

A Premarital Congregation-based Education Program: Towards Addressing
A Gap in Premarital Preparation in the Three Forks Church of Christ,
South-Central Kentucky, USA.

by
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Declaration

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and has not previously in its entirety or in part been submitted to any institution for a degree.

Signed: Nikolaus Secula Date: October 16, 2018

Dedication and Acknowledgments

This is dedicated to my beautiful family. To my wonderful and supportive wife Tiffany who has stood beside me in my pursuits, thank you. She has been my rock of encouragement and strength to continue in the low points when I wanted to lay down my research. I also dedicate this to my three kids Timothy, Levi, and Faith as well as to my church family at Three Forks. Your support and love along my educational journey have been a sustaining force.

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Abstract

The purpose and intent of this thesis were to research an observed issue and seek a resolution within the local ministry context of Three Forks Church of Christ. The issue to be observed was: what the church could do as an additional step in order to close a perceived gap in the premarital preparation program provided to congregants of the church. A literature review and surveys of married couples within the church as well as high divorce rates support the notion that a gap in the premarital preparation approach of the church exists. The findings within this research suggest that the recommended solution of a classroom-based premarital education program in addition to current efforts would help to close the gap and provide increased participation in such preparatory education in anticipation of lowering the prospect of divorce.

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Chapter One

Introduction and Orientation

1.1 Introduction

The introductory chapter presents the research problem addressed in the thesis here presented. The chapter offers background to the study, a general outline of the research and objectives sought. The intent of this research is to explore an observed issue within the Three Forks Church of Christ, a local congregation of the Churches of Christ in the United States, regarding the need to take further steps to address premarital preparation in an effort to lower divorce rates. Premarital education will be looked at in order to accomplish this. Education has been identified as a part of counselling approaches that help prevent future struggles and/or prepares individuals with the skills needed to face future troubles. In relationship to premarital education, Julie Atkins states, “A skills training approach to preventative relationship intervention involves teaching couples critical relationship skills, such as conflict management or positive communication” (Atkins 2008:46). Education as a part of premarital counselling is a natural element to any form of premarital counselling as its very intent is preventative.

The research focuses on the premarital preparation program and biblical principles of teaching for the local congregation. This research seeks to explore possible steps a local congregation of the “Churches of Christ,” such as the Three Forks Church of Christ, can

take to raise marital satisfaction through a premarital education program and thereby lower the divorce rate.

1.2 Background

High rates of divorce and broken homes present the need for local congregations of the church to be engaged in efforts to counter the marital dissatisfaction that often leads to such. Accurate statistics referencing divorce rates in the United States are difficult to ascertain based on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) last reporting data from 1997 (NCHS 1998). Some researchers have claimed a 42% rate and a declining trend, while others believe this is not properly factoring in important details such as couples getting married at older ages than previous decades (Kennedy and Ruggles 2014:588). Those who are counted among believers in Christ have contributed to the trend. According to a 2008 study, some faith groups, those identifying as Catholic and Evangelical, fared better than the national trends. Catholics reported a 28% divorce rate and Evangelicals a 26% rate. Those of a Christian faith but not identifying as Catholic or Evangelical reported a 33% divorce rate, as reported in the study. This rate is the same as the rate among non-religious-reporting individuals (Barna 2008). The study above adjusted for those with multiple divorces and shows a smaller reported divorce rate than some previous studies.

Whether the rate is 42% or 50% or lower as the reported numbers of 26-28%, these numbers should be concerning to Christians and church leaders. From a Christian perspective, marriage is first and foremost a God-created institution (Genesis 2:23-24), and it is to be a union for life (Matthew 19:4-6; Romans 7:1-3). Therefore, divorce should be a rarity in the Christian paradigm and not as prevalent as it has now become in our modern society. Finding a way to strengthen marriages, and thereby lower the divorce rate should weigh on the hearts and minds of church leaders.

The church's primary method of premarital education has been premarital counselling offered by ministers. These programs can range from formal to informal sessions

conducted by ministers with various levels of training, and they generally contain a limited educational component. Education is often a smaller part of most current premarital counselling programs because of the limited amount of time devoted to the counselling. Minister-based premarital counselling programs are generally short in duration, often ranging from a handful of sessions to six or eight at the most. This research proposes to address this issue with an expanded education program.

Premarital counselling has proven to be a successful teaching platform to encourage greater marital satisfaction. An analysis of outcome research done by Carroll and Doherty finds that “the average person who participated in a premarital prevention program was significantly better off afterward than 79% of people who did not participate. Stated differently, the average participant in a premarital program tends to experience about a 30% increase in measures of outcome success” (Carroll and Doherty 2003). These numbers support the efficacy of premarital counselling. Since success is found in such counselling, it should implore the question, “How can the church build on these successes to meet the gap in premarital education?” The main answer being pursued is increasing the educational component by implementing a premarital education classroom-based program.

1.3 Research Problem Statement

The research herein is designed to investigate a perceived gap in premarital education offered within congregations of the “Churches of Christ” in South-Central Kentucky, specifically within the Three Forks church of Christ. There appears to be a gap in what local congregations are offering in regard to premarital training for its congregants and what is required to strengthen marriages and lower divorces rates among Christians. The research herein is designed to propose a premarital education program as an answer to this gap. The intended consequence of such a program is to affect marriage satisfaction and to lower divorce rates. A Premarital Education program as here proposed is to be understood as a local (that is, congregational), classroom-based, educational program and not as part of a premarital counselling program. This is in keeping with the Biblical model of teaching found throughout scripture (Deuteronomy 119:19, 2 Timothy 3:15-17;

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Proverbs 11:14; Colossians 3:16; etc.) as well as the very core church teaching of Christian discipleship found in the Great Commission extended by Jesus Himself: “teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20).

1.4 Main Research Question

What can the Three Forks Church of Christ, South-Central Kentucky, USA congregation do to move towards better equipping or preparing individuals for marriage and thereby lower the divorce rate?

1.5 Research Sub-Questions

- Why is premarital counselling so important? What can be learned from the success of premarital counselling and what does research show concern the effectiveness or success of premarital counselling?
- What does the three Forks congregation offer for premarital counselling? How effective has it been in preparing members for marriage? What do members see as its success?
- Is there a gap in utilization or exposure to premarital preparation as currently offered at Three Forks?
- What components of premarital counselling programs seem to offer a benefit?
- How can these components be used to design a premarital education program at the local level?
- How would these concepts relate to the church’s charge in educating its congregants?
- What Biblical principles for marriage can be derived from Ephesians 5:22-33?
- What would a premarital education program designed for the Three Forks Church of Christ, South-Central Kentucky, USA look like?

1.6 The Elucidation of the Problem

Research by Yilmaz and Kalkan (2010) analyzed outcome data among those who received premarital counselling and those who did not. Their finding was: "According to the results of research, it is concluded that premarital relationship development programs help couples to increase their relationship satisfaction and that individuals who participated in the program benefit significantly from the program" (Yilmaz and Kalkan 2010:1918). The recommended action that was concluded in their research was the implementation of mandatory Premarital Relationship Development courses for those training under professional counselling and psychology licensing programs (2010:1918). The argument to be pursued here is if the same recommendations should be applied at the local congregation level, instituted by local leadership in the form of a premarital educational program.

1.7 Objectives of the Research

- Investigated current literature on the effectiveness of premarital preparation programs.
- Investigate what the Three Forks Church of Christ is currently offering regards to marriage preparation or premarital education.
- Analyze the current premarital preparation literature for areas of education that can be extrapolated into a classroom-based education program.
- To propose practical steps to establish a premarital education ministry at the local congregational level consistent with the church's roles and functions.
- In addition to the direct benefit to the Three Forks Church of Christ, the research is presented to address a similar reality and need in other congregations.

1.8 Design and Methodology

The modified Osmer model is being chosen for this research (Osmer 2008). The model fits well with the perspective from which this research will be done, that of a congregational leader. Osmer observes that congregational leaders are the ones who witness many of the practical issues faced by congregants. He also notes that

congregational leaders can provide a high level of attentiveness to those facing struggles in their congregations, and this places them in a unique perspective for practical theological inquiry (Osmer 2008:33). The local church leader, then, is in a unique position to explore practical solutions within the local ministry context. The modified Osmer model offers a framework to explore both the statistical data and the spiritual perspective of the problem and then propose steps to address the problem from a congregational point of view.

1.8.1 Interpretive task: Literature review

The guiding question for this task is, "Why is it going on?" and as Osmer describes, it is the task of engaging in "sagely wisdom" (Osmer 2008:81-82). The literature review in this section will be a review of current research related to premarital counselling and education programs. The review will consider current divorce rates and premarital counselling success to determine whether these programs have been effective in lowering divorce rates.

The success of premarital counselling programs will be examined by gathering and comparing current findings of research outcomes on premarital counselling. The aim will be to identify whether premarital counselling has shown a positive effect on marriage satisfaction. The success of premarital education programs will be considered in a like fashion.

The high rate of marital dissatisfaction will be investigated by reviewing a) current divorce rates among Christian adherents against non-Christian adherents and b) marital satisfaction of couples who went through premarital counselling programs against those who did not. The analysis will draw on current research data by researchers like Fawcett (2010), Carol (2003, 2010), Sillman (2010) and others who have provided relative research data in the field.

A challenge would be presented to the Three Forks congregation regarding recognizing the disparity between current premarital preparation programs offered at Three Forks and continued high divorce rates. The congregation would be challenged to understand that, although premarital counselling is beneficial for those who partake in it, the program is falling short of meeting the need to deter the current rates of marital dissatisfaction.

The relevant particulars here are; (1) that marriage dissatisfaction, as demonstrated through high divorce rates, remains high; (2) that premarital counselling has shown to raise the level of marital satisfaction; (3) that premarital counselling appears limited in that it only can raise the bar of satisfaction for those who participate in it; and (4) that successful elements, concepts, and areas can be identified in premarital counselling programs and be utilized in greater depth in an educational program that would reach more individuals than are currently reached through premarital counselling.

1.8.2 Descriptive-Empirical task

The situation that is being observed is the perceived shortcomings currently found in the local church's premarital education approach. If these shortcomings are found truly to exist, the important follow-up question is: "Is the church doing enough?" A survey will be utilized to explore the effect of premarital counselling on married individuals within the Three Forks Church of Christ congregation. It is anticipated that fluidity of membership between local congregations might affect the survey results, that is, the easy migration and movement of members from one local congregation to another due to many congregations within proximity of Three Forks. The expected results are that significant numbers of married individuals would not have gone through a premarital counselling program at Three Forks or even been married by a minister from Three Forks. Others may have a connection with Three Forks but were married by ministers from other local congregations. It seems under such circumstance that a second survey would also prove helpful—one that focuses on other area congregations in south-central Kentucky. This second survey to gather further information on the current offerings of premarital counselling programs in South Central Kentucky will thus be implemented. The purpose

of this survey is to identify what premarital counselling or premarital education the church is currently offering its congregants.

This mixed method of quantitative and qualitative research inquiry will be utilized to focus on two distinct phenomena unfolding in the church: (1) participation in minister-offered premarital counselling at the Three Forks Church of Christ, and (2) the offering of classroom-based premarital education at local churches of Christ in South Central Kentucky. Furthermore, the research will be done to place the observed reality of perception of premarital counselling, derived from Osmer's principle of "priestly listening" (Osmer 2008:35-37) in a context that is productive for consideration by the leadership of the Three Forks Church of Christ.

1.8.3 Normative task

The guiding question for this task is: "What ought to be going on?" Osmer refers to this task as "prophetic discernment" (Osmer 2008:129-132). The theological reflection in this section is based on Biblical principles regarding marriage, ethical norms to guide premarital counselling and education ministry and examples of good practice. This task relies on appropriate Biblical insight and interpretation to address the issue through the lens of what should be taking place.

The main objective of this section is to encourage and equip the church to realize its responsibility, based on Scriptural principles, to teach and prepare, and thus educate its members for marriage. Furthermore, it is the objective of this section to underscore that premarital counselling alone does not combat the reality of high marital dissatisfaction and high divorce rates successfully. This research will present Scriptural evidence that the local congregation has a responsibility to teach the word of God as it relates to preparing couples for marriage. The local congregation has an inherent responsibility to do what is right, as is noted in James 4:17 (NKJV): "Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin." This research will argue that it would be good practice to take the success of premarital counselling and extrapolate it into a premarital education program taught at the local congregation.

The intended outcome is to increase the exposure to elements, teachings, and concepts that have shown success in raising marital satisfaction. This is in harmony with the teaching of the New Testament Scripture, where one is implored to “be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Roman 12:2). Paul states that we are renewed and transformed by focusing on the will and teaching of God. This approach would be consistent with preventative care in counselling circles, as already noted in the article by Julie Atkins (2008:46).

1.8.4 The Pragmatic task

The guiding question for this task is: “How might we respond?” In order to answer this question, a premarital education program will be designed based on the results of the descriptive-empirical task and Biblical principles.

The intent is to set forth a simple model for the consideration of local church leaders, such as Benjamin Silliman’s model in his article “Building Healthy Marriages Through Early and Extended Outreach With Youth.” Whereas his model strives to emphasize a “macro” approach to strengthening marriages through teaching and outreach in teenagers, this proposed model would take more of a “micro” approach focused on premarital education in a classroom setting. The goal would be to prescribe elements for a teaching program to be used at the local congregation level and address the elements that were identified in the research that is within the purview of the church’s teaching responsibilities. As an example, Benjamin Silliman identifies characteristics such as “self-control, empathy, and conflict resolution” as qualities lacking in unsuccessful marriages (Silliman 2003). Successful programs, then, should be designed to strengthen these areas in new potential marriages.

As not every congregation will have access to the same resources, there should be a base level of involvement in which all can participate. From this base, the intent is to

develop steps that could be considered to strengthen the church's involvement in this critical area of ministry. This will include adding fundamental teaching related to marriage preparation into the teaching platform of the church, as well as encouragement in seminars directly related to the topic.

1.9 Key Terms

Premarital education – As defined in this work, is a premarital education, or relationship education program that does not necessarily follow the traditional conjoint session format. These programs also have a larger participant base than just those already engaged and focus on additional areas of relationship training, for example on the important aspect mate selection. These programs are being looked at separately as they offer a different format and approach as to what is typically offered in a church setting, namely at the Three Forks Church of Christ.

Premarital preparation – As defined in this work, premarital preparation refers to premarital counselling and education programs that would be offered to engaged couples just prior to being married. This will be distinguished in this thesis from premarital education programs that break the typical model of conjoint sessions offered to engaged couples. This is important to note as some premarital preparation programs utilize the terminology of premarital education. In many cases, this is due to the format that distinguishes the program from a counselling session approach. However, for the purposes of the research herein, the conjoint nature of these programs will still have them considered under the preface of premarital preparation programs.

Church of Christ – This phrase as used in this work is to identify the Christian religious group known as the “churches of Christ.” It does not carry a general identification with denominations who claim allegiance to Jesus or Christianity. It should be assumed that

when this term is used in a singular or plural, it is in reference to this one particular group unless otherwise stated.

The “churches of Christ” are identified as New Testament Christians, desiring to reject creeds and dogmas created by men. They are most commonly associated with the Restoration Movement. Encyclopedia Britannica notes that they are, “Any of various conservative Protestant churches found mainly in the U.S. Each congregation is autonomous in government, with elders, deacons, and a minister or ministers; there is no national administrative organization” (Britannica Concise Encyclopedia 2017).

1.10 Conclusion

This chapter provided a summary overview of the direction of this research. It is the intended goal to identify the perceived gap in educational preparedness for marriage that is offered at the local congregation level of the Three Forks Church of Christ in the United States so that a solution can be pursued. This will be done primarily through a literature review and a local survey to address current premarital preparation efforts. The goal is to identify a step the church can further take in better preparing congregants for marriage.

Chapter Two

Literature Review – Marriage Preparation Programs

2.1 Introduction

This chapter is intended to elucidate the need for and effectiveness of marital preparation by means of premarital preparation and education programs. It will be done by bringing the current premarital preparation situation to light through exploration and review of the literature regarding marriage, divorce, premarital counselling, and its benefits. This section will also consider the concept of premarital education programs, though sometimes these counselling and education programs are considering one and the same within the literature.

This chapter will explore premarital education programs that focus on group training and/or mate selection. These programs offer a different approach to the current approach shared by many churches, including the Three Forks congregation, of conjoint preparation and training featuring an already engaged couple set to marry. These programs may possibly shed light into a direction where a further step could be taken by the leadership of the Three Forks Church of Christ to enhance the premarital preparation program currently offered.

The outcome pursued in this chapter is to discover the effectiveness of premarital preparation programs, as well as if an expanded education program might show promise

within the literature for consideration within the local church context. These findings will be elucidated further in chapter three when current preparation efforts will be evaluated through surveys of the congregants of the Three Forks Church of Christ.

2.2 The Need for Premarital Education - Current Divorce Rates

Divorce is a difficult issue to confront. Divorce effects so many areas of life from spirituality to psychology, to sociology, to education and even financial security. This creates an ample basis to understand divorce rates in the United States. However, as a matter of theological insight, divorce represents the breakdown of God's created institution of marriage, which means this is an issue the must be confronted by the church.

Divorce rates in the United States are high—just how high is a matter of debate and is complicated by varying studies' findings and data samples. Some researchers argue that one out of every two marriages will end in divorce. Scott Vail cites the U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2008, to claim a 50% divorce rate in the United States (2012: iv). This statistic is also cited in work by Britzman and Sauerheber, though in their work they note factors such as religious background and children can have an effect on this number (2014:428). Others have claimed the number is inflated, but that the actual number is still high at 42%, even though it is also on a downward trend (Kennedy and Ruggles 2014:588). The argument over the exact rate is inconsequential, as any number in this range should be considered much too high to church leaders who seek to promote the ways of God who "hates divorce" (Malachi 2:16).

Added to the trend of high divorce rates within the United States is a social shift in how marriage is viewed. This can be seen in varying ways, but one notable way is the shift in the general public view on same-sex marriage. Support for same-sex marriage has jumped a significant amount, 21 percentage points, from 2003 to 2013. 53% of Americans now are said to support same-sex marriage, which is a reversal when 59% percent of Americans opposed it in 2003 (Public Religion Research Institute Survey Reports 2014).

Along with the change from “one man and one woman for life” to “until one gets bored or finds someone else,” marriage is now also viewed beyond a one man and one woman definition. The United States has adopted an increasingly progressive culture that has embattled the traditional view of marriage as one man and one woman (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:4-6).

This progressive view of the state of marriage is not really new to current American culture; it has been decades in the making, resulting in an ever-deeper state of confusion regarding marriage. Even the naturalist psychologist Carl Rogers made this observation:

To me, it seems that we are living in an important and uncertain age, and the institution of marriage is most assuredly in an uncertain state. If 50-75 percent of Ford or General Motors cars completely fell apart within the early part of their lifetimes as automobiles, drastic steps would be taken. We have no such organized way of dealing with our social institutions, so people are groping, more or less blindly, to find alternatives to marriage (which is certainly less than 50 percent successful). Living together without marriage, living in communes, extensive child care centers, serial monogamy (with one divorce after the other), the women's liberation movement to establish the woman as a person in her own right, new divorce laws which do away with the concept of guilt – these all groping toward some new form of man-woman relationship for the future. It will take a bolder man than I to predict what will emerge (Rogers 1972:11).

A close examination of these words shows an acceptance of these moves to nontraditional intimate groups, not a longing to return to the truths of God. The statistics shown above from the PRRI seem to support the views of Carl Rogers. The Christian leader, who uses scripture as his guide, would point out that there is an organized way to deal with the social problems in society and that is based on God and His truth. This is seen by the presentation in Scripture of the source of moral deviations (Romans 1:21-32) as well as the remedy of such deviations being the truth of the gospel (1 Corinthians 6:9-

11). Christian leaders who abandon the standard of God would simply be marching into the same moral malaise into which the world has been caught as a result of rejecting absolute truth.

These trends have impacted the rate of divorce within the ranks of Christendom as well. As mentioned before, the 2008 study by the Barna Group indicates that Christian faith groups have not fared much better than the rest of the world in relation to divorce rates. Catholics reported a 28% divorce rate, Evangelicals a 26% rate, while those of a Christian faith but not identifying as Catholic or Evangelical reported a 33% divorce rate. This number would include those who are among the "churches of Christ," though there appears to be no scientific study done solely on this particular religious group.

Thus, the statistics show that the institution of marriage is facing grave challenges. In response to the difficulties facing marriage over the past several decades, premarital counselling programs by professionals and clergy have been developed and increasingly implemented. There appears to have been a shift in the 1970s where the focus went from educating couples about marriage to preparing them for it. This change in focus has been seen among the clergy as well as professional counselors. The result is an increased interest in formal programs that can prepare couples for entering marriage (Vail 2012:23).

It is the premise of this research that the church needs to consider implementing another step in meeting the preparation and education need of couples before marriage.

2.3 Benefits of Premarital Preparation Programs

Premarital preparation programs, such as premarital counselling, premarital education, premarital therapy, and premarital educative counselling are designed to provide tools to promote a healthy marriage in an effort to decrease the chance of divorce. Scott M. Stanley (2001:272) argues that premarital education could benefit couples in four ways:

(a) it can slow couples down to foster deliberation, (b) it sends a message that marriage matters, (c) it can help couples learn of options if they need help later, and (d) there is evidence that providing some couples with some types of premarital training, for example, the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP), can lower their risks for subsequent marital distress or termination.

Stanley's observation is that premarital preparation offers a preventative measure by slowing down a couple to consider their commitments and their choices as well as offering them an opportunity to address points of interest within the marriage that could alleviate future distress. To slow down and not rush into a commitment such as marriage is not only an observation Stanley provides from his research but is also consistent with biblical principles. In discussing making a decision that affects one's submission to God, Jesus noted the importance of counting the cost before entering such a commitment:

For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it—lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish'? (Luke 14:28-30 NKJV).

The point is decisions of such importance should be entered into with some measure of planning and preparation. Stanley's argument, involving the importance of "slowing couples down to foster deliberation," with specific reference to expectation and relationship weaknesses, is solidly grounded in his research and Biblical principles.

The second point that Stanley mentions is a point that hinges on rational logic and not on empirical evidence. He states that "there are no empirical data that I am aware of to judge if couples today take the decision to marry less serious [sic] than years ago" (Stanley 2001:274). Though this might be difficult, if not impossible, to prove empirically, as per Stanley's observation, it does seem reasonable that our culture takes marriage less seriously than in generations past. Premarital counselling can be seen as a means to

underscore the importance of marriage. Certainly, a Biblically-based view of marriage as a lifelong commitment presented in a premarital counselling session would convey such a message.

Another added benefit of premarital counselling is that it can help emphasize the weight of commitment inherent in marriage. H. Norman Wright notes that he often explains to a couple seeking premarital counselling that marriage is a commitment they are making to one another for the next fifty years (Wright 1992:79). The point is not the exact number of years, but the perspective that this is a relationship that matters and will be consequential over their entire life.

One of the great benefits that Stanley points out is his third listed benefit: "helping couples learn of options if they need help later" (Stanley 2001:272). This is predicated on the belief that if the couple has already had some contact and experience with counselling, through premarital counselling, they will be more likely to seek counselling later in times of distress or trouble. According to Stanley, "When a couple has a positive premarital educational experience, they may be more likely to seek the advice of either the person who helped them premaritally or others" (Stanley 2001:275). Though not much study or evidence can be sighted for this observation, it appears valid from a common-sense perspective. Through the counselling, a relationship is built which the couple can revisit in times of distress. In the realm of premarital counselling performed by a minister, this process hopefully builds a deeper connection not only with the minister by the godly truths that he may share with the couple.

The fourth benefit noted by Stanley is that it helps lower marriage dissatisfaction and divorce (Stanley 2001:272). This is a debated conclusion, as there are competing studies which have led to a murky understanding of the long-term effect of premarital preparation on divorce. These studies will be considered in the next section. However, Stanley does note that the short-term benefits of premarital counselling appear solid. Stanley and Markham (1997, cited in Stanley, 2001:275) report, "In nationwide polling data, those who had taken premarital counselling in the prior 5 years were less likely than others to have

thought about divorce and were more likely to have confidence in their ability to handle their future." For church leaders within the Three Forks churches of Christ, this result should be encouraging, though it does leave the questions: "Is premarital counselling enough? Should the church go beyond the current offering of premarital counselling to offer an additional education program?"

2.4 Effectiveness of Premarital Preparation Programs

An inherent problem with traditional premarital counselling is revealed in the following definition: "Premarital counselling is a brief intervention, with programs averaging about 4 hours of contact time with each couple" (Murray and Murray 2004:349). Premarital counselling works on the assumption that certain skills and points of communication can be learned prior to entering the marriage that will help prepare the couple to face difficulties that arise in the marriage.

The goals of premarital counselling generally include the following: (a) To teach couples information about married life, (b) to enhance couple communication skills, (c) to encourage couples to develop conflict resolution skills, and (d) to allow the couple to speak about certain sensitive topics, such as sex and money (Murray and Murray 2004:350).

The problem with the theory though is that premarital counselling has a debated track record. This is due to many factors, including the couples themselves. For instance, a couple may feel "love will get them through" and forgo the sessions or not make the committed effort to the sessions. Gary Collins (1998:392) makes note that even counselors are sometimes wary of preventive-type premarital counselling: "One experienced counselor concluded that premarital counselling was futile because most of the couples in his church approached the counselling with 'amused tolerance.'" This, of course, is just one symptom of many complications that make it difficult to assess the effectiveness of premarital counselling.

Despite numerous factors that can undo the potential positives of premarital counselling, it remains a tremendous tool to encourage young couples, or any couple for that matter, into a stronger marriage. A consideration of studies on these matters is helpful.

In 2003 an article entitled "Evaluating the Effectiveness of Premarital Prevention Programs: A meta-analytic review of outcome research" published the findings of Carroll and Doherty on the effectiveness of premarital preventive programs, including premarital education, counselling, therapy, educative counselling, and preparation. The research reviewed thirteen experimental studies on the results of premarital prevention programs. According to these published findings, "Results revealed that the mean effect size for premarital programs was .80, which means that the average person who participated in a premarital prevention program was significantly better off afterward than 79% of people who did not participate" (Carroll and Doherty 2003: 105). These findings bolster the view that premarital programs do have a positive effect on those who participate in them.

These positive results as found by Carrol and Doherty (2003) are not universally accepted. In competing research published in "Do Premarital Education Programs Really Work? A Meta-Analytic Study (2010)," researchers found results that were much more complicated. According to the research team of Elizabeth B Fawcett, Alan J Hawkins, Victoria L Blanchard, and Jason S Carroll (2010), the results of a meta-analysis of the published material and research showed some complex findings. Their research found that when unpublished research was included premarital education don't show an argument of premarital education improving relationship quality.

The understanding that one of the researchers—Carrol—is common to both the 2003 and 2010 studies adds credibility to these findings. This competing data seems to paint a murky picture of premarital counselling's ability to lower divorce rates.

Despite the conflicting results of long-term analyses in premarital counselling and preparation programs, there are some common findings that shed light on successful aspects of premarital counselling. As mentioned before, Stanley cites that couples

participating in premarital counselling thought less of divorce and felt more equipped than their peers who did not go through premarital counselling (Stanley 2001:275). Another study and subsequent report by various researchers concluded that a premarital education program could affect positively short-term improvements in relationship cognition and behavior (Barton, Futris and Bradley 2014:174).

Premarital counselling does have a complicated picture of results, due to many causes such as differing approaches, programs, the enthusiasm of the couples, outward pressures, faithfulness, and other factors. However, many studies point to tangible positives of premarital counselling, and it is these benefits church leaders should consider when taking steps to help lower the divorce rates among their congregants.

2.5 Premarital Education Programs

In the last section, the literature was explored and shown to provide a convincing argument for the effectiveness of premarital counselling and preparation programs. However, since the research in this thesis is being presented to argue for adding to, or supplementing, the current minister provided premarital counselling offered at Three Forks with a classroom-based premarital education program a closer look at the benefits of preventative education programs is warranted. A distinction is being made here as some premarital programs do use the term premarital education program but still follow the basic idea of conjoint education involving an engaged couple seeking to be married. What is being considered here are programs that do not necessarily follow the conjoint education concept and can be utilized at different phases of the relationship, even before a serious relationship is formed. This section will explore the literature on such programs, and the findings shall play a major role in considering the main research question of this thesis, what can the Three Forks church of Christ do to take further steps to promote a premarital education program?

The population group most relevant to this research is the local church body which is further explored through surveys in the next chapter; however, the general studies

explored in this research present a backboard for considering their findings against the local church context. The first study considered here is one conducted on the effectiveness of the PICK program with emerging adults. In research reported by Bradford, Stewart, Pfister, and Higginbotham, it was found that “there is relatively little educational programming for individuals in the mate selection phase, there is little evaluation research on such programs, particularly with community samples” (2016:631). The study targeted emerging adults and the effectiveness of the PICK program using a community sample. The researcher concluded, “the summative and formative data both point to PICK as being a promising prerelationship program” (2016:642). The difficulty in extrapolating the finds of this research into a possible program for a local congregation like Three Forks is that their community samples included varying groups of age, some even divorced children. The positive take away though is the positive results in relationship training for those participating before they are selecting a possible mate. This provides some context for suggesting a possible education program with the church might have a similar benefit in helping to teach congregants better skills in selecting a mate, rather than simply trying to counsel a couple already to the stage of engagement.

Another study, this time by McGeorge and Carlson, sought to find the efficacy of premarital education utilizing the PREP-M instrument. The findings showed a positive effect for those participating in the study.

The statistical findings described in the previous section suggests that the intervention achieved its goal of improving participants’ knowledge concerning marital relationships and teaching healthy patterns of interacting that would lead to improved readiness and preparation for the transition to marriage (McGeorge and Carlson 2006:182).

These findings encourage this researcher again in the positive effects that premarital education can play on impacting marriages.

This research underscores another point of reference that is highly applicable to the research in this thesis. The research had a secondary goal to determine whether the structure of such premarital education determined effectiveness as it compared results of conjoint structure versus a group structure. The structure of a group education format would be in alignment with a projected concept of a classroom-based education program (McGeorge and Carlson 2006:165). The findings were not as the McGeorge and Carlson had predicted. "Contrary to what was predicted, the conjoint education participants scored consistently lower on each subscale and the composite score when compared to group education; however, these differences were not statistically significant" (McGeorge and Carlson 2006:183). These findings seem to suggest that a group format for premarital education is at least as effective as the conjoint education structure. This gives more evidence for the possibility that a group premarital education program could prove beneficial to congregants at the Three Forks Church of Christ.

The research in this thesis has shown compelling evidence that premarital counselling and other premarital preparation programs present a positive effect on marital satisfaction which, it is further argued, will lower divorce rates. The survey presented to the membership of the Three Forks Church of Christ also showed a positive self-reported view of premarital preparation from those who participated. As well, the survey revealed a gap in the typical approach implemented by Three Forks as well as other area congregations. The gap is seen in the number of couples who did not engage in premarital counselling, as well as the number of couples who were not married by a minister at the Three Forks congregation. What is herein being presented to fill this gap is a classroom-based premarital education program.

In a compelling journal article on relationship education and its positive effects, W Kim Halford states: "Relationship education holds much promise for reducing the individual, family, and community costs of relationship distress and breakdown" (Halford 2004:559). The argument presented by Halford is that relationship education should be offered to a couple at strategic or "crucial development points." One of these points, of course, is prior to marriage. According to Halford, "Entry to marriage is a good time for relationship

education because couples often face significant challenges early in marriage" (2004:561). This finding, along with the other cites above, represents a compelling reason to consider a classroom-based premarital education program to potentially reach more members within the congregation prior to a crucial moment in their lives and their potential marriages.

Although there could be objections against church leaders offering the counseling and premarital education programs on the basis of not being professionally trained, it is important to note that some studies have shown counselling by clergy and laypeople to be effective in this regard. The connection between marriage and religion to most couples is closely understood, churches support the idea of preventing divorce and are heavily embedded in the community. These are some of the reasons that have been cited for the importance of churches and leaders within the church offering premarital counseling and preparation (Hook, Worthington, *et al.* 2011:870).

In a 2001 study, a comparison was made utilizing a premarital program called PREP. This program was offered by two groups. The first group was conducted in a university setting (clinical trials) and the second was conducted by religious leaders.

This study reports on the results of the dissemination of an empirically-based, premarital education program within religious organizations. The following major results are discussed with respect to premarital prevention: (a) Clergy and lay leaders were as effective in the short run as our university staff; (b) couples taking the more skills-oriented intervention showed advantages over couples receiving naturally occurring services on interaction quality; and (c) couples reported that the communication skills components of premarital education were the most helpful (Stanley, Markman, *et al.* 2001:67).

The point in referencing the above study and results is not to advocate that clergy are just as competent as clinical counselors but to refute the point that only clinical counselors

are capable of offering such a program. Furthermore, the point of a classroom-based program is to offer Biblical-based education that will help to edify and prepare congregants for marriage. Items that are more representative of a clinical setting would not be found in such a proposed program.

2.6 Conclusion

The literature explored has provided a compelling argument for the effectiveness of premarital counselling and preparation programs. However, despite the efforts put forth in premarital counselling programs, divorce rates remain high signaling the need for more to be done. While there are many areas that might be explored for steps to strengthen the Three Forks congregation approach in preparing couples and individuals for marriage, two areas seem apparent in reviewing the literature presented in this chapter. First, the inherent issue that premarital counselling cannot be effective for those who never engage in it. A second observation would also follow that those who have already sought premarital counselling are typically engaged couples looking to marry. This restricts the ability of such programs to help develop an important relationship tool, mate selection. The literature regarding premarital education programs offers a positive argument in favor of developing a premarital education program that would reach a larger segment of the local congregation not waiting to offer such education and training to those already engaged and looking to marry. A classroom-based premarital education program would help to bring the benefit of earlier development of relationship skills, mate selection skills and potentially reach a larger population of the Three Forks congregation closing a perceived gap (this gap is explored in chapter 3) of those who actually engage in premarital counselling.

While current premarital counselling and preparation are beneficial, it is not fully accomplishing the goal of preventing or lowering the occurrence of divorce, suggesting more could be done. The research in the following chapters shall focus on the gap left by the traditional format of minister based premarital counselling in the local setting. This

Chapter Two – Literature Review

leaves church leaders with the lingering question, “What can the church do as another step towards raising marital satisfaction and lowering divorce rates?” Chapter three will explore what the Three Forks church of Christ, and other local "churches of Christ," in South-Central Kentucky are offering currently in preparing couples for marriage with the intent of finding a program that can further enhance those offerings. The suggestion being pursued herein is not to replace current premarital counselling being offered by the minister but to supplement it with a classroom-based education program that will help to supplement what is currently offered.

Chapter Three

Current Premarital Program Overview Survey

3.1 Introduction

This chapter is focused on observing what is going on in the local congregation of the Three Forks church of Christ regarding premarital counselling. The observation is that the church is providing minister-based premarital counselling but that it is not offering a classroom-based premarital education program as a regular part of the church teaching program to educate and equip young adults for future marriage.

Premarital counselling effectiveness is difficult to empirically demonstrate due to the movement of congregants among local congregations. As a minister at Three Forks for ten years, the researcher has observed fluidity in the membership of Three Forks; that is, most of the married members were married elsewhere, and prior to attending Three Forks. As well, others who were married at Three Forks attend church elsewhere, while some have even left the faith. Two data collections have thus been created to gather information that could show the involvement of premarital counselling in current marriages. The first collection focuses on members of the Three Forks church of Christ congregation, and the second collection surveys local congregations on what they offer regarding premarital education and counselling. The intent of both surveys is to overcome some level of disparity due to congregant movements in the area, as well as to

demonstrate what is happening in the local church regarding premarital counselling and education.

The hypothesis is that most ministers are offering premarital counselling, both past, and present at Three Forks church of Christ and in the south-central Kentucky area, but that a classroom-based premarital education program is not offered. Based on the literature review provided in chapter two that constitutes "priestly listening" (Osmer, 2008), this is observed as a gap in the area of marital preparation. These surveys seek to bring evidence to confirm or refute what has been observed.

3.2 Survey Rationale

The data pursued to forward this research focuses on the following hypothesis: congregations of the "churches of Christ" often offer premarital counselling, generally by the local preacher/minister, but they do not offer a classroom-based premarital education program as part of the teaching program of the church. The researcher has observed this to be the case at the Three Forks church of Christ, and this observation will be explored through a survey of congregants at Three Forks. A second survey will be used to investigate the offering of a premarital education approach by other local area congregations of the "churches of Christ." The need for such a program will be further explored in chapters four and five. This chapter focuses on a discussion of the surveys and the obtained information in view of the hypothesis stated above.

3.3 Survey Process

The survey process is quite simple; questions are asked regarding the offering of premarital counselling and premarital education classes at the local congregation level. Two data collections will take place utilizing two different surveys. The first will be a survey of congregants at the Three Forks church of Christ. The second survey instrument will focus on other local congregations of the "churches of Christ" in South Central Kentucky.

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The survey will identify the congregation, the size of the congregation and location to notice any patterns in the data that might affect the results.

3.4 Data Collection

Data collection in the survey for the Three Forks church of Christ was conducted through an anonymous self-reporting survey. This approach was chosen to promote the most honest and straightforward responses to the survey. The respondents all had previous marital experience. Participants were informed of how their information would be used and their identities kept anonymous prior to consenting to the survey.

Data collection in the second survey was a straightforward person-to-person process. Ministers of local congregations were asked to answer questions relative to the congregations where they worked. Survey contacts local to this researcher's area were done face-to-face. Others received the survey through electronic correspondence, and these were filled out and returned in a similar manner. This process allowed for a healthy sample of congregations throughout the South-Central Kentucky area by which to test the hypothesis presented.

3.5 Survey Analysis – Three Forks Congregants

The data collection taken for analysis consists of 20 returned surveys. All surveys were reported anonymously for the encouragement of more accurate answers. The results are as followed:

Marital Status

- Married..... 18
- Divorced..... 1
- Remarried..... 0
- Widow/Widower..... 1

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Were you married while attending Three Forks? *Did the wedding occur while attending Three Forks?*

- Yes.....6
- No.....14

Was the minister of the ceremony from Three Forks?

- Yes..... 3
- No..... 17

Did you participate in premarital counselling before your marriage?

- Yes.....10
- No..... 10

Did you find premarital counselling helpful?

- Yes.....9 (of 10)
- No.....0
- Not sure.....1 (of 10)

If you didn't participate in premarital counselling do, do you believe that having premarital counselling would have been effective?

- Yes.....6 (of 10)
- No..... 2 (of 10)
- Not sure.....2 (of 10)

Besides premarital counselling with a minister prior to getting married, did you participate in a premarital education class program with a local congregation?

- Yes.....1 (with a Catholic church program)
- No.....19

Would you say the premarital counselling has helped to raise marriage satisfaction in your marriage?

- Yes.....8
- No.....1
- Not sure.....1
- Did not participate.....10

Analyzing the data shows that only 30% of the congregants surveyed got married while attending Three Forks and a minister from Three Forks married only 14%. These results confirm the difficulty in registering the effectiveness of minister-based premarital counselling at the Three Forks congregation. A minister outside of Three Forks married most of those responding to the survey, and not even a third of the respondents were attending Three Forks when they got married. These results lend support to the observations of the researcher.

3.6 Survey Analysis – Local Congregations Survey

The data collection for analysis consists of eight congregations in the South-Central area of Kentucky. The congregations consist of differing church sizes and differing surrounding population sizes.

Sample Church 1.

- Survey filled out by the minister.
- Size: 50-99 members
- Responded “No” to having a class offered to specifically focus on issues related to preparation for marriage and married life.
- Responded "Yes" to offering a premarital counselling program conducted with the minister and a prospective couple looking to marry.

Sample Church 2.

- Survey filled out by the minister.

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- Size: 200-249 members
- Responded “Yes” to have a class offered specifically focused on issues related to preparation for marriage. Additional notes and follow up show that this class was not designed specifically for marriage preparation as much as “building better marriages.” This is obviously a good class to have but not necessarily a premarital education class.
- Responded "yes" to offering a premarital counselling program conducted with the minister and a prospective couple looking to marry.

Sample Church 3.

- Survey filled out by the minister.
- Size: 200-249 members
- Responded “No” to having a class offered to specifically focus on issues related to preparation for marriage and married life.
- Responded "Yes" to offering a premarital counselling program conducted with the minister and a prospective couple looking to marry.

Sample Church 4.

- Survey filled out by the minister.
- Size: 200-249 members
- Responded “No” to having a class offered to specifically focus on issues related to preparation for marriage and married life.
- Responded "Yes" to offering a premarital counselling program conducted with the minister and a prospective couple looking to marry.

Sample Church 5.

- Survey filled out by the minister.
- Size: 400+ members
- Responded “Yes” to have a class offered specifically focused on issues related to preparation for marriage. Additional notes and follow up show that this class

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was not designed specifically for marriage preparation, though it did include young married couples, those looking to be soon married as well as those who were married for longer periods. The class is not exclusive for premarital preparation but does include some aspect in this regard.

- Responded "Yes" to offering a premarital counselling program conducted with the minister and a prospective couple looking to marry.

Sample Church 6.

- Survey filled out by the minister.
- Size: 350-399
- Responded "Yes" to have a class offered specifically focused on issues related to preparation for marriage. In follow up with the minister, it was discovered that they had a "transitions" class that covered, among other transitions, the transition to marriage. While not specifically a class on premarital preparation it does in part cover some related aspects.

Sample Church 7.

- Survey filled out by the minister.
- Size: 50-99 members
- Responded "No" to having a class offered to specifically focus on issues related to preparation for marriage and married life.
- Responded "No" to offering a premarital counselling program conducted with the minister and a prospective couple looking to marry.

Sample Church 8.

- Survey filled out by the minister.
- Size: 50-99 members
- Responded "No" to having a class offered to specifically focus on issues related to preparation for marriage and married life.

- Responded "Yes" to offering a premarital counselling program conducted with the minister and a prospective couple looking to marry.

Analyzing the surveys reveal results that are consistent with the hypothesis that was presented in this research. Premarital counselling as provided by a minister for couples who are about to enter marriage is popular among the churches surveyed. Only two congregations indicated that they did not provide premarital counselling; however, it should be noted that both of the congregations were on the smaller end of member size of the reporting sample congregations.

The other aspect that needed to be explored was the premarital education class within the congregations. The hypothesis was that these classes were not being offered within the local congregations. The results at first appear to be slightly mixed. Three of the eight congregations self-reported "yes" to offering such classes. However, in closer examination, these classes were not specifically focused on premarital education and preparation, but rather a larger focus on "marriage" or "transitions." It is also observed that these congregations were on the larger end of membership.

The takeaway from the survey is that the hypothesis is strongly supported. There certainly is a lack of focused premarital education in the classroom programs of the local congregations of "churches of Christ" in South-Central Kentucky, including at the Three Forks church of Christ.

3.7 Conclusion

The survey data shows that, while many churches offer premarital counselling there is a gap in the offering of a premarital education classroom-based program in at least most of the local congregations of the churches of Christ in South Central Kentucky. This gap exists specifically in the Three Forks Church of Christ where no such official program exists. The gap is found in the educational program and offers a place to consider another

step in working towards lowering the divorce rate and marriage dissatisfaction among members of the Three Forks church of Christ.

It is important to note this gap in premarital education programs for at least two observable reasons. First, the additional education might prove helpful as a preventative measure to ward off marital dissatisfaction and divorce. This is an assumption based on the findings in chapter two related to the effect of premarital counselling and the belief that additional time in preparation would serve to increase these benefits. Second, there is a noticeable gap that a potential classroom-based education program could help to fill. Out of the 30% of respondents who were attending Three Forks at the time they got married, only about half that number received premarital counselling from a minister at Three Forks. This means any potential minister-based premarital counselling would fall short of reaching all members at Three Forks seeking to get married. A potential classroom-based program would help to fill in this gap by making such premarital education available for members, whether married by a Three Forks minister or not.

In this chapter, the information gathered by means of two surveys regarding premarital counselling and premarital education programmes offered by the Three Forks Church and the churches of Christ in South Central Kentucky was discussed. The results lend support to the observation of a gap in what the church is currently offering with regards to premarital preparation. The next chapter will consider a biblical concept of marriage. It will then outline the church's responsibility in teaching this concept to its congregants in order to fill the observed gap in premarital preparation, as well as to help prevent divorce.

Chapter Four

Biblical Principles of a Christian Marriage

4.1 Introduction

During the Interpretative task, it was shown that premarital counselling does show a positive influence on marital satisfaction. Though there are competing studies, the review of the literature makes a strong argument for an effective result from premarital counselling. Under the descriptive task, it was observed that the Three Forks church of Christ members showed a positive opinion of the effects of premarital counselling; however, only half of the members surveyed took premarital counselling. Further, and more specifically to the research herein pursued, a gap was observed and confirmed through the surveys. Only half of those who were attending Three Forks at the time they got married were married by a minister from Three Forks. That means whatever premarital counselling offered by a Three Forks minister in a premarital counselling setting would not necessarily reach all members of Three Forks who seek to get married. As noted in the conclusion of the last section, a premarital education program could close this gap as well as strengthen the overall approach of educating congregants in this area.

This section seeks to explore what should be happening at the Three Forks church of Christ in regard to premarital education based on Biblical teaching. The approach will be to explore the Biblical definition and importance of marriage as well as the responsibility of the leadership of the Three Forks congregation to teach and prepare its members for

success in their marriages. Osmer refers to this task as “prophetic discernment” (Osmer 2008:129-132), and the intent is to discern from scripture the actions that should be taking place. The primary scriptures that are examined are Ephesians 5:22-33; Genesis 2:18-23 and Matthew 19:4-6; 28:18-20.

4.2 Biblical Concept of Marriage

Marriage is a confused concept in the modern culture of the United States. Marriage has become an intellectual exercise, a vehicle by which social and political groups argue about tradition or progress of human ascent. It is centered on a theme of equality or morality, but these arguments simply highlight the fact that mankind has lost its understanding of this fundamental institution. As one author states:

The politics of marriage in the United States draws attention to the uncertainty Americans feel over major shifts in sexual morality, values, and family in postindustrial societies. Moving with unparalleled momentum in the past few decades, such transformations have cast doubt on the future of marriage (Heath 2012:4).

Seemingly unaware or uninterested in God’s greater purposes, powers and created intent, there is a march forward to shift the definition and understanding of marriage to fulfill the desire of human reason and carnal thinking. “The heart wants what the heart wants” is an often-repeated refrain. To what destination will this cry for carnal pleasure lead? Jeremiah 17:9 states, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?” Scripture would point away from populace beliefs and arguments solely contingent upon emotional appeals, and towards a Godly purpose and intent.

Marriage should not be defined by politics, equality or tradition; instead, marriage should continue to be what it was intended from the beginning, defined by its Creator. “Marriage is not a human construct. God created Marriage. Right from the beginning, it was God’s

divine purpose that human couples unite in exclusive, indivisible, one-flesh, lifelong covenant relationships” (Moore and Walker 2017:7). God created marriage, and this is the most important reality to consider for the child of God today. A Christian leader’s highest authority is Jesus Himself, and He verifies this truth in discussion with His disciples regarding marriage and divorce. Matthew records Jesus as saying:

"Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason, a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate"
(Matthew 19:4-6)

Jesus’ forceful declaration of the Genesis account of marriage asserts both the structure and purpose of marriage from the point of view of God’s intended design.

Since Jesus directs the disciple back to the Genesis account, it also seems fitting that a closer look at the account of Genesis would be beneficial in exploring the point. The first chapter of Genesis displays a deliberate rhythm to the creation process— “Then God said”—and whatever He spoke came to be and was followed by, “And God saw that it was good.” This rhythm of creation and declaration follows throughout the days of creation, including the creation of man. God created and considered the work of His creation as good (Genesis 1:3,10,12,18,21,25). This is a fundamental starting point to understand marriage, and it brings a deeper perspective, drawing from a larger reality than a definition based primarily on an individualized emotional appeal. It is an awareness of origin and design that leads to a fuller vision of what life, especially married life, should look like.

The second chapter of Genesis shares a detailed account of the creation of man. Whereas Genesis one shares a summary of the whole of creation, chapter two tells, in a more detailed way, of how God created man and woman. We find in this chapter that God created man from the dust of the ground and breathed life into him. Then God observed,

"It is not good for man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18). In the midst of this perfect and beautiful creation, God had found something He considered not to be good. A man was to have a companion. This companion was not to be another animal, but one comparable to him. As all the created creatures were brought before Adam, he finds none suitable (Genesis 2:18-20). God then puts Adam into a deep sleep, removes a rib and creates woman from it. God had thus made the perfect help meet for man. She was taken from his side to be at his side (Genesis 2:21-23).

A woman was created specifically and purposefully to be the helpmeet of man. God did not create another man for companionship but a woman, and then clearly states that a man shall take a wife and the two shall become one flesh (Genesis 2:24). Before any prejudice, sin, corruption, hate or bigotry existed, God made man and woman for one another. Marriage then is a matter of creation, long established before any current of social acceptance, politics, or trend. Marriage is not about power, social class or financial gain; rather, it is about a special relationship where a man and woman cleave to one another and form a unit specifically and purposefully created by God. This is what God deemed "very good"—it is the fullness of His creation (Genesis 1:29-31).

This story is told as a common fixture in children's Bible class curriculum, so there is little doubt most Christians can recite it by memory. It has become so familiar that the weight of the details has in some ways been passed over. As students of God, and leaders in the church, a respectful approach to understanding this great aspect of the human story is needed. That begins and ends with the understanding that the words of Genesis chapter two are not simply part of a narrative written by men but are in fact the divine words of God.

Jack Cottrell presents a particularly important argument to the legitimacy of the inspiration of Genesis two. As Christian leaders, we accept that Jesus is the standard of judgment when it comes to all things pertaining to life and godliness (John 12:48). Cottrell uses Jesus to confirm the reliability of Genesis two and its authenticity.

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In Matt 19:4-5, as part of his answer to a question about divorce, Jesus cites Gen 2:24 and attributes it to God. “He who created them from the beginning” is the one who said these words. This is significant because in the text of Genesis itself these words are not attributed to God; they are simply a part of the narrative. Thus, even the words of the narrator (i.e., Moses) are of divine origin, because of inspiration (2002:51-52).

The point to be observed here is that the Christian leader is obligated to accept the definition of marriage authenticated by Jesus rather than modern definitions promoted by culture and worldly influence.

The problem is created when mankind allows desire or attractions to dominate what is defined as true and right. The standard of God is disregarded in this case, but it is to this standard that a movement towards understanding must be returned. Christian leaders are charged to teach and prepare their congregants in these truths of God. They are charged to warn and to equip against the temptation of the world and to build with Christians the spiritual strength of will to stand for Godly principles.

When it comes to marriage, Christians need to not only know how it is constituted but equally how to build and protect their marriage. It is obvious, from God's point of view, that man must take responsibility for his/her actions, thoughts and attractions; it is also equally obvious that wisdom must be applied. Many people have attempted to stand on their own volition and failed. This is true in marriages as well as other endeavors. For instance, a Christian may work with an attractive co-worker and instead of being cautious (for example not being alone with the individual) one declares faith in his willpower. Soon the individual may find himself giving in to his attraction and disrupting the trust and peace of his home and marriage. This is the concept of temptation seen throughout scripture and illustrated in James 1:14-15. This and other practical points of marital wisdom should be encouraged in the teaching program of the church.

4.3 Biblical Principles of Marriage – Exegesis of Ephesians 5:22-33

In an assessment of a God-centered view of this institution of marriage, the physical makeup of who should be married is not the only consideration. Other important questions must be considered as well. What does it mean to be a husband or a wife? What is the role of such a person? Paul gives some insight into the book of Ephesians with two direct statements, one to husbands and the other towards wives. Consider these passages:

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So, husbands ought to love their own 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 the Lord does the church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. "For this reason, a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh" (Ephesians 5:21-31).

Wives are to submit to their husbands and husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church. A wife is to submit to her husband as the church is to submit to Christ. This does not infer abuse or suggest that a wife is to be trampled upon. That some have supposed such or even brought such on women is tragic, but that does not leave the Christian to remove the words of God. Instead, the Christian is challenged to understand them in alignment with God's purposes.

A wife's submission is only half of the equation. Paul spoke strong words to husbands as well. When Paul declares that husbands are to love their wives as Jesus loves the church, what should be understood in this statement? Is the implication that wives are to submit, and husbands are to demand and command? Is this in any way how Jesus expressed love for His church? The answer would be a resounding no. The command here is full and total devotion and sacrificial love. A husband is not simply to love but to love as Jesus loved. Husbands are to give of themselves fully for the benefit of their wives. One commentary writer defines this arrangement as a wonderful design of God Himself.

The wonderful thing about God's plan for marriage is that the roles of husband and wife sustain and support each other. The more a wife submits to the man she respects and admires, the more he will love her. The more a husband loves his wife and sacrifices himself for her well-being, the more she will respect him and submit to his headship (Boles 1996:321).

Instead of a system of male dominance, what God promotes is a marriage where a husband serves his wife in sacrificial love, and a wife submits herself to her husband as unto the Lord. If marriages are built according to this pattern, both husband and wife serve the needs of each other and function as the one flesh God had in mind when He said it "was very good."

This view of marriage is at odds with the world. In the world, the emphasis is often on trying to stake out position, and those of the world often become preoccupied with who holds more power in the relationship. God charges a perspective of service to others, which motivates spouses to seek the best for their mate in everything and in every way. Marriage is an opportunity to meet the needs of one's spouse in an intimate and beautiful relationship. It should not be the ascent of personal selfishness.

It may be human nature to draw on one's own wants, desires, and achievements. It may appear natural to seek to win arguments, find flaws and wield power, but God has called Christians to go beyond naturalistic tendencies. He has called his children to a love that

sacrifices rather than demands, and he has called his children to uphold his eternal plans wherein righteousness abounds.

The observation to be drawn from this synthesis of Biblical marriage principles is that it is up to the church to convey and teach them to her adherents. The world is at odds with these principles and will not appropriately teach them to members of the Three Forks Church of Christ. Thus, the responsibility rests squarely upon the leadership of the church.

4.4 Biblical Principles of Church Education

As a part of its main mission, the church is obligated to teach its adherents. From the Great Commission, Jesus has charged his disciples to make additional disciples through teaching: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20 NKJV). It is the role of teaching that is of high significance to the arguments of this thesis.

In discussing different ways, the church is to engage in the edification of its members, Millard Erickson identifies teaching as a primary means: "The church also edifies its members through instruction or teaching. This is part of the broad task of discipling" (1998:1064). This observation is well evidenced in Scripture. The 'Great Commission' charged the disciples to, "teach them to observe all things that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:20). Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus stresses the role of the church to teach the world the wisdom of God, "to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 2:10). Though other scriptures can be cited as examples, the extent to which Christians are to engage in teaching can be seen in its priority even in the act of singing: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts

to the Lord" (Colossians 3:16). In commenting on this Passage Ash writes: "Teaching and admonishing are activities of those who love one another, and who wish to help other grow in Christ. No view of the corporate activities of Christians can afford to neglect this" (Ash 2000:207). The point is that teaching is part of the very fabric of the church.

Paul says that Jesus gave teachers to the church, to equip the saints to serve. He wrote, "And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ" (Ephesians 2:11-12). It is in this charge to not only teach, but to equip the saints for service that premarital education should be considered. As shown in the discussion of "Biblical Principles of Marriage," serving one another is not just a generic charge for all Christians but is a specific charge for husbands and wives. It is how a husband should serve his wife and how a wife should serve her husband that encompasses much of the heart of premarital education.

These Biblical principles towards education are not just a passing idea, but rather a part of the church's intent, structure, and purpose. With these truths in mind, "It is incumbent upon the church to utilize all legitimate means and technologies available today" (Erickson 1998:1065). Education in the church should be sought at every turn and through every medium. Should this not include preparing congregants for marriage? The answer should be a resounding yes.

4.5 Conclusion

The argument from scripture is that marriage is a God-created, God-ordained, and God-organized institution. Marriage is shown to be a God created and instituted institution (Genesis 2). Jesus reaffirmed this truth (Matthew 19:3-12) as he addressed God's original intent and continued intent for marriage to be a lifelong commitment; "What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate" (Matthew 19:6b). This emphasis in Scripture on marriage places a tremendous responsibility on the church to be an advocate for the created purpose and design of marriage.

It has also been shown that education is a primary function of the church's mission. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the church to lead in educating its congregants on marriage and how to prepare for it. These two accompanied realities place an obligation on church leadership to make sure appropriate effort is being given to educate congregants prior to entering marriage. The principles of love and service, which Jesus championed and by which His disciples are to be known (John 13:34-35), add an implied motivation to make sure church leaders do what they can to give congregants the tools for success in their marriages.

Chapter Five

A Premarital Education Program

5.1 Introduction

This chapter seeks to give an answer to the question: "How might we respond?" In answer to this question, a premarital education program will be the suggested solution based on the results of the descriptive-empirical task and the compelling directive of Biblical principles. This approach should help to address the gap in premarital preparation observed in the church surveys.

The intent is to set forth a simple model for the consideration of local church leaders. A model is presented by Benjamin Silliman's (2003) in his article "Building Healthy Marriages Through Early and Extended Outreach with Youth" that will serve as a launching point of creating a potential structure for the three Forks Church of Christ to consider. His model strives to emphasize a macro approach to strengthening marriages through teaching and outreach in teenagers; this proposed model will diverge from that direction in suggesting a more micro-focused approach on premarital education in a classroom setting. The goal is to prescribe elements for a teaching program to be used at the local congregation level. Alongside analyzing Silliman for potential structure, this section will address the details that were identified in the research that is within the purview of the church's teaching responsibilities.

5.2 Successful Elements of Premarital Counselling as a base for a Premarital Education Program

If the need for a premarital education program has been shown, and this thesis proposes that it has, then the natural question resulting from this observation is: What should be in it? To answer this question studies on successful elements of premarital preparation programs become a primary source of consideration alongside scriptural precedents.

Not all elements of any given premarital preparation program, whether offered to a couple by a minister or through an outside counselor, will fit into a proposed classroom-based premarital education program. There is great value in the current premarital counselling platform currently offered at Three Forks to address specific issues of the proposed couple. Thus, the proposed premarital education program is not presented as a replacement but rather as an additional step to the premarital preparation efforts of the church.

What should the premarital education program include? There are several studies that show argumentation for elements that prove successful in premarital education [Stanley (2001); Murray, C.E. and Murray, Thomas L.,JR, (2004); Halford, W, K., (2004); Barton, A. W., Futris, T.G. and Bradley, R.C. (2014); Carrol, J.S. and Doherty, W.J., (2003); Fawcett, E.B., Hawkins, A.J., Blanchard, V.L. and Carroll, J.S., (2010) and Groom, J., (2001). While not all studies agree on every point, this thesis seeks to assimilate elements that have broad support in multiple studies that would naturally lend themselves to a Biblical-based platform. These elements include communication, understanding the value of marriage and conflict management. These elements show both a positive effect within the research as well as a basis in scripture. It is proposed that in addition to these elements a comprehensive and practical education on what God teaches regarding marriage should be included in a premarital education program.

5.2.1 Communication

Communication stands as one of the pivotal elements in almost every study finding and every premarital platform offered. H. Norman Wright states that it is important for a premarital counselor to discuss communication with the couple: "The counselor needs to be able to communicate with the people he/she is seeing and help them to learn to communicate with one another" (1992:80-81). A study by Blanchard, Fawcett, Hawkins, and Carroll, which also cites the findings of Gottman, Markman, and Hahlweg, finds that "an emphasis on teaching communication and problem-solving skills is justified. The evidence is that couples learn these skills and basic research confirms that premarital communication skills are positively associated with good marital outcomes" (Blanchard, Fawcett, *et al.* 2010:235). The findings confirm that communication is a central part of successful premarital counselling programs and tied to a rise in marital satisfaction.

From a scriptural point of view, Scripture also emphasizes the importance of proper communication. To the church at Ephesus, Paul writes, "Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers" (Ephesians 4:29). Peter warns of the dangers of destructive speech, "For when they speak great swelling words of emptiness, they allure through the lusts of the flesh" (2 Peter 2:18a). James as well remarks of how powerful the tongue can be: "But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. With it, we bless our God and Father, and with it, we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God" (James 3:8-9). Good communication then is not only a paradigm within a premarital counselling program but an essential portion of the Christian faith.

With these findings observed, it is the argument that a classroom-based premarital education program should emphasize good and constructive communication skills. It should be noted here that scripture teaches abundantly regarding our speech directly as well as indirectly through ideas such as love, kindness, and service. Biblical instruction concerning communication also appears in negative warnings against gossip, malice and cursing (Ephesians 4:29; 1 Timothy 1:4; James 3; Philippians 1:27-28; 2:1-4). Paul tells the Christian, "Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one" (Colossians 4:6). The element that would

separate teaching communication in such a program from what might be taught in a regular Bible study class is the emphasis on the marriage relationship. The teacher/trainer should apply practical examples and context so that these toolsets are connected to the thinking of students' future life as a spouse. This can be done by emphasizing scenarios between a husband and wife and how scripture relates to these situations. For instance, Paul says in Ephesians 4:29, "Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers." Students should be encouraged not only to study the words of the passage but to consider how they would impact one's speech to their spouse or within personal relationships. This could involve several hypothetical situations such as a decision-making discussion, an argument and even when someone is upset or frustrated.

5.2.2 The Value of Marriage

The second element identified as a successful element in premarital counselling and as well as Biblical teaching is the value placed on the marriage relationship. Thus, students should be taught in a classroom-based premarital education program that marriage is an important institution and should not be entered into lightly. Scott Stanley argues powerfully to this point. He states, "Efforts at premarital training that are substantial convey an important message to the couples partaking in them: That marriage as an institution matters, and that how their marriage turns out depends on their own attitudes and actions" (Stanley 2001:274). He mentions that 75% of couples get married by religious groups, a number he attributes to a survey by Wirthlin Worldwide, (Stanley 2001:274). The argument is a simple observation, that emphasis on preparing for marriage stresses to those involved the importance of what they are doing.

H. Norman Wright emphasizes the same point but from a theological standpoint. In discussing whether a premarital counselor should counsel a believer and an unbeliever, he makes the point that both the man and woman should be believers in Jesus Christ. He claims that marriage is a commitment to Jesus Christ as well as to one another (Wright 1992:99). The emphasis for the purpose of this thesis is not on Wright's correct or

incorrect theology, but the importance conveyed to the couple getting married. Again, the lesson, both stated and unstated, is that marriage is an important institution and should not be taken lightly.

Scripture, of course, argues for the value of marriage and that is why this element should be strongly emphasized within a classroom-based premarital education program. Jesus Himself tells us of the import and value of the marriage institution:

"Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason, a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? 6 So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate" (Matthew 19:4-6).

The point to be observed here is that an emphasis on the seriousness and value of the marriage covenant should also bolster the desire to cherish and preserve such an institution. To this point, the presence and participation in such a class should also help to reinforce this same valuation.

5.2.3 Conflict Management

The third major element that has shown success in premarital counselling and should be considered within a classroom-based premarital education program is conflict management. It might appear to many that the need for successful means to deal with conflict is self-evident. However, such principles are often found lacking in marriages. Silliman states: "Well-adjusted couples consistently demonstrate self-control, empathy, and constructive conflict resolution in mastering life challenges" (2003:271). An article by Mackey, Diemer, and O'Brien claims that: "Interpersonal differences and the accompanying negative feelings appear to have a corrosive effect on the quality of relationships when they remain unresolved" (2000:135). The importance here again seems obvious, and its scriptural basis is just as strong.

Turning to Scripture, a basis for teaching strong conflict resolution skills can be clearly seen. Jesus emphasizes the need to deal with grievances between people appropriately: "Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First, be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23-24). As has already been noted in this thesis, Peter charges husbands to "dwell with their wives with understanding" (1 Peter 3:7). Added to this, Scripture calls all Christians to love one another and seek the best for one another (John 13:34, 15:12; Romans 13:8, etc.). In commenting on John 13:34-35 Carson observes; "the obligation of the new covenant community to respond to the God who loved and redeemed them by oblation of His Son" (Carson 1991:485). To love and desire the care and example of Christ infers a natural obligation to aid in the conflicts of believers.

The inclusion of conflict management skills in a classroom-based premarital education program is consistent with scriptural teaching. The emphasis should be on developing from Scripture both the motives and the imperatives to resolve conflicts in a way that builds and edifies rather than belittles and tears down.

5.3 Proposed Goals for a Premarital Education Program

As the successful elements mentioned in the last subsection are combined with Biblical principles and education in marriage, there is one last consideration for the proposed classroom-based premarital education program: What are the goals of the program? The overarching goals of such a program have already been stated within this thesis, namely, to raise marital satisfaction, to lower the divorce rate and to take a step in filling the gap in what the church is offering. However, the specific goals within the program are important to consider as well. They offer an opportunity to evaluate the program as it is implemented and moves forward.

5.3.1 Biblical understanding and definition of marriage.

This should be a detailed study in the scriptures regarding marriage. Passages that should be included would be Genesis 2:18-25; Proverbs 5:18-19, 12:4, 18:22, 19:14, 20:6-7, 30:18-19, 31:10; Ephesians 5:20-33; Matthew 19; 1 Corinthians 7:1-16; Colossians 3:18-19; Hebrews 13:4-7. In addition to these verses, a focused exploration and study of biblical concepts that surround marriage as well, such as love, anger, jealousy, forgiveness, listening and communicating should be emphasized.

5.3.2 To make sure they seek to know their partner, beyond the attraction and the superficial surface issues of life.

There is the need for someone to understand their spouse so that they may serve, love and cherish them appropriately. Peter speaks to this when he says, "Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered." (1 Peter 3:7). Peter makes mention here of "dwelling with understanding." Often men and women do not understand each other, and it causes a great deal of friction within their marriage. Though the emphasis is upon the husband in this passage, the principle is surely sound for wives as well. In fact, this is of necessity considering the Christian's obligation to *agape* love.

Since this premarital education program is proposed as a classroom-based program and not a couples' counselling session, the student within the program may not have a significant other yet to know. The emphasis here is upon understanding the importance of truly knowing their future spouse.

5.3.3 Understanding the role of expectations in the marriage.

Prospective spouses enter into marriage with preconceptions and expectations, whether they consciously recognize them or not. These expectations create unstated demands on one's spouse that can become toxic to the relationship. Maxwell states, "Most of us are

unaware of the demands we make on our spouse to exhibit certain traits or behaviors. What we are aware of is the feeling of anger or annoyance we experience when we are frustrated in realizing our demands” (1979:112) Too often, the perception and interpretation of the events experienced are largely dictated by expectations derived before the events. These expectations, translated into demands on how one’ spouse should act or behave, color the projected outcome of the event.

How such expectations could color what is seen can be demonstrated by a simple example. Consider a newly released movie based on a book with high notoriety. If two people go to watch that movie and one has read the book, and the other has not, what is the likelihood they will have the same reaction to the movie? It is likely the person who had read the book went in with a certain set of expectations. If the movie did not meet those expectations, they walk away disappointed. The person who had not read the book could walk away thinking it was a good movie. However, it would have obviously been the exact same movie, but the difference in expectations created a different interpretation of what they saw.

Applying these thoughts to marriage, it becomes quickly apparent expectations can truly manipulate outcomes. Unrealistic expectations have been cited as a contributing factor in divorce. Larson notes:

One explanation for the current high divorce rate and the prevalence of marital dissatisfaction is that Americans have high and unrealistic expectations of marriage-expecting a spouse to simultaneously be a friend, a confidant, a fulfilling sex partner, a counselor, and a parent (Larson 1988:3).

Expectations can impact the overall view and anticipation of one's spouse in the marriage, as noted above, and can also affect the view of everyday actions as frustration builds. To illustrate the point, consider if a particular wife had an expectation that her husband is going to want to stay at home after work giving his time to her because to her this would

be an unstated expectation of love. Not knowing this to be her expectation, the husband expects that his wife is going to want to go out to enjoy the evening together. Two differing expectations create a situation where whatever happens that night will be seen as not meeting someone's unspoken expectation and will most likely result in frustration. If they go out, he is happy, but she feels slighted, possibly even unloved. If they stay in, she is happy, yet he feels caged in. Expectations are a powerful reality of which a person must become aware of.

A premarital education program should have a goal of teaching students to be on the lookout for unstated expectations as well as helping them learn to express their expectations and communicate them with a future spouse. Of course, these communications skills would benefit Christians in other relationships as well.

5.3.4 Encourage deliberate communication and edification.

The need to communicate instead of making assumptions is a goal for improved communication within a marriage. This ties back into expectations as well, as communication can alleviate a lot of confusion, unrealistic expectations, and assumptions. According to Halford, "teaching couple communication is a key focus of all skills training approaches and observed effective communication in engaged couples predicts sustained relationship satisfaction, at least over the first 5-10 years of marriage" (2004:560). Deliberate communication then should be honest and should be extended with grace, with the intention of exhortation and with a heart of understanding. As Paul stressed, "Let us, therefore, make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification." (Romans 14:19).

5.3.5 Boundaries.

Setting boundaries in a relationship is an important aspect to understand. Boundaries are designed to do one of two things: keep something in or keep something out. In psychological terms, a boundary is defined as "a psychological limit that marks the

distinction between behavior that does not cause emotional harm and behavior that causes emotional harm" (Richmond 2017). Well-defined boundaries are a healthy aspect of relationships, marriage in particular, and need to be discussed in a premarital education program. This should include a discussion of what constitute healthy boundaries as well as the need to establish and maintain those boundaries.

Healthy boundaries help to define responsibilities and to protect the commitment of towards each other. As Cloud and Townsend put it, "Boundaries were not designed to end relationships, but to preserve and deepen them" (Cloud and Townsend 1999:236). Anything that can be seen as a threat to personal integrity, commitment, purity or the health of the marriage should be discussed, and appropriate boundaries need to be put in place. The following example illustrates this point: In this hyper-sexualized culture, there are enormous temptations and challenges in the world that will be faced. Sexual sin, lusts, and temptation are commonplace in our media and social activities. Students need to learn not only to be aware of these pitfalls but how they can impact their potential future marriage.

Jealousies, finances and time can all become major stumbling blocks for future marriages as well. These aspects have to be dealt with in a forthright and honest way. Students need to learn how to set boundaries to be observed, or trouble will be on the horizon. An accompanied biblical "study on the need for "self-control" can help the Christian understand a broad sense of the import and practicality of healthy boundaries. Texts such as Galatians 5:23 and 2 Peter 1:5-11 can offer a parallel emphasis on the impact of self-control on important relationships.

5.3.6 Sharing the importance, of growing together in their relationship, with one another as well as God.

One of the huge misconceptions that people enter into marriage with is that everything will remain the same. In a study done by Smith, "The data revealed the following: six out of eight women reported themes of sharing and caring, while seven out of eight men

revealed that the love they had developed for their ex-spouse (while dating) would not change once they were married” (2010:85). Not only are feelings of love subject to this misconception but other areas of their relationship are also subject to the same. That their feelings, looks, hobbies, likes, and dislikes will remain unchanged through the course of their marriage is an unrealistic expectation, as events, maturity, struggles, and other unforeseen influences will alter both the husband and wife over time. In the midst of these changes, a couple has the potential to either grow together or grow apart. Therefore, a premarital education program should focus on the need to continue to mature in our relationship with God and the need to mature our relationships in the ways of God.

5.4 Recommended Steps

With the proposed goals already addressed above, what steps can be taken to implement a beneficial classroom-based premarital education program?

5.4.1 Step one: Teach early and often.

This charge is supported by the research reviewed in several places. According to researchers Duncan, Childs and Larson, "In the earliest study assessing the length of intervention, Giblin *et al.* (1985) found that longer programs (over 12 hours) tended to yield somewhat better results than shorter programs” (2010:626). By planning to extend a teaching program into teen years, the church can offer earlier development of relationship skillsets that will build better preparedness for future marriages. The step recommended here is to provide an age-appropriate premarital education program once a year beginning in late middle school or early high school age groups. For these younger groups, a renaming of the class to relationship education rather than marriage preparation might be more appropriate.

5.4.2 Step two: Plan to offer a yearly class for premarital education for high school and college-age students.

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Depending on the congregation size, this may require multiple classes. For instance, current demographics at Three Forks would allow enough students to have a high school, and college class separately focused on the topic. These classes should be led by those equipped to handle such subjects, those who have training and/or years of marriage experience to draw from.

5.4.3 Step three: Develop a twelve to thirteen lesson plan to cover the required elements from chapter five and to aim for the proposed goals stated in this chapter.

This program should not be left for individual teachers to decide but should be developed by the leadership of the church. The importance of this program requires the intimate involvement of the spiritual leaders of the congregation.

5.4.4 Step four: Implement the classes.

During the classes, leaders from the church and/or those leadership finds exceptionally qualified from the congregation, should sit in on classes periodically. This is to ensure the quality of the program and the consistency of the developed curriculum.

5.4.5 Step five: Evaluate the program regularly.

Leadership should put in place a regular cycle of evaluation. This should include feedback from students at each level, teachers involved in implementing the material as well as long-term couples who go through the program and their perceived benefit from the classes.

5.5 Conclusion

Benjamin Silliman's research and subsequent article come to a similar conclusion to the one being pursued in this thesis: that it is necessary to teach relationship skills early and often (2003:270). His work identifies a similar need to do more to raise the church's efforts

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in premarital preparation and education. His focus is upon a macro, rather than a micro, approach in teaching key concepts to teenagers to improve the skillsets they enter marriage with. Though a more micro approach has been recommended in this research, Silliman's emphasis on teaching youth in order to prepare for future marriages shares this fundamental view with the research presented in this thesis, and the subsequent approach presented in this chapter.

The arguments, evidence, and elements presented in this chapter have been offered to frame a potential classroom-based premarital education program at the Three Forks Church of Christ. It has been shown that there is a need for such a program at the local congregation and the elements that should be presented in such a program. These elements have been used to present steps to implement a classroom-based premarital education program and should serve as a starting point in implementing such a program.

Chapter Six

6.1 Summary and Concluding Remarks

This thesis has set out to identify a way for the Three Forks Church of Christ to take a further step in addressing high divorce rates through its premarital preparation program. A few keynotes of finding have been identified in this research. First, it has been found that premarital counselling and preparation programs do in fact show a positive effect on marital satisfaction and a reported positive effect in lowering divorce potential for couples who engage in the programs. It has also observed that divorce rates, even among religious adherents, remain high. This forwards the main research question; What can the Three Forks Church of Christ do to take steps in addressing a perceived gap in marriage preparation efforts offered to the congregation.

A second key finding was that relationship training programs that focused outside of the traditional setting of conjoint sessions also proved to be fruitful in fostering and improving key skills for potential marriages. The systems also help promote an important skill of mate selection that would naturally be overlooked and/or underemphasized in that traditional premarital counselling scenario. This is due to the fact that such traditional settings often include only those who already engaged to be married. The finds helped booster the consideration of a classroom-based premarital

education program that could incorporate some of the important findings from premarital preparation programs and relationship education programs as a step towards a solution to filling the perceived gap in what is currently offered.

This brought the research to the third key finding, which was discovered in surveys of the married couples within the local Three Forks congregation. These surveys showed consistency with the literature explored in chapter two, where those identifying themselves as having participated in premarital counselling believed it to be helpful to their marriages. What was also found, was that there is indeed a significant and identifiable gap between those who are married within the congregation and those who actually participated in premarital counselling. These findings confirmed the basis of a gap in the current offering of premarital education or training within the congregation.

It has been discovered, through observation and confirmed through surveys, that a gap in the efforts of the Three Forks Church of Christ to educate and prepare congregants prior to marriage exists. This gap is important to identify and consider in light of the continued high divorce rates according to the Barna research group (2008) as well as the findings of Kennedy and Ruggles (2014). The gap has also been demonstrated through a survey of local congregations, showing that more needs to be done to encourage our members in preparing for marriage. The research has identified that the Three Forks Church of Christ's current form of premarital counselling needs to be adjusted to meet the members' needs in preparing for marriage.

The fourth key finding here is found in the Biblical record. It has been observed from Scripture that the church is an appropriate, if not the appropriate, institution to teach Christians within their care of the reality and importance of marriage. It is imperative for the church to engage in preparing its congregants for such an important, God-created institution.

The fifth key finding presented in this thesis is the suggested approach to address the gap discovered and what the approach should look like. What has been proposed is a

classroom-based premarital education program. Several key elements of such a program have been presented along with steps that should be considered in implementing such a program for the Three Forks church of Christ.

It is the intent of this thesis to encourage the leadership of the Three Forks Church of Christ to prayerfully and purposefully examine the research and its findings presented herein. The recommended steps offer a starting framework to begin to address the needs of the congregation in this matter and to take steps towards addressing the gap in the educational offering at Three Forks in light of premarital preparation. The desired impact is to lower projected divorce rates among congregants. It is assumed based on the studies presented herein of Stanley (2001); Murray, C.E. and Murray, Thomas L.,JR, (2004); Halford, W, K., (2004); Barton, A. W., Futris, T.G. and Bradley, R.C. (2014); Carrol, J.S. and Doherty, W.J., (2003); Fawcett, E.B., Hawkins, A.J., Blanchard, V.L. and Carroll, J.S., (2010) and Groom, J., (2001), that premarital education can have a positive influence on marital satisfaction and lower potential divorce risk. With this evidence in mind and the demonstrated gap in the premarital education program at Three Forks, the recommendation of a classroom-based premarital education program shows good promise of making a positive step forward in this area of church ministry.

In conclusion, it is recommended that the leadership of the Three Forks Church of Christ continue to have an eye on research that is developed in the field as well as periods of reflection every few years. These steps will continue to offer insight and opportunity to adjust and strengthen the premarital education program as more experience and knowledge are applied. Stronger marriages of congregants at the Three Forks Church of Christ are worth the effort proposed and serious consideration of the suggested steps herein.

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