



CONVERSATION STARTERS

 FOR ENGAGED COUPLES



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Ted Cunningham

Joshua Straub, Ph.D.

Woodland Hills Family Church

There are many ways to prepare for marriage. Traditionally, couples meet with a pastor for premarital counseling a few months before the wedding. We are also keenly aware that many couples enter their wedding day without even thinking twice about the relational dynamics that inevitably ensue post honeymoon.

Our goal was to create a resource that not only helps pastors ask great questions, but also increases the number of ways both singles and couples can best prepare for marriage. These conversation starters provide insight into *the most* important personal and relational dynamics of any premarital relationship.

Here are 5 ways they can be used:

Individuals - Whether you are single, dating, or engaged, begin asking yourself the hard questions now. You may want to treat these conversation starters like journal entries. Use these questions to search your heart.

Engaged Couples - With or without a counselor, these questions get below the surface of issues to discover what is in the heart. Before the responsibility of marriage, prepare and enjoy with curiosity and fascination. Use these questions to discover what's in the heart of the one you will soon marry.

Parents - You can use these conversation starters to teach relationship formation in the home. Too often we teach our children to honor purity, but not marriage. Use these questions to paint a beautiful picture of marriage for your children starting at an early age.

Marriage Mentors and Counselors - Many premarital books and studies focus on issues (e.g. money, sex, in-laws, etc). These conversation starters prioritize character. Use the questions to guide your sessions with couples.

Pastors, Teachers and Church Leaders - Use these questions for teaching, preaching, or counseling. You may also want to use some of the questions to get to know the couple to better prepare for the wedding.

1 - CHARACTER

Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children. –Ephesians 5:1

Moral laxity is the number-one cause of divorce. Debt, adultery, and broken promises are symptoms of a spouse's lack of character. Shallow integrity leads couples to look for an easy out when they find themselves on the poorer side of "for richer or poorer" or on the sick side of "in sickness and in health."

Tom, the Hebrew word for integrity, means "to be complete or solid." Psalm 78:72 uses *tom* to speak of the integrity of the heart: "So he shepherded them according to the integrity [*tom*] of his heart, and guided them with his skillful hands" (NASB).

Pastor Chuck Swindoll does a fantastic job of describing what integrity is and what it is not:

"Integrity is completeness or soundness....You have integrity if you keep your promises. ... If you are a person of integrity, you will do what you say. What you declare, you will do your best to be...."

But there are some things integrity is not. It is not sinless perfection. A person with integrity does not live a life absolutely free of sin. No one does. But one with integrity quickly acknowledges his failures and doesn't hide the wrong."

(Charles R. Swindoll, "A Battle for Integrity," Insights, March 2003, 1-2.)

Marriages fall apart because of deep character issues, not because of surface issues, chemistry or compatibility. You may like the way he or she looks and behaves in public, but if that person has no character or integrity then you're in trouble. Character is everything.

The Four Cs

Character is the first of four Cs needed to inspect before marriage. We believe this is the only nonnegotiable of the Cs. The other three Cs—chemistry, competency, and calling—are not deal breakers for us. Your potential spouse can be a doctor, lawyer, pastor, or plumber, but if the person you marry has no character, then you'll have problems in your marriage. He or she can have a strong personality or be fun loving, but if there's no integrity, then chemistry doesn't matter.

Your character determines your commitment in marriage. Since the average length of first marriages in the United States today is about 8 years (US Census, 2011), commitment is the essential ingredient that will help you build a lifetime of enjoying one another. The reason commitment is not a fifth C is because character and commitment are synonymous. If the one you consider marrying has no character, do not walk down the aisle.

I (Josh) ask this question a lot to young couples, "What do you believe is the biggest thing you'll lose when you get married? Many say independence or doing what I want, when I want.

But I don't believe those are the right answer. I believe the biggest thing we lose when get married is the sense of the ideal. We spend our childhood and growing-up years dreaming about the person we'll marry, listening to love songs, watching romantic comedies, and building up the ideal spouse in our heads. My biggest caution is this: Don't allow your fairy tale-developed sense of the ideal cloud the very real character of the person you plan to marry. If you do, the gap between your ideal and what becomes reality after the wedding may be too big to overcome.

If you pay attention to character, I believe God will disappoint *your* low ideal with *His* ideal for your marriage—a relationship that will blow away any preconceived notion you had about marriage.

That's why premarital counseling always begins with this first C: character. Begin by asking each person about his or her personal faith journey. Here are some of the answers we have received:

"I've always been a Christian."

"I was baptized as a baby."

"I come from a religious family."

"My parents took me to church since I was born."

"I've always believed in God."

"I attend Woodland Hills."

None of these answers work for us. A decision to follow Jesus at Vacation Bible School at age eight, or a walk to the altar at summer camp at age thirteen is not enough of an answer. And if it's not enough for the leader of the church, it should not be enough for you either. You need to ask more probing questions of your potential spouse.

Here's a better list of questions to start probing his/her character:

Is he/she an active follower of Jesus? (Not just a church attendee)

What specific evidence (fruit) is there to support this?

Does he/she honor and respect others? Parents?

How does he/she handle money?

Is he/she angry or hot-tempered?

Does he/she have follow-through on commitments?

Does he/she demonstrate respect for authority?

Is he/she entitled?

Who does he/she spend the most time with? Closest friends? What is their character like?

How does he/she handle stress or crisis situations?

Is he/she teachable?

How well does he/she set emotional boundaries in his/her life? With parents? Friends? Coworkers? Others?

Most of these questions can be answered by simply watching behavior. Integrity can be easily identified at restaurants, malls, school, parents' homes, and even more so than anywhere else today, on social media. Our responsibility as believers is to make sure everything about our lives points to Jesus.

Once you've established that the one you love is deeply committed to Jesus, you need to go a little further. There are some character qualities unique to the genders, because men and women have different struggles and temptations.

His Character

Is He a One-Woman Man?

Does he have eyes for only you? Is he struggling with or addicted to pornography? Has he confessed sexual sin and committed to physical purity?

Is He a Hard Worker?

Will he be able to provide for you and your family? Being a hard worker is different from what kind of work he will do. We will cover that in the competency C. We can promise you this: Twenty years into marriage, laziness is not cute. It will frustrate you beyond belief when you're trying to put your kids in braces and your husband is sitting around waiting for the "right opportunity." Is he motivated? Is he willing to work hard for your family even it means working jobs he's not passionate about early on?

Does He Submit Well to Authority?

You want to know that he will submit to the authority of the church, older men, and his boss at work. Why? You should marry a guy who can stand up to and receive rebuke, correction, and sound teaching. In our consumer culture, most people choose churches based on music style, the coolness factor of the pastor, and stellar children's ministries. They will stay at the church so long as their needs are being met and no one rocks their boat. But how will your potential husband react when confronted with sin in his life? You may hit a spot in your marriage when counseling is necessary. At the very least, you may need the help of a church small group. If you get to this place, will your husband be the type of guy who only hears what he wants to hear? Will he have the guts to stick it out when chinks in his armor are revealed? You want a guy with a submissive attitude toward authority and a healthy disdain for entitlement.

Is He Easily Angered?

A man's character is quickly revealed in the way he deals with anger. In and of itself, anger is not a sin. Instead, anger is a secondary emotion that typically stems from a primary emotion such as failure, rejection, or the feeling of being judged, controlled, or cheated. The issue is not so much what he gets angry about, but rather what he does with his anger. Does he know how to resolve anger? How short is his fuse? How long does it take for him to calm down? Does he always seem to be mad at someone or something? Does he take his anger out on you?

Anger can never be buried dead. Anger will always resurface in another relationship. For instance, men tend to bring their anger from work home to their family. Those closest to them usually get the harshest treatment. On a practical level, unresolved anger is like drinking poison, expecting the other person to get sick.

Instead, marry the guy who gets angry and then resolves his anger by seeking forgiveness and peace with himself and others. You do not want a toxic marriage.

Will He Be a Great Dad?

Ask yourself the question, “Will he be the type of guy who provokes his children to wrath?” (Eph. 6:4). Will he be willing to spend a lot of time with the children (Deut. 6:7)? Will he be willing to give up hobbies and sports to spend time with his children?

Quality is no substitute for quantity when it comes to family time. In the ancient Hebrew culture, a child’s education was the primary responsibility of the parents, not the responsibility of formal institutions or of government. Parents were responsible for teaching their children by modeling truth, by sharing God’s Word in everyday conversation, and by experiencing life together. This was considered the best way to educate children: “And you must commit yourselves wholeheartedly to these commands I am giving you today. Repeat them again and again to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are on the road, when you are going to bed and when you are getting up” (Deut. 6:6-7 NLT).

Is He Too Attached to His Mom, Hobbies, or Friends?

Does he understand the concept of boundaries? Will he call mommy every time the two of you get into a fight? Many marriage problems in the early years stem from a guy who wants to continue to live the single life. Do his parents still buy him cars, phones, or clothes? When he is around his parents, are they clearly in control of his life? Benevolent parents can destroy marriages if you’re not careful. Does he have the wherewithal to tell mom and dad, “Hey, thank you for your generosity, but I don’t need a new phone and I can buy my own dang clothes.”

Men, don’t wait to have your parents set the boundaries, because some of them won’t. You must take the lead and set the boundaries.

Also, is hanging with the boys on poker night still his highest priority? Does he say things like, “I need my downtime?” Be very sure he is ready to grow up and let go of the Xbox and all-nighters with his friends before you marry him.

Her Character

Is She a Busybody or Malicious Talker?

Idleness causes sin. Nothing brings embarrassment to a husband more than an out-of-control, gossipy wife. The apostle Paul told widows under the age of sixty to marry and have children because he was concerned their idleness would turn them into busybodies (1 Tim. 5:9-14). He didn’t want them to become destructive to other homes. Scripture is very clear that out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks (Matt. 15:18). If you marry a woman who is constantly running down people with her mouth, be warned—that will one day turn on you: “A nagging wife is as annoying as the constant dripping on a rainy day. Trying to stop her complaints is like trying to stop the wind or trying to hold something with greased hands” (Prov. 27:15-16).

Is She Moody?

Marry a temperate woman. The opposite of temperate is moody. With a moody woman, you never know which woman you are getting. One of the things we love about our wives is that they are easy to get along with. Every woman has mood swings (just as men do), and we all have our ups and downs in life. We’re not speaking of menstrual cycles or even mental-health issues,

but rather the nastiness that can come from an unguarded woman. (Caution: Men can be just as moody as women and can easily neglect the feelings of their wives. Do not use the “moody test” as an excuse to *not* listen to your wife.)

Is She Modest?

Women get distracted from Jesus when they act immodestly. The apostle Paul cautions women not to allow their dress to become a distraction to the gospel: “I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God” (1 Tim. 2:9-10).

Will She Be a Good Mom?

Does she want to be a mom? I (Ted) had many good friends who married their high school sweethearts right out of high school and immediately started having children. One particular friend gave birth to her first child at age nineteen. She stayed in the same town we grew up in and kept many of her high school friends who kept up their single, party lifestyle. Throughout her early twenties she went clubbing into the early morning hours then came home to sleep it off. Her husband went to work early, leaving their toddler in the care of her hungover, half-asleep mom. Men need to leave the single lifestyle and create boundaries with family and friends in order to be a good husband and father. Young women must do the same.

Being a good mom starts with investing your energy in the raising of children. Such a woman of noble character will have children that rise up and call her blessed (Prov. 31).

His and Her Character

Is He/She Committed to Purity While Dating and Engaged?

Your character must remain pure. Paul says, “But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality” (Eph. 5:3). You’ll notice it tells us to stay away from sexual immorality altogether. Young adults who are dating always want to know “How far can we go?” That’s the wrong question to ask. What you’re really asking is “How far can I go in my dating relationship, physically, without getting in trouble?” Wrong emphasis. Wrong question. Why? Consider what Jesus said: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8). If we’re not pure, we cannot see God.

Is He/She Greedy?

Guard your lives from “any kind of impurity, or ... greed, because these are improper for God’s people” (Eph. 5:3). The two primary stumbling blocks of believers in the church today are sex and money. These sins can get a hold of our lives. Sex and money are not bad or evil. However, when we pervert sex and love money, we get into trouble and lose our integrity.

Greed destroys marriages when young couples start to spend more money than they make. In most young marriages, income is low, but a couple’s lifestyle can quickly get out of control when high expectations cause overspending. Can he/she live within the means of spending less than what’s coming in?

Debt is stressful. It places a couple under bondage and builds their hatred toward God: “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money” (Matt. 6:24).

Does His/Her Mouth Reflect Christ?

“Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving” (Eph. 5:4). When we open our mouths, we should reflect the sacrifice of Christ. The Bible teaches us that our words flow from our hearts. If you want to know about a person’s character, listen to his or her words. The tongue will tell all:

We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check. When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. (James 3:2-6)

Does He/ She Have an Addictive Personality?

An addictive personality can reveal both a lack of character on one hand, or a depth of character on the other. This question doesn’t imply that you completely discount anybody with an addictive personality. We have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). The issue is whether there is current evidence of a substance abuse or a behavioral addiction (like pornography). The Bible clearly teaches that we should be living our lives always as in broad daylight, not gratifying the desires of the flesh (Romans 13:13-14). If a current addiction is evident, there is a deeper character issue that is not yet resolved.

On the other hand, if an addiction was evident, ask the hard questions. What is the length of sobriety? What lessons were learned? Who were the people who helped him/her overcome the addiction? What steps has he/she taken to prevent relapse? What are his/her most susceptible triggers? We both have helped numerous people through the years fight addiction. We can attest, there’s a depth of character unmatched for those who confessed their addiction, repented of their ways, and who put a team of people around them, took the active steps necessary to overcome it, and maintained accountability and community in their lives.

Do His/Her Closest Friends Reflect Christ?

There’s a difference between the friends and associates who influence us and those that we influence. Our friend Rick Rigsby loves to tell young people, “If you are the strongest follower of Christ among your friends, then you need new friends.” We all tend to take on the lifestyles and patterns of those we hang around on a regular basis. We get our jokes from them. We get our language from them.

So now what? Do I cut myself off from the world? No. Jesus encouraged His disciples to be friends with sinners. Jesus was a friend of sinners, but there is a difference between friendship for the purpose of leading the person to Jesus, and being a partner in crime, so to speak. Paul says “do not be partners” (Eph. 5:7) with those who lead you away from Christ. He also warned us: “bad company corrupts good character” (1 Cor. 15:33).

So where are your intimate friends and associates right now?

Are they leading you toward the world, or are they leading you toward Christ?

What do your close friends say about your character?

Involve your parents in the decision to marry by asking the character questions.

When your relationship moves toward marriage, it will probably come as no surprise to your parents. Even if they love and respect the one you plan to marry, you still need to go for the crown by having the guy officially ask the father of the bride for his daughter's hand. This is old school, but an important gauge for character.

The following questions will help you ask for the parents' blessing. Answer these twenty questions *before* you make the approach. Use the questions to help you write a letter, prepare a speech, or work through a dialogue.

- 1. Define love.**
- 2. How will you love her as much as her dad does?**
- 3. How will you resolve conflict?**
- 4. Where will you serve in the church?**
- 5. What did your parents teach you about marriage?**
- 6. What did your parents teach you about how to treat a lady?**
- 7. How do you honor your folks? Give some practical examples.**
- 8. Who is the most influential leader in your life, and why?**
- 9. Do you regularly expose yourself to sexually explicit material?**
- 10. What steps have you taken to keep yourself pure?**
- 11. Are you sexually addicted or struggling with pornography?**
- 12. When did you become a follower of Jesus?**
- 13. What would keep you from following Christ?**
- 14. What are your favorite hobbies or sports?**
- 15. What are you sacrificing for this marriage?**
- 16. How did you two meet?**
- 17. What was your first impression of the young woman you hope to marry?**
- 18. When did you know she was the one?**
- 19. Would you consider yourself a great listener?**
- 20. How will you make a living in the next five years?**

Ladies, this list and approach come with a caution. If your boyfriend or fiancé has a serious reaction to answering these questions or approaching your dad, he's not ready to get married. I'm not saying, "Don't marry him." I am saying, "Don't marry him right now." He might need some more work on his character and his ability to submit to authority.

Together take the time to answer the following questions as it relates to your parents:

What are some practical ways you can honor your parents?

How have you observed your boyfriend, girlfriend, or fiancé honor his/her parents?

What will be the challenges you will face in asking for your parents' blessing?

How will you approach these challenges?

If your parents do not approve, how will you honor them?

How can you still honor parents even when they say no?

If you met in high school, what have you done to prepare for a very young marriage?

What are the three characteristics from your parent's marriage or your family of origin you want to carry into your marriage?

What are the three characteristics from your parent's marriage or your family of origin you don't want to carry into your marriage?

Briefly share your salvation experience with them.

We also believe it is critical for the parents to be ready for the marriage. The Bible says we are to leave our father and mother and be united as one to our spouse (Gen. 2:24). Here is a list of questions you can print out and give your respective parents as well.

Do you have any reservations about the character of your own son/ daughter getting married?

Do you have any reservations about the character of your son/daughter's fiancé or boyfriend/ girlfriend?

How will you respond if your son/ daughter calls you for help resolving conflict in their marriage?

What are your expectations of how often you will see your son/daughter once they are married?

What are your expectations of how often you will talk to your son/daughter once they are married?

What are your expectations about the relationship you want to have with your new son or daughter-in-law?

How do you feel about your son/daughter, once they are married, moving away from you? (More than driving distance)

What role do you believe you should play as a grandparent?

What are your expectations for how holidays will be handled?

What will you do if you disagree with how your own children are parenting your grandchildren?

How are your expectations of how you'll use or how your son/ daughter will use social media once they have their own family?



2 - CHEMISTRY

My dove in the clefts of the rock, in the hiding places on the mountainside, show me your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.

–Song of Songs 2:14

Do opposites attract? Should I look for compatibility? How do we weigh all of our likes and dislikes? Which are more important—similarities or differences—when it comes to finding “the one”?

All of these questions are secondary to the character questions we covered in the last session. Faith, purity, integrity, and commitment trump the pursuit of chemistry and compatibility every time. Professor Mark Regenerus believes finding the right match is less complicated than we like to make it:

“Marrying early can mean a short search process, which elevates the odds of a poorer match. In the age of online dating personality algorithms and matches, Americans have become well acquainted with the cultural notion that getting the right fit in a marital partner is extremely important. *Chemistry* is the new watchword as we meld marriage with science. Should opposites attract? Or should we look for common interests? There’s no right answer to such questions, because successful marriages are less about the right personalities than about the right practices, like persistent communication and conflict resolution, along with the ability to handle the cyclical nature of so much about marriage, and a bedrock commitment to its sacred unity. Indeed, marriage research confirms that couples who view their marriages as sacred covenants are far better off than those who don’t. Toward this end, pastors, premarital counselors, and Christian friends must be free to speak frankly into the lives of those seeking their counsel about marriage. While it may be nice to find an optimal match in marriage, it cannot hold a candle to sharing a mental and spiritual commitment to the enduring covenant between God, man, and woman. It just can’t. People change. Chemistry wanes. Covenants don’t.”

The Four Personalities

Most people tend to be a blend of two or more of the four basic personality types. Gary Smalley and John Trent brought these personalities to the forefront of marriage and family teaching years ago with the beaver, golden retriever, otter, and lion.

No matter what the personality combinations are in your relationship, you can learn skills to enjoy a happy, fruitful, and satisfying marriage. And learning about these personality types on the front side of marriage can save a lot of heartache down the road.

The Precise Personality (Beaver)

The Precise Personality loves numbers and making things work right. This person pays

attention to statistics and enjoys keeping a budget and balancing the checkbook. The Precise Personality loves measuring and comparing things, and most issues are clearly black or white. He or she is constantly evaluating incoming data and will happily tell you what you've done wrong and, usually, how you can do it better. Precise Personalities help organizations run effectively and efficiently.

They value accuracy, details, correctness, and discernment. They are often great listeners. If they're not careful, they can be too critical and controlling in their pursuit of perfection. When someone withholds details, they assume that person is lying.

If you're considering marrying a Precise Personality, plan on giving them as many details as possible. Even when you think the details are unnecessary, give them anyway because it shows them that you care.

The Pleaser Personality (Golden Retriever)

The Pleaser Personality is warm and relational and tends to be extremely loyal. This personality type maintains a sense of calm in the most stressful of situations and has a knack for being a natural peacemaker. The Pleaser Personality is often concerned with group dynamics and the atmosphere of the room. More than anything, he or she wants to make sure everyone and everything is good.

The world is a better place because of Pleaser Personalities. They tend to be the glue that holds people and organizations together. They are quick to welcome, serve, and embrace others, and they value peace, loyalty, and routine. If they aren't careful they can be easily hurt. They tend to take things too personally.

If you plan on marrying a Pleaser Personality, be cautious of their feelings. They can be taken advantage of, so you must work at valuing their loyalty. If your spouse does not embrace all of your friends, it's not because she or he thinks your friends are bad people. They prefer to go deep with fewer people instead of going shallow with a lot of people. So don't expect them to be a party mixer.

The Party Personality (Otter)

The Party Personality is all about fun and will cheer you on in your activities. Right before participating in a dangerous activity they'll usually say, "Hey, watch this." They love attention.

The Party Personality is always on the go, ready to try a new sport, jump out of a plane, or catch a concert—at *the very last minute*. Along the way, they'll make sure the laughter is loud and everyone gets to hear some of their best stories. They are extreme optimists, very energetic, daydreamers, and fantastic motivators. They're constantly imagining what could be as well as how much fun it could be! They tend to come up with great ideas and love to be spontaneous.

Unfortunately, as enjoyable as Party Personalities are to be around, they also have their blind spots—like when it comes to doing the work needed to throw the party. Though they may love being the center of attention at the party, that doesn't mean they should be the ones throwing the party! Their organizational skills often leave much to be desired, and all their excitement can be overbearing. While they have a lot to say when it comes to making a decision, they may be too busy to actually follow through.

If you plan on marrying a Party Personality, be careful not to take everything so seriously. We could all stand to lighten up a bit, and the Party Personality reminds us to do just that. Avoid belittling this personality with constant words like, "Come on, get serious!" or "Why don't you ever take things seriously?"

The Powerful Personality (Lion)

The Powerful Personality loves making decisions. They are naturally task oriented and focus on getting things done. This happens to be my (Ted) personality. Powerful Personalities naturally step up to leadership opportunities. They're quick to take the reins of a project or activity, and they aren't afraid of competition or confrontation.

The Powerful Personality tends to look at relationships as *I'm your coach, not your friend*. They tend to have high expectations of themselves and others. They are not afraid to speak up, and they're willing to do what it takes to make sure the job gets done.

If left unchecked, the Powerful Personality has a natural tendency to think, *it's my way or the highway*. As a result, they can undermine relationships within a community or work environment. If a Powerful Personality gets out of balance, they may use their gung-ho leadership skills to mow over or intimidate others. The result can be a lot of relational damage.

If you plan on marrying a Powerful Personality, then remember to save money for counseling. I'm just kidding, *sort of*. My most difficult counseling appointments have been with a husband and wife who both have the Powerful Personality. Talk about a battle of the wills. It's like putting two lions in a cage together, and it often seems as if only one will come out alive.

Which personality best describes your fiancé?

What are the strengths and weaknesses with your fiancé's personality?

Which personality best describes you?

What are the strengths and weaknesses with your personality?

How well do your personalities blend?

What are some of the challenges you face in blending your personalities?

What can you do to bring balance to your personality?

Do your personalities influence the way you use social media? How could this be a potential problem area for you?

Honor the Differences

When you honor and esteem someone as a unique creation and highly valuable, you cannot help but transform your relationship with that person for the better. Honoring someone is simply seeing him or her as personally autographed by God. Romans 15:7 tells us, "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God." In other words, God is pleased when you honor others and yourself.

Precise Personality, remember that you sometimes may have to move forward in life without figuring everything out perfectly. You may need to complete a project or a household chore even though it's not perfect. Even when it feels uncomfortable, you need to risk and even embrace adventure. Don't expect your spouse to share every detail of the day. And by all means, remember that he or she is not lying when some details get left unsaid. Stretch yourself by not taking yourself or life too seriously.

Pleaser Personality, you must be careful not to wear your heart on your sleeve. People, including your mate, may take advantage of that, whether unconsciously or not. Release past hurts, and let your spouse off the hook for past mistakes. Learn to make decisions in the midst of uncertainty about what is best for everyone. Branch out and meet new people.

Party Personality, learn to follow through on your ideas and especially your commitments. If you go to Lowe's and buy tools to do a project around the house, then complete the project. If you don't follow through, you'll drive the Precise Personality nuts and frustrate the Powerful Personality. Remember: Just because the fun leaves the project doesn't mean the project is over.

Powerful Personality, learn to add softness. Study ways to become a better listener, and realize that not every statement needs a response. Tame your words with love, and temper your tone with gentleness. Look for opportunities to take other people's feelings into account.

Learning to honor personality differences takes time, especially in marriage. It doesn't happen overnight, and it will require numerous trial-and-error attempts to grow closer before it actually begins to work. You may think you're doing something your spouse would love—when in fact it's driving your spouse nuts! Those moments will become scrapbook memories that can provide lots of laughter in the years to come (though it probably isn't funny in the moment).



3 - COMPETENCY

I [God] have filled him with ... skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts.
–Exodus 31:3

Michael believes working at a movie theater or in fast food is beneath him. He's sixteen years old, and he's holding out for the more lucrative position with a nice benefits package. Shane started his own company at the age of twelve and now nets \$1,500 per month selling t-shirts online. He's nineteen years old and paying his own way through college. Sarah's dad told her that she would need to get a job in college to learn responsibility. Dad pays for her tuition, room, board, books, car payments, insurance, and gas. Sarah only works for extra spending money. Leigh Ann attends College of the Ozarks where she takes fifteen credit hours of classes per semester, works fifteen hours per week to cover her tuition, and an additional twenty hours off campus to cover her other expenses. She is twenty-one years old.

I love this C!

I love encouraging young couples to get creative and find unique ways to make a living in the early years of their marriage. For most young people we work with today, we are the first one to picture a special future for them. After their childhood dreams of making it to the NFL, NBA, or as a fashion designer, actor, or singer in New York City do not pan out, parents usually send their kids off to college. But most young people are sent into the world with few job skills and low earning potential. And when you grow up with too much privilege, the responsibility wakeup call can be brutal.

Competency is the measure of your skills, their future potential for income, and the number of opportunities available to you.

Why is Competency a part of our premarital counseling at Woodland Hills? The answer is simple. We want to get practical with young couples and get them thinking about vocational skills that provide a living.

Skilled labor generally has a higher value than hard labor. The more skills you have, the more attractive you are to future employers. I want young couples to have hope, when they first get married, that they can earn plenty of money in lots of different ways.

Take a look at the following skills and then sketch out a few different ways you can turn your particular competencies into income, both in the long term and short term:

Entertaining: to perform, act, dance, speak, or do magic

Artistic: to conceptualize, picture, draw, paint, photograph, or make renderings

Graphics: to lay out, design, and create visual displays or banners

Planning: to strategize, design, and organize programs and events

Managing: to supervise people to accomplish a task and coordinate the details involved

Counseling: to listen, encourage, and guide with sensitivity

Teaching: to explain, train, demonstrate, or tutor

Writing: to write articles, letters, or books

Repairing: to fix, restore, or maintain

Feeding: to create meals for large or small groups of people

Mechanical: to operate equipment, tools, or machinery (like welding)

Counting: to work with numbers, data, or money

Serving: to wait tables, make beds, or clean rooms

Public Relations: to handle complaints and customers with care and courtesy

Welcoming: to convey warmth, develop rapport, and make others feel comfortable

Landscaping: to garden and work with plants

Decorating: to beautify a setting for a special event

Maintain: to efficiently maintain something that is already organized (adapted from the S.H.A.P.E. assessment)

At Woodland Hills, we also teach the value of giving with a cheerful heart and prioritizing money in this order,

1. Earn
2. Give (Tithe your earnings)
3. Save
4. Spend

What is your plan for income and work early in your marriage?

What is your current financial situation? (student loan debt, credit card debt, loans, mortgages, investments, income, etc.)

After earning, do you have a plan to give, save, and then spend? How will you break that down?

Do you need to go to college to do what you're competent at?

If you are planning to continue college (or graduate school) after marriage, how will that work? For both spouses?

Will your plans for marriage and education affect the type of job you do? Why or why not?

Is relocation necessary to secure a job?

Are you teachable? Are you willing to receive constructive feedback to get better at a particular skill or competency?

Have you been mentored in budgeting and finances? If not, are you willing to seek the help of someone who is knowledgeable and can help you?



4 - CALLING

I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength.

–Ephesians 1:18-19

He is a gifted artist. She is headed to Argentina to serve on the mission field. Should they marry with two different callings?

I (Ted) was asked this question while speaking at Liberty University a few years back. He was concerned that marriage would be a roadblock to God's individual calling on each of them. My first thought was, *Can't you do art anywhere?* I would think Argentina would be a fantastic place to jump-start your life as an artist. I could be wrong. But more important than this, I felt he needed a better understanding of calling.

Calling is an ambiguous word in our church vocabulary. We throw it around for just about anything we want to do or abstain from. All one has to say is, "I don't feel called," followed by fill-in-the-blank and you are off the hook from working with the junior-high boys, or whatever.

Biblically, every believer is *called*. Single or married, if you are a Christian, you are called. Paul lays out calling theology this way: "I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you" (Eph. 1:18). Calling is not something reserved for super-spiritual Christians. Your life, family, marriage, and vocation should proclaim the life and practices of Jesus in every pursuit. *That is your primary calling.*

When you begin to get this truth in your heart, it takes your life out of the mundane. This truth brings meaning to the job that you can't stand. When you get up in the morning and ask, "What's the purpose of this?", you now have an answer.

You are a minister in whatever career you choose. It doesn't matter whether you make widgets or sell real estate—you have been called. The danger of pride lurks when we take this idea of calling and restrict it to a few enlightened Christians. This flippant use of calling produces religious leaders with elitist attitudes. And don't forget, Jesus had a lot to say to religious leaders with elitist attitudes, and none of it was good. The entire model of New Testament ministry is that leaders are not somehow superior to you in service to God. They don't have a calling that surpasses your calling.

The problem is that our world's values are the opposite of God's values. The world lacks any sense of what Scripture describes as "calling," or the perspective that God has called and equipped people to serve Him through their work in the world. Instead, our culture encourages us to climb a work/identity ladder that is ultimately self-serving and often self-destructive.

Marriage can turn the direction of your calling 180 degrees. God can use another person to direct you, ignite passion for life, and redirect your career plans. That's why you need to be reasonable with this final C. You don't have to decline a marriage proposal because your potential spouse has an opposite "calling" on his or her life.

How will marriage impact your calling?

Does your fiancé have a vision for life?

Do you have a vision for you life?

What is your plan for that vision?

What are your expectations of your spouse when it relates to calling?

Is there a common direction you feel led toward together?

How will marriage benefit your vocational calling?

How does a family fit into your calling?

Do kids fit into this calling? If so, how many?

Would this include adoption? Describe this (inner city kids, infants, foster parent, etc.)

Do you have a vision for your family?

How would you define calling as it relates to the family?

How will you and your spouse work together to ensure you're both fulfilling your calling and serving in your competencies and gifts?



5 - WHAT WILL WE DO AT THE FIRST SIGNS OF TROUBLE?

Loves seems the swiftest, but it is the slowest of all growths. No man or woman really knows what perfect love is until they have been married a quarter of a century.

—Mark Twain

TIME magazine published an article in 2009 titled *For Worse, Then for Better: Why Facing Stressful Life events Early in Coupledom Can Lead to Longevity*. The article states that, "Stressful life events often amplify a couple's problems...and increase the likelihood of divorce...studies also show that hardship can have an upside. For some couples, it's protective, helping solidify their commitment into unshakeable us-vs.-the-world resolve."

The article goes on to quote a psychologist and marriage researcher who talks about why stressful events can result in a stronger marriage. "A relationship crisis 'smashes the illusion of invulnerability,' says William Doherty, who runs the Marriage and Family Therapy program at the University of Minnesota. That illusion he says, 'was going to go away anyway, and I don't think there's any great loss to it going away sooner rather than later.'"

Marriage researcher and expert John Gottman believes there are two key predictors of a resilient relationship: mutual support and a willingness to sacrifice. Scott Stanley, director of the Center for Marital and Family Studies at the University of Denver, and his colleagues found that the willingness to forgo personal interests and put a partner's needs ahead of one's own was directly linked to a long-lasting, happy marriage—provided that the sacrifices were not damaging or one-directional.

Young and old marriages alike will face struggles, pain, and conflict at some point. The longevity and marital satisfaction you experience as a couple is up to you. It has nothing to do with your age and everything to do with how you maturely process the pain you will face together.

If you haven't already, plug into a solid local church on the day you return from your honeymoon. Join a small group or Sunday school class where you can be in fellowship with other believers. Give those in the community the freedom to speak into your lives. Your young marriage is counting on it. Submit to the leaders of your church, and respect their authority. Don't bolt when they say or do something you don't like, because you need them to point out sin in your life. Sometimes they will need to point out sin that is obvious. Other times they will need to point out sin that is leading you down an even more destructive path: "The sins of some men are obvious, reaching the place of judgment ahead of them; the sins of others trail behind them" (1 Tim. 5:24).

When your sin is blatant and flagrant, good leaders will call you on it. Be a young groom or young bride who listens when rebuked. We all need accountability, and the church is there to help us be men and women of God. Follow their leadership by obeying: "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you" (Heb. 13:17).

A church wedding is only the start; it's even better to have a church marriage. For almost fifteen years now, Amy and I have been leaning on the support of our church family and the older men and women in our congregation. Josh and Christi do the same. Don't be afraid to ask for help when you need it.

When you are married, how will your marriage struggles build your character?

What struggles and pain have you already had to work through in your relationship?

What will it take to keep you from trying to change your spouse?

Make a list of the character issues that you need to work on.

Do you have a church? Are you plugged in?

Will you submit to the authority of the church?

Will you go to leaders of the church for help?

What has prevented you in the past from seeking the help of the church in relational matters?

Are you willing to ask an older, wiser, and Godly couple to mentor or walk alongside you in your marriage?

What plans do you have in place to cultivate intimacy in your marriage?
