

Building Marriages God's Way

My purpose in the sessions that I will lead is to discuss basic marriage relational issues that will help couples to reach the level of marital oneness that God designed for marriage. Marriage is a type of the beautiful **Building a Marriage God's Way** relationship Christ has with the Church. As married couples we should not be satisfied with anything less than the fullness of the deep relationship with our spouse that is possible in Christ.

Many of the thoughts I will share have been inspired by the book The Marriage Builder by Larry Crabb. However, the basic principles discussed are consistent with the teachings of the Move and my own personal experience.

I. Spirit Oneness – Who Meets My Needs

Consider the following scenario:

A man in his early forties comes to you and says his wife is cold, angry, and argumentative. He says his wife is failing him so badly that his attitude towards her has become, according to him, justifiably bitter toward her.

You might remind him that the Bible instructs him to love her regardless of how disagreeable she may be just as Christ loves His people.

He is incredulous. He says “wait a minute! Maybe I am supposed to love her. I'm sure I should, but I need a little love and respect too. She's giving me nothing but criticism and a cold shoulder, and you tell me to love her anyway? Who's going to meet *my* needs?”

It would not be wise to dismiss this man's concerns with what I would call spiritual clichés such as “Just trust the Lord” or “Pray about it.” That does not normally bring about real conviction or healing. This man has real needs, and he is crying out for satisfaction. This man is distraught and irritated as a result of his wife's failure to love him, and he is sure that the solution to his problem is for his wife to change so she will meet his needs.

Now you meet with his wife and you tell her she needs to become more loving to her husband. Guess what? Her response is “But I have needs too, and I don't feel loved in this relationship either! Who's going to meet my needs for love and affection?”

To understand God's design for marriage we must begin with the truth that both husbands and wives have legitimate personal needs that cry out for satisfaction which can only be met in the context of a relationship with someone else. ***No person can satisfy his or her own needs.***

This creates a dilemma of needs. As a husband he cannot properly love his wife and meet her needs until he knows that he is a loved and is *worthwhile* person. As a wife she cannot show real

love and respect for her husband until she senses real *security* in the marriage. They are like two ticks on a dog without the dog.

II. Personal Needs for Security and Significance

We know from the Scripture and from our own personal experience that we are triune beings; spirit, soul, and body.

1 Thessalonians 5:23 (KJV)

²³And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Gen. 1:27 says that we are made in God's image. But God does not have a physical body. His essential being is not matter. Therefore our similarity to God is not found in our physical bodies because it is not like God. But we are personal beings, and that is like God. God is a loving and purposeful person who thinks, chooses, and feels. These same characteristics exist in us and collectively are referred to as soul, heart, mind, and will.

However, the spirit also housed within our bodies is the deepest part of our being. It is the part that in the redeemed state has the ability to fellowship with God.

We are born with a strong desire to love and be loved; to accept and be accepted. This longing for love is a need that defines in a significant way what it means to be a person or spirit.

Before the fall of man this capacity to give and receive love was continuously and perfectly filled through unbroken fellowship with God. Adam and Eve were never aware of this need because it was never unfulfilled. However, after sin separated Adam and Eve from God, their capacity for love was no longer filled and was therefore experienced as a need, a need for security.

A second capacity that was filled in Adam and Eve through fellowship with God before the fall was that of significance. Life had real meaning. They were involved in meaningful work. Since the fall, mankind has been aware of a need for significance just as God is significant.

Therefore these two needs can be stated as such:

Security: An awareness of being loved unconditionally without the need to change to win that love and with no risk of losing that love.

Significance: A realization of being involved in a truly important job or responsibility.

When both of these needs are met, we experience ourselves as *worthwhile* people.

III. How Do We Meet Our Deepest Needs?

Traditional Wedding Vows 1:

I, (name), take you, (name), to be my lawfully wedded (husband/wife), my constant friend, my faithful partner and my love from this day forward. In the presence of God, our family and friends, I offer you my solemn vow to be your faithful partner in sickness and in health, in good times and in bad, and in joy as well as in sorrow. I promise to love you unconditionally, to support you in your goals, to honor and respect you, to laugh with you and cry with you, and to cherish you for as long as we both shall live.

Traditional Wedding Vows 2 (traditional civil ceremony vows):

(Name), I take you to be my lawfully wedded (husband/wife). Before these witnesses I vow to love you and care for you as long as we both shall live. I take you with all your faults and your strengths as I offer myself to you with my faults and strengths. I will help you when you need help, and I will turn to you when I need help. I choose you as the person with whom I will spend my life

If we could really read a person's mind, perhaps their subconscious mind, I wonder if we might hear something more like the following:

Bridegroom:

I need to feel important, and I expect you to meet that need by submitting to my every decision, whether good or bad; by respecting me no matter how I behave, and by supporting me in whatever I decide to do. I want you to treat me as the most important person in the world. **My goal in marrying you is to find my significance through you.** An arrangement in which you are commanded by God to submit to me sounds very attractive.

Bride:

I have never felt as deeply loved as my nature requires. I am expecting you to meet that need through gentle affection even when I'm growling, thoughtful consideration whether I am always sensitive to you or not, and an accepting, romantic sensitivity to my emotional ups and downs. Don't let me down.

If a married couple is to become one at the level of their spirits, they must find some way to meet at the level of their deepest needs. How can this be done? How can husband and wife become deeply one at the level of their personal needs? Here are at least some of our options:

1. Ignore our needs
2. Find satisfaction in achievement or personal pleasures
3. Attempt to meet our needs in each other
4. Depend on the Lord to meet our needs.

Option 1 - Not a viable option. Deep personal needs for security and significance are as real and important as our physical needs of food, water, and shelter. To ignore them is to invite disaster.

Option 2 – By operating in a fallen world, Satan has taught people to believe the lie that a person's value is determined by his level of achievement. Many Christians have let themselves be squeezed into the world's mold of believing that our need for a sense of worth can be met without entering into a deep relationship with the living God.

Many couples anesthetize themselves by obtaining power, prestige of occupation, size of their home, cars, clothes, physical attractiveness, education, athletic ability, etc. Any and all of these become substitutes for the struggles of entering into a deep relationship with their spouses. This will prevent them from being united at their deepest level.

Option 3 - If most couples are honest with themselves, they would have to admit that they entered the marriage looking to their spouse to play a significant role in meeting those needs in them. However, every husband or wife, regardless of how godly, has many times failed to provide what the other has needed. What happens when each spouse sooner or later encounters profound hurt or rejection when he or she longed for acceptance?

This hurt demands relief, but too often we have difficulty telling our spouses how we feel or what concerns us. But the criticism or rejection is so painful, and we retreat behind protective walls of emotional distance, angry with our partners for letting us down so badly, and unwilling to meet again at the level of deep needs for fear of further rejection or criticism. As a result, spouses put up protective layers around them:

1. They just don't share deep feelings
2. They respond with anger when deep feelings are hurt.
3. Change the subject when the conversation becomes threatening.
4. Turn off or clam up.
5. Keep busy with work, social engagements, entertainment, church activities, or endless chatter so that no deep sharing is possible.

I am afraid that many couples even in the church live behind protective walls of emotional distance that block them from reaching the level of deep spiritual and soul oneness.

What are we to do? Shouldn't we strive to be more loving and sensitive to each other? Can't we break down these barriers by accepting each other as God for Christ's sake has accepted us? Of course we should! The Scripture tells us to, so therefore it is possible.

BUT WE CAN NEVER DO IT PERFECTLY!

The most accepting and loving wife in the world can never completely meet her husband's needs for significance. The most loving husband in the world cannot fully meet his wife's need for security.

As imperfect people we continually struggle with self-centeredness that discolors every motivation within us. We are just not enough for each other. What are we to do?

Option 4 – We must depend on the Lord to meet our needs.

We need to be secure. He loves us with a love that we never earned or deserved. He knows all about our faults, failures, and foibles and loves us any way. There's nothing we can do to make Him love us more or cause Him to love us less. He proved that on the Cross where He purchased for us an eternally loving relationship with God. In that love we are SECURE.

We need to be significant. The Holy Spirit has equipped us to participate in God's great purpose of bringing all things together in Christ. The Body of Christ builds itself up with the strength that each joint supplies through the spiritual gifts he has given to us. He has even set before us an agenda of good works for us to do (Eph. 2:10). When we realize these truths and act upon them, we have unparalleled significance.

Although it is true that that our needs are fully met in Christ, it is true that that the Lord normally uses husbands and wives as instruments to develop within each other a conscious awareness of personal worth. It is Christ alone who grants us security and significance, but it is often our spouse who helps us to *feel* worthwhile.

God commands us to love one another which means putting each other's needs first. This applies especially to married people. **As husbands and wives it is our God-given responsibility to minister to our spouses' deepest needs in such a way that they are conscious of being deeply loved and respected.** When spouses do this it leads to "soul oneness" or the commitment to minister to one another's needs.

This brings us to the issue of manipulation verses ministry. We must be very careful when we say our goal is to minister to our spouse's needs that either consciously or unconsciously we are not just appearing to attempt to meet our spouse's needs when our actual goal is to get them to meet our needs which is not ministry but manipulation.

Let's consider the following scenario:

In the evening after the kids have been put to bed, a husband sits down beside his wife, puts his hand on her thigh and says, "Honey, do you realize how gorgeous you are?"

What is this husband's true goal? If challenged he might say that it is to make his wife feel loved and appreciated. However, his wife may hear a completely different message which is "He wants sex."

He might say what is wrong with a wife showing warm affection to her husband through the avenue of sexual expression? There is nothing wrong with desiring sex and hoping for a responsive wife. But to be primarily motivated by the goal of winning that positive response from his wife designed to satisfy his desires, regardless of how legitimate those desires might be, is a violation of *love* and therefore wrong. This husband may legitimately desire a positive response from his wife, but if she, for whatever reason, fails to respond as he wishes, he must honor what should be his true goal of ministry and accept her unresponsiveness without complaining and pressuring.

The central goal of every interchange between husband and wife must be to minister to the deepest needs of the other for security and significance.

When the husband in this scenario replaces the goal of ministry on behalf of the other with the goal of manipulation on behalf of his own needs, he misrepresents Christ's love for His Bride.

Let's consider another scenario:

(Man comes home from work and needs to mow grass.)

Ephesians 4:29 (NIV1984)

²⁹ *Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.*

The word "unwholesome" means something worthless that rots and decays. Paul is instructing us that what we say matters. He is contrasting worthless words with words that have a clear purpose; words that meet the needs of others.

What Paul says to all Christians certainly applies to people who live together in the intimacy of marriage. I am not to say anything that compromises the basic goal of ministering to the needs of the one to whom I am speaking.

When we subtly manipulate our spouse to get them to do something we desire, we may feel like there has been an improvement, but the apparent gain will not be toward oneness. The longed-for sense of intimate closeness can only be achieved when we put all of our words and actions in the context of ministry, not manipulation.

We spent some time talking about the principle that only Christ can meet our deepest needs for personal security and significance. What we have just discussed makes it seem that as spouses we are responsible for those things.

I cannot add to the fact of my wife's security in Christ, but I can increase her feelings of security.

Husbands and wives are given by God the unique opportunity (among all the billions of men and women who have ever lived) to minister to the needs of a special person (their spouse) in a way

that no one else can. God brings them together for the purpose of enhancing their experience of worth as persons and their security and significance in Jesus Christ.

Married people will never experience the soul oneness God designed them for without grasping this truth. Techniques for communication, conflict resolution, etc. will never lead to lasting and meaningful results until this principle of ministry becomes foundational in the marriage.

When we counsel couples who are planning marriage we need to do our best to help them grasp this principle of ministry in marriage. When men and women enter into marriage, most of them do so with tremendous expectations that their spouse will meet their needs for security and significance. They must realize that although that may happen and hopefully and even likely will, but that is not to be their main purpose.

(Review the bungee cord example)