriage. He explained, “Maturing in the Lord you learn to live with tension because you are maturing. Less mine, I have to get my way. It happens on both parts. I used to have to get my way.” He also feels that Denise has been opening up more than ever because he has been calming down and is being less stubborn. Perhaps more importantly, when he came to faith in Christ he discovered that, “The struggle changed. It was a struggle with hope, as opposed to a hopeless constant bickering and struggling like a lot of people I know.”

Speaking of the conflict-resolution process that she and her husband go through, Jenna says, “I think that resolution process is just part of what happens in the growing and understanding of each other and that just going through the process strengthens your relationship.”

Cassandra reflects on the importance of the new practice of dating again as a married couple this way:

It really helps to keep the marriage fresh because it helps in the relationship building because you can have those same type of feelings when you first met even after twenty, thirty, forty years just by keeping that fire, that flame burning because you can get so caught up in ministry or anything that you forget. There are times that he is ministering and I'm ministering and by the time you get home all you want to do is go to bed. For me I think about that. We need to do something tonight. I know it is important.

One general observation about five of the seven couples interviewed is that they not only still work on their marital relationships but also avail themselves to outside help in one form or another. For Clark and Cassandra, Clark received outside counsel and Cassandra has friends that she bounces things off of. Bob and Barb, John and Jenna, and Earl and Elizabeth all spoke of rules for fighting fairly that they learned from outside sources. Two of those couples attended a marriage enrichment weekend and three of them availed themselves to marriage counseling. Bob also talked about the value of attending a men's accountability group regularly, which he is still currently involved in. Virtually all of the couples interviewed acknowledged the need to continue to work on their marriage on a regular basis no matter how long they've been married.

In this chapter the data of the seven couples was received, reviewed and reported. We discovered the role that positive affect in general played in keeping the marital relationship strong and in providing a healthy backdrop for differences and disagreements to be worked through in a healthy, constructive manner according to the couples interviewed. We also discovered some healthy ways that the couples have learned over the years to interact during times of conflict. In the next chapter, the researcher will compare and contrast the results of the interviews, quantitative research that's been done by others, Biblical data and his personal experience as a counselor.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study focused on how couples in healthy, lasting marriages worked through conflict in such a way that it strengthened rather than damaged the marital relationship. The study was comprised of interviews of couples who have been married for twenty-five years or longer. Research questions dealt with:

1. What positive practices do couples engage in when working through conflict that strengthen rather than hurt the marital relationship?
2. What things do they do to de-escalate damaging behaviors when dealing with problems and differences?
3. In what ways was the conflict-resolution process constructive towards furthering the health of the marriage?

The semi-structured interview questions were designed not only to get the couples to open up about how they de-escalate negative affect and cultivate positive affect in the midst of conflict but also to get them to dialogue about the ways they interact during times of non-conflict. The reason for this approach is that researchers like Gottman have found that “the key to reviving or divorce-proofing a relationship is not how you handle disagreements but in how you are with each other when you’re not fighting.”<sup>97</sup> Thus, recommendations will address both how couples relate to one another when they’re not in conflict as well as constructive ways of working through differences and disagreements

---

<sup>97</sup> Gottman and Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. 46

in times of conflict. Before these areas are expanded upon, a brief discussion of the helpfulness and limits of gathering information through interviewing couples will be addressed.

### **The Usefulness and Limitations of This Qualitative Study**

There is an incredible amount of literature available today dealing with marriage preparation and marriage enrichment. Even a casual review of the major schools of thought and practice reveals that in the new millennium what matters most to researchers and practitioners is whether or not their particular type of marriage enrichment can be proven to be effective by solid empirical research. Thus, John Gottman's research over the years has become extremely influential, not only due to the outcome of his research, but also by virtue of the method of the research itself. Now, in light of this development, whether one is a proponent of Cognitive Behavior Therapy, Hope Focused Therapy, Emotions Focused Therapy, or virtually any of the others, if you want to be taken seriously in the academic community you must be able to back up your claims with more than testimonials or one's own counseling experience.

As was mentioned earlier, this desire to discover whether or not a particular marriage enrichment program actually helps couples or not in the long run is obviously a positive one. It is understandable that researchers and practitioners from various perspectives would all be taking great pains to prove their methods through empirical research. However, the question remains as to whether or not empirically-based research is a more accurate barometer than testimonials and personal or professional experience.

Perhaps the best way to measure the effectiveness of a given method would be to utilize all three measuring standards.

Again, virtually all of the authors surveyed do this implicitly. In other words, even if they value empirical research most highly, they still place some value on the other two ways of determining effectiveness. Gottman himself, for instance, in one of his more recent publications all but acknowledges this fact. In the book *Ten Lessons to Transform Your Marriage: America's Love Lab Experts Share Their Strategies for Strengthening Your Relationship*, which he co-authored with his wife Julie and Joan DeClaire, they write:

Since 1994 we've been developing tools to help couples identify problems that are proven to destroy relationships and to turn those problems around. By experimenting with various forms of therapy, we've been learning how to help husbands and wives improve their marriages and prevent divorce... Through our workshops, therapy sessions, and books, couples are gaining the tools they need to build stronger friendships and manage their conflicts.<sup>98</sup>

When it comes to evaluating whether or not their strategies for strengthening relationships have been effective or not, the following evidence they provide is instructive:

Once again, we're achieving some exciting results. Our studies show that 86 percent of people who complete our marriage workshops *say* they make significant progress on conflicts that once felt "gridlocked." After one year, 75 percent of husbands and 56 percent of wives who attend our workshops and therapy sessions *feel* their marriages move from a broken state to a functional one. Even simply reading our books can make a difference. One study showed that 63 percent of husbands and wives who read John's 1999 bestseller, *The Seven Principles For Making Marriage Work*, reported that their marriages had changed for the better and were still improved a year later.<sup>99</sup> (*italics mine*).

---

<sup>98</sup> Gottman, Gottman, and DeClaire, *Ten Lessons to Transform Your Marriage : America's Love Lab Experts Share Their Strategies for Strengthening Your Relationship*. 1-2

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. 2

One can't help but note the fact that, in contrast with the empirical studies that undergird Gottman's discoveries regarding which specific behaviors lead to divorce, the studies which are used to demonstrate the effectiveness of his interventions are based mostly on personal testimonies. Note the italicized words above: those who attended his workshops and therapy sessions "say" and "feel" that their marriages have changed for the better. I point this out not because I don't value personal testimony and experience but rather to point out that Gottman and his colleagues do to a significant degree!

Having said that, it must also be pointed out that they still value the empirical research they've done more. According to them, "By collecting and analyzing such data on thousands of couples and tracking their process over time, we've learned an enormous amount about the dynamics of marriage. And, ultimately, we've been able to determine which interactions lead to lasting happiness and which interactions lead to emotional distance and divorce."<sup>100</sup>

All this is simply to say that while the empirical research done by Gottman, Markman, Johnson, and others is very significant and carries much weight in determining which methods are most effective for helping couples in the long run, gathering testimonial data as well as personal and professional experience should not be minimized or ruled out as completely insignificant. Doherty makes it clear that he has gleaned much from his own marriage as well as the many couples he's worked with over the years. He explains, "I have lots of practical crafts ideas to pass on to you, some I've learned with

---

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. 3



my wife in our marriage and others I've learned from couples I've known and worked with."<sup>101</sup>

Thus, it seems to me that identifying healthy married couples who have been married for twenty-five years or longer, discovering the healthy ways they deal with conflict and negotiating interest over the years, and comparing and contrasting it with the research available today has added valuable insight to the ongoing conversation on how to help couples.

This can also address Doherty's concern mentioned earlier regarding what he calls "solitary marriages" in that it can provide young couples with valuable wisdom gleaned from healthy couples who have learned to deal with disagreements and differences as well as negotiating interests in positive ways which strengthen rather than damage their relationship.

Although much can be said about the usefulness of the interview and self-reporting method of gathering data, during my interviews I did notice some limitations. There were times during the interview process that the couples seemed to contradict one another or struggled to come up with a clear, descriptive example of how they work through conflict. Having an outside party actually observe one of their "fights" in progress would certainly prove beneficial.

There were times during the interviewing process when I noted how helpful it would be to be a fly on the wall during a few of the couple's actual discussions during conflict! This is certainly the strength of Johnson, Gottman, Markman, Stanley,

---

<sup>101</sup> Doherty. 24

Worthington, and others' observations of couples while they are in the midst of their interactions with each other during times of conflict and discussions of problems. Thus, it's not that I disagree with basing one's marital advice on such research, rather I simply want to point out that qualitative research methods and advice from one's own marriage and from experienced counselors serve only to enhance such research.

### **Conclusions of the Study Relating to Times of Non-Conflict**

According to John and Julie Gottman in their book *10 Lessons to Transform Your Marriage* published in 2006, "Combining John's extensive research and Julie's thirty years of experience as a clinical psychologist, we've developed a body of advice that's based on two surprisingly simple truths: (1) Happily married couples behave like good friends and (2) happily married couples handle their conflicts in gentle, positive ways."<sup>102</sup> Although this may be an oversimplification, they do base their marital intervention method on those two truths. These ideas are explained in greater detail in Gottman's *Marriage Clinic* this way:

The two necessary "staples" of marriages that work (whatever their typology) are (1) an overall level of positive affect and (2) an ability to reduce negative affect during conflict resolution. These two empirical facts give us the basics of marital therapy: to create lasting change in troubled marriages, interventions need to enhance the overall level of positive affect in both non-conflict and conflict contexts and teach couples how to reduce negative affect during conflict by accepting one another's influence.<sup>103</sup>

When I first started researching for this study I had in mind the voluminous material written on negotiation, healthy communication practices, and expert

---

<sup>102</sup> Gottman, Gottman, and DeClaire, *Ten Lessons to Transform Your Marriage : America's Love Lab Experts Share Their Strategies for Strengthening Your Relationship*. 3-4

<sup>103</sup> Gottman, *The Marriage Clinic : A Scientifically-Based Marital Therapy*. 105

“techniques” on how to fight fairly. But after reading over 5,000 pages on various schools of thought relating to conflict resolution as well as interviewing seven couples, I have come to understand the impossibility of separating positive affect and friendship in times of non-conflict from times of working through conflict. This is simply to say that I believe that the overall quality of the friendship in the marriage has a profound impact on how couples relate to one another in times of stress and conflict. Thus, it seems to me that Gottman has identified something important for marriage interventionists to consider when trying to help couples strengthen their marital relationship and work through conflict constructively.

As it relates to positive affect during times of non-conflict, Gottman writes this in his chapter in *The Clinical Handbook of Couple Therapy*:

We maintain that each positive affect system requires effort and prioritization of time. This involves the therapist helping the couple to increase the Panksepp positive affect systems such as play, comfort, humor, laughter, interest, amusement, curiosity, learning, fun, exploration, and adventure. Dealing effectively with conflict or adding insight into negative patterns or creating bonding by healing attachment injuries will not enhance these positive affect systems. They are separate emotional command systems that will not flourish by themselves, unless the therapist prioritizes them.<sup>104</sup>

Even in Johnson’s EFT approach, she recommends what she calls “bonding rituals” which consist of “deliberately structured moments that foster ongoing connection.”<sup>105</sup> She then lists examples of such bonding rituals that include maintaining a regular date night.<sup>106</sup> Similarly, Doherty mentions the following three aspects of what he calls an intentional marriage: “A rock-solid commitment to marriage, a reservoir of

---

<sup>104</sup> Gurman. 153

<sup>105</sup> Johnson. 211

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. 212

marital rituals of connection and intimacy, and a supportive community.<sup>107</sup> Markman, Stanley, and Blumberg in their most recent revision of *Fighting For Your Marriage* include separate chapters on friendship, fun, and emotional connection. According to them, “There’s no more powerful change couples can make quickly in their relationship than to agree to set aside time to have fun and agree to protect this time from conflict.”<sup>108</sup>

All of the couples interviewed acknowledged the importance of increasing friendship-building as well as positive affect elements like fun, laughter, amusement, play, and the like. Some even admitted their critical need of focusing more on these in their marriage. For instance, as reported in chapter four, Elizabeth frankly confessed, “I think that is a weakness in our marriage;...we are a little weak on cultivating intimacy through friendship. I wish he would play games with me more and watch less TV. I wish we would go more each other’s way once in a while. I do think they bring you to a higher level of intimacy and I don’t think we do that much anymore.” This confession explains why she gave the following advice to young couples: “I would encourage couples to date each other, to take time and date each other, to play with each other, to regain your intimacy, focus on each other.”

John and Jenna both agreed that at the beginning of their marriage they were much more focused on having fun together and cultivating their friendship. They agreed that raising three children made it difficult to maintain. They made it clear that now that their children are grown they are getting back to being more spontaneous and kidding

---

<sup>107</sup> Doherty. 18

<sup>108</sup> Markman, Stanley, and Blumberg, *Fighting for Your Marriage : A Deluxe Revised Edition of the Classic Best Seller for Enhancing Marriage and Preventing Divorce*. 263

around again. Cassandra felt very strongly that she and Clark needed to have a date night every week even though they've been married for forty years. According to her, "It really helps to keep the marriage fresh because it helps in the relationship building because you can have those same type of feelings when you first met even after twenty, thirty, forty years just by keeping that fire, that flame burning."

It may also be noteworthy to point out that the couple who expressed the least amount of conflict (Andre and Anita) also seemed to have a very strong friendship. Besides doing things that the other person likes they also cultivate many of the same interests. When I asked them if they try to find things that they both like to do, Andre replied, "Yes, we went to Best Friends for a week (animal rescue). We both really liked that. I worked with the horses. She worked with the dogs. We both worked with the dogs. Great vacation. Great time. Both like to read and go to the library and movies."

In contrast with Andre and Anita, Darius and Denise noted that they need some help having fun together. Denise stated, "We probably have more fun with another person. We are more relaxed because we can have input bounce off from another person." Darius not only agreed but added, "We have to go out with people. That helps dissolve the tension. A third person acts as a diffuser so it is not as tense. We have found over the years we need other people because just the two of us, we don't have fun together." Denise felt he was overstating it a bit and replied, "To a point." Gail also confessed that she and her husband weren't good at cultivating fun in their marriage. However, after further probing, she realized that they do take walks, go out to dinner and for coffee, and various other activities. They did, however, say that humor played a big

role in their relationship. According to Gail, “Laughter plays a big part. We laugh together every day. We joke around and we’re silly. That helps so much.” Three other couples interviewed eagerly affirmed how important laughter is to their relationship while two others bantered back and forth humorously even in the interview. The other couple acknowledged that they were weak in that area but strongly desired to see improvement.

What does this have to do with how couples work through conflict in a way that strengthens rather than damages the marital relationship? According to Gottman, it has everything to do with it. Cultivating friendship in one’s marital relationship, especially through fun and humor, can only strengthen couples’ fondness and admiration for one another. According to Gottman,

Partners who characteristically turn toward each other rather than away are putting money in the bank. They are building up emotional savings that can serve as a cushion when times get rough, when they’re faced with a major life stress or conflict. Because they have stored up all of this goodwill, they are better able to make allowances for each other when a conflict arises. They can maintain a positive sense of each other and their marriage even during hard times<sup>109</sup>

Although Gottman refers particularly to “turning toward each other” rather than having fun and laughing together, his point about storing up goodwill can also apply to fun and humor. These elements of positive affect during times of non-conflict can only help them maintain a “positive sense of each other” when times of conflict arise.

---

<sup>109</sup> Gottman and Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. 80

Markman, Stanley, et al. affirm that modern research actually supports the idea that cultivating the positive aspects of couples' interactions contributes to the overall health of the marital relationship. According to them,

Research clearly demonstrates that couples need to protect the positive aspects of their interactions (e.g., fun, support, friendship, commitment, forgiveness, sexual and sensual connection) from destructive conflict and to make them a priority, as these positive connections are strongly linked to marital health and satisfaction (e.g. Gottman, Ryan, Carrere, & Erley, 2002; Noller, 1996; Pasch and Bradbury, 1998; Stanlet et al., 2002).<sup>110</sup>

This also explains why respecting, honoring, and even admiring one another is so important in marriage relationships. It stands to reason that when spouses feel genuinely respected and valued it will minimize what Gottman calls the four horsemen of criticism, defensiveness, stonewalling, and especially contempt. To put it another way, if respect, fondness, and admiration are not being cultivated in times of non-conflict, it will be nearly impossible to work through conflict in a respectful manner when things get tense. On the other hand, if one's spouse knows that their partner has genuine respect for them, then even in heated discussions damaging speech like contempt and criticism will be kept to a minimum, if not absent.

For John and Jenna, having and showing respect to one another is very important. They both acknowledged that at times doors would be slammed, yelling would occur, and emotions would be expressed. Yet, Jenna made it clear that "He doesn't get mean." John also made it clear that "She doesn't go to name calling." Although they both acknowledged they do occasionally get into "the wrong kind of fighting," I got a clear

---

<sup>110</sup> Howard J. Markman, 414

sense that they respected one another even in the way they interacted during the interview. As we saw in the last chapter, most of the couples interviewed mentioned the importance of respect. For Greg, respecting his wife was high on his list of essential elements in a healthy, lasting marital relationship. Gail also affirmed that they both display appreciation for one another.

The best explanation I have read of the positive influence that love, respect, and appreciation have on the marital relationship comes from Gary Chapman. He describes it this way:

What are these emotional needs that seem to be so vital in producing a successful marriage? Perhaps the three most basic are the need to feel loved, to feel respected, and to feel appreciated. To feel loved is to have the sense that my spouse genuinely cares about my well-being. Respect has to do with feeling that my spouse has positive regard for my personhood, intellect, abilities, and personality. Appreciation is that inner sense that my spouse values my contribution to our relationship. When a husband and a wife feel loved, respected, and appreciated by each other, they are experiencing emotional intimacy.<sup>111</sup>

It's no coincidence that when the Apostle Paul writes about how husbands and wives should interact with one another on the basis of the gospel message, love and respect are at the very core of his instructions. While he makes it clear that the primary need for the husband is respect and the primary need for the wife is love (Eph. 5:33)<sup>112</sup>, he and the other apostles make it just as clear in other passages that husbands are to show respect to their wives and wives are to love their husbands<sup>113</sup> (Titus 2:4, 1 Pet. 3:7).

Gottman explains the practical impact this has on a marriage relationship this way: "All the ways partners show each other love and respect also ensure that the positive-to-

---

<sup>111</sup> Chapman. 162

<sup>112</sup> Ephesians 5:33

<sup>113</sup> Titus 2:4 and 1 Peter 3:7



negative ratio of a marriage will be heavily tilted to the positive side.”<sup>114</sup> The role that love, respect, and admiration play in times of actual conflict will be discussed later. For now I simply want to point out how they contribute to cultivating positive affect in times of non-conflict.

From this perspective, one can see how sacrifice, commitment, unconditional love, and forgiveness play a huge role in cultivating strong, intimate emotional bonds which will tilt the marital relationship overwhelmingly to the positive side as well. As was reported in the last chapter concerning my interviews with the couples, when partners find ways to put the other first, sacrifice willingly, and extend one another true forgiveness, it strengthens couples sense of feeling loved, valued, and respected.

In my interviews, sacrificing for one’s partner, putting the other person first and compromising was mentioned by all of the couples. Husbands particularly felt strongly about sacrificing for their mate since Christ sacrificed for them. A few of them even directly referred to Christ’s sacrifice as their motivation and inspiration for giving freely of themselves to their partner. One of the wives even verbalized how she felt when her husband sacrifices for her this way: “His compromise, sacrificing...has been a role model of Christ for me...he does it every day. I see that and it softens me. In my heart that is what I’m thinking.”

It’s no secret that the Bible places a premium on husbands sacrificing for their spouses as Christ sacrificed for His bride, the church.<sup>115</sup> The Bible also calls every

---

<sup>114</sup> Gottman and Silver, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail : What You Can Learn from the Breakthrough Research to Make Your Marriage Last*. 66

<sup>115</sup> Ephesians 5:25

Christian to put others first and live a life of sacrificial love as Christ did for us.<sup>116</sup> It excites me as a marital counselor and pastor to find that modern research confirms how important sacrificing for one another is in marriage. According to Markman, Stanley, et al.,

A growing body of studies shows the positive effects of healthy sacrifice and altruistic supportive behavior between partners. Indeed, numerous studies show that there are positive effects on relationships when partners are able to give to each other without coercion, resentment, or a sense of personal loss to the self (Stanley, Markman 1992; Stanley, 2007; Van Lange et al. 1997; Whitton, Stanley, and Markman, in press).<sup>117</sup>

All of the couples except for one made it clear that forgiveness was a vital ingredient in their marital relationship. When asked what role, if any, forgiveness plays in their marriage, two couples used the adjective “huge” to describe its role in their relationship. Three couples intimated that their marriage wouldn’t have made it without it. As was mentioned in chapter two, Worthington points out that there is now research to back up the importance of forgiveness in marital relationships. According to him, “Couples with long-term successful marriages have identified forgiveness as one of the top three qualities responsible for their marital success. (Fennell 1993). Why? More than twenty studies (see Fincham, Hall and Beach 2005, for a review) show that forgiveness is important to marriage...”<sup>118</sup>

Again, modern research is only affirming what the Bible has been saying for thousands of years: Forgiveness is vitally important in all human relationships. Everyone

---

<sup>116</sup> Ephesians 5:1 ff

<sup>117</sup> Howard J. Markman. 419

<sup>118</sup> Worthington, *Hope-Focused Marriage Counseling : A Guide to Brief Therapy*. Xxiv

needs God's forgiveness (See Rom. 3:23, 1 John. 1:7-10)<sup>119</sup> and those who claim to have received that forgiveness need to forgive others (Eph. 4:32).<sup>120</sup> The Bible gives many reasons why we need to do so. For our purposes, it's important to point one out in particular. Simply put, because marriage partners are both sinful and imperfect and thus will hurt one another from time to time, forgiveness will need to be liberally distributed on a regular basis if couples expect a reasonable amount of happiness and longevity in their marital relationship.

The same can be said for commitment to their marriage for the long-haul. The majority of the couples interviewed clearly expressed commitment to one another for life. Four of them expressly linked this long-term view to their faith in Christ. As was mentioned earlier, this commitment over the long-haul not only contributes to the length of marital relationships but also to their quality. As Scott Peck in *The Road Less Traveled* puts it: "Couples can not resolve in any healthy way the universal issues of marriage; dependency and independence, dominance and submission, freedom and fidelity, for example, without the security of knowing that the act of struggling over these issues will not itself destroy the relationship."<sup>121</sup>

When I put together what modern marriage research has found with the rich, descriptive details found in my qualitative study and the teaching of scripture, it seems to me that counselors, therapists, and pastors need to focus on ways to help couples cultivate the aspects of positive affect mentioned above. Somehow, they must help couples find a

---

<sup>119</sup> Romans 3:23, 1 John 1:7-10

<sup>120</sup> Ephesians 4:32

<sup>121</sup> As quoted in *Fighting For Your Marriage*, Markman, Stanley and Blumberg. 29

way to be more proactive in cultivating fun, humor, sacrifice, forgiveness, respect, fondness, commitment, etc., in their relationships. I find it interesting that Worthington, Markman, Stanley, Gottman, and even Johnson to an extent all agree that this is needed. Of course, the question as to how we can help couples do so is where the debate comes in. However, many different schools of thought have been recognizing what Worthington so eloquently describes in the preface to the updated version of his *Hope-Focused Marriage Counseling*: “All of the empirically-supported treatments for couples problems have veered away from skills training. The same lesson applies that was found in marriage research: It is most important to change the emotional bond between couples and heal damage to it.”<sup>122</sup>

In my interviews, three couples in particular actually gave some responses that overtly addressed the need for emotional attachment. And in all three cases, the wives seemed to be more in tune to it. Elizabeth’s responses in this area can be explained in part by the fact that she is currently in counseling and her counselor seems to be leading her in this area. The following response sounds very much like Johnson’s discussion of EFT in *Hold Me Tight*: “If I can feel his feeling and get out of my own feelings then we will be brought together. It’s a technique for bringing each other together.” As you may recall from the last chapter, her advice to young couples was to “take risks to learn to feel each other’s feelings with their hearts. To get out of their own feelings enough that they can feel the other person’s feelings.” The language that she chooses is very reminiscent of these comments that Johnson makes in *Hold Me Tight*:

---

<sup>122</sup> Worthington, *Hope-Focused Marriage Counseling : A Guide to Brief Therapy*. xxviii

My clients had to learn to take risks, to show the softer sides of themselves, the side they learned to hide in the Demon dialogues. I saw that when more withdrawn partners were able to confess their fears of loss and isolation, they could then talk about their longings for caring and connection. This revelation “moved” their blaming partners in to responding more tenderly and sharing their own needs and fears. It was as if both people suddenly stood face to face, naked but strong, and reached for each other.<sup>123</sup>

As far as I am aware of, Barb, one of the other two wives who spoke in terms of emotions and feelings, has not had any training or teaching from the EFT school of thought. And yet, she expressed the need to know that her husband still wanted to be married to her. In EFT terms, she was asking: “Can I count on you, depend on you? Are you there for me? Will you respond to me when I need, when I call? Do I matter to you? Am I valued and accepted by you? Do you need me, rely on me?”<sup>124</sup>

On the other side of the equation, she also said, “If you can’t trust the other person with your feelings, your emotions, what is there?” The following comment from Gail displays a growing level of emotional intelligence in her marriage: “I think we’ve just learned to kind of just say what we’re feeling without accusing the other person of doing something. I think we’ve finally learned how to do that.” I mention this here because emotional connection or attachment is a major “positive affect” and if it is strong then it will certainly affect the way a couple works through conflict. Johnson describes it this way: “A sense of secure connection between romantic partners is key in positive, loving relationships and a huge source of strength for the individual in those

---

<sup>123</sup> Johnson. 44

<sup>124</sup> Ibid. 30

relationships...Those who felt close to and could depend on partners reported feeling less angry with and attributing less malicious intent to their partners.”<sup>125</sup>

My recommendation for marriage counselors and other marriage interventionists is to gain a better grasp on, not only how to help couples cultivate friendship and fun, but to go a step further and discover ways to help them do the following: (1) see that emotional detachment is one of their biggest enemies, (2) learn ways to cultivate and strengthen the attachment bond that they do possess, and (3) see that the real goal in their marriage relationship is to get to the place where they can stand before one another and be “naked and unashamed.”<sup>126</sup>

According to Johnson, “Change occurs not through insight into the past, catharsis, or negotiation, but through new emotional experience in the present context of attachment-salient interactions.”<sup>127</sup> As will be apparent in my discussion of how the couples I interviewed work through conflict, they all could benefit from a concentrated focus on emotional attachment. Having dealt with my findings and conclusions related to times of non-conflict, I now turn to the main focus of this study.

### **Conclusions of the Study Relating to Times of Conflict**

What struck me from the interviews with these couples who have weathered the storms in their marriage for twenty-eight, thirty-eight and even forty-two years of marriage was the way that they learned to accept what most likely won't be changed

---

<sup>125</sup> Ibid. 22-23

<sup>126</sup> Genesis 2:25

<sup>127</sup> Gurman. 114

about their partners. They also found ways to discuss their differences and in some cases resolve some of the issues that can be resolved.

This fits in with Gottman's concept of "two kinds of conflict." According to him, We have found that all marital conflict, ranging from mundane annoyances to all-out wars, really fall into one of two categories: Either they can be resolved, or they are perpetual, which means they will be a part of your lives forever, in some form or another. Once you are able to identify and define your various disagreements, you'll be able to customize your coping strategies, depending on which of these two types of conflict you're having.<sup>128</sup>

Five of the couples actually recognized this distinction in one way or another. For instance, Greg, without hesitation, said, "Nobody's perfect, so if there are things, maybe little quirks that you may see that you may have problems with, but if you spent your marriage trying to change the other person you'd be miserable." But, he was also quick to affirm the need to appreciate your wife for who she is, namely, a gift from God. In this connection, Gottman makes this powerful assertion based on his research:

The basis for coping effectively with either kind of problem is the same: communicating basic acceptance of your partner's personality. Human nature dictates that it is virtually impossible to accept advice from someone unless you feel that that person understands you. So the bottom line rule is that, before you ask your partner to change the way he or she drives, eats, or makes love, you must make your partner feel that you are understanding. If either (or both) of you feels judged, misunderstood, or rejected by the other, you will not be able to manage the problems in your marriage. This holds for big problems and small ones.

The couples mentioned above had a pretty good grasp on this concept. They spoke about accepting each other for who they are and not trying to change them. But they also spoke about working through the problems that can be addressed. Before I turn to my conclusions and recommendations on how healthy, lasting couples work through

---

<sup>128</sup> Gottman and Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. 149

conflict in a way that strengthens rather than damages their relationship, allow me to make a few observations about accepting one's partner for who they are and being willing to live with perpetual, unresolved problems.

One of the major ways that counselors can help couples who come to them for help is to come alongside couples and help them see the importance of not only accepting each other for who they are, but also accepting the fact that there will always be a set of perpetual problems that they will have to learn to live with. Gottman has found that

couples who have remained happily married for many years are able to enjoy each other, foibles and all, because of the strength of their fondness and admiration. Many of the older couples I studied with colleagues Bob Levenson and Laura Carstensen in the San Francisco Bay area were masters at this. They had been married for a very long time, some for more than forty years. Through the course of their marriages, they had learned to view their partners' shortcomings and oddities as amusing parts of the whole package of their spouse's character and personality.<sup>129</sup>

For Christian couples, they know experientially what it means to be accepted for who they are, warts and all. In light of this loving acceptance it propels believers to extend this same loving acceptance to others, especially one's spouse. Evangelical Christians are not the only ones to recognize this need for people to feel accepted and loved as they are. Gottman puts it this way: "It's just a fact that people can change only if they feel that they are basically liked and accepted as they are."<sup>130</sup> He gives this example of how showing love and acceptance even in times of conflict makes a positive impact on couples' interaction:

There's a big difference between, "You are such a lousy driver. Would you please slow down before you kill us?" and "I know how much you enjoy driving fast.

---

<sup>129</sup> Ibid. 154

<sup>130</sup> Ibid. 149



But it makes me really nervous when you go over the speed limit. Could you please slow down?” Maybe that second approach takes a bit longer. But that extra time is worth it since *it is the only approach that works*.<sup>131</sup>

Again, for the most part, the couples interviewed expressed acceptance and appreciation for one another as well as the growing ability to discuss differences and disagreements in a gentle and respectful manner. We turn now to my conclusions and recommendations on how healthy, lasting couples work through conflict in a way that strengthens rather than damages their relationship.

One of the things that I recognized was how some of the spouses who were interviewed truly came to learn the limitations of their partner’s ability to meet all of their needs. According to John, “You get to a point where you know it is not going to change so you have to change. That is where prayer and asking God for your needs in a different way [comes in].” Gail was even more emphatic about this. She expressed it this way: “There’s been times when it’s been just me and Jesus and I love this man and I’m in it for the long-haul but basically Jesus is going to meet those needs for me.”

This is a very mature and godly perspective. While it is true on the one hand that “it is not good for the man to be alone” (Gen. 2:18)<sup>132</sup>, it is also true that only God can ultimately satisfy our souls (Psalm 63:5).<sup>133</sup> A friend described it beautifully to me just the other day when she said, “I’m not looking for someone to complete me. I am looking for someone who will complement me.”

---

<sup>131</sup> Ibid. 149

<sup>132</sup> Genesis 2:18

<sup>133</sup> Psalm 63:5

As was reported in chapter four, three of the couples mentioned the importance of communicating in a gentle, kind manner. Gail put it this way: “I think we’re both aware of the power of our words and really try to be careful of what we say and for me that sometimes is an expression of unconditional love because I’m choosing to be gentle or I’m choosing to be encouraging.” Again, this corroborates Gottman’s findings concerning what he calls “gentle start-up.” According to him, “Marriages that are working well are characterized by a specific form of gentleness and kindness toward one another that involves starting a discussion of a marital issue in a softened way and accepting influence from one another.”<sup>134</sup> Interestingly enough, Greg affirmed the fact that he has learned to respect Gail’s opinion and influence.

The Bible puts a premium on being kind, gentle, and compassionate to one another (Eph. 4:32, Col. 3:12).<sup>135</sup> It also teaches the need to use words carefully and positively (Eph. 4:29, Prov. 12:18).<sup>136</sup> No matter what method of helping couples a counselor uses, teaching couples to soften their start-up and discuss their problems and disagreements in a gentle, kind, and respectful way is imperative. It’s the ability to improve at interacting this way that has helped most of the couples interviewed to keep negative affect from destroying their relationships. Clark put it this way:

Forty years we have known one another, what ticks each other off and you try and stay away from it so it keeps the disagreements, those things at bay. It doesn’t stop friction from happening and we may discuss our disagreements, why we feel the way we feel and what we feel should happen the next time so it doesn’t happen again.

---

<sup>134</sup> Gottman, *The Marriage Clinic : A Scientifically-Based Marital Therapy*. 85

<sup>135</sup> Ephesians 4:32, Colossians 3:12

<sup>136</sup> Ephesians 4:29, Proverbs 12:18

Notice in the comments made by Clark above that, on the one hand, he affirms the need to know what sets your partner off and try to stay away from those “hot buttons.” Yet, on the other hand, they still discuss their disagreements and express their feelings. It is important to understand that being gentle and kind when bringing up issues does not mean completely suppressing your feelings. It simply means that you must express them in a way that still maintains your partner’s dignity and worth. This varies from couple to couple. In my own marriage, when my wife and I get into disagreements we often use language that others would consider harsh. One of us might say, “What are you drunk? That actor was not in *Jurassic Park*. You’re out of your mind.” The other might respond this way: “You’re wrong, you freak.” And then we both will laugh! We call that type of interacting “love taps.” However, if one of us feels uncomfortable or disrespected by the way the other is interacting we tell each other. That is the key in this area.

At least five of the seven couples interviewed also noted the need to sometimes take a break when things get heated and come back to it later when they (the husband in particular) has had some time to think and calm down. Gottman, Markman, Stanley, and other researchers recommend this. However, they all emphasize the importance of agreeing to come back to it. Bob articulated it this way:

One of the things we agreed now that if something comes up where we get so frustrated that we can’t talk about it, we’ve come to an agreement where we say, “We just can’t talk about it right now.” I’ve done that a couple times. In the past we didn’t have that agreement. In the past if I would have said that Barb would have just got upset like I was blowing her off. But once we got to the point where we said we are both allowed to do that it makes a big difference.

Gail told me that she has learned not to push Greg when he is beginning to get flooded. She put it this way:

I've learned to not push the issue, though sometimes that can mean that we don't end up talking about it but usually we can say "Ok, let's talk about this tomorrow." We don't go to bed angry though, that we don't do but if it comes to a lot of processing and he needs the time, I just give him the time. I don't try to push him until he's angry and frustrated.

Emotions still need to be expressed. The five couples who mentioned taking a break when things get heated also mentioned the need to get back to it. I believe Gottman has it right when he says, "To reiterate these all-important characteristics: softened start-up of conflict discussion by the wife; husband's ability to accept influence from wife and de-escalate low intensity negative affect; wife's use of humor to effectively soothe husband; husband's use of positive affect and de-escalation to effectively soothe himself."<sup>137</sup>

In my interviews I noticed that the husbands did indeed learn over the years to accept influence from their wives and most employed humor even in times of conflict. John explains how he sometimes de-escalates negative affect during a time of conflict with his Italian-American wife Jenna this way: "I'm not so concerned with her getting angry or blowing up. Where I would of thought, "It's going to be terrible" but she just laughs at me. I'll say something like an Italian would and she would just laugh at me." Jenna agreed and said, "You have to be able to laugh at yourself, the situation. You can't take it too seriously because it gets out of proportion."

In summary, couples in healthy, lasting marriages demonstrate an increasing ability and willingness to work through conflict respectfully and gently. They have learned to accept each other for who they are but also to convey that acceptance and

---

<sup>137</sup> Gottman, *The Marriage Clinic : A Scientifically-Based Marital Therapy*. 85

respect even in the midst of working through disagreements. As Gottman points out from his own research on the masters of marital relationships:

somehow couples such as these have learned to mellow about their partner's faults. So although they communicate to each other every emotion in the spectrum, including anger, irritability, disappointment, and hurt, they also communicate their fundamental fondness and respect. Whatever issue they are discussing, they give each other the message that they love and accept each another, "warts and all."<sup>138</sup>

And yet, each of the couples interviewed admitted that they don't do the above as consistently as they'd like to. They fully acknowledged that this is where forgiveness comes in and how important it really is to a healthy, lasting marriage.

While forgiveness is important in general in the marital relationship, it is especially important while couples are in the midst of conflict as well as shortly after some heated discussion. Earl and Elizabeth noted how, earlier in their marriage, they didn't really work through confessing and forgiving. According to Elizabeth, "We could easily go three days and not talk. It got so bad we were either going to get together or go our separate ways." Earl followed up with these comments: "The thing that healed it was time. What we realized is that forgiveness healed it right away."

Bob and Barbara also noted that earlier in their marriage they would just push each other into shutting down and it would lead to isolation. Bob put it this way: "We would be at loggerheads and we would lose hours, days, weeks, and months." Bob explains the way they now deal with hurts this way:

I will say that again that looking back at the past and how things are now that if there was an issue before, it didn't matter what it was even if I apologized, which

---

<sup>138</sup> Gottman and Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. 154

would be rare, the issue never really was closed. The wound was still open where as now, for the most part, we just work through something like in a matter of minutes it is done. It is over. It's finished.

Gottman makes this observation concerning the importance of couples forgiving one another quickly: "We have learned that in stable, satisfying relationships people ... attempt to repair ruptures early and to accept repair attempts."<sup>139</sup> Here is where believers should have an advantage. A number of the couples interviewed even suggested as much. Barbara explained it this way: "You have to work through so many things. At that point he wasn't a Christian and, for me, I was like, 'What is my faith if I can't work through forgiveness?' If Christ forgave me then I have to work through this. Otherwise, what does my faith mean? It's not anything." John articulated the relationship between his faith in Christ and forgiving Jenna this way: "The fact that He was willing to sacrifice all that for me and I can't put up with, fill in the blank, for Jenna, that is absurd. I really have to say to myself, 'If this is an issue, deal with it; but it can't be worse than what Christ did for me,' so at that point it all pales and I put things into a new light and regroup with her."

Thus, for Christian couples, knowing how much Jesus has forgiven them helps keep things in perspective. For non-Christians, perhaps it would be helpful to simply point out that no close human relationships would be possible without regular forgiveness since we are all flawed individuals.

To sum it all up, what I've observed from the couples I interviewed, modern quantitative research, and scripture is that healthy, lasting couples learned to accept what most likely won't be changed about their partners. They also found ways to discuss their

---

<sup>139</sup> Gurman. 143

differences and in some cases resolve the issues that can be resolved. They cultivate their friendship and express much respect, appreciation, and humor in their marriage. To some extent, they do so even in the midst of conflict. In addition to this, they strive to forgive when they don't do so consistently. Husbands are characterized by a willingness to sacrifice and a willingness to accept their wives' influence. Wives allow their husbands time to cool down and come back to the issue later. And although the couples interviewed may not have always spoken in terms of emotional attachment or bonding, most spoke of needing to listen empathetically to one another and to express emotions openly without doing so in a way that disrespects their partner. They also accept outside help from time to time, whether it be counseling, marriage enrichment seminars, books, men's groups, or even just going out with other couples.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In light of the fact that even the couples who mentioned skills training acknowledged its limitations and temporary helpfulness, it seems to me that the real focus in marital intervention should be helping couples strengthen their emotional bond. Even those who have focused on Cognitive Behavioral Therapy in years past now acknowledge this. According to Worthington:

Different types of therapies work for different types of problems. A variety of studies show that many couples achieve excellent short-term results through traditional therapy, but then lose ground over time. Instead, treatments that change people's emotional lives, like insight-oriented or EFCT, seem to produce longer-lasting effects. Even integrative behavioral couples therapy, with its emphasis on accepting things that cannot be changed, seems to maintain change better.<sup>140</sup>

---

<sup>140</sup> Worthington, *Hope-Focused Marriage Counseling : A Guide to Brief Therapy*. xxviii

Even as we look at the seven couples interviewed we find that they all recognized the need to show love and respect to one another on an emotional level. They expressed the need to feel understood, heard, supported, valued and, in a word, loved. You may recall how Barbara put it: “If you can’t trust the other person with your feelings, your emotions, what is there?” She also added, “When you are really opening up and sharing your feelings with the other person, it definitely brings you closer.”

It’s precisely here that proponents of EFT have reported great gains in their marriage interventions. According to them,

When we create an environment in which it is safe for clients to share vulnerable emotions with other family members, this sharing brings down protective walls and increases connectedness. Research tells us that key change events in the therapy occur when one partner risks being vulnerable, expressing core needs and fears, and the other responds supportively.<sup>141</sup>

It seems to me that this is the place where couples ultimately need to be brought to in their marital relationship. They need to learn to make it safe for one another to share vulnerable emotions. If this is indeed the goal for couples, then one can see why learning certain communication rules or techniques can actually be counterproductive, for it may actually prevent the couple from getting to this intimate place. As Johnson puts it:

When marriages fail, it is not increasing conflict that is the cause. It is decreasing affection and emotional responsiveness, according to a landmark study by Ted Huston of the University of Texas. Indeed, the lack of emotional responsiveness rather than the level of conflict is the best predictor of how solid a marriage will be five years into it. The demise of marriages begins with a growing absence of responsive intimate interactions. The conflict comes later.<sup>142</sup>

---

<sup>141</sup> Susan M. Richard C. Schwartz and Johnson, "Does Couple and Family Therapy Have Emotional Intelligence?," *Family Process* 39, no. 1 (2000). 31

<sup>142</sup> Johnson. 38



We can certainly see this in marital affairs. A husband or wife experiences less and less affection and emotional responsiveness from their mate at home while at work or the gym they meet someone who listens attentively and even empathetically to their every word. A bond begins to develop and before you know it, they're inappropriately involved with a member of the opposite sex outside of their marital relationship.

In the movie *Blame it on Rio*, a middle-aged couple are struggling in their marriage. The wife informs the husband that he will be going on vacation without her so that they can have some space to think things through. He objects initially, yet eventually gives in and goes with his teenage daughter, his friend, and his friend's teenage daughter. He ends up having a passionate fling with his friend's daughter. When his own daughter finds out, she sends for her mother. When her mother gets to Rio, she finds out about the affair but then has a confession of her own to make: she's been having an affair with her husband's friend! At the end of the movie they come to the decision to stay together and give their marriage a second chance. Here's the dialogue they engage in at the end of the movie:

Wife: I want you to talk to me, reach down in your feelings and tell me what you're thinking, what you're afraid of. I want you to stop bottling it up.

Husband: I'll do my best.

Wife: I'll take your worst too, just share with me.

Husband: I'll do my worst.

This is what needs to happen on a regular basis *before* one or both partners fall into an adulterous affair. Couples need to be emotionally responsive to one another. As the interviews reflect, the husbands I interviewed acknowledged that they found it

difficult to open up and be vulnerable with their wives. For example, earlier I reported that when I asked Greg if he came back to the discussion after he and his wife agreed to take a time-out he responded this way: “If I can’t avoid it, yeah. Gail is really good at initiating reconciliation and dealing with the problem.” He’s not the only husband who expressed some discomfort with dealing with vulnerable emotions.

Christian counselors and pastoral counselors would do well to get some training in EFT and/or the Gottman method since both provide training in helping couples strengthen emotional attachment. Scripture makes it clear that “a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh” (Matt. 19:5, Gen. 2:24). Much has been written throughout the years about what the Bible means when it says that they will “leave and cleave” and “become one flesh.” For our purposes, we can at least affirm that the Bible is pointing out that the joining of a man and a woman in holy matrimony involves leaving one of the most influential, tender, powerful bonds in human relationships (that between children and parents) and entering into an even more mysterious, profound, and intimate relationship (that between husband and wife). And this union is so intimate that it is referred to as becoming one flesh. Thus, while counselors can certainly help couples work on spiritual intimacy, tongue control, and the like, one of the most vital things that a counselor can help couples do is to cultivate, strengthen, and pay some focused attention to connecting emotionally with one another.

This study had a significant impact on me in that it opened up a window into the interacting and intimate dealings of seven couples that have demonstrated over twenty-

five years of working through conflict and not only remaining together, but even growing in their love, respect and admiration for one another. In the same way, it can provide great insight and encouragement to young couples struggling to find direction in their relationship.

I believe it can also benefit counselors who seek to find helpful ways to prepare engaged couples for marriage and strengthen married couples by giving some attention to the real marriage expects: married couples who have learned to work through conflict in such a way that it strengthened rather than damaged their marital relationship in the long run.

## Bibliography

- Amato, Paul R. and Jacob Cheadle. "The Long Reach of Divorce: Divorce and Child Well-Being across Three Generations." *Journal of Marriage & Family* 67, no. 1 (2005): 191-206.
- Amato, Paul R., and Alan Booth. *A Generation at Risk : Growing up in an Era of Family Upheaval*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997.
- Cassidy, Jude, and Phillip R. Shaver. *Handbook of Attachment : Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications*. 2nd ed. New York: Guilford Press, 2008.
- Chapell, Bryan, and Kathy Chapell. *Each for the Other : Marriage as It's Meant to Be*. Rev. ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006.
- Chapman, Gary D. *Covenant Marriage : Building Communication & Intimacy*. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2003.
- Doherty, William J. *Take Back Your Marriage : Sticking Together in a World That Pulls Us Apart*. New York: Guilford Press, 2001.
- Goleman, Daniel. *Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books, 1995.
- Gottman, John Mordechai. *The Marriage Clinic : A Scientifically-Based Marital Therapy*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1999.
- Gottman, John Mordechai, Julie Schwartz Gottman, and Joan DeClaire. *Ten Lessons to Transform Your Marriage : America's Love Lab Experts Share Their Strategies for Strengthening Your Relationship*. 1st ed. New York: Crown Publishers, 2006.
- Gottman, John Mordechai, and Nan Silver. *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail : What You Can Learn from the Breakthrough Research to Make Your Marriage Last*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. 1st ed. New York: Crown Publishers, 1999.
- Gurman, Alan S. *Clinical Handbook of Couple Therapy*. 4th ed. New York: Guilford Press, 2008.

- Howard J. Markman, Scott M. Stanley, Natalie H. Jenkins, Jocelyn N. Petrella, Martha E. Wadsworth. "Preventive Education: Distinctives and Directions." *Journal of Cognitive Psychotherapy: An International Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (2006): 411-428.
- Johnson, Sue. *Hold Me Tight : Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love*. 1st ed. New York: Little, 2008.
- Markman, Howard, Scott Stanley, and Susan L. Blumberg. *Fighting for Your Marriage : Positive Steps for Preventing Divorce and Preserving a Lasting Love*. 1st ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Fighting for Your Marriage : Positive Steps for Preventing Divorce and Preserving a Lasting Love*. 1st ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Fighting for Your Marriage : A Deluxe Revised Edition of the Classic Best Seller for Enhancing Marriage and Preventing Divorce*. 3rd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010.
- McManus, Michael J. *Marriage Savers : Helping Your Friends and Family Avoid Divorce*. Rev. ed. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1995.
- Merriam, Sharan B. *Qualitative Research in Practice : Examples for Discussion and Analysis*. 1st ed. The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Qualitative Research : A Guide to Design and Implementation* The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009.
- Notarius, Clifford, and Howard Markman. *We Can Work It Out : Making Sense of Marital Conflict*. New York: Putnam, 1993.
- Parrott, Les, and Leslie L. Parrott. *Saving Your Marriage before It Starts : Seven Questions to Ask before (and after) You Marry*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1995.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Symbis Approach to Marriage Education Other Titles: Saving Your Marriage before It Starts Approach to Marriage Education." *Journal of Psychology & Theology* 31 no 3 Fall 2003 (2003): 208-212.
- Richard C. Schwartz and Johnson, Susan M. "Does Couple and Family Therapy Have Emotional Intelligence?" *Family Process* 39, no. 1 (2000): 29-33.
- Satir, Virginia. *The New Peoplemaking*. Mountain View, Calif.: Science and Behavior Books, 1988.

- Smalley, Gary. *The DNA of Relationships*. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004.
- Stanley, Scott. *A Lasting Promise : A Christian Guide to Fighting for Your Marriage*. 1st ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998.
- Stanley, Scott M. "Strengthening Marriages in a Skeptical Culture: Issues and Opportunities." *Journal of Psychology & Theology* 31, no. 3 (2003): 224-230.
- Stanley, Scott M., Sarah W. Whitton, Sabina Low SadBerry, Mari L. Clements, Howard J. Markman. "Sacrifice as a Predictor of Marital Outcomes." *Family Process*, no. 45 (2006): 289-303.
- Worthington, Everett L. *Hope-Focused Marriage Counseling : A Guide to Brief Therapy*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InteVarsity Press, 1999.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Hope-Focused Marriage: Recommendations for Researchers, Clinicians, and Church Workers." *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 31, no. 3 (2003): 231-239.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Hope-Focused Marriage Counseling : A Guide to Brief Therapy*. Expanded pbk. ed. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2005.