



Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage (Part V of V) “Intimacy”

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“Intimacy”

Table of Contents

Introduction:

What Can I Hope to Get from this Seminar?	3
Marriage and Pre-Marital Mentoring Series	4

Chapter 1. What Makes Intimacy Difficult? <i>The Obvious and Not-So-Obvious Things We Rarely Discuss</i>	5
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Evaluation: Appreciating Our Difference

Chapter 2. Appreciating Our Differences <i>An Essential Part of Lasting Romance</i>	15
--	----

Evaluation: Living in THE Love Story

Chapter 3. Living in THE Love Story <i>Experiencing God’s Greatest Message In Life’s Greatest Blessing</i>	25
---	----

Evaluation: Sexual Intimacy in Marriage

Chapter 4. Sex as One of God’s Gifts for Marriage (Part One) <i>Learning to Skillfully and Unashamedly Enjoy Foreplay</i>	35
--	----

Chapter 5. Sex as One of God’s Gifts for Marriage (Part Two) <i>Learning to Skillfully and Unashamedly Enjoy Intercourse</i>	45
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Appendices

A. Marriage Dates from the “Intimacy” Seminar.....	56
B. Common Challenges to a Healthy Sex Life	58
C. Small Group Accountability Questions from the “Intimacy” Seminar	61
D. What Do I Do Now?	62

What Can I Hope to Get From this Seminar?

Whether you are here due to personal need, the needs of others, or for a general interest in the topic, we hope this seminar will benefit you. If we do our job well, parts of this seminar will speak to you personally. There will also be parts that speak to aspects of this subject that are different from your own experience. What follows are **six unavoidable facts** that should help you profit from all of the material you hear (bold faced text taken from Paul Tripp and Tim Lane *How People Change*):

1. Someone in your life had a problem this week. That person may be you. Even if you are here for yourself, chances are you know or will know others who struggle in this area. Because we live in a fallen world and have a sin nature, we can be certain that we will battle with sin and suffering in our lives. Because we love people, we can be certain we will be called on to love and assist others in their battle with sin and suffering.

2. We have everything we need in the Gospel to help that person (2 Peter 1:3). God has given us Himself, the Gospel, the Bible, and the church and promised they are effective for all things that pertain to life and godliness. Our task as Christians is to grow in our understanding of and ability to skillfully apply these resources to our struggles. These resources are the essence and source of “good advice,” and we hope to play a role in your efforts to apply and disseminate this “good advice.” We do not aim to present new material, but new ways of applying the timeless, eternal truths of the Gospel found in Scripture.

3. That person will seek help from friends, family members, or pastors before seeking professionals. Counseling (broadly defined as seeking to offer hope and direction through relationship) happens all the time. We talk with friends over the phone, crying children in their rooms, spouses in the kitchen, fellow church members between services, and have endless conversations with ourselves. We listen to struggles, seek to understand, offer perspective, give advice, and follow up later. This is what the New Testament calls “one-anothering” and something we are all called to do.

4. That person either got no help, bad help, or biblical, gospel-centered help. Not all counseling is good counseling. Not all advice that we receive from a Christian (even a Christian counselor) is Christian advice. Too often we are advised to look within for the answers to our problems or told that we are good enough, strong enough, or smart enough in ourselves to overcome. Hopefully you will see today how the Bible calls us to something (rather Someone) better, bigger, and more effective than these messages.

5. If they did not get meaningful help, they will go elsewhere. When we do not receive good advice (pointing us to enduring life transformation), we keep looking. We need answers to our struggles. This means that as people find unfulfilling answers they will eventually (by God’s grace) come to a Christian for advice. When they eventually come to you, we hope you will be more prepared because of our time together today.

6. Whatever help they received, they will use to help others! We become evangelists for the things that make life better (this is why the Gospel is simply called “Good News”). We quite naturally share the things that we find to be effective. Our prayer for you today is that you will find the material presented effective for your struggles and that you will be so comforted and encouraged by it that it will enable you to be a more passionate and effective ambassador of the Gospel in the midst of “normal” daily conversations.

Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage Mentoring Series

This seminar is one piece of a five part series of seminars designed to facilitate mentoring relationships for married or engaged couples (one-on-one or in a group setting). Our goal in these seminars is to cover the key subjects that often hinder, but could greatly enhance, a couple’s ability to experience all that God intended marriage to be.

We believe that change that lasts happens in relationship. Private change tends to be short-lived change. Living things exposed to light grow. Living things kept in the dark wither. This is why we designed this series to encourage you to give your marriage the light of Christian community by studying these materials with others.

These materials are built upon a central premise – God gave us marriage so that we would know the gospel more clearly and more personally. It is the gospel that gives us joy. Marriage is meant to be a living picture of the gospel-relationship between God and His bride, the church. For this reason, we have two goals for you as you go through this study:

1. That you would get to know and enjoy your spouse in exciting, new, and profoundly deeper ways, so that...
2. ... you would get to know and enjoy God in exciting, new, and profoundly deeper ways.

This series of seminars is arranged around five topics that represent the most common challenges that face a marriage. While the challenges of each area are acknowledged, the tone of these seminars is optimistic. We believe that those things that cause the greatest pain when done wrongly bring the fullest joy when done according to God’s design.

These seminars are both sequential and interdependent. Each seminar is meant to build upon the ones before it and lead into the ones after it. If you are going through these materials for general marital enrichment or pre-marital counseling, it is best to complete them in order. However, if you are looking for guidance in a particular area of need, it is possible to start with the subject of greatest urgency in your marriage.

1. Foundations: Why is marriage hard? Why do so many marriages that begin in sincere love end in divorce? What are the essential things a couple should focus on to have a marriage that flourishes? What is a covenant and why is marriage a covenant? Why do we have a marriage ceremony? What are the roles for a Christian husband and wife? What if I don’t “fit” or like the masculine-feminine stereotypes or don’t have the personality to match a “traditional” husband/wife?

2. Communication: What does a couple talk about over a life time? What if I’m not good with words or listening? How do we maintain friendship when we’re having to keep up with so many logistics? How do we disagree and protect our marriage without losing what’s important to each of us individually? Why do words matter so much and why can they hurt so badly? How do we make things right after they go wrong and not let negative momentum build?

3. Finances: Why are money problems the number one cause of divorce? How do we maintain reasonable expectations for money in a debt-sick culture? How do two people manage their money together when it is hard enough to manage as a single person? Who should administrate the finances and how involved should the other person be? How do we learn self-control and contentment as a couple? How can “budget” become an exciting or, at least, pleasant word?

4. Decision Making: How do we manage our time? How do we navigate situations where we each want good things that cannot both happen? How do we determine God’s will for our personal and marital lives? How do we functionally express the biblical roles of headship and submission? How do we ensure that life’s tough decisions draw us closer to God and each other instead of creating distance? How do we respond when bad things happen to a good marriage or our plans?

5. Intimacy: How do you maintain the “spark” of marriage over a lifetime? How do you continue learning each other without feeling like you know all there is to know? How do we protect our expectations from highly romanticized cultural ideals? How many ways are there to express love and why are they all necessary? How do we enjoy a balance of both intimacy and intercourse? How do we grow as lovers throughout our marriage?

Chapter I

What Makes Intimacy Difficult? The Obvious and Not-So-Obvious Things We Rarely Discuss

Plumb Lines: These are the “sticky” statements that capture the core messages of this chapter.

- Understanding and safety precede love and affection
- One of the most important things you can do for your children is love your spouse well.
- Romance is more about intentionality and engagement than grandiosity and epic moments.
- It takes a mature man and woman to enjoy a romantic marriage.

Memorize: I Corinthians 13:1-3 (ESV), “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.” As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- “If I... gain nothing” – We can do everything we typically think of as love and still gain nothing for our marriage.
- “Speak” – Eloquent and affirming words can be a blessing, but if they are detached from love they accomplish little.
- “Understand” – Reading books, attending seminars, or studying male-female differences are not the key to marriage.
- “Faith... remove mountains” – A positive outlook and extravagant serving do not produce a great marriage.
- “Give away all” – Sacrificial gift giving without love does not send the message that you hope it will.
- **Question:** If these actions are not what defines love, then what is? Your marriage depends on the answer.

Teaching Notes

“It is possible to feel you are ‘madly in love’ with someone, when it is really just an attraction to someone who can meet your needs and address the insecurities and doubts you have about yourself. In that kind of relationship, you will demand and control rather than serve and give (p. 76).” Tim Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*

“Love seduces you in a way that honors you and does not turn you into an object of autoerotic satisfaction (p. 173).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

“Adults forget how to frolic and tickle and squeal with delight. Lovemaking can include much lighthearted laughter and simple fun. Play may be more necessary than passion sometimes (p. 185).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

“It is so easy for me to drift back to believing that I am the center of gravity for all my relationships, including the vertical one I have with God. Nothing squashes rejoicing like that misbelief (p. 211).” William P. Smith in *Loving Well: Even If You Haven’t Been*

“When you think about it, you’ll notice the way you treat your spouse reflects the way you treat God. The same things that cause distance in your relationship with God calls distance in your relationship with your spouse (p. 3-4).” David Powlison in *Renewing Marital Intimacy*

“I have never met a parent who could truly understand how much kids affect a sex life until they are into the experience. From the fatigue of early infancy, to the demands of an active toddler, to the interruptions of elementary days, to the late nights of a teenager—parents must deal with the confusing variables the children present to their lovemaking (p. 59).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

“Unless your marital relationship is in good condition, sex doesn’t work (p. 235).” Tim Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*

Embedded Study

What are we going to talk about in this seminar? Sex... romance... affection... affirming words... weekly date nights... talking about our feelings... vulnerability... What is “intimacy”?

Chances are you won’t create something you can’t define and many couples have a hard time agreeing about what counts as intimacy. “Agreeing to disagree” is definitely not the solution to this dilemma.

For this seminar “intimacy” will be used to capture the full breadth of romantic activities shared by husband and wife; from encouragement, flirting, serving, and handholding to romantic get aways, long love letters, and gourmet sex. This seminar is about maintaining a deep sense of enjoyment for each other.

It is easy to allow the awkwardness of this subject – talking about emotions, affection, and sex – to prevent a couple from enjoying some of marriage’s sweetest fruit. It takes a mature man and woman to flirt tastefully over a lifetime, put their dreams and desires into words consistently, and talk wholesomely about what is sexually enjoyable.

Most of these are conversations you should not be having with anyone else, so it makes sense there would be some awkwardness. Don’t allow the potential clumsiness of speech or action to prevent you from pursuing and enjoying the spouse God has blessed you with.

Put Yourself Into Words

What are your concerns, fears, questions, or challenges regarding intimacy (affirmation, closeness, romance, sex)? Put these into words and share them with your fiancé / spouse. You, both as an individual and a couple, will get more out of this seminar if you articulate these things now.

You may find that this seminar answers your concerns directly or you may find that it helps you restate your questions in a more effective way. Either way, defining what you are wanting to learn will help you assimilate what is taught.

What are your hopes for marital intimacy? _____

What are your fears about how intimacy will go or has gone in your marriage? _____

What would you define as the greatest challenges you’ve faced or anticipate facing in being an intimate couple? _____

20 Things that Makes Intimacy Difficult

Somewhere most of us get the idea that intimacy should be easy because it’s fun. Think about it, how many things do you really enjoy which were easy (i.e., a sport, hobby, career, etc...). The fact that someone takes effort is no indictment on its enjoyableness. We must let go of the lie that in order for love to be real, it must be natural.

As we talk about these challenges, our goal is to help you put into words what has been siphoning the romantic vitality of your marriage. The purpose of this chapter is to help you discover common misconceptions or oversights about intimacy which prevent us from getting the maximum enjoyment from our romantic efforts.

Each point is followed by “Couple Discussion Questions.” It is not expected that the two of you are going to have 60 conversations (20 points multiplied by 3 questions per point), but that you can have one or two conversations about each area that significantly impacts your marriage. The ability to have these conversations without defensiveness will itself be a significant catalyst to a more intimate marriage.

1. **“Good” intimacy is highly subjective; meaning the definition varies by person.** No two people appreciate love in the same way. Like music, even if two people enjoy the same song, they may appreciate it for

different reasons or in different ways. Love may be defined (i.e., “It is unloving to speak harshly or be unfaithful.”), but it can never be tamed (i.e., “When I do [blank] you should feel loved.”).

Often the subjective differences in how spouses appreciate love are attributed almost exclusively to gender differences. While some of the generalities may be helpful for some couples, they are not universal and often distract from the main point – you are not getting to know a gender; you are getting to know a person.

“Males and females have more common emotions, needs, and attributes than they have differences (p. 2).”
Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

Couple Discussion Questions: How do each of your preferences and instincts differ in giving and receiving love? What is good about the unique ways your spouse enjoys expressing love? When are you most prone to try to tame (i.e., reduce to a formula or contractual agreement) the way your spouse gives or receives love?

2. **Men and women have different levels in their cycles of sexual desire.** The fact that men and women are more alike than different does not mean they are the same. While it is important to realize that learning about your spouse’s love-preferences is more about getting to know a person than a gender, there are aspects of gender that are important to distinguish.

One area of gender to distinguish is physiology, and not just sexual anatomy. Hormonally men and women’s sexual systems operate very differently. This has more practical implications than which week of the month a husband needs to be more sensitive and patient with his wife. It also explains common differences in sex drive.

“Female hormonal fluctuation is tied to her menstrual cycle. Obviously, men do not experience this cycle. The primary hormone in the male, testosterone remains at a steady level within the male body until aging has some affects... Because men use making love as a primary way of connecting with their mates, their sexual desire can seem greater because the sexual part of the relationship may carry the load of maintaining intimacy (p. 164).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

Couple Discussion Questions: How have the different fluctuations in your sex drives created conflict in your marriage? How might you have misconstrued your spouse based upon the differences in your sex drives? How do and don’t stereotypes about male and female sex drives fit the two of you?

3. **We have different family histories of affection.** Love is not purely innate; it is shaped by our experience. How love was, or was not, expressed in your home of origin impacts your preferences and instincts about intimacy. Childhood is a time when we learn many things we cannot put into words, so the lessons we glean (for better or worse) feel very “natural” to us.

Because these preferences were situationally-shaped, they are not permanent. If they were socially-influenced once, they can be again. However, a couple should have an appreciation (if positive) or sympathy (if negative) for the shaping-influence of each other’s home of origin upon their approach to intimate relationships.

Couple Discussion Questions: What were the primary ways that love was expressed in your home of origin? What were the negative lessons you learned about trust and relationships from your home of origin? What were the positive lessons you learned about trust and relationships from your home of origin?

4. **We tend to think most self-centeredly about love.** The greater a pleasure or more valued an experience, the more self-centered we tend to become in those moments. Love is being selfless with intense pleasure and prized moments. The result is greater pleasure as love gives us more of what we were willing to sacrifice.

However, as sinners, our instincts do not compel us in this direction. Our self-centeredness can take many forms: assuming our spouse enjoys what we enjoy, become so consumed with our pleasure we ignore our spouse’s, or seeking to impose our preferences on our spouse. The more we succumb to this tendency, the less pleasure there will be in the marriage; for both of you.

Couple Discussion Questions: What form does your self-centeredness towards your favorite pleasures typically take? When have you seen being other-minded with these experiences make your enjoyment of these pleasures greater? How can you create and maintain a culture of other-minded love in your marriage?

5. **Marital love is post-sin, post-warts love.** The permanence of marriage makes the sin and quirks of your spouse more hurtful and annoying. Living in the same space means much less “time off.” The oneness of covenant makes sin more personal. Whatever love is expressed in marriage will have to reckon with this reality.

Being an excellent lover is not only about being romantic, but also forgiving sin and bearing with weaknesses. If this dynamic is understood rather than resented, it makes marital love more real than dating love. No longer is your spouse merely loving your best efforts, he/she is loving the real you.

Couple Discussion Questions: What are the faults and weaknesses that your spouse sees which few other people see? How does this aspect of being fully known make your spouse’s love more meaningful than other relationships? What insecurities have you been able to relinquish because of being more fully known and fully loved?

6. **Bad experiences (sin or abuse) can have profound effects on intimacy.** Pain makes us cautious to love. For some it may be the pain of making bad choices in a relationship. After sin, being in a healthy relationship can bring a sense of shame; “I don’t deserve this.” Because of the gospel, blessing no longer has to remind you of failures. Jesus’ forgiveness frees you, even commands you, to enjoy your marriage without shame.

“Ironically, the idolatry of sex and obsessive guilt over sex accomplish the same thing—they keep the focus on self, whether it be out of enjoyment or despair (p. 208).” Gary Thomas in *Sacred Marriage*

For others it is the pain of being abused. After verbal abuse normal conflict can feel threatening. After emotional abuse normal persuasion can feel manipulative. After sexual abuse normal marital intimacies can feel unsafe, dirty, or generate unpleasant memories. When this is the case, counseling can be an important way to put distance between a good marriage and a hurtful past. More is said on these experiences in Appendix B.

Couple Discussion Questions: What sins has Jesus paid-in-full for which you still allow Satan to charge shame and truncated joy to your account? What suffering have you not yet disclosed to your spouse and/or sought counseling to be freed from its effect? When should your spouse be most aware of how your past affects you?

7. **Intimacy happens in mundane moments.** In movies and our imaginations intimacy (romance and sex) is this ever-building crescendo. 29% of marriage happens on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Another 29% happens on Mondays and Wednesdays. In other words, most of marriage is normal, and lasting intimacy happens inside of normal.

If we think of intimacy as grand moments, then we will be dissatisfied or bored with most of marriage. The newness of other activities or relationships will promise what we thought marriage should provide and we’ll chase them. Learning and valuing the blessing of “healthy normal” is a defining mark of a mature spouse.

“You must let this more immature incarnation of your love ‘die’ if it is to rise again and live. You must stick to your commitment to act and serve in love even when—no, *especially* when—you don’t feel much delight and attraction to your spouse. And the more you do that, slowly but surely, you will find your more ego-heavy attraction being transformed into a love that is more characterized by a humble, amazed reception and appreciation of the other person. The love you will grow into will be wiser, richer, deeper, less variable (p. 105).” Tim Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*

Couple Discussion Questions: How well do each of you savor ordinary, daily pleasures of life? How have each of you grown in contentment over the last year? In what areas of your lives do you need to grow in contentment?

8. **It takes a lot of energy/endurance to maintain being in love.** It would exhaust our bodies and minds if we lived “in love” over a 50 year marriage. Actually, no one would make their 50th anniversary because the strain of a perpetual adrenaline rush would collapse their immune system or give them a heart attack. You would be so distracted that would neglect your children and get fired from your job.

In this sense, we are referring to “in love” as the emotional rush of infatuation and courtship. These are good stages in the development of a relationship, but no one can live perpetually in this stage and be a healthy person. We must learn to enjoy each stage of marriage and discover what being “in love” means as novelty gives way to a deep understanding of one another.

“It may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird: it would be a jolly sight harder for it to learn to fly while remaining an egg. We are like eggs at present. And you cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad (p. 198-199).” Mere Christianity by C.S. Lewis

Couple Discussion Questions: How will marriage be better when you can complete each other’s every sentence than it was when every sentence seemed new? In how many ways have you already seen the experience of being “in love” evolve in your relationship? What things preserve moments of exciting love as less of your lives are unknown to each other?

9. **Being “in love” and living out love are different.** Both the experience of being “in love” and the commitment of loving are good things. They do not compete with one another. One is not young love and the other old love. It is just that high of being “in love” may come and go while the commitment to love should be consistent.

Couples get in trouble when they base their commitment on their experience. When this happens, emotional lulls become times of passivity which turn into reasons for conflict and bitterness. Another product of placing too much emphasis on the experience of being “in love” is that this creates a sense of pressure which stifles the vulnerable emotions of romance and becomes self-defeating to an increasingly intimate marriage.

Couple Discussion Questions: How well do each of you maintain your commitment to something when the initial enthusiasm wears off? When have you seen the passion for something (i.e., hobby, job, etc...) return when you were faithful in your role with a good attitude? Do either of you wrongly view the commitment of love apart from the high of being “in love” as being hypocritical?

10. **Sex immediately goes from wrong to right in the space of two words.** Before you got your driver’s license you received a permit. There was time of transition between what would have been stealing your parent’s car and driving on your own. However, with the exchange of rings and simple words “I do,” our response to sex is supposed to change from guilt and avoidance to joy and freedom immediately.

That change is hard for some couples. The emotional unresponsiveness that can result is often interpreted as rejection or disinterest. Like any emotional barrier to closeness, communication is the key. Silence only reinforces both of your misconceptions (your guilt; your spouse’s sense of rejection). The freedom to talk about sex is one of the primary ways you learn it’s no longer “off limits.”

Couple Discussion Questions: If engaged, how hard do you anticipate the freedom to enjoy sex guilt free to be? If married, were there any hurt feelings about this transition in your moral relationship to sex that need to be resolved? In general, how easily does your conscience change gears after forgiveness or a life marker makes something permissible?

11. **Sex is hard to talk about and requires communication.** This Catch-22 trips up many marriages. For many couples this feels like being allergic to medicine for an upset stomach. But, in reality, it is like a child’s fear of removing a splinter – when it’s done the feared action proves to provide great relief.

One of the main outcomes of this seminar should be a greater comfort level in talking about romance and sex. The verbal presentation should provide an example of what it sounds like to talk about sex in a wholesome way. The written material provides information and questions that serve to get conversation started—often the hardest part.

Couple Discussion Questions: How well do each of you engage in uncomfortable conversations? Which is harder, starting these conversations or finding the words after the conversation is started? Is it harder for you to talk about feelings and affection or sex?

12. **Vocabulary about intimacy can be awkward.** As you read this material say the following words out loud, “Sex... penis... vagina... orgasm... it feels good when you...” Then speak out loud a few sentences of things you think would make sex more enjoyable or ways to positively disrupt romantic ruts.

Chances are, even if you’re reading alone, saying sexual words out loud was awkward and trying to put your sexual desires into words was difficult. If you’re not alone or with your spouse, it’s good that you didn’t randomly blurt out these words. Part of a healthy marital sex life is gaining comfort with the vocabulary to talk about sex. Otherwise your expectations will be unspoken and you’ll be robbing your sex life of the vitality God intended.

“Let me comment about male and female slang. If male genital slang is not funny, it is aggressive and harsh. The female slang, if not demeaning, is silly and suggestive. This is a sad and destructive distortion of God’s

gift of sexuality... Slang is certainly an area where we can practice not buying in to sinful, destructive values... You may be wondering if slang is ever appropriate. Of course, slang is permissible and fun and erotic. Your pet names for body parts and secret vocabulary shared only by the two of you contain a lot of slang (p. 91).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

Couple Discussion Questions: How does your comfort level talking about sex compare with your comfort level talking about personal feelings and love in general? Does one of you lack tact in talking about sex in a way that inhibits, embarrasses, or turns off the other? Would tactfully-provocative conversations about sex serve as stimulating foreplay for either of you?

13. **Relationally selfish messages pervade our sex saturated culture.** We do not live in a culture that promotes or encourages other-mindedness. “Love yourself first,” is the mantra of our day. If you project the longevity of relationship in the most popular movies and novels of our day (what we entertain ourselves with), they do not set themselves up to last a lifetime.

The kinds of sacrifices that would allow a marriage to last a lifetime are deemed unromantic and not-exciting by modern media standards. Sex that is not forbidden or spontaneous act between two young, fit lovers is considered boring. But if we step back consider how our culture defines “boring” we realize they’re undermining “stable.” Too often couples adopt these expectations or, at least, allow them to creep into their marriage unchecked.

“Couple struggling with desire issues often have unrealistic expectations of what ‘normal’ sexual desire and frequency should be. Many men use their own sexual desire as the standards their wives must meet. Others pull from the standard of friends, media, or culture (p. 214).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

Couple Discussion Questions: What is the “story line” you want, maybe expect, your marriage to follow? How do the two of you ensure that story line is built around serving one another more than being served by your spouse? How does serving each other allow for long-term romance in a way that selfishness can never achieve?

14. **We are too busy.** We must set aside time in our lives for romance and sex or both will be absent. The proverbial “tyranny of the urgent” will not make room in your life for the things that will bless your marriage. If you simply “let life happen to you,” then intimacy will be squeezed out.

Without an attitude of defensiveness it is vital that we realize, “I must fight for my marriage because no one else will.” This is not because others are against your marriage; they are simply for their agenda based upon whatever role you play in their life (i.e., boss, volunteer, friend, etc...). You and your spouse are the only two people who will have the priority of making sure your marriage is healthy.

“The more you make love, the more you will make love. Busy couples don’t have a choice but to structure times that they can make sacred and reserve for lovemaking (p. 60).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

Couple Discussion Questions: How often do you and your spouse say no to a good thing in order to protect something important for your marriage? Do you each plan enough margin in your life to allow for the possibility of a healthy marriage? What are the early indicators that you are allowing yourself to be too busy?

15. **Demands of child rearing interfere with intimacy.** A product of romance is sex. A product of sex is children. A product of children can be less romance and sex. This does not have to be the case, but for many couples who are not intentional and well-managed, this becomes their reality.

Many couples fail to think through what it means to make their marriage a priority during the season of life when they are raising children. The result can be an intrapersonal (i.e., guilt) or interpersonal (i.e., conflict) struggle over an inevitable sense whether “We’re going to neglect the kids or neglect each other.”

Realize – the most important thing you can do for your children is to love your spouse well! This makes home a stable place, provides an example of a healthy marriage, and protects the parental unity necessary to navigate difficult decisions.

“At the start of the children years, younger marriages often find the couple still adjusting to new roles, struggling through the loss of independence and privacy, and blending their life together (p. 231).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

Couple Discussion Questions: What aspect of having children put the greatest strain on romance and sex in your marriage? How has this changed with each season in your children’s lives? What new opportunities to care for one another romantically did having children provide? If you do not have children, ask a mentor couples these questions to help prepare your marriage for these transitions.

16. **Intimacy is risky.** You won’t have intimacy – emotional or physical – without allowing someone to get close. This closeness can be both exciting and unsettling. Fear and excitement are very similar emotional experiences neuro-chemically and physiologically, the primary difference is whether we feel safe. For those who struggle to trust, good parts of marriage can feel intimidating because of these similarities.

This “risk of disclosure and closeness” is usually an accepted part of courtship, but for some—whether for insecurity, lack of trust, or laziness—it is neglected after the wedding. However, this lack of continued transparency and vulnerability is a primary reason marriages lose their spark and begin to feel like “just roommates.”

“When you were dating and putting your best foot forward, you abandoned your defenses and allowed yourself to be intimate and uninhibited... In order to really feel in love and sexually alive, you will have to let down your walls and defenses and need for control all over again (p. 119).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

Couple Discussion Questions: When have you experienced closeness as both exciting and unsettling? What fears do you anticipate facing in remaining open and close over a lifetime of marriage? Are there experiences in your life which make trust hard that you have not yet shared with your spouse?

17. **Dating sex and married sex are different.** Pre-marital sex is both wrong and common. The former should not prevent us from discussing the implications of the latter. The reality is that couples, particularly those who believe pre-marital sex is wrong, spend more time in foreplay (trying not to “cross the line”) in pre-marital sex than they often do after marriage.

Pre-marital sex, regardless of a couple’s moral convictions, tends to be less available than it is when a couple is married and living together (concerning cohabitation visit www.bradhambrick.com/cohabitation). This results in more anticipation and the “moments” for sex feeling more special than when sex is always possible and permissible.

In spite of this, studies consistently show that Christian couples have a more enjoyable sex life than non-Christians. But for some couples, the anticipation, foreplay, and sense of special momenta created by pre-marital sex makes married sex seem less exciting. This is very remediable when sex is given comparable attention in marriage. But the dynamic needs to be understood and forgiveness embraced for the excitement to return.

Couple Discussion Questions: If the two of you were sexually active with each other before marriage, have you repented to each other and discussed how it has affected your marital sex life? Do you experience the freedom of God’s forgiveness and sense that God wants you to enjoy sex now? How has sex being possible and permissible changed your attitude towards sex (positively or negatively)?

18. **Intimacy is childlike.** Romance and sex are both playful activities. When romance is fully engaged we are not “dignified adults” but playful children who are willing to vie for attention, say “Do it again! Do it again!,” and ignore what other people may be thinking. This childlike freedom is what makes romance and sex fun.

It is also what makes many adults feel like being romantic is “being silly.” Instead of arguing with these adults, I would say they’re right and that’s the whole point. Romance and sex were designed by God to be a time when humility is really fun. Even as responsible adults God graciously gives us this outlet to frolic with our spouse.

Couple Discussion Questions: How well do you embrace God’s invitation to be playful during romance or sex? Is pride or insecurity your primary hindrance to being more playful and engaged? How would your life be more free and fun with humility?

19. **Couples often have no plan for intimacy.** It has been said, “Nothing worth doing happens by accident.” Even if you can think of an exception to that statement, it is definitely true, “Nothing worth doing happens *consistently* by accident.” Too many couples like to think marital romance and a healthy sex life are the exception to this rule; that true love “just happens” without forethought.

Others will argue that a plan kills the spirit of intimacy (romance or sex). But ask yourself, “Does planning a vacation make it less relaxing or merely more likely to happen?” A vacation that doesn’t happen is not relaxing. Similarly, a date or romantic getaway not taken is not bonding.

Couple Discussion Questions: How frequently do you want to have a date with your spouse? How often do you want to have sex and when are the most feasible times? How frequently do you want to have an overnight get away with your spouse and when is it feasible?

- 20. **Intimacy cannot be reduced to a set of activities or principles.** There is no formula or recipe for a romantically satisfying marriage; it cannot be reduced to one weekly date, 2.5 weekly sexual encounters, a 7:1 positive-to-negative statement ratio, and bi-annual weekend getaway.

All of those things are good. I would even recommend them as a starting place for your romantic planning conversations. But the goodness of marital intimacy is not achieved; it is enjoyed. There are many parts of marriage that you can and should “work at” (these will contribute to intimacy) but, ultimately, intimacy is something you “play at” and enjoy.

Couple Discussion Questions: Are either of you prone to kill a good thing by dissecting it (over analyzing in order to control / understand it)? Are either of you prone to the score-keeping mentality that romance-as-activity tends to promote? Do you feel relieved, confused, scared, or offended by this challenge to marital intimacy?

Which points stood out to you most from this list of 20 challenges? _____

What have you learned about yourself and your marriage in this chapter? _____

Conclusion

If you are overwhelmed by these challenges to marital intimacy, you can relax for several reasons. First, if you could relate to many of these challenges, then you can know this material was written for your marriage. Second, God realizes we are incapable of doing what He requires – that doesn’t send Him scrambling. Third, the gospel gives us the example and power to love our spouse like we would be otherwise incapable.

That is why one of the foundational themes for this seminar will be I John 4:19, “We love because he first loved us.” We don’t begin creating an intimate marriage by listing what we ought to do. Instead, we begin by realizing what we are incapable of doing. That is the beginning of the gospel – realizing we are sinner incapable of pleasing God.

From that realization we accept the grace that God offers. We are amazed at the sacrifice of Christ and this gives us the humility to love well. This humility is needed because your spouse is as incapable of loving well as you are. Unless we allow the gospel to be the foundation of our marriage, your spouse’s failures will begin to be the “reasons” for your failures (and vice versa).

But with this acknowledgement of our mutual need for grace and God’s extravagant provision we can enjoy the journey of seeing each other transformed into the lovers God designed us to be. The abundance of God’s grace to us means that our times of neglect or rudeness need no longer threaten our marriage. We are not living off of one another to meet our needs, but living off of God’s grace with an appreciation for our spouse as one of God’s graces to us.

With that gospel mindset in place you can look at the challenges of this chapter and the skills / concepts of the upcoming chapters without a sense of pressure or fear of failure. You can try, fail, learn, and grow because of the freedom Christ gives you in the gospel. Let that give you the courage to attempt the things that would enable your marriage to flourish.

Evaluation: Appreciating Our Differences

Note: Each major section of the Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage series will have a brief evaluation tool to help you assess your marital strengths and weaknesses. Complete the evaluation before reading the material, then review the assessment again after completing each section to learn the accuracy of your initial self-assessment.

Instructions: Read the following descriptive statements. Consider how well they describe your experience or perspective on your marriage. If you are engaged, consider how well they describe your courtship experience or your beliefs about what you think your coming marriage should be. Mark the answer that best fits how you respond:

(CD) Completely Disagree, (SD) Somewhat Disagree, (NS) Not Sure, (SA) Somewhat Agree, or (CA) Completely Agree

1. I am joyfully sacrificial in my love for my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
2. My spouse is joyfully sacrificial in his/her love for me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
3. My spouse gets the best of who I am.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
4. I believe I get the best of who my spouse is.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
5. I resist the temptation to keep score of who has done more for the other.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
6. My spouse resists the temptation to keep score of who has done more for the other.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
7. I compliment all dimensions of my spouse’s character, not just appearance.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
8. My spouse compliments all dimensions of my character.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
9. I know the things that most effectively communicate love to my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
10. My spouse knows the things that most effectively communicate love to me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
11. I look for new ways to express the things that my spouse finds most affirming.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
12. My spouse looks for new ways to express the things that I find most affirming.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
13. I am able to hear and receive the love and affirmation my spouse gives me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
14. My spouse is able to hear and receive the love and affirmation I give him/her.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
15. I am skilled at using words to build up and encourage my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
16. My spouse is skilled at using words to build up and encourage me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
17. I am willing to and regularly look for ways to serve my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
18. My spouse is willing and regularly looks for ways to serve me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
19. My spouse does not cause me feel insecure about my appearance.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
20. My comments or actions do not contribute to insecurity in my spouse about appearance.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
21. I am able to put myself into words and share myself with my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
22. My spouse is able to put him/herself into words and share him/herself with me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
23. I am comfortable with the amount of time my spouse spends on personal interests.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
24. My spouse is comfortable with the amount of time I spend on personal interests.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
25. I am a growing person and feel like I have new things to share with my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
26. My spouse is a growing person and has new things to share with me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
27. When I learn something new my spouse is one of the first people I want to tell.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
28. When my spouse learns something new I am one of the first people he/she tells.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
29. Throughout my day I anticipate the time I will spend with my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
30. Throughout the day my spouse anticipates the time we will spend with each other.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
31. Throughout my day I consider conversations I want to have with my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
32. Throughout his/her day my spouse considers conversations we will have together.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
32. I believe we spend an adequate amount of time together as a couple.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
34. My spouse believes we spend an adequate amount of time together as a couple.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
35. I regularly put intentional time and effort into romancing my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
36. My spouse regularly puts intentional time and effort into romancing me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
37. I frequently look for new and creative ways to romance my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
38. My spouse frequently looks for new and creative ways to romance me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
39. When we are apart I look for ways to let him/her know I’m thinking of him/her.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
40. When we are apart my spouse looks for ways to let me know he/she is thinking of me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
41. I look for spontaneous and unexpected opportunities to show love for my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
42. My spouse looks for unexpected opportunities to show love to me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA

Key to Survey Scoring: For each set of questions tabulate your score using the following numerical values. The scoring is weighted with the “neutral” NS answer being a negative score, because if you have not defined or pursued important aspects of your marriage relationship it will negatively impact the marriage.

CD	–	Negative 3 points	SA	–	Positive 1 points
SD	–	Negative 2 points	CA	–	Positive 2 points
NS	–	Negative 1 point			

If your total score...

- ...**matches or exceeds the total number of questions**, then this area of marriage is an area of strength.
- ...**is less than the total number of questions**, then this area of marriage could use attention or refinement.
- ...**is a negative number**, then this area of marriage should be given immediate and concentrated attention.

➤ Questions 1-6: (Total: _____ in 6 questions)

This set of questions examines the “**sacrificial love**” aspect of healthy marital intimacy and romance. Love requires us to give ourselves away. No expression of love or romance will be lasting and satisfying without this willingness to be vulnerable, authentic, and sacrificial.

Recommended Resources: *When Sinners Say “I Do”* by Dave Harvey

➤ Questions 7-22: (Total: _____ in 16 questions)

This set of questions examines the “**types of non-sexual love**” in healthy marital intimacy and romance. In order for love to be known it must be expressed. The most sincere affection or devotion that does not express itself cannot bless the one it cherishes. We should strive to express our love in the ways that are more receivable to our spouse and appreciate the way our spouse most naturally expresses love.

Recommended Resources: *Loving Well (Even If You Haven’t Been)* by William P. Smith

➤ Questions 23-42: (Total: _____ in 20 questions)

This set of questions examines the “**time and attention**” aspect of healthy marital intimacy and romance. *Quality* time and interaction is no replacement for *quantity* of time in a marriage. A couple can share time together in many ways, even when they’re apart if they’re intentional. Failing to give regular time to your marriage is like failing to change the oil in your car; whatever gain it provides short term will cost you more long term.

Recommended Resources: See “Appendix B: Creating a Time Budget” in the *Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage: Decision Making* seminar notebook.

Sometimes within a marriage the problem is not one specific area or issue but an overall imbalance in the effort, skill, thoughtfulness, and awareness being put into the marriage. Below is a list of questions that reveal your perspective on your effort and your spouse’s effort in the marriage. Use the same numerical scoring system as you used above. In this case, the closer your scores are to another, the more mutual (and typically healthy) the marriage.

_____ **My Score** – Using the same scoring system as above add together the score for the odd numbered questions.

_____ **Spouse’s Score** – Using the same scoring system as above add together the score for the even numbered questions.

Chapter 2

Appreciating Our Differences

An Essential Part of Lasting Romance

Plumb Lines: These are the “sticky” statements that capture the core messages of this chapter.

- The greatest joy of love is not the act of loving, but seeing the joy our act of love produces in our beloved
- Unbalanced nutritional diets lead to bad physical health, as imbalanced romantic diets lead to poor relational health.
- Being a growing person is important for a romantic marriage; stagnant people have stale marriages.
- Serving one another builds trust built around the message, “Your joy is more important than my preferences.”

Memorize: Philippians 1:9-11 (ESV), “And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.” As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- “Love may abound” – In this passage Paul is praying through the process by which love grows in a relationship.
- “Knowledge” – Love begins by knowing your spouse. Learning is both evidence of and equipping for love.
- “Discern... approve” – Knowledge enables you to make more choices that “fit” and affirm your spouse.
- “Pure” – Love can be trusted because true love does not compromise righteousness for pleasure.
- “Filled with fruit” – We do not have to worry about running out of love because it is a self-replicating resource.

Teaching Notes

“For centuries, thinkers have discerned forms of love. The Greeks had words to distinguish affection (*storge*), friendship (*philos*), erotic love (*eros*), and service (*agape*). There are other ways of breaking down expressions of love into categories. All forms of love are necessary, and none are to be ignored, but all of us find some forms of love to be more emotionally valuable to us. They are a currency that we find particularly precious, a language that delivers the message of love to our hearts with the most power. Some types of love are more thrilling and fulfilling to us when we receive them (p. 153)... In the incarnation, God came to us in a manner that we could grasp. So we, too, must clothe our love in the forms to which our spouse can relate (p. 154).” Tim Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*

“Most of the folks I know pursuing romance and intimacy in their marriages are spending time planning, asking questions, investigating what is romantic to their spouses and not assuming they know. As with any artistry, there are far more discarded ideas than masterpieces (p. 167).” Dave Harvey in *When Sinners Say “I Do”*

“You may think, *I just don't love my spouse any more*. He [God] has a different way of looking at your disappointment. God says, ‘You're discovering for the first time you don't know how to love. You enjoyed affection and romance but love is hard and hard-won. Romance is a wonderful gift, but love endures through the hard times; it endures when the heat comes (p. 6-7).’” David Powlison in *Renewing Marital Intimacy*

“Love never demands from your spouse spiritually what God has already given you in Christ (p. 197).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

“The only context that anyone will ever have for experiencing grace from me is when she is in need of it—which is another way of saying when she sinned against me. So if you want to be a gracious (grace-filled) person, expect to be sinned against (p. 62)... If you struggle to love someone, or even like her, start by asking ‘what does Jesus enjoy about this person?’ What traits, strengths, and qualities did he put in her (p. 93)?... The moment you become aware that you tend to hold back your joy from other people is the moment when you (re)discover that you're no longer moving outward to enjoy and embrace your friendships (p. 203).” William P. Smith in *Loving Well: Even If You Haven't Been*

“[People] are attracted to those they honor and are repulsed by those they disrespect (p. 140).” Bryan Chappell in *Each for the Other*

Embedded Study

Which system is the right system? What gauge is the right gauge? What metaphor best captures what we’re supposed to be paying attention to? If you have read many books on marriage you know how confusing these questions can be: love languages, pink hearing aids, blue sun glasses, love tanks, love banks, waffles, spaghetti, Mars, Venus, his needs, her needs, love, respect, love dare, seven key questions, seven minute solutions, new marriages by Friday, fourteen secrets, etc... (that’s from a two minute search on “marriage” on a Christian bookstore website).

Is all this language different ways of saying the same thing or do we need to know this many different systems?

You hear one couple talk about how a book / speaker completely revitalized their marriage and another couple tells you the same book / speaker didn’t do anything for them, is totally unrealistic, or created tension in their marriage.

How do we know what is “worth our time” (which is limited and we’d prefer not to waste)?

If you let these kind of questions stress you out, then you likely either to do nothing or fail to enjoy whatever you do in pursuit of marital romance. In this chapter, we want to do a few things to help you navigate these challenges.

1. Describe why understanding differences is important
2. Outline the kind of differences a couple needs to be aware of (main focus)
3. Caution against common misuses of our differences

The Importance of Understanding Our Differences

God’s design for heaven is that unity in the midst of diversity will be a key component of our eternal joy (Rev. 7:9). Marriage is meant to be the clearest earthly picture of Christ’s relationship to the church (Eph. 5:32). Put these two truths together and it becomes clear why it is so common for “opposites to attract” and why it is important for a couple to gain a deep appreciation for their differences in giving / receiving love – this is what we’ll be doing in heaven; marriage is a warm-up for eternity.

If we love, then we will want our expressions of love to be understood. The greatest joy of love is not the act of loving, but seeing the joy our act of love produces in our beloved. This is a primary difference between immature self-centered love and mature other-minded love.

Read I Corinthians 14:19-20. This passage is addressing speaking in tongues rather than love languages, but at least two principles are relevant to both. First, the primary purpose of speaking is to be understood. Paul says, “I would rather speak five words with my mind [understandable to others] in order to instruct [encourage, build up] others, than ten thousand words in a tongue (v. 19).” Second, putting our preferences and enjoyment first in our communication with others is an indicator of immaturity (v. 20).

“Ask your spouse this wonderfully honest, humble question (which is much easier to read than to do), ‘What change in me would make the biggest difference for you?’ (p. 15)” David Powlison in *Renewing Marital Intimacy*

Think of the things you will consider in this chapter as a series of different frames you can put around the concept of love. Love itself doesn’t change as you put each new frame around it, but your creativity and perspective is expanded.

“Have you ever noticed that you tend to have different kinds of ideas when you use different tools to help you think (p. 42)?” C. J. Mahaney in *Sex, Romance, and the Glory of God*

The goal of this chapter is to give you eyes to see opportunities to love you may be missing. With each new frame the possibilities of how to love your spouse in fresh ways will expand. As life changes (month-to-month or year-to-year), you could read this chapter and have new opportunities sparked by the same frame. One of the disciplines of a romantically vibrant marriage is two spouses who discipline themselves to continually look for these opportunities.

“Sadly, many people don’t notice the needs others have for the opportunity to build their friendship by meeting those needs because they have trained themselves not to notice (p. 133).” William P. Smith in *Loving Well: Even If You Haven’t Been*

If these things seem hard or unnatural, remember they are essential parts of love. If we embrace this discomfort as part of love, then it becomes adventuresome, playfulness, flirting, or exploring. However, if we grumble, then it becomes laborious,

sacrificial, monotone, and self-defeating. Trusting your spouse enough to fail at an attempt to love him/her well is itself part of love – vulnerability.

“Think about the fact that marriage without vulnerability is not marriage... The degree to which you are comfortable with emotional, physical, and spiritual nakedness in front of your spouse is a sure indicator of the quality of trust that exists between you (p. 148).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

As much as any chapter in this series, it is recommended that you talk your way through this chapter. That may be more challenging for some husbands, but remember Jesus was a talker and a listener, and your calling is to love your wife as Christ loves His bride (Eph. 5:25).

“Jesus was not the stereotypical strong and silent type, limiting himself to 7000 words per day. He talked all the time. He was constantly teaching, preaching, comforting, rebuking, encouraging, and telling stories (p. 120-121).” William P. Smith in *Loving Well: Even If You Haven’t Been*

Differences to Consider

Yogi Berra, a famous baseball player for the New York Yankees, now more known for his unique way of describing life, was one asked if he wanted his pizza cut into four slices or eight. His response was, “Better make it four. I don’t think I could eat eight.” That offers a helpful way to think of the different ways popular books categorize how couples give / receive love; they are different ways of slicing the same pie. Here are several popular examples.

“The 5 Love Languages” by Gary Chapman	“The 3 Foundations of Love” by Tim Keller	“The Four Loves” by C.S. Lewis	15 Expressions of “Loving Well” by William P. Smith	Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage: Intimacy
1. Physical Touch 2. Words of Affirmation 3. Quality Time 4. Gifts 5. Acts of Service	1. Affection 2. Friendship 3. Service	1. <i>Storge</i> – Affection 2. <i>Phileo</i> – Friendship 3. <i>Eros</i> – Romance 4. <i>Agape</i> – Unconditional Love	1. Responding to a broken world Comforting Sympathy Struggling Forgiving Long-Suffering 2. Building others up Partnering Pursuing Communicating Serving Providing 3. Enjoying heaven on earth Welcoming Humbling Celebrating Peaceful Hospitality	Head Ears – Listening Eyes – Admiring Mouth – Words Heart Emotions Interests Intellect Hands Service Presence Touch <i>“Learn the importance of loving your whole spouse with your whole self.”</i>

The question for this seminar becomes, “How are we going to slice the pie of romance and why?” We’ll be using an approach that uses parts of the body to represent types of love: head (loving with your ears, eyes, mouth), heart (loving with your emotions, interest, and intellect), and hands (loving with your service, presence, and touch).

The purpose is to help you see the importance of loving your whole spouse with your whole self; we do not want to become so enamored with our favorite expressions that we become imbalanced. We want to avoid portraying preferences as being so distinct that they require learning a new language or special gender-decoding glasses.

In our breakdown couples should also be able to see the need for balance regardless of their preferences rather than thinking they can live off their preferences. Unbalanced nutritional diets lead to bad physical health, as imbalanced romantic diets lead to poor relational health.

Head

Ears: One of the most endearing things one spouse can do for another is to listen well. It could be argued that the ears are the sexiest piece of human anatomy. Husbands, seduce your wife with your ears by attentively listening to her thoughts, fears, and dreams. Wives, draw your husband out by being listening to him talk about the things that interest him.

“You and I are drawn to people who listen (p. 141).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = not at all; 10 = excellent) answer the following questions. Answer separately at first and then compare your answers.

- How important is listening as a form of romance to you? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- How important is listening as a form of romance to your spouse? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- How skilled and willing are you at listening? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- How skilled and willing is your spouse at listening? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Eyes: The eyes play into romance in two ways. First, your spouse should be your standard for attractiveness. Human beauty should no longer be a subjective taste for you; once you marry, attractiveness has a face, shape, voice, personality, hair color, height, smile, skin tone, etc... Your calling as a Christian spouse is to make “in your eyes” the safest and most cherished place your spouse could be. As your spouse ages, attractiveness should mature. Home should be a place where neither of you compete with cultural definitions of beauty, because your home has its own culture.

“Keeping in good shape is a gift we can give to our spouse. But so is the grace of acceptance—particularly on the part of husbands—in recognition that age and (in the case of women) childbearing eventually reshape every individual body. Marriage helps to move men from an obsession over bodies ‘that do not exist’ into a reconsideration of priorities and values (p. 216).” Gary Thomas in *Sacred Marriage*

“This is true as we grow older and body sagging muscle tone is fading. We must look through the eyes of love with our imaginations and allow our mate to be sexy in new ways (p. 75).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

Second, you should use your attractiveness (seeing yourself through the eyes of your spouse) to bless your spouse. Enjoy the flattery and power your spouse’s admiration gives you. This is not pride; it is a way to encourage your spouse to enjoy you (which is a good, God-honoring thing). When you find your spouse looking at you, smile, allow yourself to blush, flirt, enjoy the moment, talk about how good it feels to be admired, and allow prolonged eye contact to build a sense of connection; using the moment to fuel “spark” in the marriage.

“‘Sexy’ in a God-given sense is a state of mind and not the shape of our bodies or our weight. If you learn to accept your body and revel in your sexual feelings, your husband will follow suit and be tremendously turned on by you (p. 14).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

A part of reveling in your spouse’s attraction towards you is maintaining good physical health. This should not be to “earn” your spouse’s visual compliments. Rather, it is hard for most people to feel attractive and fuel this aspect of marital romance when they do not care for their body. While the quote below speaks about women, the same point can be made about many men.

“Often women who meticulously attend to their physical appearances before marriage neglect it once the wedding ceremony is over. I once overheard a woman negatively comment about another woman’s appearance: “She looks married.” Ouch! That shouldn’t be! We should give the same careful attention to her physical appearance *after* marriage as we did *before* (p. 121).” C. J. Mahaney in *Sex, Romance, and the Glory of God*

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = not at all; 10 = excellent) answer the following questions. Answer separately at first and then compare your answers.

- How important is your spouse’s attractiveness to you? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- How important is your attractiveness to your spouse? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- How willing are you at reveling in your spouse’s admiration? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- How willing is your spouse to revel in your admiration? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Mouth: If a big part of loving is knowing, then verbal sharing is should be large part of marriage. The ability to communicate with words is something that is unique to humans, and, therefore a special part of human relationships. Even when other animals pair up with a single mate for a lifetime, they do not give compliments, review their days, share fears, or dream together – those things are exclusively human.

In this section we'll look at two types of words

Words of Encouragement – “Good job... I really like how you... Thank you for... It's so nice how you... I don't know what I would do without you when...” are the kind of sentences that should be spoken frequently in every Christian home. With the multitude of mundane tasks in marriage, life begins to feel pretty pointless when we fail to speak words of encouragement. These words say, “What you're doing matters. You matter. I notice. Our life is going somewhere and I like it.” Part of marriage is becoming an expert on when and how your spouse benefits from these words most.

“The respect a wife offers her husband is vital for finding the deeper levels of marital bliss for which her heart yearns. The more she treasures her husband, the more precious and fulfilling a woman will find their union. The woman who longs for deep satisfaction in her marriage must provide the support that secures the relationships for which she longs (p. 139).” Bryan Chappell in *Each for the Other*

Words of Endearment – “I love you... You're a blessing to me... My life is full because you're in it... I love being married to you... Enjoying you is the highlight of my day... You make home my favorite place... I smile when I think of you...” are the kind of phrases that should be spoken in Christian marriages. Some would say, “That's not me” or “That sounds silly;” which is kind of the point. These are things you shouldn't say with anyone else, so at first they will feel odd. But try it for a week and see if silly doesn't begin to improve the “normal” of your day-to-day marriage.

Read Revelation 2:17. Did you know that when you get to Heaven God will give you a pet name that is exclusively used by Him towards you? That name will be sentimentally unique to the journey you shared with God in this life. Allow this to remind you of the importance of words of endearment in any relationship. If God can be “silly” enough to use a pet name to express his unique love for you, you (who are slightly less dignified than God) can do the same for your spouse.

“God will give the new name to those who overcome, and name unknown except to the one who receives it. You will have your own name, shared by nobody else (p. 170).” William P. Smith in *Loving Well: Even If You Haven't Been*

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = not at all; 10 = excellent) answer the following questions. Answer separately at first and then compare your answers.

- | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| • How important are words of encouragement and affection to you? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| • How important are these kinds of words to your spouse? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| • How skilled/willing are you with words of encouragement/affection? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| • How skilled/willing is your spouse with these kinds of words? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |

Heart

In our modern vocabulary, “heart” is a purely sentimental term when it is used in reference to marriage. But in the Bible, “heart” is the word used to denote the center of our thoughts, emotions, will, desires, ambitions, allegiances, and everything else the little-voice-in-our-head does. As you think about loving your spouse with your heart, review these passages to give you a more complete picture of what this would entail – Psalm 4:7, 143:4; Proverbs 4:23, 23:7, 25:20; Mark 12:30; Luke 6:45; Romans 2:15, 6:17; 2 Corinthians 9:7; and Ephesians 3:17.

Emotions: Part of sharing your entire person with your spouse is sharing your emotions. Knowing how something moves you, motivates, discourages, offends, confuses, or marvels you is part of knowing you. Withholding this information impedes your spouse's ability to love you.

To some people emotions feel unsafe; to “be emotional” carries a volatile or distant connotation to them. Or, they may just prefer the predictability of logic to the uncertainty of emotion. Learning to enjoy emotional connection will be a process for them, but it is important enough that it is a journey that should be embraced.

To other people emotions feel sacred; to question someone's emotions is an “irreverent” chief offense. For these individuals, they will need to de-throne their emotions. Emotions were meant to serve and enrich life; not vice versa. In taming their emotions, these individuals will actually enjoy their emotions more.

“The expression ‘I have run out of patience with you!’ is misleading. It invites you to think of patience like a mineral deposit: once you mine it out of the ground, it’s all gone. Instead, patience is more like an organic resource. It grows in proportion to your need because it’s produced in you by the most fruitful farmer there is (p. 79).” William P. Smith in *Loving Well: Even If You Haven’t Been*

The type of questions that can generate emotional bonding are: How did that make you feel (let’s get the cliché counselor question out of the way)? What did you enjoy about that? What was it that made that draining for you? What is it that is making you uneasy about that? What would help you relax at a time like this?

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = not at all; 10 = excellent) answer the following questions. Answer separately at first and then compare your answers.

- How important is sharing emotions to you? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- How important is sharing emotions to your spouse? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- How skilled and willing are you at sharing emotions? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- How skilled and willing is your spouse at sharing emotions? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Intellect: Being a growing person is important for a romantic marriage; stagnant people have stale marriages. Learn and share what you’re learning; think and share what you’re thinking; ask questions and search for the answers together; dream and explore the possibilities together. Being intellectually engaged in each other’s lives is a great way to romantically connect (on the negative side, this is why so many affairs start at work).

The possibilities are endless: forward your spouse an interesting blog and discuss it, watch the news together and talk about the implications, allow your spouse to teach you about their hobby, watch a movie about a culture neither of you know well, plan an event or trip together to bless someone you both know, lead a small group or begin marriage mentoring together, etc...

Being a growing person doesn’t just make you more interesting to your spouse, it also makes your spouse more interesting to you. As you are intellectually stimulated you gain new perspectives and find new things to share with your spouse. This draws out new conversations – conversations you get more from because you’re putting more into it.

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = not at all; 10 = excellent) answer the following questions. Answer separately at first and then compare your answers

- How important is being a growing person to you? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- How important is being a growing person to your spouse? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- How skilled and willing are you at continual learning? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- How skilled and willing is your spouse at continual learning? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Interest: Words are a way we explore our world; reading a book, listening to a lecture, or asking questions. When we show interest in the world of our spouse we are loving them through “Words of Discovery” (a word play on the more common phrase “words of encouragement”).

Showing interest in each other’s day-to-day events, hobbies, career, successes, dreams, changes in preference (i.e., food, fashion, music, etc...), decisions, appearance, challenges, or quirky-humorous stories is a way to love. Interest is an expression of love because it says, “If it happened to you, then it’s significant to me.” Actually, the less significant an event is, the more our interest expresses love because it is clear that what captures our attention is our spouse not the event.

Read Matthew 10:29-30. Often this passage is used to display God’s omniscience (i.e., that God knows everything). However, in light of this discussion, notice God’s love. God’s knowledge – attention to every detail of our life – reveals His interest in everything about us. God is not trying to win a trivia game by knowing the details of our lives. Instead, He is displaying His love for His children and Creation.

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = not at all; 10 = excellent) answer the following questions. Answer separately at first and then compare your answers.

- How important is interest as a form of romance to you? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- How important is interest as a form of romance to your spouse? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- How skilled/willing are you at showing interest in your spouse’s life? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- How skilled/willing is your spouse to show interest in your life? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Hands

Service: Service may be the clearest manifestation of the frequently emphasized truth, “Love is a verb.” Oddly, we can love someone through service without words, touch, or even being close enough to them to be seen. In that sense, service may be the most versatile expression of love. Service can even transform an activity that is highly unpleasant and turn it into something romantic.

“Love is shown in very small things. Small kindnesses tell your spouse that he is not out-of-sight-out-of-mind (p. 20).” David Powlison in *Renewing Marital Intimacy*

Nothing protects a marriage from a sense of competition (i.e., “whose getting the better end of the deal”) more than mutual service. A couple who serves one another regularly will have many fewer arguments where they cannot reach a mutually satisfying compromise. Serving one another builds an atmosphere of trust built on the clear message, “Your joy is more important than my preferences.” Couples can navigate many differences when that kind of trust is present.

“Serving love affects your relationship in two ways. First, when I serve you, I remind myself that I am not in this friendship for what I can get out of it as much as for how I can benefit you. Second, when you know that you are clearly the beneficiary of my service, you gain greater confidence that you are special to me (p. 129).” William P. Smith in *Loving Well: Even If You Haven’t Been*

Read Hebrews 6:10. Allow this to sink in; there are not meaningless, unnoticed acts of service. If you want to get God’s attention, serve your spouse (and others too). One of the primary reasons we resist serving is because we feel like it makes things “unfair;” others get the blessing, while we do the work. That is the mindset this passage negates; it begins with the phrase, “For God is not unjust.” Allow resting in God’s fairness to free you to enjoy serving your spouse.

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = not at all; 10 = excellent) answer the following questions. Answer separately at first and then compare your answers.

- How important is serving as a form of romance to you? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- How important is serving as a form of romance to your spouse? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- How skilled and willing are you at serving? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- How skilled and willing is your spouse at serving? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Presence: Proximity is romantic during good times (which should be obvious, but often neglected) and bad times (which is less obvious, but probably even more impactful). There is something special to a child when a parent attends their ballgame or performance. Which is odd; from the stands to the field/stage there is usually no opportunity for interaction. But simply “being there” is endearing, provides a sense of security, and builds relationship. The same is true in marriage.

“The most enjoyable part of sex to 90% of married women in the NSSCW was closeness: physical closeness, emotional closeness, or both (p. 222).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

This is even true during hard times. The unpleasantness of a hospital bedside, funeral home, crying conversation over conflict with a friend, or silent companionship as a disappointment is processed often causes us to miss the expression of love that is occurring in those uncomfortable moments.

“That simple act of coming near to share himself in your difficult moments eases your suffering because you learn that you are not alone... If you’re going to become someone who loves others well when they suffer, you will first have to see how God comes near to you in your misery (p. 3).” William P. Smith in *Loving Well: Even If You Haven’t Been*

Read Mark 14:32-33. In Jesus’ hour of distress he wanted his friends nearby. Jesus, love incarnate, allowed – even asked – his friends to love him. They failed him multiple times (v. 41), but he did not respond with desperation or aggression. As always, Jesus is our model. We should ask for the forms of love that are meaningful or timely for us, recognize that our spouse will at times let us down, and refrain from attacking our spouse when this happens.

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = not at all; 10 = excellent) answer the following questions. Answer separately at first and then compare your answers.

- How important is presence as a form of romance to you? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- How important is presence as a form of romance to your spouse? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- How skilled and willing are you at being present? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
- How skilled and willing is your spouse at being present? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Touch: A discussion of erotic touch and sex as an expression of love will be reserved for chapters four and five. But the power of non-erogenous touch (i.e., holding hands, cuddling, massaging sore muscles, kisses that don’t “lead anywhere,” etc...) should not be ignored. These are not the JV of romantic touch that are forgotten when, with marriage, a couple is “promoted” to varsity touching.

While no emotion can be reduced to its biology, it should be noted that cuddling and other skin to skin contact stimulates the production of oxytocin – the neurotransmitter most closely connected with the experience of trust. For this reason, couples that do not utilize touch to bond with their spouse may only share the functional trust that exists with a co-worker. God designed our brains to bond with those we allow to get close enough to touch our bodies. Like a balanced diet is important for physical health, marital touch is important for the literal neuro-chemistry of closeness in marriage.

If one spouse, most often the husband, is more aroused by touch and prone to fast forward to sex, this reality should be a call to self-control in order to allow touch to have its bonding influence. If one spouse, for reasons of preference or past abuse, does not find touch particularly meaningful, this does not negate the role of touch in bonding. Appendix B contains resources that can be helpful if your marriage is facing these kinds of challenges.

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = not at all; 10 = excellent) answer the following questions. Answer separately at first and then compare your answers.

- | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| • How important is touch as a form of romance to you? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| • How important is touch as a form of romance to your spouse? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| • How skilled and willing are you at using touch to love your spouse? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| • How skilled and willing is your spouse at using touch? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |

Misuses of Our Differences

What should a wise couple do with what they learn about their differences? Love one another. Use your growing knowledge of your spouse to grow in appreciation for the unique person God made them to be and to equip you to serve-romance them well over a lifetime.

What should a wise couple be on guard against so that their differences do not become points of division? This is an equally important question. The most damaging lies are exaggerated truths, because we can feel justified about our misapplications. Below we explore five uses of marital differences that are counter-productive.

1. **“This Is Just Who I Am”** – Our preferences should not define us; when they do our “likes” become the definition of love and our “dislikes” become the definition of sin. When we allow this to happen we are placing ourselves at the center of the universe. Romantic preferences, like other preferences (i.e., food, learning style, room temperature, morning-evening person, etc...) are something we should enjoy, recognize their strengths and weaknesses, and then submit to the best interest of the relationship (Eph. 5:21, Phil. 2:3-4).

“This self-centered person feels affection for others, but not real love. You feel affection when your spouse is nice to you—if you make you a good meal where he brings you flowers—but real love is more than a feeling. Love means bearing in mind the interest of another person. Love is a lifelong commitment to your spouse's well-being and to building harmony and unity (p. 5).” David Powlison in *Renewing Marital Intimacy*

2. **“Your Neglect Justifies My Sin”** – It is easy to defend our harsh or passive-aggressive response to our unmet preferences with, “What else was I supposed to do when my needs were not being met?” Did you notice the vocabulary change; from preferences to needs? This change in mindset leads many couples to get caught in the degenerative spiral of feeling powerless to love the other when their preferences are not being met. But in a gospel-centered marriage we are not swapping love deposits, as if we’re trapped in a limited marital merchant economy; we are sharing from the abundance of love and acceptance which God lavished on us through Christ.

“An important aspect of loving people well involves moving toward others for the reasons God intended. When you build your relationships with his goals in mind, your expectations of others will be in line with what healthy relationships can offer. When you don't, you will tend to want more from your friendships than they can provide, leading you to respond in destructive ways (p. 85)... Pursuit is also not based on my own neediness. I do not pursue you because I have a deep, unmet need that you will fill if you return... If I successfully pursue you in a godly way, then I am not the one who will benefit most. You will. If that's not the case, then I'm not really pursuing you. Instead, I'm pursuing you because doing so will get me something that I long for. You become a means to an end for me (p. 109).” William P. Smith in *Loving Well: Even If You Haven't Been*

3. **“I Should Only Have to Do What Is Natural”** – This is the excuse used by those who believe that education (i.e., reading a chapter like this one) should make love easy. It is the equivalent of the athlete who believes learning fundamentals should remove the necessity of practice and working out. These individuals are usually disappointed with every marriage event they attend, because “it just didn’t work for them;” which means “that event-book didn’t remove the necessity of me working on my marriage.” If we believe in the sinfulness of people, then we must realize loving our spouse (or anyone else) well will not be natural.

“Laziness is rooted in self-love. It is the ability to take ourselves off the hook. It is the willingness to permit ourselves not to do things we know we should do. It is believing that good things should come our way without having to work to get them. It is opting for what is comfortable for ourselves rather than what is best for our spouse. Laziness is always self-focused and self-excusing... Laziness expects more from others than we require from ourselves. Laziness demands good things without being willing to invest in them. I am persuaded that laziness is a much bigger deal in our marriages than we have tended to think (p. 111).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

4. **“Why Do You Hate Me?”** – Where a couple’s differences are most pronounced, it is easy to give into the temptation to hyper-personalize their differences. When we over-emphasize our preferences (viewing our spouse as the source of our emotional life), it is easy to conceive our spouse’s neglect to love according to our preferences as starving or bankrupting our soul. For many spouses, this justifies their highly dramatized attempts to manipulate or punish their spouse into rapid romantic-change. The most frequent responses are either (a) resistance in order to avoid being emotionally bullied, or (b) timidity out of fear they will not be able to get something “this important” right enough.

“No one changes overnight, despite the best intentions or strongest desires to live differently... A necessary part of love, therefore, is learning to live patiently with people as they continue on their own journeys of learning to live more righteously (p. 68).” William P. Smith in *Loving Well: Even If You Haven’t Been*

5. **“We Need to Balance Each Other Out”** – The opposite temptation to hyper-personalizing your preferences is to balance each other out. These couples often lose the “spark” of their marriage by trying to “find the middle between their preferences.” Happiness is not necessarily at the halfway point of our preferences. A couple should learn to mutually enjoy each other’s preferences to their fullest. The danger of this approach is that the passions God would use to make life amazing are “tamed” instead of “unleashed.” Each spouse winds up losing themselves in the marriage in unhealthy ways that God did not intend.

Which of these misuses are you most prone towards? When? _____

Conclusion

You should be excited. If this chapter feels like a “chore,” then you either missed the point or are highly apathetic about blessings God wants give to and through you in marriage. Even if you discovered that there are important changes you need to make, the changes should be enjoyable. Unlike the changes required in the budgeting seminar, which required delayed gratification, this material is fun from the start.

Your next question should not be, “How do I do all of this? How do I enact nine new ways of loving my spouse?” Instead, start with two questions:

- Which of these ways of loving would be most natural to incorporate into my current lifestyle?
- Which of these ways of loving would be most appreciated by my spouse?

With those questions, you give yourself two objectives that come with strong motivational qualities: question one (ease of implementation) and question two (high degree of impact). These motivators, which are much more enduring than guilt or duty, will help ensure your efforts lead to a lifestyle instead of a fading few weeks of good intentions.

In the next chapter we will examine how to ensure that the kind of things we listed in this chapter do not degenerate into a mere to-do list; a form of fear-driven marital legalism. But instead, we will provide the framework to help you see any marital enriching activity that you do as an expression of the largest love story of all time – the gospel.

Evaluation: Living in THE Love Story

Note: Each major section of the Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage series will have a brief evaluation tool to help you assess your marital strengths and weaknesses. Complete the evaluation before reading the material, then review the assessment again after completing each section to learn the accuracy of your initial self-assessment.

Instructions: Read the following descriptive statements. Consider how well they describe your experience or perspective on your marriage. If you are engaged, consider how well they describe your courtship experience or your beliefs about what you think your coming marriage should be. Mark the answer that best fits how you respond:

(CD) Completely Disagree, (SD) Somewhat Disagree, (NS) Not Sure, (SA) Somewhat Agree, or (CA) Completely Agree

- | | |
|--|----------------|
| 1. I can enjoy being selfless with the things I enjoy most. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 2. My spouse can enjoy being selfless with the things he/she enjoys most. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 3. I put as much thought and energy into my spouse’s dreams as I do my own. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 4. My spouse puts as much thought and energy into my dreams as their own. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 5. I live as if sacrificing for my marriage is an opportunity instead of a burden. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 6. My spouse lives as if sacrificing for our marriage is an opportunity instead of a burden. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 7. I am able to turn to my spouse for comfort and support during hard times. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 8. My spouse turns to me for comfort and support during hard times. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 9. I see Christ in even the small ways my spouse loves and serves me. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 10. My spouse sees Christ in even the small ways I love and serve them. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 11. I encourage my spouse to express their gifts as much as meet my needs. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 13. My spouse encourages me to express my gifts as much as meet their needs. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 14. I do not struggle with jealousy towards people or activities in my spouse’s life. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 15. My spouse does not struggle with jealousy towards people or activities in my life. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 16. We have a growing sense of unity and common identity in our marriage. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 17. My spouse and I agree on what it means to be faithful to one another in marriage. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 18. Our marriage is energized by our opportunities to do ministry together. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 19. We take time to reflect on God’s goodness to us as a couple. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 20. Our marriage is a major catalyst in our personal relationships with God. | CD SD NS SA CA |

Key to Survey Scoring: For each set of questions tabulate your score using the following numerical values. The scoring is weighted with the “neutral” NS answer being a negative score, because if you have not defined or pursued important aspects of your marriage relationship it will negatively impact the marriage.

CD	–	Negative 3 points	SA	–	Positive 1 points
SD	–	Negative 2 points	CA	–	Positive 2 points
NS	–	Negative 1 point			

If your total score...

- ...matches or exceeds the total number of questions, then this area of marriage is an area of strength.
- ...is less than the total number of questions, then this area of marriage could use attention or refinement.
- ...is a negative number, then this area of marriage should be given immediate and concentrated attention.

➤ Questions 1-20: (Total: _____ in 20 questions)

This set of questions examines evidences of “centering romance in the gospel narrative.” We tend to be most self-centered and selfish with the things bring us the most joy; this includes the romantic aspects of marriage. Only centering our martial affection on the gospel can protect the joy of romance from our sinful tendencies.

Recommended Resources: *What Did You Expect?* by Paul Tripp (Commitments 5 and 6); *Preparing for Marriage* by Dennis Rainey (Part 2) *The Meaning of Marriage* by Tim Keller (Chapters 1-4)

Chapter 3

Living in THE Love Story Experiencing God’s Greatest Message In Life’s Greatest Blessing

Plumb Lines: These are the “sticky” statements that capture the core messages of this chapter.

- Encouraging your spouse will change you more than it blesses your spouse.
- We tend to be most selfish with the things bring us the most joy; this includes the romantic aspects of marriage.
- “We replicate what we celebrate.” Be on the lookout for the fruit of the Spirit in your family.
- Neither a powerful romance nor a great sex life can exist outside a story captivating enough to contain them.

Memorize: Philippians 3:1 and 7 (ESV), “Finally, brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is not trouble to me and is safe for you... But whatever gain I had, I count as loss for the sake of Christ.” As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- “Rejoice in the Lord” – When you say “This is good” does “good” mean “has some Godly or heavenly quality?”
- “Same things” – If we’re repetitive about what annoys us (we are), let us be more repetitive about God’s blessings.
- “Not trouble to me” – Paul cultivated a character that enjoyed rehearsing God’s blessings, so should we.
- “Safe for you” – There is great soul and marital safety in contextualizing our struggles within God’s blessings.
- “Gain... loss” – This perspective changes how we think about the “things that are really important.”

Teaching Notes

“It is vital to understand that the biblical story is the only story that can make sense out of the story of your life and your marriage (p. 208).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

“Only if you maintain your love for someone when it is not thrilling can you be said to be actually loving a *person* (p. 97).” Tim Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*

“The way I live out my relationships with people is one of the clearest indicators of how healthy my relationship with the Lord is (p. xxi)... Encouragement is far more important than we often realize. It’s an attitude that focuses more on the reality of what Christians are becoming than on where they are presently failing (p. 125).” William P. Smith in *Loving Well: Even If You Haven’t Been*

“I do not want to live. I cannot live without my husband. I love him so much.” And when I respond, as I frequently do, “You are mistaken, you do not love your husband.” “What do you mean?” is the angry question. “I just told you I can’t live without him.” I try to explain, “What you describe is parasitism, not love.” Scott Peck in *The Road Less Traveled*

“Romantic love has no elasticity to it. It can never be stretched; it simply shatters (p. 15).” Gary Thomas in *Sacred Marriage*

“Take careful note, men, that these complements are not merely physical (p. 64).” C. J. Mahaney in *Sex, Romance, and the Glory of God*

“When two people speak honestly about their burdens, they come to a deeper understanding and love for one another. This is intimate stuff, the fine china of your spouse’s life (p. 17)... When two people sorrow together, rejoice together, and join together in a life task, the result is intimacy and closeness (p. 19).” David Powlison in *Renewing Marital Intimacy*

Embedded Study

What is the love story mold into which you want your marriage to grow? Cinderella, Pretty Woman, Snow White, Titanic, Gone with the Wind, It’s a Wonderful Life, Sleepless in Seattle, Grease, Jerry Maguire, Dirty Dancing, etc...? Whether the plot line comes from Hollywood cinema or not, we all have an ideal “narrative” we want our marriage to follow.

As one friend of my wife pointed out, “All chic-flicks are about the same thing. The guy does everything the girl wants to win the girl’s love and attention. She gets to be a god.” The same could be said of the pornographic films to which many men are becoming addicted, “The girl does everything the guy wants to win his love and attention. He gets to be a god.”

This is the really dangerous parts about our ideal love stories (even more than sexual lust); we are a god in the story—the story centers on us. Everyone else, including God, is a supporting actor in our story. This tendency doesn’t go away when we get married. In fact, for many people, it only gets worse as we try to make our “forever relationship” into the “happily ever after” we’ve been creating with each book we read and movie we watch. This was the human tendency before modern media, but the multi-billion dollar, idealized story-telling industry greatly exacerbates the tendency.

In this chapter we want to combat these tendencies in two ways:

1. Examine how and where a non-gospel narrative takes root and gains power in your marriage.
2. Discover simple, powerful practices to keep the gospel as the grand narrative of your marital love.

In order to help you appreciate how we’ll approach these two things, consider the following question, “How does a news story catch traction and gain definition in our modern media?” The answer is “sound bites” – a clip is played over and over, and opposite sides compete so their phrase is used to describe the event.

This is more than political theatre or the product of cramming world news into a 30 minute program. It is a basic human tendency played out on a large scale. We give things meaning and reinforce that meaning through frequently repeated small messages or images. This is as true of individuals as it is of cultures.

Where does it happen for individuals? In our self-talk, the things we replay in our minds. As Paul Tripp is fond of saying, “No one is more influential in your world than you are, because no one talks to you more than you do.” We spin (for better or worse) the events of our lives and quality of our marriage in our own mind constantly. The bias of our “coverage” will either be gospel-gospel-gospel or self-self-self.

Roots of a Non-Gospel Narrative

What does the Bible call these non-gospel sound bites of our lives? Grumbling. Often we think of grumbling as it were merely ruminating on something negative. If that were the case, then God would expect us to always be positive and we would have to remain naïve or silent about real problems or challenges that exist.

Instead, grumbling is thinking about life in sound bites that reinforce a non-gospel narrative. With this definition we see that grumbling can take many forms. As you read through the forms of grumbling listen below do not get caught focusing exclusively on your poor emotional hygiene; as if you just need to “be more positive.” Instead, see the real danger of how each of these mental habits reinforces a non-gospel narrative on your life and marriage.

There is a progression implied in the descriptions below. This progression is meant to illustrate how one experience of grumbling leads into the others. However, this progression is not meant to imply there is a universal pattern of grumbling or that one experience will necessarily lead into the next.

- **Grumbling Proper** – Rehearsing all the undesired parts of your day, marriage, or life. The more we give into this tendency, the more celebrating the blessings of God feels empty or a mere distraction technique. Grumbling establishes a negative “main story” and renders life’s other events insignificant by comparison.
- **Critical Spirit** – Rehearsing all the unmet expectations you have for your spouse. “Things don’t get better by focusing on what is right” this person might retort. “No, but life can be enjoyed that way” I would reply. Education is not the answer for this attitude. Often the more we educate ourselves on how to do something well, including marriage, the more we have to be on guard against grumbling. “Experts” can be the most negative people, because they know most clearly how things ought to be done.
- **Worry** – Rehearsing all the unmet expectations you have for yourself. “Am I [verb – doing, praying, loving, serving, etc...] enough?” is the mantra of this form of non-gospel sound bite. It is having a critical spirit towards

yourself instead of towards your spouse. No accomplishment can penetrate this narrative, because whatever good was done could (i.e., should) have been done better or sooner.

- **Insecurity** – Rehearsing all your perceived weaknesses and undesired attributes. “Am I [noun or adjective – pretty, strong, smart, etc...] enough?” Now the non-gospel narrative is fixated on your person instead of just your performance. You leave the gospel with the assumption “if there is someone better than I am less loveable.” You begin to believe the love of God and your spouse is in limited supply and, therefore, you must compete for them.
- **Depression** – Rehearsing the message “there is no hope” for the things that concern you. Now things are not just bad, but they’re permanent. Whatever negative, non-gospel theme is darkening your thoughts and emotions are now perceived to be eternal. Effort at improvement seems overwhelming and futile.
- **Avoidance** – This is the attempt to disengage with the important things of life due to fear or laziness. The fatalism of depression takes its most logical behavioral expression – passivity. As we divert our attention from the things that are good and reduce our effort change, all non-gospel messages begin to ring truer and truer as life becomes more over-whelming.

Which of these patterns of rehearsing non-gospel sound bites are you most prone towards in your marriage? _____

In light of this reflection on grumbling, consider the following passage, which would not typically be used in marriage enrichment material, but hopefully now seems highly relevant.

Philippians 2:14-16 (ESV, emphasis added), “Do all things *without grumbling* or questioning, *that you may be blameless and innocent*, children of God without blemish *in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation*, among whom you *shine as lights* in the world, *holding fast to the word of life*, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.”

Consider the implications of obeying Paul’s command to “do all things without grumbling.”

1. “*That you may be blameless and innocent.*” Hopefully now you can see the connections that exist between various forms of grumbling and the blameworthy things you do in your marriage. When you grumble you feel justified in sin because life is “so bad.”
2. “*In the midst of a crooked and twisted generation.*” The content of our grumbling is often common, and even encouraged, in our culture. To speak positively of one’s marriage and redemptively of its weaknesses is, sadly, “odd” in most segments of our culture and media.
3. “*You shine as lights.*” A marriage that resists grumbling stands out. Couples want to know how to acknowledge each other’s weaknesses, be patient with each other’s growth, and not turned off by each other’s quirks without becoming negative. When we model this, it provides great opportunities to talk about the gospel.
4. “*Holding fast to the word of life.*” The absence of grumbling is not just a testimony to the world around you; it feeds your own soul. There is only room for one grand narrative in our life. When grumbling replaces the gospel our soul starves; as we begin to read our Bible through grumbling’s cynical prism.

Keeping the Gospel as Your Grand Narrative

Too often, at this point, a marriage talk becomes hyper-positive. We become afraid of acknowledging things that need to change or mentioning things that are annoying for fear of being “negative.” If that is the result of this chapter, then this material is not sustainable and would require us to be less honest than the Bible.

So we ask the question, “What is the alternative to grumbling?” We’ll summarize our answer with the word “encouragement.” But if our approach to grumbling was more robust than expected, our approach to encouragement must also be expanded. We will use the word “encouragement” to capture all of the head, heart, and hands actions discussed in chapter two.

Let’s begin by asking, “What do both grumbling and encouragement have in common?” In order for two things to be opposites they must share something in common; hot and cold are both temperatures, good and evil are both moral expressions, light and dark are both visual experiences.

What is it then that grumbling and encouragement have in common that allow them to be opposites – they are both forms of mental (intrapersonal) and verbal (interpersonal) rehearsal which replay the parts of our life we deem most significant.

How does this definition of encouragement help us be honest about our hurts and concerns which will exist in any marriage while still keeping the gospel as the grand narrative of our life? The biggest part of this answer is found in the final phrase “we deem most significant.”

The gospel acknowledges sin, suffering, character traits, and personality quirks. But it does not deem any of them “most significant.” Another way to define grumbling would be when our dislikes becomes more important than our gratitude and our doubts become more important than our faith.

How do we prevent this imbalance from occurring? To answer that question we need to examine three aspects of encouragement. As you read, you should discover the encouraging your spouse will change you more than it blesses your spouse! Encouragement is more about us keeping the gospel at the center of our own story than it is about providing a positive experience for your spouse.

1. Encouragement Teaches

A pre-requisite to encouragement is looking for things to affirm. This means encouragement blesses you before it blesses your spouse. In order to encourage, you must discipline yourself to look for those things that are good, true honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, and excellent (Phil 4:8) in your spouse.

Encouragement teaches you like a child learning his colors. The child lived in a world of color long before she could name any of them. Learning didn’t add to the child’s quantity of known information; rather it provided the child the opportunity to share what he was already experiencing.

We live surrounded by the goodness of God. Naming that goodness, particularly when you see it in your spouse, in spoken words does not add to the quantity of God’s blessing in our lives; rather it is the opportunity for us to draw the attention of our spouse to the goodness of God they display so both our enjoyments are energized.

This is how encouragement teaches you to keep the gospel as the grand narrative of your life; not be adding theological content to your memory, but by continually drawing your attention to the reminders God’s blessings. Even with all these personal benefits God also uses your encouragement to keep the gospel as the grand narrative of your spouse’s life.

What is the key to learning? Repetition. What is the key to learning not becoming annoying or discouraging? Encouragement. Too often we think we have to teach exclusively by looking for what needs to be corrected. If your spouse is a Christian, then there should be gospel-fruit in their life. Whenever you point out these evidences of God’s grace you are reinforcing the gospel narrative in their life.

Leaders often say, “We replicate what we celebrate.” This is true in our homes. We should always be on the lookout for love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23) in our family. We should use all of the methods of encouragement discussed in chapter two to affirm these qualities every time we see them.

This will curb at least two negative effects of encouragement. First, it will negate the perception that we are merely complementing our spouse in order to get what we want. Second, it will negate the tendency we have to only complement those aspects of our spouse that are appealing to us. It should be our aim that our encouragement both points out and draws out the full character of Christ in our spouse.

2. Encouragement Motivates

The same principle that holds true between encouragement and teaching also holds true for encouragement and motivation—the act of encouraging motivates me before it motivates my spouse. Training myself to notice the goodness of God around me doesn’t just improve the positive-negative balance in my memory; it increases my motivation for doing the things God has called me to do.

I am no longer able to feel as if God just wants things *from* me *for* other people (eventually demoralizing); instead I begin to realize how much God has already done *for me* through the way He is active in those around me (perpetually motivating). This perspective is essential for sustaining the effort necessary to nurture a lifelong romantic marriage. Otherwise, ant of us would succumb to thinking we are giving more than we are getting, even from God.

Read John 7:37-39. In light of this discussion reflect on what it means for Jesus to be the spring of “living water.” As we do what He calls us to do (in this case, look for and express the things that would encourage our spouse), He is – through that same action – nurturing our soul with the motivation to continue that activity because we discover how God is ministering to us through what we’re affirming in our spouse.

But your encouragement of your spouse is not merely self-motivating. If you have protected and honored your marriage, then your spouse’s heart will be motivated to increase or enhance those things you affirm. It is easiest to create movement when movement is already occurring. When we affirm the goodness we see in our spouse we are contributing to the momentum of God’s grace in our spouse’s life.

Romantic celebration is one thing that makes the hard work of character transformation “worth it.” Self-denial, delayed gratification, service, patience, and other ways we display Christ-likeness are difficult, but when the person who knows you best and loves you most notices and affirms these efforts (in the ways that are most satisfying to you) it reminds us that these actions are not God’s “harsh demands” but instead his “loving protections” for us.

Read Hebrews 10:24. Reflect on what it means to “consider how to stir one another to love and good works” in light of what you’ve just been reading. Your affection towards your spouse, especially when given in response to the godly character of your spouse, is used by God to shape your spouse’s character as much as having a time of shared Bible study and prayer. Romance between a husband and wife is a deeply edifying activity.

In order to maximize the teaching and motivating impact of encouragement, two focal points of encouragement are recommended.

First, look for opportunities to encourage the full and balanced character of Christ in your spouse. We all have a tendency to become affirmationally-lazy by only drawing attention to our “favorite” aspect of our spouse (i.e., appearance, work ethic, reliability, good with the kids, etc...). It is good to celebrate these things and for your spouse to know your favorite things about him/her, but gospel-centered encouragement will not stop with our preferences; instead it will look for all aspects of Christ’s character in our spouse.

If you need help thinking through how to do this, take several key passages that capture Christ’s character and make index cards of key attributes: Galatians 5:22-23, 1 Corinthians 13, Philippians 2:1-11, and Proverbs 31. Use these index cards as a scavenger hunt and to ensure that you are teaching and motivating your spouse to pursue the full character of Christ in your compliments. Make those cards which you have not yet found an opportunity to affirm points of prayer for your spouse, but be sure they do not get more of your mental energy than the ones you have affirmed.

Second, encourage your spouse for those qualities and interactions that are unique to your marriage. You get to see more of your spouse’s life than anyone else. You get to see parts of your spouse’s life that no one else gets to see. That is sometimes less-than-appealing (i.e., bed-head and morning breath), other times offensive (i.e., particular sins that show up predominantly at home), but also a sacred responsibility.

There are aspects of God’s work in the life of our spouse that only we are able to celebrate. If we fail to celebrate these at-home-alone graces, then these marks of God’s grace will go unpraised. We alone, in all of creation, have the opportunity to see and rejoice in these private showings of God’s goodness in and through our spouse.

To guide you in looking for these opportunities to encourage your spouse, consider the following questions.

- What are the ways in which your spouse cares for you that no one else does?
- What are the aspects of your spouse’s character that you get to see that few others see?
- What is special about your marriage that you do not share with anyone else?

Focusing your attention on these things protects you from viewing your marriage as ordinary. It is easy, because home becomes such a familiar place, to begin to view the things outside your marriage and family as “special” or “unique.” Using encouragement to remind you of what makes your marriage special is a great protection for your marriage.

3. Encouragement Reinforces a Narrative

Encouragement does more than teach and motivate; it writes, or at least reinforces, a story. To come full circle, back to where this chapter began, the marital sound bites that we use to tell our “marriage story” (most often without realizing it) are our compliments and our grumbings.

During neutral or good times it should now be clear how to reinforce the gospel narrative through our words and thoughts. We give God the credit for the good things in our lives and we train ourselves to notice and give weight to His blessings even in the midst of mundane events.

What remains to be done in this chapter is to demonstrate how the gospel narrative is able to allow us to be honest about each other's disappointments and failures while not detracting from an ever increasing closeness within a marriage. Let's examine each of the four major themes of the gospel in order to see how they can still generate an encouraging story when the topic to be addressed is unpleasant.

1. **Creation:** We realize we only have the standard and expectation of “good” because God is good and He made our world (including marriage and our spouse) to be good. If life were random or built purely on a “survival of the fittest” evolution, then the expectation that life would be “good” would be irrational.

Allow your points of failure or disappointment to be a reminder that it is a blessing that we have a good God who created us to be good people and live in a good world. The fact that our hearts are calibrated to want and pursue good is a blessing that is easy to take for granted. Praise God the compass of our conscience is set to desire to the true North of God's goodness.

This is part of God's grace which should shape the story of the disappointments and failures we face and perpetrate in our marriage. Even when we disagree on how love could/should be expressed in our marriage, we are blessed to want love more than power, unity more than dominance, and relationship more than isolation.

2. **Fall:** But the preceding paragraphs are not always true. They may represent what we know to be right and what we want to want, but we do not have to look outside ourselves to see that life does not match the ideals of our own conscience. This is where many of us get appalled and draw back from relationships because of the fear of being hurt or insecurity of being found out.

For Christians the presence of sin should be expected, not a surprise. We do not believe that people are good, and there must be a reason people do selfish things. It is when we are surprised at sin that increases our sense of being threatened. You can see an unknown man in a mask with a knife in a haunted house and the experience is much different than if he's in your home. The first you expect and are merely startled. The second you don't expect and are traumatized.

The absence of shock gives you the opportunity to respond to sin differently. Whereas the “rose colored glasses of love” would mean your ideal marriage story is crumbling; the gospel allows us to grieve the presence and be hurt by the impact of sin without feeling like the narrative has turned tragic. It also reminds us that the presence of sin is not the final scene in our story; it's only the second of four.

3. **Redemption:** We see a greater goodness of God in His redemptive work than we do in any other aspect of creation or history. We can take good things and make lesser good things; turning trees into paper or used paper into recycled paper. Only God can take bad things and make them good. For this reason, Christians believe that broken things restored by God can have a greater glory than something that has never been broken.

That begs the question of Romans 6:1, “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” and is met with the answer of Romans 6:2, “By no means!” That would revel in the brokenness instead of celebrating redemption.

Relationships, especially marriage, afford us the opportunity to do more than witness God's work of redemption; we also get to participate in it. We are not fans in the stands of God's grace, merely cheering on what is going on “over there.” We are in the huddle participating in the play being drawn up by our great Player/Coach who graciously involves us in the restoration of those we love; and them in our restoration.

4. **Glorification:** If the story stopped with perpetual redemption it would eventually become dissatisfying. Being forgiven is wonderful; the thought of inevitably needing to be forgiven is discouraging. Forgiveness can be powerfully romantic (hence the adage “fight hard and make up hard”), but the expectation you'll unescapably be hurt in a way that requires forgiveness becomes a turn-off.

The gospel does not leave us in the hamster wheel of redemption. We will enter eternal rest (Hebrews 4:3-9). God will not exhaust us with a good thing we cannot sustain; He is the Good Father who does not provoke His children until they become discouraged (Col. 3:21).

As we maintain encouragement during times of disappointment and failure by contextualizing these experiences in the larger narrative of the gospel, we can rest knowing these are momentary struggles – the short chapters before the gloriously eternal concluding chapter (2 Cor. 4:16-18).

Do these four points tell you how to respond when sin or disappointment affect your marriage? No. Not if you want a script to read to yourself or your spouse for every potential unpleasant circumstance the two of you will face. We can begin to see the question is not realistic.

Do these four points alert you to when your thought life is going off-script with the gospel narrative for your marriage? Yes. When you can discern when you are leaving the gospel narrative you can reach out for help before the new-false narrative becomes entrenched. The earlier you can root out a false-narrative the easier it is to resist.

Which of the four themes of the gospel tend to get distorted most when you face hard times?

What are the areas of your life, that when negatively impacted, most tempt you to leave the gospel narrative?

Part of what we see in the gospel narrative is that it begins and ends in paradise – the Garden of Eden and Heaven. These are two pictures we see of life and relationships as God intended. The goal of every narrative is to lead people somewhere. Let’s look at Genesis 1 to learn one more thing about where the gospel narrative intends to lead us.

Read Genesis 1:10, 12, 18, 25, and 31. Notice the restraint of God’s language. He was content to say His creation was “good,” even for the pinnacle of His creation He only said “very good.” There is no use of words like better, best, or other superlatives. God was not competing with other creators. God was not even competing with Himself. We often get lost wondering, “Is our marriage better than [name]? Are we doing better than [name]? Does [name] do conflict better than we do?” We lose the basic question – is what we’re doing good? When this happens we invariably leave the gospel narrative for either pride or insecurity.

Conclusion

Loving well is not a theological labyrinth. Hopefully after reading this chapter you can see that cultivating a romantic marriage requires knowing two of the most basic tenants of the Christian faith.

1. **The Character of God** – We must believe that God is good and wants good things for us. This belief compels us to look for good things in the world around us, including our spouse, and to give God credit for the good things we find. Knowing that God is the source of everything good protects us from looking for His gifts to satisfy our hearts in the way that only He can.
2. **The Simple Truths of the Gospel** – We need to understand how the themes of creation, fall, redemption, and glorification make sense of our life better than any other faith system. The rise and fall of pleasant and unpleasant experiences in our life and marriage must be navigated in light of these themes in order for us to enjoy relationships with people who are in process of being redeemed (that is everyone in our lives).

These are the truths that allow the practices you learned in chapter two and those you will learn in chapters four and five from merely building expectations that result in disappointment. Neither a powerful romance nor a great sex life can exist outside a story captivating enough to contain them.

Think of the “ideal love story” you identified at the beginning of this chapter. What would happen if you watched that movie daily for a month or lived it day-in-day-out for a decade? It would lose its appeal. It would no longer be new. Only the gospel can make and keep the promise to be “new every morning” (Lamentations 3:23). If the activities we do to bless our marriages are going to be satisfying for a lifetime, they need to be rooted in a story that big.

Evaluation: Sexual Intimacy in Marriage

Note: Each major section of the Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage series will have a brief evaluation tool to help you assess your marital strengths and weaknesses. Complete the evaluation before reading the material, then review the assessment again after completing each section to learn the accuracy of your initial self-assessment.

Instructions: Read the following descriptive statements. Consider how well they describe your experience or perspective on your marriage. If you are engaged, consider how well they describe your courtship experience or your beliefs about what you think your coming marriage should be. Mark the answer that best fits how you respond:

(CD) Completely Disagree, (SD) Somewhat Disagree, (NS) Not Sure, (SA) Somewhat Agree, or (CA) Completely Agree

***** Note:** For couples taking this evaluation as part of their pre-marital preparation, parts of this evaluation will be difficult to answer. It fine to skip questions you are unable to answer. Those questions will likely represent important conversations for you and your fiancé to have leading into your honeymoon.

1. I believe that sex is a good gift from God made for our enjoyment.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
2. My spouse believes that sex is a good gift from God made for our enjoyment.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
3. We believe that an enjoyable married sex life is one way we experience God's goodness.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
4. My family had a healthy and positive view of sex.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
5. My spouse's family had a healthy and positive view of sex.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
6. I want to have a healthy sex life that blesses our marriage.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
7. Sex is not so important to me that it creates fear or pressure for my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
8. Sex is not so important to my spouse that I feel pressure or intimidated.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
9. Sex is not unimportant to me to a degree it disappoints or offends my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
10. Sex is not unimportant to my spouse to a degree is disappoints or offends me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
11. My spouse and I agree on the difference between sex and intimacy / closeness.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
12. My spouse and I agree on the balance we want between sex and intimacy / closeness.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
13. I feel attractive and appealing to my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
14. My spouse feels attractive and appealing to me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
15. I am comfortable being nude in front of my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
16. My spouse is comfortable being nude in front of me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
17. We are balanced in who requests and initiates sex.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
18. I request sex in a way that is tactful and appealing to my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
19. My spouse requests sex in a way that is tactful and appealing to me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
20. The language I use to describe sex is wholesome and non-offensive to my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
21. The language my spouse uses to describe sex is wholesome and non-offensive to me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
22. My spouse and I can talk about what we enjoy and want from our sexual relationship.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
23. My spouse and I can talk about our fears or insecurities related to sex.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
24. My spouse and I can talk about the effects of age on our bodies and sexual desire.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
25. We agree on the frequency with which we have sex.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
26. We manage our schedule and work load to protect time for romance and sex.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
27. Sex does not feel like a duty or routine that robs us of its full satisfaction.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
28. I am satisfied with the quality of sex in our marriage.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
29. My spouse is satisfied with the quality of sex in our marriage.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
30. I feel like I can meet my spouse's sexual expectations and desires.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
31. My spouse feels like he/she can meet my sexual expectations and desires.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
32. I am unselfish during sex and seek to find greater pleasure in my spouse's enjoyment.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
33. My spouse is unselfish during sex and seeks to find greater pleasure in my enjoyment.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
34. We intentionally plan for variety in the way we foreplay before sex.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
35. We will both be assertive during sex to take the lead in pleasuring our spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
37. We will both be assertive during sex to affirm the things that are enjoyable.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
38. We will both be assertive during sex to let our spouse know what would be enjoyable.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
39. We take time after sex to enjoy each other during the afterglow.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA

40. In the days after we talk about our sexual encounter to affirm and flirt with each other.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
41. I do not use sex as a tool to get things I want or punish my spouse.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
42. My spouse does not use sex as a tool to get things he/she wants or to punish me.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
43. Guilt over past sexual experiences does not interfere with my ability to enjoy sex.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
44. Guilt over past sexual experiences does not interfere with my spouse’s ability to enjoy sex.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
45. Trauma related to past sexual experience doesn’t impede my ability to enjoy sex.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
46. Trauma related to past sexual experience doesn’t impede my spouse’s ability to enjoy sex.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
47. My spouse does not ask things of me during sex that make me feel uncomfortable.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
48. I do not ask my spouse to do things during sex that makes him/her feel uncomfortable.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
49. If sex were uncomfortable or difficult we would seek medical or counseling help.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA
50. Same sex attractions do not interfere with our ability to enjoy our marriage relationship.	CD	SD	NS	SA	CA

Key to Survey Scoring: For each set of questions tabulate your score using the following numerical values. The scoring is weighted with the “neutral” NS answer being a negative score, because if you have not defined or pursued important aspects of your marriage relationship it will negatively impact the marriage.

CD	–	Negative 3 points	SA	–	Positive 1 points
SD	–	Negative 2 points	CA	–	Positive 2 points
NS	–	Negative 1 point			

If your total score...

- ...**matches or exceeds the total number of questions**, then this area of marriage is an area of strength.
- ...**is less than the total number of questions**, then this area of marriage could use attention or refinement.
- ...**is a negative number**, then this area of marriage should be given immediate and concentrated attention.

➤ Questions 1-12: (Total: _____ in 12 questions)

This set of questions examines the “**belief and values related to sex**” present in a gospel-centered marriage. Sex is good. Sex is a gift from God given to married couples to enjoy and strengthen the bond their covenant. Married couples should feel emotional freedom to enjoy sex with each other.

Recommended Resources: *Preparing for Marriage* (Chapter 8) edited by Dennis Rainey; *The Meaning of Marriage* (Chapter 8) by Tim Keller; *Intimate Issues* (Part 1) by Linda Dillow and Lorraine Pintus

➤ Questions 12-24: (Total: _____ in 12 questions)

This set of questions examines the “**comfort with our bodies and vocabulary**” present in a gospel-centered marriage. The gospel is the essence of being fully known and fully loved by the One who ultimately matters; the Christian life begins with a very awkward conversation with God about personal things hard to talk about (i.e., our sin). By parallel, sex is the next most tangible expression of being fully known and fully loved; marriage involves talking about things that can be awkward, like sex. The gospel gives us the freedom to have these conversations without shame or embarrassment; more than that, we can share these moments with confidence and joy.

Recommended Resources: *The Celebration of Sex* (Section One) by Doug Rosenau; *Intimate Issues* (Part 3) by Linda Dillow and Lorraine Pintus

➤ Questions 25-40: (Total: _____ in 16 questions)

This set of questions examines the “**frequency and quality of sex**” present in a gospel-centered marriage. Marriage was not made for sex, but sex was made for marriage. This is the same principle Jesus taught when he said, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:37).” The implication is that people should not be legalists about rest, but they should rest. Similarly, Christian couples should not be counting and ranking their sexual experiences, but they should be having sex and enjoying it.

Recommended Resources: *The Celebration of Sex* (Sections Two and Three) by Doug Rosenau; *Intimate Issues* (Part 3) by Linda Dillow and Lorraine Pintus

- Questions 41-50: (Total: _____ in 10 questions)

This set of questions examines the “**red flags related to sex**” that would damage or undermine a gospel-centered marriage. The nature of these red flags vary significantly, but if they are present, it is recommended that a couple voluntarily seek the appropriate assistance rather than allow these struggles to devolve into a crisis that forces the couple to seek outside assistance when they are less receptive and the situation is complicated.

Recommended Resources: *The Celebration of Sex* (Sections Four, Five, and Six) by Doug Rosenau; *Intimate Issues* (Part 2) by Linda Dillow and Lorraine Pintus

Sometimes within a marriage the problem is not one specific area or issue but an overall imbalance in the effort, skill, thoughtfulness, and awareness being put into the marriage. Below is a list of questions that reveal your perspective on your effort and your spouse’s effort in the marriage. Use the same numerical scoring system as you used above. In this case, the closer your scores are to another, the more mutual (and typically healthy) the marriage.

_____ **My Score** – Using the same scoring system as above add together the score questions 1, 4, 6, 7, 9, 15, 18, 20, 32, and 41.

_____ **Spouse’s Score** – Using the same scoring system as above add together the score for questions 2, 5, 8, 10, 16, 19, 21, 33, and 42.

Chapter 4

Sex as One of God’s Gifts for Marriage (Part One)

Learning to Skillfully and Unashamedly Enjoy Foreplay

Plumb Lines: These are the “sticky” statements that capture the core messages of this chapter.

- Sex is a celebration more than recreation
- Your sex life will never be better than your overall marital health
- The brain (imagination), skin (touch), and ears (listening) are the sexiest parts of our body.
- The purpose of this chapter is to heighten the God-intended bonding effect of sex by accentuating every aspect of the spouse and marriage you are celebrating in sex.

Memorize: Proverbs 5:18-19 (ESV), “Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love.” As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- “Rejoice” – The Bible does not want us to be embarrassed about enjoying sex; God wants you to enjoy His gift.
- “Of your youth” – This history you share together should add to the enjoyment of each other in sex.
- “Lovely... graceful” – A wife may not be a ballerina, but God calls you to see and speak of her with these qualities.
- “Breasts” – The Bible is not bashful about the delight a husband and wife should take in each other’s bodies.
- “Intoxicated always” – The sensual delight you take in each other should not be restricted to your young bodies.

Teaching Notes

“Another mark of this community should be free and open discussion about how the Bible’s perspective on sex plays out in life and relationships. The more often singles and married Christians reflect on the Biblical teaching about this, the more support singles will feel for abiding by it (p. 228).” Tim Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*

“The task you face is not getting rid of all of your expectations, but basing them realistically on biblical principles.... It may seem like strange advice, but the quality of your sex life may depend on turning off the television, picking a good fight, becoming independent of your parents, setting up a budget, or taking regular vacations (p. xi).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

“In the busyness of life, lovers forget to make eye contact when they’re talking—or for that matter, when they are making love. The eyes express so much: acceptance, excitement, a longing to understand, and sexual desire (p. 122)... Every mate who wants to be a passionate lover must practice the discipline of growing up and becoming a confident person (p. 180)... There is nothing sexier than men or women who are comfortable in their own skin and can confidently launch into new adventures in wild and unique ways (p. 181).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

“In order for romance to deepen, you must touch the heart and mind of your wife before you touch her body (p. 28).” C. J. Mahaney in *Sex, Romance, and the Glory of God*

“To be sexy is to be aware of your body as an instrument of playfulness and delight, to be able to communicate this awareness to your husband and give him the gift of your body for pleasure, delight, variety, and playfulness. We’re going to tell you a secret. It’s better to be sensuous than to have a perfect ‘10’ body. (p. 59)... One of the quickest and best ways to feel good about your body is to have a rewarding sexual relationship with your husband. Good sexual experiences breed high levels of body satisfaction (p. 64).” Linda Dillow and Lorraine Pintus in *Intimate Issues*

“Making love needs to be based on an intimate marital partnership. Without the playful, loving companionship, sex becomes another buzz or rush that loses its perspective and has increasingly diminishing returns (p. 8)... You cannot *work* at creating better lovemaking; you and your mate have to *play* at it (p. 13)... Sexy lovers take the time to develop the sensual, romantic part of their minds and personalities (p. 18)... Sex is perhaps 80 percent fantasy (imagination in mind) and about 20 percent friction. Granted, pleasuring erogenous zones (friction) is fun, but what truly creates the excitement is your mind (p. 74).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

Embedded Study

How do you feel as we get ready to talk about sex? Nervous, excited, guilty, awkward, self-conscious, aroused, or tired of me asking question and ready to get the conversation started? Surprising to many people, the first step towards a great sex life is the ability to talk about sex. Sex is a “team sport” and communication is essential to anything involving the synchronization of two people’s bodily movements (not to mention schedules and emotions).

For many couples the most beneficial thing they will gain from this chapter and the next will be a conversation guide. Hopefully, the content will be informative and stimulating, but what they really need most-first is a series of positively-framed prompts to have some awkward but exciting conversations they may only try to have when one of them thinks “the moment is right” and the other is not so sure.

But even when there is agreement on the frequency and initiation of sex, communication is paramount to a healthy and thriving sex life. Talking about sex should not just be educational (i.e., learning what your spouse does and does not enjoy), but also arousing (i.e., part of the foreplay and building of a healthy sexual tension between husband and wife which adds to the climax of intercourse).

“Many couples find it uncomfortable to initiate sexual conversations and openly discuss individual needs and desires (p. 16)... Great sex is based on mature lovers who can be honest with themselves and with their mates. They are self-aware and assertively communicate (p. 17).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

Pause for a moment. Do not read the next paragraph before writing your answer to the following question. What are the three sexiest, most stimulating organs of the human body?

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

If you grasp the significance of the answers to this question, it will revolutionize how you understand sex. The quality and, probably, the quantity of your sex life will increase dramatically. Your ability to be creative during love making, avoid the ruts of ho-hum routine sex, and ability to build a wholesome anticipation for your spouse will grow.

1. **Your Brain.** Without imagination sex becomes one more thrill ride that progressively loses its impact the more you do it. If we wait until the first kiss to think about sex, it probably won’t be that fulfilling. Positive anticipation of sex may be the best “technique” for keeping life in your marital sex life.
2. **Your Skin.** When the “touching” and attention in sex is reduced to breasts, butt, penis, and vagina those four notes don’t make a rockin’ sex life; especially for women, whose biological arousal system is not as immediate as men’s. But for both genders the positive sexual tension that is built through taking the time to stimulate through touch is important for a maximally and mutually satisfying climax.
3. **Your Ears.** Sex is the celebration of a shared life; not merely a few minutes of cardiovascular recreation. Listening to each other is a huge part of knowing what you’re celebrating through sex. Sex without listening is like throwing a birthday party for a deceased relative. There may be cake and balloons, but you leave with a feeling that something was missing.

We want to approach this chapter like a healthy married sex life; not rushing to the conclusion, allowing time for exploration, but with a few “quickie” points interspersed throughout. That means in these two chapters “getting to the end” is not your objective, but instead your goal is conversation about what you’re reading.

“Many loving couples never talk about sex together. This is sad, because effective communication is at the heart of falling deeper in love in creating a truly passionate marriage. It isn’t easy to create a comfortable sexual vocabulary or develop the ability to dialogue about lovemaking... Lack of sexual communication can be disabling, though... It robs them of the great aphrodisiac because talking is very sexy (p. 86).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

This chapter will flow into the next chapter. In this chapter we will discuss sex from anticipation to non-erogenous touching. In the final chapter we’ll discuss sex from erogenous touching through afterglow. No couple will follow every recommendation in every sexual encounter, but if one of these recommendation is consistently neglected it would negatively impact a couple’s sex life.

Sex Begins with Priorities

Sex begins before any touching or kissing occurs. Sex begins before either spouse raises their eyebrows flirtatiously towards the other. Sex begins before either partner feels “interested” or aroused. Sex begins (and too often ends) when a couple intentionally arranges their life to make sure there is time and energy to enjoy one another.

“Passion begins with priorities, not genitals (p. 222).” Linda Dillow and Lorraine Pintus in *Intimate Issues*

Too often this marital reality is viewed negatively; as if it is anti-romantic. “Spontaneous sex” is deemed to be the highest and only true expression of “making love.” But this is a standard to which nothing in the courtship phase (usually the phase of relationship viewed most favorable by those with this romantic ideal) was asked to meet.

“Before a couple marries, they scheduled dates... One woman said, ‘I can only see my fiancée on weekends, and all week long I replayed each hug, the moments his arms embraced me, and dreamed of being there again.’ Wasn’t unromantic for this woman to ‘plan’ time with her beloved? Of course not. They’re crazy schedules demanded it. Why then, when we marry, do we think it is unromantic to schedule sexual encounters (p. 211)?... Planning for lovemaking doesn’t mean forcing sex to happen but creating the opportunity for it to happen (p. 212).” Linda Dillow and Lorraine Pintus in *Intimate Issues*

This is not “settling” for a marital reality that is second-best out of logistical necessity. Consider the level of affection and romance involved in a couple actively engaging the following questions.

- When do my spouse and I have the most energy and focus to enjoy each other sexually?
- What stressors do we need to manage most faithfully to protect our sexual interest and vitality?
- What lifestyle habits are most important to each of us feeling like a sexy, desirable person?

Later we will discuss the importance of spontaneity and creativity for a thriving marital sex life, but establishing a lifestyle that can sustain a healthy sex life is the first step. Consider this parallel. It is good to ask, “How can we still allow for freedom to make spontaneous purchases if we have a budget?” But if you do not first create a budget, this question will prevent you from having a life where spontaneous purchases are a blessing instead of a means to financial bondage.

“The truth is that if you don’t plan sex into your schedules and take advantage of optimal times, you will never make love with any frequency (p. 20)!” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

Here are several pointers that are important for couples wanting to make sex a priority:

- Have realistic expectations for what you can accomplish in your 168 hour week and with your monthly income.
- Protect time together; not just date nights but at least two evenings a week when you’re “just at home.”
- Examine the rhythm of your week and month to determine when the “optimal times” for intimacy are.
- Be willing to say “no” to other people in your life in order to say “yes” to your spouse.
- If you have children, enforce a bed time that allows you to have marriage time in the evening.

“Sex makes little kids and kids make little sex (p. 69).” Linda Dillow and Lorraine Pintus in *Intimate Issues*

These may not sound profound or novel; hopefully they don’t. But they are a vital foundation to a healthy marital sex life. We can and will add icing to the cake later (sprinkles and candles too if you like), but first we need to bake a good cake; otherwise the decorations will collapse and each bite will be less enjoyable because of inferior cake.

“I remember one of my country clients who I could tell was not very impressed with my counseling. After his first session, he looked at me and slowly drawled, ‘Dr. Rosenau, you had told me nothing my mama didn’t tell me.’ And I quickly replied, ‘And if you are doing everything your mama told you, you probably wouldn’t be here.’ (p. 237-238).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

Sex Requires an Environment

Contrary to the euphoria of how really good sex makes us feel, we do not make love in mid-air. Sex happens in a location; in an environment. We’ll examine three environments that are important to consider for cultivating a healthy sex life: (1) physical environment, (2) emotional environment, and (3) relational environment.

First, a couple should consider the physical environment in which they make love. What follows is not a prescription, but a list of things that are important to many people; things you should discuss with your spouse to learn how important they are to him/her and consider as you cultivate your expectations and fantasies about marital sex.

- Privacy – An important part of energetic sex is being comfortable being naked. The fear of being seen by someone else or walked in upon by children can be a strong inhibitor to playful sex. Knowing and honoring how important this is to your spouse is essential to being a good lover.
- Cleanliness – Sex is messy; body fluids are involved. Having a washcloth available to account for this is important to be able to not rush the afterglow part of sex. Our bodies are not always “fresh;” we get stale (or worse) throughout the day. Being clean, smelling good, and non-bristly on the face or legs can be an important part of removing environmental distractions from enjoying each other.
- Comfort – Sex requires bodies to move on their knees, backs, stomachs, and sides. If the environment is not right this can make the movements of sex painful or difficult. Freedom from thinking about these kinds of things is important for the desired release and euphoria of sex. Make sure your love-making environment sets you up to succeed in this way.
- Ambiance – This is where you can be creative as you continue to learn and romance your spouse. What is arousing for your spouse? Candles. Scents. Clothing. Location. How many things are you aware of that would make a particular sexual encounter “more special” for your spouse? Most of your answers will probably take five minutes or less.

Second, a couple should consider the emotional environment in which they make love. We do not engage a highly personal and emotional activity like sex in an exclusively physical environment. It is not just our bodies that are uniting as we become “one flesh” but also our souls. Sex that does not consider its emotional environment assumes people are not different from animals and sex is just for reproduction or personal fulfillment.

- Conflict – Romance and conflict are two sides of the same coin; both reveal what is most important to us. For more on this, visit bradhambrick.com/romanticconflict. A couple that can maturely discuss when their “most important things” are in conflict, is greatly aiding (not just protecting) their sex life. A couple that gives into immaturity in these moments is sabotaging their sex life.

“More often, however, the female counterpart to grabbing is needing control. Making love with clothes on can be hampered by always wanting exactly the right time and place (p. 127).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

“You see, what we expressed towards our wives and how we behave towards our wives in the days and hours before we make love is actually far more important than what we do when the clothes come off (p. 58).” C. J. Mahaney in *Sex, Romance, and the Glory of God*

- Areas of Neglect – Unkept promises and unfulfilled responsibilities contribute to the sense that sex is merely recreation instead of a celebration. We celebrate hard work towards an outcome that was mutually invested in (i.e., 10 year anniversary). When this mutual hard work is absent or unreliable, then sex becomes about merely the sensations instead of the relationship. The more committed or dependable spouse begins to feel used.
- Insecurities – The person who should know you better than anyone else is your spouse; this knowing includes both your strengths and weaknesses. This is what is great and awkward about marital sex – the person loving you, knows you. Whether the two of you openly discuss your insecurities, encourage one another, and put these areas into perspective for each other will go a long ways towards determining the quality of your sex life. These conversations are not always thought of as “romantic” but they are vital to romance.

“Arousal is dependent on feeling safe and inviting vulnerability (p. 71).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

- Personal Challenges – Couples should be intimate when life is going well and when life is hard. There will be seasons when couples abstain from sex to pray for a hard season (1 Corinthians 7:5) or because of physical injury. But a couple needs to learn how to effectively care for another emotionally during hard times. This protects the emotional climate of the marriage during these seasons and allows sex to carry the connotation of comfort and support as much as passion and romance.

Third, a couple should consider the relational environment in which they make love. Having sex without considering the relational environment is like doing the standing long jump in the Olympics. You can do it, but you're not going to get as far as you would if you take a running start. The momentum of how you pursue each other in daily life should be the momentum that launches your sex life.

“People are not born romantic. Romance is a combination of skills and attitudes that are learned (p. 153).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

- **Regular Times of Closeness** – The neurotransmitter most closely associated with trust and bonding—oxytocin—is triggered in large part by skin-to-skin contact. Holding hands, cuddling, massaging, and other forms of closeness are not just “nice things to do;” they are intensely bonding. A couple who relies exclusively on service, conversation, and sex for this bonding are practicing bad biology and may, therefore, be disappointed in their chemistry (for more see bradhambrick.com/oxytocin).
- **Date Nights** – Season of life and finances will influence how frequently a couple “goes on a date,” but a couple should always date one another regularly—setting aside blocks of time devoted to reconnecting and romancing one another. This is why Appendix A in every *Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage* seminar has ideas for implementing that seminar’s content on a date. Here are a few key qualities of a healthy date life:
 - Both spouses prioritize and protect these times on their schedule.
 - Frequent enough neither spouse wonders “When will our next date be?”
 - Balanced in who plans the date and whose preferences are the focal point of each date.
 - Not a burden to the family budget; don’t stress yourselves with something intended to be romantic.
 - Focused on each other more than the activity or event; talk more than you eat, watch, or do.
 - Cover your city with pleasant memories of your marriage to encourage as you do anything else.
- **Romantic Surprises** – The day is absolutely full of opportunities to romance your spouse. If you do not see these opportunities, it can only be because you’re not looking. Your spouse’s phone should be full of affirming text messages he/she can review whenever encouragement is needed. Written notes, screen saver messages, wearing a favorite outfit, smiling for no reason, getting the paper, or anything else that would be “special” to your spouse can be a romantic surprise. Creating and protecting this kind of culture is another overlooked powerful “technique” to enriching a couple’s sex life.
- **Enrichment Trips** – This might be a vacation or an overnight stay at a Bed & Breakfast, but the title “enrichment trip” is selected to help you remember the purpose of getting away. A simple, short trip where a couple connects is better for the marriage than a long, elaborate trip where a couple is merely entertained. When a couple focuses on connecting it helps them enjoy these trips even when finances are tight, and not get distracted from the main point when/if time and finances are more plentiful.

Sex Should Involve Anticipation

“Getting there is half the fun” may or may not represent your experience with family vacations, but it should represent your mindset towards sex. Remember where we are in the process; we haven’t even taken our shoes off yet, much less anything else. Chances are you and your spouse will not even be in the same room, maybe building, as you implement the “technique” of anticipation.

Anticipation is a technique you should use as a double-edge sword: preparing of yourself and flirting with your spouse. Sex without forethought tends to be poor quality sex. Too often couples expect physical stimulation (aggravated nerve endings) to produce what can only be achieved through healthy imagination (sensual thoughts of your spouse mixed with things you admire-appreciate about them). When you put imagination together with stimulation that is when you get something special.

First, anticipation should be a tool you use to enhance your own sexual experience. It is not selfish to enjoy sex. It is only selfish if pursuing your pleasure decreases your spouse’s pleasure. However, in a healthy marriage, your enthusiastic participation in sex and overt expressions of enjoyment will be affirming and stimulating for your spouse. This can begin before the first kiss and, if it does, will add to the electricity of every kiss thereafter.

“An active fantasy life can be wonderful for building a great sex life with our mate and companion. I wonder why it is that often when I mentioned fantasy people think I'm encouraging something very kinky or lustful... Use mental imagery in your imagination to enhance many areas of your life. You pray and build a meaningful concept of God by utilizing your mind and imagination and by letting the Holy Spirit direct your mind... You become a wise steward of your time in relationships by building on positive experiences and mistakes, and you use the mines repository of information to achieve this... Sex is not excluded from these other processes (p. 73).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

- Start by asking yourself the question, “What would put me in the best physical and emotional place to enjoy sex?” The suggestions below are merely brainstorming efforts to spark your creativity for this question.
- Make decisions about your schedule (i.e., taking nap if possible or moving a stressful task) that allows you to have more physical energy on a day when you anticipate being intimate.
- Give your spouse a clear hint of your intentions for them later and allow yourself to be flattered by their anticipation of you throughout the day.
- Wear something that makes you feel sensual throughout the day. It doesn't have to be visible to anyone else, but you know and that's the point.
- Replay compliments you've received from your spouse or reread letters / texts from your spouse that express their love and appreciation for you. Use this to combat any insecurities that might otherwise inhibit your anticipation of a wonderful encounter with your spouse.

“Think of how difficult it is to sexually focus on your mate when you are embarrassed, inhibited, or self-conscious (p. 13).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

- Overall, learn to enjoy (i.e., be stimulated by) the ability God has exclusively given to you to bless your spouse through the physical-emotional-visual experience of your romance and sensuality.

Second, anticipation should also be a tool you use to enhance the sexual experience of your spouse. It is not conceited to revel in and capitalize upon your spouse's desire for you. Because the portrayals of enticement in our media are almost exclusively extra-marital, these actions can be viewed negatively by many Christians. But all sin distorts something godly; that is true of the “good” of building your spouse's sexual anticipation.

- Start by remembering that sex is not just about physical stimulation; it is about feeling wanted. The ideas below are merely suggestions for how to add this sense of being wanted to the previews of a sexual encounter.
- Ask your spouse, “What are the best ways for me to leave you ‘simmering’ all day so that when we make love you experience all the fireworks I want for you?” This question alone builds anticipation.
- Initiate a conversation about your favorite sexual experiences as a married couple. You review every other area of your marital history, why not this one? You might stage a re-enactment, laugh at some mishaps, get ideas to be creative with later, or just be encouraged that you have a good sex life.
- If you have a day when you normally have sex, then say something like “I know it's only Tuesday, but I'm looking forward to Wednesday already.” This prevents regular from becoming routine.
- If you know there is something that makes sex exciting for your spouse (i.e., articles of clothing, cologne or perfume, location in the house, etc...) invite your spouse to pick that out at the beginning of the day; know they won't be able to get it off their mind all day.
- Flirt with each other in a crowd (i.e., discreet but suggestive wink or whispered invitation for later) when both of you are powerless to act on the offer. The “unfairness” of the rest of the errand or party will generate anticipation with will make “later” more enthusiastic.

Sex Calls for Us to Focus

Take a moment to consider your favorite hobbies. Are any of them as much fun when you're distracted? No. Unless your hobby is multi-tasking we want to be able to focus on the things we enjoy. The same is true for sex. The question becomes, “How do I give my full attention to sex when my spouse and I are being intimate but life won't stop so we can play?”

“Being truly present is a marvelous but difficult exercise and intimacy. Tuning out the rest of our life (especially children and job) and focusing in on the ‘now’ with our mind, heart, and body are such valuable aspects of lovers becoming erotic and intimate (p. 183).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

- The previous points on anticipation can help. When you’ve been looking forward to something it is easier to focus on that activity when the time comes.
- Understanding that God’s grace gives you the moral freedom to interrupt “being productive” to “play” with your spouse can be important for many task-driven spouses.
- Manage your schedule and finances well so that you do not live in crisis.
- Do not keep work-related tools (i.e., computer, smart phone, etc…) in your bedroom.
- Consistently make eye contact with your spouse during foreplay and intercourse. This helps with focus, but is also romantic as you connect with your partner.
- Take time to talk, cuddle, and affirm one another afterwards so that sex does not feel like a task being completed so you can move on to the next thing.

Sex Includes Non-Touch Bonding

Don’t read this material as a long to-do list before sex. Most everything being discussed should either already be happening or could easily be incorporated into day-to-day life. We’re not talking about how to “add” more romantic activities into your already busy life; we’re showing you how to incorporate romance into the life you’re already living.

In this section we will begin to follow an outline from Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex* where he traces the steps of sensual bonding through twelve stages. The outline (bold text) comes from Dr. Rosenau but the description and applications provided are unique to this material.

Neglecting this process generates a ho-hum sex life in many marriages. The convenience of sex in marriage (i.e., we just go up to the bedroom) often results in skipping to stage nine. The result is couples who say, “We just don’t have the ‘spark’ we used to have.” The reason is they shortened the fuse on their sex life to the point that there wasn’t much to burn. Use these twelve stages to recapture or hold on to the things that created romance in your courtship.

1. **Eye to Body:** Don’t stop noticing one another. Allow your spouse to catch you checking them out. Recall compliments from your spouse about each outfit as you dress and your body as you undress. Discipline your mind so that your spouse’s body is your standard of attractiveness. Meditate (appreciatively replay) on their appearance. Allow your definition of attractive to mature as your spouse matures. Associate all the blessings from your marriage with the person God has given you and use that to continually energize your attraction.
2. **Eye to Eye:** Don’t waste a date night without taking time to look in each other’s eyes. Eye contact sends a message of belonging, mutuality, enjoyment, and freedom from shame. A large percentage of our non-verbal communication is contained in the eyes; if you want to really know someone you will pay attention to their eyes. Allowing someone to look in your eyes communicates acceptance, trust, interest, and openness to continued relationship. Capitalize on these experiences and messages to galvanize your romance.

Let’s pause for another guessing game. What are the three sexiest things you can wear? These are universal answers regardless of your gender, body type, or your spouse’s attractiveness preferences (give your best guess before you look at the answers below).

These answers do not have to be tied to times of foreplay or seducing your spouse (although they work then too). They can be worn in public without concern for being immodest. As you wear these your spouse will be drawn to your entire person; not just your body.

- a. **Smile** – Mutual enjoyment is bonding; people who smile together grow closer. A smile does more than losing 10 pounds, a new wardrobe, or makeup ever could. During a day-to-day event a smile provides a positive atmosphere to life. During foreplay and intimacy a smile creates an atmosphere where your spouse is encouraged to continue to play and allow their excitement to build.
- b. **Eye Contact** – Everything about said eye contact above remains true but during foreplay and intimacy the impact of eye contact grows. Eye contact ensures that sex is about the person more than the activity. You may close your eyes and lose yourself in the enjoyment of sex, but also take time to build your spouse’s excitement by watching the enjoyment in their eyes with a smile.

- c. **Confidence** – This is the basis for the first two points. “Trying” to be sexy usually flops even if your spouse would otherwise enjoy what you’re doing or wearing. The unconditional love of a gospel-centered marriage should allow you to fully commit to whatever you do to tease or flirt with your spouse. Sometimes it will be the silliness of trying that is most endearing. Other times it will be the power of your confidence combined with the force of your desire that excites your spouse. Regardless, over the course of a lifetime together, the freedom to be confident (in day-to-day life and foreplay) should be a mark of a gospel-centered marriage.
3. **Voice to Voice:** Like Pavlov’s dogs salivated at the sound of a bell, your voice should generate a sense of peace and security in your spouse. Safety is the first part of arousal. Security is romantic. Uncertainty and insecurity are the leading causes of psychological impotence. No spouse will be perfect in their communication; but it is vital to romance that our spouse hears more compliments than criticisms and more cooperation than argument from our voice. This is essential for the freedom to “give yourself away” in the manner mutually satisfying sex requires.

Stop and ask yourself this question, “To this point I have not been instructed to touch my spouse in any way that would be considered sensual and I have not learned anything that could be considered a ‘sex technique,’ but if we applied what we learned how much would our sex life improve?”

Are you surprised by your answer? Are you excited to see how much room there is for mutual gratification once we begin to move into the areas of intimacy that involve touch and erogenous stimulation? Assuming you’re responding “yes... yes,” let me encourage you not to forget these foundational points about sex. Nothing you’re about to learn is more important than what you’ve already learned.

Sex Moves on to Mild Touch Bonding

We are now beginning our descent into to more sensual forms of romantic engagement. In becoming an excellent lover, it is helpful to understand the three levels of erogenous zones that exist on the human body.

- **Level III – The Entire Body:** Our bodies are covered with skin which has nerve endings that can be used to produce arousal when lovingly touched by a person we trust.
- **Level II – Traditional Foreplay Regions:** These include inner thigh, breast, abdomen, small of the back, neck, face, and mouth. These are areas for spouses to explore and stimulate as they seek to bring their partner to an optimal level of anticipation before beginning with intercourse.
- **Level I – Genitals and Nipples:** Stimulating these areas too early in the buildup of arousal will impede the intensity and duration of pleasure possible during intercourse. Instead, a mature lover will build a momentum of desire before beginning the touches that will culminate their sexual encounter.

In the remainder of this chapter we will discuss the use of Level III touch and some Level II touch. In chapter five we will complete instruction on Level II touch and also address Level I touching. But now we will examine stages four through eight of Rosenau’s pair bonding model.

4. **Hand to Hand:** Take a moment to remember the excitement of the first time you and your now spouse held hands. Holding hands is a public way to acknowledge belonging and gives a sense of security about the relationship. These messages are still needed in marriage; they are not merely courtship-moments (e.g., exchanging phone numbers or driving to pick up your girlfriend for a date).

Much of the Christian life is not learning new things about God and gospel (although hopefully we are always learning) as much as it is learning to appreciate and savor the first things. Similarly, much of what makes married life special is not the new things you can do (e.g., sex, which may not be “new” after a few years), but learning to appreciate and savor the first things that were bonding. This is true of every lasting relationship.

5. **Arm to Shoulder:** Remember the honor you felt the first time you were the first person from whom your now spouse requested comfort from you in a hard time. You felt “promoted to special” more than “demoted to servant.” As these interactions become common it is easy for them to lose their significance; maybe even begin to be viewed as a burden.

Realize these actions are part of the bonding process. They are what allow sex to culminate an experience of being “full known and fully loved” instead of being merely a physical rush generated by friction between two body regions bombarded with nerve endings. A mature lover sees the privilege of these touches (real or symbolic) as a high honor of sharing one’s life which heightens the meaning, and thereby pleasure, of being one flesh.

6. **Arm to Waist:** This action reveals another level of closeness. Friends give side hugs or hug at the shoulders. The freedom to hug and touch your spouse around the waste should never be taken for granted romantically. The more we minimize the significance of “lesser touches” the more we will expect from “more intimate touching.” Yet we quickly realize that without romantic momentum these erogenous touches lose much of their stimulatory power.

Daily take time to hold your spouse around the waste and look in his/her eyes. Even fifteen to thirty seconds of genuinely engaging and savoring this posture can significantly enhance the romantic culture of your marriage. If you will smile, make eye contact, and a kiss with a gentle caress of your spouse’s face for only 60 seconds a day, you will experience some major romantic climate change in your home.

7. **Mouth to Mouth:** If a couple only kisses in the seven minutes before sex, they are in trouble. A couple should do more romance-kissing than foreplay-kissing. Again, this is vital to keeping the emphasis of sex on celebrating relationship more than merely stimulating a body. Enjoying a passionate kiss for its own sake communicates, “I enjoy you more than the pleasure you can bring me.”

When a married couple “can have sex” foreplay-related activity often becomes compartmentalized to times when “we can do something about it.” That is a romantic travesty. It requires a mature lover to delight in the enjoyment of a kiss and allow that delight simply be an affirmation of the joy you take in each other.

- Make it a point to exchange a hug and/or kiss each time you part from your spouse.
- Have variety in the duration of your non-foreplay kissing with at least one passionate kiss per day.
- Have variety in the location of your non-foreplay kissing – lips, cheek, neck, shoulders, etc...
- Allow your delight in your spouse’s kiss to be known with sounds of appreciation.
- Accompany a kiss with a verbal affirmation of your spouse and eye contact that communicates delight.

8. **Hand to Head:** Not many people get to touch your face. It is a sign of great closeness when someone reaches towards your face and your instinct is to move closer instead of pull back. Even when we are deeply grieved only our closest friends would be allowed to wipe away our tears (Rev. 21:4). Even when we are looking down in intense embarrassment or shame very few people would be allowed to lift our chin (Psalm 3:3).

Hand-to-head contact may be the most neglected intimacy in marriage literature. It is not as relaxing as massage. It is not as obvious as kissing. It is not as arousing as intercourse. But it has a unique intimacy that should not be neglected. When we allow someone to touch our face we communicate, “I have no space in which you are not welcome, even when I am sad or ashamed.”

For this reason, gently touching the face of your spouse as you look into his/her eyes just before foreplay transitions to intercourse can add to the bonding nature of the pleasure you’re about to experience. That is the purpose of everything that is said in the chapter and the next – to heighten the God-intended bonding effect of sex by accentuating every aspect of the spouse and marriage you are celebrating in sex.

Conclusion

Read the Song of Solomon. Too often we read the Bible only to find what we already know. That is one of the reasons we avoid books like the Song of Solomon. It doesn’t resonate with what we expect to find when we read the Bible. We are not used to the Bible being sexually explicit.

“The role of the woman throughout the Song of Solomon is truly astounding, especially in light of its ancient origins. It is the woman, not the man, who is the dominant voice throughout the poems that make up the Song. She is the one who seeks, pursues, initiates. In Song 5:10-16 she boldly exclaims her physical attraction [‘His abdomen is like a polished ivory tusk, decorated with sapphires...’ (v. 14)]... Most English translations hesitate in this verse. The Hebrew is quite erotic, and most translators cannot bring themselves to bring out the obvious meaning (p. 254).” Dan Allender and Tremper Longman in *Intimate Allies*

In this case, I would like to invite you to read the entire book of the Song of Solomon (only eight chapters; about five pages) for two reasons:

1. To discover the biblical basis for the material in this chapter. This chapter has intentionally been highly descriptive and instructive with fewer biblical references than other portions of this seminar series. This approach was chosen because it is how Scripture approaches the subject (as you will read) and to help you see that romance is not a series of independent actions but a form of energy with flow and momentum.
2. To reinforce the idea that God does want Christians to think about these things. We want you to be confident that being sexy and thinking sensually is pure and holy within marriage. As you read the Song of Solomon make notes of where you see examples of each of the techniques and recommendations from the chapter. Allow this to assuage any concerns you have that this kind of interaction is worldly. Read this book of the Bible as God telling you, “This is the kind of marriage I want for you” (that was His purpose in inspiring this book to be written).

“Any couple can ‘have sex.’ But the kind of unashamed openness and joyful, expressive intimacy that we see in the Song of Solomon only happens when a husband and wife are united at a far deeper level (p. 26).” C. J. Mahaney in *Sex, Romance, and the Glory of God*

Portion of this Chapter	References in Song of Solomon	Ways You Want to Grow
Three Sexiest Parts of Our Body <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brain • Skin • Ears 		
Sex Begins with Priorities		
Sex Requires an Environment		
Sex Should Involve Anticipation		
Sex Calls for Focus		
Sex Includes Non-Touch Bonding <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eye to Body • Eye to Eye <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Smile, Eye Contact, Confidence • Voice to Voice 		
Sex Moves on to Mild Touch Bonding <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hand to Hand • Arm to Shoulder • Arm to Waist • Mouth to Mouth • Hand to Head 		

Chapter 5

Sex as One of God’s Gifts for Marriage (Part Two)

Learning to Skillfully and Unashamedly Enjoy Intercourse

Plumb Lines: These are the “sticky” statements that capture the core messages of this chapter.

- When you think of sex, think of serving.
- Marriage was not made for sex, but sex was made for marriage.
- Sex is not sin; neither is it salvation.
- Sex should be a gift you give each other not a tax you exact from one another.

Memorize: I Corinthians 7:3-5 (ESV), “The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.” As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- “Give” – If we are going to have a biblical view of sex, we must focus on giving more than getting pleasure.
- “Not have authority” – This clause in no way validates abuse; but highlights that spouses “belong to one another.”
- “Do not deprive” – Sex is a gift that only you can give your spouse. Your neglect in this area would be absolute.
- “Limited time” – The Bible does not speak to how often a couple should have sex beyond this – frequently.
- “Tempt you” – The temptations that exist because of neglecting sex are greater in number than “just lust.”

Teaching Notes

“If you feel confused when it comes to sex, you are not alone (p. 3)... A woman responds to accumulated touches in many parts of her body until she reaches the desire to be ‘filled up’ while a man quickly responds to direct touch of his genitals and feels a need to ‘empty out’ (p. 37).” Linda Dillow and Lorraine Pintus in *Intimate Issues*

“Sex in marriage is best compared to a thermometer, not a thermostat. It is the physical expression of what is true of a couple on the emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual levels. It is not a thermostat that, if turned up, will warm up your relationship (p. 218).” Dennis Rainey (editor) in *Preparing for Marriage*

“If you want powerful techniques and easy answers, you may be disappointed in this book. God’s plans often involve time, effort, and difficult changes... You’ll discover that sex is more about an exciting process and way of life than it is a simple acquisition of techniques. In God’s design, sexual fulfillment and intimate marriage can never be separated (p. ix).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

“Study your mate’s responses to know what is most enjoyable. No book can give you that information. Women, even more than men, vary about what feels good—even the strokes and rhythms that are most pleasurable. Be a lifelong student of your partner’s body and reactions (p. 15).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

“Too many couples are guilty of sabotaging their erogenous zones and sexual enjoyment with ignorance, anxiety, and sheer effort. Intimate marital companions have usually never developed their sexual awareness to include even half of the erogenous zones on their bodies, and they often short-circuit their sexual reflexes (p. 24).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

“Orgasms are such beautiful metaphors of uninhibited worship and giving up control to Christ. You are allowing your bodies and souls to soar with surrender. Apexes cannot be reached without letting go, which is built on a series of individual choices. I will trust you; I will choose to feel; I will choose to give up control in front of and to my mate (p. 48).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

Embedded Study

If you do a good job applying chapter four and have a basic understanding of the fundamentals of intercourse, then you may be wondering, “Is there really anything else we need to know? Let us go and do our thing already.” Which brings up an important point, you can be so intentional that sex becomes mechanical and loses its passion.

There is still more to learn – things that can enhance your sexual experience and common obstacles to avoid – but do not fall into the pattern of thinking that you need a “Masters in Sexology” in order to enjoy a satisfying sex life.

Sex is not unlike tennis. You can enjoy the game whether or not you know all the fundamentals and strategies. Many people who have never had a tennis lesson enjoy the game more than the “professionals.” You can lose your love of the game in the effort to master the game.

But there are some basic principles and advanced strategies that those who excel at tennis share in common. Most of those who love the game of tennis over a long period of time either pick up on these or seek ways to learn them. Likewise, this material is intended to reinforce those things that you naturally do well and refine those areas where you are not getting the optimal, mutual enjoyment from your romantic efforts.

In this chapter, we will pick up where we left off last chapter. In the last chapter we did not get any more physically intimate than a passionate kiss and caressing your spouse’s cheek. Hopefully you now have a much greater appreciation for how much affection can be communicated and passion generated from romance available while your clothes are still on.

Now we will transition to the point where you communicate to each other that you would like this romance to “lead to something else.” For many couples this can be an awkward juncture. Initiating sex can be a point ripe for confusion (“I didn’t know that’s what you were asking”), crudeness (“I don’t like it when you talk about sex that way”), or rejection (“I know you’re [legitimate reason], but it hurts when you decline my initiation”). So we will discuss the challenges and opportunities around initiating sex.

Then we will look at how to understand, protect, and build upon the phases of arousal in intercourse. Arousal should build momentum. When you build upon it, the experience escalates into something increasingly wonderful. But when you break the momentum it can be hard to regain it. The better we understand the physical and emotional processes that contribute to arousal’s momentum the more consistently (never perfectly) we will use it in our favor.

Finally, we will refocus ourselves on the real meaning of sex. The goal of marital sex is not to have the intensity and synchronization of your orgasms perpetually increase. Aging bodies won’t allow that. Pinnacle experiences never sustain a life-long relationship. Even in marriages with the most vibrant sex lives, sex comprises only 60 minutes of their week at most (three occurrences lasting 20 minutes each). It’s the other 167 hours that will define the relationship. Sex, at its best, only celebrates the other 167 hours. We will consider how to remind ourselves of this truth and of those facets of our relationship with God which sex was given to teach us.

Challenges and Opportunities of Initiating Sex

For many married couples initiating sex can be an awkward moment that leads to conflict or hurt feelings. They’re not sure what to say. They fear being rejected. They want sex to be “special” but most of the moments they’re both home together are “normal.” They don’t want to seem demanding. They want their spouse to “just know.” They don’t want to interrupt and their spouse is always doing something else. They’ve tried and been told their attempt was crude or unclear.

This may begin to sound overwhelming, but there are few simple points to keep in mind when initiating sex with your spouse. Taking a few minutes to talk through these with each other can prevent a great deal of awkwardness and hurt feelings over the course of your marriage.

- I. **Use Mutually Honoring Language or Actions** – Do not refer to sex with terminology that is offensive to your spouse. That is a turn-off at the moment you’re striving for a turn-on. Do not grab or grope your spouse in ways that are unappealing to him/her. That makes your touch a threat at a time when you want it to be welcomed.

As a couple, discuss the kind of language that is comfortable and appealing to use when initiating sex. How many ways would the two of you complete the invitation, “Do you want to... have sex... have a date... make a rendezvous... dance... enjoy one another?” If you don’t like these phrases, that’s fine. Their purpose is to break the ice and help you come up with your own (variety is good, as long as it’s mutually agreeable and understood).

2. **Be Clear** – A lack of clarity in your request is a great way to make initiating sex an uncomfortable experience. Generic questions like, “Are you doing anything right now?” when you’re interested in sex are bad. If you’re spouse says “yes” (which will be most of the time) you’ll hear him/her say “no” to sex and feel rejected. When they finally realize you’re pouting and you finally explain why, an extended time of hurt feelings will have passed; making initiating sex feel like an “emotionally dangerous” thing to do.

One of the benefits of having agreed upon language to initiate sex is that it adds to the clarity of an attempt to initiate. Ambiguous requests are a form of game-playing that expects your spouse to read your mind. They are unfair and are easily avoided with a few minutes of intentional conversation.

3. **Invite Don’t Demand** – Questions honor; expectations dishonor. “Are you interested in...?” or “Would you like to...?” are much better introductions initiating sex than “Let’s...” or “It’s time to...” Consider the fact that even when God offered you all the pleasures of Heaven, He still invited you to accept it (John 3:16) instead of forcing the invitation upon you (Mark 10:22).

However, if you know your spouse is interested in sex, then a more assertive initiation can be a way to show your enthusiasm. This playfulness rooted in an awareness of your spouse’s desire for you reveals a level of sexual maturity; knowing each other and resting in each other’s acceptance should result in occasions for this kind of confident seduction of one another.

4. **Have Realistic Expectations** – Don’t let your sexual imagination ignore the realities of your spouse’s life and skillset. Initiating when you know your spouse is exhausted is rarely a loving thing to do. Expecting an eloquent initiation from a “spouse of few words” is unrealistic. While both of you should be willing to sacrifice and stretch yourselves to please the other, love does not make untimely or against-another’s-nature requests.

A responsibility that each of you share is to manage your life so that you are regularly available to your spouse. A blessing each of you should want to provide to your spouse is the willingness to grow in areas that are important to your spouse, but unnatural to you. But these things should be a gift you give each other, not a tax you exact from one another.

5. **Be Balanced as a Couple** – Both husband and wife should regularly initiate sex. The ratio does not have to be precisely 50-50, but it also shouldn’t be 80-20. Both initiating sex and responding affirmatively to the initiation of the other are unique ways to love each other. You each should be able to bless the other with both responses: pursuing and responding. This maintains a balance in confidence and voice for both of you.

Consider this parallel to initiating sex; worship is the balanced experience of love drawing us towards God and the awe-struck suspense of being allowed into His presence. Both experiences are needed for worship to occur. The more both are present the more intense our worship. Initiating sex carries both of these dynamics; we are drawn by love towards our spouse, yet there is the suspense (e.g., anticipation) of requesting an intimate encounter. The more both are present, the more enjoyable our sexual encounter will be.

“Many Christian women believe that sex is a gift from God, but even so, they can’t give themselves permission to revel in the sensual pleasures of married love. Why? Because in their minds, the words *godly* and *sensuous* do not go together. Their definition of a godly woman does not include words like *sexual* or *sensuous*, and so in their quest to become godly women, they have denied their sensuousness (p. 13).” Linda Dillow and Lorraine Pintus in *Intimate Issues*

However, this begs a second question about initiating sex, “How do we respond if our spouse declines our invitation? How would we lovingly decline our spouse’s invitation? How do we protect these moments from becoming part of a negative cycle in our marriage? If my body belongs to my spouse (1 Cor. 7:3-5), is it ever permissible for me to decline my spouse’s invitation to sex?”

“Please don’t use God’s loving guidelines as weapons against each other. Some husbands and wives club their mates with this passage and say things like, ‘If you don’t have sex with me tonight, you are sinning.’ The real sin is theirs because they usually have never taken the time, loving kindness, and energy to make changes needed to appeal to their mates romantically... Remember, making love is about giving—not demanding... On the other hand, are you too fatigued or busy or inhibited to have sexual relations regularly? You two are missing God’s plan for marriage and the enjoyment of one of His avenues for increasing intimacy (p. 5).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

Here are some suggested guidelines for these questions. Resist the urge to consider them “rules.” Instead view them as a conversation starter. As you read through them, discuss with your spouse, “What would this principle sound like in conversation for us?” and “How has / would neglecting this principle negatively affected our marriage?”

- **Only decline for important reasons.** The perfect moment doesn’t occur very often; at least not often enough for a satisfying sex life in most marriages. There will be times when you are too tired or have an intense headache, but most often the disruption of declining your spouse’s initiation (e.g., hurt feeling, second guessing yourself, conflict) will be greater than the effort required to engage an enjoyable sexual encounter with your spouse.
- **Resist interpreting a decline as rejection.** For some reason we are prone to think “no” means “never” when it comes to sex; we hear “I don’t like you” in “Not tonight.” Part of this is understandable; whenever we are disappointed about an anticipated pleasure it is hard to be objective. But when we do this, we are unfair with our spouse’s intent. We also undermine the future enjoyment of sex by creating conflict over an activity (i.e., sex) that is dependent upon closeness and vulnerability for its enjoyment.
- **Pair a decline with an affirmation.** “Honey, I love you and want to be with you, but I wouldn’t be able to participate as fully as we both would like if we tried right now.” This kind of reply has both a direct affirmation (e.g., “I love you and want to be with you”) and an indirect affirmation (e.g., “I want to fully participate”). Even though we are not at our physical or mental best when we would decline, we do not want to be lazy in these conversations by neglecting to pair an affirmation with our words.
- **Pair a decline with another time.** “That sounds wonderful, but if you give me 30 minutes I will be much more engaged.” Or, “I would really like to, but what if we got up 30 minutes early in the morning so we’re both rested.” Or, “I like the idea, but the kids are at a friend’s house tomorrow and we could be a bit more expressive with our love in an empty house.” Offering an affirmation and alternative time helps your spouse resist the temptation to interpret your decline as rejection.
- **If you are declining frequently, initiate frequently.** If you find that you are frequently declining sex because of how you feel (fatigue or health), become the spouse who initiates sex more often. Find the times that are optimal for you and pursue your spouse. This shows your spouse that you are interested in sex and helps to create a rhythm for intimacy that is more conducive to the rhythm of your shared lives.

“The only sexual life a Christian spouse can legitimately enjoy is the romantic life a spouse chooses to provide. This makes manipulation and rejection ever-present spectators in the marital bed. Anything denied physically becomes an absolute denial, because there is no other legitimate outlet (p. 194).” Gary Thomas in *Sacred Marriage*

The reason that declining an invitation to sex becomes such a difficult issue in marriage is not because the action itself is so rare, dangerous, or wrong. Rather, this is one of the moments when couples are most prone to play dishonest games with one another; using the activity of sex to indirectly communicate about or avoid other issues. If a couple can identify and avoid these games, their ability to discuss when is and isn’t a good time for sex will greatly improve.

1. **Sulking or Pouting:** These actions are the passive-aggressive alternative to yelling and screaming. Sulking uses guilt like anger uses fear to coerce a desired behavior or discourage an undesired behavior. Either way, healthy and constructive conversation is being replaced by forms of punishment. A couple must be mature enough to discuss their disappointments if they are going to have a satisfying sex life.
2. **Using Sex for Control:** Sex is not a reward to be given when life goes “your way.” This mindset reduces sex to a tool rather than elevating it as a celebration of your marriage covenant. Often a couple who falls into this trap does so because one or both of them are prone to game #3 (see below). When sex becomes a “power chip” used to barter the differences in your individual preferences, then it becomes a source of division instead of unity.
3. **Using Sex to Avoid Confrontation:** This game comes in two varieties: (a) using sex to signify “everything is okay” even when an issue has not been resolved, and (b) withholding sex to communicate that something is wrong instead of verbalizing the concern. Regardless of that tactic, in this game sex is not about sex. The more we allow sex to be about something other than celebrating our covenant love, the more damage we do to this unique marital blessing from God.
4. **Settling for Mediocrity:** As you should be learning in this material, a great sex life is not about body types, the ability to contort your body into awkward gymnastic positions, or ever-increasing adventurous escapades. But we

should not become lazy in our attention to our sex life by allowing it to become a routine chore conducted in the same manner, at the same time, with no thought each week. When we neglect to mature this way, then “important” and “special” things tend to become the things we do outside the home. This is one thing that leads to spouses feeling like roommates. Intentionality and creativity in the one thing you only get to do with your spouse is an important part of keeping home as its appropriate priority.

5. **Faking Orgasm:** Orgasm is not the end-all-be-all of sex. It can be difficult to experience for many women and many men as they age. We must realize that dishonesty and a lack of genuineness kill everything they touch. So the main problem with faking is not the lack of orgasm, but the lack of honesty. The lack of honesty inhibits the communication and emotional freedom which would make orgasm possible. More will be said about orgasm later in the chapter.

“According to a 1994 sex in America survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, nearly 1/4 of American women never achieve orgasm and another half only climax occasionally. This means almost three-quarters, or more than 50 million of us, go without orgasm either some or all of the time (p. 188)... The world sees orgasm—and the physical release that accompanies it—as the goal of love making. But God sees the goal of love making as something much more grand. Love making is not just a series of ecstatic sensations, but truly loving one another (p. 189).” Linda Dillow and Lorraine Pintus in *Intimate Issues*

6. **Failing to Share Feelings:** Sex is the ultimate form of vulnerability and being known. Trying to have great sex while withholding emotional vulnerability is like trying to surf while being unwilling to step into the ocean. You will only feel the thrill of the wave if you are willing to risk the pull of the tide. Often the spouse who is unwilling to share their feelings either becomes disappointed that sex does not live up to “all the hype,” expects adventurous activity to replace emotional vulnerability in generating excitement, or begins to think that they are “sexually incompatible” with their spouse.

“Our view of sex becomes detached from relationship and intimacy. Sex in porn is just a physical activity, nothing more. But real sex, sex as God intended, is the celebration and climax—quite literally—of a relationship. Godly sex is part of a package that includes talking together, sharing together, deciding together, crying together, working together, laughing together and forgiving each other. Orgasm comes at the end of a process that began with offering a compliment, doing the chores, recalling your day, unburdening your heart, tidying the house. Sex that disregards this is hollow... If you view sex as personal gratification or a chance to enact your fantasy, if you have sex while disregarding intimacy or unresolved conflict, then that sex will be bad in both senses of the word: poor quality and ungodly (p. 18).” Tim Chester in *Closing the Window*

The Physical and Emotional Process of Arousal's Momentum

Now, let's get back to the fun parts of sex. To this point we have identified the challenges of romance (chapter one), become skilled non-sexual romancers (chapter two), rooted our romance in the gospel narrative (chapter three), learned how to creatively engage foreplay (chapter four), and gotten past the sometime awkward stage of initiating sex (so far in this chapter). Now we are rounding third base and headed for home!

In this section we will explore what is happening at the various stages of arousal (excitement, plateau, climax, and resolution) and what we can do at each of these stages to (1) enhance our spouse's experience, (2) enhance our own experience, and, thereby, (3) allow sex to bless our marriage as fully as God intended.

There are several models for how the process of arousal gains moments through intercourse, but one of the leading models is the four phase model of Masters and Johnson.

1. The Excitement Phase
2. The Plateau Phase
3. The Orgasm Phase
4. The Resolution Phase

We will use these four phases as the outline for this section. However, in the plateau phase, we will pause and examine the remaining four pair-bonding elements from Doug Rosenau which we began discussing in chapter four.

The Excitement Phase

Chapter four was all about keeping the excitement phase exciting. When marriage makes sex permissible and you get accustomed to seeing each other naked, developing excitement may require more intentionality than it did during courtship. That is not an indictment on the quality of the marriage, but reality that comes with availability and familiarity.

“One of the reasons we believe in our culture that sex should always and only be the result of great passion is that so many people today have learned how to have sex outside of marriage, and this is a very different experience than having sex inside it. Outside of marriage, sex is accompanied by a desire to impress or entice someone. It is something like the thrill of the hunt. When you are seeking to draw in someone you don’t know, it injects risk, uncertainty and pressure to the lovemaking that quickens the heartbeat and stirs the emotions... The fact is that ‘the thrill of the hunt’ is not the only kind of thrill or passion available, nor is it the best (p. 79).” Tim Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*

For some people, more frequently men, they try to reinvigorate excitement by adding risk, role playing, or adventure to intercourse. If both spouses are in agreement and moral lines are not crossed, these can be one form of maintaining excitement. However, if these are the primary means of maintaining excitement, it begins to treat sex like a drug – requiring a greater and greater stimulus in order to achieve the same “high.” This is why the approaches of chapter four are recommended as the primary way of cultivating the excitement phase of sex.

“She may never want to make love on an elevator or have oral sex on an airplane. Men can wreck a great sex life by obsessing on something we think is the ultimate in erotic adventure or the only symbol of real variety (p. 158).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

On this early phase, one more subject should be addressed. How much time should be given to the excitement and plateau phases of sex? Should sex always be an “elaborate production”? Are “quickies” sexual junk food or a healthy form of variety? Is it okay to sometimes have sex out of compassion for our spouse more than our personal passion?

In order to engage these questions, we will look at several “types of sex” in marriage. The list is not exhaustive or technical, so as the two of you discuss the list feel free to add to it and change the titles. The purpose of the list is not to help you study for a matching quiz, but to give you expanded vocabulary and concepts for communicating about sex.

- **Normal Sex** – This category does not make the list; not because it doesn’t exist, but because it’s a category with a strong tendency towards “ho-hum” sex. Routines tend to take the life out of things that are meant to be intimate. This is true when a couple inadvertently creates a sex ritual – take our clothes off, both get in bed, kiss, rotate, kiss, rotate, intercourse, done, and repeat twice per week. Here are some routine-breaking suggestions.
 - Don’t always begin sex by taking your own clothes off. Allow your spouse to do this as part of foreplay.
 - Don’t always begin sex by getting in bed. Allow foreplay to begin standing on another piece of furniture.
 - Don’t always have sex in the same room. You can go to the bedroom, but start almost anywhere.
 - Don’t always have sex at the same time of day. Morning and afternoon are as fun as evening.
- **Quickie Sex** – Duration is not the only, or often even the best, measure of quality. Finding a brief moment that is ripe for sex, making eye contact with a smile, and seizing it can be great fun. In some especially busy seasons of life a couple may show great care for one another (see nurturing sex below) by these quick encounters to stave off frustration or loneliness. However, if the “season” become extended, then a couple needs to re-examine their schedule and priorities.
- **Duty Sex** – This category also does not make the list, because it takes a gift and devolves it into a job. When “should” and “have to” become the verbal prefix to sex, then either a couple is turning play time into a responsibility or there is a larger problem that needs to be addressed; interpersonally through communication, relationally with a counselor, or physically with a physician.
- **Nurturing Sex** – The alternative to duty sex is nurturing sex. It is not an obligation to fulfill, but a way to care for your spouse even if, at that moment, sex is not personally desired by you. Nurturing sex can be engaged for

several reasons: greater desire for sex by one spouse, desire of one spouse to encourage the other when he/she is down or insecure, or when there is a desire for closeness more than pleasure.

- **Passion Sex** – While nurturing sex is engaged out of compassion, there should also be times when sex is engaged out of passion and overwhelming desire for your spouse. “I want you more than I want anything else in the world right now. I can’t think about anything else and don’t really want to.” If a couple practices the recommendations of chapter four, then both spouses should be able to affirm the other with times when their desire rises to this level.
- **Fun Sex** – There are also times when sex is just fun. If the choices are between watching a movie, engaging a hobby, going shopping, or sex, then sex should frequently win out simply because “it’s more fun.” The fact that sex should be seen as a celebration more than recreation doesn’t mean it’s bad to view it as satisfying recreation. Fun sex is a great way for a couple to remind themselves of the playfulness essential to a good sex life.
- **Celebration Sex** – Whether it’s birthday, anniversary, Valentine’s Day, or achieving a personal goal, sex is a great way to celebrate significant occasions and achievements. This is a gift only you can give and a celebration that only the two of you can share. It is fitting to celebrate special occasions in a way that is exclusive to the two of you.
- **Gourmet Sex** – Candles, fruit, music, bed and breakfast, full body massage with scented oils, etc... You don’t fix a meal like Thanksgiving dinner very often, but when you do there are usually two results: (1) you remember it and (2) you talk about it. There ought to be times that you put enough forethought into sex that it is memorable and that the two of you say “do you remember when” for years to come. Like everything else in life, sharing the memories is one of the sweetest parts of enjoying sex. Don’t rob your sex life of reminiscence.

The Plateau Phase

The “plateau phase” sounds about as exciting as “twelve step pair-bonding.” We’re going to talk about both in this section.

“The second phase, plateau, is a bit of a misnomer because instead of excitement leveling off, it builds. For many couples this phase, which tends to be more spouse centered, is often the longest and most enjoyable. The husband concentrates on pleasuring his wife, and she reciprocates. Back and forth they ignite the flames of passion in each other’s bodies (p. 190).” Linda Dillow and Lorraine Pintus in *Intimate Issues*

Read Acts 20:35. The words of Jesus in this passage are the best sex advice ever written. When you can take greater joy in your spouse’s arousal than you do your own, then you have the character to sustain a stellar sex life over a lifetime. It is not that your personal enjoyment is selfish, but the pleasure experienced by both of you is greater when both spouses strive for and are excited by the enjoyment of the other. This is what fuels creativity in sex instead of passivity; service instead of entitlement.

“I believe this particular part of I Corinthians 7 is an important practical resource. Each partner in marriage is to be most concerned not with getting sexual pleasure but with giving it. In short, the greatest sexual pleasure should be the pleasure of seeing your spouse getting pleasure. When you get to the place where giving arousal is the most arousing thing, you are practicing this principle (p. 233).” Tim Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*

“But looked at within the context of service, sex leads to the apex of spiritual maturity—being able to walk through something so powerful as the ultimate human pleasure and yet use it to serve rather than to demand, exploit, or abuse (p. 196).” Gary Thomas in *Sacred Marriage*

It is one thing to know what we should do. It is another thing to know how, in a variety of ways, to do it. The practical side of being a skilled, selfless lover is what we will discuss in this section.

There are two sides to the building passion that exists in sex. Both sides need to be understood and engaged in order for passion to build; otherwise passion will roll-and-stop or teeter, like a bowling ball cut in half.

- **Assertive Desire** – This is flirting, wooing, pursuing, teasing, kissing, touching, stimulating, and praising your spouse. Both spouses should engage in these assertive activities; with the assertive-receptive roles alternating even within the same sexual encounter.

- **Receptive Desire** – How you respond to your spouse’s assertive desires is profoundly important. A flat response kills the momentum. Smiling, squeezing, moaning, being amused, giving your full attention, verbalizing what you like, and asking for more are all ways to show that your spouse’s efforts are having their intended effect.

With these two responses in mind, let’s consider the final four pair-bonding phases. With each one discuss with your spouse both: (a) What would you enjoy? and (b) What would I enjoy? If both of you are going to have the opportunity to serve the other, then both questions are relevant for both of you.

9. **Hand to Body:** The couple is now exploring each other’s Level II erogenous zones (see chapter four). While this does not yet include genitals, these are parts of the body that others rarely (if ever) are allowed to see and not welcome to touch. So this touch is a special privilege to the assertive spouse and a unique pleasure to the receptive spouse.

This type of bonding can include sensuous massage. For couples wanting to learn more about how to give and enjoy this kind of massage, chapter nine in *The Celebration of Sex* by Doug Rosenau covers the subject well.

“Massage will help you as a couple feel more sensuous and close. By its very relaxing and nurturing nature, it will be an aphrodisiac to your sex life. Massage can’t help but teach you to be a more gentle and sensitive lover and bring you as one-flesh companions into a more bonded, caring, and stress-free relationship (p. 115).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

10. **Mouth to Breast:** This seems awkward to talk about in Christian material, but the Bible celebrates what can make many of us blush (Prov. 5:18-19). In order for a couple to enjoy this type of love-play there must be abandonment to each other and the moment. Otherwise, like in so many of its other expressions of love, intimacy may begin to feel silly. This transition of abandonment to the moment will also be important for the transition from the plateau phase to the orgasm stage of sex.

It is not just the wife who can enjoy kisses on the chest, abdomen, and back. To have your body explored and affirmed in this sensuous way is exciting for both genders. If you are the assertive lover in this action, allow for moments of eye contact to allow your spouse to see your excitement and know you love them, not just their body. If you are the receptive lover, bask in your spouse’s enjoyment of you; feel as attractive and desired as their actions reveal you to be.

11. **Hand to Genital:** Electric is the literal description of this moment. The most concentrated collection of nerve endings in the body is located in the male and female genitals. With this touch more neurons are firing in your brain than any other time.

A deep level of trust is signified by your spouse’s willingness to lay in relaxed-enjoyment while you fondle or stroke their genitals. The level of surrender to your spouse and to the moment is complete; though not yet climaxed.

For the mature lover, having the anticipation of intercourse prolonged by this flirting behavior of fondling or stroking the other’s genitalia can be very exciting. Realizing that the goal of sex is not merely orgasm, but the joyful celebration of marital love, both partners can allow the tension of this increasing arousal to elevate the celebration.

Because of the sensitivity of these regions, communication and tenderness is vital. One’s excitement at this phase could cause one to lose control, hurt their spouse, and disrupt the mood. But your excitement-under-control is another feature that should affirm and draw out trust from your spouse. This restraint says “I value your pleasure more than my own” like few other moments in life allow.

12. **Genital to Genital:** Now the couple comes together as one flesh, interlocking bodies in the most intimate possible way, through sex. This moment by itself fails to live up to the “hype” of our culture and the honor given to it by our God. But when enjoyed as the culmination of romantic and bonded marriage it is anything but anti-climactic.

In order for this phase to be mutually enjoyable it is important that the wife’s vagina be properly lubricated. If not, then sex can be unpleasurable or painful. Giving time for foreplay, oral stimulation by her husband, or lubrications products can ensure that the wife is prepared to receive and enjoy her husband. Certain medications, especially antihistamines, impede female lubrication; if being taken, extra care should be given.

Once intercourse begins a couple can still express creativity and variety through the depth and pace of thrusting, position, and ways that they continue to affirm one another during intercourse. The question is often asked, “How many different ways or positions are there to have sex?” For this information, we recommend chapter twelve of *The Celebration of Sex* by Doug Rosenau where he discusses the basic positions and pleasure advantages of each.

“There are actually only about eight basic types of positions because we are limited by anatomy and flexibility. After these eight basics, then there are variants like husband on top with toes crossed, or wife on top with eyes closed (p. 139; second sentence is for humor).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

As we wrap up the twelve phase pair-bonding material, remember the key to an enjoyable sex life is to enjoy all the phases of bonding. You will not take all twelve steps every time you’re intimate, but you should be intentionally enjoying and thinking creatively about how to bless your spouse with each form of bonding.

The Orgasm Phase

While orgasm is the physical culmination of sex and pleasure peak of sex, it would be inaccurate to say that orgasm is the reason we have sex. This is often misunderstood, but would be the equivalent of saying that we have the 4th of July to shoot fireworks. Fireworks are the celebration of something larger and more important; similarly, orgasm may be the fireworks of sex, but sex celebrates something more important than the sensation of orgasm.

“Creative intercourse is making love, not just building to an orgasm (p. 144).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

So the absence of an orgasm does not make sex “bad” any more than the absence of fireworks negates the 4th of July. If covenant love is celebrated, then it is good sex. However, if either the husband or wife struggles to experience orgasm on a regular basis, then it is advisable to work to remedy the situation.

1. Openly discuss the struggle without a sense of shame or failure. Open communication about sex is an important factor in being able to achieve orgasm. It is hard to release one’s self to this experience if the subject of sex is one that creates a sense of inhibition.

“The ability to tell her husband what feels good is directly linked to the likelihood of an orgasm. Women who are emotionally open have tremendous freedom to experience orgasm (p. 193).” Linda Dillow and Lorraine Pintus in *Intimate Issues*

2. Read chapters 17 and 22 (for women) or chapter 21 (for men) in *The Celebration of Sex* by Doug Rosenau for guidance on common obstacles to achieving orgasm. There is also more information in Appendix B in this seminar.
3. Visit a physician to rule out any medical or physiological problems that may be contributing to your difficulty.
4. Meet with a Christian sex therapist. Often the struggle to fully enjoy sex has to do with either a cognitive-emotional obstacle related to sex or misinformation about sex.

Orgasm may be the most “selfish” part of sex. The word “selfish” is put in quotes, because it not truly selfish (i.e., putting yourself before your spouse). But orgasm is an experience to which you must give yourself fully; otherwise it is like trying to ride a waterslide with your feet pressed against the side walls. You won’t know the pleasure of orgasm or a waterslide until you give yourself fully to the moment.

This is a transition, although not a contradiction, to the earlier point about sex being best when it is selfless. In the plateau phase you want to build enthusiasm and anticipation for orgasm through being energized by your spouse’s pleasure. This should be the way you use assertive desire to increase the intensity of orgasm. You also want to use receptive desire to increase the intensity of orgasm by focusing on and being responsive to your spouse’s pleasuring of you.

“As Christians, we often think that focusing on ourselves is wrong, that we should concentrate on giving, not receiving. But in order to move toward physical orgasm, we must give ourselves permission to dwell on our physical responses and emotional feelings (p. 193).” Linda Dillow and Lorraine Pintus in *Intimate Issues*

In orgasm you are focusing on your own pleasure, thereby affirming your spouse’s efforts, to such a degree that you are free to allow the transition from sympathetic (aroused responses) to parasympathetic (relaxed responses) nervous system

that occurs as orgasm occurs. Don't let the biology intimidate you; this just means that orgasm is an involuntary response where your body quickly transitions from intense pleasure to intense relaxation. The rapid journey between intensity in these two satisfying experiences accounts for the unique joy found in orgasm.

“Anxiety, anger, boredom, and resentment trigger the sympathetic nervous system reactions and are great saboteurs of having stimulating times making love (p. 23).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

This necessary transition from sympathetic to parasympathetic nervous systems is why conflict, insecurity, thinking about what needs to happen, and similar dispositions can impede orgasm. Their stimulating effect can prevent transition to the parasympathetic nervous system which allows for the relaxed-release of orgasm.

The Resolution Phase

There is still one more aspect to sex before a couple goes back to day-to-day life; which should include intentionality in the type of romantic efforts described throughout this seminar. While Masters and Johnson call it the resolution phase, it is more commonly referred to as “afterglow” – a time of basking in the relational closeness and physical pleasure associated with a satisfying sexual experience.

This part of the sexual experience should not be omitted (unless you are engaging in a “quickie” and part of the afterglow is mischievously scurrying to your next activity with a smile as if you've gotten away with something). The resolution phase is a time to experience and articulate one of the primary purposes of sex – covenant renewal.

“Sex is God's appointed way for two people to reciprocally say to one another, ‘I belong completely, permanently, and exclusively to you.’ You must not use sex to say anything less (p. 224).” Tim Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*

A couple may only formally renew their vows once in all their years of marriage, but sex provides a regularly opportunity to declare, “I belong you to in a way that I belong to no one else and that brings me great joy.” The moments after sex can be a very significant time to affirm this reality.

- Verbalize messages like those found in the two paragraphs above.
- Continue to cuddle and touch so it is clear you were making love to a person more than enjoying an experience.
- Be able to laugh about anything awkward that happened (kids knocking on the door, muscle cramps, or awkward noises), so that it is clear that sex is a relaxed celebration rather than a tense performance.
- Reinforce compliments you give your spouse at other times in order to allow the closeness of the moment to further cement them in their memory and emotions.

Remembering the Real Meaning of Sex

The intent of chapters four and five has been to be highly “practical;” maybe to a point that was uncomfortable for some readers who feel like being sensual is somehow dirty or worldly. It is unfortunate that sex has become so associated with its distortion that it can be hard to examine God's gift with a clean conscience.

“Would you believe Scripture talks more about the pleasure of sex than it does about ‘being fruitful’ and ‘being one’? God devoted an entire book of the Bible, the song of Solomon, to the subject of sexual pleasure in marriage (p. 8).” Linda Dillow and Lorraine Pintus in *Intimate Issues*

Hopefully this discussion has been tactful and allowed you to see that sex is a good gift from God meant to be both understood and enjoyed within marriage. The ability to have these mature conversations between a husband and wife is a vital part of reversing the effects of the fall within a marriage.

“Isn't it fascinating that making love reached its peak expression in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve before the fall?... Since the fall, sex is been in a downhill spiral of immaturity and distortion. As Christians, we have a responsibility to redeem and reclaim God's wonderful gift of sexual union as we experience making love in its garden of Eden fullness: naked and unashamed (p. 1).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

“When a married couple is in the midst of enjoying sexual relations, they may not be experiencing holiness in the same way they experience it when praying or worshiping God, but make no mistake—that is a very holy moment (p. 15).” C. J. Mahaney in *Sex, Romance, and the Glory of God*

Read Psalm 63:1-8. As a way to conclude this seminar, read the intimate language God gives us to understand our relationships with Him. While it would be inaccurate to construe this language with sexual connotations, it is so powerfully intimate that it is hard to miss the parallels to the intimacy of husband and wife which is intended to be the clearest earthly representation of Christ’s relationship with the church (Eph. 5:32). As you read, allow what you have learned in all five chapters of this seminar to speak not only to your relationship with your spouse, but also your relationship with God.

Psalm 63:1-8 (ESV)	Psalm 63:1-8 Brief Commentary
1. O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.	1. Notice the yearning David has for God which could not be satisfied in any other relationship. All the water around him seemed dry compared to God.
2. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.	2. David was invited to gaze on God in the privacy of His personal dwelling and found His attributes mesmerizing.
3. Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.	3. The satisfaction that David experienced in God’s love spilled out in words of praise.
4. So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands.	4. Words of praise moved to the works of his hands as David sought ways to express his love over a lifetime.
5. My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips,	5. Other pleasures could only serve as metaphors for the greater satisfaction David took in his relationship with God.
6. when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night;	6. Daydreaming of God was not a discipline but a reflex of love that caused him to ponder the things of God.
7. for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy.	7. Acknowledging how God nurtured and supported him was David’s joy and strength, not a sign of weakness.
8. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.	8. David fully and publicly relied upon God.

“What we believe about God determines the quality of our marriage (p. 20).” Dave Harvey in *When Sinners Say “I Do”*

Appendix A

Dates from the Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage “Intimacy” Seminar

You will remember what you rehearse. You will rehearse what you enjoy. Marriage is meant to be enjoyed but requires rehearsing (i.e., remembering) the things that are most important. For this reason, each seminar in this series will provide a collection of dates that are designed to allow couples to review what they’ve learned. Two things you should note:

1. Each date can be taken multiple times. You and your spouse will change over time. Because you change, the same date, with the same person becomes a new experience. Marriage resists becoming stale when we enjoy anticipating and learning what God is doing in our spouse’s life and marriage next.
2. Create the habit of reinforcing key marriage lessons with playfulness and romance. Learn from the content and pattern of these dates. Pick a section of this seminar that was useful to your marriage and create a date that allows you to review those truths in an enjoyable way.

Head, Heart, and Hands Date

Preparation: Review chapter two of this seminar using the 1-10 scales to discern how you are doing at loving your whole spouse with your whole person. As you review these assessments prepare yourself to answer two sets of questions.

1. In what way is your spouse excelling at loving you? What blessings from your spouse have gone unnamed and unpraised in the recent weeks and months?
2. In what area would it be most beneficial for you to grow in how you love your spouse? What ideas do you have for the practical expression of this growth?

Activity: What you do on this date, so long as it allows for conversation, is less important than the order of the conversations. Be sure to spend a significant portion of time on the first set of questions. If your date involves two parts (i.e., a meal and a walk), devote the first half of the date to these questions.

When you discuss the second set of questions you should have two objectives: (a) to demonstrate you’ve given time and energy in this brainstorming, and (b) to invite your spouse to contribute those things he/she would find most meaningful.

Ending: It is easy for these discussions to end idealistically; our ideas and intentions being larger than circumstances allow. The result would be a romantic date followed by a disappointing week. When this happens couples learn not to engage these kinds of conversations. To prevent this dynamic, conclude your date by discussing where the changes you want to make fit most naturally within the rhythm of your marriage.

Follow Up: In the days and weeks after this date focus your attention on saying “thank you” for your spouse’s efforts; both those you identified in the first set of questions and those your spouse wants to grow in from the second set of questions. Enthusiasm and appreciation for our spouse’s love and service are two of the best ways to cultivate a marital culture where romance and intimacy are present.

Goal for Date: To help you see that having a romantic marriage does not always mean doing more; often it simply means appreciating what each other is already doing. To provide an opportunity for the two of you to assess and discuss what would be most meaningful at enhancing the romantic culture of your marriage.

Grand Love-Story Date

Preparation: Reflect on one question from each of these three gospel-narrative themes.

- Creation – What is good about your marriage? When do you most clearly see the character of God in your spouse? How and when is your home a place of rest and refuge for you?

- Fall – What are the recent sins that have damaged your marriage? What are the recent forms of suffering that have challenged your marriage? When have the two of you been on the “same team” against sin and suffering (i.e., emotionally and practically agreed about the needed response)?
- Redemption – How has your spouse been gracious in spite of these hardships? How has God been faithful in light of these hardships? What opportunities for redemption has your marriage not taken advantage of?

Activity: This date will likely have a high-low-high feel. The activities you plan and their setting should account for this. The middle part of the date should allow for more privacy and not be in a celebratory setting. You might organize these conversations around the courses of your meal (appetizer-creation, fall-entrée, redemption-desert) or with activities. Regardless, the point is to trace the gospel in recent challenges of your marriage.

Ending: Pray together, thanking God that the gospel will one day have its full effect and make these strivings irrelevant. Thank God that, until Heaven, He has given us the gospel as a sufficient remedy for sin and suffering, and as the only thing powerful enough to protect marital unity in the midst of these experiences. Pray with expectancy of the final theme of the gospel-narrative: glorification.

Follow Up: Allow this extended date-conversation to give you “eyes to see” the themes of the gospel in the day-to-day events of your marriage. Allow the conversation to change the sound bites of your passing comments and thoughts. See God’s creative fingerprint in every good thing about your marriage. Contextualize the challenges of sin and suffering in light of God’s power and presence. Look for how God wants to respond redemptively to your challenges. When you see these things, speak them as a way to encourage each other.

Goal for Date: To radically change the way you see marital challenges by providing you with basic gospel categories in which to understand the events of life. To instill the conversational habit of articulating these themes as you face challenges.

Sexy Date

Preparation: Remember your favorite sexual experiences with your spouse. Think about them for your own enjoyment (this is savoring the gift of sex in marriage) and to be able to articulate what was special or stimulating about these experiences. Affirm your spouse as a lover as you talk about these experiences on the date.

Activity: Plan the evening around things that are sensually stimulating for you and your spouse: what you wear, food or setting of the meal, get a massage to relax, go try on clothes and model them for each other (whether you buy them or not), go for a walk at sunset, walking back through the events of your engagement (or comparable event), etc... Allow the evening to be about building a healthy sexual energy for both of you.

Ending: Go home early or rent a hotel room for the night. Allow this to be an evening of “gourmet sex” where you take time to affirm another and the marriage afterwards.

Follow Up: Talk about the evening together and smile big when you do. Make flirty allusions to the sexual experiences that your spouse found most satisfying.

Goal for Date: To demonstrate that it can be wholesome and non-selfish to set aside time to enjoy each other sexually. To allow sex to be a safe, on-limits topic of conversation and exploration between the two of you.

Appendix B

Common Challenges to a Healthy Sex Life

This seminar has been designed to counter the leading cause of sexual difficulty in marriage – a poor education about how sex works; either physically and relationally. Hopefully at this point you have a clearer understanding of the marital environment and physical process necessary to cultivate a satisfying sex life.

But sexual education alone will not guarantee a satisfying sex life; even the effective implementation of a good sexual education cannot make this guarantee. There are factors outside of being an informed and skilled lover than contribute to a satisfying sex life. In this appendix we will divide those factors into two categories:

1. **Sin Variables** – Factors that interfere with a satisfying sex life for which you bear personal responsibility. In this category we will provide initial guidance and recommendations for guilt over past sexual behavior, the effects of pornography on marital sex, and adultery.
2. **Suffering Variables** -- Factors that interfere with a satisfying sex life for which you do not bear personal responsibility. In this category we will provide initial guidance and recommendations for the effects of having been sexually abused, the experience of pain during sex, infertility, and impotence.

Sin Variables

The transition of sex from forbidden to frequent can be difficult for many couples. This difficulty can be compounded when one individual or the couple has participated in pre-marital sex; creating an association between sex and guilt (“I’ve done something wrong”) or sex and defiance (“Nobody is going to tell me what I can’t do.”).

These associations often make it harder to enjoy marital sex. In effect, when these associations are present pre-marital sex felt like an adventure (i.e., a trip into the forbidden) and marital sex feels like a trip to the grocery (i.e., an expected, normal routine of life). Here are some suggestions if you believe past sexual behavior is diminishing your present marital sex life.

- Be honest and talk about it. Silence always echoes and multiplies any sense of guilt or shame we experience. If your spouse brings this concern to you, do not dismiss it with, “But sex is okay now.” Instead, hear your spouse and walk with them towards the experience of forgiveness.
- If your past sin was with your spouse, then confess to one another and seek God’s forgiveness together. Allow this to start or reinforce the pattern that the two of you will openly talk about your struggles and take them to God.
- Realize God forgives and restores. God wants you to have a satisfying sex life. God has no desire for you to experience a life of guilt, awkwardness, and inhibition about His gift to your marriage. You are not being a “good Christian” by punishing your past sin with present guilt. Christ died for you to be free from that.
- If guilt and a sense of emotional restriction continues talk to a pastor or counselor. You must be more committed to knowing God’s freedom than you are living in your guilt. As you speak with a pastor or counselor, they may put God’s forgiveness into a better perspective, they may counter the lies you tell yourself in a new way, or their warmth towards you may simply be a more tangible example of God’s disposition towards you.

A common struggle for many spouses (not just husbands) is pornography and masturbation. These activities have many negative effects on a marriage: promoting selfish sex, generating the fantasy of an ideal and all-knowing lover, portraying sex for purposes other than covenant-bonding, robbing your sexual vitality from times with your spouse, and many more.

Another struggle that impacts many marriages is adultery; having an emotional bond with a member of the opposite sex that is greater than the one you share with your spouse, or any sexual activity that exists with someone other than your spouse. If either pornography or adultery has impacted your marriage, here are some suggestions.

- Be honest. You will never be more pure or feel more loved than you are honest with your spouse. Beyond the sexual offense, the lying and deceit may be more damaging to the marriage. It allows you to believe, “If my spouse knew, he/she wouldn’t love me,” which fuels your fantasy escape and sabotages your marital efforts.

- Do not try to deal with this alone. Shame causes most couples to deal with sexual sin alone. This is a mistake. Seek out a pastor or counselor to help you walk through the needed marital restoration.
- “False Love: Overcoming Sexual Sin from Pornography to Adultery” (www.bradhambrick.com/falselove) is a seminar designed to walk you through how the gospel guides you to freedom from sexual sin. It is a study that can be done in conjunction with a pastor, counselor, mentor, or accountability group.
- “True Betrayal: Overcoming the Betrayal of Your Spouse’s Sexual Sin” (www.bradhambrick.com/truebetrayal) is a seminar designed to walk you through the process of recovering from the impact of your spouse’s sexual sin. It is also a study that can be done in conjunction with a pastor, counselor, mentor, or accountability group.
- For additional guidance on how these forms of sexual sin impact a marital sex life and what recovery looks like, chapters 26-29 of Doug Rosenau’s book *The Celebration of Sex* are recommended.

Suffering Variables

Sin is not the only thing that disrupts a satisfying marital sex life. There are also many ways suffering impacts a couple’s sex life. This means that you do not necessarily need to repent if sex is not what you hoped it would be.

The lack of a good sex education and the (often) presence of a bad sex education is part of this suffering. We live in a day when there is more mis-information about sex than accurate information. Parents and churches frequently do not prepare people to enjoy the gift of sex as God intended. This seminar is an attempt to alleviate that form of suffering.

Another unfortunately common form of suffering is the experience of sexual abuse (one in four women; one in six men). When sex has been a weapon used to violate you it can be hard to experience sex as a gift meant to bless you. If you have experienced sexual abuse, then here are several suggestions.

- Realize this was not your fault and the shame you may feel is not yours to own. Likely you have been silenced, blamed, and shamed so this may be hard to accept. But it is true.
- Share your experience with your spouse. You may choose to watch or read some of the resource below first, but an important part of you being “fully known and fully loved” in your marriage is the assurance that your spouse does not love you any less because of what happened to you.
- Do not try to deal with this alone. Sexual abuse is a complex experience. Some of the emotional dynamics may change when you get married, when you have kids, when your kids have their first sleep over, etc... Developing a relationship with an experienced counselor to guide you through these experiences is important.
- “Hope and Restoration After Sexual Abuse” (www.bradhambrick.com/sexualabuse) is a seminar designed to overview many of the common experiences of sexual abuse. If you have not told anyone of your experience it can be a safe first step towards feeling understood so you can feel safer to talk to someone about your experience. It is also a good resource for your spouse to watch in order to understand how to best love and support you in light of your experience of abuse.
- *On the Threshold of Hope* by Diane Langberg is an excellent book on recovering from the effects of sexual abuse.
- Chapter 24 of *The Celebration of Sex* by Doug Rosenau discusses how to navigate many of the challenges couples face in their sex life while one of them is processing their experience of sexual abuse.

A third way suffering can affect sex is through pain. When sex is painful it means something is wrong; not with you morally but physically. Pain is the alarm system of the body like guilt is the alarm system of the soul. When you’re hurting go to the doctor, like you go to God when you feel guilty. There is no reason for you to feel shame. Allow God to care for you through the expertise of a OBGYN or other relevant physician.

“Painful sex does not get better by ignoring it or trying to play through it. Often, it further traumatizes and creates more sexual difficulties (p. 285).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

- In addition to seeking assistance from the relevant medical professionals, chapters 22 and 23 of *The Celebration of Sex* by Doug Rosenau are recommended for additional guidance.

A fourth experience of suffering that changes the experience of sex is infertility. Most couples do not think about the possibility of having children every time they have sex. But when a couple struggles to conceive, then they do begin think about it each time they have sex. What is not happening (i.e., conceiving a child) begins to overshadow what is happening (i.e., celebrating their marital love).

- Chapter 25 of *The Celebration of Sex* by Doug Rosenau provides excellent material on (a) the common misconceptions and hurtful advice given to couples experiencing infertility, (b) how to walk through the medical testing, (c) considering medical and adopting options, and (d) how to protect your marriage on this journey.
- “Taking the Journey of Grief with Hope” (www.bradhambrick.com/griefseminar) is a seminar designed to help individuals process their experiences of grief; not just the traditional grief of losing a loved one to death, but also less commonly considered griefs such as miscarriage and infertility.

A fifth experience of suffering that impacts sex is impotence. This is a highly common struggle, especially in its episodic form, which has a tendency to become chronic when men fixate on it.

“All men will struggle with getting or maintaining an erection at some point. Fatigue, alcohol, medications, and performance anxiety are common causes. The key is not to panic because that would just compound the problem (p. 36)... The surest way to become psychologically impotent is to worry about erections rather than enjoying the moment (p. 249).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

Medication has allowed for significant alleviation of erectile dysfunction.

“Remember that Viagra restores the capacity for an erection, not libido... The impotence pill reminds us again that a healthy marriage and intimate lovemaking are about connection and not penetration. It's not about the penis, but about the person and the ability to relate intimately (p. 254).” Doug Rosenau in *A Celebration of Sex*

If impotence or erectile dysfunction is impacting your marital sex life, consider the following suggestions:

- Do not mistake “good sex” with the ability to sustain an erection or ejaculate. This sense of failure will inhibit your sexual ability to a degree much greater than whatever physical challenge you may be facing and rob your marriage of a continued sense of romantic closeness.
- Grow in your understanding of the complexity of impotence. Chapters 20 and 21 of *The Celebration of Sex* by Doug Rosenau offer excellent guidance on this subject.
- Seek medical advisement. It is important to identify or rule out contributions from low testosterone levels, blood pressure, prostate difficulties, or glandular malfunctions (especially the thyroid).
- Seek counseling from a reputable Christian sex therapist. Once medical causes are ruled out, the emotional relational aspects of arousal and climax are the remaining variable. Performance anxiety about sex is the leading cause of psychological impotence. A trained and experienced counselor can help you understand and overcome the effects of anxiety and insecurity upon your sexual performance.

Conclusion

The purpose of this appendix was not to answer all of your questions about sexual difficulties, but to give you guidance on what next steps you can take to overcome whatever challenges are interfering with a satisfying marital sex life.

The main piece of advice is, “Don’t struggle alone.” Too many couples either (a) continue to do the same things over and over again hoping for a different result, or (b) give up and do nothing; both of these options result in sex being a subject that hinders your marriage rather than contributing to its flourishing.

Hopefully from the larger seminar and this appendix you have received two things to enable to reach out for help more effectively.

1. A vocabulary and example of what it means to more freely and openly talk about sex.
2. Direction on specific resources (seminars or books) or helping professionals (counselors or doctors) who are most appropriate to help you with the given struggle you are facing.

Appendix C

Small Group Accountability Questions From the “Intimacy” Seminar

How do small marital problems become big marital problems? There are two primary ways: (1) they get ignored, and (2) they are dealt with alone. Ask yourself these questions about any case of divorce or chronic marital unhappiness you know:

If that couple had addressed their struggle early on with the love and perspective of fellow Christians, how different would their life be now? How many generations would be blessed? How much pain and suffering would have been alleviated? How much sin and destruction would have been averted?

The condition of Christian marriage is a church problem. When the church does not fulfill the one another commands of the New Testament, every marriage in that church suffers (even the good ones). Excellent, crisis-based pastoral counseling (no matter how effective) will not have near the impact as small groups regularly asking one another simple, fundamental questions about “Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage.”

For this reason, every seminar in this series will contain a series of accountability questions to be used in the small group life of our church. It is suggested that at least once per month any small group with married couples divide men and women for the prayer time and ask one of the questions below.

Chapter 1

- Which of the “20 Challenges” are present in your marriage?
- How have you allowed these challenges to develop into unhealthy habits or expectations?
- Which of these challenges have you most successfully navigated recently?

Chapter 2

- How well are you doing at loving your spouse with your head, heart, and hands?
- Which of these is most important to your spouse and how are you seeking to grow in that area?
- Which of these is easiest for you to neglect and when are you most prone to neglect it?

Chapter 3

- What is the “love story” by which you judge your marriage and expect it to fit that narrative?
- What form does your dissatisfaction take when your marriage does not conform to your “love story”?
- How do you use encouragement to teach, motivate, and reinforce the true gospel love story in your marriage?

Chapter 4

- Do you and your spouse intentionally reserve time and energy for intimacy?
- Do you and your spouse cultivate a relational climate where romance and intimacy are natural?
- Do you and your spouse build anticipation for one another where sex is the climax of healthily sensual marriage?

Chapter 5

- Do you and your spouse have clear, mutually agreeable ways to initiate intimacy?
- Do you and your spouse use sex to indirectly communicate about grievances or avoid conflict?
- Are you and your spouse increasingly selfless with the things that bring you pleasure, including sex?

Rebuttal: Wow! That seems really personal for a small group discussion.

Response One: It is not more personal than a divorce is public. And, it is not more personal than the Bible calls for us to be transparent about our sin.

Response Two: Once you have done this for three months and seen the benefits to your marriages, you will laugh at the defensive rebuttal. Accountability is only scary like swimming lessons are scary for a child. Putting your face in the water is only intimidating until you do it. Then you realize a whole new world of freedom and fun awaits.

Appendix D

What Do I Do Now?

A plumb line of the Summit counseling ministry is, “We don’t do events; we create resources.” That means you should be asking yourself, “What can or should I do with this information now?”

We have created a series of brief videos that answer that what-now question from several different perspectives. Each of these can be found at:

www.bradhambrick.com/whatnow
www.bradhambrick.com/gcmintimacy

Personal Study or Small Group

Question: I’ve been to several of the Summit counseling seminars and notice there appears to be a couple of different kinds. You frequently recommend studying them as a small group or with a friend. That seems like a great idea, but since I haven’t done that before I’m not quite sure how to start something like that. Do you mind giving me guidance?

Pursue Personal Counseling

Question: After attending this seminar I realized I would like to pursue counseling to help me grow in this area. It sounded like there are several different options available. Would you mind explaining to me what those are and how I could connect with the one that best serves me need?

Leveraging My Workplace

Question: I’ve heard rumors that I’m supposed to be able to use the Summit counseling seminars to leverage my workplace for gospel influence. My first impression is that it sounds awkward and intrusive; like I’m telling people they’ve “got issues” or “need help.” But I’m also worried about putting up Christian material that might be offensive to some people who visit my workplace. But I would at least like to hear what you’ve got to say. How would this work?

As a Professional Counselor

Question: I’m a licensed counselor (LPC) and came across the Summit counseling seminars. I’m excited to see the church addressing these kinds of subjects, and I’m curious how you might see someone in my position (or a LCSW or LMFT) using the materials. I can see recommending them to my clients who are open to an overtly Christian aspect to their counseling, but it seems like there could be more uses than just counseling homework. Could you share your thoughts on how those in private practice might use these resources?

Our goal in Summit counseling is to (1) equip the church to care for one another and our community with excellence; (2) provide quality counseling services that allow our people to get involved in the lives of others with confidence – knowing additional, experienced care is available to come alongside them if needed; and (3) create ways for our members and other Christians in our community to leverage their workplace and careers for greater gospel impact in their spheres of influence.

We hope this seminar and these videos give you a vision for how this can happen and stirs a passion in you to be a part of God’s work of redeeming and restoring hurting individuals and families.