

Marriage Preparation

3. Baggage from the past



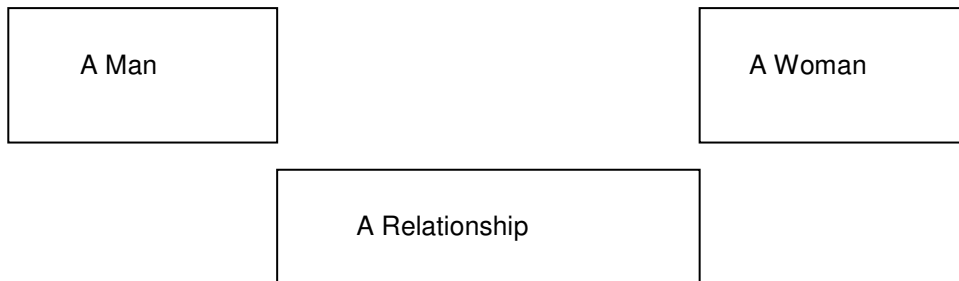
ADDRESSING ENDURING VULNERABILITIES

INTRODUCTION

We've mostly waited expectantly at the carousel hoping our baggage has flown in with us. Such baggage is of value to us. We feel bereft until we see the familiar item slowly trundling towards us. However the sort of baggage I'm talking about is best left on a remote African airstrip and eaten by termites!

Regrettably we cannot get rid of it that easily. It is stuff that has often been with us for as long as we can remember and some of it before we can remember. In fact it is in some cases so much part of us that we would not be who we are without it. It is in a sense who we are, and certainly what we take into marriage!

So when we look at a marriage we see three things - **A man laden with baggage, a woman with all her stuff and a relationship.**



All work with married couples needs to take this into account.

We are not likely to achieve much in for example counselling if we simply focus on the relationship.

People do not come into the relationship as two blank slates – they bring with them their whole history and this has significant effect on shaping the marriage.

The reason why marriages fail is not because marriage itself is a bad idea, but because it is entered into by two basically selfish and imperfect creatures with varying degrees of damage and hurt, and each with their own coping mechanisms. A nut and a bolt may be designed to fit together perfectly but if one or both are damaged then there is a problem.

Marriage would be easy were it not for the people!

There are only two ways in which we accumulate this negative stuff. Either we are born like it or we pick it up from our environment as we travel through life.

EXAMPLES

This is of course not a comprehensive list.

Relationship with parents and siblings (Rejection, resentment, jealousy, anger etc).

A person's life can be plagued with unresolved conflicts from the past.

Rejection (probably in childhood) leads to anticipated rejection (fear of rejection), jealousy, anger etc and can be a factor in addiction and sexual deviance.

Resentment (the unwillingness to forgive past hurts) can be a major factor in depression and indicates that the inability to forgive could well be a significant problem in the marriage.

Parental role models. *Not only is parental divorce a strong predictor of divorce (problem solved by moving out) but the way parents generally handle conflict may set a pattern **or** provoke a reaction.*

It is not only in conflict that patterns are laid down. Superficial issues like garbage disposal, bedtime stories etc may be "set in concrete" simply by parental example.

Emotional ties with parents. *Importance of "Leaving and cleaving"*

Marriages have been ruined by the unwillingness of either parents to release their children or children who are still emotionally or otherwise dependent on their parents.

Previous Relationships. *Marriage, co-habitation or any previous relationship which has the potential to affect the present one.*

Has a previous marriage been properly "laid to rest"? Is the relationship still active through contact with the children? Have previously married parties taken their share of responsibility for the breakdown of the relationship?

If the couple cohabited before their marriage there will be many issues to raise.

*Are they clear of **all** previous emotional entanglements?*

Differences of Socio-economic, ethnic or religious background. *These can be overcome in a relationship where most of the other factors are positive, but often provide such a different outlook on life that marriage is not a realistic possibility.*

Religious differences are so profound that in most cases marriage should not be contemplated.

Cross-cultural marriages can work where there is an awareness of the potential difficulties and a real determination to overcome obstacles often created by outsiders.

Similarity of background is a positive indicator.

Opposites in all sorts of ways often attract but can they live together?

Addictions (substances, obsessive-compulsive disorder, sexual addictions including pornography, gambling etc). These usually have their roots deep in the past. How often has a young woman married a guy with (say) an alcohol problem hoping that she may change him, only to discover that he gets worse rather than better?

Homosexuality etc. practice, feelings, gender identity etc

The marriage of convenience designed to cover up homosexuality is rarer than it used to be but bisexuality seems to be on the increase. Unfaithfulness may follow and will be made worse by the confusion and shame.

Occult involvement (from Satanism to superstition)

Whether practised by those preparing for marriage or by their parents or grandparents it is an issue which needs total renunciation.

Phobias. Irrational fears are much more common and sometimes more serious than many might think. For example, a man bitten by a dog as a child may develop a general fear of all dogs. This will affect the couple's attitude to pet ownership.

Sexual abuse in childhood. The seriously abused person will have general relational difficulties and specific to marriage there are likely to be extreme attitudes to sex.

In some cases a woman may view herself as so worthless that she continues to allow her body to be abused in adult life. Alternatively she may display total frigidity to her husband. Both extremes may be present in the same person.

Financial irresponsibility. It is not usually the lack of money that is the problem but either mismanagement (maybe the wrong person is looking after the finances) or lack of mutual trust.

Financial irresponsibility is usually learned in childhood and is a difficult habit to overcome. Many couples have struggled with this one!

If a couple cannot trust each other enough to share their finances (joint accounts etc) then should they be getting married at all?

PURPOSE OF INTERVENTION

Most couples seem to approach their marriage with a great deal of unreality. Far more thought and effort goes into preparing for the wedding. Cohabitation may remove some aspects of the "rose-tinted spectacles" that filter out the negative features of their partner and make "falling in love" possible. Nevertheless cohabiting couples do not realise the extent to which marriage changes the shape of the relationship. Once the commitment is made many couples simply cease to work at the relationship and relapse into a way of taking each other for granted that will cause love to atrophy.

Marriage preparation has several objectives.

- 1. To actually discourage the “hopeless cases” from getting married.*
- 2. To point out areas of their individual lives that may need attention.*
- 3. To provide therapy or refer on in certain cases.*
- 4. To help them to see each other as clearly as possible and to adjust to each other.*

Most people will not have performed ritual cannibalism or be registered heroin addicts but the more ordinary kinds of baggage will be encountered in all couples. Each one’s history is a combination of genetic and environmental factors. It is not always possible to be absolutely certain where to draw the line, but clearly the way issues are approached will depend very heavily on what we perceive about their origin.

Ideally a marriage preparation course should draw attention to these issues and facilitate discussion.

We suggest the following four steps

1. Identification

The first thing we must do is to try to identify significant issues. Most courses have some form of inventory, either to be processed by the preparers or to be addressed by the clients. PREPARE raises most of the issues.

For some things identification is sufficient. This obviously goes for those issues which seem to be genetic in origin.

For example:-

Gender differences (Communication style, approach to intimacy, focussed or diffuse)

Information rate

Personal clock (Night owl or morning lark)

In such areas self-awareness (including the issues they’d rather forget) is primary.

2. Acknowledgement

Identifying the issues is of little benefit if the matter is not acknowledged.

Those taking people through Marriage Preparation need to satisfy themselves that both parties are willing to acknowledge their own issues.

*Our normal human approach to most things is inevitably a fairly subjective evaluation which either sees “different” as “wrong” or in unusually favourable circumstances as **exciting** or **a challenge**.*

Then the excitement wears off, the challenge dies down and the only remaining perception is that different is actually wrong.

3. Acceptance

Acceptance by oneself of that which cannot be changed and mutual acceptance by the couple of “where they are” is vital to further progress otherwise unrealistic demands will be made.

*One thing is clear – **mutual** acceptance is going to be a key issue when couples come face to face with the reality of what each is bringing into the relationship.*

4. Therapy

Treatments are almost as wide-ranging as the problems. Most of us will have had training in certain therapies and believe that ours is the most effective. We're human as well!

For Christians a discipling programme such as “Freedom in Christ” will deal with most of the issues. For information on this course contact “Freedom in Christ Ministries (UK), PO Box 2842, Reading RG2 9RT, Tel 0118 988 8173, Fax 0118 988 5952, Email ukoffice@ficm.org. www.ficm.org.uk

For various conditions there are specialist helps available. As with all kinds of counselling and ministry it is important to know when to refer on.

For more information about specialist help consult the Directory of the Association of Christian Counsellors on the web at www.acc-uk.org

CONCLUSIONS

It may seem that we are placing a heavy burden on marriage preparers. But marriage counsellors have frequently sensed that thorough preparation would have prevented the couple years of unhappiness. Instead they would have faced the issues at the start and either not got married or been helped to get sorted out.

People have all kinds of training for less demanding work than marriage. Most of us learn “on the job” but there is no doubt that a much better start is possible through thorough preparation.

Yes, it is a heavy responsibility but also an immense privilege to be involved where possible in such an important aspect of life.

Eric Bird