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Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity

Premarital Counseling as Foundational to Discipleship

A Thesis Project Report Submitted to
the Faculty of the Liberty University School of Divinity
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry

By

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THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY THESIS PROJECT ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This paper will examine the lasting impact of biblical, pastoral premarital counseling. Couples who have completed this type of program before marriage will be studied. This work will attempt to measure the impact of premarital counseling based on whether couples have used tools explored in their original counseling program in areas such as effective communication, conflict resolution, stewardship of money, and spiritual disciplines. If the tools and resources provided in counseling have never been utilized, this survey will seek to discover reasons the material was never used. The purpose of this study is to determine which areas are most helpful to a successful marriage, which areas need further explanation, and what other areas of marriage should be included in a complete premarital counseling program. Participants will be asked to provide examples of times counseling was beneficial. Answers to questions will be measured in terms of very helpful, somewhat helpful, not helpful, or never used. Participants will be asked about church attendance and other ministry participation. This paper will also determine whether premarital counseling contributed to a foundation of discipleship for the participants.

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Abbreviations

DMIN *Doctor of Ministry*

LURSOD Liberty University Rawlings School of Divinity

Chapter 1

Introduction

In the Bible, believers are challenged to be followers of Christ from the very moment of their conversion. Jesus gave His followers the Great Commission in His own words. In Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus tells the church, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And, behold, I am with you always to the end of the age.” In Mark’s gospel, Chapter 16:15, Jesus said, “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.”

As leaders in the church, pastoral counselors are called to walk alongside people in almost every imaginable circumstance. We are commanded, in Scripture, to present the gospel at every opportunity. This gospel message should flavor our lives and ministries. In 2 Corinthians 5, Christians are encouraged to be ambassadors for Jesus. It is vitally important for society and the church that followers of Christ be equipped to join the mission in sharing the gospel. For far too long, in many churches, there has existed an emphasis on bringing souls to Christ without an emphasis on following through and making disciples and teaching new believers to observe all the things that Christ has commanded.

There is a mandated biblical responsibility among believers to both educate and model the teachings of Jesus to the younger generation of Christians. It is the belief of this researcher that exploring the definitions, methods, and results of discipleship should be included in every area of pastoral counseling. This is especially true in premarital and marital counseling. In pastoral counseling, the term pastoral indicates that the kind of counseling received by the counselee is being administered by a representative of the church and that the counselor is

accountable to the church.¹ In a strategic approach to pastoral counseling, discipleship should be, at the very least, an underlying goal. Premarital counseling, when sought by couples, presents itself as an opportunity to begin a family legacy of discipleship. To a Christian, faith, which is of the utmost importance, can grow and even be passed down through the generations. It can begin as a foundational part of premarital counseling as discipleship.

The pastoral counselor acts as an agent of change or transformation by engaging in a therapeutic and healing relationship with people. Townsend explored not only how pastoral counselors integrate science and faith, but also examined what it is that pastoral counselors do.² A great amount of research demonstrates that people with mental health problems improve quicker when they receive psychotherapy. There is great debate over which model counselors should use. A popular opinion states that it is not about counseling technique but that it is the relationship that heals. Since pastoral counselors work from an internalized religious framework, relationships are extremely important. Most pastoral counselors believe that they have a unique relationship with clients, and they refer to this as pastoral presence. Pastoral presence is a mystery connected to the spirit of God. Second, it is referred to as a perfected empathy. These pastors connect from the heart and often believe things for the client while the client cannot believe.

Clinton and Hawkins also discussed counselor-client relationships stating that God is relational and that He lives in perfect relationship.³ God prefers face-to-face community. As we are made in the image of God, we too crave relationships. As the counselor and counselee build a

¹ David G. Benner, *Strategic Pastoral Counseling: A short term structured Model*. 2nd Ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 47.

² L. Townsend, *Introduction to Pastoral Counseling*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 46.

³ Tim Clinton and Ron Hawkins, *the Popular Encyclopedia of Christian Counseling*. (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 2011), 16.

rapprochement, the relationship grows deeper. Clients often develop tight bonds with their counselors as this comes as stories are shared and care and concern are demonstrated throughout the counseling process. Almost all counseling theories view the counselor-client relationship as a key element in the outcome of the process.

Clinton and Hawkins also discuss change readiness and barriers to change. More specifically they discuss defense mechanisms. There are pathological defenses which are often dangerous and harmful. There are immature defenses which are a very normal part of child and adolescent development. There are neurotic defenses which are common in adults and utilized when stress is high. There are also mature defenses which are mostly found among mentally and emotionally healthy adults.⁴

Another critical part of biblical pastoral counseling is confession and repentance.⁵ This is a very important part of biblical pastoral counseling. To repent is to literally turn from sin. Counselors must urge clients to strive for genuine Christian living. A pastoral counselor should point out that an accurate description of confession is seeing it as a process containing several steps.⁶ These steps include recognition and personal admission of guilt to oneself, acknowledgement of guilt to God, and an admission to guilt to the one who has been wronged. Achan, for example, was remorseful for all the calamity of his sin of stealing and coveting brought on the nation. However, his sorrow only came after he was caught. At that point, it was too late for Achan. Thankfully, they also discuss sin and redemption.

⁴ Clinton and Hawkins, 87-89.

⁵ Ibid., 132-137.

⁶ Ibid., 134.

This thesis project will study the importance of premarital counseling as a foundational part of discipling a family from its beginning. The researcher will study the impact of premarital counseling as it relates to couples married during my ministry. I will focus on couples who have completed my solution-focused, brief, pastoral counseling during my time as senior pastor of Solid Rock Baptist Church in Flintstone, Georgia. I plan to develop a list of questions for couples to answer related to the topics discussed during counseling. The counseling sessions covered a vast array of topics from the definition of marriage, effective communication, healthy sexuality, building intimacy, love styles, commitment, finances, and conflict resolution. This study will attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of pastoral counseling in relationships to the survival of marriage. In addition, this paper will attempt to prove the need for deliberate, ongoing discipleship ministries within the local church. The results of this study should aid both pastoral counselors and discipleship pastors in that it will prove the effectiveness of proper, consistent, and theologically sound teaching.

A Definition of Premarital Counseling

Married men and women report less depression, less anxiety, and lower levels of other types of psychological distress than their counterparts. This includes those who are single, divorced, or widowed.⁷ Marriage is beneficial to the individual. However, a typical couple in the United States considering marriage spends more money and effort preparing for the wedding ceremony than they do in planning for a life together.⁸ Premarital counseling can help a couple decide whether they are prepared for marriage.

⁷ Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 67.

⁸ Les Parrott and Leslie Parrott, *Saving Your Marriage before it Starts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 14.

Premarital counseling is defined as training a couple and preparing them for the better or worse of marriage.⁹ Obviously, there is no possible way to cover all the situations and scenarios that might arise in a marriage. Premarital counseling should be more concerned with teaching the couple how to navigate troubles, how to avoid the most common obstacles, and how to communicate with each other during these trying times.¹⁰

A good premarital counseling program should include biblical examples and references using scripture.¹¹ In fact, pastors should never be afraid to turn away a couple where one or both parties are not Christian.¹² Premarital counseling is not something that should ever be taken lightly. While planning a marriage is new and exciting, counseling should be serious addressing the hard issues that often arise in a marriage.¹³ With divorce rates, for both Christian and non-Christian couples at 50%, premarital counseling should focus on equipping the couple with the tools they need to not become another statistic.¹⁴ As part of the premarital counseling program, this pastor and researcher asks the couples to sign a contract with him stating that should they ever get to a place where they are considering divorce, they will contact and meet with the pastor first. This is done in an effort to save the marriage.

⁹ Dr. Tim Clinton and Dr. Ron Hawkins, *The Popular Encyclopedia of Christian Counseling* (Eugene, Harvest House Publishers, 2011), 259.

¹⁰ Clinton and Hawkins, 549.

¹¹ James W. Bryant & Mac Brunson, *The New Guidebook for Pastors* (Nashville: B&H Publishers, 2007), 161.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 162.

¹⁴ Clinton and Hawkins, 259.

A Definition of Marital Counseling

While premarital counseling often begins with a happy couple seeking to prepare for their new life together, marriage counseling is usually a troubled couple seeking help after a trauma has occurred. No matter how traumatic or shocking the trouble may be, a pastor should never encourage a couple to divorce.¹⁵ Marital counseling can strengthen a marriage, even after a trauma.¹⁶ Marital counseling, on the other hand, steps into a marriage that is already in progress. This type of counseling varies in that it often is used to improve or save an existing marriage. Marital counseling could be a time of discovery and rediscovery and includes fully engaging the whole heart into every aspect of the marriage.¹⁷ Proper marriage counseling can help a couple regain their hope, their intimacy, and their focus, as well as equipping them with the proper tools to work through future problems together.¹⁸

One great concern of marital counseling is reestablishing hope. Hope that is found in Christ has a great impact on the future. Worthington defines love as being willing to value the other person and unwilling to devalue that person.¹⁹ When a person can reestablish hope and love, they can begin to realize an overarching goal of marriage counseling. Often, just reminding the couple of how much excitement and love they once had will rekindle those feelings.

¹⁵ Bryant and Brunson, 163.

¹⁶ Clinton and Hawkins, 262.

¹⁷ Ibid., 262-263.

¹⁸ Parrott and Parrott, *Saving Your Marriage...*, 38-39.

¹⁹ Everett Worthington, *Hope Focused Marriage Counseling* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2005), 32.

The Place of Pre-Marital and Marital Counseling in General Life

With around half of marriages ending in divorce, there is a great need for premarital and marital counseling in our general lives.²⁰ Often many couples marry for the wrong reasons, premarital counseling could address these issues and possibly keep some couples from making a mistake.²¹ Both premarital and marital counseling almost always teaches a couple how to communicate better.²² These communication skills are often not just used in a marriage, but also with others that the counseling participants may encounter while at work, at church, and in all other relationships. Obviously, these skills can be taught to the children of the participating couple too, making home life a happier one.

According to Waite & Gallagher, studies show that men do better in marriage than women. Some research indicates that marriage protects men from depression and makes women more vulnerable. However, research also shows that both men and women gain a great deal from marriage.²³ Men and women both live longer, healthier, and wealthier lives when married, but husbands typically get greater health benefits from marriage than wives.²⁴ Both men and women get bigger bank accounts and a higher standard of living in marriage. Wives reap greater financial advantages than husbands.²⁵ According to the text, a good marriage enlarges and enriches the lives of both men and women.

²⁰ Parrott and Parrott, *Saving Your Marriage...*, 14-15.

²¹ Waite and Gallagher, 13.

²² Tim Clinton, Archibald Hart and George Ohlschlager, *Caring for People God's Way* (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 2005), 38-39.

²³ Waite and Gallagher, 163.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

In their book, Waite & Gallagher discussed the idea that marriage is not just a private emotional relationship regarding two people. Instead, it is a very public thing, having an impact on many people and practices.²⁶ The marriage agreement is between both the partners and society. Marriage to be legal and recognized must be performed by a qualified person and it must be registered legally within the state. Marriage is legally binding and takes a court order to dissolve. The authors specifically state the public impact of marriage as making it difficult to have inappropriate relationships outside of marriage.²⁷ Married people are responsible for each other. They are responsible for health, well-being, mental health, and financial stability.²⁸ Marriage doesn't just change the couple's relationship to each other, it changes the way the couple relates to the outside world. Married couples are treated differently by other people, the government, business, and religion.²⁹ Therefore, proper premarital and marital counseling should have a huge impact on life in general. All of society should benefit from happily married productive people. Happy productive Christians make wonderful Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, deacons, trustees, and other ministry leaders. They should also make good employees in the workforce. This is why it is so important to equip our couples with the tools they need to work on their marriage when it seems sluggish.

²⁶ Waite and Gallagher, 18.

²⁷ Ibid., 19.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 21

The Place of Pre-Marital and Marital Counseling in Pastoral Ministry

Counseling is a large part of pastoral care.³⁰ Even after becoming a Christian, people are still going to make mistakes and need forgiveness, redirection, and encouragement.³¹ Counseling in the context of marriage is a great opportunity to teach the bible and help others come closer to Christ. The efforts of premarital and marital counseling are often great opportunities to discuss the values of individuals and to plan the shared values of the family. According to Worthington, not everyone has the same need for closeness. Some people have a greater need for intimacy. Still, some people prefer to be alone a lot of the time while others prefer to be together with their spouse. This simple fact lends to the usefulness of Worthington's following acrostic:

V = value

A= affection

L= lovemaking

U= use positives

E= empty a calendar³²

Discussing love and hope in pastoral ministry should almost always lead back to a discussion of Christ. When one values their spouse, they are demonstrating the love of God to an otherwise lost and dying world. Husbands and wives need to know that they are commanded to love each other as Christ loves the church. Parrott and Parrott discussed love styles by countering a quote from Chaucer who said that "love is blind."³³ The authors suggests that

³⁰ Bryant and Brunson, 156-157.

³¹ Ibid., 181.

³² Worthington, 77.

³³ Parrott and Parrott, 35.

readers take the blinders off and examine love for what it really is. They propose three critical questions. First, what is love? Second, how does one give and receive love? Third, how can you make love last a lifetime?³⁴ The authors cite the work of Robert Sternberg and cite his model of love being like a triangle. The triangle has three sides representing passion, intimacy, and commitment.³⁵ When people express love, they often express it reflecting different levels of these three ingredients. These three ingredients give us the outcome of either romantic love, foolish love, companionable love, or consummate love.³⁶ When a person understands how to give and receive love, he or she has a better understanding of the love of Christ.

Another great factor of marital counseling in pastoral ministry is accountability. A good pastor should have a great desire and passion for helping to facilitate the best marriages possible within his congregation. When marriages fail within the church it is a painful and difficult set of events for the entire congregation. On the other hand, when marriages and families thrive, the overall health of the church is reflected in a positive light. The pastor who desires to do his best job for the glory of the Lord should be equipped to counsel his flock regarding marriage.

Lastly, Among the ethical and legal aspects of pastoral counseling confidentiality should be discussed.³⁷ Trust in the counselor is an absolute necessity in order to help the counselee to open up about his or her situation. However, there are circumstances in which a Christian counselor must not remain silent. One example is when death or deadly harm is a possibility to those in the life of the counselee. It is the duty of the Christian counselor to protect others. The

³⁴ Parrott and Parrott, 35.

³⁵ Ibid., 37.

³⁶ Ibid., 42-43.

³⁷ Clinton & Hawkins, 2011, 515.

counselor has a duty to take action in order to protect life. Violence or harm to a client or a third party must always be avoided if possible.³⁸

The Place of Pre-Marital and Marital Counseling in Marriage Relationships

Parrott and Parrott discussed four myths concerning marriage. Myth #1, we expect exactly the same things from marriage. Myth #2, everything good in our relationship will get better. Myth #3, everything bad in my life will disappear. Myth #4, my spouse will make me whole. The authors discuss these myths from the standpoint that they are unrealistic expectations.³⁹ The authors detail the unspoken rules of marriage by stressing the necessity of learning to discuss our secret expectations and bringing unspoken rules into light. Marriage calls for a lot of work and maturity with a plan to reach a goal. Many people marry to escape undesirable circumstances. However, marriage does not completely erase unresolved problems from our past.⁴⁰ While marriage cannot instantly heal us from the pains of the past, it can be a great path to resolving troubles and traumas of adolescence.

Parrott and Parrott explained that choosing a positive attitude can pave the way for a fulfilling marriage.⁴¹ Circumstances change, yet attitudes stay the same. Further, negative interpretations of life events drain the happiness out of marriage. The answer to overcoming negative outlooks lies in taking responsibility for our own feelings.⁴² Every happy couple has learned to find the right attitude despite the circumstances surrounding them.⁴³ The authors

³⁸ Clinton & Hawkins, 2011, 515.

³⁹ Parrott and Parrott, 20.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 28.

⁴¹ Ibid., 63.

⁴² Parrott and Parrott, 64.

⁴³ Ibid., 66.

provide factors which deplete relationships of joy and happiness. Self-pity, blame, and resentment are three areas which rob a couple of happiness.

Parrott and Parrott discussed communication by asking the questions, “How well do you communicate?” and “How should we not communicate?” They cite the well-known therapist Virginia Satir regarding four styles of miscommunication. These include placating, blaming, computing, and distracting. Each style is a negative response to potential pain which frustrates our abilities to understand what is being spoken to us.⁴⁴ These are terrible habits which become traps making effective communication extremely difficult. These habits are barriers to healthy communication.

The happiest couples can speak easy about difficult subjects, they feel that they understand each other, and they withhold very little from each other.⁴⁵ Parrott and Parrott offer three personal qualities that must be present for effective and rich communication. They are warmth, genuineness, and empathy.⁴⁶ It is important to learn how to communicate with our spouse, not with the intention of manipulation, but with the intention of understanding each other’s points of view. One of the things we learn from Scripture is recorded in John 12. Mary of Bethany anointed Jesus with an expensive ointment. She did so as an expression of love. Real love seeks the best for the object of its affection. Effective communication should never seek to harm or damage the other spouse. James Petersen discussed communication in detail for married couples. He proposed having couples use taker and listener cards. Depending on the card you are

⁴⁴ Parrott and Parrott, 81.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 83.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

holding, you engage in that activity. Learning to speak and to listen well will aid in the success of the entire family.⁴⁷

In the case of blended families, the article entitled, “Nothing like the Brady Bunch” could be very useful. The author lays out an exercise and handout helping clients identify changes in roles, alliances, parental arrangements, household responsibilities and other expectations while building a Christ-centered new family.⁴⁸ This theme addresses the challenges faced by blended families within the context of Christian therapy. When two people get married and they have children from previous relationships, the marriage takes on a whole new set of challenges.⁴⁹ Family members are encouraged to overcome past feelings of failure, guilt and shame. Using Scripture, members of the new family are encouraged to see each other as blessings. At the same time, they are also encouraged to value and appreciate the clearly defined roles of each member.⁵⁰

The Danger of a Lack of Pre-Marital and Marital Counseling Preparation in Pastoral Counseling

Based on my experience, a pastoral counselor is first a pastor. Further, it has been my observation that the job of the pastor is ten percent preaching and ninety percent everything else. The pastor who seeks to have a well-rounded ministry will seek to equip himself to handle various situations. My personal conviction is to avoid giving advice as often as possible and instead teach tools so that Christians can work out their own issues. The danger of a lack of preparation for the pastor attempting to counsel in marriage and family situations can never be

⁴⁷ James C. Petersen, *Why Don't we Listen Better?* (Portland: Petersen Publications, 2007).

⁴⁸ Lori Figueroa, *The Christian Therapist's Notebook* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 185.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 186.

overstated. There are many things that come to mind when I think of a pastor being unprepared. Often, by the time a couple reaches the pastor's study they are already in crisis mode. Personal experience has taught me that either shame or a desire for privacy causes many people to reach out for help as a last resort. When a person finally decides to come to his or her pastor for help, the last thing they would expect is a bad experience, a lack of help or a babbling unprepared pastor.

Another danger of a lack of preparation is for the pastor to give his opinion or share his own experiences. While this may not always be harmful, it also may not always be accurate. Part of the job of the pastor is to point people to Christ. A major way that this is accomplished is by directing people to Scripture. The bible addresses how to live the Christian life. It is a wonderful living tool which should always be the focus of pastoral counseling.

Another area of concern is personal accountability. For example, learning to practice solution focused brief pastoral counseling will keep the counseling sessions focused and somewhat brief. There must be a goal to effective pastoral counseling. The unprepared pastor may not be clear in establishing goals and measuring milestones throughout the counseling process. The preparation of completing the degree or finishing the training of a counselor is valuable for time management and reaching results. Another danger of being unprepared is seeing a greater failure rate of marriages within your congregation. If a pastor is equipped and prepared, he can often help a family rescue its relationships in a relatively short amount of time.

In the 1970s, the rise of feminism made it socially awkward to discuss the differences in men and women.⁵¹ The thought which prevailed in the day leaned toward gender identity being

⁵¹ Les Parrott and Leslie Parrott, *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 99.

learned as opposed to being pre-wired. However, science has shown that men and women are, in fact, biologically different in the brain.⁵² To make a marriage work a successful couple will learn to appreciate their differences in their genders. Often, men are motivated by achievement and women are motivated by relationships. Men and women who know their differences can celebrate those things and learn how to respond to each other appropriately.⁵³ According to research, a wife's most basic needs in a marriage are to be cherished, to be known, and to be respected. Almost every woman has a longing to hear the words "I love you" very often. In addition, women want to know that they are thought about through the day. To love and cherish is not just a wedding vow but a way of life.⁵⁴ Next, women want to be understood. This involves the learned skill of active listening.⁵⁵ Last, a woman wants to be respected. This is as simple as reacting in a respectful way: opening a door, take her requests seriously, and include her in decisions.⁵⁶ Research has shown that men also have basic needs. In marriage, men wish to be admired, to have autonomy, and to enjoy shared activity.⁵⁷ Men tend to thrive when being praised by their wives. By being appreciated men tend to achieve more and more tasks resulting in more praise. Men demonstrate an even stronger need for admiration and appreciation in marriage than women. When a woman does not receive admiration from their spouse, she is motivated more than ever to earn it. On the other hand, when a man does not receive admiration from his wife, he quickly loses the motivation to try. Without admiration, men simply lose

⁵² Parrott and Parrott, 100.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁵⁷ Parrott and Parrott, 110.

interest.⁵⁸ Autonomy is the next need for men in marriage. Men have a desire to have problems solved. They tend to focus and withdraw more than women.⁵⁹ Next, men need shared activity. Husbands place surprisingly high values on having their wives as companions during recreation.⁶⁰ It is important for men and women to find common interests in marriage and to spend time enjoying those things together.

According to Waite and Gallagher, studies show that men do better in marriage than women. Some research indicates that marriage protects men from depression and makes women more vulnerable. However, research also shows that both men and women gain a great deal from marriage.⁶¹ Men and women both live longer, healthier, and wealthier lives when married, but husbands typically get greater health benefits from marriage than wives.⁶² Both men and women get bigger bank accounts and a higher standard of living in marriage. Wives reap greater financial advantages than husbands.⁶³ According to the text, a good marriage enlarges and enriches the lives of both men and women.

Each person brings their own spiritual experiences in to the marriage. Tending to the spiritual elements of the marriage can unite a couple with unbreakable bonds.⁶⁴ Marriage is closer to the nature of God than any other human experience. God compares our relationship to

⁵⁸ Parrot and Parrot, 111.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 112.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 114.

⁶¹ Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage* (New York: Broadway Books, 2007), 163.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Waite and Gallagher, 163.

⁶⁴ Les Parrott and Leslie Parrott, *Saving your marriage before it starts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 138.

Him to that of a marriage. God shows his faithfulness and his forgiveness in the context of a relationship. As the believer is in Christ, a husband and wife become one flesh. God is faithful, and in that faithfulness, we find many dimensions. They are trust, commitment, truth, loyalty, value, and care. Our faithfulness to one another can only be sustained by God's faithfulness to us.⁶⁵ God intends for husbands and wives to be faithful and forgiving to one another. Forgiveness is also at the heart of marriage.⁶⁶ Loving your partner as yourself is the most important step in fulfilling the love of God in your marriage.⁶⁷

Disaffection occurs when negative feelings replace positive feelings in the marriage. This manifests itself in a desire to leave the marriage or in a desire to hurt your spouse.⁶⁸ At times, disaffection includes an unintentional severing of emotional ties. All marriages go through times when love grows cold.⁶⁹ It is possible to rekindle the warmth of marriage. Actions to take to rebuild the love in a marriage can include but are not limited to the following: first, reframe your marital story; second, respond to each other as Christ would; third, find a marriage mentor; fourth, have a realistic dream for your marriage; fifth, remember what God has done.⁷⁰ With the goal of saving a marriage lasting, passionate commitment is possible. Intimacy can return when proper steps are taken to get it back.

⁶⁵ Parrott and Parrott, 144.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 145.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 146.

⁶⁸ Clinton and Trent, 115.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Clinton and Trent, 116.

Too many marriages are ending in divorce and separation. To define divorce proofing simply means to make a marriage relationship healthy and secure.⁷¹ The authors give a terrific plan of action to divorce proof a marriage. First, have a dream for your marriage. This is simply a goal for what the marriage could be. Clinton and Trent also rely on the love triangle consisting of passion, intimacy, and commitment.⁷² Any dream of marriage should include loving and cherishing your spouse. Second, Clinton and Trent discuss making deposits in a love bank.⁷³ This conveys the idea of making more emotional deposits than withdrawals and lends itself to balance in the relationship. Third, be invested.⁷⁴ Forth, be God centered; and fifth, be accepting of positive influences.⁷⁵

Personal Application

I have been in the ministry for over twenty-two years. I have been married for almost twenty-eight years. I have raised boys and girls. I have been a business professional for a long time. I have been a student, a youth pastor, a music minister, a Sunday school teacher, an associate pastor, an interim pastor, and the senior pastor. I have served as the director of evangelism for our association. I have served on the boards of benevolence committees and countless other associational projects. Through it all, I have found myself working with and managing people. People have all kinds of talents, gifts, traits, and problems. The big draw for

⁷¹ Tim Clinton and John Trent, *The Quick Reference Guide to Marriage and Family Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), 122.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 123-124.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

me, in ministry, has always been helping people achieve spiritual peace. I enjoy helping people overcome obstacles, and I equally enjoy watching people mature in the Lord.

My desire and decision to study pastoral counseling was born out of necessity. I was twenty-nine years old. I had just been elected the senior pastor of my first church. One of my experiences as pastor was counseling an older couple who had been married over thirty-five years. Their marriage was falling apart, and they were eager to either fix it or get out of it. They came to me for help, and I found myself in a crash course on marital counseling. Fortunately, the three of us learned together and this couple was able to save their marriage. In fact, I recently officiated the funeral for the husband. He remained married to his wife for the rest of his life. This experience caused me to love counseling and to crave the necessary tools to do it often, to do it right, and to do it well. This course has caused me to move beyond many of my initial thoughts regarding pre-marital and marital counseling and into a more informed position.

Problem Statement

This researcher has been active in the ministry for almost twenty-two years, with the officiation of a wedding eighteen years ago. My version of pastoral counseling has evolved over time and was heavily influenced by my education at Liberty University. This program was developed partly as a requirement for the researcher's Master of Arts degree in Pastoral Counseling. The researcher has been using the same type of counseling for at least ten years now. This researcher is aware of several couples who are eligible to participate.

The church where the researcher is pastor does not have a formal mission statement or set of core values. They do have a doctrinal statement which covers the church's position on salvation, scripture, the deity of Christ, the definition of marriage, and other Baptist beliefs. The church body is very traditional. It has seen very few changes since its conception several years

ago. One of the central values of the church is its position on biblical truth. Our church is proud to stand on the authority of the word of God. Next, the church is missional. The church supports missionaries around the world. We often host missionary families when they are stateside. The church also emphasizes faithful stewardship. This means that the membership, of the church, faithfully gives of their time and resources to the success of the church. The church is also involved in local evangelism efforts. The church is regularly involved in the nursing homes and hospitals surrounding our community. We also participate in regular outreach programs throughout the year.

The researcher believes a good mission statement for the church would be something like the following: we are living with a heavenly mandate to reach the lost with the gospel of Christ, to make disciples, and to perpetually repeat the process. We want to be engaged in our community and in worldwide evangelism.

The vision of the church should reflect the body's commitment to be obedient to scripture. Jesus commanded us to be totally committed to God and to love our neighbors. This church has a desire to reach the community and the world for Christ. So, we do what we do in obedience and with gratitude. The goal of this researcher, as a pastor is to preach and teach the gospel and make disciples. How this is done is complex, but it begins with being tightly connected to the church body.

Often, the pastor meets with a couple with a desire to be married. Many times, the researcher and pastor already know the couple from attending the church. It is the desire of this researcher to not only help the couple identify tools which can be used to strengthen their marriage and commitment to Christ and to each other, but also to teach them how to be disciples

and use many of those same resources, taught in premarital counseling to, to disciple others that they encounter in other settings such as work.

The researcher plans to survey all participating couples with identical questionnaires. The questionnaire will ask the participants for examples of times counseling has been helpful. The researcher will also use a numeric rating system to gauge which parts of the program were found to be most and least helpful. The survey will also include a section for suggestions on how to improve the program. Background questions such as: how long the couples have been married, whether the participating couple is currently active in church, education levels, income bracket, and how many children are in the home will all be used to further study the couples.

In the biblical account of creation, the only part which God declared to be not good was for man to be alone. This study is foundationally based on the principle that Christian marriage is a covenant between three people. Those three people consist of a husband, a wife, and God. In Christian marriage, a man is said to leave his parents and cleave to his wife. Two individuals become one flesh in the eyes of God. This study of the impact of pastoral counseling in this case will attempt to evaluate strengths and weaknesses of the program. This evaluation will bring the program closer to an accurate biblical model.

Relational intimacy is a need that all of us have. This need must be fulfilled for a person to enjoy his or her life. This need is as important as the other needs of air, water, food, and sleep.⁷⁶ Life tends to turn sour when one is deprived of relational intimacy. When this need for intimacy is met, it becomes life giving.⁷⁷ Relational intimacy, simply put, is to relate closely to

⁷⁶ Dr. Al Sarno, *On the Same Page: Relationships Daily* (need this info, 2016), 4.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

another person.⁷⁸ When this need is met in the context of marriage, the relationship becomes a truly blessed union. Further, we are to be intimate with God. By this, we are closely connected to God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One can enjoy a closeness in prayer, fellowship, bible study, and the indwelling spirit.

The entire pastoral premarital counseling program is intended to strengthen the church by strengthening the families in the church. Solid Rock Baptist Church, as a congregation, hopes to produce converts, marriages, and families who live out the power of God in our community.

Specifically, the church desires to aid married couples in imitating the Ephesians 5 marriage.

Below is a list of Scriptural references for this study:

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,⁸⁰ that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. “Therefore, a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.” But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise, the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. To the unmarried and the widows, I say that it is good for them to remain

⁷⁸ Sarno, 4.

single, as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

In Genesis 2:24, we are told, “therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. Matthew 19:6 explains, “So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” Titus 2:1 expounds that stating, “But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine.” Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, and sound in faith, love, and steadfastness. Older men also urge the younger men to be self-controlled. Likewise, older women are to be reverent in behavior not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, so that the word of God may not be reviled. Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us.

Purpose Statement

The focus of this project is limited to couples who have completed premarital counseling as a ministry of the Solid Rock Baptist Church. Most participants are working middle-class subjects. The participants come from a variety of economic, educational, and spiritual backgrounds. The research will be based on the opinions and experiences of the participants. In its entirety, the presentation of the program lasted a duration of eight weeks. As a result, questions will be limited to a small list derived from topics studied.

One of the purposes of this study is to better the church. The church has a desire to protect and preserve Christian marriage. The church especially wishes to cultivate strong marriages within the body. As a result, this study will concentrate only on couples who are now

or have previously been affiliated with the church. The questions presented in written form and during the interview process will attempt to determine the impact, if any, that premarital counseling has had on participants. This study will also evaluate which parts of the counseling program were most and least valuable to the participants. So, this study will rely greatly on experience and opinions of a small pool of couples reached within the church.

Limitations

The scope of this project is limited to couples who have completed premarital counseling as a ministry of the Solid Rock Baptist Church. All participants were Caucasian. Most of the participants were working middle class subjects. The participants come from a variety of economic, educational, and spiritual backgrounds. The research will be based on the opinions and experiences of the participants. In its entirety, the presentation of the initial pre-marital counseling program lasted a duration of eight weeks. As a result, questions will be limited to a small list derived from topics discussed within the eight week premarital counseling sessions.

Delimitations

One of the purposes of this study is to better the church. The church has a desire to protect and preserve Christian marriage. The church especially wishes to cultivate strong marriages within its body. As a result, this study will concentrate only on couples who are now or previously have been affiliated with the church. The questions presented in written form and in the interview process will attempt to determine the impact, if any, that premarital counseling has had on participants. This study will also evaluate which parts of the counseling program were most and least valuable to the participants. So, this study will rely greatly on experience and opinions of a small pool of couples reached within the church.

Chapter 2

Conceptional Framework

The basis for this thesis project comes from my desire, as a pastor, to appreciate and realize the importance of family as an essential part of an effective discipleship ministry. The members of my church deserve the best discipleship ministry that we can build. Further, Christ himself is worthy of our best efforts. This study will examine the lasting impact of Biblical pastoral premarital counseling as it relates to discipleship. Couples who have completed this type of program before marriage will be studied. The researcher will attempt to measure the impact of premarital counseling based on whether couples have used tools explored in their original counseling program in areas such as effective communication, conflict resolution, stewardship of money, and spiritual disciplines. If the tools and resources provided in counseling have never been used, this survey will seek to discover reasons the material was never used.

The purpose of this study is to determine which areas are most helpful to a successful marriage, which areas need further explanation, and what other areas of marriage should be included in a complete premarital counseling program. Participants will be asked to provide examples of times counseling was beneficial. Answers to questions will be measured in terms of very helpful, somewhat helpful, not helpful, or never used. Participants will be asked about church attendance and other ministry participation. Participants will review the information and knowledge they received in their private premarital counseling sessions and then asked specific questions related to those sessions. This will allow the researcher to gather data related to the significance of premarital counseling in the couples lives and how that specific counseling has influenced discipleship.

Theoretical Framework

Not all couples who seek premarital counseling are young and naïve about marriage. Often one or both counselees have experienced a failed marriage or the death of a spouse. Unfortunately, some of the counselees may have been through some form of relationship trauma and are carrying this trauma with them into their new relationship. Because of this, this researcher has found that the counselees have certain expectations, fears, and schemas concerning their new partner. This researcher feels that a well-rounded program which seeks to focus on biblical principles while also utilizing secular, yet proven theories, will allow this researcher and pastoral counselor to fully address each concern. In doing this, this researcher will be able to develop a plan of action for each couple, tailored to their needs both as a couple and individually.

Cognitive behavioral theory is one of the most widely used integrated theories in psychotherapy counseling.¹ This theory is a combination of both cognitive theory and social learning theory.² Together, these theories are used to make up cognitive behavioral therapy which is used in the counseling field to address many disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, eating disorders, and depression. The major idea behind this therapy is to change the counselee's thought process as well as their behavior. This is often conducted through different types of exercises and other assignments. Often, counselors focus on the idea of changing the counselee's thought patterns and behaviors but leave out the element of a biblical worldview. Many times, this is the changing factor for most clients in the counseling setting.

¹ S. Hoffman and G. Asmundson. *The Science of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy*. (San Diego: Academic Press, 2017); W. Riley, D. Rivera, E. Heckler, and M. Adams. "Development of a dynamic Computational model of social cognitive theory." *Translated Behavioral Medicine*. Dec 2016, 483-495.

² Clinton and Hawkins, 455.

Adding the Christian worldview to the counseling setting can make a significance difference in the success of the client. This success has been seen and noted in many studies such as Carr³ and Pandya.⁴ Often, it is quickly revealed that even in the premarital counseling setting, a person seeking help is bringing a total of life experiences with them. These experiences are both good and bad. By including the principles and values taught by Christ in the scriptures, many counselees find forgiveness, grace, and hope in an otherwise uncaring world.

In the counseling setting, a counselor is meeting with a client who is seeking some sort of change in their life. The client has developed some sort of habit, good or bad. All of this can be addressed through cognitive behavioral therapy using social learning theories and cognitive theories. This thought still applies to the couple seeking counseling before their marriage. While a couple becoming one flesh in marriage is a happy occasion, sometimes, failed past marriages can leave old wounds. These theories address the way a person learns to navigate their world and how they view or think about their world. Identifying the factors that are troublesome for the client in these areas will allow the counselor to develop a treatment plan. However, the willingness to truly want to change must also be addressed. There must be a true desire to change within the client. When counselors add in the religious worldview factor to the treatment plan and offer the client with this resource to aid in the desire to change, if the client desires to utilize this resource, change is often the outcome.

³ A. Carr. "Family therapy for Adolescents: a research into perspective." *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, Vol 4.

⁴ S.P. Pandya. "Spiritual Counseling program for children with anxiety disorders: A multicity experiment." *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling*, 45-57.

Influencers

Cognitive Theory

Cognitive theory, originally developed to conflict with behavioral theories, focuses on how people think, understand and know things.⁵ Major contributors to this theory include Allen Paivio, Robert Gagne, Howard Gardner, Benjamin Bloom.⁶ Another component of this theory is cognitive development which explores how one learns. One of the most famous contributors to the cognitive development theory was Jean Piaget.⁷

Paivio exerted that people process information in two different ways.⁸ Paivio developed dual coding to explain this avenue of information processing. Paivio's dual coding theory states that people process information through images or through language.⁹ Paivio believed that people processed information both verbally and non-verbally. Robert Gagne developed two models: Gagne's 5 categories of learning and a model containing nine events of instructions, both are still widely used today.¹⁰ Next, Howard Gardner furthered the theory by researching both regular and gifted adult students at Harvard University where he taught.¹¹ Gardner sought to define understanding and intelligence. Benjamin Bloom focused on educational psychology and students learning domains which he identified as cognitive, affective, and psychomotor.¹² Bloom

⁵ S. McLeod. "Cognitive Theory." Retrieved from Psychology Today: www.psychologytoday.org, 2015.

⁶ McLeod.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ McLeod.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

is also contributed with developing Bloom's taxonomy of knowledge, six levels of knowledge skills.¹³ Last, Jean Piaget studies how a child constructs knowledge and builds a mental model of their world. Piaget is accredited with being the first to conduct and develop a systematic study of cognitive development.¹⁴

The theme of cognitive theory is centered around the concept that thinking and remembering is a like a behavior.¹⁵ Therefore, researchers can use behavior analysis in order to measure learning effects.¹⁶ One of the building blocks of this theory is the schema. A schema can be defined as, "a cohesive, repeatable action sequence possessing component actions that are tightly interconnected and governed by a core meaning."¹⁷ Often by identifying the schema, a counselor is able to focus the intervention on that particular schema in order to bring the trouble area to light for the client.¹⁸ Schemas are often connected to historical events, can be activated and deactivated, and are connected to a mode meaning that they lead to a person's connection to the world and their identity within their world.¹⁹ Schemas can be adaptive or maladaptive.²⁰ Even the eager couple seeking premarital counseling will have schemas and a good pastoral counselor will be able to identify these schemas and address them.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ McLeod.

¹⁵ P. Monroe. Integrative Psychotherapy IX: Schema focused Interventions. *Global Trauma Recovery Institute Journal*, 243-255.

¹⁶ D. Clark and A. Beck. "Cognitive theory and therapy of anxiety and depression: convergence with neurobiological findings. *Trends in Cognitive Science* 14, 2010, 418-424.

¹⁷ Monroe, 243-255.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

One of the biggest strengths of cognitive theory is the many practical applications within several different disciplines. While Baron-Cohen developed a theory of mind study to aid in the research of autism and Asperger's Syndrome,²¹ others in the field were working on studies that enhanced the field of forensic psychology. This ability to reach from one application to another is certainly something that gives cognitive theory an advantage. However, the idea of how we think and process information should certainly be considered in almost every application. Another strength of this theory is that it relies on experiments to validate main research methods. In doing this, these experiments allow a true cause and effect to be determined. In these experiments there are high controls over variables making tracking these results easier than with other methods.²² Lastly, in the counseling setting, one of the biggest strengths of using this theory is that there are numerous experiments and studies addressing several issues and cognitive therapy. There are a lot of resources available to the counselor or therapist for this type of therapy. This theory seeks to identify the schema associated with the problem and then develop a treatment plan that leads to processing bias or threat related thoughts.²³

The biggest weakness when dealing with this theory is that cognitive results cannot always be directly observed. Meaning that the researcher must rely heavily on the subject's recollection of events. Sometimes, biases may cloud the subject's memory or recall when dealing with specific factors and therefore give a false positive or negative in certain situations. These processes are invisible and heavily subjective. They can be influenced by the researcher's suggestions. Another weakness of this theory is that often it ignores other factors that might

²¹ J. Morgan. "Simon Baron-Cohen: Cultivating Diversity, *Lancet Psychiatry*, V2 I, 11.

²² McLeod, 2015.

²³ Clark and Beck, 418-424.

influence a behavior. This would include other theories, such as behavioral theories or social learning theories. Many times, these factors, even though they have been shown to affect a specific behavior are dismissed, and not considered in the findings.²⁴

Social Learning Theory

Bandura's Social Learning Theory is centered on the notion that people learn behaviors, such as what is right or wrong, by watching others that are influential to them.²⁵ Bandura developed Social Learning Theory to explain how people learn from one another through systems such as observation and imitation.²⁶ According to this theory, we learn more by watching others and how they react to certain dilemmas. We learn less by being handed a manual full of rules and regulations and being told to do certain things and not to do other things.²⁷ Therefore, it is important that young candidates for marriage have good role models in the church, and even more important in the counseling setting.

Social learning theory uses the idea that people learn from those who are most influential around them.²⁸ Further, one might develop a sense of "the reward outweighs the consequences feeling" when one accomplishes deviant behaviors without being punished properly.²⁹ This theory addresses the idea of how each person weighs the consequences for their actions based on

²⁴ McLeod, 2015.

²⁵ J.R. Anderson. *Learning & Memory: an Integrated Approach*. 2nd ed. (New York: John Wiley and Sons Inc.)

²⁶ Anderson.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ McLeod, 2016.

²⁹ A.T. Chappell and A.R. Piquero (2004). "Applying social learning theory to police misconduct." *Deviant Behaviors* (25), 89-103.

the perceived rewards and/or punishments for their actions.³⁰ Therefore, although this theory is used more to explain deviance and criminal behaviors, it also makes sense that this theory be used in the premarital counseling setting when addressing infidelity, dishonesty, hypocrisy, and abuse.³¹

One of the major strengths of this theory is that can be used to target, explain, and treat several different social issues. This theory is often the basis behind the idea that we can change someone if change their surroundings. This idea has been used in many drug rehabilitation facilities, schools for troubled children, and abuse situations.³² The idea behind this concept is that if we are influenced by those around us, then naturally, changing those we are around would in turn change us. Another strength to this theory is that it is very supportive of the idea that you must find what works for your client. This theory embraces different learning styles and techniques. Remember that this theory encompasses the idea that we are impacted by our environment and outside influences, so therefore, these will be different for each person. Lastly, another big strength to this theory is the verification of the biggest concept by Bandura's Bobo doll experiment.³³ When children were given these blow-up dolls and shown aggressive acts, and the aggressor was not punished, the children repeated these acts of aggression on their dolls. Further, this theory and particularly, this research, has been attached to copy-cat school shootings, violent video games, and violence in television and movies being repeated by

³⁰ Chappell and Piquero.

³¹ Clinton and Hawkins.

³² M. Johnson. "Applications of Social Learning Theory: A counselor supervision model." *National Institute of Education*, 2018. 1-27.

³³ P. Graham and A. Arshad-Ayaz. "Learned Unsustainability: Banduras bobo Doll Revisited. *Journal of Education for sustainability development*, 2016.

adolescents.³⁴ Further, in the premarital counseling setting this theory could be applied to abusive situations, acts of infidelity and even previous failed marriages.

One weakness related to this theory is that often the focus is on the outside source and not on the subject itself. This often leads to the subject to blame others for their actions and wrongdoings instead of realizing their ultimately responsible for their own decisions. Many critics complain that the theory does not provide accountability rather only a change of scenery. If the subject never admits fault to their wrongdoing, if there was any, then there can never be a change no matter how many times you remove them from the situation. Some critics argue that the theory does not provide for a “bad seed” and cannot explain subjects who seem to be a bad influence everywhere they go.³⁵

Another weakness to this theory is that it never attempts to explain the why factor. Why someone does something is often difficult to understand. Social learning theory often focuses on how the person learned a specific behavior, but not why they would choose a specific behavior. Social learning lacks the why factor, and for this reason, social learning theory is often combined with other theories to provide the why factor to a specific action.³⁶ Theories which focus on ethical dilemmas and ethical decision making are often combined with social learning theory. Therefore, theories such as cognitive theory often explains why someone decides to do something, and what impacted that decision.

³⁴ Graham and Arshad-Ayaz.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

Combining Cognitive and Social Learning Theories

Combining the theories of cognitive and social learning theories is not an unusual idea. In fact, this is often accomplished through cognitive behavioral therapy. This type of therapy is actual a combination of cognitive, behavioral and social learning theories.³⁷ This combines how one views their world, or their schemas³⁸, with how one acts or learns in their world.³⁹ By combining these theories, a counselor is able to address more of the issues at hand, both how we see and how we act. Instead of looking at one side of a problem, the counselor can look at more of the dynamics involved such as where the behavior was learned and addresses the cognitive elements associated with the action.⁴⁰

Interestingly, Monroe (2008) states that a schema is often tied to the original sin and may influence how one views God.⁴¹ A counselor who is refusing to offer any religious worldview options to their client would certainly omit this factor. Therefore, by not addressing this sin, or infraction, that lead to the development of this schema, the therapist or counselor is never truly uncovering the root of the problem.⁴² In order to fully view the entire problem of the counselee, the counselor must explore the problem from the cognitive viewpoint, the social viewpoint, and the spiritual viewpoint.⁴³ Pandya (2018) conducted a study of children suffering from several different anxiety disorders. Developing a cognitive behavioral therapy treatment plan which

³⁷ Graham and Arshad-Ayaz

³⁸ Monroe, 2008

³⁹ Chappell and Piquero, 2004.

⁴⁰ Pandya, 45-57.

⁴¹ Monroe, 2008.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Pandya.

included access to a religious worldview option, Pandya saw better results from those clients who utilized and truly embraced the religious factor of the program.⁴⁴ This seemed to complete the package, offering not only something to aid in healing the mind and body, but also something to aid in healing the heart and soul. It is the goal of this researcher, that when a couple comes to their office seeking premarital counseling, they are receiving an action-packed, well-rounded program.

Specific Techniques/Interventions

Cognitive Therapy

One technique in cognitive theory is cognitive therapy. One can define cognitive therapy as a “structured, collaborative and problem oriented psychotherapy that seeks to reduce symptom expression by modifying maladaptive thoughts, attitudes and beliefs as well as the faulty information processing biases that characterize emotional disturbance.”⁴⁵ This is often used to treat major depression, eating disorders and various anxiety disorders.⁴⁶ Again, the main focus of this treatment technique is to change the biased information processing, or cognitive mediation.

Social Learning Therapy

This technique or therapy method relies on teaching the client to first identify the bad behavior. Next, they are asked to observe those around them who are not engaged in the behavior. Lastly, they are taught to “model” the better behaviors. This is a very simple variation of this process. In a study conducted by Shafer & Silverman which focused on bullying, this technique was introduced to an entire school through a music department. Students were asked to

⁴⁴ Pandya.

⁴⁵ Clark and Beck, 418-424

⁴⁶ Ibid., 418-424.

participate in creating rules against bullying and provided with role-playing scenarios and learning opportunities.⁴⁷ After repetition of the correct behavior and responses, the result was a decrease in bullying within the school.⁴⁸

Cognitive Behavioral therapy

Yet, another technique that combines cognitive and behavioral theories is cognitive behavioral therapy. This treatment allows the counselor to focus not only on the cognitive factors, such as the schema, but also on the social or behavioral factors such as outside influences, peer pressure, etc. Often used to treat depression, behavioral disorders, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, and personality disorders, this type of therapy is widely accepted by psychotherapists.⁴⁹ While this therapy was originally introduced more in individual setting, there have been studies showing success in group settings.⁵⁰

Used in conjunction with cognitive behavioral therapy or as a standalone treatment, imagery rescripting is a type of treatment which focuses on social anxiety disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder.⁵¹ Imagery rescripting seeks to use a collection of therapeutic imagery techniques aiming to alter specific negative meanings and beliefs associated with certain autobiographical memories of traumatic or disturbing events.⁵² The patient visualizes the specific

⁴⁷ K.S. Shafer and M. J.Silverman. "Applying a social learning theoretical framework to music therapy as a prevention and intervention for bullies and victims of bullying." *The arts of psychotherapy*, 495-500.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 495-500.

⁴⁹ Clark and Beck, 2010, 418-424

⁵⁰ P. Holas, H. Suszek, and M.Szaniawska. Group Cognitive-behavioral therapy for anxiety disorders with personality disorder in day clinic settings." *Perspective in Psychiatric Care*, 2016. 186-193.

⁵¹ J. Norton and M.J. Abbott. "The Efficiency of Imagery rescripting compared to cognitive restructuring for social anxiety disorders." *Journal of anxiety disorders*, 2016, 18-28.

⁵² Norton and Abbott, 18-28

memory, but in the present tense. Then they are asked to alter the memory or update to a more positive outcome.⁵³ This therapy is very similar to the “play to the movie” approach which is discussed in the book, *Telling Yourself the Truth* by William Backus and Marie Chapien.⁵⁴

Biblical Integrative Factors

“Christianity was the backdrop to virtually all scientific discussion in the formative stages of science.”⁵⁵ This statement alone supports the idea that science and Christianity can co-exist. Further, they can be used together to bring hope and healing to hurting people. The first step in reconciling psychology with faith is the pursuit of truth. Often, negative views experienced by a person have no basis in truth or reality. Therefore, the first step in changing behavior is to counter untruthful statements with healthy truthful statements. This concept can be found in Philippians 4:8, “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” So, when one chooses to think or even learns to think on things that are opposite from the above verse then their thinking is flawed. In fact, some might go as far as to say it is ungodly. To think on things that are true, for the Christian, is to focus on Christ and the truth of His word.

While the concepts in cognitive therapy, social learning therapy, and cognitive behavioral therapy are useful in the psychotherapy world, they are lacking the biblical worldview element that seems to be the glue that holds in all together. Several studies have been conducted in which

⁵³ Norton and Abbott, 18-28.

⁵⁴ William Backus and Marie Chapien. *Telling Yourself the Truth*. (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2000), 139-149.

⁵⁵ David N. Entwistle. *Integrative Approach to Psychology and Christianity*. (Eugene: Cascades Books), 2010.

adding biblical principles and concepts to cognitive and social learning therapies proved to be extremely successful for the participants.

Romans 12:2, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (ESV, 2008). In the verse, the Christian worldview would look at the trials of life and its problems as testing. When our thinking is flawed and our worldview becomes cloudy, the Christian has a God that he or she can go to. God can renew the mind of the believer making change possible. This is not speaking of a temporary change. Instead, it speaks to the reality of God making it possible for a follower of Jesus to understand the will of God and do it. When we submit to being transformed and renewed in our minds, it is important not to discount the God factor.

When Christ called the disciples to follow him, he called upon them to forsake friends, family and even vocations to make disciples of them. If a person is suffering from the influence of expendable relationships, then it becomes important and necessary for the counselee to sever ties with sinful, destructive influences. This is one reason it is greatly important to insist that a client engaged in Christian counseling be faithfully involved in the local church. Hebrews 10:25 reminds us, “not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” This is very important because it also lines up with the main concept of social learning theory. If someone is hanging out with real Christians at bible studies, prayer groups and worship services then they are not hanging out with evil influences during these times. Social Learning therapy would call this concept modeling.

One biblical concept that is not congruent with social learning therapy is the concept of free will. This concept goes all the way back to the Old Testament. One such occurrence is when

Joshua was preparing to die he assembled the nation together and issued a challenge, and if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. Clearly, we have a choice as to whether we will serve the Lord and apply biblical principles to our lives or not. Further, we also make our own decisions, even when influenced by outside forces, ultimately, we make the decision to do what we want to. For me, this could be why one of the biggest weaknesses to the social learning theory is the inability to explain why. When you couple social learning theory with biblical principles then you can see a clearer picture of the problem and solution for the client.

Another biblical concept can be found in Ephesians 1:17-19, “that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might” This would be indicative toward the idea that God can enlighten a person according to His power. Therefore, the believer has so much available in Christ. This coupled with a cognitive concept might be understanding to one who is hurting or suffering from a traumatic event in their life. God is the one who can offer wisdom and understanding in times of trouble.

Yet another biblical principle can be found in I Peter 5:7 which states, “casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.” Much like the game of tag, when a person makes it to base, he or she is safe. When we cast our cares on the Lord we are simply running to base.

There is safety in the presence of God. When a counselee learns to call on the Lord and take their problems to God, it relieves the weight of pressure associated with having to carry your burdens alone. Discipleship counseling is not just a technique we should learn; it is an encounter with God, who is the wonderful counselor.⁵⁶ Moreover, by combining cognitive behavior therapy, social learning therapy and biblical concepts, counselors are able to identify the schema, prepare focused based counseling sessions, and deliver a well-rounded program.

Lastly, the biblical concept of visualizing is critical in the counseling process. Proverbs 29:18 states, “Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he.” If a couple can imagine a better future while working toward it, they have a greater chance for success. Further, if a couple can visualize the consequences of wrong choices, then they now have a deterrent. Having a couple visualize their thoughts on how marriage should be may produce some great discussions on financial planning and commitment to God and each other. This exercise also works well when discussing their future families. Often it becomes apparent that the couple has different expectations as to family size and types of discipline for their children.

Cognitive theory is telling the client that they are who they think they are. Social Learning theory is telling the client that they are who they hang with. Biblical application says the client is striving to be what God would have them to be. A good pastoral counselor should be well versed and able to combine all three of these counseling therapies.

⁵⁶ Dr. Neil T. Anderson. *Discipleship Counseling* (Ventura, CA: Regal Press, 2003), 110.

Literature Review

The following sources were located and examined by this researcher to further understand the concepts of premarital counseling and discipleship. Chapter 2 of this project examines scholarly literature, including books and peer reviewed articles, related to premarital counseling and discipleship. This researcher aims to use the following sources to prove the importance of premarital counseling at the conception of the family as it relates to a family engaging in lifelong discipleship.

Kingdom First Starting Churches That Shape Movements by Jeff Christopherson and Mac Lake

While this book from Christopherson mainly deals with church planting, there is more to this book than just that. Christopherson urges his readers to be Kingdom minded throughout the book. The idea of being Kingdom minded goes hand in hand with discipleship. This resource reminds the researcher, and those who read it, to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and a multitude of good things will come.⁵⁷ This source explains that when God is placed first in our lives, then everything else will fall into place. This is a principal step in premarital counseling and discipleship. The resource also pairs well with this thesis project in that it elaborates on several other core ideas that are also discussed in discipleship and premarital counseling such as the need to understand that it only takes a small amount of faith to do great things for the Lord.⁵⁸ This resource also discusses morality as being of the utmost importance and a need for all of us to examine our strengths and weaknesses before embarking on any new endeavor.⁵⁹ When dealing with premarital counseling, it is always important to discuss the

⁵⁷ Jeff Christopherson and Mac Lake, *Kingdom First: Starting Churches that Shape Movements* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015).

⁵⁸ Christopherson and Lake, 7.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

strengths and weaknesses of both partners. It is also important, in both marriage counseling and discipleship, to discuss the need to morally and ethically abstain from things that will tarnish their ability to fully serve as they grow in Christ and build their family together. The authors offer a seven-point list of character dos and do not do.⁶⁰ The authors do a great job discussing several aspects of life including family and career issues which also apply to premarital counseling. Lastly, the source discusses discipleship by stating, “Christian discipleship is what happens when people live daily for Jesus.”⁶¹ Discipleship is following Jesus, and following Jesus is something one should do every day, not just on Sunday.⁶²

***Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts* by Dr. Lee Parrott and Dr. Leslie Parrott**

This book offers statistics on marriage, which is very important when dealing with premarital counseling. It is important for the pastor to discuss these statistics and ways for the Christian couple to combat the desire to divorce. The writers establish the foundation for marriage by attacking myths about marriage created by pop culture. This work also discusses love styles within a relationship. Determining one’s love style has an impact on how one will behave and respond in the marriage relationship. Discussing and discovering this concept in the counseling setting is helpful to build a lifelong commitment. This resource provides a Triangle of Love with the three sides being passion, intimacy, and commitment.⁶³

⁶⁰ Christopherson and Lake, 57-61.

⁶¹ Ibid., 187.

⁶² Ibid., 187-189.

⁶³ Dr. Lee Parrott and Dr. Leslie Parrott, *Saving your marriage before it starts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 42-43.

Why Don't We Listen Better? by James C. Petersen

This book addresses the need of communication. This source teaches a technique called talker/listener.⁶⁴ The author addresses the following two questions:

1. How well do we listen?
2. Would you like to be a better listener?⁶⁵

This source prescribed the use of Talker-listener cards where one party holds the “Talker” card while the other holds the “Listener?” card. This allows the talker to speak while the listener’s job is to only listen. Then the cards are switched.⁶⁶ It is the opinion of this researcher that this communication is a key component of premarital counseling, and this resource plays a big role in teaching those embarking on marriage to truly listen to each other.

Hope Focused Marriage Counseling by Everett L. Worthington

This resource elaborates on values, intimacy, and commitment.⁶⁷ According to Worthington, not everyone has the same need for closeness. Some people have more need for intimacy. Some folks prefer to be alone, while others prefer to be a couple all the time.⁶⁸

The source provides an acrostic for VALUE meaning the following:

V= value your partner
 A=affection
 L=lovemaking
 U=use positives
 E=empty a calendar⁶⁹

⁶⁴ James C. Petersen, *Why Don't we Listen Better?* (Portland: Petersen Publications, 2007).

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Petersen.

⁶⁷ Everett L. Worthington, *Hope Focused Marriage counseling* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2005).

⁶⁸ Ibid., 77-79.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 78-79.

It is vital in Christian marriage to bring one's values in line with a biblical worldview. The goal of premarital counseling is to provide resources, methods, techniques, or skills which will enable a couple to live in the sacredness of a lifetime commitment. I hope to demonstrate Scripture as the authority on how to live, how to love, how to resolve conflict, and how to live life to the fullest. There is also an assessment for a couple's relationship, table 5.1.⁷⁰ This tool allows the couple and pastoral counselor to go over the assessment together and discuss the couple's individual expectations for love and commitment. The source also discusses value in depth and provides another useful table to assist the couple in discovering that, "love is being willing to value the other person and being unwilling to devalue that person."⁷¹ This source uses the scriptural reference of Ephesians 5. The use of Ephesians 5 further shows that not only does God expect us to show love and commitment to each other in a marriage setting, but also that we are to love the way Christ loves the church. By teaching discipleship during marriage counseling, we teach our couples to not only love each other, but also to love Christ and His church enough to lead others to Him.

***Planting Missional Churches: Your Guide to Starting churches that Multiply* by E. Stetzer and D. Im**

This resource is an exhaustive description of church planting. The source provides a detailed plan and requirements for effective church growth. The source emphasizes that healthy churches should and can plant churches.⁷² In order for churches to be able to grow, they first need leadership, and then they need a discipleship ministry.⁷³ The resource details various topics

⁷⁰ Worthington, 77, table 5.1

⁷¹ Ibid., 105, table 7.1

⁷² E. Stetzer and D. Im, *Planting Missional Churches: Your guide to starting churches that multiply* (Nashville: B&H, 2016), 45.

⁷³ Ibid., 55.

and the specific struggles of certain types of ministries, often offering a do and do not in each discussion.⁷⁴

“What God has joined Together: family Formation and Religion Among Young Adults” By Melinda Denton Lundquist, and Jeremy E. Uecker

This resource studies the changes in religion between the ages of 18 to 28 years.⁷⁵ The source divided participants into age groups of study and studied the differences of religious views from one age group to another. The article discusses the researcher’s findings and compared it with data from the National Study of Youth and Religion.⁷⁶ This article explored how these religious views and opinions were impacted by their family status.⁷⁷ Participants were located by using a random digital dial telephone database and conducting online surveys of the teenagers and at least one parent.⁷⁸ Even though this study is a quantitative study, I feel that the information concerning religious views among various age and people groups would be helpful to my thesis.

“Chastity for Democracy: Surplus Repression and the Rhetoric of Sex Education” by Casey Ryan Kelly

This source is a scholarly essay concerning the debate surrounding sexual education and how it is impacted by protestant religious views.⁷⁹ The article discusses how sexual education

⁷⁴ Setzer and Im, 103-316.

⁷⁵ Melinda Denton Lundquist and Jeremy E. Uecker, “What God has joined together: Family Formation and Religion among Young Adults,” *Review of Religious Research* 60, no. 1 (2017): 1–22.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Casey Ryan Kelly, “Chastity for Democracy: Surplus Repression and the Rhetoric of Sex Education.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 102, no. 4 (June 25, 2016): 353–375. Accessed October 8, 2020. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00335630.2016.1209548>

plays a part into a person’s developed views of abstinence, contraceptives, and sexual activities and how those views are impacted through sometimes conflicting information.⁸⁰ This article examines how one might reason out their own views on these matters as it pertains to their religious views on the subject. This information is useful to this thesis by providing critical information that is pertinent to premarital counseling. In today’s world, mainstream ideas concerning sexuality, and how we view sexuality, has been mingled into our everyday life, including the church. Therefore, this article is also useful as a reference when discussing discipleship and issues related to sexuality by taking a Christian standpoint.

“Giving Counsel: Donald Capps’ Contributions to Pastoral Counseling” by R. LaMothe

LaMothe gives a description of the work of Donald Capps and how his work impacted pastoral counseling.⁸¹ This resource highlights Donald Capps’ several key attributes to the field of pastoral counseling.⁸² This resource describes the importance of pastoral counseling, and the components that Capps felt were vital to conducting effective pastoral counseling.⁸³

“Is Marriage Counseling Perceived as Scientific? Examining the Views of U.S. Adults” by Lisa F. Platt and Christopher P. Scheitle

This source studied how the general public viewed marriage counseling in relationships to science.⁸⁴ The researchers used a nationally representative sample to explore how marriage counseling is viewed by the general public and the factors and demographics that predict how a

⁸⁰ Kelly.

⁸¹ R. LaMothe, “Giving Counsel: Donald Capps’ Contributions to Pastoral Counseling. *Religious Health* 57, 509–522 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-017-0506-x>

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Lisa F. Platt and Christopher P. Scheitle, “Is Marriage Counseling Perceived as Scientific? Examining the Views of U.S. Adults” *The Family Journal* (2017): 1-17. Accessed October 8, 2020. <http://doi-org.exproxy.liberty.edu/10.1177/1066480717710950>

person will perceive marriage counseling.⁸⁵ Using 1000 variables, and a set of core questions, researchers used split ballots and skip patterns to ask 1133 respondents.⁸⁶ Researchers found that the majority of the general public did not view marriage counseling as being scientific.⁸⁷ Platt and Christopher also studied several factors such as age, sex, and race that might impact the decisions.⁸⁸

“Relationship Help-Seeking: A Review of the Efficacy and Reach” by Wade J. Stewart, Kay Bradford, Brian J. Higginbotham, and Linda Skogrand

This source explored relationship helps, both formal and informal.⁸⁹ This resource narrowed down all types of relationship helps into seven categories: couple therapy, couple relationship education, self- help books, internet and other media resources, talking with clergy, and talking to friends.⁹⁰ This article also researched how gender and ethnic backgrounds impacted which resource was used, how frequently they are used, and at point in the relationship the resource was sought.⁹¹ The article further investigated the factors surrounding gender and ethnicity and how and why they selected the relationship help resource.⁹²

⁸⁵ Platt and Scheitle.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid..

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Wade J. Stewart, Kay Bradford, Brian J. Higginbotham, and Linda Skogrand. “Relationship Help-Seeking: A Review of the Efficacy and Reach.” *Marriage & Family Review* 52, no. 8 (2016): 781–803.

⁹⁰ Stewart et. al.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

“The Role of Marital Beliefs as a Component of Positive Relationship Functioning” by Brian J. Willoughby

This source studied how the general public viewed marriage counseling in relationships to science.⁹³ The researchers used a nationally representative sample to explore how marriage counseling is viewed by the general public and the factors and demographics that predict how a person will perceive marriage counseling.⁹⁴ Using 1000 variables, and a set of core questions, researchers used split ballots and skip patterns to ask 1133 respondents.⁹⁵ Researchers found that the majority of the general public did not view marriage counseling as being scientific.⁹⁶ Platt and Christopher also studied several factors such as age, sex, and race that might impact the decisions.⁹⁷

This article highlights a study conducted to determine to one’s beliefs about marriage, and how growth and longevity were associated with the individual’s decision-making process and how their preset ideas of marriage impacted those decisions.⁹⁸ Willoughby researched 962 individuals who were either dating, living together, or married.⁹⁹ The results of the study suggested that decisions related to many aspects of marriage were associated with the individual’s pre-conceived ideas of marriage. These aspects included risk taking, sexual decision

⁹³ Lisa F. Platt and Christopher P. Scheitle, “Is Marriage Counseling Perceived as Scientific? Examining the Views of U.S. Adults” *The Family Journal* (2017): 1-17. Accessed October 8, 2020. <http://doi-org.exproxy.liberty.edu/10.1177/1066480717710950>

⁹⁴ Platt and Scheitle.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Brian J. Willoughby, “The Role of Marital Beliefs as a Component of Positive Relationship Functioning.” *Journal of Adult Development* 22, no. 2 (2014): 76–89.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

making, mental health, and union formation behaviors.¹⁰⁰ In this study, the researcher proposed a marriage paradigm theory and argued that every person has some idea, or perception, to what they expect marriage to be like.¹⁰¹

Strategic Pastoral Counseling: A short term structured Model by David G. Benner

This resource is a model for how to structure counseling. This resource offers several illustrations of real-life counseling situations to aid pastors and counselors. “The term pastoral points to the fact that it is offered by a representative of the Christian church who is accountable to the church. The term counseling means that the help offered is organized around the problems experienced by those seeking pastoral assistance.”¹⁰² This source emphasizes the fact that pastoral counseling is church based and spiritually focused. Further, it is explicitly Christian. The goal of pastoral counseling is to bring members of the body of Christ closer to the goal of being like Christ. This source provides models to guide the pastor in the pursuit of counseling and discipling members of the church.¹⁰³

Growing True Disciples: New Strategies for Producing Genuine Followers of Christ by George Barna

In this source, Barna lays out strategies for making disciples. This source is filled with statistics, suggestions, and models for churches to help equip better followers of Christ. The author offers a detailed list of definitions that describe the meaning of discipleship. For example, words include passion, depth, maturity, practice, process, interactive, multifaceted, lifelong, and

¹⁰⁰ Willoughby.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Benner, 47.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

Christlike.¹⁰⁴ The researcher will use this resource to build the case for in-depth and meaningful discipleship. Discipleship will be defined as a person doing whatever Jesus did and whatever Jesus commanded.

***Discipleship Counseling: The Complete Guide to Helping Others Walk in Freedom and Grow in Christ* by Dr. Neil T. Anderson**

This work offers definitions of discipleship counseling in theory as well as methods of discipleship counseling in practice. This researcher will use this source to help build the case for intimacy with God.¹⁰⁵ Building a family requires intimacy between a husband and wife. In turn, the husband and wife seek to build intimacy with God. This source defines intimacy and expounds upon ways to diminish intimacy as well as methods to increase intimacy.

***On the Same Page: Relationships Daily* by Dr. Al Sarno**

This book was written by my mentor and deals with building relationships. This book provides a 45-day plan to build intimacy in a relationship.¹⁰⁶ This work presents the idea that couples can be on the same page daily within the context of their relationship.¹⁰⁷ This book includes a workbook for people desiring to have their best relationship now. The workbook allows the couple to write down their thoughts, feelings and concerns so that they can share these things with each other. The author refers to the book as a treasure hunt of intimacy.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ George Barna, *Growing True Disciples: New Strategies for Producing Genuine Followers of Christ* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2011), 108-110.

¹⁰⁵ Dr. Neil T. Anderson, *Discipleship Counseling: The Complete Guide to Helping Others Walk in Freedom and Grow in Christ* (Ventura: Regal Books, 2013), 138-140.

¹⁰⁶ Dr. Al Sarno, *On the Same Page: Relationships Daily* (New York: Amazon Publishing, 2016).

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

The Popular Encyclopedia of Christian Counseling by Dr. Tim Clinton and Dr. Ron Hawkins

The book by Clinton and Hawkins discusses counselor-client relationships. Right out of the gate this work states that God is relational and that He lives in perfect relationship. God prefers face-to-face community. As we are made in the image of God, we too crave relationships. As the counselor and counselee build a rapport, the relationship grows deeper. Clients often develop tight bonds with their counselors this comes as stories are shared and care and concern are demonstrated throughout the counseling process. Almost all counseling theories view the counselor-client relationship as a key element in the outcome of the process.

Clinton and Hawkins discuss change readiness and barriers to change. Further, the authors also write about defense mechanisms. This is a very interesting part of the book. There are pathological defenses which are often dangerous and harmful. There are immature defenses which are a very normal part of child and adolescent development. There are neurotic defenses which are common in adults and utilized when stress is high. There are also mature defenses which are found most among mentally and emotionally healthy adults.

Clinton and Hawkins also discussed confession and repentance. This is a very important part of biblical pastoral counseling. To repent is to literally turn from sin. Counselors must urge clients to strive for genuine Christian living. The authors discuss hinderances to confession. They point out that an accurate description of confession sees it as a process containing several steps. These steps include recognition and personal admission of guilt to oneself, acknowledgement of guilt to God, and an admission to guilt to the one who has been wronged. I appreciate the strong position the authors take regarding the seriousness of sin, confession, and repentance. The book also discusses several disorders such as anger, anxiety, bitterness, and shame. Thankfully, they also discuss sin and redemption. Topics such as legalism, spiritual warfare, and deliverance are

also discussed. Stress disorders, depression, and oppositional defiant disorders are also discussed. This book is what it claims to be. It is an encyclopedia of terms related to Christian counseling. It truly is an indispensable tool for helping people with their problems.

Introduction to Pastoral Counseling by L. Townsend

This work by Townsend begins the conversation of how pastoral counselors combine their pastoral identity with their work and practice. Townsend explores the distinction between pastoral counseling and other types of counseling. Further, the author explores ways in which pastoral counselors integrate behavioral sciences with theology and faith. Many pastors claim to practice what the author refers to as spiritually integrated psychotherapy. Interestingly, this blend of behavioral sciences, faith, theology, and practice is something many pastoral counselors find difficult to describe. Instead, it is something that happens internally and flows through the Christian counselor. The book offers many definitions and positions regarding behavioral sciences and theology. Questions arise such as how do we know what we know is trustworthy? How do we avoid conflict?

The Quick Reference Guide to Biblical Counseling by Dr. Tim Clinton and Dr. Ron Hawkins

This reference was very helpful in the establishing a proper intake questionnaire. Often, in the premarital counseling setting, a pastoral counselor may discover that one member of the couple may be dealing with some other sort of trauma. Any trauma should be addressed in this premarital setting to fully counsel the couple. This resource aids in identifying these traumas and how to address them. This reference deals with topics such as abortion, grief, addictions to substances, money crisis, parenting, stress, loneliness, pornography, anger, domestic violence, fear and anxiety, Depression, jealousy, and divorce. While most couples seeking premarital counseling do not wish think about divorce, this resource allows the researcher to help the

counselees with the grief of a broken marriage and to help divorce proof the marriage. This book also includes a section on decision making and the will of God which is always helpful to couples.

The Quick Reference Guide to Marriage & Family Counseling by Dr. Tim Clinton and Dr. John Trent

This book is like the above referenced book in that it offers a lot of the same resources but updated and focused only on marriage and family issues. This book has a section which includes premarital counseling. Page 237 has an example of premarital counseling assessment interview. The book has definitions and key thoughts as they relate to premarital counseling. The book then lays out a very basic action plan to assist a pastoral counselor with developing their premarital counseling program. Lastly, this book offers a sample starter prayer to start the sessions and some helpful biblical insights.

Telling Yourself the Truth by William Backus and Marie Chapien

This book has been a huge resource for me. I even included the “play the movie” concept derived from this book in many of my counseling sessions, including premarital counseling. This concept allows the counselee(s) to see the rest of the story, how will a choice play out, and who will be hurt by this decision. This book also touches on anger, fear, infidelity, lying, and many other topics, but by far the play the movie concept is one of my favorites. This is a concept that I use often in counseling sessions, especially the premarital setting. This concept allows the counselees to walk themselves through a decision and to talk through how that choice may impact the people they love. This can be a humorous and serious discussion at the same time. Couples often report to me that this exercise is something they find they use a lot to make major decisions in their lives.

The Case for Marriage by Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher

In this book, the authors discuss the idea that marriage is not just a private emotional relationship regarding two people. Instead, it is a very public thing, having an impact on many people and practices.¹⁰⁹ The marriage agreement is between both the partners and society. Marriage to be legal and recognized must be performed by a qualified person and it must be registered legally within the state. Marriage is legally binding and takes a court order to dissolve. The authors specifically state the public impact of marriage as making it difficult to have inappropriate relationships outside of marriage.¹¹⁰ Married people are responsible for each other. They are responsible for health, well-being, mental health, and financial stability.¹¹¹ Marriage doesn't just change the couple's relationship to each other, it changes the way the couple relates to the outside world. Married couples are treated differently by other people, the government, business, and religion.¹¹²

Discipleship Counseling by Dr. Neil T. Anderson

Dr. Anderson uses practical and real world scenarios to describe counseling situations that a pastoral counselor may encounter while helping his congregation. Dr. Anderson reinforces his thoughts and methods with scripture. This book explains what discipleship counseling really is and what it looks like when it is put into practice. Several times in the book, the author focuses on our enemy and evil forces. Over and over he reminds his readers that the true follower of Christ has victory over Satan. Dr. Anderson stated, to be completely free from the past, we have

¹⁰⁹ Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage* (New York: DoubleDay, 2000), 18.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Waite and Gallagher, 21.

found it necessary for each person to specifically renounce every false religion, false teacher, false practice and every means of false guidance in which he or she has participated.¹¹³

Effective Church Growth Strategies by Gene Getz & Joe Wall

Getz and Wall have a combined several tried and proved church growing strategies in this book. This book discusses needful foundations for any church seeking to grow scripturally. The book discusses growing churches with mature Christians and teaching them to be disciples to those coming into the church. Getz and Wall have a segment on discipleship and spiritual gifts that aided this research. There is also a segment on identifying future church leaders and how to teach them. There is a small section which discusses discipleship in the Epistles. The book discusses the need for churches to have biblical priorities.

¹¹³ Anderson, 221.

Chapter 3

Introduction

For this project, I will reflect with the couples on their eight-week premarital counseling sessions. This is only the outline for the counseling sessions and should be used as a guide and not a complete blueprint for these sessions. This researcher prefers to use solution based counseling methods, meaning that the goal of the sessions is to cover a specific topic. Therefore, if other needs are identified, then the researcher may address those topics in a future session. This ensures that the eight-week premarital counseling sessions are not interrupted and that the goal or focus of the sessions will not change.

The following is the layout for the premarital counseling course that every participating couple received:

Week One

What is marriage? Marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman. They agree to become one flesh and to live together for life. God designed marriage in the days of Adam and Eve.

Week one is a getting to know you time. As we consider a biblically based definition of marriage, we must also discuss what marriage is not. After allowing for discussion, have the counselees read the following verses: Genesis 5:2, Genesis 2:18, Proverbs 18:22, 24:3-4, and I Cor.7:39.

As a matter of discussion, present the question, is your marriage based in reality or on an unrealistic expectation?

Toward the end of the session, take the opportunity to present the gospel. Close in prayer. Set the next week's appointment.

Assign homework. Next week we will discuss communication. Have the counselees read the book *Why Don't We Listen Better? Communicating & Connecting in Relationships* by James C. Petersen.

Week 2

Communication

This week we will discuss communication. Present the following questions:

1. How well do we listen?
2. Would you like to be a better listener?

After the brief discussion, I will have the counselees play a game with the talker and listener cards prescribed by Petersen (2007). For fun, we will have the husband hold the listener card first. I will have him discuss a favorite hobby or topic with his bride to be. She holds the listener card and as a rule must listen intently without interruption. After a few minutes of discussion, the bride and groom can trade places. I will ask questions to the one holding the listener card such as, "what can you tell me about what the talker was discussing?" and "can you remember specific details?"

Point out how hard it is to listen the way we should, but how much more effective language is when we actively and unselfishly participate.

Wrap things up. Pray over the future home. Assign homework. Homework will be for the counselees use the talker-listener cards to discuss important aspects of their wedding such as financial planning. Make notes concerning challenges that they had with the exercise.

Have the counselees study scripture independently while looking for a definition of love.

Week 3

Love styles

What is love? How do we love? Worthington defines love as being willing to value the other person and being unwilling to devalue that person (2005).

Scriptural Reference for discussion: Ephesians 5. The point to be made is that husbands and wives are to love each other the way that Christ loves the Church. We will discuss the triangle of love as defined by Parrott & Parrott in their book, *Saving Your Marriage before it Starts* (2006). The three sides of love are passion, intimacy, and commitment. I will draw on the board different illustrations of the love triangle found on pages 42-43(2006).

Week 4

Building Intimacy

I will use table 5.1 on page 77 of Worthington's Book, *Hope-Focused Marriage Counseling* as an assessment of the couple's relationship.

According to Worthington, not everyone has the same need for closeness. Some people have more need for intimacy. Some folks prefer to be alone while others prefer to be a couple all the time (2005). I will use Worthington's acrostic on the dry erase board to teach the lesson.

V= value your partner

A=affection

L=lovemaking

U=use positives

E=empty a calendar (Worthington, 2005).

Week 5

Values

It's important that we respect each other's values, but it's also important that we understand each other's values. This week we will be discussing the value of marriage.

As counselor, I will discuss the fact that I believe in marriage. We will discuss values and the importance of knowing early on how we feel about marriage and divorce.

Week 6

Values, continued

I will have already collected the assessments before our session. We will discuss the events of the previous week after the fact that the counselees went home and discussed their values.

Evaluation Point: Were there any challenges to the values of the counselees? Were there any opportunities to help bring a counselee's values in line with a biblical worldview? Ask the question, how much do you value your potential spouse? Would you be willing to give your life for your spouse, just as Jesus gave His for the church? These are great discussion questions, and it is important to keep the conversation focused. Make notes about things that may need to be revisited later in another session.

Assign Homework:

Homework for this week is to spend at least five hours working on the potential marriage. Sow seeds of kindness and discuss ways to promote romance and intimacy.

Continue the assigned reading and scriptures.

Week 7

Commitment

What are your expectations of marriage? When you take your vows, have you considered the possibility that there may be poorer days than richer days? There may be more days of sickness than of health? Life happens. Circumstances change. It is important to be committed to the person. The person you marry today may never change into your expectations. Commitment comes when we use Worthington's definition of love (2005) and apply it to each day we live. This week we will discuss Christ's commitment to the Church, even to death on the cross. We will also discuss God's own promise to never leave or forsake His own. It is important that we adopt His attitude toward our spouse if we are to love and be committed the way He is. We will have discussion on what this means.

Assign Homework:

Go home and write a love letter to your spouse in the future. Assume that he or she will open this letter on your 25th wedding anniversary. Where do you see yourself in 25 years? No one knows the circumstances that lie ahead.

Tip: What the Pastor is looking for is an understanding that God will be with you in every step of your marriage, and He intends for you to be fully committed to your partner all the way. We will open these letters next week in our final week of counseling. Be sure to express how you feel today as if you were still feeling it in the future. Your goal is to get there.

Week 8

This week we will review what we have learned. We will also look ahead in our calendar and finalize the date and time for the marriage ceremony. We will spend this time discussing the growth we have experienced over the last eight weeks. I will ask the couple to sign a promise which states their agreement to seek counseling in the event they face trouble in their marriage. Before I agree to perform the ceremony, I ask them to sign a contract in which they promise to seek every alternative to divorce in every effort to save their marriage. Make sure couples understand that I am always here if they need to talk or need any future sessions. I never want them to feel as if I am unapproachable.

The letters to the future will be read aloud. I feel that it is valuable for the couple to visualize a successful future. It is now their job to get to work.

Questions? Concerns? Any topics that may need to be revisited?

As with every counseling session we will close with prayer and place ourselves in the hands of God.

Methodology

For this project, I will be creating my own survey. I plan to ask questions based upon the application of the skill sets and materials presented during my premarital counseling program. The eligible participants will be either current or former members of the churches I have pastored over the years of my ministry. The people eligible to participate in this study are middle class couples who identify as practicing Christians within a fifty-mile radius of our city. The subjects of this study range in ages from 20 years to 46 years old. The questions in the survey will be based on biblical applications and related to their premarital counseling sessions. Additionally, I seek to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' attitudes and beliefs in reference to discipleship in the Christian faith and practice.

Chapter three will also discuss my own biases, as the primary researcher, related to this study as well as my perceptions related to this study. This chapter will also include the study's methodology, including how I plan to locate study participants, the selection of those participants, and interactions between myself and the selected participants.¹ This chapter will also discuss the research design, and the location of the focus group. This chapter will define the plans this researcher intends to use to ensure that this study is an ethical and trustworthy study. This chapter will discuss any perceived ethical concerns and how this research will address these concerns. Lastly, this chapter will discuss how the data will be analyzed and the application of research data.

¹ Kjell Erik Rudestam and Rae R. Newton, *Surviving Your Dissertation 3rd ed.* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007), 275.

Preparing for the Study

To begin this project, the researcher will gain IRB approval as prescribed by the standards of Liberty University and the seminary. CITI training will also be completed to further ensure the ethics and responsibilities of the researcher. Once IRB has approved the research, the researcher will inform the church where he pastors of his intention to complete the research as described in this thesis project. Participants will be selected based on their prior completion of the researcher's pastoral counseling program which is made available to all couples seeking to be married by the researcher officiant. Once approval has been granted and the researcher can conduct the focus group interviews, the researcher will begin to invite participants.

The researcher will then gather a focus group involving all willing participants who meet the requirements. A list of questions will be distributed to the participants in the focus group. All forms and questions will be identical. After the focus group has met, the researcher will analyze, organize, and populate the results of the research within this thesis project.

Research Question

The following question is the research question that will guide this study:

RQ1: How has premarital counseling among couples in the Christian faith been foundational and useful in furthering the desire to follow Christ as it relates to discipleship?

This thesis project will research Christian couples who sought premarital counseling and whether they felt that counseling was fundamental to discipleship. The researcher will seek to determine if the methods regarding biblical communication, biblical roles of the husband, wife and children have had an impact on the duration of the marriage as well as an impact on the importance of Christian service. Further, the research intends to determine whether the fundamentals discussed in premarital counseling has carried over into other aspects of daily life. In addition, this researcher will attempt to determine or gauge the usefulness of tools, such as

conflict resolution and edification of the spouse, within the marriage. Lastly, the researcher will explore how the tools and fundamentals of the faith learned in premarital counseling were applied to discipleship.

It is important to recognize the main differences between qualitative and quantitative research. Qualitative research retains research methods different from those methods used by quantitative, or traditional research. In quantitative methods, the researcher will identify a sampling of the participants to represent the entire population.² However, the goal of my research was not to identify a sampling of the population to generalize their thoughts, conceptions, and behavior patterns and apply these results to all couples who have ever attended premarital counseling classes. Therefore, the participants of my study do not represent an entire population.

There are several characteristics of a qualitative study. The first characteristic is that it is holistic.³ This means that the researcher will attempt to see and understand the whole picture of the study.⁴ Next, the study should examine the relationship within a system or subculture.⁵ Qualitative research is personal with face-to-face data collection, attentive to details and focused on social data.⁶ Research which is qualitative incorporates consent forms and is cautious concerning ethical issues.

After researching study methods, I decided to use a qualitative focus group study. A qualitative study is one that seeks to understand from the data which is analyzed.⁷ In comparison,

² Yin, 2018.

³ Janesick, 11.

⁴ Ibid, 11.

⁵ Ibid, 11.

⁶ Ibid, 11.

⁷ Robert K. Yin. *Case Study Research and Application: Design & Method 6th ed.* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing, 2018).

a quantitative study seeks to test a certain hypothesis for a result.⁸ Since one of the advantages of qualitative research is being able to analyze human experiences, I felt that this was the correct method for my planned study to answer the research question. Focus groups are considered a way to better study and measure reactions of the participants, and not just opinions.⁹ Conducting a focus group allows the researcher to study group interactions.¹⁰ By allowing the participants to speak freely, the researcher is able to learn both from the entire group of participants, as well as from each individual participant. One of the weaknesses of a focus group is that some participants may tend to overshare while others prefer not to be open about personal experiences. This is one reason this researcher decided to also use a personal questionnaire that was given to each participating couple. The researcher plans to use the focus group to allow the participants to be open and share as much as they would like about their personal experiences. The questionnaire will be used for the participants to share things that they may not wish to share in a group setting.

Focus groups do rely on a skilled moderator to ensure that the group stays on topic and to move the conversations along in order.¹¹ This requires control from the moderator and a planned and printed interview schedule. The researcher will have a digital clock visible so that the researcher can be punctual and keep the discussion flowing in the right direction. If the

⁸ Yin.

⁹ Valarie J. Janesick. *Stretching Exercises for Qualitative Researchers*. 3rd Ed. Los Angeles: Sage Publishing, 2011), 119.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 120.

researcher feels that a follow-up discussion group is necessary, then the researcher will schedule that on a later date.

Focus groups alone do not make a study qualitative.¹² Instead they are considered a self-contained research technique.¹³ Focus groups can be used in both qualitative and quantitative research and is often used in mixed method research studies. The study becomes qualitative when the researcher has a qualitative theoretical framework to guide the study.¹⁴ A good qualitative study is equipped with good qualitative questions and uses the focus group setting to gain quality narrative data to accompany a questionnaire or survey.¹⁵ This researcher will use a focus group, a questionnaire, and both a conceptual and theoretical framework. This study will focus on premarital counseling and discipleship.

Identification of Research Study Participants

The focus of this thesis will be couples of the Christian faith and practice. These couples will have needed to successfully complete premarital counseling prior to this project. Specifically, the participants will have completed an eight-week brief, solution focused pastoral counseling program with this researcher. Couples do not need to be attending services or programs at the researcher's church. Couples need to have been married for no less than one week.

The researcher intends to locate couples from past experiences to complete this study. The researcher has kept contact with the couples after their premarital counseling sessions.

¹² Janesick, 118.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

Therefore, the researcher has a list of eligible couples who have successfully completed the required premarital counseling sessions with the researcher. The researcher will reach out to couples that successfully completed premarital counseling with the researcher through emails, texts, calls, in-person visits, and social media messaging. The couples will be asked to review the study information and sign a consent form approved through IRB.

Couples received an invitation to participate by the researcher. Couples were asked to reply to the invitation if they are interested in participating. Once the researcher receives notification of an interest to participate, he will then reply with IRB consent form for each participant to review. Couples agreeing to participate will receive a follow up notification of the date, time, and location for the focus group. Couples who have a conflict to this focus group date may be disqualified from the research or a secondary date, time and location may be established, if needed.

Data Collection Locations

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this researcher will conduct this study utilizing a questionnaire which will be given to each member of the couple. These questionnaires will be issued via email and completed by the couples. The couples will submit their answers individually. Questionnaires will be reviewed by this researcher. Once the researcher has evaluated all the responses, the researcher will conduct any follow-up questions for clarification using a meeting website such as Zoom or GoToMeeting.

With restrictions being lifted in our area for COVID-19, the researcher was able to conduct the focus group in person. The researcher researched COVID-19 restrictions in their area and made every effort to comply to these guidelines. The researcher also advised that participants who were not comfortable attending the focus group in person could request a link to

join the focus group over the Zoom platform. No couple chose the option to attend via Zoom. Each participant wore a mask, and each couple was seated six feet apart from other couples and the moderator.

The location for a focus group is very important. Participants need to feel that their privacy is protected. Choosing a neutral location, where couples feel that they can freely leave, if they desire to, is also very important. Keeping this in mind, the researcher decided to conduct this focus group in his office setting. There was plenty of room to safely conduct the research and move about freely. The researcher also over recruited for the focus group to cover last minute dropouts or those who had conflicts with the established date and time. The location also provided plenty of room to set up a recording device at both ends of the main meeting room. This allowed the researcher to be able to hear everyone since the couples were spread out in the area for COVID-19 safety.

Research Design

This qualitative focus group study will seek to understand how premarital counseling among couples in the Christian faith have been foundational and useful in furthering the desire to follow Christ as it relates to discipleship. This study will examine how these couples integrate Christ in their marriage and whether they practice disciplines of the Christian faith regularly such as prayer, church attendance, participating in worship, bible intake, evangelism, and giving. The researcher intends to gain knowledge concerning how the couples have applied the tools they learned in premarital counseling to their day to day lives. The researcher intends to discover a correlation between premarital counseling and discipleship. By creating a list of steps, the researcher was able to plan for each step of the process. The researcher is also able to share the

research with others who may recreate the study, based on the steps outlined in this chapter. The following is a step-by-step process of this research design.

Step One: Consent Form

The researcher has kept an extensive list of the couples that have attended premarital counseling with him over the years. The researcher has kept in touch with all the couples and followed them over the years. Not all the couples who attended this premarital counseling followed up with a marriage union. Unfortunately, not all the marriages survived. The researcher was able to make a list of the couples that not only completed premarital counseling, but that also were still married. Then the researcher made another list of those couples who were also actively participating in a church setting. Not all the couples attend services at the researcher's church, and this was not a requirement for participation.

After contacting each couple and receiving confirmation that they are willing and interested in participating, the researcher will provide each one person with the consent form detailing the research study. It will be imperative that both members of the couple agree to participate separately. At least one member of the couple will be asked to participate and represent the family; however, both members of the couple will be allowed to participate if they desire to do so. The consent form will list in detail in the amount of time required for the study and what will be expected of them. It is the preference of this researcher to have both members of the couple participant in the focus group in person. However, arrangements were made and extended for anyone wishing to join the focus group virtually using the Zoom or GoToMeeting platforms. Couples wishing to participate returned the consent forms and were given the pre-established date for the focus group. Couples who had other arrangements or could not commit

to the pre-arranged date were kept on a secondary list in case a second focus group date was needed.

Step Two: Questionnaire

A lot of work goes into the creation of a questionnaire. A researcher should prepare by creating a questionnaire containing questions relevant to the research question. Prior to the research being conducted, the researcher will design the questionnaire tool. This questionnaire must contain focused, open-ended questions.¹⁶ The researcher will send the questionnaire to a panel of experts in the theology field for review and approval. This will ensure that the questionnaire aligns properly with the study. Once the researcher has received feedback and approval for the questionnaire from the panel of experts, the researcher will seek approval of the document through the IRB. After the IRB has approved all data collection materials, the researcher will request participation. Couples will then respond to the researcher with a signed consent form.

Once the researcher receives the signed consent form from the participant, the researcher will send the questionnaire via email to the participants. The researcher will set a deadline of 10 days for the participant to complete the questionnaire. Once the questionnaire is returned to the researcher via email, the researcher will schedule the focus group, and will compile the data. If necessary, the researcher will conduct follow-up interviews with the couples, individually, on a meeting website such as Zoom or GoToMeeting. If a follow-up interview is needed, the participants will be audio and video recorded. The researcher will also set up a virtual link through the Zoom or GoToMeeting website for couples who prefer to join the focus group

¹⁶ Janesick, 2011.

virtually and not in person. This will ensure that couples feel safe during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Step Three: Focus Group

The researcher will schedule a focus group session with the couples who consented to participate in this study. Males will be referred to a participant “A” and females as participant “B” along with a designated couple number. For example, the first couple to arrive would be “1A” and “1B.” This will allow the researcher to track specific demographics for each participant as well as being able to address each participant as an individual and as a couple. Each couple will be provided a copy of the questionnaire. This is the same questionnaire that they received in their email. Couples can complete the questionnaire at the focus group or provide a completed copy prior to arriving at the focus group. The focus group will be a time of discussion between the participating couples and the researcher. This will allow the researcher to gather data concerning the couples’ thoughts about marital counseling and discipleship. This will also allow the researcher to ask any follow-up questions to specific couples, or to the entire group of participants. Light refreshments will be served.

Couples were asked to RSVP to the focus group so preparations could be made. Couples were also asked if they preferred to attend the focus group online through the Zoom platform or in person. All participating couples stated that they would prefer to attend in person. Chairs were placed for the couples, sitting each couple six feet apart from other couples. This was to adhere to COVID-19 restrictions and guidelines in our area. Couples were served light refreshments such as finger foods and bottled soft drinks and water. Couples were advised that they were free to leave at any time and were not required to stay. Couples were issued a number to keep their identities anonymous for this study.

Research Dates and Recording Equipment

The researcher scheduled the focus group for June 24, 2021. Couples were notified via text and email and asked to respond to confirm their ability to attend. The focus group event was scheduled to begin at 7pm EST and ended at 9pm EST. Couples arrived on time and left in a timely manner. The researcher invited 14 participants (7 couples) to the focus group and ten participants (5 couples) were able to attend and take part. Two of the couples were unable to participate due to a last-minute conflict with their work schedules.

The couples were seated six feet apart from other couples and asked to wear a mask. This seating situation was based on current COVID-19 restrictions and suggestions in our area. This focus group was held in a large office environment where seating was not an issue. Further the large open area also allowed the researcher to place two recording devices, one of each side of the room. This ensured that all comments would be recorded, and all data would be captured.

The focus group was audio and video recorded to capture the responses of each participant. The audio/video recording device was set up in plain view, but in an area that would not distract from the conversations. There was a second audio recording device only that was set up in the center of the room which worked as a backup device.

The researcher prepared and printed a copy of the focus group schedule. This schedule allowed the researcher, as moderator, to keep the focus group on track. This allowed the researcher to move the group through each discussion topic in a timely manner. This assured that the research was completed in the time frame given. There was no need for follow-up questions or additional focus groups.

The researcher led a quick review of relevant topics and answered questions from the participants concerning the questionnaire. The researcher went over each question and took

voluntary verbal responses from the focus group. The provided questionnaires were collected at the end of the focus group, as well as the brief survey of demographic material for each participant. Again, the focus group allowed the researcher to open the floor to the discussion between each participant, both as an individual and as a couple. The focus group also allowed the researcher to capture reactions and body language and not just written expressions and opinions.

After the focus group ended, the researcher uploaded the media file to a secure, password-protected computer. The researcher also scanned in the questionnaires and demographical information and these items were placed together with the signed consent forms in a secure, encrypted folder on the password-protected computer.

The researcher also made notes throughout the focus group and immediately following the focus group. This allowed the researcher to journal his impressions and thoughts about the focus group. By conducting the focus group, the researcher was able to witness face to face interactions. These impressions were noted in the journal. The researcher's journal was then uploaded and saved with the data for review.

The researcher then began the process of transcribing the focus group recordings. Transcription is the tedious process of putting the focus group into written word. These transcriptions were saved with the other data in a secure, encrypted folder on the password protected computer. Once all the data had been transcribed, scanned, and saved, the researcher began the process of analyzing the data and looking for common themes.

Role of the Researcher

The qualitative researcher must first design the study and then collect and analyze the data.¹⁷ In this study, the researcher will be in the role of the observer-participant. A researcher in

¹⁷ Yin, 2018.

the observer-participant role must ask questions that may be considered personal to the participant to gain knowledge about their feelings and decision-making process concerning a certain topic.¹⁸

The qualitative researcher must first establish their credibility and determination when faced with such a vast project. I first established credibility and trustworthiness. Next, I communicated to the reader about the topic of this research study. Further, I explained how this will contribute to the study in the areas of experience, personal perspectives, bias and assumptions, and adaptability.

A researcher should always be able and prepared to adapt.¹⁹ The researcher, when conducting qualitative research methods, can adapt to changing contexts and be able to explore new discussions without losing focus. Researchers should not be worried by new conversation topics that may arise in the focus group, rather these should be seen as new opportunities.²⁰ When conducting a focus group, in a qualitative study, there are always new dynamics and dimensions to the study which may enhance one research theory while discounting another.²¹ My role as the researcher required me not attempt to change or control the direction of the research. Instead, I listened carefully to the information provided in the focus group and was also able to explore new information as received. However, the researcher must have a clear understanding of the issues being studied and be disciplined enough to not stray too far from the study focus.²²

¹⁸ J. Sutton & Z. Austin. Qualitative Research: Data Collection, Analysis, and Management. *The Canadian journal of hospital pharmacy*, 68(3), 226–231.

¹⁹ Yin, 2018.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

It is important for the researcher to be able to explore their own subjectivity and constantly changing biases, ideas, and perspectives concerning the present project to understand how the researcher may influence the outcome of the study.²³ This is considered reflexivity, and it is very important for the researcher to know how their own reflexivity can impact the study when restating and coding interview information. It is important that I understand the necessity to correctly state the views and opinions of the participants and not the researcher.²⁴ Qualitative studies should not be used to substantiate a researcher's preconceived position.²⁵ A researcher must be able to listen and document, without bias. Therefore, I allowed the participants to share and did not show any bias to their responses. My role as the researcher was merely to gather the data and lead the focus group.

Each participant was treated with respect, no matter what view they had on the topics discussed. I kept an in-depth journal to document my assumptions and knowledge regarding the material to account for how these types of bias may have influenced the study.²⁶

Analysis of Data

The data collected from the focus group and the questionnaires were analyzed by the researcher. All data was then transcribed. The researcher converted the demographical data for each participant into a chart. The researcher kept a journal of their impressions and findings as they gathered the data. The researcher reviewed the qualitative data for common phrases. The researcher then begins to code the data to locate common themes throughout the research. Data

²³ Yin, 2018.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

from the participating couples was compared to determine similarities and differences between each couple's responses to the questionnaire. The researcher then began to write common phrases and words found throughout the data onto small note cards. The small cards were then grouped together with other note cards of similar subject matter. This process continued until all the notecards had been properly placed in a group. The researcher then reviewed the groupings and identified the main idea of the grouped note cards. This main idea was written on a larger note card. This process continued, with the researcher identifying and regrouping the note cards until the subthemes were grouped into main themes. These five themes were then identified and discussed in Chapters four. Chapter five explores how the themes identified relate to the research question, the conceptual and theoretical frameworks of the study. The data was analyzed tediously to reveal recurring themes related to both premarital counseling and discipleship and how the themes relate to premarital counseling as it pertains to discipleship. During this process, the researcher kept a very detailed journal jotting down potential codes. The researcher also noted subthemes and themes as they began to emerge.

Coding & Theming of Data

I used the special analytic technique of pattern matching, known as explanation building.²⁷ This allowed me to explain the how and why of the data collected. To process the research properly, Yin suggested using four high quality principles for social science research.²⁸ First, Yin explained that researchers are to attend to all the evidence. In using this design, I attempted to follow all loose leads, even rival hypothesis.²⁹ Next, I investigated all plausible rival

²⁷ Yin, 2018.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

interpretations.³⁰ In doing this, Yin disclosed that it will assist in the development of research data and lead to future studies.³¹ Third, I only included the most significant aspects of my study in order to provide a high-quality analysis.³² Lastly, I demonstrated familiarity with prevailing thinking and discourse about my study topic.³³

To properly code the data, I used the process known as open coding.³⁴ Open coding required me to read the transcribed text several times while searching for common themes and concepts. These themes or concepts were labeled or coded. This process is known as open or initial coding because the label, or code, is obtained straight from the data itself.³⁵ I preferred to use open coding to look for common themes and concepts within the data and assign codes to those common themes as they emerged. Again, I also utilized inductive-deductive logic and analysis to continue building themes.³⁶

I used a process called two cycle for qualitative research.³⁷ After reading the transcripts multiple times and locating codes that aligned properly with my research question, open coding was a better choice for my data analysis.³⁸ I reviewed the data received from the interview questionnaire, the focus group, and my journaling notes and memos and begin the process of

³⁰ Yin, 2018.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid .

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ J. Saldana. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers 3rd ed.* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publishing, 2016).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Yin, 2018.

³⁷ Saldana, 2016.

³⁸ Ibid.

coding. The focus group recordings were immediately transcribed into written text by using transcription programs. These transcriptions were reviewed for any errors and corrected by comparing them to the recordings. I broke down the information into small, manageable parts to compare them for similar ideas and for differences.³⁹

Then I began to group these codes into patterns and larger categories.⁴⁰ During the second cycle, or categorization cycle, I used pattern coding to group the larger categories into smaller categories and eventually into themes or concepts.⁴¹ From this coding process, I was able to take a large amount of information gained from questionnaires and focus group to gain scholarly knowledge concerning premarital counseling and discipleship.

I viewed the data through the lens of an analytic researcher lens to avoid bias and misinterpretations.⁴² Due to my background in premarital counseling, I was able to understand and interpret the meanings of the answers given by the participants correctly. I avoided bias and remained neutral throughout the process. I did not put words in the mouths of the participants. I asked the questions and lead the focus group allowing the participants to share their personal definitions, ideas, and reflections they had gleaned from the premarital counseling sessions.

I analyzed the data for this qualitative study by using coding and theme development and by paying close attention to my data analysis plan and the data collected. I scrutinized the data collected through the focus group, my research journals and the answers provided on the questionnaires. By securitizing the data received, themes began to emerge. These codes were

³⁹ Saldana, 2016.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

eventually grouped to create subthemes and eventually into bigger themes. This researcher was able to identify five themes from the research data.

Analytical themes in the data

The data obtained from the participating couples in both the focus group and the written questionnaire were analyzed to determine congruent responses. These responses were used to evaluate whether premarital pastoral counseling has had an impact on discipleship or not. The analytical methodology reported themes in the responses of each couple, and within the focus group, as a group discussion.

Data not gathered

The research participants completed a brief questionnaire about their personal demographics concerning age and education level. Each couple was also asked to provide how many years they had been married. Participants were asked to provide a very basic education level response of whether they completed high school/GED or had higher education. No specifics were obtained as to what type of higher education had been completed. The participants were not asked about their ethnicity or any mental or physical handicap issues. The researcher also did not ask about participants' past relationships or the possibility of prior marriages.

Application of Research Data

The results of the data analysis were used to discover a correlation between premarital counseling and discipleship. The data analysis showed that there is a correlation between couples who participated in premarital counseling by the researcher and their understanding of discipleship. The data analysis further showed that there is a correlation between couples who completed the premarital counseling program offered by the researcher and the couples' affiliation with their local church and their personal faith in Jesus Christ. The data was used to

answer the research question affiliated with this project. Five themes emerged during the analysis of the data. The five themes identified in this study are that Christian marriage is distinct in that it is biblical and not secular, Premarital counseling helped to form a solid foundation for marriage, Premarital counseling was informative and enjoyable, the concepts from premarital counseling helped participants in other areas of their lives, and that premarital counseling is foundational for the discipleship of the family. These themes will be discussed in depth in Chapter 4.

In conclusion, Chapter 4 provides a blueprint of how this research was conducted. The researcher completed CITI training and gained IRB approval. Chapter 3 began with an overview of the premarital counseling sessions that all participants experienced. Chapter 3 continued by explaining the methodology, and how the researcher planned to use the study to answer the research question. The researcher identified the study participants and addressed where the study was to be conducted. The researcher carefully organized the answers given by each couple both in the focus group and on the personal questionnaire. After analyzing the data, the researcher populated charts, which are provided in Chapter 4. Chapter 3 also provided the chosen research design. Lastly, Chapter 3 provided a step-by-step process in which the researcher will analyze the data. Chapter 4 will discuss the results of the study. Chapter 4 will discuss, in depth, the five themes which emerged through the data analysis and coding process. These five themes will be explored, and the researcher will explain how these themes relate to the research question.

Chapter 4

Introduction

In the previous chapter, the methodology was discussed in detail. This section will outline and report the results of the questionnaire provided to the participants. It will also report the data received during the focus group. This chapter includes charts and tables detailing information regarding the participants and their answers. These charts are provided to assist the reader in understanding the results of this study.

It is of greatest importance that the church understands its goal. The goal of the church should be so deeply engrained into its DNA that the purpose of the church is like swimming to a fish or hunting to a lion. Individual members of a team agree on a common purpose then come together in alignment. When all the members of the team press towards the goal, they are in the same boat pulling together in the same direction.¹ To lead the church in defining its clear purpose, we should always look at what the bible says about our goals. Our job is not to create the purpose of the church. Instead, it is to discover the church's purpose.² After the act of discovery, the church can then communicate and construct a written purpose statement which is specific and measurable.³ Discipleship, to this researcher, is part of the Great Commission and should be a main goal in any church.

The couples who participated in this research were connected to the researcher's church where he pastors. Not all the couples were members of this church, however, all the couples sought out the researcher for premarital counseling. All the couples either attended this church or

¹ Pat MacMillan, *The Performance Factor: Unlocking the Secrets of Teamwork* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2001), Chapter 4.

² Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 98.

³ Warren, 101.

knew someone who attended the church. All the couples attended premarital counseling with the researcher in his office once a week for eight weeks with each session lasting about an hour.

Results

The researcher engaged fourteen (7 couples) potential research candidates. However, once the focus group was scheduled, only ten (5 couples) were able to participate. Two couples had conflicts with the chosen date and/or time. Completed questionnaires were scanned and saved on a password protected computer. The researcher kept a journal concerning the data collection and data analysis stages. The researcher also kept detailed notes concerning the questionnaires and their personal thoughts during the process. All data collected including audio/video recordings, researcher's journal, and notes were also saved on the same password-protected computer.

The candidates who were unable to attend the focus group were not eligible to complete the study. This was due to the couples not being able to participate in the focus group. While the researcher tried to host a second focus group for these two couples, the researcher was unable to find a date and time that worked for both couples. Any research data gathered from these couples was not included in this study. This data was saved in a separate file on the password-protected computer.

During the focus group, all the couples expressed a desire to fortify their marriage on the Christian principles taught to them in their premarital classes. They expressed thanks to the researcher for allowing them to participant in this study. At the end of the focus group, the couples stated that they felt recharged and refreshed as a couple. Couples stated that they felt a renewed desire to focus on their marriage as a couple, to make more time for each other, and to continue to use the tools they were given in their premarital counseling classes. Couples also

stated that felt a renewed drive to share the gospel of Christ to other couples who may be struggling.

Participant Demographics

After the questionnaires were completed and collected, the researcher began analyzing the data. First, the researcher examined the demographics of the participants. This information was gathered through a written survey attached to the questionnaire. The information was provided in the demographic survey and each participant provided their own answers. While the questionnaire was given to participants as a couple, the demographic survey was given to every single participant. Participants were asked to provide their age, education level, and the number of years of their current marriage. The ten participants were 5 participating couples, or individually 5 males and 5 females. Ages ranged from 20 years of age to 45 years of age. 6 of the participants had completed some form of higher education, while 4 of the participants did not complete any form of higher education. Higher education was defined as any education completed after receiving a high school diploma or GED. Marriage experience ranged from 32 days to 9 years. In addition, all participants successfully completed the researcher's premarital counseling program prior to their wedding date. All participants identified as practicing Christians during the time of the conducted study. Not all the participants currently attend the church where the researcher is pastor, but all reported being affiliated with a local congregation.

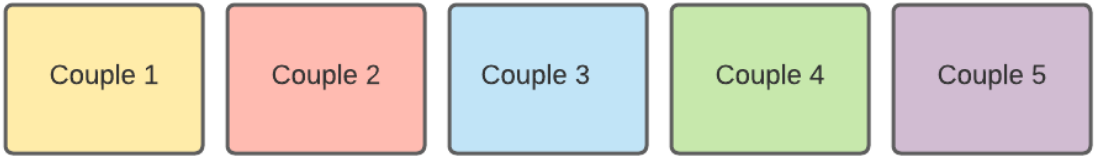
See Table 1 for a chart of the demographics for the participant individuals.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Assigned Name	Sex	Age	Education	Time Married
1A	Male	45	Higher education	6 years
1B	Female	40	High school/GED	6 years
2A	Male	27	Higher education	9 years
2B	Female	28	Higher education	9 years
3A	Male	23	High school/GED	3 years
3B	Female	22	Higher education	3 years
4A	Male	20	High school/GED	32 days
4B	Female	20	High school/GED	32 days
5A	Male	26	Higher Education	4 years
5B	Female	25	Higher education	4 years

For charting purposes, the researcher gave each couple a specific color for their response. The color-coded charts found throughout chapters four and five provide the answers of each participating couple. Please see figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Color-Coded Response Chart



Marriage Defined

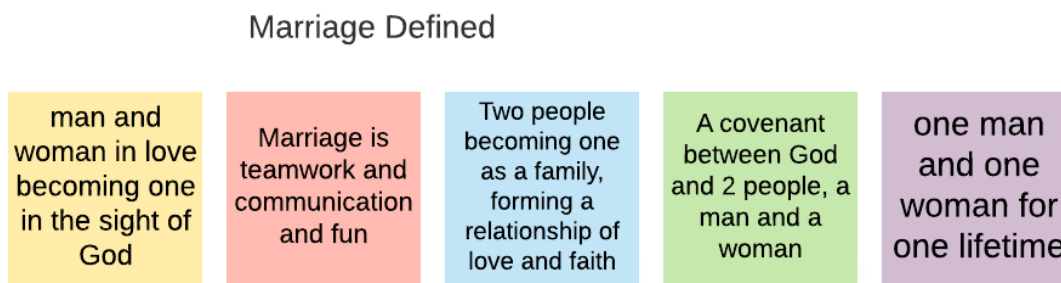
Couples were asked to define marriage. Participants were asked to do this in their own words as a couple. Couples provided answers about the union of marriage. Answers varied per couple, although couples agreed that marriage was something ordained by God and expressed that this was a sacred relationship. Couples reported that they did better with the challenges of life when they faced them together as a team. During the focus group, one couple reported that they felt there should be a clear difference between secular and Christian marriage.

Marriage experience between the couples varied significantly. While most of the participating couples had only been married once, one participant expressed the demands of dealing with the guilt and shame of a previous failed marriage. Several of the participating couples expressed fear of their marriage failing, and a need to fortify their marriage with a Christian foundation. Couples felt that their Christian marriages were very different from secular marriages that they observe. Couples agreed that they felt marriage was designed by God for one man and one woman. Couple one stated that they felt marriage could be defined as a man and woman in love and becoming one in the sight of God. Couple two stated that marriage requires teamwork and communication and was designed to be fun. Couple three reported that they believed marriage was two people becoming one as a family, forming a relationship of love and faith with each other. Couple four stated that marriage was a covenant between God, a man, and a woman. Lastly, couple five stated that they defined marriage as one man and one woman for one lifetime.

Couples elaborated on these written definitions during the focus group setting. Couples discussed a need for their marriage to be different. Couples explained that when they, as a couple, was close to God, they felt closer to each other. The discussion at the focus group

contributed to the idea which eventually became theme one, that Christian marriage is very different than secular marriage and that it is based on biblical principles and secular ones.

Figure 2: Marriage Defined



Discipleship Defined

Couples were asked to define Discipleship, in their own words. Responses from the participants are noted on the chart below. Couples felt that discipleship was very important in their Christian life and that following Christ in a way that set an example for others was part of their Christian faith. Participants shared that they felt sharing Christ and providing a Christian home for their children was also part of discipleship.

Couple one defined discipleship as following Christ as a couple to an example to others. During the focus group, couple one elaborated that being a good example to other couples, to single friends, to family, and co-workers was important to them. While they stated that their marriage was far from perfect, others sometimes compliment them on their ability to work through issues together as a team. Couple one expressed happiness with having other Christian couples in their lives to look up to. They stated that they hoped they could be an example to other couples too. Couple two defined discipleship as a relationship with the Lord, both individually and as a couple, and being able to share Christ with their children. Couple two also discussed their desire to be good Christian parents for their children during the focus group. Couple three

felt that discipleship could be defined as sharing the gospel together and to others and being an example to others through their faith. Couple three agreed with couple one during the focus group concerning being a Christian example as a couple went a long way when trying to share their faith with others. Couple four described discipleship as sharing the gospel with others, with family as the first ministry and passing down the gospel through your children. Couple four further stated in the focus group that they felt discipleship started at home between parents and their children. It was important to couple four that they share their faith and pass it down to their children through devotions, bible studies, traditions, and family values. Couple five explained that would define discipleship as a theme of the Great Commission after winning souls we commit to learning and teaching everything the Lord has commanded. Couple five explained in the focus group that once someone accepts Christ in their heart and life, they are instructed to share that gospel with every creature. Couple five stated that they agreed with all four of the other couples in their definitions too. All five couples agreed that discipleship should start at home with Christian devotions and Christian family values. Then the arm of discipleship should reach further out to extended family, friends, and co-workers.

The vision of the church should reflect the body's commitment to be obedient to scripture. Jesus commanded us to be totally committed to God and to love our neighbors. This church has a desire to reach the community and the world for Christ. It is important that we identify this as our goal. So, we do what we do in obedience and with gratitude. What we do is preach and teach the gospel and make disciples. How we do it is complex, but it begins with being tightly connected to the church body.

Figure 3: Discipleship Defined



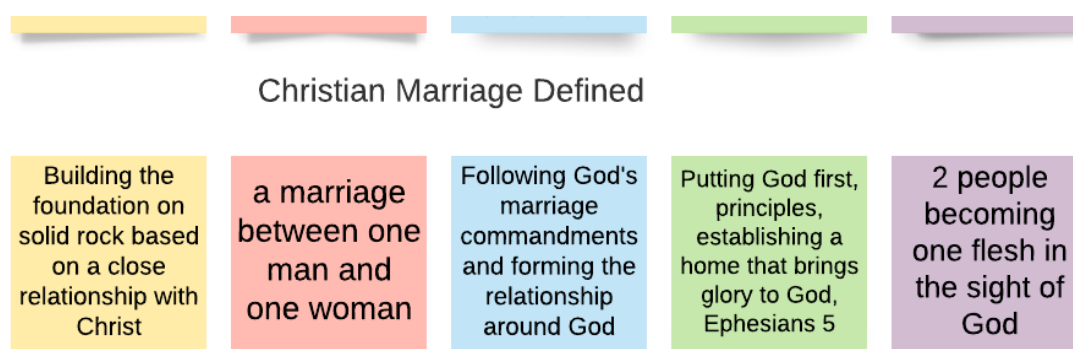
Christian Marriage Defined

The researcher asked the couples to define Christian marriage, in their own words. Participants agreed that Christian marriage is different than secular marriage. All ten participants agreed that Christian marriage is one where both spouses are following Christ and putting Christ as number one in their life and their spouse second. Responses from the participants are listed on the chart below. The answers were very similar to the discussions of marriage in the focus group. Again, there was clear understanding that the couples wanted to express how different Christian marriage is from the secular marriage today.

Couple one started the discussion by once again stating that a Christian marriage was building the foundation on solid rock based on a close relationship with Christ. Couple one stated during the focus group that there must a solid foundation for a Christian marriage to survive. This foundation needed to be firm in the couple's beliefs, their faith, their traditions, and their values. If the foundation was not firm, then the marriage could fail. Couple two stated that Christian marriage is between one man and one woman. Couple two stated that today, in America, secular marriage allows many different types of union. Couple three stated that they defined Christian marriage as following God's marriage commandments and forming the

relationship around God. Couple three stated that they remember discussing in premarital counseling the idea of taking divorce off the table. Couple three stated that they felt this was very important and didn't want their marriage to end up as a statistic. They felt that by embracing the commandments of God, as given in the scriptures, they have been able to form a better relationship with each other, while placing Christ first in their lives. Couple four also agreed with the other couples and their definitions. Couple four elaborated by defining Christian marriage as a couple putting God first in everything, a marriage with Christian principles. Couple four further stated that a Christian marriage is one that establishes a home that brings glory to God and cited Ephesians 5 as a verse they adopted for their family. Couple five stated that they defined Christian marriage as two people becoming one flesh in the sight of God. Couple five felt that they had to let go of some things to truly become one flesh. They expressed a desire to make their marriage work by always putting Christ first, renewing their commitment to each other from time to time and through open communication with each other.

Figure 4: Christian Marriage Defined



Marriage life and Christian Service

Next, the couples were asked how understanding marriage had affected their Christian life as it relates to Christian service. Couple 1 described a marriage where they were learning to support each other. They described a desire to be part of their church, to teach and share with others, especially other couples. Couple 2 did not provide a response for this question, however, during the focus group session, couple 2 stated that they felt that Christian service was a big part of being a Christian family. Couple 3 stated that a Christian marriage had influenced their spiritual roles and was helping them to lead their children and other family members to Christ. Couple 4 stated that they realized that the man was the spiritual leader and must take this role seriously by leading his family in devotion, prayer, bible study, and church attendance. Many of the women in the focus group rely on their husbands, yet they provide counsel to him, and feel that their opinions validated. Couple 5 stated that having a real Christian marriage allows them to live together, share their faith with each other, and disciple others together. They look forward to raising their children in a Christian home.

During the focus group, couples expressed concerns over juggling the stress of daily family life with Christian service. There are several stages of life, and the five couples who participated in this focus group were in several different stages. One couple was a newly married couple, others were experiencing life as new parents or were expecting their first child, and yet one couple was in the grandparent stage. Couples expressed a desire to continue their Christian service by being good stewards with their money, being faithful to their church, participating in worship and sharing their faith with others. The couples did voice their appreciation for spiritual disciplines such as prayer, fasting, and meditation. In addition, all five of the couples voiced a desire to be closer to God and to be more active in living out their Christian faith.

Marriage and Family Life

Couples were asked to how their understanding of marriage had affected their Christian life as it relates to their family life. Couple 1 stated that their faith and trust in Christ had helped them weather many storms throughout their marriage. Couple 2 stated that throughout many difficult trials in their marriage, they learned to lean on one another and together to lean on God for strength. Couple 3 stated that being able to draw strength from each other was a source of comfort. Couple 4 stated that they learned to be forgiving and to lean on each other for strength through Christ. Couple 5 stated that they look forward to starting a family and raising that family to be Christians, too.

Marriage and Biblical Activities

Couples were asked what activities they engaged in on a regular basis that they considered to be exceptionally biblical. Couple 1 stated praying over meals and an overall thankfulness for the blessings of God. Couple 2 stated praying with their children before bedtime and teaching them to turn to God when they are scared. Couple 3 stated giving thanks, devotions, praying together, sharing their faith with others, and joining together in worship. Couple 4 stated being thankful and praying together, reading the Bible together, taking roles and participating in church activities, and singing in church. Couple 5 responded with bible study, praying together, worship, giving, and serving in the church.

Love Defined

Couples were asked to think back on the pre-marital counseling they had received before marriage and to define love. Couple 1 stated that love is spiritual, selfless, and unending devotion. Couple 2 stated that when they thought of love, they thought about strength and forgiveness. Couple 2 stated that they felt it took a lot of love to truly forgive someone. Couple 3

stated that love is putting someone else's needs first and is unconditional and rewarding work. Couple 4 stated that love is rewarding work and spiritual devotion. Couple 5 stated that love is choosing to value your spouse.

Passion, Intimacy, and Commitment

Couples were asked to reflect on their counseling again, specifically to the segment on the Anatomy of Love, and to share their thoughts on passion, intimacy, and commitment. Couple 1 stated that always supporting and upholding each other helps to float the workload. Couple 2 stated communication and listening helps to establish not being selfish and putting the needs of your partner first. Couple 3 stated that sometimes you need an equal balance, other times you need one of the features a little more or a little less. Couple 3 continued by stating everyone's needs are going to be different and communication is important for others to understand what you need. Couple 4 stated that communication and both partners are important and that any of the levels may change over time. Couple 5 stated that all three are important and should be balanced for a healthy marriage. It is important to recognize where your spouse is on the triangle.

Love Styles

Next, couples were asked about Love Styles, and how this concept had affected their marriage. Couple 1 stated that they learned to strive to support the happiness of each other. Couple 2 stated that one has the love language of touch while the other does not. Couple 3 stated that understanding each other's needs helps to navigate situations. Couple 4 stated that you must recognize what is important to your spouse and find compromise. It benefits your marriage to understand each other's love styles. Couple 5 stated that it is interesting that love styles change based upon needs. Here again, we find communication to be very important.

Talker-Listener Communication

Couples were asked to reflect on the activities in the communication section of their premarital counseling and to discuss how the talker-listener strategy has affected their conflict resolution skills in their marriage and family. Couple 1 stated they find this strategy great and that because of it, they do not argue. Couple 2 stated they had not used the strategy but expressed a need to do so. Couple 3 stated that this strategy helps them be able to understand each other's feelings and stay on topic in a discussion. Couple 4 stated that the strategy helps them to understand when to listen and when to talk so they can enjoy their time together instead of arguing. Couple 5 stated that they use the strategy to discuss important matters. It makes them feel more deliberate in their discussions.

Biblical Concepts and Daily Life

Couples were then asked to give an example of how they had used these Biblical concepts in their daily lives. Couple 1 stated that they find themselves checking on each other constantly. Couple 2 stated that they use the concept to conduct family financial meetings. Couple 3 stated that this concept helps them to be a better friend to others and that listening to what others are saying makes it easier to identify what they need and what they can do to help with that need. Couple 4 stated that the concept has also helped them to be a better friend and listener and that they use the concept when planning their futures. Couple 5 stated that the talker-listener concept has guided many discussions throughout their marriage, from vacation plans to financial planning. Couple 5 stated that until you learn to truly listen to your partner, you cannot truly know their needs, dreams, and desires for the life you are sharing.

The Impact of Premarital Counseling

The researcher then asked the couples how large of an impact has premarital counseling had on your life as a disciple of Christ. Couple 1 stated that they considered premarital counseling a cornerstone to their foundation of discipleship. Couple 2 stated that premarital counseling has helped to prepare them for what is to come such as family and working in the church together. Couple 3 stated that premarital counseling gave them something to base their marriage on, helped them to take divorce off the table, and provided them with ways to help them in steady communication. Couple 4 stated that premarital counseling gave them a foundation to start their marriage and base their future lives on. Couple 5 stated that they feel that premarital counseling helped to give them the tools necessary to have a successful marriage. During the focus group, the researcher asked the couples to use a scale of 1-10, with 1 being not at all impactful and 10 being the most impactful, how large of an impact has premarital counseling had on your lives as disciples of Christ. All five couples rated it a 10 out of 10.

Future Development

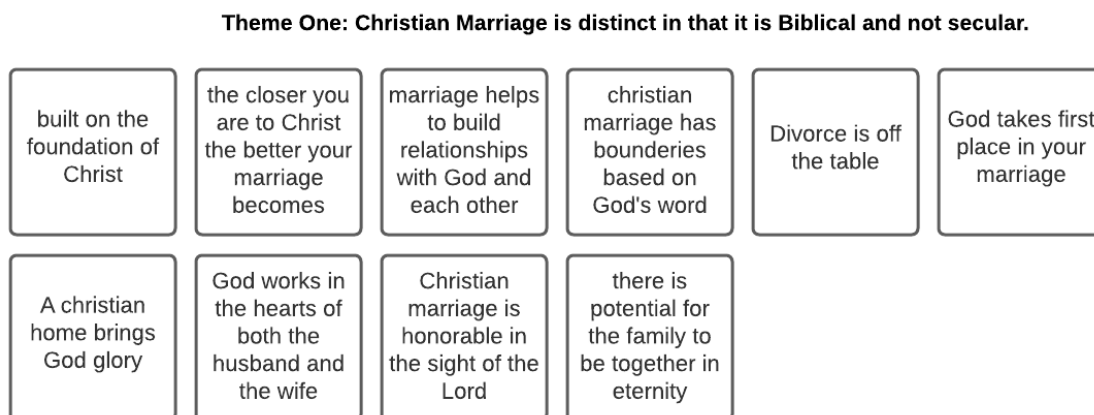
Couples were asked about their relationship with Christ, and as they follow Him, what areas of counseling would you like to develop more, based on your personal experiences. Couple 1 stated that they would like to follow closer to Christ. Couple 2 stated that they feel that they have a good handle on things right now. They stated that they would like to develop better communication and added that they have been working on this. Couple 3 stated that they would like to develop patience, talking and listening and not talking over each other. Couple 4 stated that 4B would like to develop love styles, communication, and commitment; and 4A stated talker-listener and honesty. Couple 5 stated that as they look forward to becoming new parents, they would like to explore what the Bible says about parenting.

The researcher considered all the information gathered from the questionnaires, the responses provided from the focus group, the researcher's notes, and journal, and began to code the data. First, the researcher looked for common words and phrases to responses. Next, the researcher began to group these responses into categories and eventually themes. The following themes were gleaned from this research:

Theme One: Christian Marriage is distinct in that it is Biblical and not secular

Throughout the research, this theme began to emerge immediately. Couples responded to definitions of marriage and defining Christian marriage. Couples stated that building their marriage with premarital counseling allowed them to use biblical concepts and put biblical tools in their toolbox for when their marriage needed to be fixed. Participants, both individually and as a couple, felt that these tools were provided to them during their premarital counseling provided by the researcher at an earlier date. Participants advised they had often used these tools or concepts and applied them to not only their personal marriages, but also to other relationships with friends and co-workers and while working at the church. Christian marriage is based on biblical concepts and principles and does not depend on secular thinking and reasoning.

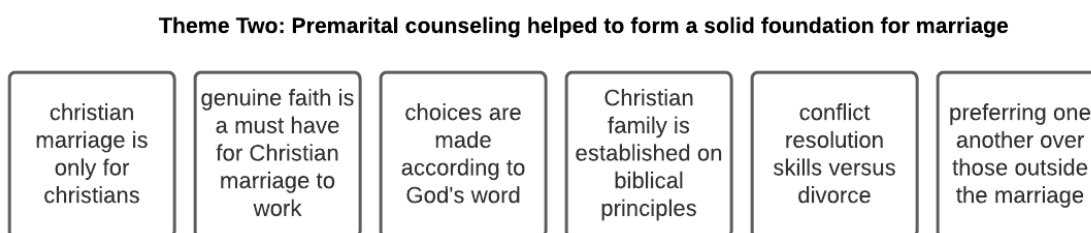
Figure 5: Theme One: Christian Marriage is Distinct



Theme Two: Premarital counseling helped to form a solid foundation for marriage

The participants, both as individuals and as a couple, expressed that premarital counseling had provided them with the biblical concepts and principles to build a solid foundation for their marriage. Couple 4 who had only been married for 32 days stated that premarital counseling had provided them with the tools they felt they would need in the future. While couple 3, who had been married for 9 years, stated that premarital counseling, the concepts, and tools provided had helped them to not give up on their marriage when times got tough. Couples stated that premarital counseling gave them a foundation for communication, financial discussions, and even arguments. Premarital counseling helped them to understand their partner's needs, dreams, and desires for their marriage. Couples stated that learning about different love styles allowed them to identify their own love style and that of their partner. Couples stated that in doing this, they were able to do things for their partners to show their love and support for them in ways that they may have not known to do otherwise. Further, couples also stated that the concept of the Anatomy of Love, or the love triangle of passion, intimacy, and commitment really assisted them in understanding how these areas change throughout our lives and how to recognize when one area is lacking and how to fix it.

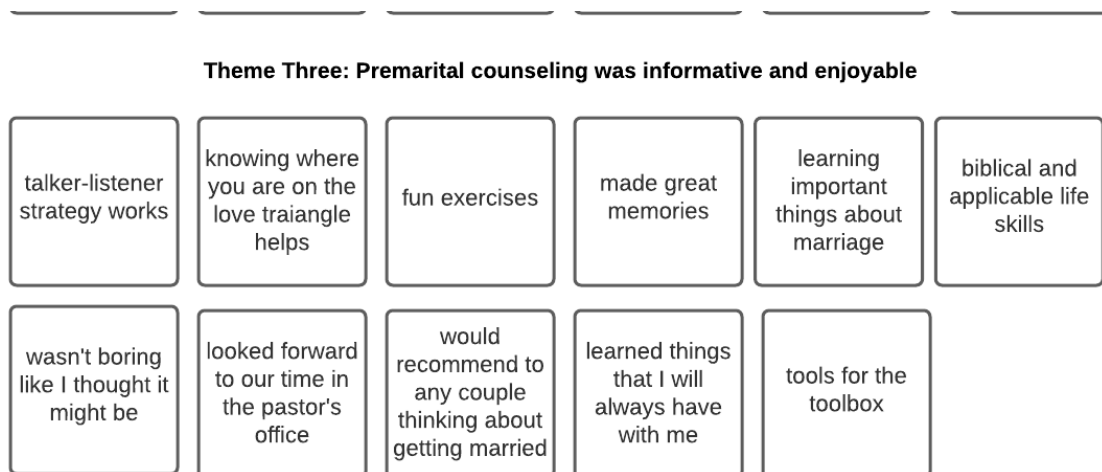
Figure 6: Theme Two: Premarital Counseling Helped



Theme Three: Premarital counseling was informative and enjoyable

Participants, as individuals, stated that they enjoyed premarital counseling and found it to be a fun learning experience. All ten participants expressed fond memories of time spend in their pastor’s office discussing the concepts included in premarital counseling. Participants shared memories of the exercises completed during the premarital counseling such as the talker-listener exercise. While participants shared these memories, they also made sure to note that they learned a lot during these sessions. One participant stated that they had been skeptical at first but was happy to note that they felt that premarital counseling had helped them in many aspects of their lives and not just in their marriage. All ten participants also stated that they would enjoy a “refresher” course or a couples counseling event such as a review of these concepts through devotions, exercises, and even a retreat to focus on their marriages.

Figure 7: Theme Three: Premarital Counseling Was Enjoyable

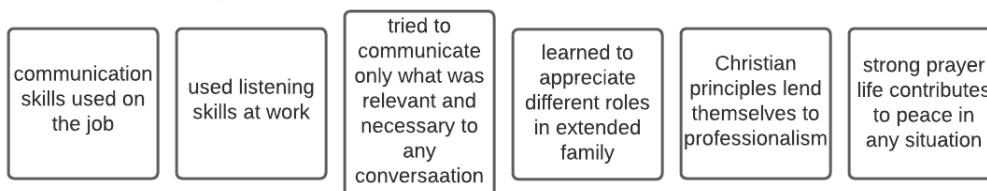


Theme Four: The concepts from premarital counseling helped participants in other areas of their lives and was not exclusive to just marriage.

Participants agreed that the concepts taught in premarital counseling has helped them in more areas of their life than just marriage. Participants identified the lessons on communication as being one of the most important tools they took away from the sessions. Couples reported that being able to identify better communication skills and better ways to work through arguments, discussions, and even meetings had assisted them not just in marriage but anywhere they interact with other people.

Figure 8: Theme Four: The Concepts from Premarital Counseling

Theme Four: The concepts from premarital counseling helped participants in other areas of their lives, and was not exclusive to just marriage.

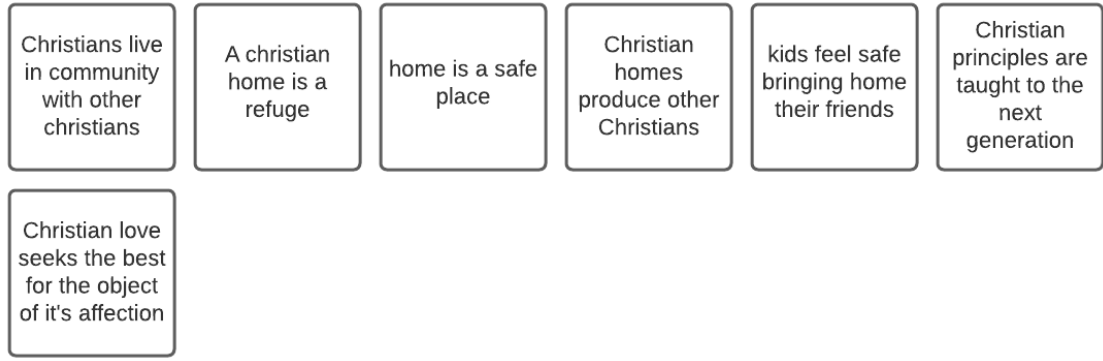


Theme Five: Premarital counseling is foundational for discipleship of the family

As a marriage begins, a new family is established. A family can be a husband and wife or a husband and wife with children. Participants reported coming away from premarital counseling with an understanding of Christian marriage. This includes definitions, expectations, and limitations. Participants expressed thankfulness of having “tools” in their marriage toolbox such as communication skills. Participants showed an understanding of biblical marriage and what that includes and what it does not include. Participants showed a knowledge of the importance of prayer, bible study, and fellowship in their family. Lastly, participants demonstrated their commitment to Christian service to their family, their churches, and their communities.

Figure 9: Theme Five: Premarital Counseling is Foundational

Theme Five: Premarital counseling is foundational for discipleship of the family



Chapter 5

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to determine the importance of premarital counseling as a foundational part of discipling a family from its beginning. As noted in Chapter 1, this research project used the following research question to guide the research:

RQ1: How has premarital counseling among couples in the Christian faith been foundational and useful in furthering the desire to follow Christ as it relates to discipleship?

The results of the research data in Chapter 4 answered the above referenced research question by identifying five key themes pertaining to premarital counseling and discipleship. All ten participants were able to reflect on how premarital counseling had impacted them as an individual as well as their relationship with their spouse, their family dynamics, their relationships with others, their activities, and their worship. The qualitative study of the research and literature review uncovered a gap in the research of the correlation between premarital counseling and discipleship in the family unit.

The purpose of premarital counseling has always been to better the church by making families better and stronger. It is no secret that even in today's churches, families are falling apart. We cannot expect to disciple others outside the church when we cannot disciple our own members. This researcher set about to change that. Years ago, this researcher developed a premarital counseling program to aid in helping couples understand better ways to communicate, understand each other's love styles, and to know what to expect in everyday day to day life after the honeymoon fades. During the literature review segment of this project, the researcher laid out the various authors and programs that were used to create the premarital counseling program.

Participants in this study were all couples who went through the researcher's premarital counseling program. Chapter 4 is a review of the data gathered and this chapters will explore those results as they relate to the research questions noted above.

As discussed in Chapter 4, research revealed that there is a correlation between premarital counseling and discipleship. Participants noted that often used the tools provided to them in their premarital counseling sessions when dealing with others. This facilitates a biblical worldview and establishes the home environment as Christ centered. Many couples reported discipleship activities such as bible study in the home, attending regular worship services and small groups, and serving in the church. These were all things that were stressed in premarital counseling sessions as being necessary and important for the home to thrive.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this research was based on the importance of the family unit as an essential part of an effective discipleship ministry. By strengthening the family, first, as a new couple seeking premarital counseling, the purpose of this research, is to build on the foundation laid and then branch out to other areas of family life. Using the same tools given to the couples in their premarital counseling sessions, the couples reported that they did, in fact, use those tools in other parts of their daily life. Couples reported that they wanted the best for their families, their church families, and most importantly, for Christ.

This study examined the lasting impact of biblical pastoral premarital counseling as it related to discipleship. The couples reported that they have used the tools to obtain more effective communication, not just as a couple, but also with co-workers and others outside the family unit. Couples reported that they have used the tools presented to them during the conflict resolution sessions to solve problems in their families, in the workplace, and even with fellow

church members. Couples stated that they used the skills to handle conflict in a biblical and Christian way. Couples reported a feeling of calmness in these situations due to the tools they were given during their premarital sessions.

Another area which couples reported a sense of control is that of financial stewardship. Couples reported that this session was very helpful in establishing and maintaining a budget for their married life. Couples stated that they had shared their knowledge about financial stewardship with their friends who were struggling with financial issues. Tithing is a concept that couples felt spilled into discipleship. By giving to God the first fruits, couples reported a feeling of control and being able to not only worship with tithes and offerings, but also to seek God's will in their lives.

Yet another concept couples felt was important to their families was the session on spiritual disciplines. By learning these spiritual disciplines during their premarital counseling sessions, couples reported a sense of growing and maturity in Christ. In studying spiritual disciplines, the couples felt that they, as people, had changed both spiritually and emotionally. They felt that they had more patience for each other and with others. The concept of spiritual discipline is a big component of discipleship. Couples reported that using the tools taught in the sessions allowed them to not only feel closer to God, but also equipped with ways to identify things in their lives that would separate them from God and His will for their lives.

Lastly, couples expressed thanks for a well-rounded premarital counseling program that had given them so much to use. After completing the sessions, couples reported that they had a sense of what to expect after the wedding ceremony. Couples also reported that once they were married, they laughed that they used the tools given to them to handle all sorts of obstacles that arose. One couple reported that they started laughing during an argument because one of them

started using the talker-listener approach. Couples reported an overall satisfaction in their day to day lives. While no marriage is perfect, and there will always be troubles, knowing how to navigate these things, knowing that divorce was off the table, and knowing that they had the option of a refresher course as needed, made them feel that they could handle the things life threw at them if they put God first.

Again, these concepts started out as part of a premarital counseling program and yet they spilled over into day-to-day life. By focusing on the family unit, other areas of the Christian life were enhanced. The goal has always been to fortify the family before it ever started with a strong biblical foundation. In doing this, couples, and eventually families, can withstand the temptations, the heartaches, and the stress in their lives. Stronger families are stronger church members, and stronger church members together make stronger churches. Stronger churches have stronger community outreach programs and stronger mission programs. Stronger Christian communities have a voice together than can change the world. For too long the family has been under the attack of the world. Attacking the family is attacking the church. Teaching Christian couples who are starting out how to identify and handle crisis in their marriage and in their families with success will certainly spill over to identifies and handling crisis in all other areas of life.

Assisting to the needs of your congregation is part of the job of a pastor. Helping new Christians mature and become spiritual leaders is something that is found in the Epistles.¹ Part of this process is the identification and development of spiritual gifts.² The development of these

¹ Gene Getz and Joe Wall. *Effective Church Growth Strategies*, (Nashville: Nelson Reference & Electronic Publishing, 2000), 13.

² Ibid, 14.

gifts can be instrumental in the growth of a church. This researcher believes that one should begin with the discipleship of couples in the church and expand to the family as a whole. This allows the placement of experienced and seasoned people spread throughout the church that are able to identify a need, physical or spiritual, and offer encouragement and nurturing.³

As a pastoral counselor, I am not just investing my time in a new marriage and a new couple, but I am investing my time in to building a better church on a stronger biblical foundation, one couple at a time. It is vitally important for the family, the church, the community and the nation that the older generation teaches the younger generation to observe the words of the Lord. Faith in Christ is meant to be shared. Deliberate and impactful discipleship changes lives and the impact of one fervent disciple can be limitless. The goal of the church should be to make converts and immediately begin the discipleship process.

Theoretical Analysis

While analyzing the data and looking for common themes, I also compared the data against the theory Cognitive Behavior Theory. As discussed in Chapter 2, Cognitive Behavior theory is a theory comprised of both social learning theory and Cognitive theory. During the focus group, several of the couples expressed their expectations related to the premarital counseling. While some of the couples were new to marriage, other couples had prior marriages. During the premarital counseling sessions for each couple, we addressed many different underlying habits, fears, and expectations that might cause conflict in a marriage later down the road. These factors, or schemas, were identified and addressed during the established premarital counseling sessions. Many of these schemas were identified by the participants on the initial

³ Getz and Wall, 14.

questionnaire, some were identified during the initial intake process and yet others were identified throughout the counseling process.

In identifying these schemata and combining both biblical principles and cognitive behavior theory practices, I was able to put together a premarital counseling program tailored to the needs of each couple. It has always been my goal to equip the couples I meet with all the tools that they may need to overcome obstacles in their marriage, but also in their daily life. Cognitive Behavior theory coupled with biblical principles allows me to address every aspect of life. You cannot simply offer premarital counseling to a couple without realizing that each member of the couple is bringing their total sum of life experiences, good and bad, to the table.⁴

Not all challenges faced by new couples are negative, but all present with the possibility of new stress and a change in routine. Welcoming a new baby, for instance, can be a joyous occasion, however, it is also filled with challenges both on a personal level and as a couple. Many couples struggle with the discipleship of this child, finding that it is easier to stay home than to attend church services. Hopefully, by applying the cognitive behavior theory and biblical principles learned in my premarital counseling program, the couple will be able to recognize the importance of worship, bible study, and church fellowship. Again, Cognitive behavior theory seeks to change the counselee's pattern of thought, and the biblical principles seek to bring knowledge about Christ's plan for our lives.

Often other challenges are not as easy to address. Participating couples expressed stress over dealing with family issues. This ranged from a young couple who felt pulled in both directions by all the outside family members and their opinions. Another couple reported that they struggled with dealing with disciplining children from another marriage and also with

⁴ Pandya, 45-57.

former spouses. These challenges are very difficult to address, but again, equipping the couple with the right tools in their toolbox, allowed them to navigate far more than just their own personal relationship with each other.

Cognitive behavior theory is applied to this research, in that during the premarital counseling sessions, the counselor is not only identifying schemas and addressing them, but also developing ways for the couple to recognize an obstacle and teaching them how to hurdle it. This is done through images, languages, and exercises. During the focus group, all the participating couples expressed gratitude for being taught the “Talker-Listener” exercise. This exercise was presented in the communication session. All participants stated that they had used this exercise not only in their marriage but also with others. Another example of purposeful learning, as stated by the participating couples in the focus group, was the “Play the movie” exercise. All participants, personally, not just as a couple, stated that they often used this exercise to weigh out tough choices not only in their marriage, but also at work. This data relates back to the core concepts of cognitive behavior theory.

Cognitive behavior theory is centered around the concept that thinking and remembering is like a behavior.⁵ Teaching a couple to address a situation in a certain way could have long lasting impacts on their marriage. Teaching a couple to view the tools in their preverbal toolbox to “fix” emotional and spiritual troubles should be just as easy as teaching them to change a lightbulb. Couples expressed that they had learned to use and apply the tools taught to them during their premarital counseling sessions, and that they continue to use them.

⁵ Monroe, 243-255

Another aspect of this theory, as noted in the research, is that people learn from watching the behaviors of others.⁶ This is very important in the discipleship function. Couples, in their intake interviews, that they had a perceived idea of what marriage would be like. These perceptions, good and bad, were developed by watching other couples throughout their lives. This included what they perceived to a good marriage and what they perceived to be a bad marriage. Couples then addressed why they felt that these marriages were good or bad during later counseling sessions. While no marriage is truly perfect, having the couples state their expectations and fears for their own marriage allowed me to point out couples that seemed to have weathered many storms. This included biblical couples. It was here that I was able to explain that by becoming part of the church, getting to know other couples, and participating in worship, small groups, and other church activities, they would be able to see other couples in actions. While I would never instruct my counselees to put others on a pedestal, it is a biblical principle for older, more mature Christians to teach the younger ones.

Researcher's Insight from the Data

Five themes emerged from the data collected, and the researcher was able to relate these themes back to the original research question. These themes showed that premarital counseling was worthwhile and at times fun and enjoyable. The researcher felt that this was an important part of the research, because had the couples not enjoyed the counseling sessions, they may not have remembered or cared to apply the concepts in the future. The researcher was amazed at how much of the counseling sessions the couples or participants were able to recall.

The first theme, that Christian marriage is distinct that it is not secular marriage, is very important. God's word teaches us not to unequally yoked, meaning that Christians should marry

⁶ Anderson.

fellow Christians. Using this biblical principle, I always began with making sure that both parties in my office could remember a time when they accepted Christ as their savior. There were people along the way that initially made a profession of faith in my office, only to realize as the sessions went on that they were missing Christ in their lives. Only Christians can live a Christian marriage. Secular marriage sometimes has an anything goes approach, and seems to be based on popular trends, while Christian marriage was established in the word of God and has not changed. Secular marriage sometimes says that divorce is just part of marriage, while God teaches us that divorce should never be considered unless in specific circumstances. The seriousness of God's plan for marriage, as outlined in the Bible, was something that couples felt strongly about. Couples stated that biblical marriage is defined as being between one man and one woman for one lifetime. This is very different than the idea of secular marriage that often tells couples that if this relationship doesn't work out, then find someone else that makes you happy.

The second theme, that premarital counseling helped to establish a solid foundation. Once a solid foundation is established, the couples stated that they felt they could successfully start of family. Couples stated that they comfort in knowing that their marriage was solid, and they were able to take on obstacles head on, both individually and as a couple. People with a solid biblical foundation make teachers, preachers and leaders helping to share with others and fortify the foundation of others and the church. Families with a solid foundation build churches with a solid biblical foundation. This solid foundation also spills into other areas of their lives such as being better employees, better leaders, better people in their community.

The third theme, that premarital counseling was information and enjoyable was one that brought this researcher joy. I wanted to make a program that would not only cover the major

issues of a new union but also one that would be memorable for the couples. Learning does not have to be boring. Couples reported that they did not realize that they were learning such important concepts while they were laughing and having fun until after they began to use these concepts. Couples stated that they reminisce on the time spend in the pastor's office as some of their favorite wedding prep memories. During sessions, some of the material can be looked at as difficult for some couples. Many times, sessions began by expressing fears, sharing stories that brought tears and facing failure and regret. I tried to bring these sessions full circle and end on a high or happy note. Planning a marriage should be fun and exciting not stressful.

The fourth theme, that the concepts learned in premarital counseling were not just exclusive to marriage was an outcome that I anticipated but came as a surprise to the couples. The researcher was pleasantly surprised to hear from the participant as that premarital counseling had not only benefitted their marriage years later, but also impacted their day to day lives. The researcher's goal of premarital counseling was that couples would realize the important of knowing and serving Christ in their marriage and family. All the participating couples are Christian couples and are serving Christ in some capacity.

The last theme, that premarital counseling is foundational for the discipleship of the family was also not unexpected. When two people become one a new family is created. Two families are forever changed. Extended families become larger as a new smaller unit is created. The family unit is an individual unit and a component to the much larger family block. Being able to understand where your new family unit fits into the family block is very important. Applying the concepts learned in the premarital sessions prepared the couples for the growing pains of family life. While conducting the focus group, the researcher learned that the participating couples were appreciative of the premarital counseling sessions provided to them

by the researcher. The couples felt that the counseling sessions had an impact on how they relate to their spouse, how they communicate with others, how they serve Christ, and how they share Christ with others.

Application of Research Data to Other Areas of Ministry

The researcher reported that this thesis could be applied to other counseling sessions offered by the church. Love styles and communication skills are beneficial to all types of family counseling. Parents and children can use communication skills to resolve conflicts or express needs. Communication skills could also carry over to grief counseling in that those grieving often find it hard to express their feelings and ask for help. All marriages experience difficult times and the research data gained from this thesis could apply to a refresher marriage course or marital counseling.

The vision of the church should be a reflection of the body's commitment to be obedient to scripture. Jesus commanded us to be totally committed to God and to love our neighbors. This church has a desire to reach the community and the world for Christ. It is important that we identify this as our goal. So, we do what we do in obedience and with gratitude. What we do is preach and teach the gospel and make disciples. How we do it is complex, but it begins with being tightly connected to the church body.

There is no reason why scientific methods of counseling cannot be combined with spiritual methods. Offering someone a faith-based option is offering them the whole package in the counseling process. While cognitive therapy is focused on the mind, social learning therapy is focused on your social life, behavioral therapy is focused on her behavior and spiritual therapy is focused on your spirit. To truly heal from a traumatic event, depression, personality or anxiety

disorders, a counselor must treat all these areas. Christian values may be expected in the church, but they are appreciated in the workplace and the community.

Limitations

The scope of this project is limited to couples who have completed premarital counseling as a ministry of the Solid Rock Baptist Church. This pastor and researcher met all of the participants through a connection to Solid Rock Baptist Church. All participants were Caucasian. The participants come from a variety of economic backgrounds; however, all participants would fall under the working middle class people group. Participants were from various educational backgrounds ranging from high school graduate/GED recipient to doctorate degrees. Participants were equally diverse in spiritual backgrounds ranging from being raised in church to new Christians.

The research will be limited to the information received from the participants. Data and the theories collected from the data are based on the opinions and experiences of the participants. The participants were limited to only those who completed the premarital counseling program which was administered by this researcher. This program was established by the researcher and consisted of eight sessions. These sessions were scheduled weekly and lasted an hour per session. As a result, questions will be limited to a small list derived from topics studied in this specific program.

Areas of Future Research

This research project studied only those couples who had participated in premarital counseling with this researcher. It would be interesting to study couples who had participated in other premarital counseling programs. Participants expressed a desire for a similar program directed towards raising children based on Biblical principles. This research was conducted in a

qualitative design, repeating the study using a quantitative analysis method could also prove beneficial. The researcher finds that it would be beneficial for this research area to repeat the study with the same participants in five years from now to gain insight in how things may or may not have changed.

Another area of future research would be to develop a program which encases other areas of marital counseling and traumas that may occur in that marriage. Unfortunately, noted statistics mentioned in this paper show that not all marriages will make it. Therefore, the church should be equipped and ready to step in and try to counsel and lead a couple who is struggling. Another area that could be explored would be parenting and the stresses that may be brought about by conflicting parenting styles.

Yet another area of future research would be to continue to follow the participating couples as they continue. This would allow researchers to observe celebrations and trauma unique to each couple and see how they navigated these milestones in their marriage. The researcher could examine how the couples applied the concepts to each specific situation. Further, the researcher could review how the couple impacted others by using the tools learned in their counseling sessions.

Another area of future research would be to conduct the same study using a different people group. This research was not limited by race or economic class; however, all of the participants were middle class, Caucasians. Therefore, it would be beneficial to the discipline of theology to recreate this study using couples of different economic status and racial diversity. It is very important to this researcher that all people can glean from the knowledge of premarital counseling and discipleship.

Lastly, another area of research would be to conduct the study under a different research method. This could be a quantitative study looking for statistics on marriage rates for those with Christian premarital counseling versus those who participated in secular premarital counseling. Another study method might be conducting a qualitative study but using a different research model. This study was conducted through a questionnaire and a focus group. Other researchers may want to conduct a case study model or multiple case study.

There is not a lot of research when dealing with the connection of premarital counseling and how it applies to discipleship. Any future research in this area would be beneficial to the disciples of theology, sociology, counseling, and psychology. There will always be a need to study how people use the tools given to them in a counseling setting. More specifically, the study of how discipleship is impacted by the application of sound life skills and accurate theology, brings a positive influence on the world around us. This research and how to apply it brings about stronger families, stronger churches, stronger communities, and a stronger nation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are many similarities and differences in premarital and marital counseling. Strains on any relationship this important have an impact on every aspect of life. A healthy relationship, which is equipped with tools and reasonable expectations, can avoid a lot of snares, and can weather a lot of storms. The pastor who seeks to serve his congregation well will desire rock solid marriages for his flock. He will also realize that he plays a significant role in helping his congregation reach their marriage potential.

This research project was insightful in the correlation between premarital counseling and discipleship. There is a need from our young couples to learn the tools to sustain a happy Christian marriage. There is a difference in secular marriage and Christian marriage. However,

there is a need for secular counseling theories to be used along with Christian practices. For families to be able to live and grow in Christ together, they must first be able to identify the biblical principles of Christ and how to apply them in their day to day live. The participants of this study further noted that they not only remember and use the principles they were taught in their premarital counseling sessions, but also that they use them every day. Participants report that they also use these communication skills when dealing with others outside of their marriages such as co-workers and extended families.

Parrott and Parrott ask the question, “Can couples really live happily ever after?”⁷ They answer the question by proposing that happiness in marriage only works when you make it work. Finding the right attitude and building a successful marriage is possible. To build on the idea of working hard and building a happy and enduring marriage, this research proves that following Christ and submitting to being disciplined is a good path to victory. It is possible to live in the marriage relationship and have a fulfilling life. To be engaged in discipleship and it is important to remember Jesus’ most important request of His followers. Christians are commanded to completely love God and other people. God’s people are to be different and separated from worldly thoughts and ways. At the same time, a marriage that has submission to being a disciple of Christ as its goal, can be the starting point for a life filled with passion, commitment, intimacy, and holiness. One goal of discipleship is to be willing and able to share the gospel with others. The marriage that seeks to glorify God in every possible way will often be blessed in order that its blessings flow down to others.

True discipleship begins in the heart of a believer. The Christian who has a genuine desire to mature in Christ is ready to be equipped with tools for success. This desire for maturity

⁷ Parrott & Parrott, 74.

moves beyond a basic desire for knowledge. It has been the experience of this researcher, that couples starting a new life together are in an almost perfect place to begin the process or build on the existing process of becoming a genuine disciple of Jesus.

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Appendix A

Premarital Counseling Assessment Interview/Intake

1. How did you meet?
2. What do you love about each other?
3. What are your thoughts about children- do you already have children? Will you have children as a couple? Will you adopt? Will you foster?
4. What parenting style will you adopt?
5. Are there any spiritual or theological differences or histories that may become problematic in relation to serving Christ together?
6. Are you a spender or saver when it comes to money? Who will pay the bills and manage the finances? How do you plan to manage your money? Will you take out loans or use credit cards? Who will establish the guidelines on what goes on the credit card and how it will be paid?
7. Will one of you have the final say or veto power regarding your use of money?
8. How will you make decisions about disciplining children and choosing friends?
9. Will the two of you have mostly mutual friends or separate friends? Will the two of you have separate friends of the opposite gender?
10. Which one of you needs the other person more? How do you both feel about this?
11. Will either of you have a “guys night out” or “girls night out”? How often will you do this?

12. What are your greatest apprehensions or worries about getting married to this person in particular? What unspoken expectation(s) are you aware of that you have for him or her?
13. What support system or marriage mentoring system do you have in place? Are there family members who might infringe on the time you need to spend on your marriage? How will you set boundaries with each other's family demands? Where will you spend the holidays?
14. After getting married, where will you live? Will you move at any time? Who will work? Who will cook? Clean? Take care of the lawn? Fix things around the house?
15. How do you give and receive love?
16. Do you know how to deal with conflict in healthy ways?
17. Are you and your partner soul mates? What does this mean to you? ¹

¹ Dr. Tim Clinton and Dr. John Trent. *The Quick Reference guide to Marriage and Family Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), 237.

Appendix B

MY PERSONAL CODE OF PASTORAL ETHICS

As a minister of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, and as a pastor of a local congregation, and having been called by God to be led by his spirit in this ministry, I therefore resolve myself to conduct my ministry according to the ethical guidelines and principals set forth in this code of ethics, in order that my life and ministry might always bring glory and honor to God and that my life would be an uncompromising witness to my family, my church and church staff, my colleges, my community, and the world at large. I will submit to the leadership of Christ in every area of my life. I will preach, study, shepherd, and counsel to the best of my abilities.

Duties and Responsibilities to My Self:

I will endeavor to maintain my emotional, mental, and physical health through the proper care of my body, through a proper daily diet, good sleeping and eating habits, and abstain from anything that could potentially damage my body. I will practice the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, and solitude on a regular basis. I will not only lead worship. I will actively participate in worship.

I will endeavor to maintain and nurture my personal devotional life through a regular time of Bible Study, meditation, time alone with God, and prayer. I will learn to recognize the times in my life when these disciplines start to slip away so that I can regain control.

I will endeavor to grow and nurture intellectually through personal reading and study, continuing my education to achieve my seminary goals and to apply what I have learned to the benefit of my congregation.

I will endeavor to maintain and nurture my family devotional life through a regular time of Bible Study, meditation, time alone with my wife, children, and grandchildren. Our home will be a refuge and we will maintain and use a family altar.

I will endeavor to maintain and manage my time well by balancing my personal obligations with my ministerial responsibilities and my family responsibilities, and by observing a day off weekly and by taking regular vacations with my family.

I will endeavor to be responsible and honest in my personal finances by paying all my obligations on time, never taking advantage of my position as a minister over others, living an equitable lifestyle, and be an example to others by giving over and above my tithe to the church and giving sacrificially to even other worthwhile causes. I will give financially to missions and Christian charities.

I will endeavor to be truthful in my speech, never plagiarizing another's work, using indecent language or speech, exaggeration of life experiences, or communicating gossip between people in any shape or fashion. Further, I will respect confidentiality when a church member, friend, or

family member confides in me. I will study, research, and cite my sources for all sermons, and papers I write.

I will endeavor to be Christ-like in my actions and attitude toward all persons in my community, church and walk of life regardless of their race, social class, religious beliefs, or their position of authority.

Duties and Responsibilities to My Family:

I will endeavor to be fair to my wife, children, and grandchildren with my time by sharing love, care with them and strive to considerate of their needs. I will demonstrate the highest regard for their well-being.

I will endeavor to understand the unique role of my wife as an individual with her own dreams and goals in life. I will regularly thank her for the role she plays in my church and ministry. She is a child of God, a fellow believer, a wife, mother, and grandmother. As her pastor and husband, I will be especially attentive to her needs.

I will always consider my children as a gift from God and will do my best to meet each of their individual needs without showing partiality to either of them or imposing expectations upon them that are beyond their abilities to achieve. I will invest in their lives as they add so much joy to mine.

Duties and Responsibilities to My Church:

I will endeavor to be a dedicated servant of my church by following Christ's example in faith, love, wisdom, courage, and integrity. I will prioritize the spiritual health of my church by leading the congregation in healthy, biblical, programs and habits.

I will endeavor use my time faithfully as pastor, teacher, preacher, and administrator through proper work habits and reasonable schedules.

I will endeavor to be impartial and fair to all members of my congregation in the exercise of my administrative and pastoral duties. I will love in accordance with John 13:34.

I will endeavor to give adequate time to prayer and preparation in my preaching responsibilities so that my presentations of God's Word will be biblically based, theologically correct, and clearly communicated and empowered by the Holy Spirit. I will preach the Bible without regard for politics, persons of importance, or political correctness.

I will endeavor to maintain strict confidentiality in my pastoral counseling, except in cases where disclosure is necessary to prevent harm to persons or such disclosure is required by law.

I will endeavor to lead persons to salvation and to church membership in my evangelistic responsibilities, without manipulating converts, proselytizing members of other churches, or demeaning other religious faiths.

I will endeavor to never be alone with a person of the opposite sex in my visitation and counseling practices unless another church member or my wife is nearby. The only exception to this rule would be in an extreme emergency.

In weddings or funerals, I will not charge fees to church members; I will establish policies based on ministry opportunities, time constraints, and theological beliefs for all wedding and policies for nonmember wedding & funerals. I will only officiate weddings for those couples who complete my premarital counseling program.

Duties and Responsibilities to My Fellow Ministers:

I will offer and receive counsel in times of difficulty to my fellow ministers and always seek to be a brother in Christ in all situations. I will pray for my fellow servants in the community. I will pray for their success and celebrate their victories. I will seek to be a friend and brother. I will be a help to pastors.

I will endeavor to always speak positive about the work of either my predecessor or my successor. I will never encourage members in their real or imagined grievances.

Except upon invitation of the resident pastor, I will refrain from visits to a former field for funerals, weddings, anniversaries, or baptisms.

Duties and Responsibilities to My Community:

I will accept reasonable responsibilities which the community may call upon me to assume but will consider my primary duty to be the pastor of my church.

I will never set aside ideals and convictions to win popular favor of my community. I will seek the peace and betterment of my community. I will strive to be a consistent role model accurately representing my Lord and my church.