

## I. Introduction: Crisis In Relationships

THE U.S. LEADS THE WORLD IN DIVORCE. The U.S. economy may grow each year while the “index of social health” as it includes painful statistics on child abuse, crime, and poverty.

Thousands of people leave the Christian church every day in North America and Europe, converting to other religions or non-religion.

Each of these seemingly unrelated tragedies shares the common thread of human aloneness. We have become a culture alienated, disconnected, and alone as the divinely ordained relationships of marriage, family, and the church have broken down.

We should not be surprised that even from the beginning, we would find the thief seeking to undermine the Father’s plan for marriage (Genesis 3:1), family (Genesis 4:7), and the church (Matthew 16:23). And so it continues to this day.

## II. Crisis In Marriage

*“For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church” (Ephesians 5:31–32).*

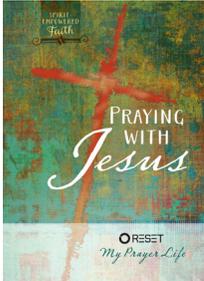
What can we say if we ignore so great a mystery?

At no time in history, except before the fall of the Roman Empire, has the relationship of marriage been under such attack and misrepresentation. Some scholars and researchers are referring to the advent of a post-marriage society as confidence and commitment to marriage collapse

Since 1960, the United States leads the world in divorce with a five-fold increase per thousand in number of divorces. Thirty percent of all births in the United States are outside of marriage with similar alarming patterns and trends being noted in the United Kingdom, Western Europe, and even parts of Eastern Europe and the Orient. Two of the many alarming social consequences of this marriage crisis are:

- The continuing decline of child and adolescent wellbeing.
- The continuing rise of widespread violence.

Children in the Western world are, for the first time in history, less advantaged socially, economically, psychologically, and morally than the previous generation. A myriad of factors contribute to this decline of child well-being and traditional marriage including relativistic values and morals, rising parental narcissism, media influences, and, of course, no-fault divorce.



Jared Pingleton's article entitled "Making Magnificent Marriages" provides an added resource. (Click Here)

### *The Church Giving Priority to Marriage*

What God has joined together, let the church help hold together.

*"Take the rod; and you and your brother Aaron assemble the congregation and speak to the rock . . ." (Numbers 20:8). "Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod . . ." (Numbers 20:11). "But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them'" (Numbers 20:12).*

Apparently, it was significant to God that Moses speak to the rock after having previously struck the rock in Exodus 17:6. Without understanding the ultimate significance of God's instructions, Moses should have believed God, spoken to the rock, and in so doing, honored Him as holy (Numbers 20:12). He would have exercised faith in God's Word and His character even though the particularities of God's instruction seemed minor and irrelevant. Moses had known God as a jealous God (Exodus 20:5), and in this encounter, Moses was being challenged to honor without insight into its fullest significance—God's jealous commitment to protect His typologies or pictures of key truth we have in Scripture. The Apostle Paul would reveal the fuller significance of this request to speak and not strike in 1Corinthians 10:4 when he wrote that the rock was Christ.

Moses violated this typology of the once-smitten Christ and was banished from ever entering the Promised Land (Numbers 20:12). Could it be that God is just as jealous about the typology or "truth picture" of marriage, which portrays the mysterious love relationship between Christ and the church? Violating this typology through adultery, divorce, homosexuality, immorality, etc. has serious implications just as there was for Moses (Exodus 20:1; Malachi 2:16; Romans 1:26–27; 1Thessalonians 4:3–5). As God's first declared human relationship (Genesis 2:18, 24) was protected in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 7:3, Numbers 36:6, Isaiah 62:5), blessed by Christ with His first miracle (John 2: 1–12), and the subject of much New Testament writing (Matthew 5:32; 19:9; 1Corinthians 7:15; Hebrews 13:4; Revelation 19:7), marriage must regain a priority of ministry in the 21st century church. The healthy 21st century church must address several probing issues such as:

- How much of the church's ministry actually involves married couples experiencing God's Word together at church?
- How much ongoing marriage enrichment ministry is available week-by-week (i.e. not event-focused, but ongoing through classes, groups, and mentoring)?

Colossians 3:16 Moment:

“Let the Word of Christ dwell deeply in you . . .” (Col. 3:16).

**Pastor/Teacher:** Pause to vulnerably share some of the enrichment disciplines you have developed to keep your marriage strong.

“I know it has been very important for us to \_\_\_\_\_.”

- How comprehensive is premarital counseling, testing, and mentoring to better prepare every marriage and prevent problem marriages before they start?
- How comprehensive is marriage enrichment ministry throughout the inevitable stress points of engagement, newlyweds, new parents, parents of teens, and the empty nest?
- How much priority is given to participation in ongoing marriage enrichment as a prerequisite for service and leadership in church ministry?

Chastity before marriage is the single most important guarantee of a life-long marriage. Modern statistics substantiate Scripture! “Flee from sexual immorality,” Paul wrote to the Corinthians. “All other sins a man commits are outside of his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body . . . Therefore honor God with your body” (1 Corinthians 6:18–20).

When did we last hear a sermon on remaining pure until marriage? Indeed, nearly two-thirds of U.S. weddings are cohabiting couples. They are not only sexually active, but living together.

Result? America has had one divorce for every two marriages for 40 years. In 2013, for example, there were 1.15 million divorces and 2.2 million marriages.



**W-7** A life explained as one of “Experiencing Scripture”

### *Experiencing Scripture*

“Rejoice with those who rejoice . . .” (Romans 12:15).

Reflect on God’s provision of your spouse just for you. Your life has been blessed because of God’s ample provision of marriage. How does this provision touch your heart?

*For example: I feel blessed and grateful that He \_\_\_\_\_.*

Reflecting on the way God has provided for you often prompts gratitude and can motivate your care toward others.

*For example: As I think about how God has provided abundantly for me, it makes me want to do a better job of \_\_\_\_\_.*

Pause now and celebrate together how God has provided for you through the spouse, family, and friends He has given you.

### **III. CRISIS IN FAMILIES**

“. . . the unrivaled military leader in the world, the undisputed economic heavyweight of the world, increasingly leads the world in social dysfunction!” It is painfully ironic that just as we have begun to more fully understand the optimal conditions in which to rear children—a secure, nurturing, interactive family environment—these conditions are being eroded more quickly than we can establish them. This irony is noted by Don Eberly in *Culture in Crisis and the Renewal of Civic Life* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1996).

Dr. Armand Nicholi of Harvard’s Medical School notes: “The breakdown of the family contributes significantly to the major problems confronting our society today. Research data make unmistakably clear a strong relationship between broken families and the drug epidemic, the increase in out-of-

wedlock pregnancies, the rise of violent crime, and the unprecedented epidemic of suicide among children and adolescents.” (“What Do We Know About Successful Families,” contact Grad Resources 13612 Midway Rd #500, Dallas, TX 75244).

Additionally alarming are the connections between family health and the civil society in which we live. Family is where we inculcate a shared set of values, norms, and beliefs (i.e. morality). A democratic society can only survive when this set of common moral ideals, nurtured in secure family relationships, is founded upon divinely revealed truth. Moral beliefs that form a democracy cannot be adequately grounded without the presupposition of a divine being. If there is no God, we are not equal, nor are we of inestimable worth (*The Responsive Community*, Summer 1996, Christopher Beem).

### *The Church Giving Priority to Family*

Why the family? First and foremost, the family is God’s idea. It’s where we are to first experience love and the “give and receive” of relationships that influence how we respond to God and to others. From the Great Commandment to love both God and others, family is our first set of others outside ourselves. The challenge of parenting with its call to unselfish giving and unconditional love becomes a first reading of our relational and spiritual health.

It seems that our enshrinement of personal “rights” as the reigning cultural ideal has become the great illusion leading us into crisis after crisis. It’s this self-focused emphasis on rights that contributes to the nearly fivefold increase in divorce. It’s likely that this selfishness exhibited between mom and dad contributed to 52 percent of church-attending youth indicating they did not want the type of marriage their parents had (Josh McDowell, *Right from Wrong*). Addressing the contagious nature of this “fraying of fidelity,” Josh states, “When people lose confidence in fidelity between husbands and wives, it is easy to imagine that other fidelities—of parents to children, of adult children to their elder parents—no longer need to be permanent”

To the 21st century church, this challenge speaks to needs such as:

- Individuals, couples, and parents learning to walk intimately with God;
- Experiencing His constraining love to drive out selfishness;
- Bringing families together in community to learn the joy of unselfish giving to one another
- Establishing marriages among church leaders as a role model of self-less nurture and care for children, youth, and single adults.

How parents receive and then share their heavenly Father’s gracious love with the gift of children speaks volumes as to the health of the home, the church, and the culture.

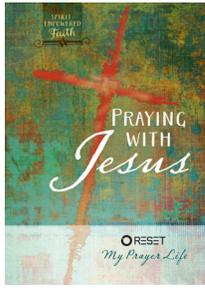
Family is where we learn to cherish, protect, and praise children as “gifts from the Lord” (Psalm 127:3). A culture which refuses to cherish children will soon find itself in crisis. It is also the extended family relationships at church or “families of choice” that can give role modeling and ministry to single adults and single parents. It’s the 21st century church functioning

Colossians 3:16 Moment:

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**Pastor/Teacher:** Pause to vulnerably share some of the enrichment disciplines you have developed to keep your family strong.

*“I know it has been very important for us as a family to \_\_\_\_\_.”*



The article entitled “Diligence in Ministry” by Mark Dance and Michael Lewis provides an added resource for leaders’ marriages. (Click Here)

as the Body of Christ that provides loving relationships in a culture torn apart by mobility, family dysfunction, divorce, and abandonment.

To the 21st century church this challenge speaks of:

- Ongoing ministry to men, women, and couples to prepare for lifelong marriage and family commitments.
- Bringing single adults together with nuclear families to provide role modeling and mentoring.
- Restoration ministry to the separated, divorced, and never married parents.
- “Families-of-choice” where single parents and their children join traditional families to provide mentoring, extended care, and role modeling of godly fatherhood.
- Fathers in leadership giving priority to the Lord, marriage, and children
- Relationship networks within the church, which deepen friendships and provide the support of extended church family, removing aloneness and isolation.

### *Engage Fellowship*

*“It’s not good to be alone” (Genesis 2:18).*

*“Bear one another’s burdens and thus fulfil the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2).*

Pause now, and think about some of the important family members and friends who have “been with” you at critical moments of your life. Consider some of these questions:

Who was “with” you as you came to Christ? Think about not only those who were physically present, but those who loved you, spent time with you, got to know you, or invested in you as you came to a personal relationship with Christ.

Have there been particular family members that have “been with” you during times of failure? Did someone “stick with you” even though they knew about your struggles and personal challenges?

Have there been a particular family members or friends that have “been with” you during times of personal crisis? Has someone come alongside you and helped you carry a burden? Did someone help ease your pain with their supportive care?

Now, as you reflect on one or more of these relationships consider this: how were you less alone because of this person “being with” you?

*As I reflect on how this person was “with me,” I realize that it was so meaningful to me because I was less alone in that . . .*

Now celebrate with one or two others.

## **IV. The Mystery of Divine Example**

*“This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church” (Ephesians 5:32).*



**P-5** Ministering His life and love to our nearest ones at home and with family as well as faithful engagement in His Body, the church

The general context of Paul's declaration of a mystery relates to this major teaching on marriage, but the immediate context is the preceding verse, "For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother and shall cleave to his wife and the two shall become one flesh" (5:31).

How is it that this verse on leaving and cleaving to become one speaks to the mystery of Christ and the church?

Was it not Christ who left His Father? "Regarding not equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself . . . becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:6–8); in order that He might cleave to His bride, "For we have become united with Him" (Romans 6:5); so that we, with Him, might become one, "But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one Spirit with Him" (1 Corinthians 6:17).

Reflect often on this mystery:

- The unity of unselfish giving and unconditional love in my marriage is a powerful gospel witness.
- Celebrate His leaving, cleaving, and becoming one—in my behalf!



**L-3** Experiencing God as He really is through deepened intimacy with Him

### *Encounter Jesus*

*"Thanks be to God for Jesus Christ my Lord" (Romans 7:25).*

Think about the moment when you surrendered in oneness to Jesus Christ. How did the Holy Spirit reveal Jesus to you? Was it through the example of a family member or a friend? Was it in a sermon or through the Scripture? Was it through a testimony? Did He meet you and reveal Himself directly? How did you "hear" Him?

### *Pause and Reflect:*

*The Spirit revealed Jesus to me through \_\_\_\_\_.*

*My yielding to Christ involved \_\_\_\_\_.*

*As I reflect on His "leaving" heaven and sacrificing in my place, my heart is overwhelmed with \_\_\_\_\_.*

### **Now tell Him!**