



Married with Problems



by Alfred Ells, M.C.

Noted Christian author H. Norman Wright said, "Marriage is a total commitment of the total person for the total life." This view is in tune with scripture, but stands in stark contrast to America's divorce statistics. The church has taken increasing action against the country's high divorce rate by developing marriage-fortifying programs.

Many churches now require premarital counseling in order for couples to be married there, and some cities have followed suit, implementing "community marriage policies", wherein local clergy sign a covenant not to marry any couple that has not had a specified, substantial amount of premarital counseling. The results show an encouraging 1.3 percent drop in the national divorce rate between 1986 and 1997.

Despite hopeful news for the general public, serious problems persist, especially for couples in ministry. All too often churches have programs for members of the congregation in marital crises, but have nowhere for the minister to turn for help.

Ministry leaders may experience attacks on both their marriages and their ministries. Behind many seemingly successful ministries lurks the hidden tragedy of unresolved marital discord. As one pastor shared, "I was constantly witnessing God change others, but frustrated and hopeless because I saw no change in my own marriage."

Ministry couples experience not only the difficulty of marriage problems but also nagging feelings of guilt and fear of being found out. Doubts and questions plague the church leader in a marriage crisis: How do I preach on marriage and counsel others when I know my own marriage is lacking?

Who can I tell about my marriage? Will people whom I have married doubt their own marriages because mine isn't working well? If you are struggling with unresolved marital issues, please consider the following recommendations:

DO NOT DOWNPLAY THE PROBLEM

Because ministers are under so much pressure to perform and model perfection, they tend to minimize the severity of their problems. Do not allow yourself to be lulled into a false sense of security. Marriages require time and effort to thrive. Resolving marriage problems takes even more investment of energy. The first step to healing is admitting that your marriage is in trouble, as difficult as that may be.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IS ESSENTIAL

Virtually all unresolved marital problems between ministry couples continue to exist because the couple lacks effective communication skills (James 3:5-6). Take classes in communication and conflict resolution techniques. Listen to tapes and read books. Any step you take toward improving communication will help resolve your marriage relationship problems.

THE FIRST TO THE CROSS WINS

Often marriage problems take the form of power struggles in which one partner sees the other's weakness and responds inappropriately. Pray for God to reveal and deal with the root causes of your marriage problems. Be willing to invite Him to surface these in you first (Matthew 7:5). Humble yourself before the Lord and ask Him to change you rather than complain to Him about your spouse. Your humility will be rewarded with His grace (James 4:6).

BELIEVE YOUR PARTNER - DON'T BE DEFENSIVE

In his book, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, John Gottman, Ph.D. cites research showing defensiveness as one of four major destructors of a marriage. We develop defensiveness as a tactic to fend off an attack and protect ourselves. While we are preoccupied with ourselves, God may be trying to refine us through our partner's criticisms. Even if exaggerated or painful to hear, our partner's truth will be helpful to us if we receive it willingly (Proverbs 19:20).

DON'T PROTECT OUR PARTNERS BONDAGE (2 PETER 2:19)

When some force or substance controls one marriage partner, not only is that individual in bondage, but the bondage also controls the marriage. Alcohol and drug abuse, sexual obsessiveness, lingering anger, rage, fearfulness, infidelity, and and/or an inordinate need for attention are all signs of bondage in a person's life. As long as this bondage remains, the marriage problems cannot be resolved, nor can the marriage flourish. If your partner has such a problem, seek wisdom on how to respond. Do not think you are helping your spouse by concealing the matter and remaining protective. This only gives the enemy opportunity to further empower the bondage.

COMMIT TO RESOLUTION, NO MATTER HOW DIFFICULT

Too much is at stake in the Kingdom and in a minister's life to betray his or vows and divorce. Do not grow weary in doing good (Galatians 6:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:13). A lack of commitment to resolve the problem at hand is one of the major reasons for the stagnation or deterioration of a couple.

FIND SOMEONE OUTSIDE THE CHURCH TO HELP YOU

Congregational members will have difficulty conducting a healthy, equal relationship with you as their spiritual leader. However, another leader or counselor will better understand your predicament. Pray for God to lead you to someone who understands marriage problems and ministry and can invest time and effort to help you (Proverbs 17:17). Above all else, don't allow yourself to think there is no one who can help you. God always provides a way out of trouble.

ASK FOR THE SUPPORT OF YOUR BOARD OF ELDERS

Don't be afraid to admit that you are having problems. Marital problems alone do not disqualify you from ministry. Share your need for prayer in general terms without divulging all the details of marital strife. Admitting that you are struggling and need their prayer and support demonstrates your honesty, humility and integrity.

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