

Last month I had the great privilege of being invited to attend a two week Counseling Enrichment Program at Focus on the Family in Colorado Springs. The program was designed for professional Christian counselors and psychologists. I was able to meet and visit with some of the leaders in Christian counseling including, James Dobson, Paul Meier, H. Norman Wright, John Trent, Siang-Yang Tan, Gary Oliver, Gary Collins, Cliff and Joyce Penner, to name a few. These names may not mean much to you, but it was a wonderful blessing for me to meet them and be a student of theirs for two weeks. Throughout the seminar, a theme seemed to emerge among the speakers: *Christian marriages are coming apart in unprecedented numbers*. Troubled Christian marriages are providing a steady stream of work for counselors and pastors like never before. Why is this? What is going on? This is what I would like to address in the next few newsletters.

THE CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

In my practice, I get more calls for marriage counseling than any other. The sad thing about most of these marriages is not that they are struggling, for we all do this from time to time, but that they did not reach out for help when they first started having difficulties. By the time too many couples seek help (usually initiated by the wife), the marriage is all but over. The state at which most couples present their marital difficulties to counselors is right at the brink of divorce. By this time, so much damage and deception have occurred, it is difficult to lead many of them into the type of selfless love that God intended for husbands and wives. Don't get me wrong here, God is quite willing and capable of healing the most troubled marriages. The problem often is that the husband and/or wife does not want to be healed; they do not particularly want to learn to love their spouse again (or perhaps for the first time). It requires a lot of work and forgiveness. And as evidenced by scripture, as well as current-day observation, hardened hearts do not change easily, nor does God tend to move against a hardened heart. That would be taking away one's free will to choose.

With most failed marriages, the primary problems can almost always be traced back to the pre-marital courtship days. Most individuals marry out of either love or desperation. Regardless of the state, faulty expectations in the pre-marital stage are at the core of dysfunctional marriages. Perhaps if the dysfunction was not overshadowed by the love or desperation feelings in the

courtship days, critical issues would not be overlooked and Christian divorces would not be occurring at the same rate as secular divorces. (The importance of thorough pre-marital counseling will be discussed in another issue.) Most of the faulty expectations that I mentioned above are sub-conscious. I would like to address four of the most dangerous expectations (myths) believed by many who are seeking marriage.

1. We (the man and the woman) expect the same things from the relationship. This is not true. Men and women expect very different things from the relationship. We each have our own subconscious 10 commandments which are rules usually passed down to us from our family of origin. We don't know we have them until our spouse breaks one. We feel unloved when our spouse doesn't step into our unconscious roles for us.

2. Everything good in our relationship will get better. The problem with this is that most everything in the pre-marital relationship feels pretty good. When the "in love" feelings fade, (and they will, this is healthy), we are left with the one we married, only the cloud of euphoria that once surrounded us somehow is gone, leaving our warts and other flaws clearly visible to each other. Couples marvel at how they never saw this new side of their mates.

3. Everything bad about my life will go away. Marriage is not therapy. It is hard work which can bring out the best and the worst in us. If you have sound expectations about marriage and its purpose, and bring health and joy into the situation, your joy will be enhanced. If it is misery and unrealistic expectations that you bring with you, the misery will most likely be enhanced.

4. My spouse should make me whole. This is impossible. Only God can complete us. Perhaps the greatest myth couples bring into marriage is that our spouse will complete us, that somehow we are only a half person until we meet our other half. This is great deception. Until we are whole in the Lord ourselves, we have no business bringing another individual into the void in our lives. If you try to achieve intimacy with another person before you have a sense of identity on your own, all of your relationships will be an attempt to complete yourself. Whether divorce occurs or not, a failed marriage will result.