

THE POWER OF ONENESS

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Theme: Christian marriage is based on the biblical model of leaving father and mother and cleaving to one's spouse. In addition, the notion of becoming one is of paramount importance to the unity that God intends should exist between husband and wife.

Using this Resource: This marriage strengthening resource may be used by a group of married couples with a facilitator or by a couple on their own.

Session One: Understanding Oneness

According to annual surveys conducted across the United States, "Most people say that having a good marriage is one of the most important goals in life, and no other variable is more predictive of the health, happiness, and general well-being of adults than whether or not they are in satisfactory marriages" (Glenn, 1996, p. 15). Currently, approximately 45 percent of all first-time marriages end in divorce, yet about 60 percent of those who divorce remarry. These statistics confirm that people have a tremendous need to love and to be loved.

Every human being was formed by the Creator with a deep need and longing to be in relationship—first with God and then with another human being. We can clearly see in the Bible that love and relationships are central to God's plan for humankind. God wants to restore oneness between us and Him, and the relationship which most closely reflects our relationship with Him is the marital relationship.

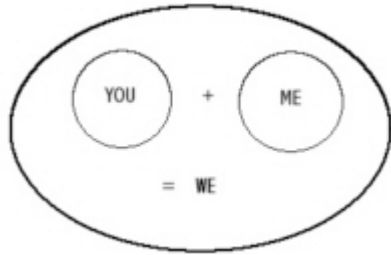
The notion of oneness and separateness is at the core of Christian theology. In fact, very different modalities of oneness are presented in the Bible for us to ponder—the Trinity, the relationship between Christ and the Church, the body of Christ—represented by the members of the Church—and also marriage, the most central of human relationships (Stanley et.al., 1998, p. 15).

Exercise: Read the following scripture passages, and underline key words and phrases that promote oneness with others. Then, based on these verses, share with your partner what oneness means to you:

- "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24).
- "So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate" (Matthew 19:6).
- "Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" (Romans 12:4-5).
- "Then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit

and purpose" (Philippians 2:2).

The Mystery of Oneness



"This oneness thing is quite a mystery," a newly married individual might say. "I mean, Lord, you said that the two of us would become one—but which one?"

We cannot develop true oneness in marriage by having one person's identity integrated into that of their spouse. One person's identity is never to be lost in the other. To make this point abundantly clear, Ellen G. White presents in her book *The Adventist Home*:

In your life union your affections are to be tributary to each other's happiness. Each is to minister to the happiness of the other. This is the will of God concerning you. But while you are to blend as one, neither of you is to lose his or her individuality in the other. God is the owner of your individuality. (p. 103)

Make no mistake, however. Every lasting relationship involves a compromise of personal independence. We call it accommodation. In no way should we confuse accommodation with assimilation. In assimilation one loses one's identity. Accommodation is planning for the benefit of both husband and wife; for the good of the whole. To be sure, in a meaningful and healthy marriage, the concept of "being in control of my own life" does not exist.

God intends that we should come together with our wonderful diversity and form a powerful new oneness that is unique. In 1 Corinthians 12 and 14, the apostle Paul describes the body of Christ as being one but made up of many individual parts, each unique in its own function. It is one body with multiple functions.

The mystery of oneness, then, is to be interdependent. Husband and wife are distinct individuals, yet allies. Husband and wife are on the same team—like a professional basketball team. Each member doesn't always get to the basket to score, however, each member contributes to the process of getting the ball up the court and into the basket of the opposing team in order to win the game.

As a couple, we need to put aside anything that blocks the possibility of our one-flesh relationship. We cannot allow society to set our pace—the pace of fast, frenetic lives where we have no time to feel, think, and experience God and one another. There must be an understanding, a deep commitment, and a strategy to win for the team.

Exercise: Individually, reflect on the following questions for a few minutes. Then discuss your answers with your spouse. Encourage each other to really explore the answers in depth in order to gain a sense of how you can foster more "we-ness" and less "me-ness." Close your discussion with prayer together.

- Do you feel that you and your mate are a team?
- When do you most feel that you and your spouse are a team? At what times do you feel that

you are playing on different teams? Are there ways in which you are competitive with each other in unhealthy ways?

- In your daily life, are you more inclined to individualism or teamwork? Are there ways in which you may be selfish with your mate? How can you be less selfish?
- Think of three nice things to do for your spouse this week (and thereafter) that would foster a greater sense of teamwork between the two of you. Don't discuss these with your spouse, just do them.

Session Two: Facilitating Oneness Through Communication

Exercise: • Ponder the following text together for a few moments: "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger" (James 1:19).

- Sit facing one another. Hold hands, then take turns listening to your spouse speak for two minutes. Use active listening. Maintain positive, accepting eye contact, but do not interrupt for any reason, just listen. The speaker may speak about anything s/he chooses. Each partner should have a turn as listener and speaker.
- Discuss with each other how it felt to be listened to without interruptions. How did it feel to speak without interruptions?

"Communication is the marital glue of oneness" (Meredith, 1999). Unfortunately, most couples have not learned how to communicate effectively, especially when they have disagreements. For many couples, the main problem is not finances, sex, or in-laws, but their inability to resolve these issues without destroying their oneness.

As a couple, you must learn to create a safe, loving environment which fosters a positive atmosphere for communicating; in essence you must learn the secrets to dialogue. Susan Heitler in her book *The Power of Two* (1997) says it well:

Picture two soccer players with a ball that they are kicking as they run the length of a field. They may take turns gently kicking the ball back and forth as they move forward. One player may dribble the ball most of the way, the other running alongside. One could kick the ball at the other, intending hurt rather than play. One could kick the ball in a different direction, veering away from the direction the two of them had been traveling. Actually, there are infinite variations in how the two runners and the ball might interact—the tone between them, how they pace themselves, how they share the ball, and what path they run.

It is much the same when you and your spouse converse. Different patterns are created as you share the "conversational ball." There is frequent back and forth interaction as the two of you take turns listening and speaking. When each partner is intentional about directing the conversation toward the same goal, then the conversation will stay on a positive or straight line. Like a teammate, each of you needs to be conscious of how much you speak, how much your partner speaks, whether or not you are connecting or isolating one another as you converse, pay close attention to your tone and certain patterns in your dialogue.

There are conversational skills or techniques which you can learn in order to better facilitate communication and foster oneness. Although communication techniques or skills may feel awkward or uncomfortable at first, the key is to practice them so that they become a part of

normal behavior. Learning to communicate effectively with your spouse is critical to managing conflict properly.

The Four S's of Dialogue

Heitler (1997, p. 87) suggests that effective dialogue generally has four important characteristics: *symmetry*, *short segments*, *specifics*, and *summary*. Here's an explanation:

1. *Sustain symmetry*. Symmetry is the balance of how much each partner listens and speaks. Be sure when you are speaking that each partner is receiving equal airtime. It can be tiring and annoying to only listen, there needs to be a give and take in order to achieve balance.

2. *Speak in short segments*. Short segments refer to how much is said at one time. In order for your spouse to really hear and digest what you are saying, like eating, it has to be taken in small chunks. When you are speaking, pause often to allow your spouse, the listener, to paraphrase what you just said, to be sure your partner understood you. Keep your speeches short; try to cover just one point at a time. Then the listener can become the speaker, you can now respond by sharing your point.

3. *Share specifics*. "Specifics" means details. Details are crucial especially when you are trying to problem solve as a team. Of course, this doesn't mean that you start the dialogue talking about what you did from the moment you woke up this morning. That might be an invitation for your spouse to tune out. However, you need to be very specific about the issue that you are discussing, sharing your thoughts and feelings, and what your needs are regarding the discussion.

4. *Summarize*. Summaries are not necessary when you are just having a casual conversation with each other. But they are very powerful when you are trying to resolve a specific dilemma. Summaries consolidate all the information that has been shared by both partners, and gives the opportunity to restate or clarify what was said by either party earlier. Summaries help to move you from just discussing the issue at hand to beginning to generate possible solutions.

Using the Four S's For Couple Dialogue: Symmetry, Short Segments, Specifics, Summary

John Gottman (1999) says that the most obvious indicator that a discussion is not going to go well is how it begins. According to his research, the first three minutes of a fifteen minute conversation can predict the outcome of a conversation. If there is a "harsh startup," then chances are the conversation is destined to failure. For instance, if you begin the conversation by blaming, accusing, or in other negative ways, there is little chance that you will resolve the problem. So if you start your dialogue with a "harsh startup," take a breather, ask for pardon, and start over by "softening your startup" (p. 157).

In the following example, Nancy is concerned that Bob has been staying very late at the office. She has tried in the past to speak to him about it, but usually attacks him upon arrival home, naturally leaving the issue unresolved because of the negative path of the conversation. Nancy and Bob have been learning how to use the four S's in couple dialogue and so she is trying to practice this new skill. Bob and Nancy have previously found a mutually agreed upon time to have this discussion—a time when they are not as tense, perhaps after the children have gone to bed, so they can speak without distractions.

Nancy: Bob, I've been concerned that for the past three weeks, you have come home after 9:00 every evening. I know that things have been very hectic for you at the office, but I really miss having dinner with you in the evenings and the time that we spend together.

Bob: You are concerned that I have been coming home late and not spending much time with you?

Nancy: Yes. I am also concerned about your health and well-being. I think it is causing you a lot of stress to be putting in so much time at the office without having any down-time.

Bob: I really have been very busy at work and can't seem to be able to get to the bottom of my piles. Each day, I feel that I have not accomplished much and feel that I am not producing as much work as is expected of me.

Nancy: It sounds like you are not feeling very successful right now.

Bob: Absolutely. So I need you to understand that it is not that I don't want to spend time with you, I just need some extra time to try to catch up at work. But I also don't want to jeopardize my health and I certainly don't want to take you for granted. I really could use your help brainstorming about some possible solutions to this dilemma.

(Bob and Nancy begin brainstorming about possible solutions to their dilemma. They choose a solution to their problem and then summarize.)

Bob: I know that the last few weeks have been very difficult for you. I am committed to making whatever changes I can, in order to affirm you and let you know I love you and care for you very much. I will stay late only two nights a week as we agreed for the next few weeks until I get caught up at work.

Nancy: I really appreciate your understanding and being sensitive to me in this matter. And I want to be as supportive to you while you go through this very hectic time at work. I will try to give you the space that you need to unwind in the evenings and know that if you need some quiet time, it's not because you do not want to spend time with me.

Exercise: Now it's your turn. One of the most powerful ways in which you can learn how to change your pattern of communicating on sensitive or conflicted issues is to practice. For this session, choose a topic that is not a heated issue for the two of you to begin your practice. Talk about anything of interest to either of you: your dream vacation, goals for the future, sports, concerns at work, etc. Spend fifteen minutes practicing the techniques of the four S's. Don't try to solve problems or come up with solutions at first, just talk. Make sure that you keep the balance of speaker and listener, speak in short segments, be specific, and summarize.

Practice every day in your daily dialogues. When you feel more comfortable with the technique, then move up to tougher and deeper issues and begin to practice problem solving.

Session Three: Maintaining Oneness: The Power of Commitment

"Love. . . is not self-seeking . . . love always hopes, always perseveres." 1 Corinthians 13:7

When God designed marriage, He designed it with lifetime commitment in mind. Having a long-term view of marriage is essential to developing and maintaining oneness in marriage. Couples who understand that no relationship is consistently satisfying will be successful because they will be committed to their relationship through thick and thin.

In order for marriage to thrive over time the long-term perspective is crucial. It gives each person in the relationship a feeling of security to know that their mate will be there when it really counts. When a secure and safe environment is created, then you feel more at ease to take the risk to reveal intimate details about yourself (Stanley et al., 1998, p. 180).

In the story of Ruth, this long term view is expressed beautifully when Ruth says to Naomi: "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16). In this statement you find the kind of commitment that expresses a future together, it conveys that oneness that we have been talking about all along.

Exercise: Take a few moments right now to read and discuss Ruth 1:16 together. Share with one another what this text means to each of you.

In order to maintain oneness in marriage, husband and wife **MUST** be committed to the ideal of oneness in marriage. Unless the notion of oneness in marriage is a high value for a couple, chances are that such a preferred future will not be sought after.

Couples who are committed to maintaining oneness in their marriage look at their relationship something like investing in the stock market. There is a measure of realism that is aware of the fact that there will be low times and high times in the marital relationship—bear markets and bull markets—if you will. However, there is a commitment to staying in the relationship for the long haul and giving close attention to the little things that nurture the relationship, just like experienced investors do with the stock market.

If your marriage has become tired and routine, it will be important to stop and reflect on what your relationship was like when it was vibrant, in order to recapture the oneness you once had.

Perhaps you will need to take the counsel the true and faithful witness, Jesus Christ, gives to the church at Ephesus: "You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first" (Revelation 2:3-5a).

Exercise: Take a few moments and reflect on the following together:

- *Remember* what you used to have together. What attracted you to each other? What did you do on your first date? What kinds of things did you do for fun?
- *Repent.* Decide to turn things around. Talk together and commit yourselves to getting away from the routine in your lives that has brought you to this point. You have the power to change your mind and the current direction of your life. Pray to the Lord for strength to change your current pattern of living which is leading you to be alienated from each other.
- *Do the things you did at first.* Set aside time each week for you and your spouse to talk as friends, just like you did when you first started dating. Schedule time to do some of the fun things you used to do together in your early marriage. Commit yourself to being less self-centered and more other-centered. Ask the Lord's help for the willingness to act on these convictions that will give you the power of commitment to maintain oneness in your marital relationship (Stanley et al., 1998, pp. 193,194).

In *Happiness Homemade*, Ellen G. White encourages married couples in their commitment to maintaining oneness by saying:

"Determine to be all that is possible to be to each other. Continue the early attentions. In every way encourage each other in fighting the battles of life. . . Let there be mutual love, mutual forbearance. Then marriage, instead of being the end of love, will be as it were the very beginning of love" (p. 24).

Always remember that you are not alone in your quest for oneness in your marriage. It is not an easy road, but it is a real possibility. The promise of success is found in Philippians 4:13 which states: "I can do everything through him who gives me strength." Trust God, and watch your marriage grow from strength to strength.

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