

GOOD NEWS FOR MODERN MARRIEDS

Four Evenings of Bible Study and Marital Growth for Couples

by

Karen Flowers

Co-Director, Department of Family

Ministries, General Conference

1994

Outlined below are four evenings of Bible study and marriage enrichment for couples. These provide a starting point for Family Ministries leaders planning marriage strengthening activities at the local church, or for couples who would like to experience marital growth in a Christian context with small groups of couples in a home setting. The activities suggested will take 1 1/2 - 2 hours per evening.

Evening 1 Marriage Under the Everlasting Covenant

Introduction

Human beings were created for relationships with God and with one another. In the Genesis account, the only conflicting element present that seemed to mar the perfection of all that God had created was the "aloneness" of Adam. Fittingly then, the creation of the two sexes brought a cry of ecstasy from the lips of the male (Gen. 3:23). Because the intimacy they were created to enjoy is too risky apart from the protection of covenant, God instituted marriage: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24, NKJV).

The tragic account of Genesis 3 marks the cataclysmic effect of the Fall on marriage and family relationships. Wherever sin reigned, co-regency and mutuality would give way to domination, exploitation, blame, and hostility, even unfaithfulness, abuse, and violence.

Praise God, however, the curse of Genesis 3 is not the gospel! Jesus came to restore all that had been lost, including His original design for marriage. In her book *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessings* (1956) Ellen White notes, "Like every other one of God's good gifts entrusted to the keeping of humanity, marriage has been perverted by sin; but it is the purpose of the gospel to restore its purity and beauty" (p. 64). Commenting further in *The Adventist Home* (1980, p. 99), Ellen White makes it clear that God did not alter His design for marriage after the Fall, but rather that Jesus came to restore God's *original* design for the marriage relationship. We may even now experience this restoration as the kingdom of God comes to us in Christ. (See Matt 12:28; Gal. 1:4, Heb. 6:5; 2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 3:17-19.)

Jack O. and Judith K. Balswick, in their book *The Family: A Christian Perspective on the Contemporary Home* (1991, p. 21), propose that Christian marriage and family relationships grow through sequential stages. These move from the limited commitments humanly possible on the wedding day (initial covenant) to a commitment based on a growing understanding and experience together of unconditional love, grace, empowerment, and ever deepening levels of intimacy (mature covenant). (See Figure 1, p. 50.)

The logical beginning point of any family relationship is a covenant commitment, which has unconditional love at its core. Out of the security provided by this covenant love develops grace. In this atmosphere of grace, family members have the freedom to empower each other. Empowering leads to the possibility of intimacy between family members. Intimacy then leads back to a deeper level of covenant commitment. . . .

Since relationships are dynamic and ever changing, . . . if a relationship does not spiral in to deeper levels of commitment, grace, empowering, and intimacy, then it will stagnate and fixate on contract rather than covenant, law rather than grace, possessive power rather than empowering, and distance rather than intimacy (Balswick and Balswick, pp. 21-22).

The following four evenings for couples are a means to enable married couples to move toward a maturing covenant.

The Nature of Covenant

The biblical model for Christian marriage and family relationships is God's everlasting covenant of love with His children (Isa. 54:5; Jer. 31:32; John 15:12; 1 John 4:7-11). In the New Testament, marriage is elevated as a symbol of the union between Christ and the redeemed (compare Matt. 9:15; 25:1-13; John 3:29; Eph. 5:31, 32; Rev. 21:2, 9).

There are two words for covenant used in connection with covenant-making between God and His people in the Old Testament. One is the word used for a "last will and testament," a covenant where God makes all the promises and His people enjoy all the blessings (see Isa. 55:3; Jer. 32:40). Abraham—and all the believers of the Old Testament—were saved by a promise until Christ, whose last will and testament the everlasting covenant represented, died and the will took effect (Heb. 11:39; 9:15-22).

The other word for covenant in the Old Testament is a word used for a contractual agreement where an exchange is made between the two parties concerned, an arrangement whereby blessings come in exchange for obedience (see Josh. 24:24-27). God never intended to enter into a contractual agreement with His children, knowing our inability to hold up our end of any contract requiring faithfulness and obedience. However, when Israel insisted on a contractual response to His gesture of love, God went along with them to allow them to learn by experience the futility of promising God "all that You say we will do" (for an example, see Exodus 24:7-8). Just as a parent might allow a young child who was determined he didn't need any help tying his shoes to try until his failure caused him to turn to the parent for help.

Sadly, even bitter experience has often not been enough to teach God's children the futility of such responses. Rather than turn to the God of promise and blessing with a response of love and gratitude, God's people attempt to reduce covenant to rules they think they can keep. But mercifully, God continues to offer His covenant of promise, one which came to fullness in Jesus Christ (Jer. 31:31-33; Luke 1:68-74; Gal. 3:15-25; Heb. 9:15-22).

Study the following passages as a group. What characteristics of covenant can you identify? What implications do your discoveries have for understanding God's ideal for the marriage covenant?

Gen. 9:13, 16; Deut. 4:31 - *Covenant is initiated and confirmed with ceremony and symbol.*
Gen. 17:7, 9; Eph. 5:8 - *Covenant calls for a response of love.*
Ex. 2:24-25; Jer. 32:40 - *Covenant is extended in compassion and concern for the well-being and happiness of another.*
Deut. 7:6-9; Isa. 54:10; Isa. 43:1-7; Hos. 3:1-4 - *Covenant is an exclusive, cherished relationship of love. Faithfulness and fidelity to covenant is a response to that love.*
Deut. 4:23-31; Ps. 89:28, 34; Ps. 106:43-46 - *Covenant is not broken because of the failings of one's partner. It is a total, unconditional commitment. Though consequences may not be removed, covenant love is unconditional. Covenant love anticipates restoration and renewal in broken relationships.*
Judges 2:1; 2 Kings 13:23; Isa. 54:10 - *Covenant is tenacious. It hangs on through the tough times.*

God's covenant is one of unconditional commitment. It is not contingent upon our response. God did not offer to enter into a "something for something" contract with Israel. His covenant is not extended only *if* His children keep up their end of the bargain. It is not based on performance. Rather God freely enters into a covenant relationship with each generation by His own choice and based upon His promises to generations before them, knowing all the risks.

God's covenant is everlasting. It is durable. It is founded on His unconditional, changeless, selfless love. God introduces Himself as a faithful, steadfast God who keeps covenant forever. With Him, covenant always precedes expectations. He is a promise-keeping God, and His history as One who provides for all our needs is evidence of the surety of His covenant (compare Ex. 20:2, Phil. 4:19).

Jesus set the standard for covenant when He entered into a new kind of relationship with twelve men. One by one He called them to follow Him, and as they each stepped over the line and accepted His invitation, He committed Himself totally to them, loving them—even when they were unfaithful—with a changeless, selfless love; promising to be with them even to the end (Matt.

28:20).

Think of the difficulties faced by Jesus within this band. There was quarreling and arguing. They expressed doubt, hatred, and violence. There were among them the bigoted, the deceitful, the stubborn, the disloyal. They were not above manipulation to secure the best for themselves or to get their own way. They possessed chauvinistic attitudes toward women and children. They had an aversion to servile duties. Ultimately one was unfaithful to the point of betrayal, while the others abandoned Jesus in His darkest hour of need. Plenty reason enough in our day to break covenant, yet Jesus' commitment remains firm.

COUPLE ACTIVITY

Dennis Guernsey in his book *The Family Covenant* (1984) suggests that the usual wedding vows sound like they were written for angels, and that they would be more realistic if they read:

I take you to be my lawfully wedded spouse with the full knowledge that you are weak as I am weak; that you will be unfaithful as I will be, if not in actuality, then in fantasy; that there will be times when you will disappoint me gravely as I will disappoint you. But in spite of all of this, I commit myself to love you, knowing your weaknesses and knowing the certainty of betrayal (p. 23).

Talk "knee to knee" about your reaction to these vows. In what ways would these vows have been more realistic for your marriage in the light of your experience together as a married couple? Does the acknowledgment of the limitations of every fallen human being to keep covenant detract from the commitment being made? In what ways does this acknowledgment strengthen commitment? Compose "wedding" vows for yourselves now in the context of your experience together to this point. Find opportunity to recommit yourselves to each other with these vows.

ALTERNATE COUPLE ACTIVITY

The following comments were shared by a mother whose 23-year-old daughter offered the following explanation for her new live-in arrangement with her boyfriend of three years.

Joel and I have known each other too long to continue living apart. We believe we are right for each other and are pretty sure we will eventually get married. It's just that right now there are several good reasons why we should wait. Both of us have educational goals yet to complete. We can save quite a bit of money by sharing expenses. Furthermore, we have a lot of differences to work out—like domestic roles and deciding where we want to live and whether we want to have a family. We believe we can work these things out better if we are living together and can see on a day-to-day basis whether we are compatible. Neither of us ever wants to be involved in a divorce, so we are postponing marriage until we are sure of ourselves. Besides, for relationships to become really stable, each person has to have some room to change and to grow. In marriage, it's too easy to get locked in. Right now, living together is a big enough step.

In the light of your discussion about covenant, are the young woman's conclusions valid? What would you share with this young couple from your own experience about the importance and

value of commitment in marriage?

Evening 2 Living Together by Grace

Louis Smedes begins his book *Forgive and Forget* (1984) with the following fable.

The Magic Eyes A Little Fable

In the village of Faken in innermost Friesland there lived a long thin baker named Fouke, a righteous man, with a long thin chin and a long thin nose. Fouke was so upright that he seemed to spray righteousness from his thin lips over everyone who came near him; so the people of Faken preferred to stay away.

Fouke's wife, Hilda, was short and round, her arms were round, her bosom was round, her rump was round. Hilda did not keep people at bay with righteousness; her soft roundness seemed to invite them instead to come close to her in order to share the warm cheer of her open heart. Hilda respected her righteous husband, and loved him too, as much as he allowed her; but her heart ached for something more from him than his worthy righteousness.

And there, in the bed of her need, lay the seed of sadness.

One morning, having worked since dawn to knead his dough for the ovens, Fouke came home and found a stranger lying on Hilda's round bosom.

Hilda's adultery soon became the talk of the tavern and the scandal of the Faken congregation. Everyone assumed that Fouke would cast Hilda out of his house, so righteous was he. But he surprised everyone by keeping Hilda as his wife, saying he forgave her as the Good Book said he should.

In his heart of hearts, however, Fouke could not forgive Hilda for bringing shame to his name. Whenever he thought about her, his feelings toward her were angry and hard; he despised her as if she were a common whore. When it came right down to it, he hated her for betraying him after he had been so good and so faithful a husband to her.

He only pretended to forgive Hilda so that he could punish her with his righteous mercy. But Fouke's fakery did not sit well in heaven.

So each time that Fouke would feel his secret hate toward Hilda, an angel came to him and dropped a small pebble, hardly the size of a shirt button, into Fouke's heart. Each time a pebble dropped, Fouke would feel a stab of pain like the pain he felt the moment he came on Hilda feeding her hungry heart from a stranger's larder.

Thus he hated her the more; his hate brought him pain and his pain made him hate.

The pebbles multiplied. And Fouke's heart grew very heavy with the weight of them, so heavy that the top half of his body bent forward so far that he had to strain his neck upward in order to see straight ahead. Weary with hurt, Fouke began to wish he were dead.

The angel who dropped the pebbles into his heart came to Fouke one night and told him how he could be healed of his hurt.

There was one remedy, he said, only one, for the hurt of a wounded heart. Fouke would need the miracle of the magic eyes. He would need eyes that could look back to the beginning of his hurt and see his Hilda, not as a wife who betrayed him, but as a weak woman who needed him. Only a new way of looking at things through the magic eyes could heal the hurt flowing from the

wounds of yesterday.

Fouke protested. "Nothing can change the past," he said. "Hilda is guilty, a fact that not even an angel can change."

"Yes, poor hurting man, you are right," the angel said. "You cannot change the past, you can only heal the hurt that comes to you from the past. And you can heal it only with the vision of the magic eyes."

"And how can I get your magic eyes?" pouted Fouke.

"Only ask, desiring as you ask, and they will be given you. And each time you see Hilda through your new eyes, one pebble will be lifted from your aching heart."

Fouke could not ask at once, for he had grown to love his hatred. But the pain of his heart finally drove him to want and to ask for the magic eyes that the angel had promised. So he asked. And the angel gave.

Soon Hilda began to change in front of Fouke's eyes, wonderfully and mysteriously. He began to see her as a needy woman who loved him instead of a wicked woman who betrayed him.

The angel kept his promise; he lifted the pebbles from Fouke's heart, one by one, though it took a long time to take them all away. Fouke gradually felt his heart grow lighter; he began to walk straight again, and somehow his nose and his chin seemed less thin and sharp than before. He invited Hilda to come into his heart again, and she came, and together they began again a journey into their second season of humble joy (pp. xiii-xv).

["The Magic Eyes, A Little Fable" from FORGIVE AND FORGET by Louis B. Smedes. Copyright © 1984 by Louis B. Smedes. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.]

Forgiveness: Healing the Wounds We Don't Deserve

Living together by grace is possible only as we grasp the radical concept of forgiveness. It is a complex process with many facets, only one of which we will be discussing: the process by which a person who has been deeply hurt can come to forgiveness and find personal healing. It is this process that alone can pave the way for reconciliation in a broken relationship. It can provide the balm to soothe a hurting heart, whether the other person involved ever asks for forgiveness or full restoration in the relationship is ever achieved.

(Note: Consequences of actions cannot always be removed. Forgiveness cannot make things as though the painful event never occurred, and it should never be proffered as the reason a person should remain in a destructive, abusive situation. But forgiveness can remove the sting from the wounded place so that in time a person can think of the events and the other person involved and the memory will not give rise to incapacitating levels of pain.)

All that we know about forgiveness we learn from God. The most just Being in the universe—the great Lover of rightness and fairness—is also the great Forgiver. In His justice, God could not wink at our sin and overlook it. Sin's consequences must be borne. Rightfully, they should be borne by sinners. But God in His mercy "made Christ to be sin for us" (1 Peter 2:23, 24; 2 Cor. 5:21). Ellen White puts it eloquently:

Christ was treated as we deserve that we might be treated as He deserves. He was condemned for our sins in which He had no share, that we might be justified by His righteousness, in which we had no share. He suffered the death which was ours, that we might receive the life which was His. "With His stripes we are healed" (*The Desire of Ages*, 1940, p. 25).

Forgiveness is painful, it is costly, it is hard. Forgiveness forever changes the life of the forgiver. It will never be the same again. Lasting impressions are made, permanent scars are created, but willing forgiveness can over time bring healing for the hurts we don't deserve. So Christians are encouraged to leave repayment with God (Rom. 12:17, 19) and called to forgive one another (Eph. 1:7).

Of all the Bible writers, the physician Luke has the most to say about forgiveness. Perhaps he found in this radical principle of the kingdom the balm for which he was searching to heal the hurts of his patients' hearts. Consider the following passages (most from Luke's gospel) as a group. What understanding about forgiveness do they offer?

Luke 5:18-26 Jesus first heals the wounds of the heart with forgiveness before touching the paralytic's broken body. Before we can become forgivers, we must hear Christ's words, "Your sins are forgiven," and experience the inner healing for our own sins which He freely offers.

Luke 23:34 Forgiveness is present even before the offender asks for it. At the cross the fountain was prepared from which we may draw. Genuine forgiveness is a free gift offered in love by one who has been hurt. It may never be asked for, but it is there. It provides a reservoir of refreshing for our own souls and courage to those who have inflicted pain to come and ask for forgiveness. To have forgiven already, whether or not full reconciliation takes place, can bring great peace to the person who has been hurt.

Luke 17:3-4 Forgiveness is not about keeping score. It is not a single, one-time act. Rather it is a process which moves a person from deep hurt, often through deep pain and much anger and resentment, to healing.

"If you never even want to forgive, never even try to remove a hateful memory and restore a loving relationship, you are in a lot of trouble.

"If you are trying to forgive, even if you manage forgiving in fits and starts, if you forgive today, hate again tomorrow, and have to forgive again the day after, you are a forgiver. . . . In this game nobody is an expert. We are all beginners" (Smedes, 1984, p. 151).

Luke 7:41-48 Little forgiveness produces little love. Much forgiveness produces much love.

Matt. 18:21-35 When people grasp the magnitude of the forgiveness offered them by God, they will cease relating to others as if they must exact payment for every harm done to them and will become forgivers out of gratitude.

The key to this parable is the magnitude of the debt. One talent equals US\$1000. A 10,000 talent debt equalled an amount which was 12 1/2 times the annual tax of all five Jewish provinces paid to Rome! In those days a laborer typically worked for 20 cents a day. The debt was impossible for the debtor to pay! The magnitude of our sin also constitutes an impossible debt. But we are so like the debtor when we plead with God for more time and opportunity to change, to prove ourselves! And how like the debtor we are when we measure out to one another our meager forgiveness as though God has measured it out to us in small rations.

This parable is about comprehending the magnitude of God's forgiveness, freely granted us in Christ. As we stand under the cascading fountain of His forgiveness, we may reach out to those who have hurt us, with forgiveness which we do not have of ourselves. As Ellen White comments in *Christ's Object Lessons* (1941), "The ground of all forgiveness is found in the unmerited love of God, but by our attitude toward others we show whether we have made that love our own" (p. 251).

COUPLE ACTIVITY

Complete the following statements individually, then share your responses privately as a couple, dialoguing together about forgiveness in your relationship as husband and wife.

New thoughts I have had about the meaning of forgiveness in marriage . . .

Times in our marriage when your forgiveness has meant so much . . .

Areas where forgiveness is needed in our relationship to make way for new beginnings . . .

Contemplate together this statement from Dennis Guernsey, *The Family Covenant* (1984):

If there is no commitment, no covenant, there is no will to go on. If there is covenant, you can forgive seventy times seven. You can endure when everything inside you says quit. Covenant does not consign us to the past and its defeats. Covenant orients us to the hope that our covenant-making God can make all things new in Christ (p. 25).

ALTERNATE COUPLE ACTIVITY

Gordon & Gail MacDonald, in their book *Till the Heart Be Touched* (1992), recount a modern story of commitment.

David and Lisa Johnson were an average couple with two young sons. One day Lisa became ill with what seemed to be a bad bout with the flu. After a few days she recovered sufficiently that her doctors released her from the hospital, though she was still extremely weak. There was no indication for Lisa that the worst was yet to come. But upon her arrival at home, her husband David gave her a letter revealing his extramarital affair with a homosexual lover and his recent discovery that he was HIV positive.

David tells how he expected her to react with hysteria and order him out of the house. In advance he had arranged with a psychiatrist to see her and had already packed his bags. She stunned him with her response. "David, do you love me?" When he responded affirmatively, she continued, "Then let's work this out." Forgiveness was a slow, painful process during which David made his break with his illicit lover, and God's grace did its work of healing and reconciliation. When Lisa became ill again, it was evident that the HIV virus would soon take her life. The couple decided to share their secret with friends. Some were horrified and terminated their relationships with the couple. Others came closer to try to understand this incredible story of forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing in a marriage relationship. David and Lisa said their story was about commitment, a nearly forgotten kind of commitment which meant "going the extra mile until all possibilities are exhausted, mercy has been extended to the repentant, and life's worst has been forced to produce good" (p. 51).

The MacDonalds reflect, "Not everyone would be able to do what Lisa did, but what happened will always be a benchmark as to what is possible when someone takes commitment seriously—a lot more seriously than many people in our age take it" (p. 52).

What is your response to this story? In what experiences of your marriage has God been given the opportunity to produce good out of life's worst? Are there ways even now that you could give

Him that chance?

Evening 3 Empowering One Another for Abundant Life

Theirs was a fabled romance. The young Robert Browning returned from the Continent to find England astir over a new edition of Miss Elizabeth Barrett's Poems. The poet-playwright was an adventurous, much-travelled bachelor, the poetess a fragile spinster sealed away from the rest of the world by a controlling father and her ill health.

Although a porcelain glaze of propriety glossed every page of the letters which passed between them, deep admiration and growing devotion created warm hues beneath the surface. In time he ventured, "I love you," and pleaded to visit her. She pulled instinctively away, warning that "her poetry is the best of her." "It has all my colours;" she wrote. "The rest of me is nothing but a root, fit for the ground and the dark." But love persisted, and Elizabeth slowly surrendered to it. For years she had scarcely left her bedroom. Little could she have imagined that in the empowering encouragement of Robert's love she would soon travel, publish widely, function capably as wife and mother, and take her place as an empowering force in his life as well.

From childhood (Elizabeth disclosed in her letter of November 12, 1845), she had hungered for an "irrational" love, for she could not imagine herself worthy of any other. To find herself loved apart from pity for her condition or admiration for her genius was "something . . . between dream and miracle," but she flourished under Robert's sunshine.

Many secrets lurked behind the red-brick front of the Barrett residence at No. 50 Wimpole Street. Mrs. Barrett was dead, the doors to her rooms locked the day of her death by a single command from her husband, who forbade the mention of her name from that day forward. Mr. Barrett, from all outward appearances a devoutly religious man, rigidly controlled his family and demanded obedience in the name of biblical authority. It was a household that tiptoed about his overpowering presence, fearful of touching one of his "vibratory wires" and setting off the rocking tremors of his explosive anger and his punitive wrath.

Elizabeth was one of only three of his twelve children who ever dared defy him and marry. It was a decision for which her father and her brothers, except for George, would punish her for the rest of her life. Even the news of her father's death brought the mixed emotions of grief and relief, for though a family friend reported that he had in the end "forgiven" his married children, even prayed for their well-being, tragically it was only in hearsay about his prayer life that his children learned that he ever acknowledged their existence once they challenged his ultimate authority.

Elizabeth did not make her decision to marry without fear and trembling. Her inner turmoil reflected not only trouble with her father, but her ongoing battle with shame. She once admitted that she had toyed with the idea of letting Robert "try me for one winter," then offering to walk out of his life forever if she proved a disappointment. On another occasion she considered that perhaps she "should choose to die this winter—now—before I had disappointed you in anything." For Robert, the decision had been simpler. "What I mean by marrying you," he concluded in his letter of August 3, 1846, "it is, that I may be with you forever—I cannot have enough of you in any other relation." She tells him he is blind, but for now she would accept his blindness. Having searched the length and breadth of Robert's devotion for hidden cracks and chinks, she eventually succumbed completely to an unconditional love that had at last "conquered fear, or worn it out."

Though accounts of their love and devotion will always bear the markings of a fairytale, the Brownings also lived with trouble. Despite their romance, there was "plenty of room for battles," Elizabeth confided to her sister. There were five miscarriages, too many brushes with death for the fragile Elizabeth, and the ever-lengthening shadows of family difficulties with Wimpole Street. The day or two following the birth of their only son Pen, news arrived that Robert's mother was gravely ill. In reality, she had died before the letter arrived. She had been Robert's joy as a child and an ongoing source of encouragement through all the ups and downs of an artist's career.

She had believed in him when the acclaim of others had faltered. It was to her that he first entrusted his works, knowing she would be gentle in her criticism, lavish with her praise.

It was one of the darkest moments of Browning's life; there was little that would cheer him. Now the roles of the two lovers were reversed. It was Robert who was preoccupied with death, and it fell upon Elizabeth to guide him through the shadows back into the world.

Many passages in their letters to family and friends attest to her patience, her tact, her understanding. But when all else failed, she held one last gift to call him from his intense grief—the sonnets she had written three years before about their love. She had been shy about showing them to Robert then, but knowing the high value he set upon her poetry, she now presented him with her journal and the question, "Do you know I once wrote some poems about you?"

Later he wrote of standing at the front window, lifting his eyes from time to time to gaze at the tall mimosa tree in full blossom in the garden, as he read from the little book of love poems penned in his wife's fine hand.

*"How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach . . ."*

Empowerment had come full circle in their relationship as Robert, the fountain of love and enabling from which Elizabeth had drawn so deeply, now turned to his beloved for strength. *[All references to the Brownings' correspondence are from Kintner (1969), cited in Irvine and Honan (1974).]*

Talk together as a group about insights into the empowerment process in marriage which you have gleaned from this story and other empowering relationships you have witnessed.

The dictionary defines "empowerment" as "enabling" or "establishing power in another." Balswick and Balswick (1991) describe the empowering process as ". . . the active, intentional process of enabling another person to acquire power. The person who is empowered has gained power because of the encouraging behavior of the other" (p. 28).

Empowering is the process of helping another recognize strengths and potentials within, as well as encouraging . . . the development of these qualities. It is the affirmation of another's ability to learn and grow and become all that he or she can be. It may require that the empowerer be willing to step back and allow the empowered to learn by doing and not depending. The empowerer must respect the uniqueness of those being empowered and see strength in their individual ways to be competent. Empowering does not involve controlling or enforcing a certain way of doing and being. It is, rather, a reciprocal process in which empowering takes place between people in mutually enhancing ways. . . .

Empowering is the action of God in people's lives (p. 28).

Jesus summed up the purpose of His mission among human beings as one of empowerment. In John 10:10 (NIV) He said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." It is the mission to which we are also called in our relationships with one another.

John explained Jesus' mission of empowerment in this way: "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12-13, RSV). Power to become children of God, according to John, did not come as a result of birth into the right family, or through obedience. Rather the empowerment Jesus offered was of a different nature. Jesus came to make it possible for sinful, powerless human beings [despite all our pretense to power in

our relationships with one another] to become, "in Him," the children of God (compare Gal. 3:26). Christ then becomes our enabler, our empowerer (compare Phil. 4:13, Eph. 4:12-16).

An understanding that power is not intrinsic to human beings, but is a gift from God, calls for a radical change in the use of power in human relationships. Jesus rejected the widespread misconception that persists wherever sin reigns that power is a commodity that is in limited supply. (Hence it is regarded as something to be coveted, acquired by any means, carefully guarded once acquired, and used wherever possible to further one's own desires and to control others.) Jesus subtly overturned all prevailing notions of hierarchy and power in family relationships by making agape love the foundational principle of His kingdom (1 John 4:7-11). His affirmation of the appropriate use of power "to serve others, to lift up the fallen, to forgive the guilty, to encourage responsibility and maturity in the weak, and to enable the unable" (Balswick and Balswick, 1991, p. 29) sets the standard for the Christian's use of power in relationships. (See, for example, Matt. 20:25-28; John 13:3-15; Phil. 2:3-8; Eph. 5:21-29; 1 Peter 3:7).

A corollary concept is the New Testament emphasis on "one-anothering," that is, love one another deeply from the heart (1 Peter 1:22; 1 John 4:11); seek the good of others (1 Cor. 10:24); look to the interests of others (Phil. 2:4); bear one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2); bear with one another (Col. 3:13); pray for one another (James 5:16); build one another up (1 Thess. 5:11, Rom. 14:19). Gordon and Gail MacDonald (1992) call this "making an investment" in each other, and they place it at the heart of the empowering process:

Empowering has to do with the investments people make in one another. It is what happens when we concern ourselves with the question, Is the person with whom we are friend, spouse, or family a growing person because he or she is in intimate connection with us? (p. 159).

COUPLE ACTIVITY

Empowerment and marital growth rarely "just happen." Spend the rest of the evening together as a couple: reflect on the implications of this evening's discussion of Christ's call to be empowerers of one another in your marriage and create a marital growth plan for the next 12 months. Begin by writing separately, and complete the following three sentences. Think in terms of your relational goals as well as the more tangible things you might like to accomplish.

Things I want for you . . .

Things I want for me . . .

Things I want for us . . .

Share what you have written with each other. Decide together on the top three priorities in each section and how you will empower one another and together achieve these mutual goals and desires.

Evening 4 Stretching Toward a Full Measure of Intimacy

Ironically, in an age of ever-expanding communications technology, crowded cities, and overpopulation, many people, even within their marriages, confess they feel lonelier and more isolated than ever. Caught up in the whirlwind of modern life, they speak wistfully of relationships that they wish could fill the void, but with a resignation in their voices calculated to protect them

from disappointment. Yet the "vast and empty inner ache to know and be known" (Achte-meier, 1976, p. 133), remains.

Intimacy—the experience of knowing deeply and being known by significant human beings in our lives—is not optional for human beings. Either we experience it, or we will spend our lives developing coping mechanisms to survive as best we can.

Gordon and Gail MacDonald (1992) believe that intimacy became an issue the moment we were conceived (p. 22). For some, there may never come any improvement on the intimacy experienced in the womb, where from the earliest moments of life they floated in warm fluid, — secure, warm, and nourished in a total embrace close to their mother's heart.

A Kikuyu chief from East Africa, even at 80 years of age, speaks with satisfaction of his continued intimacy with his mother and remembers how as a small babe he was tied snugly to his mother's back:

My early years are connected in my mind with my mother. At first she was always there: I can remember the comforting feel of her body as she carried me on her back and the smell of her skin in the hot sun. Everything came from her. When I was hungry or thirsty she would swing me round to where I could reach her full breasts; now when I shut my eyes I feel again with gratitude the sense of well-being that I had when I buried my head in their softness and drank the sweet milk that they gave. At night when there was no sun to warm me, her arms, her body, took its place; and as I grew older and more interested in other things, from my safe place on her back I could watch without fear as I wanted, and when sleep overcame me I had only to close my eyes (Ashley Montagu, 1971, p. 79).

Intimacy remains at the center of our journey, even into adulthood. Studies proliferate about the importance of human intimacy to basic health and well-being, even to survival. As a leading specialist in psychosomatic medicine at the University of Maryland explains, "Simply put, there is a biological basis for our need to form human relationships. If we fail to fulfill that need, our health is in peril" (James J. Lynch, *The Broken Heart: The Medical Consequences of Loneliness*, 1979, quoted in MacDonald, 1992, p. 24).

Hopefully, as we mature, our quest for closeness will include a balanced concern for the needs of others as well as for our own. But while it is instinctive for us to seek intimate relationships for ourselves, the capacity to meet the intimacy needs of another must be learned.

One fundamental aspect of God's character is that He is a social being who delights in relationships with His creation. To be made in His image is to be created for relationships, born for intimacy with Him and with each other. Scripture is replete with evidence that God wants to know us and be known by us.

The testimony of Scripture is sure: God knows us through and through.

Jer. 1:5; Ps. 139:15 - *He knew us before we were born.*

Ps. 103:14; John 2:25 - *He knows our makeup, for we are His creation.*

Ps. 44:21 - *He knows the secrets of our hearts.*

Ps. 139:1-4; Luke 11:17 - *He knows our thoughts and our words before they are spoken.*

Ps. 69:5 - *He knows everything we have done.*

Ex. 3:7 - *He knows our sufferings.*

Ex. 33:12; Isa. 43:1; John 10:3 - *He knows us by name.*

God is also a God who reveals Himself to us, that we may know Him (Rom. 1:20). He revealed Himself fully in Jesus (John 1:14; 14:8-11; 15:15; Hebrews 1:1-3).

Elizabeth Achte-meier (1976) concludes:

Certainly we never can know one another as completely as our Lord knows us. Yet, because marriage is to be the imitation of Christ's love for His church, we are to know our mates with a knowledge approaching His. We too are to be able to say, "I know my own and my own know me."

It is this task of developing such communication and intimacy within our wedded unions which forms another of the major responsibilities of Christian marriage partners. By working at that task, by constantly striving to know and be known, . . . Christian partners deepen their intimacy and their commitment to each other and thereby live out their commitment to Jesus Christ (p. 134).

Human beings are unique in God's creation in their ability to use language to communicate and thus know one another intimately. In his book *The Secret of Staying in Love* (1974) John Powell outlines five levels of communication, which can be likened to a person coming out of the forest into a clearing. In the deep recesses of the forest, little about a person is open to view. But as a person moves toward the edge of the forest, more and more light penetrates through the trees, and more and more can be seen. Out in the open spaces of a clearing, the person steps into full view.

1. Cliche Level

The first level of communication that John Powell speaks of is the cliché level. At this level, the person is still figuratively deep in the forest, sharing in mere chit chat with another. Couples use chit chat to enter and exit one another's presence and to "test the waters" as they contemplate deeper levels of communication, to determine whether or not to proceed.

Conversation at this level includes comments like, "How was your day?" "Sure glad it's Friday!" "Aren't those flowers beautiful?" "It's good it rained today; the lawn is so dry!"

Nothing of any personal significance is revealed at this level. But it is useful in a relationship as we move in and out of one another's lives.

2. Facts Level

Moving only slightly out of the recesses of the forest of personal privacy, a couple communicating at the facts level report the news and events of their daily lives to one another. It is at this level of communication that we make one another aware of the facts necessary to care for the details of life together as a family and to coordinate everyone's needs.

Conversation at this level runs along these lines: "Joe has a dental appointment right after school tomorrow and will need to be picked up fifteen minutes early." "I will be home late this afternoon because I need to stop at the market." "Jeff got his final examination scores today and he did really well in history." "The chain came off my bicycle and I had to push it home." "The pastor called and the Church Board meeting has been changed to Monday night."

3. Ideas Level

At this level the couple figuratively take further steps toward the sunlight of the clearing. Here disclosure cautiously moves beyond mere facts to the sharing of ideas. "I prefer the darker color to the lighter one." "I think we should see what books are available at the library before we spend the money to order these." "You could push your bicycle over to Uncle Jim's house and maybe he could help you fix the chain." "Let's plan to do something as a family Monday night since Mom's meeting has been cancelled."

4. Feeling Level

While the first three levels are important to the smooth running of a household, intimacy cannot be achieved when communication is limited to them. Couples limited to these levels may enjoy "meeting minds," and share considerably at the intellectual level. But to this point, emotions are still carefully guarded. It is at the feeling level that couples really take significant strides toward the light, moving toward intimacy with every step.

At this level, feelings are attached to information. With the disclosure of feelings, couples become increasingly more vulnerable in their relationship, risking personal safety for intimacy. Someone has said that feelings can be sorted into four main categories: glad, mad, sad, and afraid. Learning to share negative feelings in a constructive manner particularly represents an important step toward intimacy.

5. Self-disclosure Level

It is at this level of communication that intimacy is built. The term *intimacy* is often equated with sexual intercourse. But to clamp so narrow a limitation on the term is to cheat it of its fullness. Scripture uses the imagery of "naked and unashamed" to describe the intimacy of marriage in God's original design. To stand naked and unashamed in a relationship is to risk being fully known that you might stretch toward fully loving. Nothing is hidden. There is no reason to hide. Each feels safe in the other's love, able to risk any disclosure because of trust built over time. This is no experience of illusion, however. As Elizabeth Achtemeier (1976) explains it:

In the biblical faith, there is never any illusion that you and I are saints, at least not according to the usual definition of the term. When we share that faith, we therefore do not take with us into marriage unrealistic expectations about what we are like or are apt to do. We are, according to the Christian faith, a unique blend of saint and sinner, capable of the highest and most tender love and equally of the lowest spite and selfishness. Usually both sides of our natures are in full operation at any given time. . . .

If we can acknowledge that in our marital unions, if we know we are both saint and sinner, if we realize that we live by the grace of love, rather than by earned merit and admiration, then we have the freedom to come out from behind our facades and to bare our souls, warts and all (pp. 136-137).

Interestingly, however, the Hebrew verb "to know," is the word used in the Old Testament for sexual intimacy (compare Gen. 4:1; 1 Sam. 1:19). It is the same language used to speak of God's desired relationship with His people (Ps. 139:1; Jer. 9:3; Hosea 13:4; John 17:3; 1 Cor. 8:3). It is much more than mere knowledge *about* a person. It connotes a profound relationship *with* another. One who *knows* God and is *known* by Him experiences a sense of total acceptance, assurance, and peace. *Knowing* one's spouse and being *known* provides for the most complete, fulfilling, and at the same time pleasurable and satisfying experience known to humans. Physical intimacy then becomes a "bright thread of joy woven in the ordinary colors of daily life" (Grace and Grace, 1980, p. 81), a celebration of the vitality that surges in us as His creation as male and female, of the experience in knowing intimately—which we pursue together in marriage, and of the joy which is beyond belief as we enter into intimacy with the Giver of every good gift.

Discuss together as a group some of the barriers to this kind of "terrifying closeness" (Achtemeier, 1976, p. 136) between couples today. For starters:

- fear of the response that sharing at this level or about this issue might elicit
- fear of rejection or ridicule
- resignation that no one listens, so why talk
- inability to be in touch with or express feelings
- too much "togetherness," need space to develop as persons
- withholding communication to punish
- lost touch with each other over time

- fatigue, time pressure
- cultural norms
- unwillingness to be drawn from the pursuit of personal development and desires
- the reality of life that there is an ebb and flow in relationships, seasons when we move close and taste intimacy at the deepest levels and other moments when the best we can do is live together side by side

COUPLE ACTIVITY

Write separately and then share alone as couples on the following:

1. Ways in which I feel I really know you . . .
2. Ways in which I feel known and understood by you . . .
3. Barriers we are experiencing that inhibit intimacy . . .
4. Areas in our relationship where there is still distance, intimacy to be stretched toward . . .
5. Things I can do to bring down the walls between us . . .

ALTERNATE COUPLE ACTIVITY

On a large sheet of paper, create a map of your journey toward intimacy together over the years of your marriage. What events mark the valleys, the mountain peaks? During what seasons in your marriage have you made the best progress? What circumstances sent you off on a detour? Where are you right now? Where would you like to be tomorrow? next month? next year? What can you do to encourage new levels of intimacy between you?

A closing thought —

To plumb the depths of one another in search of intimacy in marriage is a rewarding experience within God's plan for every Christian couple. But we must not forget that we are also called as individual Christians and as couples to more than a quest for personal joy. As children of the light, we are challenged to turn from the total pursuit of our own happiness to become involved in one another's lives. All that we achieve together toward wholeness and intimacy must eventually be placed in service, service which "outlasts our waxing and waning, and that finally issues in an eternal kingdom . . . of love and joy and righteousness" (Achtemeier, 1976, p. 150). It is to this end that couples come together for growth and move apart from the circle of support and encouragement they have created together to become the salt of the earth.

References

- Achtemeier, E. (1976). *The committed marriage*. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press.
- Balswick, J. O., & Balswick, J. K. (1991). *The family: A christian perspective on the contemporary home*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.
- Grace, M., & Grace, J. (1980). *A joyful meeting*. St. Paul, MN: International Marriage Encounter.
- Guernsey, D. (1984). *The family covenant*. Elgin, IL: David C. Cook Publishing Co.

MacDonald, G., & MacDonald, G. (1992). *Till the heart be touched*. Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell Co.

Montagu, A. (1971). *Touching: The human significance of the skin*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Powell, J. (1974). *The secret of staying in love*. Niles, IL: Argus Communications.

Smedes, L. (1984). *Forgive and forget*. San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers.

White, Ellen G. (1952). *The Adventist home*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association.

_____. (1941). *Christ's object lessons*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association.

_____. (1940). *The desire of ages*. Boise, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association.

_____. (1946). *Thoughts from the mount of blessings*. Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association.