

Preparing a Heart for Marriage



By Ernie Baker

Stacy agonized over whether she would ever be involved in a serious relationship. She poured out her heart to the Lord day by day, but nothing changed. Would the Lord ever provide someone to meet her needs?

Then it happened. As she left class one day, she saw an attractive young man sitting on a garden wall reading what appeared to be a Bible. Could this be a sign from God? The answer to her prayer was right there in front of her. This had to be from God! She approached him, introduced herself, and after a brief conversation, invited him to church. He turned out to be a believer, but it didn't take long for Stacy to find out that they had major doctrinal differences stemming from their church backgrounds. The cruel reality set in. This relationship would not work.

Stacy wondered, *Is God playing tricks on me? Does God really care about me? Is He punishing me? Will I ever find "Mr. Right" and have a relationship? What's wrong with me?* Her feelings of despair, worry, and even anger surfaced anew. She fell back into her vicious cycle of trying to trust God, fantasizing about various potential mates at church, and worrying

that she would end up an old maid.

In many ways, Stacy is a typical young woman longing for her knight in shining armor. At the same time, the typical young man scopes out the young women looking for his princess.

This vignette reveals much about Stacy's understanding of God's will in her life and her views on male-female relationships. But what does this reveal about her relationship with the Lord? Why is she so passionate about finding a suitable marriage partner? What else is happening in her life? Is she trying to escape home? As a counselor, how can I help Stacy focus on the Lord and His purpose in her life? What pushes the "right kind" of young men away her? What does this struggle reveal about how she determines the Lord's will for her life? What roles do her parents and the church have in helping her sort through these issues?

The Churches' Role in Discipleship of Singles

Traditionally, churches have waited until singles made their choices of marriage partners before beginning premarital counseling. Given the type of questions going through young people's minds, the wrong view of relationships, and the weak state of marriage in American culture, I do not believe we start early enough with marriage preparation. Many parents, busy with their own frantic lives, do not have time to shape the lives of their own "Stacy's." They cannot, or do not, provide the kind of nurturing

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needed for building strong relationships.

This article proposes that churches start much earlier with marriage preparation—even before singles find the person they want to marry. This is wise. There just isn't enough time in premarital counseling to cover everything that needs to be discussed. Couples carry baggage into the relationship from past relationships. Or the way they chose one another is totally random and faulty. Maybe these two people shouldn't even be together. Or they have no idea why God created this thing called marriage. Instead, they hold the view that it's "all about us" and "meeting each other's needs."

Churches do address some of these issues during premarital counseling, but wouldn't it be wiser to start earlier? Wouldn't it make sense to build a stronger and more solid foundation for the couple's future marriage instead of trying to play catch-up during premarital counseling?

The state of marriage in our culture demands that we work towards building stronger marriage foundations. Too many young people stumble around without direction,

approximately 50% of young people live with someone before marrying. This is a 1000% jump since 1960.² Singles try to find the right one, yet current research suggests that those who live together have a higher risk of divorce. Sounds like the fruit of the world's wisdom, doesn't it?

Many in the United States recognize the fragile state of marriage today and have joined the "saving marriage" movement. This initiative recognizes the need to start earlier with marriage preparation. In Florida in 1998, the "Marriage Preparation and Preservation Act" mandated that all public and private schools teach marriage and relationship skills. The church has an excellent opportunity to speak the wisdom of Scripture to a culture grappling for answers. Scripture gives clear guidance on how to be wise in marriage preparation.

Pre-engagement discipleship is the responsibility of the whole church: parents, families, pastors, biblical counselors, and friends. It starts in homes where parents take their shepherding seriously and have a desire to see their children make wise choices in life. These parents model and train their children in a

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making unwise choices, not having the right information about marriage. As a result, their marriage foundation is full of cracks. Many young people have fears about marriage. In a survey of 200 university students concerning marriage preparation, over 40% echoed one another almost word for word, "What if I marry the wrong person?" Or, "How do I find the right one?"¹ Singles need direction and guidance long before finding the "right person" and beginning premarital counseling.

Finding the perfect "soul-mate" consumes enormous amounts of time, energy, and thinking for these singles. Fear of failure in marriage partly explains the phenomenal jump in cohabitation in our culture. Currently

biblical view of marriage—one that glorifies God (Prov. 22:6). They use other passages to teach how to choose the right mate (for example, in Proverbs, where the father teaches the son how to avoid the wrong type of women). They disciple their own children. Pastors must teach on topics that help young people make wise choices in order to prepare for marriage. Biblical counselors need to know what wise house construction looks like. In the absence of parental or pastoral guidance, singles need material that will help them think through potential marital relationships.

This article proposes a model to help guide our thinking as we prepare the next generation

¹ Ernie Baker, informal Campus Crusade survey, 2000.

² The National Marriage Project "The State of Our Unions Report 2003," available at www.marriage.rutgers.edu.

for marriage. No single biblical passage deals solely with marriage preparation and related questions. The model presented in this article is a compilation of what Scripture says and it follows the metaphor of building a house.

Marriage Preparation is Like Building a House

When Scripture speaks of families, it often uses the analogy of a house. Joshua 24:15 gives the well-known verse, "...but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD." Joshua obviously refers to his own family and their commitment to the one true God. This same thing is true in Proverbs 24:3-4: "By wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established; And by knowledge the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches." God gives many wonderful promises for those

bitterness towards God for giving her such a husband.

Other young people may build their relationships on sexual experiences. Or, others just want to escape from home, so they make a rash decision about whom to marry. Relationships can be built upon many different bad foundations. But we can be thankful to God that He has provided the wisdom in Scripture necessary for building the solid foundation necessary for a strong house.

Three major principles form the basis for building a strong foundation in marriage.

1. Grow in Wisdom

It is obvious in Scripture that growing in wisdom is synonymous with growing in Christ and in Christlikeness as we assimilate His Word into life. Both Matthew 7: 24-27 and Colossians

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young people who commit to building their future marriage house wisely. I will employ the house metaphor more literally as a picture to help young people think more practically about marriage.

Build a Strong Foundation

My wife and I once lived in a duplex that did not have a good foundation. As we look back on it, I am surprised the house was not condemned! Under one corner of the house the foundation kept sinking away. The landlord kept pumping cement into what seemed like an endless hole. This foundational flaw affected the whole structure of the house. We had crooked floors and cracked walls. We could place a ball on our dining room table and it would roll toward the center of the house! Similarly, it is no surprise that many marriage houses built on the wrong foundation develop cracks in the structure.

Stacy developed her future marriage house on a mystical view of God's guidance and faulty views of God's purposes for marriage. Picture the bad fruit that will come out in the structure of her home when her husband, whom "God provided," lets her down. The result may be

2:3 make this clear. For young people to make wise decisions about marriage partners and to be truly ready for this incredibly significant aspect of their life, they need to have a solid relationship with the Lord and be committed to doing things His way.

At the close of the "Sermon on the Mount" the Lord described the truly wise person as one who built his/her life "house" on His teachings. He said, "Therefore every one who hears these words of Mine, and acts upon them, may be compared to a wise man, who built his house upon the rock." Even though "house" in this context is more general than the term "marriage," it is an accurate picture of what a marriage needs in order to be stable. If an individual does not build his or her house wisely and ignores the Lord's teaching, their marriage house will crumble when bombarded by the pressures of life, Jesus Christ is the only wise foundation on which to build the marriage house.

Wisdom and Christ are synonymous (Col. 2:3). Paul says that in Christ "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." If a person grows in Christlikeness, he or she will also grow

in wisdom. If young people commit to the authority of Scripture and apply it to their lives, they will grow in Christlikeness.

The Lord tells us how to get this wisdom in Proverbs 2. He promises that if Stacy seeks for wisdom as "hidden treasure" (verse 4) and if she "cries out for discernment" (verse 3) then He will deliver her from the wrong kind of men (verse 12). He will give the wisdom necessary to know what to look for and what to avoid in men. These promises are also true for young men. Young men gain wisdom in how to avoid the type of woman who breaks her marriage covenant (verses 16-17). Of course, these verses need to be understood as proverbs. That is, they are not hard and fast promises, but generally speaking, these promises hold true, unless the Lord in His sovereignty has another plan in mind.

Stacy admits though, in her honest moments, that she is more committed to finding a spouse than growing in wisdom. She needs to be disciplined to have the Lord as the chief priority in her life. A chief characteristic of a disciple is that she is a learner. She wants to know God's word. God's loving plan for Stacy is that through all the frustrations she has experienced in relationships, and even her lack of relationships, that she be driven more to accepting the Lord as her foundation. She needs to pursue the Lord as hard as or harder than she seeks a marriage relationship.

2. Understand God's Purposes for Marriage

How can young people build wisely if they do not follow God's plan? Most young people don't know or understand God's intentions for marriage, so how can they know what to look for in a spouse? If they do not understand God's design, how do they look for someone who agrees with that design? Following God's blueprint, rather than haphazardly building, always leads to a more stable construction.

The foundational chapters of the Bible, Genesis 1 and 2, clearly show that God has a design for marriage. Our Lord's crowning act was making woman and presenting her to Adam as his wife in marriage. Our culture needs to accept the many truths in these Genesis chapters if marriage is going to remain part of the foundation of our culture.

Every single person needs to understand

the implications of the following verses and think of wise questions to ask of potential life partners: Genesis 1:27-28; 2:18; 2:23-25 and Ephesians 5:31-32. Here are some questions to get started.

- What was God's intention for marriage?
- What roles for a husband or wife do these verses suggest?
- What are the implications of marriage being a "one flesh" relationship?
- How does Genesis 2:24 tie in with Ephesians 5:31-32 and how is this fulfilled in marriage?
- Was it God's intention to create marriage as a picture of Christ's relationship with the Church, or was it just a nice after thought?
- What type of commitment is implied in a "one flesh" relationship?
- What type of person should I be looking for based upon my answer to these questions?

For Stacy to make a wise choice of a life partner, she needs to pick someone who will help her fulfill the Chief Architect's plan for marriage.

In America's psychologized culture, we need to be especially careful in our interpretation of Genesis 2:18. It is easy to read into Adam's aloneness a neediness that God never intended. Was Adam really lonely or was he incomplete? Marriage could not fulfill God's design until Adam had his completer. Fulfilling God's intentions leads to stability in marriage.

3. Understand Heart Attractions

Sin makes its entrance in Genesis 3 right after the wonderful introduction to marriage in Genesis 2. Right from the beginning with Adam and Eve, sin impacted relationships. Scripture provides numerous examples of those who made bad choices because of their sinful desires and how these choices dramatically affected their relationships.

Singles often seem to be naïve about the effect of sin on their relationship choices. We live in a culture that emphasizes feelings and young people do not recognize that their sinful hearts deeply influence their attractions and feelings for others (Jer. 17:9). Our culture emphasizes "Let your heart be your guide." Scripture, on the other hand, urges us to "Guard your heart for from it flow the issues of life" (Prov. 4:23). In order to choose a marriage partner wisely, a young person must know his or her own heart tendencies.

Stacy needs to understand that her heart has "thoughts and intentions" (Heb. 4:12). Another set of words for intentions include, "wants," "drives," or "desires." Why does she so desperately want a relationship with a guy? What are her motivations? What does this indicate about her relationship with the Lord? What does she desire? What is driving her? Many young people crave intimacy, or desire to be "wanted" by someone.

Stacy views marriage as a panacea for a lonely life. She says, "If only I could get married then all would be well. My husband will be my perfect 'need-meeter.'" In reality, she has far different needs. She needs to learn that her heart (thoughts, feelings, drives, desires, wants) is not a trustworthy guide for building solid relationships. Her heart needs radical transformation by the Spirit, teaching her the truth that God is her refuge, fortress, and shield

"people pleasing." She recognized that she made herself vulnerable to any man who expressed an interest in her. This was her pattern until she became more concerned with what the Lord thought of her first. As she grows in Christlikeness, she trusts Him more for her future and is more concerned about what He thinks of her, rather than what men think. Her eyes open to see different characteristics in men. She walks in wisdom. She makes Psalm 27: 13-14 her own.

I would have despaired unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.

Wait for the LORD; Be strong and let your heart take courage. Yes, wait for the LORD.

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(Ps. 18:1-3). A husband cannot do this: only God can. Stacy lusts after a relationship and that is idolatry!

It is dangerous for other singles or married persons to view spouses as our chief "need-meeters." When we do this, we elevate our spouse to a level that God never intended. It becomes spouse worship. American culture puts marriage on a pedestal and gives it god-like status. Current research shows that individuals look for "soul-mates." We expect "a spiritualized union of souls" in our marriages.³ Marriage counselors are kept busy as these marriages fall apart because one of the "soul-mates" disappointed the other by not meeting their needs.

Stacy realized that she worried so much about marriage because she was trying to control her future. She also realized that she had a tendency to be "needy" in relationships. She thought she needed a man's approval. She finally recognized this tendency as dangerous

in a relationship. If Christ cannot be in His rightful place, their motives will be wrong for seeking a relationship, and they will be naïve about why they are attracted to others. They will not have a wise foundation.

First Floor:

Based on this solid foundation, a couple is now ready to start building the first floor of the future marriage house. This level of construction deals with practical questions about

- How will I know the Lord's will?
- What method should I use to find a partner?
- How will I know when I am ready for marriage?
- How should I be using my single years?
- What relationship skills should I be working on now?

Each question builds logically on another. As couples deal with these questions biblically and incorporate that truth into their life, they will be better prepared for marriage.

How should I use my single years? Stacy has been seriously trying to address her "need" of

³ "The State of Our Unions Report," p 14.

a relationship. One of those ways has been to use her single years to serve her Lord consciously. This helps her to focus on things that count for eternity, to grow in her walk with the Lord, to be attracted to the right kind of young men (those with the same priorities in life), and to see which of her gifts can be used in a local church. She is learning not to be so captivated with romantic relationships. Millions of singles desperately need this focus.

The Apostle Paul addresses marriage issues in 1 Corinthians 7. There is much in this chapter that is wise advice for today's Christian single. Among other things related to marriage, he brings up the question of remaining single for Christ (verses 7-9), a wise outlook on responsibilities in marriage (verses 28, 32-35), and implies a father's responsibility to protect his daughter in areas related to marriage (36-38). Paul's motives are, "...not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is seemly, and to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord" (verse 35). Stacy needs to study these topics as a single. Maybe God has gifted her to remain single—though the passions of her heart seem to contradict this. She definitely needs a realistic picture of marriage responsibilities. Right now, her view of marriage is from "Princess Bride," or another fairy tale. She also needs to make sure her attitudes are right about her heavenly Father overseeing her relationships while she seeks to live a life of "undistracted devotion to the Lord." Stacey continues to make progress as she seeks to live by the right priorities.

How can I deal with sexual temptation? Christian singles also need to learn how to deal with sexual temptation. In 1 Corinthians 9:19-27 Paul explains why he is willing to exercise self-control. Saying that he wanted to minister to others summarizes his motivation. In other words, he loved others more than himself. This is a great motivation for single guys. They should learn self-control out of love for the Christian young women around them and as an act of love for their future wife.

Young women need to learn self-control also. A great question for a young woman is, "Am I using my manner of dress just to attract guys? Young men should ask, "What am I attracted to in women?" "Is it just the physical?"

What relationship character traits and skills do I need to develop while I am single?

Typically, a church waits until a couple becomes engaged to teach relationship skills in a premarital counseling setting. We hope that in seven or so sessions, we can teach them all they need to know. It is better than nothing, but wouldn't it be wiser to be discipling our children all along in biblical relationship character traits and skills? Stacy needs to learn good relationship character traits now so that she shows Christ-like characteristics. By doing this, she will attract the right kind of guys. In Colossians 3:12-15 and Ephesians 4:1-3, Paul emphasizes relationship character traits, not just relationship skills like communication and conflict resolution. The biblical emphasis seems to be on the former while we emphasize the latter in our culture.

Typically, Stacy is very polite, thanking people repeatedly for kindnesses done for her. Or, she is overly apologetic if she believes she has offended someone. Her relationship character traits are coming out of a heart that seeks to please people. As she learns to deal with her heart she will also improve her relationship skills. The same holds true for all of us. If I am not kind to someone, it is because of the attitudes my heart. Or, if I am not gentle with my spouse, it is because of my heart tendencies. My words reflect what is in my heart.

Relationship character traits are the bridge between our inner and outer person. When you think of a "kind" person, you think of someone who has a kind disposition and who also shows it in behavior. Singles need to start now in developing these dispositions and also working on traditional relationship skills. It will be easier for them to learn the proper relationship skills if they are already working on the proper character traits. *The Peacemaker*, by Ken Sande, is an outstanding resource for teaching singles how to communicate and resolve conflicts.⁴

How do I know when I am ready for marriage? According to current wisdom in our culture, psychologists encourage singles to wait to get married until they are twenty-seven for

⁴ Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000).

men, or twenty-six for women. Studies do show that those who wait until these ages have a better chance for success in marriage and a lower chance of divorce. Should we encourage our singles to wait until this age? What would the Scriptures say to answer this question?

The wise biblical answer is that you are ready when you can assume the responsibilities of manhood or womanhood. And the church, counselors, and families need to teach our singles what this wise biblical manhood and womanhood looks like. Scripture is full of great passages and descriptions of characteristics of manhood and womanhood. I counsel many long-time married men and we have traced some of their marriage problems back to not accepting their God-given responsibilities as a man.

Rather than go through a lengthier

not like that of a fairy godmother, granting all our wishes, but instead, He conforms us to the image of Christ. So, He plans for circumstances in the lives of His children to help them grow. Relationship struggles do help a young person to depend on the Lord!

Stacy, like many singles, believes that feelings, impressions, and circumstances will lead her to the right person. This is obvious from her prayers illustrated in the opening story. She must learn that, yes, God is in all circumstances, but His primary means of leading from our perspective is for us to learn to think wisely. I recommend James Petty's book, *Step by Step*, to get an accurate, practical view of God's guidance.

What method do I use to find a spouse? We have progressed in our construction of our marital house to the point where a single person

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description of manhood and womanhood, allow me to recommend three books I have found extremely helpful. *The Excellent Wife* by Martha Peace, *The Exemplary Husband* by Stuart Scott, and *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* by John Piper and Wayne Grudem.

How will I know God's will? In the survey mentioned earlier in this article, the fear of marrying the wrong person came up repeatedly. Some of this fear and anxiety is rooted in the belief that there is only one person in the entire world that is the perfect match. This is contrary to what Scripture teaches. 1 Corinthians 7:39 gives a biblical pattern for thinking about this question even though it primarily addresses widows. This pattern fits the historical doctrine of God's providence. Paul wrote, "...she is free to be married to *whom she wishes, only in the Lord*" (emphasis added). The only requirement is that the person be a believer. Other than that, Scripture gives the person the liberty to make his or her own decision.

Scripture teaches that our loving Lord is our Shepherd who guides our lives (Ps. 23:1; 28:9; 79:13; see also Gen. 48:15). His goal is

can ask, "What method do I use to find a marriage partner?" A variety of approaches have become popular within Evangelical Christianity. Neil Clark Warren emphasizes compatibility in relationships and provides an internet matching services called e-harmony. Some say that *betrotal* (parents matching the children) is the biblical method. Others say, "No, the biblical method is *courtship*." And yet others defend *dating* and say it's okay. What are singles to do with so many voices clamoring for their attention?

Scripture is a transcultural and transgenerational book, so you would not expect that a certain culture's method of putting couples together (like the use of a matchmaker in "Fiddler on the Roof") is binding on all cultures in all times. The methods are primarily cultural but the way you practice your culture's methods must be biblical. If your culture practices *betrotal*, then do it wisely. If your culture practices *courtship*, then do it wisely. In other words, it is possible to practice *betrotal* or *courtship* in an unwise way. The method for finding a spouse itself is not the answer for

saving marriage. We must emphasize growth in wisdom, not methods, to our young people!

For example, if Stacy is going to date, she ought to do by keeping biblical parameters as her boundaries. She ought to make sure the relationship stays pure in the sexual area. Keep her parents involved. Make sure that her romantic relationships head toward godliness, love, and marriage. In fact, I recommend that Stacy not date until she finds a person she considers for marriage. There are too many

premarital counseling subjects.

Conclusion

Stacy came to understand what it takes to make wise choices in a marriage partner. She has said, "A husband will not satisfy me, only God can do that. If I love, honor, desire, and obey God first, the relationship with my marriage partner will be everything it is supposed to be. But, I will not be surprised to find that my husband is human! I need to

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dangers in casual dating. During this whole process, she needs to trust that her loving heavenly Father is guiding her to make a wise choice. Instead of emphasizing a method, emphasize maturing in Christlikeness.

Second Floor

In this model, the second floor is the actual engaged relationship and an appropriate time for premarital counseling in the traditional sense. If both individuals in the relationship have been working on growing in Christlikeness, understanding God's purposes for marriage, and developing an understanding of the heart's attractions, they will be better prepared to discuss all of the traditional

become a godly woman now, not assume it will magically fall into place when Mr. Right comes along. So, my time now isn't wasted; I have a lot to do to become that person."

If we as parents, pastors, counselors, college ministry leaders invest in teaching wisdom to our singles, then we will reap the beautiful fruits of stable marriages that glorify the Lord. We will be a witness to the world that marriage God's way does work. Marriages will be reflecting Christ's loving, passionate relationship with the Church. "Lord, please grant the desires of our heart!"